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Ronald Mendoza-de Jesús Date

Reading Now: Historical Danger in Spanish Caribbean Literary Modernism

By

Ronald Mendoza-de Jesús
Doctor in Philosophy

Comparative Literature

____
Geoffrey Bennington, D.Phil. (Oxon)
Advisor

____
José Quiroga, Ph.D.
Advisor

____
Andrew J. Mitchell, Ph.D.
Committee Member

Accepted:

____
Lisa A. Tedesco, Ph.D.

Dean of the James T. Laney School of Graduate Studies

____
Date

Reading Now: Historical Danger in Spanish Caribbean Literary Modernism

By

Ronald Mendoza-de Jesús
Bachelor of Arts

Advisor: Geoffrey Bennington, D.Phil. (Oxon) and José Quiroga, Ph.D.

An abstract of a dissertation submitted to the Faculty of the
James T. Laney School of Graduate Studies of Emory University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in
Comparative Literature
2015

Abstract

Reading Now: Historical Danger in Spanish Caribbean Literary Modernism

By Ronald Mendoza-de Jesús

Can history be conceived and practiced *otherwise* than in accordance with historicism's idea of history? Given the complicated status of the "literary" vis-à-vis any traditional notion of epistemological certainty and ontological reality, is it possible to historicize literary texts while doing justice to their literariness? Finally, if modernist literature is often defined by the challenge that it poses to historicist forms of narrating and remembering the past, then what kind of literary history would be attuned to the historicity of modernism? This dissertation proposes an answer to these three questions by developing the "concept" of "historical danger" to designate the intense historicity that irrupts whenever the possibility of appropriating the past—predominantly through the form of a narrative—becomes *impossible*. Rethinking the historicity of history as a *dangerous* experience that deprives the historical subject of the power to secure its position as the ground of historical knowledge, this dissertation also elaborates a concept of *reading danger* to theorize a historical "method" that is better equipped to respond to events that elude the form of presence and resist historicist frames of representation. By reconfiguring literary history as "reading danger," this dissertation seeks to displace the epistemological imperative that often animates literary historiography in favor of an *ethical* approach to the past that emphasizes the instability that marks historical encounters.

The first section of the dissertation, "Reading Danger: Another Literary History," proposes a new definition historicism by retracing its historical "closure." If history for Aristotle was the domain of the accidental and the concrete and was thus incapable of yielding the totality that characterizes philosophy and poetry, historicism turned the past into a possible domain of teleological totalization. When grasped from the point of its closure, historicism emerges as the transposition of an ontology of actuality—an *ergontology*—unto the domain of historical reality. In showing that the determination of the past as a *possible* object of experience and knowledge *for* the historian constitutes the metaphysical decision that structures the very history of historicism, this dissertation seeks to argue that the deconstruction of historicism requires interrupting the ontology that privileges the historian's *presence* as the surreptitious source of history's possibility.

The second part of the dissertation, "Reading Now: Spanish Caribbean Literary Modernism," turns to two literary authors whose work thematizes the historical force of events that threaten the historian's capacity to represent and narrate the past. Through chapter-length readings of Julia de Burgos's elegiac poetry and of Giannina Braschi's engagement with embodiment, I show that these writes invite us to think history *otherwise*. Historicity emerges in their texts as a dangerous event, whose legibility calls into question our capacity to witness and reliably represent history in the *form* of *actuality*.

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Acknowledgments

Y en nosotros nuestros muertos
pa' que nadie quede atrás.

A. Yupanqui, "Los Hermanos"

Since the reader will soon corroborate that this dissertation, which promises to be a study on the theory of literary history, is rather a set of loosely gathered notes on the impossibility of dying *one*, *single* death, it would have been impossible not to begin this *parergon* without mentioning the names of those who have made possible the composition of these pages and who are no longer here:

Donald Mendoza, whose love and vigilance accompanied every step of my childhood until his sudden departure, more than twenty years ago. Later on in life many who knew him would remark that we have much in common, including a somewhat exacerbated tendency to indulge in reflections of a mystical kind.

Delia Rodríguez, who took care of me with devotion both unconditional and infinite, devotion that did nothing but intensify exponentially after Donald's death, until the time came for me to leave her home and our island. But the time of my departure was not only mine, it was also hers: it was then when she was forced to embark on a long and opaque journey towards immemoriality.

Lydia Bonet, my living image of resilience, dignity and joy in the face of so much worldlessness.

Amado A. Pereira, who, more than anybody else, continues to give me undeserved gifts of expropriation from the other side. Friend, model, most excellent paternal prosthesis, the secret referent of all the pages that follow, their intimate addressee, as well as their most efficient cause.

The law of *this* genre is well-known and any degree of familiarity with the impossibility that it prescribes does not absolve anybody from responsibility. For this reason, it is perhaps advisable to adhere to conventions. Therefore, I must above all acknowledge the bonds of transatlantic family love that have sustained me during this decade of devotion to philosophical and literary reflection outside of my home: my mother, Angie, my aunts and uncle, Carmen, Doris, Edna, Zilkya, and Robert, my siblings, Natalia, Arnaldo, Juan Carlos, Katherine, and Ricardo Jesús. Barely a day has passed since 2005 in which I have not asked myself whether the pursuit of a life of study is worth me being separated from you. I must also acknowledge the support of friends, new and old: Rafy and Zoriel, Beatriz and Orlando, Michy, Nicole, Chiara, Wilda, Graciela, Nilda, Modesto and Evelyn, Jaime. These pages pale in comparison with your luminosity.

My time at Emory marks a before and after in my life, and this is mostly because of Christina León. I still do not know what I would do—or, truly, who I would be as a scholar and a person—without your vigilance and our enduring friendship.

Emory and Atlanta were generous to me in many ways, above all in putting in my path friends whose intellectual interlocution and emotional support has made possible seeing this project through. I would like to thank in particular Aaron Goldsman, Mark Stoholski, Matías Bascuñán, Melinda Robb, Ania Kowalik, Taylor Schey, Tze-Yin Teo, Adrian J. Long, Ana María Díaz Burgos, Margarita Pintado, Stu Marvel, Marta Jiménez, Richie Hoffman, Hannah Markley, Perry Guevara, Phillip Meeker and many other friends and colleagues who have heard or read parts of this manuscript, helped me to clarify arguments in our conversations or patiently understood when I had to stay home working on this manuscript. I must also thank Naveen Kanalu for reading most of the dissertation, making helpful corrections, and listening lovingly to my rants against historicism in spite of his own commitments to more traditional ways of thinking history and practicing historiography.

In my academic career, I have been blessed by the support and the vigilance and generosity of incomparable mentors. In chronological order, I would like to acknowledge Isabel Armstrong, who urged me to leave my hometown in order to pursue studies in philosophy in a more serious manner. At Boston College, I had the opportunity to study with kind and engaging scholars whose work still provokes my own: Vanessa Rumble, Richard Kearney, Frances Restuccia, David Rasmussen, John Sallis. But, above all, is Kevin Newmark, who lent me his eyes and who taught me how to read and how to think in reading. I would like to think that this project is as much his as it is mine. I would also like to thank Debbie Rusch for her enduring friendship.

At Emory, I was fortunate to have the chance of being exposed to the work of remarkable scholars whose teaching and scholarship continues to inform my own thinking and writing. I would like to thank, above all, Cathy Caruth, Elissa Marder, Lynne Huffer, Elizabeth Wilson, Elizabeth Goodstein, Ricardo Gutiérrez-Mouat, and Hernán Feldman. I would also like to acknowledge all the support and affection that I have received from Alian Teach since joining the Department of Comparative Literature at Emory in 2008, and later on from Kathy Ly-Nguyen. It has been a pleasure working with you and learning from your combination of warmth and efficiency. During a prolonged stay in Frankfurt am Main, I had the privilege of studying with Werner Hamacher, and spending much time with Mauricio González and María del Rosario Acosta: in their own ways, their thinking and our conversations remain very much present throughout these pages.

Finally, I would like to thank my dissertation committee. Without the diligence and mentorship of Geoffrey Bennington, the patience and trust of José Quiroga, and the enthusiastic support of Andrew J. Mitchell, this project would have never been finished. Thanks for believing in my work from the first moment I arrived at Emory; thank you, above all, for giving me the freedom to pursue this project, even at times in which it was not clear to any of us what the end result was going to be, and for being such different and yet equally exemplary role models of scholarship and mentoring.

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Introduction

Of Literary Events

> *Al negar lo contemporáneo, Borges da en el clavo mohoso de la venganza: la venganza es imposible porque la única posible venganza es el olvido y el olvido es imposible porque el pasado es inconmovible y sólo el recuerdo de ese pasado es modificable. Creo que Borges ha descubierto un antídoto eficaz para el desamor. Pero si Borges niega la existencia 'de un solo tiempo, en el que se eslabonan todos los hechos' y si como luego dice 'todo lenguaje es de índole sucesiva', entonces no hay tiempo en la escritura ni hay escritura en el tiempo. Lo que ahora contaré (o descontaré) realmente no ocurrió, todos esos tiempos siguen siendo absolutos, pero tan absolutos como todos estos tiempos que tomará la escritura de este cuento. Comprendo que la escritura es cómplice del recuerdo y modificará lo que ha pasado. El lector modificará este texto con su lectura. A lo mejor sentirá en alguna línea lo mismo que yo sentí al escribirla.*
>
> (In negating contemporaneity, Borges hits the rusty nail of revenge: revenge is impossible because the only possible revenge is oblivion and oblivion is impossible because the past is unmovable and only the remembrance of this past is modifiable. I believe that Borges has discovered an effective antidote for heartbreak. But if Borges denies the existence 'of a single time in which facts are linked,' then there is no time in writing and no writing in time. What I am about to tell (or untell) really didn't occur, all of those times continue to be absolute, but [they are] just as absolute as all these times that the writing of this story will take. I understand that writing is the accomplice of remembrance and will modify what happened. The reader will modify this text with his reading. Perhaps he will feel in some line just what I felt when I wrote it.)
>
> Manuel Ramos Otero, "Descuento" ("Tale Untold")[1]

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[1] Ramos Otero (1988) 89. Barring a few exceptions, passages from texts not originally written in English are cited in the original language and translated within parentheses in the main text. Translations are mine, unless stated otherwise in a footnote to the translation in question.

1. A History of Nothing: Hayden White *avec* Ramos Otero

My epigraph comes from the last sentences of the opening paragraph of Manuel Ramos Otero's "short story," "Descuento" ("Tale Untold"), the last text in *Página en blanco y staccato* (*Blank Page and Staccato*), a volume of short stories that the Puerto Rican author published in 1987. I wrote "short story" in scare quotes because we should not assume that "Descuento" constitutes a "short story" in any traditional sense of the term. After all, how could this text satisfy the minimal conditions of the genre if its own title announces the undoing of story telling? What would be the generic status of a text that promises to sever the bond that unites a narrative to what it narrates? What kind of text would be capable of achieving this destruction of narrative through its own composition and narration?

The narrator of Ramos Otero's story begins by un-telling his story, interrupting the form of narrative within a text that appears to take a narrative form. If we take the opening paragraph of this story *à la lettre*, we must then assume that everything recounted by this voice is immediately "discounted" through its very inscription. Moreover, the singularity of this story lies not only in the fact that it claims to untell itself in its very narration, but also in the way in which it anticipates and even invites to be *altered* by the reader. Reading here becomes a form of disfiguration that redoubles the disfiguration that already took place *in* and *as* the scene of writing. But since the story's composition is also an alteration, an un-telling of the events that it tells, writing here has the same status as reading: to read is to rewrite and thus to change what was written and to write is to reread and thus to modify what happened. Still, the movement of un-telling that this story identifies as what is "proper" to reading and writing encounters a limit in this story. Although everything can be modified

in the scene of reading and writing, the transmutations that these processes generate take place over an abyss: "Lo que ahora contaré (o descontaré) realmente *no ocurrió*" (Ramos Otero 89, emphases mine) ("What I am about to tell (or untell) really *didn't occur*"). Writing and reading appear in Ramos Otero's story as originary dissimulations that, instead of covering up what has happened, mask that *nothing* has *really occurred*.

"Descuento" would then be a story or a history *of* nothing.

What kind of literary history would be able to do justice to this "story"? What kind of historical narrative about literature might be capable of weaving into its texture a text like "Descuento" without betraying the gesture of "untelling" that de-forms and commands its textuality? Can we turn to the traditional concepts of literary history in order to approach the *scene of history* that Ramos Otero's story invokes from its opening paragraph—a history that coincides with the uncertain possibility of an encounter between the reader and the writer; an encounter in which *nothing* is at stake other than the *trans*formation of both the reader and the writer? For instance, would it suffice to locate Ramos Otero's literary production within the context of the "Generación del 70" ("70s Generation") in order to begin to approach the historical significance of Ramos Otero's work within Puerto Rican and Latin American literary history?[2] Or would it be more appropriate to adopt a broader scope and read Ramos Otero as precursor to the hybridity that is said to characterize Latin American and US Latino/a literary and cultural production since the "advent" of postmodernity?[3] Or

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[2] Ramos Otero was at the center of the "Generación del 70," a group of writers who are credited with modernizing the literary field in Puerto Rican culture. See Barradas (1976) 5, Palmer (2002) 157-69, and Trigo (2009) 481-508.
[3] For influential discourses on postmodernity and hybridity in Latin American studies, see Yúdice (1992) 1-28 and the introduction to García Canclini (1995). For a deconstructive critique of these notions of hybridity, see chapter nine in Moreiras (2000). On Ramos

should a literary history of Ramos Otero's work instead approach this *corpus* by taking as its point of departure the historical constellations that inform the singularity of his *œuvre*: the affirmation of queer survival and embodied pleasure in the midst of the AIDS crisis or his attempt to reexamine the history of Puerto Rico after the consolidation of national communities in the diaspora?[4] What image of Ramos Otero's body of work would these literary histories produce? And how would these approaches incorporate into their accounts the movement of un-telling, de-narrating, and dis-counting that marks the short story "Descuento"? Would they discard it as insignificant or as not significant enough to merit the attention of the critic or the historian?

From a perspective informed by recent debates within Anglo-American criticism, we could read Ramos Otero's gesture of de-narration as evidence of his commitment to the aesthetic and historical project known as "modernism." Consider Hayden White's definition of this term in *The Practical Past*. For White, the specificity of literary modernism lies in its "rejection (diminution, avoidance, abandonment) of narrative, narration, narrativization" (White 94). White's definition challenges historicist interpretations of literary modernism that understand this term primarily as a historical period. For White, the specificity of modernism does not lie in the historical context in which it emerged, but rather in the way in which its poetics undoes what White calls "narrativization," which he defines as "the imposition of a story-form on a series of real events" (White 93-94). For White, the opposition between modernism's undoing of narrative and, for instance, realism's insistence

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Otero's work in relation to the Puerto Rican diaspora, see Sancholuz (2006) 117-138 and Reyes (1996) 63-75.

[4] For readings that emphasize Ramos Otero's queer, marginal poetics, see Morán (2012) 137-162, Lafountain-Stokes (2005) 887-907, Arroyo (2001) 31-54, Ríos Ávila (1998) 111-19.

on presenting historical reality in a narrative form is not a matter of mere aesthetic preference, but goes to the heart of the possibility of having a *historical* relation with history. For White, narrativization is an ideological, and thus *unhistorical* form of poetics that "invites its projected audience to indulge in fantasies of coherence, completion, and fulfillment utterly imaginary in kind which may then function as a solace for the pain of the actual conditions of existence in modernist societies" (White 94). While refraining from establishing any causal link between modernization and/or modernity and literary modernism, White considers the poetics of modernism to be more attuned to "the actual conditions of existence in modernist societies" (White 94). In this way, we could say that whereas any poetics that insists on imposing a narrative form unto history stands in a regressive, if not reactionary relation to modernization, modernism is *historical* precisely because it affirms the incoherence that characterizes history in modernity.

White's approach to modernism offers us valuable resources to reconsider the critical possibilities of this literary-historical category beyond its ambivalent if not outright negative appraisal within cultural studies, long suspicious of modernism's supposed elitism.[5] For instance, a literary history that would regard modernism as a critical poetics would be better equipped to give "Descuento" its due; it would in fact recognize Ramos Otero's story as a brilliant case of his modernist commitments. Rather than shedding light on this story by reconstructing the context in which it emerged, calling a text like "Descuento" *modernist* in White's sense of the term implies analyzing the historical work that is achieved by the poetics that inform its textuality. The historical status of a text like "Descuento" is linked to its

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[5] For examples of this tendency within Latin American studies, see chapter three in Larsen (1990) and chapter two in García Canclini (1995).

demystifying function: by undoing narrative, Ramos Otero's story can help us to attain a higher degree of distance from the narrative framework that continues to grant solidity and coherence to the histories that we tell ourselves to give some shape to our present. If we follow White's notion of modernism, literary form becomes a historical force *in its own right* whenever it displaces the form of narrative and the narrative form. Ramos Otero's commitments to fragmentation and de-narrativization could be seen as attempts to counter the violence of totalizing, foundational narratives. On this account, the *modernity* of Ramos Otero's work would have less to do with its historical context—i.e., its place within the literary history of Puerto Rican, Latin American, or Latino/a cultures—and more to do with the historical stance that is already embedded in the very textuality of a text like "Descuento." Ramos Otero's de-narrativizing modernist fiction could be thus construed as part of an effort to craft a minoritarian aesthetics that would contest the hegemony of literary genres, such as realism, that lend themselves more easily to the political ideologies that require aesthetic totalities, identifiable subjectivities, and historicist histories.

The differences between the two two modes of literary history outlined above are fundamental—they betray a discrepancy about the meaning and the purpose of literary and history, in particular, and of history, in general. We could call "historicist" the first kind of history, since it seeks to reestablish the historical context in which a literary work was produced. White's history, on the contrary, focuses on the historical implications of the poetic structures of a work of literature. If the first type of literary history relies on a *referential* understanding of the literary text's historical meaning, the second locates a crucial layer of historical significance in features that are *intrinsic* to the literary text.

And yet, I would argue that both modes of literary history are ill equipped to respond to the *history of nothing* that seems to take place in "Descuento." Whether this movement of un-telling is read as a representation of a broader constellation of extra-textual historical processes (i.e., modernity or post-modernity, the experience of "sexile" and diasporic migration[6]) or is taken as a key feature of Ramos Otero's modernist poetics of de-narrativization, the history of nothing that marks the singularity of "Descuento" would have been reduced. The de-narration that takes places *in* and *as* this story would have been stabilized in both cases, either through the identification of its *origin* in an extra-textual realm of reality or by turning its own un-telling into the *essence* that secures the modernist credentials of "Descuento." As if the very process of determining the historical significance of a text like "Descuento" required the neutralization of its movement of de-narration, its transformation into another species of narrative.

Would it be possible to pay heed to this movement of un-telling without betraying it? Conversely, if we assume that the betrayal of this self-destructive narration may be unavoidable, could we find any other way of approaching the radicality of this de-narrativization? Another way of telling this *history of nothing* without neutralizing precisely this very "nothing," without reducing this movement of subtraction from narration by grasping it as a mode of negativity? Is this history of nothing to be understood only as a negative mode of narrativization whose historical meaning can be explained by taking its negativity either as a symptom of historical periods, such as modernity or postmodernity or as the very constitutive feature of a specific kind of poetics, such as modernism?

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[6] On the importance of "sexile" in Puerto Rican diasporic cultural production, see La Fountain-Stokes (2008) 294-301.

For the rest of this introduction, I want to sketch out a positive answer to the questions that I just posed above. But before I do so, I would like to take a moment to account for one of the assumptions that has determined implicitly my references to "history" thus far. From the outset, the questions that I have been posing concerning the *historical* significance of Ramos Otero's "Descuento" belong to the discipline or field known as *literary history*. The question therefore arises whether it would be possible to make the case for the importance of this "history of nothing" for the discipline of history *tout court*. Does this instance of de-narrativization have anything to say about the status of narrative in current debates regarding the possibility of historical knowledge in general? Would it be possible to argue that the destruction of narrative that Ramos Otero's text enacts demands not only another *literary* history, but another *history* altogether?

In the Western tradition, the complicated nature of the relation between the writing of histories and poetic or literary modes of composition has been the subject of intense debates since before Aristotle's famous opposition of history and poetry in the *Poetics*: "For the historian and poet differ […] in this, that the one speaks of things that *have* happened, but the other of the sort of things that *might* happen" (Aristotle 32, emphases mine).[7] The importance of this moment in Aristotle's *corpus*, and the persistence of its effects in our theoretical frameworks and our habits of thought, cannot be overstated. In fact, White's own engagement with modernism in *The Practical Past* attests to the actuality of this Aristotelian schema precisely at the moment when he is about to part ways with it:

[7] Although Aristotle's *Poetics* is usually taken as the reference *de rigueur* when it comes to the genealogy of this problem, we know that his own characterization of this distinction is in conversation with a much broader history of sophistic reflections of *mimesis*, *poiesis*, and *historia*. For remarkable analyses of the pre-philosophical Ancient Greek sources for this debate, see the groundbreaking work of Grethlein (2010) and Grethlein (2013).

> With the repudiation of the aestheticist ideology of art and the disidentification of narrative writing with realism, the modernist novel is licensed to abandon as well the 'mimeticism' that had dominated the Western idea of *poiesis* since Aristotle [...]. With the dissociation of art from aesthetics, it was now possible to think of fiction as merely one type or kind of literary writing, so that an artistic treatment of reality—whether past, present, or future—might be quite as 'factual,' might be quite as much about 'reality,' as utilitarian or communicative writing. (White 92)

Since in the first chapter of this dissertation I deal extensively with the moment from Aristotle's *Poetics* that White refers to in the passage cited above, I will limit myself to showing the extent to which White's thinking of modernism remains indebted to Aristotle, even as it departs from the Aristotelian schema.

According to White, it is only with modernist literature that the opposition between history and poetry is finally undone. In other words, the advent of modernism blurs the line that separated the mode of writing that imitates *possibilities* (*ta dunata*) from that which imitates *what has happened* (*ta genomena*), enabling fiction to be "quite as much about 'reality,' as utilitarian or communicative writing" (White 92). Still, for White there is a difference between a literary text that deals with "reality" and a historiographical text that deals with the same "'factual'" content as its literary counterpart. This difference is grounded in an ontological distinction that White establishes—following Michael Oakeshott's argument in *On History and Other Essays*—between two modes of the past: the "historical" and the "practical past." According to White, a modernist work of art that treats a historical

phenomenon like the Middle Passage would not be any *less* historical than a historiographical account of this process. To understand their difference we must instead thematize the kind of past from which these two texts draw their "facts." Whereas the historical past "consists of the referents of those aspects of the past studied and then represented (or presented) in the genres of writing which, by convention, are called 'histories' and are recognized to be such by professional scholars *licensed* to decide what is 'properly' historical and what is not," the practical past designates "the past that people as individuals draw upon in order to help them make assessments and make decisions in ordinary everyday life as well as in extreme situations" (White xiii). Relying on the distinction between the historical past and the practical past, White is able to argue not only for the historical status of modernist literature, but also for its eminent historical function. In fact, White's argument privileges modernist literary explorations of the past over historiographies, since the former challenge the claims of aesthetic totalization that underscore literary genres like the realist novel and narrative-based approaches to historiography. Modernist literature, for White, is better equipped than scientific or scholarly historiography to fulfill the role that history had within Western culture before the advent of historicism: a literary text like W.G. Sebald's *Austerlitz* enables its readers to relate to their practical past in such a way that history, once more, becomes *magistra vitæ* ("life's teacher") (White 99).[8]

If we follow White's approach to the relation between literature and history, we would be in a position to give an affirmative answer to the very general question that I posed above concerning the relation between literature and history. Although their role should not be equated with that of historiographies—which take the historical past, rather than the

[8] On the history of the "demise" of this historical *topos*, see chapter two in Kosselleck (2004).

practical past, as the basis of their narratives—literary texts *do* have an irreducible place in history as historical forces in their own right.

And yet, could we take White's notion of the "practical past" as the basis for a different way of relating to the historical relevance of the "history of nothing" that "Descuento" de-narrates? Do we stand to learn anything about the past from Ramos Otero's story? Does this text convey a historical lesson? Does it give us access to a dimension of the past that historiography, given its commitments to narrativization and a "realist" poetics, cannot but dissimulate? In order to answer these questions, we would have to establish that "Descuento" satisfies the conditions that White lays out in order to determine whether a literary text can be read as an engagement with the practical past. As we saw above, the first condition for a literary text to be classified as historical in the eminent sense that White elaborates in *The Practical Past* is that the text must take as its content "factual," historical reality. It is here that White's debt to Aristotle manifests itself most patently. In spite of claiming that the Aristotelian distinction of poetry or artistic writing and history is outdated, the opposition between *possibility* and *reality*—which provides the ontological ground for Aristotle's opposition of poetry and historiography—continues to structure White's historical framework. White's gesture vis-à-vis Aristotle's *Poetics* does not contest the opposition between poetry and history but rather seeks to expand the definition of historical writing so that it can also encompass those literary texts that activate the practical past, and which were usually regarded as the exclusive province of literature. White's intervention in debates about history and narrative challenges a commonly-held view that neglects the historical status of literary texts, either because they are seen as autonomous, aesthetic objects or because they do

not satisfy the criteria that professional historians have identified in order to establish what counts as a historical narrative. Contesting the historian's conflation of the past as a whole with the historical past, White's use of the category of the practical past opens up a way of rethinking the historical power of literature beyond its representational or mimetic capacities.

And yet, White's theory leaves the ontological decision that enabled Aristotle to distinguish epic poetry from historical chronicles untouched. White's approach to the relation between literature and history continues to rely on the basic presupposition that grounds most historical ontologies, including the ontology of history known as *historicism*: the tacit determination of the past as having the ontological character of *reality*. White's understanding of history thus remains very close to the traditional schema that construes history as the unity of *historia res gestæ* and *historia rerum gestarum*. Hegel is perhaps the most famous exponent of the philosophy of history that takes the unity of these two historical dimensions as an essential characteristic of history as such. In his *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Geschichte* (*Lectures on the Philosophy of History*), he makes this case by insisting on the importance of a certain untranslatability of the Germanic term for history, *Geschichte*, which is built from the verb "*geschehen*," to happen or to occasion. As Hegel points out, the German word for history encompasses "what occurs not any less than the historical narration" ("*das Geschehene nicht minder wie die Geschichtserzählung*") (Hegel 83). Rather than seeing this equivocation as a hindrance or as a mere linguistic accident, Hegel takes it as a sign not only of the intrinsically speculative character of the German language, but also of the spiritual nature of the bond that links history as mode of narration and history as an occurrence or an event that actually happened: "Diese Vereinigung der beiden

Bedeutungen müssen wir für höherer Art als eine bloß Zufälligkeit ansehen: es ist dafür zu halten, das Geschichtserzählung mit eigentlich geschichtlichen Taten und Begebenheiten gleichzeitig erscheine; es ist eine innerliche gemeinsame Grundlage, welche sie zusammen hervortreibt." (Hegel 83) ("We must regard the union of these two meanings as being of a higher kind than a mere coincidence: it is to be held that historical narration appears at the same time as proper historical deeds and incidents; it is an inner, common ground that drives them forth together.") A few sentences later, Hegel identifies the common ground that secures the unity of deed and narration: the existence of the state furnishes "the prose of history" ("*die Prosa der Geschichte*") with a content that is truly appropriate to it ("*geeignet*"), insofar as history itself *emerges* together with the state's prosaic time—more precisely, with the temporality and the historicity that is intrinsic to its customs and its universal laws (Hegel 83). Proper or authentic historical deeds—true *res gestæ*—have their origin in the state because it is only with the state that something like history *as* the unity of deed and narration becomes the necessary stage for spirit itself to appears in itself and for itself. For Hegel, the emergence of the state is coterminous with the rerouting of *Mnemosyne*'s task in a properly historical direction: the goddess of memory is *now* "driven to adjoin the duration of remembrance for the use of the perennial end of this form and constitution of the state" ("*zum Behuf des perennierenden Zweckes dieser Gestaltung und Beschaffenheit des Staates, die Dauer des Andenkens hinzuzufügen getrieben ist*") (Hegel 83).

What Hegel describes here is an eminently *historical* event. History, in the sense of historiography (*Historie*), emerges as a *historical* (*geschichtliche*) event as soon as the structure of memory itself undergoes a trans*formation* with the advent of the state. In turn, the state

requires the prosaicness of historical writing to become the proper medium of remembrance, which acquires its properly-speaking *historical* content as soon as its task is linked to the establishment and the preservation of the concrete universality of the law. The state's innermost *spiritual* activity coincides with the proper *historical* content of history. But what triggers this historical event is a certain crisis, which in a different context could even be called "modernity." History becomes necessary, according to Hegel, precisely when a spiritual-social configuration has emerged that is incapable of attaining its own immediate satisfaction ("*befriedigend*") in the present ("*gegenwärtig*"). Such an immediate unity characterized both the Hegelian family—bound by the principle of love—and the religious community—bound by an asymmetrical relation to the abstract universality of divine law.[9] As opposed to these present and self-sufficient modes of immediate or abstract unity, the unity of the modern state requires *time* and *memory* in order to attain its proper, higher mode of spiritual self-sufficiency. This explains why Hegel claims that the satisfaction, autonomy, and universality that are proper to the state no longer occur *in the present*, but rather in the state's self-consciousness, in the dimension of presence that is capable of integrating the state's present with its past: "die […] Existenz des Staates ist eine unvollständige Gegenwart, deren Verstand zu ihrer Integrierung des Bewußtseins der Vergangenheit bedarf." (Hegel 83-84). ("The existence of the state is an incomplete present, whose comprehension requires the integration of the consciousness of the past.") History becomes the very medium of the state's spiritualization; its prose enables the state to attain *self-understanding*—to be present to itself and to *know* itself—by absorbing the *reality* of its past deeds and laws into the *actuality* of its self-perennializing ("*perennierenden*") *activity*.

[9] On Hegel's family, see Derrida (1974).

In spite of the differences that separate Aristotle, Hegel, and White, their notions of history rest upon the same presupposition: at the most basic level of ontological determination, history is to be grasped as the realm of beings that "have happened" (*ta genomena*, *res gestæ*, *das Gewesene*). Historiography may be understood as a way of writing that imitates the *infinite* accidentality of what has actually emerged (Aristotle), as the medium in which subjectivity (determined *as* the state and in accordance with the state's form of universality) gathers the *totality* of what has been and appropriates it as *its own* externalization (Hegel), or as a genre of composition that is specified in terms of its relation to the historical or the practical past (White). Still, for these thinkers, historiography is *historical* because it deals with what is *real*; it is a praxis that is both sustained by and at the same time enables what Werner Hamacher calls "ergontology."[10] In his essay on literary history, "Über einige Unterschiede zwischen der Geschichte literarischer und der Geschichte phänomenaler Ereignisse" (On Some Differences between the History of Literary and Phenomenal Events), Hamacher mobilizes this term to characterize Hegel's definition of history: "Faßt man den Begriff der Geschichte ebenso radikal ergontologisch wie Hegel, so gibt es Geschichte nur unter der Voraussetzung, daß Handlung und Erkenntnis sich in der Erscheinung als ihrem Korrespondenzmedium durchdringen und durch es sich ineinander und in sich selbst verwandeln können" (Hamacher 166-67). ("If one grasps the concept of history as radically ergontologically as Hegel, then there is history only under the presupposition that action and knowledge interpenetrate each other in appearances as the medium of their correspondence and through it they could change into each other and in themselves.") History appears, and its very appearance attests to the unity of praxis and

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[10] For Hamacher's most famous exposition of this motif, see Hamacher (2002) 155-200.

theory, of action and science, of reality and ideality. But history's appearance is its own *ergon*; its sheer auto-production bears witness to the actuality of the subject, which always commands in advance the transformation of the contingency of deeds into possibilities that are already pre-determined in view to their actualization. It is thus that history is knowledge in action. Conversely, White's reorientation of history as a practical matter takes for granted that past deeds *must* have the ontological status of *real things*.[11] Although his commitment to the historical function of modernist de-narrativization indicates his distance from both an Aristotelian rejection of historiography and from Hegel's totalizing theory of history, White's notion of the practical past and the privilege that he grants to literary texts that narrate deeds that actually occurred clarify the extent to which his concept of history remains committed to an *ergon*tological determination of what could be said to be historical.

To return to Ramos Otero, it is not just that White's notion of literary modernism is at odds with the force of Ramos Otero's "modernist" gesture *par excellence*; his understanding of the historical function of literature requires the neutralization of the "nothing" that is at stake in "Descuento." Whereas, for White, the past as a whole is marked by having *actually* occurred, a text like "Descuento" characterizes its own historiographical labor as the un-doing of deeds that never actually occurred and that do not even have the status of poetic possibilities (*ta dunata*) that Aristotle theorizes in the *Poetics*. "Descuento" would be best described as something like a disjointed *historia nihilum gestæ* and a *historia nihilōrum gestarum*: a history *of* nothing (objective genitive), since the deeds that it recounts did not occurred, and a history *of* nothing (subjective genitive), since its own recounting *gives*

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[11] For a strong elaboration of the connection *between* the concepts of reality (*Realität*) and thing (*res*), see paragraph 43 in Heidegger (2006).

this nothing to be reread and further transformed. “Descuento” would thus be an ab-errant narration at a distance from the sphere of *historia*, traditionally construed. Perhaps an impossible history of the impossible.

2. Another History: A Sketch

In spite of White’s criticisms of traditional “historicist” approaches to historiography and history, his concepts of literary modernism and the practical past can hardly help us to read Ramos Otero’s “Descuento” without neutralizing this text’s *history of nothing*, without diminishing the radicality of its de-narrativizing wager. Another notion of history would thus be required.

In this section, I want to sketch this *other history* by staging an *Auseinandersetzung* (a confrontation, or, more literally, the act of setting apart one thing from another) with White’s way of characterizing the relation between literature and history. Though I have been engaging with *The Practical Past* significantly since the beginning of this introduction, I want to isolate the three aspects of White’s approach that are most important for my project: 1. The relation between history and ethics. 2. The historicity of literature and the status of literary history. 3. The relation between periodization, historicism, and modernity. I want to lay out the basic theoretical groundwork of this dissertation in conversation with White because of the strong affinities between my project and his work. Above all, I am sympathetic to White’s displacement of the epistemological bent of traditional approaches to history in favor of an ethical understanding of our engagement with the past. I also share White’s efforts to rethink the historical function of literary texts beyond their capacity to refer or represent an external reality. And yet, I find White’s way of framing these two issues, as well

as the answers that he offers, unsatisfying. Tracing how my own project departs from White's approach to the relation between literature and history thus allows me to clarify the theoretical positions that inform this dissertation, as well as anticipate the main arguments and reading strategies of the chapters that follow.

a. *History and ethics.* This issue plays a central role in White's attempt to theorize history otherwise; in fact, it is for the sake of thematizing the importance of ethics in history that White turns to Oakeshott's *On History and Other Essays* in order to expand on Oakeshott's distinction between the historical and the practical past. We saw that White's approach to the practical past challenges two of the dogmas of hegemonic historiography: on the one hand, the traditional historian's conflation of historiography and the historical past with history as such; on the other hand, the methodological assumption that historiography can be done in a manner analogous to the "exactness" that characterizes research in the natural sciences. White:

> As it turned out, the modern project of turning history into a science took the form of protecting it from a host of nonscientific or antiscientific practices: of which […] literature or fiction in general, metaphysics, and ideology were the principal kinds. […] But in the process, history had to cede its place among the moral sciences and its function as an *organon of ethical reflection*. The 'scientific' status of history was saved but at the cost of history's demotion from its traditional role as *magistra vitæ* to that of a second-order, fact-collecting enterprise. (White 97, emphases mine)[12]

[12] White's phrase "organon of ethical reflection" could be traced back to Walter Benjamin's essay on literary history, "Der heutige Stand der Wissenschaften XII. Literaturgeschichte und

The notion of the practical past is thus meant to restore history to its eminently *ethical* role, allowing us to "gain awareness of a richer array of conditions which have been experienced as the field whereon identities can be forged or fashioned" (White 102).

In this dissertation, I also focus on history's *ethical* import. Like White, this project rethinks history away from the epistemological imperative that usually animates historiography and brings it closer to what I would call an *ethics of historical reading*. But I differ from White insofar as I do not locate the ethics of history as what enables an "individual subject to take responsibility for the authenticity if not the truthfulness of a version of where one had come from, who one was, and what future one had a right to choose for oneself" (White 99). Although I retain his insistence on the notion of "responsibility" as a crucial aspect of history, I understand "responsibility" as a mode of responsiveness that dis-places the "individual subject" and the "authenticity" of its life-story from the privileged position that White grants them. As opposed to White's pragmatic and agentialist notion of ethics, my understanding of ethics stems from a *post*-Levinasian tradition, in which ethics names the radical experience of awakening to the primacy of *alterity*, which the history of ontology and the ontology of history have managed to dissimulate through their insistence on sameness.

In order to clarify in which sense I understand the term "post-Levinasian" ethics, I

Literaturwissenschaft" ("The Current Status of Sciences XII: Literary History and the Study of Literature") published in *Kritiken und Rezensionen*. In this essay Benjamin proposes a methodology of literary history that would enable literature to "become an organon of history" ("*Damit wird die Literatur in Organon der Geschichte*") (Benjamin 312). This formulation, in turn, is Benjamin's own variation of his long-standing engagement with the motifs of the "organon" and the "organ," which he adopts from Novalis, and which plays a major role in his reflections on art and history since his dissertation on the German Romantics. See Benjamin (2008) 6-131.

would like to offer a sustained reading of several crucial passages from Emmanuel Levinas's *Autrement qu'être ou au-delà de l'essence* that shed light on Levinas's thinking regarding alterity, ontology, time, and history. Before I do so, I must note that the phrase "ethics of historical reading" is a variation on the title of J. Hillis Miller's *The Ethics of Reading: Kant, de Man, Elliot, Trollope, James, and Benjamin*. Although in a recent interview Hillis Miller claims to be skeptical vis-à-vis the pertinence of the notion of "*tout autre*" or the "wholly other" for a thinking of ethics,[13] his notion of the "ethical moment" of reading unfolds within a theoretical space opened up by Levinas's rethinking of ethics as *prima philosophia*. In the first chapter of *The Ethics of Reading*, Miller outlines the two aspects that constitute literary reading's "ethical moment:" on the one hand, reading is traversed by an imperative, a "must" (Hillis Miller 4). The text has a performative force that necessarily interpellates the reader into a realm marked by the primacy of *respons*ibility: the necessity of *responding* to the text's demand to be read according to its singularity (Miller 4). On the other hand, an ethics of reading leads to a particular kind of "action," to a specific mode of decision that cannot be understood by analogy with other modes of acting, i.e., political, historical, cognitive, etc., since the terms of the decision are informed by the singular encounter with the interpellative force of the text that demands to be read (Miller 4-5). Reading for Miller has an intrinsically ethical charge, involving a complex mode of "relation" between the reader and the text.

It is not difficult to see the traces of Levinas's notion of ethics in Miller's approach to the "ethical moment" in literary reading. Levinas's rethinking of ethics as *prima philosophia* is articulated most forcefully in his two major philosophical works: *Totalité et infini* (*Totality*

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[13] For Miller's confession of skepticism, see del Río-Álvaro and Collado-Rodríguez (2006): 23-34.

and Infinity) and *Autrement qu'être ou au-delà de l'essence* (*Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*). Perhaps the concept that best captures the ethical exigency that motivates Levinas's thinking is the notion of "désintéressement" "(disinterestedness)," which is at work from the first chapter of *Autrement qu'être ou au-delà de l'essence*. Levinas introduces this notion as part of his general project of rethinking subjectivity and signification as structures that transcend the ontological dyad of being and essence, leading to a thinking of transcendence that eludes the strictures of Western ontology:

> Le sujet qui n'est plus un moi—mais que je suis moi—n'est pas susceptible de généralisation, n'est pas un sujet en général, ce qui revient à passer du Moi à moi qui suis moi et pas un autre. L'identité du sujet tient ici en effet a l'impossibilité de se dérober à la responsabilité, à la prise en charge de l'autre. Signification, dire—mon expressivité, ma signifiance de signe, ma verbalité de verbe, ne peut se comprendre comme une modalité de l'être: le désintéressement suspend l'essence (Levinas 29).
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> (The subject, which is not anymore an ego—but which I myself am—is not susceptible to generalization, it is not a subject in general, which amounts to going from the Ego to the ego which I am and not another. Indeed, the identity of the subject here lies in the impossibility of withdrawing from responsibility, from taking care of the other. Signification, saying—my expressivity, my significance of sign, my verbality of verb, cannot be understood as a modality of being: disinterestedness suspends essence.)

Disinterestedness suspends essence for Levinas because essence is a name for the way in

which the history *of* ontology grants primacy to a being's originary interest in enduring in its being. If, for Levinas, "*esse* est *interesse*" ("*esse* (being) is *interesse* (interest)") (Levinas 15), then this should be read in at least two different ways: on the one hand, the "meaning" of being or its essence lies in the originary structure of interest-in-being. In this sense, essence thematizes the conditions of existence that obtain in a world in which every being is inaugurated by the totalizing positivity of its *conatus* and is thus compelled to insist in its self-interest and persist in being-*its-own*-being (Levinas 15). On the other hand, being is "*inter-esse*" in the sense of being-in-between-being: to be is always already to persist in a totalized, historical world of beings that are compelled by their essence to coincide fully with their originary egoism. This is what in *Totalité et infini* Levinas calls "war" ("*la guerre*"), which for him coincides with historical time *as such*: war and history are modes that obtain within a world understood as a totality of beings whose purely horizontal relations among each other dissimulate the an-originarity and the asymmetric verticality of the relation to the other in its alterity.[14]

With this context in mind, we can begin to see how Levinas's notion of *dis*interestedness constitutes an attempt to think in the wake of this an-ontological relation to the other that precedes the presence of the ego and thus eludes the time and the space of the ego's consciousness and freedom. The radicality of Levinas's notion of disinterestedness comes to the fore even more forcefully in a later moment in *Autrement qu'être ou au-delà de l'essence*. In the first chapter of the section "Exposition" ("*L'exposition*"), Levinas writes for the first time the word "disinterestedness" by hyphenating it: "désintéressement" becomes "dés-intéressement." Levinas:

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[14] See the preface to Levinas (1961) and the second paragraph in the first chapter of Levinas (1974).

> Absolution qui inverse l'essence: non pas négation de l'essence mais dés-intéressement, un 'autrement qu'être' s'en allant en 'pour l'autre,' brûlant pour l'autre, y consumant les assises de toute position pour soi et toute substantialisation qui prendrait corps de par cette consumation, et jusqu'aux cendres de cette consumation—où tout risque de renaitre. […]Le retournement du Moi en Soi—la dé-position ou la de-stitution du Moi c'est la modalité même du dés-intéressement en guise de vie corporelle vouée a l'expression et au donner, mais vouée et non pas se vouant: un soi malgré soi, dans l'incarnation comme possibilité même d'offrande, de souffrance et de traumatisme. (Levinas 85-86)
>
> (Absolution that inverts essence: not the negation of essence but dis-interestedness, an "otherwise than being" going away into "for the other," burning for the other, consuming there the bases of all position for itself and of all substantialization that might be embodied through this consummation, and up to the ashes of this consummation—where everything risks being reborn. […] The reversal of ego into self—the de-position or the de-stitution of the ego is the very modality of dis-interestedness by way of a corporeal life vowed to expression and giving, but vowed and not vowing itself: a self in spite of itself, in incarnation as the very possibility of an offering, suffering, and traumatism.)

The splintering of the privative prefix "des-" from the word "intéressement" is meant to highlight the strange mode of non-negative nothing, the pre-originarity of the privation that

characterizes the transcendentality of the relation to the other. The necessity of this recourse to a mode of nothing that exceeds the negativity of non-being and thus cannot be said to have the status of the mere negation of essence is at work from the beginning of *Autrement qu'être ou au-delà de l'essence*.[15] Within the economy of Levinas's argument, the gesture of hyphenating the privative prefix "dés-" registers the same concern that moves Hamacher to coin the term "ergontological" when he describes Hegel's concept of history: the history of ontology and the ontology of history are *ergon*-tologies. If we follow Levinas, ontology's own inauguration occurs through the originary conversion of nothing into non-being (*me on*) and privation (*steresis*): ontology gives itself to itself by declining or inflecting the nothing as a derivative function of being (*on*) and presence (*ousia*) *from its very origin*. If ontology for Levinas is *interest*, this conflation holds even at the highest level of ontology's *ego*-logical determination. For ontology's interest in itself coincides with its interest in deciding that its other—i.e., nothing—has always been *its* other. The e*labor*ation of this inversion is ontology's *ergon*. Through ontology's *operation*, the nothing *labors*; it becomes the negative whose very non-identity lies in its capacity to install, through its own exclusion, the totality of beings as particularizations of an ultra-immanent *conatus* that is the being of totality: a persistent *drive-to-be*.

The primary of *ethics* for Levinas lies in its transcendentality, which interrupts the immanent drive-to-be that *is* the very activity of ontology, of *ergon*tology. The gesture of splintering the word "dés-intéressement" is meant to convey this interruption: the experience of the "dés-" of "dés-intéressement" remits us to a "privation" that, paradoxically, *must* have anteceded its own originary determination as the mere negation of essence. The "dés-"

[15] See in particular Levinas (1974) 14.

conveys the strange mode of "anteriority" that characterizes the movement of "de-position" and "de-stitution" in which the self is brought into an irreducible relation to the other. This destitution is radical without being *at* the origin: it not only deprives this self of any stability, but also prevents this self from ever *dwelling* in relationality—i.e., the dimension marked by the structure of "pour-l'autre" or for-the-other. The self cannot occupy the for-the-other *long enough* for it to acquire a present that it could then modify into a past-*present*. Conversely, relationality cannot appear to the self as a constituted space: the self cannot but give up the possibility of grabbing its chrono-topological bearings. There is no position that would belong to the self in the dimension of the for-the-other, no place from which the self could resume the labor of e(r)go-onto-logical determination. The self is dispossessed of its power to have power, to possess itself by turning its for-the-other into a *being*-for-the-other, converting the relation to the *other* into the *phenomenal* time-space in which the other appears to the ego as having already become *its* other: an other-for-the-self that stands within the ego's self-generated ontological continuum and amount to an other that is ultimately the same as the self itself.

Levinas's recourse to the figure of ashes and his implicit reference to a Phoenix-like conflagration pushes the radicality of dis-interestedness even further. The self is so de-posed from the position of the ego that it cannot even determine itself from the minimal space that would have been produced through its hetero-combustion—its "burning for the other." These ashes are not *of* the self; in fact, the self is even deprived of these ashes, which would have perhaps enabled the self to launch a *meontology*, an ontology of non-being or of the nothing. For even these remainders are consumed by the "blazing fire." The infinite

transcendence that is released in this exceptional relation engulfs even the very traces of the ego's conflagration, consuming the remnants of its consumption, depriving the self of what it could have otherwise regarded as *its* nothing, its last ego-logical refuge. Levinas's self emerges in the experience of dis-interestedness, which deprives the self from the possibility of ever relating to the other in a way that would enable the self to insist and persist in its *egoity*. Not even the minimal mode of an ego-remainder—a self that would be made only of *its own* ashes—is to be spared. Even the self's ashes are *due* to the other.

I want to conclude this brief excursus through Levinas's thinking of dis-interestedness in *Autrement qu'être ou au-delà de l'essence* by briefly analyzing the relation between the notion of disinterestedness and the question of time and history. For Levinas, the exposure of the self to the event of transcendence also implies the interruption of the circle of homogenous time, which is formalized under the *aegis* of a consciousness that is determined solely as presence. The relation to the other is also a relation to a "past" that *cannot* be regarded as a modification of the present and for this reason is not at the disposal of the ego's essential determination as presence (Levinas 23). But this past, which never passed before any consciousness and thus has no presence, not only leaves its trace in the self and assigns it to an irreducible and infinite responsibility, but also imprints upon this responsibility the "temporal" character of an "always already"—a "*je schon*" or "*toujours déjà*"—the "time" of a non-spatial, non-temporal anteriority that signals to the transcendence of the other that comes before the self (Levinas 24).

As opposed to the temporality of being, essence, and interest, dis-interestedness is experienced as "[t]his wrenching from itself, from the core of its unity, this absolute non-

coincidence, this dia-chrony of the instant," which, for Levinas, "signify by way of the one-penetrated-by-the-other." *("[c]et arrachement à soi, au sein de son unité, cette absolue non-coïncidence, cette dia-chronie de l'instant signifient en guise de l'un-pénétré-par-l'autre.*") (Levinas 84-85). Levinas's recourse in this passage to the notion of diachrony clarifies the extent to which an ethics of disinterestedness requires rethinking time. To unfold this *other* notion of time, we would have to pay attention to Levinas's decision to split the word "dia-chronie" ("dia-chrony") into its prefix, "dia-" and its root "chronie." This choice could be seen as mirroring in a way the splintering of the term "dis-interestedness" that I analyzed above. Not unlike *dis*-interestedness, *dia*-chronicity is not to be seen as the mere opposite of *syn*chronicity, a temporal mode of unification that would stand in solidarity with the regime of being and essence. The dia-chronic instant does not have the character of a *simple* moment that could come to *pass* and which the ego could recover through an act of *Vergegenwärtigung* or presentification. The severing of the Greek prefix *dia-* from the noun *chronos* points instead towards a certain *achronicity*—an interruption *of* succession—which is not to be confused with the traditional concept of a *syn*chronic eternity. Thus, it could be said that Levinas's understanding of the dia-chonic character of this instant turns the prefix "*dia-*" into an allegorical mark: a term that is most often translated in English as "through" (or in some cases as "by" or "by way of") and which most often denotes the completion of a passage or the motion of passing through a certain well-defined passage is made to signify *otherwise*, i.e., a time that not only exceeds the time of succession, but even that time which Husserl takes as the absolute flow of absolute subjectivity—and for which we may still lack a name.[16] For

[16] See paragraph 37 in Husserl (2000). For an earlier and inchoate articulation of the motif of the absolute flow, see Husserl (1965) 36-37/312-13.

this reason, the prefix "dia-" in Levinas's "dia-chronie" should perhaps be read with the "dia-" of Aristotle's "diaporia" in mind. In this nominative form, "diaporia" is a construction that belongs to the history of Aristotle's reception, where it is often used to designate one of the features of Aristotle's method, best exemplified in Book III of the *Metaphysics*,[17] namely, the "working *through* of opinions" (Spranzi 46, emphasis mine) or a "puzzling *through*" (Smith, emphasis mine) of what has been said about a topic. In Aristotle's own text, however, the term appears only as a conjugated form of the verb "diaporeo," where the prefix "*dia-*" does not mean a "passage" or a going through—much less a *working* through—but rather an intensification of the "aporeo," which is derived from the noun *aporia*, and which means to have no means of passage, to be at an impasse. A "diaporia" that truly took its bearings from Aristotle's text would be rather something like an *aporetic aporia*: an aporia that remains at a loss even about being itself an aporia.[18] With this "meaning" of the "*dia*" in mind, we are perhaps in a better position to read the dia-chrony of Levinas's instant. If *chronos* is conceived of in an implicit analogy with *poros* as the passing of time, the *dia*-chronic character of this instant is rather an intensification that *un*times time, that pulls time from the mode of succession and extension: an *intensive* time that turns the instant into not only a time that cannot pass, but that is also uncertain about whether it is actually at an impasse.[19]

The paradoxical status of this instant contains another *irony*, which might, after all, justify the allegorical intention that informs Levinas's gesture of making the prefix "*dia-*" say

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[17] See Aristotle (1924) 995a35.
[18] On the grammatical status of "*dia-*," see Smyth (1984) 374-75. For a reinscription of the name "*Diaporia*" that informs my approach to this question, see Derrida (1996) 33 and Hamacher (2012) 211. On the ultimate aporia, see Derrida (1996) 44-48.
[19] The reference to intensity here should not be taken in a strictly Bergsonian or Deleuzian sense, though Levinas never ceased to acknowledge Bergson for his notion of time. See Levinas (1982) 18.

the opposite of what it usually means. For, after all, a *certain* way of passing is nonetheless at stake in this dia-chronic instant. To grasp this *other* way of passing, we must keep in mind not only that this instant is marked by "absolute non-coincidence" ("*absolue non-coïncidence*"), but also that this non-coincidence comes to signification in the structure of the "one-penetrated-by-the-other" ("*l'un-pénétré-par-l'autre*") (Levinas 87-88). Whereas the first formula points to the infinity of the instant's dis-location, the latter introduces the asymmetry of the relation to the other *in* each instance of this splintered instant. Thus, Levinas's way of *untiming* time is at the same time a way of *timing* time at the incommensurable measure of the ethical relation to the wholly other. The *time* of the *ethical* requires that the instant be rethought, away from the value of *sim*-plicity that the Western tradition has always ascribed to it and removed from any notion of the instant as *in*trinsically *com*-plex and *in*ternally differentiated. Levinas's instant is neither simple nor complex because it is unhinged from its very center; it is an ex-centric instant whose pre-originary multiplicity cannot be synthesized into a unity or broken down into smaller units that could be then juxtaposed and constitute a series, giving way to something like a complex arrangement of micro-instants, a set or a *comm-unity* of temporal units. For this instant is not split *in* itself; it is rather split *out* of itself and displaced unto the infinity of its non-coincidence, which deprives it of the possibility of ever achieving unification. Only under this mode of exteriority could something like the instantaneity of the instant be conceived and a time for the dis-interested self—the self without ego, in the singularity of its accusative ipseity—be thought. It is also in this way that Levinas's notion of time opens unto a passage or a passing that does not pass, which authorizes the allegorical use of the lexicon of

diachrony. "Le temps se passe. [...] C'est comme sénescence par-delà la récupération de la mémoire, que le temps—temps perdu sans retour—est diachronie et me concerne" (Levinas 88). ("Time passes itself. [...]It is as senescence, besides the recuperation of memory, that time—time lost without return—is diachrony and concerns me.") The instant is never synchronous with itself, rather it *passes* by itself and is thus always in relation to an*other* instant that *this* instant which passed itself by cannot retrieve or anticipate. The dia-chronic instant is thus the place in which an absolute *past* occurs, without ever emerging, without coming-to-be or *passing* away. It is rather an instant that has already past: an absolute past that ex-poses the self and expels it from its egoity, making its time pass itself by without any succession and exposing its time as an altered time that belongs to the other. The *ethical* time of dis-interestedness—the time of a self without ego and without presence—is inflected as the instant's *self-passing* that cannot surpass the alterity of the other instant or leave it behind, but rather is exposed to its unretrivability and immemoriality.

After taking this rather long excursus through Levinas's thinking of dis-interestedness in *Autrement qu'être ou au-delà de l'essence* we are in a better position to measure the distance that separates the *ethics of historical reading* that this dissertation seeks to elaborate, from White's approach, which understands the ethics of history in terms of the opposition between the historical and the practical past. In fact, our notions of ethics are antithetical: whereas White hopes to displace the primacy of historiography and restore history's role as *magistra vitæ* by recuperating a notion of history that is linked to authenticity and action, rather than historicism's truth and erudition, I follow Levinas's notion of ethics by theorizing history's ethical moment as an encounter with alterity in which the reader is *no longer capable*

of appropriating the past into *its* own history and turns the past into the object of a history of a self that is in possession of itself.

At the same time, the "ethics of historical reading" that I elaborate here belongs to a post-Levinasian tradition precisely because it departs in significant aspects from Levinas's own views on ethics in relation to time and history. I take *ethics* neither as a program nor as *prima philosophia*, but rather as a strategic and provisional metaphor, chosen because its own *history* has seen the decisive inflection of its semantic field within contemporary theoretical discourse towards a thinking of radical difference. It is in this sense, for instance, that Judith Butler mobilizes the term in *Giving an Account of Oneself*:

> [...] we must recognize that ethics requires us to *risk* ourselves precisely at moments of unknowingness [...]. To be undone by another is a primary necessity, an anguish, to be sure, but also a chance—to be addressed, claimed, bound to what is not me, but also to be moved, to be prompted to act, to address myself elsewhere, and so to *vacate the self-sufficient 'I' as a kind of possession* (Butler 136, emphases mine).

My use of "ethics" throughout the dissertation resonates with Butler's post-Levinasian ethics of a self that would not be self-sufficient and could only experience itself in the risky, dangerous moment of exposure to the unknown. At the same time, my own theoretical intention is close to the critique of Levinas that is at work in Derrida's notion of "hyper-ethics," which he mobilizes in later texts, such as *Voyous: Deux essais sur la raison* (*Rogues: Two Essays on Reason*),[20] but which draws from insights contained in his 1965 essay on

[20] Derrida's "hyper-ethics" is also a "hyper-politics" ("*hyper-politique*") that "carries itself unconditionally beyond the economic circle of duty and the task" ("*se porte*

Levinas, "Violence et métaphysique: Essai sur la pensée d'Emmanuel Levinas" ("Violence and Metaphysics: Essay on the Thought of Emmanuel Levinas), published in *L'écriture et différence* (*Writing and Difference*). In particular, my attempt to elaborate an "ethics of historical reading" follows Derrida in reading Levinas's ethics against the grain of its explicit rejection of the ethicality of the historical. Levinas's philosophy dissociates the ethical from the historical because he presupposes that history cannot be thought otherwise than as a form of ego-logical remembrance that must necessarily take the form of a poetics of *epic* reappropriation that neutralizes the immemoriality of the past, depriving the past of its irretrievability and alterity. This accounts for Levinas's systematic subordination of politics to ethics and of history to eschatology, a distinction that ultimately refers back to the difference that Levinas establishes throughout his corpus between the horizontal immanence of the "*conatological*" war of interest and the vertical transcendentality of eschatological peace.[21] Derrida challenges precisely this aspect of Levinas's philosophy in "Violence et métaphysique" ("Violence and Metaphysics"). For Derrida, Levinas's reduction of the transcendentality of historicity in favor of eschatology as the site of true transcendence deprives history of any alterity. Rather than denying the possibility of *another* history, Derrida insists, *contra* Levinas, that history "is not history in the sense that Levinas gives to it (totality), but rather it is the history of exits outside of totality, history as the very movement of transcendence, of the excess above totality without which no totality would appear. History is not the totality that eschatology, metaphysics, or speech transcend. It is transcendence itself." ("*n'est pas l'histoire des sorties hors de la totalité, histoire comme le*

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inconditionnellement au-delà du cercle économique du devoir ou de la tâche"). See Derrida (2002) 210.

[21] For one of the latest formulations of this distinction, see Levinas (1982) 75.

movement même de la transcendance, de l'excès sur la totalité sans lequel aucune totalité n'apparaîtrait. L'histoire n'est pas la totalité transcendée par l'eschatologie, la métaphysique ou la parole. Elle est la transcendance elle-même") (Derrida 173).

Besides Derrida, my dissertation also takes a cue from Walter Benjamin, whose concept of an excessive, hyperbolic history resonates with Derrida's critique of Levinas.[22] For instance, in *Das Passagen-Werk* (*The Arcades Project*) Benjamin rethinks "authentic" ("*eigentlich*") historical time on the basis of what he calls "*Jetztzeit*" or "now-time." The time of the now configures historical knowledge as an irreducibly *dangerous* (*gefährlich*) practice of reading that takes place in the site of an encounter between a past that cannot be retrieved and the "now" of historical reading. For Benjamin, historical encounters only occur on the condition that the historian ceases to function as the ego of historical knowledge. Deprived of intentionality, history becomes thinkable as the irruption in the *now* of an immemorial past. Thinking in the wake of Benjamin, Levinas, Derrida, and Butler, this dissertation moves towards a concept of history that opens the historical to the hyper-ethicality of a dangerous encounter whose taking place is never guaranteed, since the only possible index of its occasion would consists of an "experience" that deprives us of the very possibility of having an experience in a phenomenological sense. As *reading danger*, history becomes thinkable as a form of expropriation that is properly speaking impossible to experience, since its radicality is such that it deprives the present of its presence and the now of its self-sufficient instantaneity. Reading danger removes the historian from the stability of a subjective, egological position, the place from a sovereign self projects its backward glance and safeguards the very *possibility* of history.

[22] See Benjamin (1991) 203-04 and Benjamin (1991b) 577-78.

b. *The historicity of literature and the status of literary history.* For White, literary texts have a historical function that fluctuates according to their poetic structure: whereas texts that fall on the side of realism often rely on the historical past in order to provide a sense of a totalizing communitarian or trans-individual narrative, de-narrativizing narratives activate the practical past: the non-totalizable "depository" of memories, experiences, events and stories that we rely on in order to construct and reconstruct our identities in the midst of a fluctuating, de-substantialized world. It is here that White's argument for an ethical approach to history relates to both his critique of contemporary historiography and the privilege he grants to literary modernism as an eminently historical mode of literary writing. Although I appreciate White's expansion of the historical function of literary texts beyond their capacity to represent an epoch or a period of the past, I understand literature's historicity rather differently. Instead of being charged with the task of producing "practical" accounts that serve as a provisional, fragmented, and illusory *ground* for our own individual and collective identities (White 103), I locate the historical force of literature as an event that *occurs in* the scene of writing/reading. The opening paragraph of Ramos Otero's "Descuento" provides a telling example of the intensification of time and history that takes place in the moment of reading: "Lo que ahora contaré (o descontaré) realmente no ocurrió, todos esos tiempos siguen siendo absolutos, pero tan absolutos como todos estos tiempos que tomará la escritura de este cuento. Comprendo que la escritura es cómplice del recuerdo y modificará lo que ha pasado. El lector modificará este texto con su lectura" (Ramos Otero 89). ("What I am about to tell (or untell) really didn't occur, all of those times continue to be absolute, but [they are] just as absolute as all these times that the writing of this story will

take. I understand that writing is the accomplice of remembrance and will modify what happened. The reader will modify this text with his reading.") The figure of the writer and the reader within Ramos Otero's story are thematized as undergoing a historico-temporal *crisis*: time becomes other than itself and history can be seen only under the mode of an irreducible and original alteration. The writer becomes the reader of a story which is no longer the writer's property, the reader becomes the writer of a story that will engender *other* readings/writings unto infinity without ever coming *to its own*.

My post-Levinasian approach to the ethical import of history goes in tandem with a rethinking of the *historicity* of literature in terms of what I call, following Benjamin, "reading danger." Rather than offering a historical methodology, reading danger names a way of *responding* to the past that does not seek to overcome its alterity, but rather registers the instability that marks temporal (mis)encounters. "Reading danger" redirects our attention away from the task of elaborating the historical identity of the past: to read dangerously is to stay within a *scene of history* that is at the same time understood as a scene of reading and writing. But writing and reading here have parted ways with the notion that literature's historical function lies in its capacity to represent the past or in the historical semantics embedded in its poetics: the historicity of literature irrupts as a force that traverses the encounter with the past, suspending our capacity to narrate, and unhinging our present.

The second part of this dissertation develops this notion of literary historicity concretely by Julia de Burgos's poems "!Dadme mi número!" ("I myself was my own route") and Giannina Braschi's *Yo-Yo Boing!*. These literary texts stage their own complicated relation to their historical present, betraying their incapacity to occupy the hegemonic

historico-temporal position from which the past can be gathered, narrated, and judged. Indeed, these texts thematize a relation to time and history that no longer asserts the sovereignty of the subject *as* the site in which the historical could be constituted. Delegitimizing their own historicist interpretations; de Burgos and Braschi invite us to rethink both history and literary history away from the ergontology of history that requires the transformation of contingency into the possibility of a historical narrative.

Finally, White's dismissal of "scientific" historiography allows me to clarify my own stance vis-à-vis literary history as a discipline. Although my project also criticizes traditional literary historiography, our critiques do not share the same grounds and do not lead to the same conclusions. White's negative appraisal of historiography—inspired not only by Oakeshott, but also by Friedrich Nietzsche[23]—rests on the distinction between the historical and the practical past. For White, historicism names the ideological conflation of history with the historical past, which not only renders illegible the ethical claims of non-historiographical engagements with history, but also perpetuates the monopoly that professional historians have on the field of the historical (White 99).

My critique of the historicism that underlies "scientific" historiography encompasses even what White would characterize as the non-historicist, poetic approaches to the practical past. In order to make this argument, this dissertation redefines historicism as a historical ontology—an ergontology—that neutralizes the alterity of the past by presupposing that historical events have the categorial status of reality—*historia res gestæ*—and that the historian's subjectivity constitutes the ultimate ground and the condition of possibility for the elaboration of historical realities in the form of a historical narrative—*historia rerum*

[23] See the foreword to the second untimely meditation, Nietzsche (1999).

gestarum. The concept of historicism that I elaborate in this dissertation encompasses even White's own presumably "non-historicist" approach to the practical past, which coincides with traditional historicism in foreclosing a more robust engagement with the ethics of history. Conversely, by dissociating historiography from historicism and theorizing an alternative to the latter, I leave the door open for a more robust literary history that would challenge the ontology of *reality* and *actuality* that lies at the basis of historicism, without completely abandoning the task of literary-historical scholarship and the disciplinary space of literary history.

The first section of this dissertation is devoted to the task of reopening the question of historical alterity from within the field of literary history by redefining historicism in the terms that I outlined above. The first two chapters of this section reexamine current debates in the fields of literary history and of history. Then, the following two chapters engage with the critiques of historicism proposed by philosophers and theorists such as Walter Benjamin, Martin Heidegger, and Jacques Derrida. As I will show, these three continental thinkers contest the epistemological bent of "scientific" historiography, while also opening up the possibility of reconfiguring historical knowledge as a *hyper-ethical* experience. Rather than reinforcing the boundaries between an epistemological and an ethical approach to history, I follow Benjamin's call to rethink *historical truth* as the historical event *par excellence*, namely, as the historical event that deposes the historian from any position of mastery over the past.

c. *Periodization, historicism, and the history of (literary) modernity*. My critique of historicism and my efforts to theorize history as "reading danger" converge around a concrete historiographical problem: the status of literary modernity. There is a growing consensus

among literary theorists and critics regarding the need to reopen the question of the history of literary modernity.[24] These debates have for the most part focused on the role of periodization in literary history, especially as it pertains to literary modernism. Two of the most salient examples of this trend are to be found in the work of Eric Hayot and Emily Apter. Hayot's *On Literary Worlds* proposes to rethink literary history from the bottom up by displacing the periodizations that a "normative historicism" (Hayot 8) continues to impose within the discipline. Likewise, Emily Apter's *Against World Literature* reorients literary history away from established historical periods towards a consideration of the historical significance of temporal concepts that she characterizes as "Untranslatables of periodicity" (Apter 61). According to Apter, these terms differ from historicism insofar as they enact "radical re-sequencing, through anachronic timelines, non-Eurochronic descriptions of duration, and a proliferation of new names for periods yet unnamed" (Apter 65). White's own effort to rethink modernism beyond its historicist interpretation could be seen as another contribution to this ongoing tendency against the prevalence of traditional historicist methodologies within the field.

This dissertation seeks to consolidate and radicalize the methodological proposals of critics such as White, Hayot, and Apter by challenging the underlying *historicist ontology* that sustains interpretations of modernism as a historical period. I use the terms "consolidate" and "radicalize," because my critique of historicism extends beyond the critiques of periodization. Indeed, many critics of historicism tend to conflate historicism with periodization. This confusion is to a certain extent understandable. After all, periodization has been a staple of historicism since its historical emergence in the historiographical work of Leopold von Ranke

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[24] For a recent argument in favor of periodization, see James and Seshagiri (2014) 87-100.

and Wilhelm von Humboldt and dividing the past into epochs is a prominent feature of philosophical precursors to historicism, such as Vico, Schelling, and Hegel. Historicism and periodization are so close that Frederic Jameson even argues in *A Singular Modernity: Essay on the Ontology of the Present* that these two names are synonyms:

> Thus, the more we seek to persuade ourselves of the fidelity of our own projects and values with respect to the past, the more obsessively do we find ourselves exploring the latter and its projects and values, which slowly begin to form into a kind of totality and to dissociate themselves from our own present as the living moment in the continuum. […] At that point, then, simple chronology becomes periodization […]. This is no doubt the moment most often called *historicism* (Jameson 24).

Jameson's concise definition of historicism takes the form of a description of its *historical emergence* in a double sense of the term. First, historicism has the character of a historical event in the sense that it is something that *happens* to our relation to the past, something that occurs *to* history. For Jameson, the shift from chronology to periodization takes place through a certain intensification in the process of scrutinizing moments in the past, which progressively leads the historian to endow the past with cohesion, giving it a form and an identity by gathering its multiplicity into "a kind of totality" (Jameson 24). It is not a coincidence that the theorist perhaps best known for the maxim "Always historicize!" mobilizes the notions of totality, the present, the living moment, and the temporal continuum in order to characterize historicism as a mode of periodization.[25] In fact, we could read the first of the four maxims of modernity that Jameson proposes in *A Singular*

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[25] See Jameson (1981) 9.

Modernity—"We cannot not periodize." (Jameson 29)—as a less performative version of his earlier *dictum* about the need to historicize. Indeed, these two phrases form a chiasmus: we cannot but periodize because we must always historicize and we must historicize because we cannot not periodize. For Jameson, the ground of this reversal lies in the notion of the post-modern, which demands a rupture with modernity in favor of an "ontology of the present" (Jameson 214) that would be capable of periodizing the modern period since it has already left it behind.

The inevitability of periodization communicates with the second historical dimension of historicism's emergence, according to Jameson's theory of modernity. The constitution of a period within the historical continuum is not simply an event that occurs *to* the consciousness of historians and that affects only the theory or the methodology of the discipline historiography. Historicism is also a historical event that occurs *in* real history; its emergence is a historical event in its own right that *can be dated*. For Jameson, the origins of periodization or historicism can be located in the appearance of a unique kind of modern historical consciousness that is to be distinguished from other "modernities" insofar as the truly modern modernity was aware of the radicality of its rupture with the past: the modernity that emerges alongside historicism enables the present to determine itself, "to name itself," and to give a form "to that new thing we call actuality, and for various forms of which our contemporary usage of modern and modernity are made to stand" (Jameson 25). For Jameson, periodization or historicism is the gesture through which "our own present as the living moment in the continuum" (Jameson 24) comes to its own by transforming its sheer force of rupture into a period that is part of a historical narrative.

Jameson's defense of periodization in the context of the historicity of the modern leads him to a consideration of *artistic* modernism, which he regards as the "aesthetic category or adaptation" (Jameson 94-95) of modernity. His analyses of the "ideology" of modernism reconstruct the totality of modernism by positing a correlation between artistic modernity and a social situation marked by "incomplete modernization" (Jameson 141). The historical reconstruction of modernism's search for the new is therefore taken as the artist's response to the dynamics of aesthetic "autonomization" within societies that, in spite of undergoing rapid industrial, technological, and social transformations, have not yet attained full modernization (Jameson 146). It is here that Jameson's analysis reproduces a gesture that characterizes most histories of literary modernity, which explain the literary modernity by placing it within a metonymical chain of substitutions that usually achieves closure with the term "modernity." Jameson's take on artistic modernism illustrates the mechanisms that enable this chain of displacements and substitutions to unfold. First, the question of *literary modernity* is immediately taken as a question about *literary modernism*, and the latter is understood primarily as a historical period.[26] The specificity of modernism is then usually explained by recourse to a whole cohort of social, economic, political, and cultural events and processes that are classified under the category of *modernization*, and which modernist

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[26] For a paradigmatic case of this phenomenon, see Jameson (2002) 94-95 and 141-210. For a sound exploration of the complexities of the "modernity/modernism" relation, see Cutler (2003) 16-21. In the context of Latin American literary history, the slippage between literary modernity and modernism is more complex, since the term *Modernismo* designates a movement that precedes Anglo-modernism by at least three decades and some of the criteria used to distinguish "modernism" from other aesthetic and literary periods or modes apply to *Modernismo* as much as to *Vanguardia*—the Spanish literary avant-garde. On the discontinuities between *Modernismo* and *Vanguardia* see the introduction to Gallo (2005).

literature is supposed to represent, figure, or, at the very least, register.[27] In turn, the dynamics of modernization—in particular, the ever-accelerating pace of global capital[28]—are taken to set the pace for *modernity*, which is then elevated to the status of a general concept, which gathers every specific process of modernization. In this way, modernity comes to occupy the position of the highest instance of referential validity, determining the framework in which *literary modernity* is *a priori* determined as the transposition into the literary field of the accelerating rhythms and universalizing logics of modernity.

If I am critical of the way in which this metonymical series functions, it is not because I deny the pertinence of concepts like rationalization, industrialization, democratization, cosmopolitanism, aesthetic autonomy, cultural capital, etc. in order to lend specificity and thickness to the concept of modernity. Rather, what I contest is the conflation between historical *meaning* and *reference* that enables these concepts—and the events that they represent—to determine in an *exhaustive* manner the historical significance of literary modernity (or, for that matter, of modernity in general). This referential framework not only informs periodization à la Jameson; it is also at work in approaches to literary history that challenge the field's tendency to equate the task of historical interpretation with the exercise of dividing the historical past into more or less cohesive periods. This is the case with White's own concept of modernism: although he rejects the logic of periodization, he

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[27] For one of the most influential cases of the slippage between modernity, modernization, and modernism, see the introduction to Berman (1982). For a critical approach within Latin American studies to the "crude" deterministic models that take economic, social, or political processes of modernization as the driving forces behind cultural forms of modernity, see chapter two in García-Canclini (1995).

[28] Jameson provides an extreme case of this view. His case is extreme because he does not claim that capital determines the history of modernity but rather proposes as a heuristic tool the substitution of modernity for capitalism in all theoretical debates about modernity. See Jameson (2002) 80 and 215.

continues to tacitly posit a *referential parallelism* to account for the historical significance of modernism as the affirmation, at the level of *poetics*, of "the actual conditions of existence in modernist societies" (White 94). If White does not feel the need to spell out what those "actual conditions of existence" actually are, this is probably because he presupposes that the specificity of these conditions has been sufficiently established; after all, if he did not already knew what are those conditions, he could not have privileged modernism's commitments to fragmentation as a more historical and less ideological poetics of history than the realist novel. Nevertheless, the eminently historical function that White ascribes to modernism ultimately lies in the correspondence between a modernist poetics and an equally modernist social reality: the literary form *mirrors* the disjointed, incoherent interruption that *is* life *in* modernity.

We find a similar approach in Eric Hayot's *On Literary Worlds*. Hayot's supposedly "non-historicist" proposal for literary history rethinks terms like realism, romanticism, and modernism in a more "structuralist" vein as literary-historical categories that function trans-historically and that can be used to describe different ways of "literary worlding" (Hayot 135). For instance, he suggests that "modernism" should be understood as a poetic mode—rather than as a historical period—whose particularity lies in the kind of "world" that it brings forth. The modernist literary world is to be distinguished from its realist counterpart insofar as the former brings forth a set of possibilities that configure a "total ontological rejection of the normative world-view of its era" (Hayot 132). This is why modernism for Hayot is linked to a radical mode of negation or destruction and is thus impossible to attain in its generic purity. At the same time, Hayot's approach to modernism and to literary

modes of worlding still subscribes to a thoroughly *historicist* notion of modernity as a process that *really emerged* in Europe in the sixteenth/seventeenth centuries and which he defines as a "world-view" that is marked by the production of the "feeling that one lives in the same world as everyone else" (Hayot 115).[29] The historians who favor periodization as well as the critics who take a more structuralist approach to literary modernity share the same ontological ground: historicism as the *ergon*tology of historical being; historicism as the unity of the *substantial* determination of historical beings as the *real things* that have *actually* occurred—*historia res gestæ*—and of a *modal* determination of historical being as a *possibility* that is guaranteed by the historian's power to produce a narrative—*historia rerum gestarum*.

My efforts to theorize another literary history that might not neutralize in advance the *history of nothing* at work in a text like Ramos Otero's "Descuento" therefore require the displacement of the periodizing logic of traditional historicisms and the historical poetics of theorists like White and Hayot. But what kind of literary history might be able to open itself up to the historical intensities of events that elude the form of presence and the presence of form, of occasions that remain recalcitrant to the historicist principle whose activity consists in the very neutralization of the alterity of time and history? The second part of this dissertation responds to this question by retaining one aspect of White and Hayot's thinking of literary modernity or modernism. My readings of de Burgos and Braschi focus on moments in which a certain determination of history as narrative is interrupted: de Burgos's elegiac demand for the number of her death and Braschi's fictional disclosure of the opacity of embodiment configure the interruption of narrativization and the rejection of "normative"

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[29] For an analogous similar approach to Latin American modernity and literary modernity, see Siskind (2014).

images of the world, the two traits that Hayot and White associate with the poetics of modernism. However, my intervention is not limited to making the case for the modernity of these writers. Instead, I engage with these texts in order to highlight how they explicitly or implicitly raise the question of the possibility of history and of literature's historical function. These texts thematize their own relation to their actuality as one marked by opacity and insecurity. Moreover, my claim is that these authors read and write their own relation to history *dangerously*. I argue that the response to the ethical moment in history that I call *reading danger* is already at work in these literary texts, which confront and register the impossibility of bearing witness to modernity. It is in this confrontation with the impossibility of historical narrative and the difficulty that these texts register in securing their relation to the past that my dissertation locates their literary modernity.

Moreover, reading these texts *now* confronts us with the difficulty of avoiding experiencing the impossibility of history that these authors register in their writings. On the contrary, rather than turning their texts into exemplary instances of *historia magistra vitæ* à la White, these texts delegitimize the narratives that literary historians produce in order to write a history of literary modernity. The modernity of these texts is instead to be located in the way in which these texts not only configure their own difficult relation to their own time, but also interrupt attempts to explain away their difficulties from the privileged vantage point of the present and its presumed capacity to determine the totality of the past. These literary texts enact in their own textuality the danger of history's impossibility; their legibility confronts us to with the irreducibility of this impossible experience. Literary modernity here emerges as a force that deprives our present of its supposed historical privilege by inviting us

to enter into the *scene of history* where time perhaps no longer passes and the past is no longer retrievable by an egological consciousness. The history at stake in these modernist texts is not the epic history of cycles and circles; the history in which the history returns to itself and is capable of reconciling itself with its own pass. These modern stories are rather literary histories of dispossession and immemoriality.

3. Hamacher's "Literary Events"

To conclude, I want to go back to the "history of nothing" that I thematized through Ramos Otero's story. How could we approach the historicity of this history, in which nothing seems to happen? To work through this question, I turn to "Über einige Unterschiede zwischen der Geschichte literarischer und der Geschichte phänomenaler Ereignisse" ("On Some Differences between the History of Literary Events and the History of Phenomenal Events"), an essay where Werner Hamacher argues that the totalizing tendencies that have dominated historiography since the nineteenth century are at odds with the most historical dimension of literature: "literary events" (*literarischer Ereignisse*). Hamacher turns to Book VIII of Homer's *Odyssey* in order to flesh out his notion of the literary event as an "*experience* of what can be called *history*" ("*Erfahrung* dessen, was *Geschichte* heißen kann…" (Hamacher 168, emphases mine). The experience at stake here is thus not merely the source of "literary history;" it gives us an idea of what history *tout court* could be.

Hamacher reads in Odysseus's uncontrollable tears the cipher of this historical experience, the textual trace that suggests that a literary event may have taken place. Recall that weeping assails Odysseus twice in Book VIII of the *Odyssey*; on both occasions,

Odysseus's tears are elicited by Demodokos's singing. Performing for those who were gathered at the court of Alkinoös, the ruler of the Phaiakians, to welcome the stranger who had washed upon the shores of Scheria, Demodokos's song touches upon Odysseus's deeds in the Battle of Troy. From a textual perspective, this moment could be regarded as a very early instance of *mise en abîme* in Western literature. The *Odyssey* here gives way to another song in what could be read as an inter-textual citation—for instance, of *The Iliad*—as well as a representation of events that make up the very history of its own hero, Odysseus.

Faced with his own story, Odysseus weeps. This entire book of the *Odyssey* is structured as a play of concealment and recognition. Recall that Odysseus arrived incognito to the land of the Phaiakians and was taken to the court by Nausicaa, Alkinoös's daughter, in accordance with Athena's plans. Recall also that Demodokos's first song at court confronted Odysseus with a very significant part of his own life-story—his relation to Achilleus and their experiences battling side by side. Hearing this song forced Odysseus to cover his face with a veil to hide his tears and avoid revealing his identity. The second time that Demodokos sings about his role in the Battle of Troy, Odysseus could not maintain composure; his weeping revealed his identity, confirming Alkinoös's suspicion that the stranger who was his guest at court was indeed Odysseus:

> So the famous singer sang his tale, but Odysseus melted,
> and from under his eyes the tears ran down, drenching
> his cheeks. As a woman weeps, lying over the body of
> her dear husband, who fell fighting for her city and people
> as he tried to beat off the pitiless day from city and

> children; she sees him dying and grasping for breath,
>
> and winding her body
>
> about him she cries high and shrill, while the men behind her,
>
> hitting her with their spear butts on the back and the shoulders,
>
> force her up and lead her away into slavery, to have
>
> hard work and sorrow, and her cheeks are wracked
>
> with pitiful weeping. Such were the pitiful tears
>
> Odysseus shed from under his brows… (Homer 520-530).

Rather than taking these tears as a symbol of Odysseus's self-recognition in Demodokos's song, Hamacher explores a more ironic possibility, namely, that Odysseus's tears bear witness to the experience of not being able to recognize himself *as himself* in the epic retelling of his past deeds:

> Odysseus erfährt die Erzählung seiner Taten und Reden nicht als objektive Bestätigung und Bereicherung seiner subjektiven Erfahrung und genießt die Begegnung mit seiner Vergangenheit nicht als Wiederaneignung und Verinnerung seines zum Epos veräußerten Lebens – so würde Hegel den Akt geschichtlicher Selbstauslegung der eigenen Person, der die Ökonomie seines Lebens und seines Geschlechts zu sichern bestimmt war. Die Erzählung der Geschichte ist Raub am Leben dessen, dem sie geschehen. Was bei der Erzählung der Geschichte geschieht, ist Abschied von der erfahrenen Geschichte. Und nur so ist die Erfahrung der Geschichtserzählung die Erfahrung der Geschichte noch einmal: nicht als Erlebnis, in das man sich

wieder hineinleben, hinein- und einfühlen könnte und das sich in seiner Gegenwärtigkeit wieder und wieder reproduzieren ließe, sondern als Abschied von eigenen und immer nur dem Scheine nach und auf Widerruf eigenen Leben, das erst im Schmerz des Abschieds als geschehenes und erst in der Gefahr seines Verlustes als erfahrenes, also immer erst *post festum* und unter den Bedingungen seines Verschwindens und also nie *als solches* darstellbar ist. Was geschieht, ist Abschied. (Hamacher 169).

(Odysseus does not experience the narration of his words and deeds as the objective confirmation and enrichment of his subjective experience and he does not enjoy the encounter with his past as the reappropriation and recollection of his life, externalized in an epic—so Hegel would have understood the act of historical self-interpretation of the proper person, which is determined to secure the economy of its life and gender [*Geschlecht*]. The narration of history is a deprivation in the life to which history occurred. What occurs in the narration of history is a departure from the experienced history. And only in this way is the experience of the narration of history the experience of history once more: not as lived-experience [*Erlebnis*], in which one could again relive, feel, and empathize with oneself, and that lets itself be reproduced again and again in its presence. Instead, as the departure from a proper life and always only as the semblance of a proper life out of its revocation, which can be presented as an occurrence primarily in the pain of departure and as an experience primarily in the danger of its privation, thus is

> always primarily *post festum*, under the conditions of its disappearance, never presentable *as such*. Departure is what occurs.)

Odysseus weeps because he cannot come to terms with his own past and appropriate Demodokos's song as his own *his*tory. This is clear from Odysseus's "gender troubles," which the extended metaphor or the allegory of Odysseus *as* a wife whose husband has died in battle and who faces exile and slavery conveys. Hamacher insists on the status of Odysseus's gender because Odysseus's "emasculation" is indicative of how literary events break with the logic of historical appropriation and identification that underlies traditional historical schemas, from historicism to Hegelian philosophies of history. The tears that flood Odysseus's face are like the tears of a warrior's widow—say, Andromache—because Odysseus can only experience his own story as the story of another. Although Odysseus is bound to this other, he remains incapable of relating to this other in such a way that he might ever come to recognize himself *in* and *as* this other. Odysseus's "becoming-woman" is also a becoming-widow to himself: Odysseus cries *for* himself (the dead husband) *from* the position of another (the wife), positioning himself as both the partner of a fallen other and as that other, which is both himself and yet not himself—a self-*as*-other that haunts the time and the space of Demodokos's song as heard by Odysseus, while remaining radically inaccessible to him.

Odysseus's missed encounter with himself is exemplary of a disjunction that is part and parcel of the "experience of what," for Hamacher, "could be called history" (Hamacher 168). At first sight, the disjunction at stake here seems to be located in the incommensurability that separates the "experience" and the "narration" of an event. And yet,

the disjunction between Odysseus's experience of his own deeds and Demodokos's narration is itself indicative of a more fundamental disjunction, namely, the distinction between what Hamacher calls the "history of phenomenal events" and the history of "literary events." The former could be also labeled as "history in an epic mode," since it is the kind of historical presentation that enables a life to come to terms with its own past and recognize itself in its own story. In the case of the latter, a life experiences "its own" story as an occurrence that is happening *now*, rather than as the representation in the present of its past. For Hamacher, literary history occurs whenever a "life" cannot turn a story is into *its* story or its *his*tory, whenever a person or a subject cannot appropriate its past as a unified totality of moments.

A history of missed experiences, what Hamacher calls a "literary event" cuts across the first disjunction mentioned above and turns both the experience and the narration of an event into "literary historical" events. Hamacher's literary history disables the old distinction between *historiam rerum gestarum* and *historia res gestæ*, where the former corresponds to a dimension of history that is supposedly "literary" or "rhetorical"—history understood as a mode of narration or representation, a genre of *Erzählung*—and the latter refers to history understood as something that *actually happened*, as a *Geschehen* or an occurrence that would be historical regardless of its representation. Displacing this traditional distinction, Hamacher suggests that both the experience and the narration of literary event are historical, since being-historical is itself to be seen as the specific mode of occurrence that brings about a "tearing of the continuity of life" ("*Geschichte ist, …als Zerreißen der Kontinuität des Lebens…*") (Hamacher 169). Literary history itself *occurs*; its occasion is indicated by the interruption of the epic circle of reappropriation that allows a life to continue on its *proper*

trajectory towards self-recognition. A *historia privationum gestarum* that is at the same time a *historia privationes gestæ*—a deprived history of deprivations. The literary event is historical precisely because it brings to a halt any attempt by any subject or any life to appropriate the past for itself by transforming any moment within a series of temporal moments into its *own* productive reflections.

An impossible history, what Hamacher calls a literary event is not only a history of missed encounters; it is also a history of the irreducible failure of encountering those missed encounters: a history that deprives the subject of history of even the possibility of *knowing* that it cannot know itself. For this reason, the historical experience at stake in Hamacher's thinking of literary history cannot be reduced to the experience of history that motivates Hegel's oft-quoted remarks in the *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Geschichte* that the only thing that one can learn from the history of nations is that no nation ever learns anything from its history.[30] The history of "literary events" is not *magistra vitæ*; it has *no* lesson to offer, not even the negative lesson that it has nothing to teach. Literary events cast history in a different light, turning the writing of history into a radically "*an*epistemological" pursuit. History construed from the side of literary events discloses the occurrence of surprise or chance happenings that cannot be experienced *as such*, in the presence of their present. Literary events begin as proleptic repetitions that do not have the shape of a future-present; they install their readers in a time whose configuration could not have been foreseen or anticipated from the dia-chronic instant of their occurrence. Likewise, literary events recur without being experienced *again*. Instead, they are only experienced *anew*: oxymoronic original-repetitions that can only irrupt in the mode of an auto-citation. But since the event

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[30] See Hegel (1986) 17.

that they cite—i.e., themselves—could not have been mastered as a lived experience [*Erlebnis*] and deployed in the presence of memory, literary events cannot but alter themselves in their own repetition.

For Hamacher, a "literary event" is only experienced in the danger of its loss or privation ("*in der Gefahr seines Verlustes als erfahrenes*") (Hamacher 169). A similar danger is at stake in Ramos Otero's "Descuento:" "Comprendo que la escritura es cómplice del recuerdo y modificará lo que ha pasado. El lector modificará este texto con su lectura. A lo mejor sentirá en alguna línea lo mismo que yo sentí al escribirla" (Ramos Otero 89). ("I understand that writing is the accomplice of remembrance and will modify what happened. The reader will modify this text with his reading. Perhaps he will feel in some line just what I felt when I wrote it.") If Hamacher *reads* in Odysseus's tears a description of what could be called history and literary history, Ramos Otero's story could also be read as a literary-historical text that is *written* from such a dangerous, deprived space.

And yet, something *else* seems to be at work in "Descuento." Perhaps *another* danger is at stake here—a danger that would be analogous to the privation that Odysseus undergoes in this crucial moment of the *Odyssey*, while also taking place in a very different affective register. This change in tone and affect is related to the strange lucidity that accompanies the narrator's realization that incoherence cannot be avoided: the narrator in "Descuento" *knows* that the story he is about to *un-tell* does not and cannot correspond to the *nothing* that underlies the events to which this story supposedly refers. The *historia nihilum gestæ* and the *historia nihilōrum gestarum* shall never meet, since the narrator assumes, following Jorge Luis Borges's speculations on time in "Nueva refutación del tiempo" ("New Refutation of

Time"), that time neither flows nor coincides with itself, that each temporal moment is absolute and thus remains irretrievable by the present.[31] Levinas's notion of dia-chrony—a time that passes *without* passing, that is neither diachronic nor synchronic but rather acutely and intensely *a*-chronic, *dia*-chronic in the sense of being irredeemably split in its very instant—is not far from what *un*-timed time that is unleashed in the texts of Ramos Otero and of Borges.

The story "Descuento" is written from a place that no longer harbors any illusion about coming to terms with itself, coming to its own, or cohering in and with itself. This is the condition that enables the narrator to experience the incoherence of his story and the destruction of the continuity of his own life-story as the *chance* of another history, rather than solely as the pain that results from the loss of *his own* history. But the *possibility* that opens up is not the chance of telling a story that would enable a reader to finally gather the dispersion of words and deeds in the epic time of a totalized narrative. This possibility does not overcome the impossible. Quite the contrary, the narrator un-tells this story in full awareness that the reader will modify what he has written: "El lector modificará este texto con su lectura. A lo mejor sentirá en alguna línea lo mismo que yo sentí al escribirla" (Ramos Otero 89). ("The reader will modify this text with his reading. Perhaps he will feel in some line just what I felt when I wrote it.") An intense *literary event* is lodged in this possibility, in the chance of a reading that would not merely reproduce Ramos Otero's story but would rather *trans*-form what is written in it. It is *for* the sake of this transformation, which not only requires the *other* but also could only happen *in* and *to* the *other* who reads (never in the self who wrote), that the story is written in the first place. It is in this way that I suggest we

[31] Borges (2007) 164-81.

should read the last line of the opening paragraph of "Descuento." The possibility of a transformative reading also harbors the chance of an encounter between two times and two affects: "A lo mejor sentirá en alguna línea lo mismo que yo sentí al escribirla" (Ramos Otero 89). ("The reader will modify this text with his reading. Perhaps he will feel in some line just what I felt when I wrote it.") But this encounter is not only uncertain; it is traversed by the unsurpassable certitude that mis-encounters pervade any possible encounter. The writer and the reader will *never* meet, even if the reader were to stumble upon the same feelings that the writer felt when he wrote this or that line. The narrator will never know whether this encounter has happened or will happen and thus can only state the possibility of this encounter in the uncertain mood of a "perhaps" ("*a lo mejor*").

At this point in "Descuento" emerges *another* historical danger, which is registered not as a painful privation but in the mode of a *generous* offering. The narrator gives up the possibility of ever coming to terms with himself in his story, offering a text that is open to the reader's rewriting and that is written for the sake of opening up the possibility of this encounter *in* and *through trans*formation. History here no longer appears in the mode of a correspondence between the narrated and its narration. Furthermore, the encounter between the historical times of writing and reading is marked by contingency—i.e., a possibility thoroughly traversed by its impossibility. Finally, if it were to happen, this encounter would remain incapable of granting coherence and justification to the past of rescuing what has happened from the dangerous exposure to infinite rewritings. Rather, historical writing here surrenders itself to the other besides any possible correspondence to this other. This would be something like an ethics or a hyper-ethics of historical writing—*reading danger*.

How should we read and respond to the gift of such dangerous writings? If what I call "reading danger" has any purchase on what we regularly call "history," its first and perhaps its only task would be that of dismantling every mode of historical interpretation that seeks to preserve the past "as it actually happened," accomplished, save from any danger. The following chapters are attempts to theorize *another history* that might free the past from its fixed inscription in a totality and "place" history in the danger of contingency—where the most intense historicity *perhaps* lies.

• • •

Part One

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Reading Danger: *Another* Literary History

CHAPTER ONE

On the Possibility of Literary History

Il n'y a que du texte, il n'y a que du hors-texte, au total une 'préface incessante', qui déjoue la représentation philosophique du texte, l'opposition reçue du texte à son excès. L'espace de la dissémination ne met pas seulement le pluriel *en effervescence; il s'agite de la contradiction sans fin, marquée dans la syntaxe indécidable du* plus. *[...] Protocole indispensable à toute ré-élaboration du problème de l' 'idéologie', de l'inscription spécifique de chaque texte (au sens, cette fois, étroitement régional) dans les champs couramment référenciés comme champs de la causalité 'réelle' (historique, économique, politique, sexuelle, etc.). L'élaboration* théorique *du moins, si l'on pouvait s'en tenir à telle circonscription, devrait suspendre ou du moins compliquer, très prudemment, l'ouverture naïve qui rapportait son texte à la chose, au référent, à la réalité, voire à une instance conceptuelle et sémantique dernière.*

(There is nothing but the text, there is nothing but the outside-text, in total, an 'incessant preface' that foils the philosophical representation of the text, the traditional opposition of the text to its excess. The space of dissemination not only renders the *plural* effervescent; it agitates itself with contradiction without end, marked by the undecidable syntax of (no) more. [...] An indispensable protocol for any re-elaboration of the problem of 'ideology,' of the specific inscription of each text (this time, in a strictly regional sense) in the fields commonly referred to as fields of 'real' causality (historical, economic, political, sexual, etc.). The *theoretical* elaboration at least, if one could restrict oneself to such a circumscription, ought to suspend or at least complicate, very prudently, the naïve opening that related its text to the thing, to the referent, to reality, that is, to an ultimate conceptual and semantic instance.)

Jacques Derrida, "Hors texte" ("Outside Text")[1]

[1] See Derrida (1972) 50-51.

I. 1. The Possibility of Literary History

A great number of literary histories have been written in Modern European languages since the middle of the eighteenth-century and we can safely assume that literary histories will continue to be written and published in the years to come.[2] And yet, in spite of the existence of entire bodies of scholarship that are commonly referred to as "literary history," and notwithstanding the profound historical orientation that characterizes most fields of humanistic inquiry today, many critics and scholars continue to harbor doubts about the possible emergence of a unified method or a single discipline—a "science" that could bear the name of literary history.[3]

Some critics, like Werner Hamacher, might even go as far as to argue that no work of historiography that would merit the title of "literary history" has ever been written. In his essay "Über einige Unterschiede zwischen der Geschichte literarischer und der Geschichte phänomenaler Ereignisse" ("On Some Differences between the History of Literary Events and the History of Phenomenal Events"), Hamacher argues that the totalizing, aestheticizing, idealistic, and organicist tendencies that dominate the practice of historiography since the

[2] English scholars agree that Thomas Warton's *History of English Poetry from the Close of the Eleventh to the Commencement of the Eighteenth Century*, published between 1774-1781, constitutes to the first literary history written in English. For a detailed study of Warton's text, see Fairer (1981) 37-63. For an account of the consolidation of French modern literary history in the period immediately following the Revolution, see Vaillant (2010) 19-98. For a detailed history of the emergence of German literary history, see Benjamin (2011) 305-312. For a good historical and theoretical overview of developments in European literary history, see Rauch and Geisenhanslüke (2012) 9-24. For a Bourdieuian account of the emergence of literary history in Spain, see Venegas (forthcoming).

[3] For a negative assessment of the possibility of a scientific history, see Veyne (1978) 349-54. For a different argument against regarding history as a science, see Ankersmit (2012) 3-4. For an optimistic view of literary history's lack of methodological or scientific unity, see Fohrmann (2012) 85-105. For a defense of literary history's scientific status, see Japp (2012) 149-62.

nineteenth century are at odds with the most historical dimension of literature, what Hamacher calls "literary events" (*literarischer Ereignisse*).[4] As we saw in the Introduction, Hamacher's notion of a literary event demands that we rethink the entire edifice of history from the point of view of temporal dis-continuities that no traditional historiography could ever fully account for by means of contextualization, let alone periodize. For this reason, his essay concludes by opposing both literature and history to literary historiography in the starkest manner possible; for Hamacher "literature is the declaration of impossibility of literary historiography" *("Literatur ist die Unmöglichkeitserklärung der Literaturgeschichtsschreibung")* (Hamacher 182). Traditional methods of literary historiography would go against the mode of event that could be said to be both *literary* and *historical*: the *occasion of contingency*, the con-figuration of a disfiguration, the writing of *accidents* that cannot be reduced to mere positions within the totality of *facts* that constitutes the presumably unbroken texture of life.[5]

Literary theorists are far from being the only critics who harbor doubts about literary history's possibility. In the last decades, even scholars committed to more traditional modes of literary historiography have become increasingly skeptical about the status of their discipline. A notable case of this phenomenon is David Perkins, whose 1991 book on literary history bore the title, *Is Literary History Possible?* Perkins's answer to the question at the center of his book is ambiguous. On the one hand, Perkins concedes that literary history as an epistemological pursuit is *impossible* in principle, since the literary historian can never

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[4] For Hamacher's most concise argument for the need to dissociate historicist historiography from both history and literature, see Hamacher (2012)180-82.

[5] For the elaboration of a notion of the "occasion" that has strong affinities with Hamacher's "literary event," see the Introduction to Newmark (2012).

satisfy the demands of plausible contextualization—a statement that brings to mind Jacques Derrida's insistence that no context can ever be fully delimited.[6] And yet, he ultimately answers the question of literary history's possibility affirmatively by recourse to an argument from necessity. For Perkins, literary history might be *impossible*, but it is *necessary* if we are to read literature in order to make *some* sense of our past: "The question, then, of whether literary history is possible is really whether any construction of a literary past can meet our present criteria of plausibility. […] My opinion is, then, that we *cannot* write literary history with intellectual conviction, but we *must* read it" (Perkins 17, emphases mine).[7] Whereas Perkins concedes that literary history is impossible only to rescue it as a mere instrument that satisfies our need for cultural orientation, Hamacher's essay could be read as a call for *another* literary history. But can literary history be done, while doing justice to the singularity and the rupture that characterizes what Hamacher calls a *literary event*?

At any rate, the field of literary history finds itself in a strange situation, which resembles the conundrum that Aristotle faced in Book I of his *Poetics*. The discipline's situation is in fact the exact inversion of Aristotle's problem: whereas Aristotle found himself lacking a Greek name that could designate different species of discursive production that display common characteristics,[8] literary critics have at their disposal a common name—i.e., literary history—that cannot be used to designate any concrete instance of "literary history" without eliciting serious reservations from the part of most literary historians. Perhaps the

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[6] See Derrida (1972) 365-93
[7] For a more detailed account of the necessary character of the literary history, see the last chapter in Perkins (1991), in particular pages 185-86. This argument also reappears, though in an even less optimistic fashion, in an article of Perkins (1993) 133-39.
[8] See Aristotle (2006) 1447b 20.

only status that we could give to the concept of literary history would be analogous to what Kant in the *Kritik der reinen Vernunft* (*Critique of Pure Reason*) calls an "*ens rationis*" (Kant A290/B346 25 - A292/B329; 402-404).[9] Literary history would be a purely "rational being," an "empty concept without an object" (*Leerer Begriff ohne Gegenstand*), something that is thinkable *as* a concept without being possible *as* a representation or an experience (Kant 402-404). Seen as an empty concept, "literary history" is but a paradox. Although the existence of the concept or the name "literary history" in several modern languages provides enough proof that something like literary history can be thought, it is possible that the price to be paid for thinking literary history is the impossibility of ever experiencing its fulfillment. As if literary history could only be done without being thought, or could only be thought without ever being done.

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My main task in this chapter is to take up once more the question of the possibility of literary history. The brief introductory remarks to this chapter provide enough justification for why a reexamination of the field's foundations is necessary. After all, we saw that both Hamacher and Perkins argue that literary history is impossible, albeit for rather different reasons. Indeed, one of the most common words in the methodological debates

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[9] See Kant (1998) A290/B346 25 - A292/B329; 402-404. Kant distinguishes *ens rationis* from three other conceptual articulations of the Nothing: privation (*nihil privativum*), imaginary being (*ens imaginarium*), and negation (*nihil negativum*). Kant's example of an *ens rationis* is *Keines*—the German word for "none." This word is an empty concept since it fulfills two conditions: 1. it can be conceived without any contradiction; and 2. the "ground" of its conceptual identity—its "none-ness," if you will—subtracts the concept from the realm of appearance. All appearances are determined *a priori* by the categories of quantity, that is, by the concepts of "one," "some," or "all." Since the concept "none" is the very negation of quantitative determinations, "none" must be outside the realm of possible appearances.

within the field is the term "crisis." Although I am interested in reopening this foundational question, I do not wish to adjudicate this issue. Instead, I am more interested in shifting the terms of debates about literary history in two concrete ways. First, I want to displace a number of oppositions that continue to figure prominently in methodological discussions in the field, in particular, the binaries of extrinsic/intrinsic criticism, periodization/interpretation, and history/theory. In the second section of this chapter, I examine how other critics—from Paul de Man to Stephen Greenblatt and Pascale Casanova—have confronted the discipline's crisis. My survey suggests that the conceptual oppositions mentioned above are of little help if we want to get a better sense of the differences between post-structuralist, new historicist, and world literary approaches to the discipline. For the intractable methodological differences between these theoretical frameworks ought to be traced back to a more fundamental disagreement about the very *meaning* of history and the nature of the relation between literature, history, and historiography.

To continue to explore these differences, in the third section I turn to two important moments in the history of the crisis of literary history: Walter Benjamin's 1931 article "Literaturgeschichte und Literaturwissenschaft" ("Literary History and Literary Studies") and a text from French critic Roland Barthes, titled "Histoire et littérature: à propos de Racine" ("History and Literature: On Racine"), published in 1960. Although Benjamin and Barthes are regarded as seminal influences on contemporary theoretical approaches to literary history—as opposed to more historical or even historicists takes to the discipline—this section shows that their methodological proposals for literary history are radically

incompatible. Their irreconcilability is based on an intractable difference at the core of their concepts of history, which generates entirely different ways of looking at the historicity of aesthetic artifacts in general, and of theorizing literary history in particular. Barthes subscribes to a traditional, quasi-Aristotelian notion of history that is heterogeneous to the very essence of the aesthetic, whose core remains *a*-historical. Literary history for Barthes can thus be legitimately practiced only as long as it does not trespass the boundaries that delimit the part of a work of art that is historical. Contesting both the formalist aestheticism and the empiricist historicism that informs an approach like Barthes's, Benjamin construes literary history in terms of a temporal encounter that occurs in the very reading or interpretation of a literary text and which discloses an intensely historical time: the "now-time" (*Jetztzeit*). Understood in terms of this non-successive, discontinuous time, history becomes an event that occurs to both the reader who engages with a literary text and to the literary text that is being read: in both cases, the reader and what is read become once more at stake; they exceed the fixity of their temporal positions and historical epochs and enter into the different temporal dimension in which their very status as an event or an occurrence is once more at stake. Moreover, the fact that this historical methodology unfolds in and *as* reading explains why literary history constitutes for Benjamin an important site from which to rethink the methodology of history in general against historicism. Literary history thematizes to a higher degree than perhaps any other historical discipline the role of historical legibility in the historicization of the past. The confrontation of Benjamin with Barthes vividly illustrates why moving beyond the conceptual oppositions that continue to determine debates about literary history is necessary if we are to get a better grasp of the crisis that the field faces.

What the situation requires is an interrogation of the very foundations that enable certain claims about the meaning of history and the structure of properly historical methodologies to go unchallenged and continue to exert an unbridled influence in shaping conversations in the discipline.

The fourth section of this chapter interrogates one of the major foundational discourses of the relation between historiography and poetics: Aristotle's *Poetics*. Expanding on my claim in the third section regarding the link between Barthes's notion of history and Aristotle's, I explore in detail the recurrence of a certain Aristotelianism in Barthes's text, which I take as indicative of the sedimentation of a metaphysical framework that Aristotle renders explicit in his writings. Moving from Barthes's essay to Aristotle's *Poetics* allows me to cast a different light on contemporary debates between literary theorists and literary historians concerning the status of literary history. My recourse to Aristotle discloses the ways in which a certain teleology of form (*eidos* and/or *morphē*) and what, following Hamacher, I called in the introduction an "*ergon*tology," continue to be at work *even* in thinkers associated with poststructuralism, like Barthes. As I will show in my reading, the privilege of form and of actuality comes to its own in Barthes's text the moment he asserts the possibility of establishing a clean-cut separation of the historical from the literary dimension of the literary work. This separation, I will argue, taps into Aristotle's evaluation of historiography in the *Poetics* as a "less philosophical" form of *poiesis* than poetry or philosophy—regardless of whether Barthes actually had this Aristotelian schema in mind when he asserted the possibility of this separation. The privilege that Aristotle ascribes to poetry vis-à-vis the writing of histories is predicated upon the different ontological status of their matter:

whereas history retells what has happened (*ta genōmena*), poetry deals with possibilities (*ta dunata*) (Aristotle 32). And yet, Aristotle's distinction between fictional possibilities and historical occurrences relies upon the former's inherent teleological and formalistic potential. Under the aegis of the privilege of *eidos* and *energeia,* literary or fictional possibilities are modulated in terms of their necessity (*to anangkaion*) and likelihood (*to eikos*) so that they constitute a series or an arrangement of possibilities—a plot or a *muthos*—whose cohesion and unity is determined by the task of bringing forth *one* sole *action* (Aristotle 31).

My excursus through Aristotle leads to the other way in which this chapter pretends to shift the focus of current conversations in the field. Rather than providing an answer to the question of whether literary history is possible, posing this question leads me to interrogate the status of the concept of possibility that informs this methodological debate. Although this notion is usually approached as an epistemological concept, my analysis of Aristotle suggests that we should shift the terrain of our discussion of the field's possibility from epistemology to ontology, and from ontology to ethics. The privilege of form and actuality has implications not only for the way we conceive the task of the historian; it determines the very meaning of history as a homogeneous region of being where contingency and alterity have been neutralized. The same ontological investment in the primacy of form and actuality that we find in Aristotle and in Barthes can also be seen at work in the emergence of nineteenth-century *historicism* in Germany. Leopold von Ranke and Wilhelm von Humboldt enacted a powerful reversal of Aristotle by taking the very Aristotelian principles of poetic production as the foundation of their "scientific" historiographies. This reversal is analyzed in detail in the next chapter; for the time being, it suffices to say that,

paraphrasing Martin Heidegger, a reversal of Aristotelianism *remains* Aristotelian.[10] To the extent that this teleology of *morphē/eidos* and this ontology of the *ergon* are still at work in contemporary approaches to the thinking of history, the *question* of the *possibility* of history cannot be posed *as* a question and the examination of the presuppositions that are implicit in such a question cannot take place. My reading of Benjamin, Barthes, and Aristotle thus allows me to shift the terms of the contemporary debate concerning literary history. From a confrontation between *ahistorical* literary theorists and *historical* literary critics, ongoing debates in the field can be seen as a dispute between critics who remain committed to a historicist notion of history (thoroughly Aristotelian *contra* Aristotle), and those who are attentive to the historical import of *contingencies* that resist their inclusion in any totality, in any narrative, or in any world.

After giving an account of contemporary debates on the issue of literary history's possibility, in the fifth and last section of this chapter I turn to the work of three contemporary literary critics and historians: Pascale Casanova, Eric Hayot, and Stephen Greenblatt. I do so in order to clarify the ways in which I see historicism's legacy at work in more recent approaches to history and literary history. In the last two decades, these three critics have proposed compelling ways of rethinking literary history that elude the easy opposition between historical and theoretical approaches to literary studies that became so predominant since the advent of literary theory in the 1970s. That said, in this section I argue that there is a profound continuity between traditional historicist approaches to history and the work of these contemporary critics. I locate this continuity in their common reliance

[10] See Heidegger (1991) 200-10.

on an unexamined notion of "possibility" as the ontological ground of their historiographical methodologies. At crucial moments in their analysis, Greenblatt, Casanova, and Hayot mobilize the term "possibility" in order to give an account of the grounds upon which their own literary-historical methodologies rest. However, it is telling that they never explain what they mean by possibility, nor do they examine the status of the concept "possibility" by drawing from the ways in which this term is defined and used in fields like metaphysics, logic, or rhetoric. In fact, in their work, possibility remains unthematized, untheorized, and, above all, unhistoricized. More than identifying a lack in their arguments, I am interested in the implications of this peculiar blindness. For I would argue that there is a profound necessity to this lack of thematization. Possibility must be unambiguous and self-explanatory for these critics if it is to provide them with a stable ground that could secure the status of their own critical approaches and historical methodologies. The "decision" to designate "possibility" as the ground on which their own histories stand places these "new historicist" or "world-literary" approaches to literary history on the side of historicism. These literary histories leave little room for a consideration of the historical weight of accidents, of chance events, and of impossibilities—of things that *might not be possible*, although they might indeed *occur* and thus demand not just to be historicized *otherwise*, but rather demand *another* history altogether.

I. 2. The Crisis of Literary History: Theory vs. History?

That the question of literary history's possibility remains an open issue might come as a surprise to readers unfamiliar with the debates in the field. But declarations of crisis in literary history are common. In fact, David Ferris regards the insistence on the rhetoric of

"crisis" as one way to avoid a more robust confrontation with the discipline's crisis by turning this "crisis" into the event that determines and thus secures the discipline's history.[11] In the opening paragraph of his *Theory and the Evasion of History*, Ferris tackles the compulsive repetition of the word "crisis" by the field's leading theorists at that time (scholars such as David Perkins and Marshall Brown). According to Ferris, the indiscriminate use of the term "crisis" betrays the desire to avoid coming to terms with the crisis that literary studies and literary history would actually face since the advent of poststructuralism: "If literary study is indeed in the midst of a crisis about what it is, never mind what it does, then the turn to literary history can be viewed as an attempt to face this crisis. This turn does, however, run the risk of transforming this crisis into the origin of a history of literary history" (Ferris xi). For Ferris, the emerging consensus regarding the need for a historical turn in literary studies—a trend that had already been diagnosed by Paul de Man in his classic 1973 essay "Semiology and Rhetoric" and which goes on more or less uninterruptedly even today—ignores the profound challenges that any conception of literary studies as an academic field faces. More importantly, the very gesture of transforming the crisis of literary studies into the foundational event of a new literary history should be seen, according to Ferris, as an attempt to immunize the field against the very crisis that it faces, and to do so precisely by turning the interruptive, disruptive effects of this crisis into the field's inaugural moment. Through an operation that we could characterize as an inoculation, the infinite power of historical narrative would once again become manifest through the construction of a story in which moments of rupture constitute the beginnings

[11] See Perkins (1991) 6, Ferris (1991) xi-xii, and Colebrook (1997) vi. For an older appearance of the motif of crisis, Benjamin (2011) 305-6.

of a new version of the same. The irony of this situation betrays the perverse power of this logic of neutralizing appropriation: the very notion of history that would have come into question through "theory" neutralizes all questionability by turning the problematic status of historical knowledge into *its own* inaugural moment, reaffirming the power of the form of historical narrative by transforming impossibility into *its own* impossibility, thereby rending the impossible possible.

The perception of a crisis in the discipline is general enough that even more traditionally-minded scholars seem uncertain about its possibility. In his 1991 introduction to *Theoretical Issues in Literary History*, Perkins gives a concise history of the numerous challenges that literary history has faced since the nineteenth-century and concludes by stating, unsurprisingly, that the discipline is in a crisis: "literary history is in a state of crisis [...], its purposes are unclear, and its traditional forms, procedures, and concepts have been theoretically undermined" (Perkins 6). In *Is Literary History Possible?*, Perkins continues to explore the crisis in literary history by exposing the methodological tenets of traditional approaches to the discipline:

> The assumption that the various genres, periods, schools, traditions, movements, communicative systems, discourses, and epistemes are not baseless and arbitrary groupings, that such classifications can have objective and valid grounds in the literature of the past, is still the fundamental assumption of the discipline, the premise that empowers it (Perkins 4).

According to Perkins, the possibility of literary history traditionally conceived depends on the ontological objectivity and the epistemological validity of terms like "Harlem

Renaissance" or "*Modernismo*." The ontological and epistemological aspects of these concepts need to be understood as both interrelated and yet asymmetric. For instance, a concept like *Modernismo* contains an indexical reference to a specific time period (roughly, from 1880 to 1920), and a specific geography (the emerging metropoles of Buenos Aires, Bogotá, Ciudad México, La Habana, or even New York); its mere mention among Latin American literary historians conjures up a whole network of names (José Martí, Rubén Darío, José Asunción Silva, among others), concepts (aestheticization, industrialization, mass culture, democratization), motifs (the estranged artist, the city, *Americanismo*), titles (*Ismaelillo, Lunario sentimental*), and events (The Hispanic-American war). All of these historical phenomena would constitute the very concrete, objective historical existence of *Modernismo*. At the same time, *Modernismo* as a concept of Latin American literary history also has an epistemological function. But the latter must be grounded in its historical objectivity. The use of a historical category—such as a specific literary period or a particular aesthetic movement—can only yield valid knowledge if the very identity of this category is constructed out of the objective matter of history. Because of this, literary history must always proceed in a circular manner. Historians account for the historical significance of concrete phenomena by relying upon terms like *Modernismo*, but the very validity of these terms can only be established by reading the literary past.

Although Perkins claims that historical periodization is "the fundamental assumption" of literary history, he also acknowledges that such a historicist understanding of literary history might not satisfy the demands that are now placed upon historical knowledge. For Perkins, the crisis of literary history is the result of an increasing discrepancy

between the ways in which history today is deemed necessary and the ways in which previous generations of literary historians needed history, namely, as a tool to "organize the past, to make it comprehensible, to explain why it had the character and tendency it did, and to bring it to bear on our own concerns" (Perkins 6). If critics no longer expect literary history to explain the past in the way that Perkins describes, then how is the task of the literary historian to be understood? Is literary history, after all, possible or necessary?

A different way to approach this question would be to point out that the conditions of possibility of literary history are already spelled out in its very name. A literary history worthy of its name must at least respond to two heterogeneous claims: the claims of historicity and the claims of literariness. In the Introduction to *Beyond Symbolism: Textual History and the Future of Reading*, Kevin Newmark articulates the minimal condition that any literary history would have to fulfill if it is to do justice to its name: "If it were possible to write a coherent history of literature […]," such a history would have "to describe and account for what actually occurs in literary texts as such […]" (Newmark 1). Note that Newmark relies on the conditional in order to refer to the concretization of the claim that is implicit in the very name literary history. His use of the conditional highlights the contingency of literary history—its potential impossibility. A literary historiography presupposes the possibility of accounting for the events that take place in a literary text in a historical manner. And yet, Newmark seems to remain skeptical about whether such accounting might actually be possible.

In spite of the uncertainty of his tone, Newmark's formulation seems both general and capacious enough to provide us with a good model to begin to characterize, not so much

what literary history *is,* but more what it *ought* to be. And yet, turning this critical statement concerning the possibility of literary history into a model for the future of the discipline assumes that critics and literary historians agree on their approach to the historical dimension of literature, which Newmark here refers to as "what actually occurs in literary texts." But this is far from clear, just as it is not clear that the question of "what actually occurs" in history has yet been settled among historians.[12]

What actually occurs in a literary text? We already encountered Hamacher's answer to this question: literary events occur whenever a text becomes the site for the legibility of a crisis in the movement of self-appropriation and self-recognition that is often taken by many as the very *end* of history. For a different answer to the question of what occurs in a literary text, we could turn to a recent essay by French critic Pascale Casanova, titled "Literature as World." Although Casanova does not explicitly frame her argument as an intervention into this debate, her theory of world literature is ultimately concerned with the quintessential dilemma of literary history: how are literature and history to be related? In Casanova's own words, her work seeks to "re-establish the lost bond between literature, history and the world, while still maintaining a full sense of the irreducible singularity of literary texts" (Casanova 71).[13] Casanova conceives of the relation between literature and history according to the opposition between the inside and the outside of a literary text. Her methodology aims to disclose a space—the "World Republic of Letters" (*la république mondiale des lettres*)—where the inside and the outside of a work of art or of literature are inevitably

[12] For a recent overview of the status of representation in historiographical texts, see chapter four of Ankersmit (2012).
[13] See Casanova (2005), in particular 71-72.

intertwined. Insofar as this "republic" is both literary and historical, the elucidation of the rules that govern this world republic and the historical account of its dynamics provide a way to reconcile literature and history. This "world republic" ultimately offers a model to explain the interplay of the formal or aesthetic and the institutional or political dimensions of literary texts.[14] To the question of what happens in literature, Casanova would most likely respond that the very historicity of a literary text—let alone its concrete publication and distribution—requires a world-literary space, since such a space is the dimension in which the literary work's claims for aesthetic autonomy encounter the institutional conditions that either enable or hinder the realization of the work's aesthetic claims.

In his 1973 lecture, "Semiology and Rhetoric," Paul de Man anticipates and challenges the kind of gesture that animates critical work like Casanova's. His critique points to the problems that underlie any understanding of literary criticism as intrinsic or extrinsic—formal or referential—irrespective of whether the critic ultimately aims to reconcile or overcome this opposition:

> The attraction of reconciliation is the elective breeding-ground of false models and metaphors; it accounts for the metaphorical model of literature as a kind of box that separates an inside from an outside, and the reader or critic as the person who opens the lid in order to release in the open what was secreted but inaccessible inside. It matters little whether we call the inside of the box the content or the form, the outside the meaning or the appearance. The recurrent debate opposing intrinsic to extrinsic criticism stands under

[14] For a clarification of the status of the "World Republic of Letters," see Casanova (1999), especially the first chapter.

> the aegis of an inside/outside metaphor that is never being seriously questioned. (de Man 28)

De Man's critique brings our attention to the rhetorical underpinnings that sustain the discourses of formalist or referential approaches to literature. These rely on an unexamined metaphor, a trope that implicitly figures the literary text as a container endowed with neatly defined boundaries that determine its inside and outside. For de Man, the historical import of literary texts demands the disfiguration of precisely this trope. A literary-historical event must displace any model that understands history to lie outside (as referent) or inside (as content) of a literary text. Instead, what has to be assumed is the irreducible textual status of everything that could be said to be historical. Indeed, as de Man argues near the end of "Literary History and Literary Modernity," literary criticism and history ultimately share a common "ground," since "the bases for historical knowledge are not empirical facts but written texts, even if these texts masquerade in the guise of wars or revolutions" (de Man 165).[15]

Since de Man, other literary critics have continued to question traditional literary-historical accounts of the possibility of literary history that tend to rely on the same metaphorical understanding of the literary text as having an inside and an outside. For instance, Catherine Gallagher and Stephen Greenblatt describe new historicism as a practice of literary history that is cognizant of the fact that "[i]f an entire culture is regarded as text, then […] it becomes increasingly difficult to maintain a clear, unambiguous boundary

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[15] For de Man's most influential early essay on literary history, see de Man (1983) 142-65. For a lucid account of the thinking of history that animates de Man's later work, see chapter nine in Newmark (1991).

between what is representation and what is event. At the very least, the drawing or maintaining of that boundary is itself an event" (Gallagher and Greenblatt 15). For Gallagher and Greenblatt, what actually happens in a literary text necessarily bears a close relation to the tracing of the limit that determines in the first place what counts as a literary text and what can be said to constitute an "extra-textual event" within a *specific period* in history. Representation and the world are thus highly unstable *historical* entities of which no general theory can be formulated without betraying their historical particularity.[16] For new historicists, the text of culture is historical precisely because it allows the historian to *read* the drawing and redrawing of the shifting boundaries that delimits what counts as historical.

Another strong critique of approaches to literary history that understand "history" as what is outside the literary text can be found in Claire Colebrook's *New Literary Histories: New Historicism and Contemporary Criticism.* According to Colebrook, literary history has to confront and recognize the untenability of any claim that posits "history" as external to literary textuality (Colebrook viii). Such a move implicitly postulates history as a general concept that determines the historical significance of a literary text. In so doing, the historical particularity—the contingency of a text's history—would be inevitably reduced. On this account, Casanova's world-literary space would efface both the very singularity of the literary text—which it purports to preserve—as well as the contingency of its own history—which it can only recognize as a particularization of its general theory of "literature as world." At the same time, Colebrook's approach to literary history is particularly compelling insofar as she is also attentive to the limits of new historicism. Indeed, her call for a "new historicism" that

[16] For a more general overview of new historicism, see Salkeld (2001) 59-70.

would be different from Greenblatt's is related to a theoretical problem that she identifies in extant new historicist approaches to literary history. According to Colebrook, new historicists cannot account for their historical praxis without betraying their reliance on concepts that are not historically contingent.[17] New historicism radicalizes traditional historicism's focus on the individual or the particular as the locus of historical knowledge. And yet, when new historicists like Greenblatt attempt to explain how they arrive at historical knowledge, they inevitably must have recourse to general or trans-historical concepts—such as wonder—that trace the limits within which their historical praxis can take place.[18] For Colebrook, this problem is not just an epistemological issue; it also has important ethical implications. She argues that literary history should cease to engage in debates concerning the status of its claims as either general or particular—as "theoretical" or "historical"—focusing instead on finding modes of reading that would be historical insofar as they "do not confirm our theory," but instead allow us "to *read something else*" (Colebrook 235, emphases mine). Colebrook's call to think literary history as a way of reading otherwise can be reframed as another response to our guiding question. What "actually occurs" in a literary text happens by way of a reading that does not approach literature in order to fix the identity of our literary past and of our critical present. Instead, literary history allows for an encounter with alterity, in which both the historian and the past may become "something else."

Although this survey of the field is by no means exhaustive, it is broad enough in scope to lend some legitimacy to the claim that the crisis of literary history is structural.

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[17] See the preface in Colebrook (1997).

[18] In the next section, I will deal with Greenblatt's recourse to possibility. For an engagement with the problematic status of Greenblatt's reliance on wonder, see chapters nine and ten in Colebrook (1997).

Some critics claim that this is a direct consequence of the complicated historical status of its object of study: literary texts. For instance, Ferris argues in *Theory and the Evasion of History* that it is not certain that literary texts are historical in a way that would justify their historicization in a historicist manner: “If the justification of literary history as well as literary theory may only be had through a historical relation to literature, then the object of their study is ill-suited to answering their needs” (xii). Historicist approaches to the possibility of literary history seem to argue for the exact opposite claim. For instance, Greenblatt insists that in order to get a sense of the relation between history and literature one would have to retrace the very history of the meaning of the term “literature,” showing how it has undergone drastic semantic fluctuations throughout its history.[19] Only by uncovering those fluctuations can we determine what was called literature then and what we call literature today. This position seems incompatible with the arguments of most critics influenced by deconstruction, which would regard new historicism as placing too much emphasis on the “genetic” aspect of the concept of literature at the expense of its “structural” dimension, which is presupposed by the very possibility of tracing the shifts in the meaning of the term.

Besides lending credence to the claims about literary history’s crisis, I hope that the survey carried out above achieves a more positive goal, namely, to shift the terms of the conversation, away from any simple opposition between theory and history, towards a more supple account of the similarities and differences between deconstructionist, new historicist, and world-literary approaches to literary history. New historicist and post-structuralist critics *do* share similar positions concerning the nature of reference and the textual constitution of

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[19] See Greenblatt (1997) 460-81.

culture. And yet, there is a tension between their conceptions of history, which has less to do with how literary texts relate to their "outside" and more to do with how to conceive of the relation between literature, history, and literary history.

It is precisely this issue that I would like to interrogate now through a careful reading of some crucial passages from Benjamin's "Literaturgeschichte und Literaturwissenschaft" (Literary History and Literary studies) and Roland Barthes's essay, "Histoire et littérature : à propos de Racine" ("History and Literature: regarding Racine"). These two texts engage with the crisis in literary history, but they do so by raising fundamental questions concerning the very meaning of history, the historicity of literature, and the relation between history, literature and the possibility of literary history.

I. 3. Literature, History, Literary History: Benjamin and Barthes

As we saw in the previous section, the claim that literary history is in a state of crisis might be the only constant feature in the discipline's rather short history. One of the earliest diagnoses of the crisis in the field is found in "Literaturgeschichte und Literaturwissenschaft" ("Literary History and Literary Studies"), a short essay published by Walter Benjamin in 1931. Benjamin's text appeared as the twelfth entry in a series of articles that *Die literarische Welt* published under the general title of "Der heutige Stand der Wissenschaften," which translates to "The Current Status of the Sciences" or, more colloquially, to something like "The Sciences Today." As the title of the series suggests, each contributor was asked to account for the current status of the science or discipline in which they were experts.[20]

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[20] Heinrich Keulen, editor of volume 13 of Benjamin's *Werke und Nachlaß: Kritiken und Rezensionen* points out that the series counted among its contributors "renowned

Benjamin was responsible for acquainting the readership of *Die literarische Welt*—at that time, one of the most prestigious periodicals in Weimar Germany—with the most recent developments in *Literaturwissenschaft*, a word that literally means "literary science," but that could be better translated into English as "literary studies."

In a rather bold move, Benjamin's essay opens by questioning the notion of "autonomous sciences" (*autonomen Wissenschaften*), in a gesture that goes against the explicit aim of the series: to offer its readers an account of the current status of science in general by publishing reports on the contemporary situation of individual sciences. Benjamin:

> Immer wieder wird man versuchen, die Geschichte der einzelnen Wissenschaften im Zuge einer in sich geschlossenen Entwicklung vorzutragen. Man spricht ja gern von autonomen Wissenschaften. Und wenn mit dieser Formel auch zunächst nur das begriffliche System der einzelnen Disziplinen gemeint ist – die Vorstellung von der Autonomie gleitet doch ins Historische leicht hinüber und führt zu dem Versuch, die Wissenschaftsgeschichte jeweils als einen selbständig abgesonderten Verlauf außerhalb des politisch-geistigen Gesamtgeschehens darzustellen. Das Recht, so vorzugehen, mag hier nicht debattiert werden; unabhängig von der Entscheidung über diese Frage besteht für einen Querschnitt durch den jeweiligen Stand einer Disziplin die Notwendigkeit, den sich ergebenden

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representatives of each discipline" ("*renommierte Vertreter der einzelnen Fachdisziplinen*") (Benjamin 293). It is worth noting that this was not Benjamin's case. Although by the 1930s time Benjamin had already established for himself a reputation as a major literary critic, his career as a literary scholar was damaged beyond repair after his *Habilitationschrift* on the German baroque was rejected in 1925.

Befund nicht nur als Glied im autonomen Geschichtsverlaufe dieser Wissenschaft, sondern vor allem als ein Element der gesamten Kulturlage im betreffenden Zeitpunkte aufzuzeigen. Wenn, wie im folgenden dargelegt wird, die Literaturgeschichte mitten in einer Krise steht, so ist diese Krise nur Teilerscheinung einer sehr viel allgemeineren. Die Literaturgeschichte ist nicht nur eine Disziplin, sondern in ihrer Entwicklung selbst ein Moment der allgemeinen Geschichte. (Benjamin 305-6)

(Time and again one tries to restate the history of individual sciences within the course of a self-contained development. Indeed, one readily speaks of autonomous sciences. And even if what is meant by this formulation is only the conceptual system of individual disciplines, the representation of autonomy easily slides over into the historical [realm] and leads to the attempt to present the history of science at each time as an independent, detached process external to the whole course of politico-spiritual events. The right to proceed in this way may not be debated here; independent of any decision on this question, what is necessary for a cross-examination of the current status of a discipline is to show the given findings not only as links within the autonomous historical process of this science, but above all as elements of the whole cultural situation at respective points in time. If, as will be laid out in what follows, literary history stands in the middle of a crisis, this crisis is only a partial manifestation of a much more general [one].

> Literary history is not only a discipline; rather, in its development itself, [it is] a moment of general history).

Addressing a broader public about the status of literary studies in the German academy, Benjamin begins his text by announcing that literary history in a state of crisis and that this crisis is part of a more general critical situation. However, in order to grasp the extent of this crisis, the notion of autonomy in the theory of science must be bracketed. The significance of this gesture should not be understated, given the prominent role that the concept of autonomy played in the "*Methodenstreit*" ("the methodological conflict") that took place in German universities after the turn of the twentieth century.[21] Scientific autonomy must be bracketed because this concept already contains embedded in it a notion of the "historicity" of science that determines the history of literary history as a "self-contained development." Rather than merely elaborating a *static* ontology or a logic of the "conceptual system" (*begriffliche System*) of any science—i.e., the totality of norms that is specific to each discipline and which encompasses axiomatic propositions, methodological rules, and categorial lexica—theories of autonomy overreach their boundaries by also

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[21] The *Methodenstreit* is a name for a series of debates about scientific methodology that dominated German philosophy, theology, and social sciences for most of the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century, involving figures such as Wilhelm Dilthey, Wilhelm Windelband, Heinrich Rickert, Georg Simmel, Edmund Husserl, Max Weber, Karl Barth, and Rudolph Bultmann. One of the major sources of debate was the status of historical knowledge and historical modes of representation in the social sciences. The debates ranged from the attempts of Neo-Kantian such as Windelband and Rickert to establish the autonomy of the human sciences vis-à-vis the natural sciences, to the rejection of historicism as leading to relativism in fields like theology, economics, and philosophy. For a very early examination of some of the main figures involved in the philosophical side of this debate, see Raymond Aaron's 1938 classic study of this period, in particular the conclusion (1987 2nd edition). For a more recent account of the *Methodenstreit*, see the first chapter in Barash (2003).

providing a *genetic* account of the development of science on the basis of teleological principles that are particular to each discipline. The notion of autonomy may be valid from an strictly *epistemological* perspective; however, it has little purchase if one is considering an academic discipline *historically*, which for Benjamin requires inscribing said discipline within a broader field of social, political, and cultural forces, let alone if one is trying to diagnose a general crisis of which the critical status of a specific field is ultimately a symptom.

Where does Benjamin locate this crisis? Benjamin begins to build the case for his initial argument by taking the readership of *Die literarische Welt* on a brief but rather exhaustive survey of the history of the literary history in Germany. The results of this examination are damning. The field of literary history appears to Benjamin's historical gaze as a non-event, as something that has yet to occur—a promise that has failed to live up to its own historical vocation: "Seine Leistung hat mit wissenschaftlicher schon lange nichts mehr zu schaffen, seine Funktion erschöpft sich darin, gewissen Schichten die Illusion einer Teilnahme an den Kulturgütern der schönen Literatur zu geben" (Benjamin 310) ("Since long ago its achievements have nothing more to do with science, its function exhausts itself in giving certain strata the illusion of participating in the cultural goods of the *belles lettres*.") Benjamin links the lack of academic vocation in the literary history practiced by his contemporaries with a broader historical crisis, namely, with what he calls in this essay the "Krise der Bildung," the "crisis of education" or "formation:" "Mit der Krise der Bildung wächst der Leere Repräsentationscharakter der Literaturgeschichte, der in den vielen populären Darstellungen am handgreiflichsten zutage tritt. Es ist immer derselbe verwischte Text, der bald in der, bald in jener Anordnung auftritt" (Benjamin 310). ("With the crisis in

education, the empty representational character of literary history expands itself, which becomes most palpably evident in its many popular presentations. It is always the same blurry text, which emerges in this or that arrangement.") "Denn mit der Krise der Bildung steht ja in genauem Zusammenhang, daß die Literaturgeschichte die wichtigste Aufgabe – mit der sie als 'Schöne Wissenschaft' ins Leben getreten ist, – die didaktische nämlich, ganz aus den Augen verloren hat." (Benjamin 310) ("For indeed, with the crisis of education, it stands in a clearer context that literary history has lost sight of the most important task, namely, the didactic, with which it came to life as "*belles lettres*.")

This crisis was at work since the appearance of the "first" German literary histories written by Georg Gervinus, who composed the first monumental histories of "great" German literature (Benjamin 306). According to Benjamin, the transformation of literary history into an academic discipline further deepened the field's crisis, leading to the increasing abandonment of the discipline's relation to history in favor of methods and frameworks emerging from the natural sciences (Benjamin 306-07). This process reached an end with the consolidation of the neo-Kantian notion of "Kulturwissenschaften" or "sciences of culture" as the hegemonic framework for scholarly practices in the humanities and the social sciences within the German academy: "Was sich hier vorbereitet, ist der falsche Universalismus der kultur-historischen Methode. Mit dem von Rickert und Windelband geprägten Begriff der Kulturwissenschaften vollendet sich diese Entwicklung [...]." (Benjamin 307) ("What is being prepared for here is the false universalism of the cultural-historical method. This development reached its fulfillment in the concept of cultural science formulated by Rickert and Windelband […].") The false universality of neo-Kantian

approaches to the human or cultural sciences lies precisely in their reliance on an anthropological, subjectivist notion of value. Philosophers like Heinrich Rickert and Wilhelm Windelband relied on the concept of value ("*Werte*") in order to formulate a logical framework for science that could establish once and for all the boundaries between culture and nature, thus providing a solid ontological basis that would enable the historical sciences to be recognized as epistemologically-valid as the natural sciences, in spite of their divergent epistemologies and normative frameworks.[22] Benjamin's radical dismissal of the unbridled use of the term "culture" and "value" in early twentieth-century Germany recalls Martin Heidegger's equally scathing criticisms of the ideology of "culture" and "formation" or *Bildung*—criticisms that remained a constant throughout Heidegger's career.[23] If both thinkers took the elimination of the neo-Kantian image of science to be a necessary task, Benjamin's short essay on literary history sheds some light on why they agree on this point. For ultimately, the adoption of the category of value and the understanding of culture as an autonomous realm of objectivity is a rejection of a notion of historicity in favor of a subjectivist approach to historical reality. For the neo-Kantians, humans are the origin and source of both history and historiography—of *historia res gestæ and historiam rerum*

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[22] See chapters two and three in Bambach (1995), Barash (2003) 20-32, and Farin (2009) 355-84.

[23] Recall Heidegger's characterization of modern, city-dweller humans as the "apes of civilization" ("*Affen der Zivilisation*") (Heidegger 7) in his 1929-30 seminar on world, finitude and solitude. For one of Heidegger's most extensive engagement with the notions of "Bild" and "Bildung" in the context of a discussion on the Greek notion of *paideia* or "education," see Heidegger (1967) 109-44.

gestarum—since all values are ultimately constituted and established as such by human subjectivity.[24]

Moreover, according to Benjamin, the neo-Kantian insistence on value resonated with German Modernism and its reliance on "eternal values," a historical correspondence that shows the text to which the history of literary history for Benjamin was intrinsically bound up with these problematic tendencies in philosophy and German letters: "Mit der Proklamation der 'Werte' war die Geschichte ein für allemal im Sinn des Modernismus umgefälscht, die Forschung nur der Laiendienst an einem Kult geworden, in dem die 'ewige Werte' nach einen synkretistischen Ritus zelebriert werden" (Benjamin 307-08). ("With the proclamation of 'values' history was falsified once and for all in a Modernist sense, research became only a lay servant in a cult in which "eternal values" were celebrated in accordance to a syncretic ritual.") Finally, for Benjamin not even the Marxist criticism spawning from the school of Franz Mehring poses any real challenge to the humanist/subjectivist alliance of modernist aestheticism and Neo-Kantian philosophies of values:

> Indessen ist Mehring Materialist weit mehr durch den Umfang seiner allgemein-historischen und wirtschaftsgeschichtlichen Kenntnisse als durch seine Methode. Seine Tendenz geht auf Marx, seine Schulung auf Kant zurück. So ist das Werk dieses Mannes, der ehern an der Ueberzeugung festhielt, es müßten 'die edelsten Güter der Nation' unter allen Umständen

[24] It must be noted that Heidegger and Benjamin coincided in the mid-1910s in Rickert's seminar at the University of Freiburg. Thus, they were both very familiar with the work of the most prominent neo-Kantian thinker at that time. For a text that explores the impact of Rickert's philosophy of life for both Benjamin and Heidegger, see Fenves (2013) 365-371. For the most thorough intellectual-historical account of Benjamin's early period, see chapters one and four in Fenves (2011).

> ihre Geltung behalten, viel eher ein im besten Sinne konservierendes als umstürzendes (Benjamin 309-10).
>
> However, Mehring is a materialist more through the range of his knowledge of universal and social history than through his method. His tendencies go towards Marx, his schooling goes back to Kant. So the work of this man—who brazenly held fast to the conviction that 'the noblest goods of the Nation' must retain their value in all circumstances—is rather much more conservative in the best sense than revolutionary.

The crisis in education to which the crisis of literary history belongs is also a political crisis. Modernism's neutralization of history through its insistence in eternal values and a "museum-like concept of education" ("*musealen Bildungsbegriff*" Benjamin 310-11) deprives literary history of its critical or even epistemological function: the task of literary historians becomes "the division of the entire German literature in holy groves with temples to eternal poets inside" ("*die Aufteilung des ganzen deutschen Schriftums in heilige Haine mit Tempeln zeitloser Dichter im Innern*" Benjamin 312). A conservative interpretation of culture as the spiritual *possession* of an individual, a class, a nation or of the whole of humanity has penetrated the discipline of literary history to such an extent that it has even lost sight of its most basic vocation, which is grounded in the "knowledge that the existence [of a work of art] in time and its becoming-understood are only two sides of one and the same state of affairs" ("[…] *Erkenntnis, daß sein Dasein in der Zeit und sein Verstandenwerden nur zwei Seiten ein und desselben Sachverhalts sind*" Benjamin 312).

It is only at this point, in the concluding paragraph to his column, that Benjamin

makes his methodological proposal:

> Wahr ist, daß es [die Literaturgeschichte] vor allem mit dem Werken ringen sollte. Deren gesamter Lebens- und Wirkungskreis hat gleichberechtigt, ja vorwiegend neben ihre Entstehungsgeschichte zu treten; also ihr Schicksal, ihre Aufnahme durch die Zeitgenossen, ihre Uebersetzungen, ihr Ruhm. Damit gestaltet sich das Werk im Inneren zu einem Mikrokosmos oder viel mehr: zu einem Mikroaeon. Denn es handelt sich ja nicht darum, die Werke des Schrifttums im Zusammenhang ihrer Zeit darzustellen, sondern in der Zeit da sie entstanden, die Zeit, die sie erkennt—das ist die unsere—zur Darstellung zu bringen. Damit wird die Literatur ein Organon der Geschichte und dies—nicht das Schrifttum zum Stoffgebiet der Historie zu machen—ist die Aufgabe der Literaturgeschichte (Benjamin 312).
>
> (The truth, however, is that it [literary history] should struggle above all with the works. Their entire life circle and sphere of influence has the same, if not a predominant right to stand alongside the history of their emergence; thus their fate, their reception by contemporaries, their translations, their fame. For with this the work turns itself in its inside into a microcosm, or much better: a microeon. For what is at stake is not to present the works of literature in the context of their time, but rather to bring to presentation the time that knows them—that is, our [time]—in the time in which they emerged. For with this literature becomes an organon of history and this—

> not to make writing into the material of history, is the task of the literary historian.)

It is worth noting that Benjamin's proposal for another literary history does not entirely dispense with the category of knowledge. In spite of his criticisms of scientific autonomy and neo-Kantian epistemology, Benjamin's attempt to theorize a literary history that might entertain a different, more critical relation to the crisis in education and culture implies also a rethinking of the status of knowledge and of historical understanding in light of an altogether different notion of historical truth. This explains why the kind of historical knowledge that Benjamin sketches out in these lines is rather unlike the image of historical knowledge that that we have grown accustomed given the influence of historicism in literary history. If, for Benjamin, to *understand* a literary text coincides with *knowing* its existence in time, this is because the *knowability* that belongs to the temporality of history and to the historicity of temporality is of a different order than the mere accumulation of information about what happened in the past and its configuration in the form of a narrative. Instead, to *know* time for Benjamin requires the suspension of the image of time as flow or a succession of temporal moments and its substitution for a notion of time based on an encounter in which the collision of two heterogeneous times *takes place.* Benjamin's notion of historical time is thus marked by the tension of two seemingly incompatible structures within the same historical instant, which is both describable as the non-simultaneity of the simultaneous and as the simultaneity of the non-simultaneous. The first structure is activated as soon as the moment or the instant—traditionally understood as the simplest unit of time—is seen as divided within itself and thus as not fully coincident with itself. This brings to mind

Emmanuel Levinas's notion of the instant's dia-chrony, which I analyzed extensively in the introduction to this dissertation. For Benjamin, not unlike Levinas, there is a multiplicity implicit in the reputed unicity of the instant, rendering the simultaneity of the latter incoherent, non-simultaneous. And yet, at the same time, the multiplicity of the unique time—the intensity of the moment—is not simply a factor of temporal arithmetic; the numerous multitude of this time-point becomes instead charged with history to the point that Benjamin argues that the non-simultaneity of an entire historical process is, as it were, abbreviated within the simultaneous, punctuality of one single moment in time. This is the process through which the instant becomes a microeon and a single literary work contains a historical infinity enfolded within its time-point, already prefiguring the shape of a broader history.

But in order to think through the kind of knowledge that Benjamin singles out as characteristic of literary history, we must destroy the standard image of time that underwrites our notion of historical knowledge. Traditionally understood, historical knowledge has always presupposed an encounter between different temporal moments, if not a gathering of the diversity of historical time. The task of unifying the dispersion of time usually falls on the shoulders of the historical subject or the historian, since it is ultimately in the present of the historian that the past is elaborated historically through an analysis of documentation and sources. In this historicist construal of the labor of history, the historian is ultimately understood in terms of *presence*, since the feature that singularizes the historian vis-à-vis what is historicized consists in the former's capacity to bring the past back into their present *as* a present-past, as a modification of the absolute flow of time. There is thus an underlying

homogeneity between the historian's time and the past, in spite of their indexical or nominal difference. The very fact that the historian is capable of retrieving the past into the present attests to the persistence of an understanding of time as continuity, if not necessarily as succession: even if it already passed, for the historical subject of presence the past is in a certain way never gone; in fact, the retrievability of the past constitutes one of the key conditions of possibility of historical work in a historicist sense. Now, for Benjamin, not only are the now of reading and the past of the text that is read simultaneous, but also the text that is read is no longer understood as a present-past and thus its own history is no longer a function of the historian who reads it and ensures its enduring presence by bringing it back into the present. It is rather the opposite: history itself occurs when the time of the historian or of the reader—which, for Benjamin, amounts to the same—is presented in the time in which the literary text that is being historicized was written. The microeon of the literary past ceases to be a place that the historian knows objectively and instead becomes a site where historians interrogate themselves and *perhaps* come to experience the diaporia of not having any determined historical identity.

The historical truth that animates Benjamin's literary history *otherwise* requires the displacement of the historian from the position of the ground of history's innermost possibility. It is in this way that history becomes political, ethical and critical, that historian *knowability* (*Erkennbarkeit*) becomes *recognizability* (*Anerkennbarkeit*) and that literary history becomes a model, or better still, an organon for what history in general could and perhaps *ought* to be.

*

To a certain extent, the question that preoccupies Benjamin in his text on literary history is very similar to the issue that concerns Roland Barthes in his essay "Histoire et littérature." Is literary history a discipline or a science? If so, what is its relation to history in general? Barthes's first explicit characterization of the relation between literary history and history in his essay relies on a geographical metaphor:

> [L]'historien de la littérature coupe court dès qu'il approche de l'histoire véritable : d'un continent à l'autre, on échange quelques signaux, on souligne quelques connivences. Mais, pour l'essentiel, l'étude de chacun de ces deux continents se développe d'une façon autonome : les deux géographies communiquent mal. (Barthes 525)
>
> ([T]he historian of literature cuts short the moment he approaches true history: from one continent to another, one exchanges a few signals, one underlines a few complicities. But, essentially, the study of each of these two continents unfolds in an autonomous manner: the two geographies communicate poorly.)

Barthes describes these two disciplines as two continental masses that are separated by an irredeemable distance. Moreover, their lack of connection hinders the possibility that the historian and the literary historian might ever come to occupy the same territory. At the same time, we would be misreading Barthes if we were to take this passage as arguing that literary history bears no resemblance to history in general. For Barthes is quick to point out that there is some form of meaningful communication between the literary historian and the historian, even if this communication is limited and weak. What he does deny, however, is

the possibility that literary history as a scholarly discipline might ever become a branch of history. Although the tone of this passage seems to lay the blame on the literary historian for falling short, as it were, of achieving true historical status, the fact that Barthes deploys the language of autonomy to characterize the dynamics of the relation between these two disciplinary formations indicates that their separation is not to be seen as the result of the shortcomings of literary historians. The reason for their separation is structural, or to use Barthes's term, "essential:" these two modes of scholarship *must* necessarily give rise to their own laws (*auto-nomy*) and their own methodologies prior to the establishment of any analogy between them.

And yet, Barthes' own insistence on the autonomy of literary history and on the impossibility of fully integrating the former into a general field of history raises the question of how to conceive of the relation between the former and history in general. If no isthmus will ever connect these two continents, then what kind of common ground might there be between literary history and history? Are they always condemned to touch upon each other only in the most tangential ways?

But do they even sustain a minimal form of communication? As we have seen, some critics like Ferris have suggested that literary history and history ought to remain irremediably at odds with each other.[25] Ironically, a passage from the same essay of Barthes quoted above could be used to illustrate this position:

> [L]a résistance générale des historiens de la littérature à passer précisément de la littérature à l'histoire nous renseigne sur ceci : qu'il y a un statut particulier

[25] See Ferris (1991) xi-xx.

> de la création littéraire ; que non seulement on ne peut traiter la littérature comme n'importe quel autre produit historique (ce que personne ne pense raisonnablement), mais encore que cette spécialité de l'œuvre contredit dans une certaine mesure à l'histoire, bref que l'œuvre est essentiellement paradoxale, qu'elle est à la fois signe d'une histoire, et résistance à cette histoire. […] [T]out le monde sent bien que l'œuvre échappe, qu'elle est autre chose que son histoire même, la somme de ses sources, de ses influences ou de ses modèles : un noyau dur, irréductible, dans la masse indécise des événements, des conditions, des mentalités collectives ; voilà pourquoi nous ne disposons jamais d'une histoire de la littérature, mais seulement d'une histoire des littérateurs. (Barthes 525)
>
> ([T]he general resistance of literary historians to go precisely from literature to history teaches us that literary creation has a specific status; that not only one cannot treat literature like any other historical product (which no one deems reasonable), but also that the specialty of the work contradicts history to a certain extent, in short, that the work is essentially paradoxical, that it is at the same time a sign of a history and a resistance to this history. […] [E]verybody feels that the work escapes, that it is something other than even its history, the sum of its influences or of its models: a hard core, irreducible, in the indecisive mass of events, of conditions, of collective mentalities; this is why we never have a history of literature, but only a history of literary actors.)

At first sight, this passage appears to contradict the previous argument that Barthes makes in

his essay concerning the autonomous status of literary history and history. Here, Barthes seems to deny the very possibility of literary history by insisting on the incompatible ontological status of literary texts and historical phenomena. And yet, what Barthes argues here could be seen as a radicalization of his previous argument. Radicalization should be here understood literally as taking something back to its root. Indeed, in this passage Barthes provides the ontological justification for his earlier claim about literary history's autonomy, from which it follows that it is impossible to subsume literary history under history. According to Barthes, the reason for this impossibility lies in the very ontological structure of the literary work. The autonomy of literary history finds its source in the *resistance to history* that is part and parcel of what constitutes a work of literature. Therefore, the very composite or hybrid nature of literary history—which, as we saw before in the metaphor of the two continental masses, is historical without ever coinciding fully with history—can be seen as an expression or a symptom of the constitutive ambivalence of the literary work itself. Barthes affirms that the work is a "sign" ("*signe*") of a history and a resistance to history. An "irreducible" *a-historical* force traverses the literary work—a force that goes against the very history that the work nonetheless also signifies. Literary history cannot be fully historical insofar as a constitutive dimension of literature works cannot be accounted for within the framework of historical interpretation.

Barthes uses the word "creation" ("*création*") to refer to the "hard core" ("*noyau dur*") of the literary work that resists the work's own relation to history. Interestingly enough, he gives the name of "psychology" to the mode of discourse that would legitimately correspond to the aspect of the literary work that exceeds the sum of its historical vicissitudes: "En

somme, dans la littérature, deux postulations : l'une historique, dans la mesure où la littérature est institution; l'autre psychologique, dans la mesure où elle est création" (Barthes 525). ("In short, in literature there are two postulates: one is historical, to the extent that literature is an institution; the other psychological, to the extent that it is creation.") Ironically, although the argument up to this point seemed to lead to an even more radical separation of history and literature, the very fact of the radicality of this separation is what ultimately secures the possibility of literary history. For Barthes, literary history is ultimately possible insofar as the ambivalence of the literary work—its mutually-exclusive com-position as a depository of *historical* meaning and an *ahistorical* creation—is nonetheless contained through the very separation of the part of the literary text that literary history can legitimately approach from its "hard core," which resists historicization.

After reaching this point in his argument, Barthes is now in a position to undo the metaphor of the two continents that he introduced earlier in his essay. He does not create an isthmus connecting these two continental masses, but instead abolishes altogether their separation. For Barthes, the historian and the literary historian ultimately do the same work, since literary history is nothing but the name for the exploration of the historical part of literature. Barthes: "[R]amenée nécessairement dans ses limites institutionnelles, l'histoire de la littérature sera de l'histoire tout court" (Barthes 530). (Brought back necessarily to its institutional limits, the history of literature will simply be history.")

Barthes's early essay on literary history could be read as reconciling the claims of historical and sociological as well as formalist or "theoretical" approaches to literary criticism by properly tracing the boundaries that separate the creative kernel of the literary work from

its historical side. By doing so, Barthes establishes the limits within which literary history could be legitimately practiced, excluding any consideration of the work of art as a "creation." But Barthes's way of securing the possibility of literary history relies on the validity of the distinction between history and literature. This, in turn, presupposes that Barthes has a way of accessing this distinction. How does Barthes read the movement that traces a limit in the very heart of the structure of the work of art? How does Barthes encounter the line that delimits the literary text's history and prevents the latter from touching the work's irreducibly creative, *ahistorical*, properly *literary* kernel?

Barthes does not provide any argument to justify his claim that the literary work is both historical and ahistorical—a sign of history and something that goes against the supposed contingencies and vagaries of its own historical factuality. He merely asserts that this is the case and invokes an instance of *sensus communis* in order to make his case for this separation: "tout le monde sent bien […]," "everybody feels" or "everybody knows well" that something in the literary text escapes its history, even if the very name for this escape—i.e., creation—remains theoretically and historically unexamined. This moment in Barthes's essay demands a more careful examination, involving, among other things, a reconstruction of the critical debates that Barthes was engaged in around the beginning of the 1960s. Still, it is possible to show that Barthes's understanding of the distinction between literature and history if we see these moments as implicit citations of the most canonical tradition of Western literary criticism, which traces its origins back to Aristotle's *Poetics*.[26]

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[26] In Perkins (1991) 1, Aristotle is mentioned as a forerunner of literary history. See Ferris (1991) 1-36 and Hamacher (2012) 171-77, for substantial engagements with the *Poetics*.

I.4. History, Poetry and the *Eidos* of *Ergon*tology: Aristotle's *Poetics*

To make this argument, I would like to begin by analyzing a passage from Book IX of the *Poetics* where Aristotle establishes a distinction between literature and history:

> [t]he work of a poet is to speak not of things that have happened but of the sort of things that *might* happen and *possibilities* that come from what is likely or necessary. For the historian and the poet differ [...]in this, that the one speaks of things that *have* happened, but the other of the sort of things that *might* happen. For this reason too, poetry is a more philosophical and more serious thing than history, since poetry speaks more of things that are universal, and history of things that are particular. (Aristotle 32, emphases mine)

The distinction between poetry and history for Aristotle is predicated on a distinction concerning the modal status of the events that are presented or imitated in historical narratives and in poetry.[27] For this reason, we could say that Aristotle's distinction presupposes that there is an ontological difference at the core of the "events" (*ta genomena*) that are brought forth in poetic and in historical composition. Historical writing speaks about and imitates *what has taken place*, whereas poetry is to be distinguished insofar as it presents "possibilities" (*ta dunata*). Whereas the object of historical imitation (*mīmēsis*) must have taken place in order to be represented by the historian, the poet works with beings that

[27] See Ferris (1991) 1-36. Although Ferris does not comment on this passage of the *Poetics*, the first chapter of his book addresses Aristotle's concept of *mimesis* and its role in debates concerning literary history.

have *actuality* regardless of whether they *really* happened or not.[28] That Aristotle privileges possibilities over things that have actually taken place might sound surprising at first, since we tend to think of possibilities as contingent—something that could happen or not—and what has *really* happened as having "more being" simply by virtue of having seen the light of day. Yet it is precisely this detail that justified Aristotle's argument that poetry is "more universal" and "closer to philosophy" than history. Poetry's universality lies in the fact that, unlike history, its mode of imitation is not determined by the "fixity" of historical facts. The ground of poetry's proximity to philosophy lies in its ability to make things be otherwise through its mimetic powers.

At first sight, Aristotle's characterization of the relation between poetry and philosophy seems to both valorize poetry over history and contingency—i.e., what *might* happen or could have happened—over the positivity of historical facts. And yet, there is a strong philosophical reason behind this rather uncharacteristic privilege of contingency over reality. We find the clearest formulation of this philosophical argument in the previous chapter of the *Poetics* (Book VIII), when Aristotle tries to account for Homer's superiority as a poet by introducing the logical and rhetorical motifs of necessity (*to anangkaion*) and likelihood (*to eikos*). Aristotle writes:

> A story is one, not, as some people suppose, if it is about one person, for many—countless many—things are incidental attributes of one person, with no unity taking in some of them. […]Homer […]seems to have recognized this beautifully […]. For in making an *Odyssey,* he did not make it out of all

[28] For a philologically sound reading of this moment in the *Poetics* that is sympathetic to Aristotle's privileging of poetry over history, see de Ste. Croix 23-32.

> the things that happened to the man, such as being wounded on Parnassus, or pretending to be insane at the calling up of soldiers, things of which none was necessary or likely to happen because of another thing that happened, but the *Odyssey* is organized around one action of the sort we are speaking of, and similarly also with the *Iliad* (Aristotle 31).

According to Aristotle, Homer's greatness as a poet lies precisely in the way in which his works enact the qualities that distinguish the medium of poetic presentation over and above historiography. Homer fulfills this condition insofar as all the events that are narrated in his poems are pre-ordained or *selected* in view of their inherent potential to be "organized around one action." The poet *decides* upon those possibilities that will go well with the rest of the possibilities that belong to the total series of possibilities that constitutes the work of poetry. The initial criterion for this selection is provided by the modal status of each possibility, namely, by the *necessity* or the *likelihood* that determines each specific possibility as an event that *should have happened* given the possibilities that *preceded* it, and that necessarily or most likely *will have* lead to the possibility that will come *after* it. The modal determination of possibility in terms of necessity or likelihood achieves the homogenization of the series of possibilities that *is* the work of poetry by establishing a *continuum* of possibilities that precede and follow each other in a necessary or highly-likely fashion.

I employed above the conditional construction "would have happened" in order to emphasize once more the basic line of demarcation that, according to Aristotle, separates the work of the poet from that of the historian. For Aristotle, these possibilities are possible *not* merely because they could have been otherwise. The possibilities that Aristotle valorizes as

justifying poetry's philosophical status have *actuality* is independent of their effective *past* realization; they are possibilities that enable a degree of idealization that historical reality cannot achieve because of its accidental nature. When it comes to the ontology of poetic works, actuality (*energeia*) and the reality of what has emerged (*ta genomena*), are severed. The sole ground for the ideal determination of possibility resides in the *telos* of poetic *poiesis*, that is, in the determinant power of the "one action" that in-forms all possibilities in light of their homogenization, which coincides with the configuration of an equally homogeneous *mūthos* or plot. The poet is able to integrate each possibility as part of a whole tissue composed of possibilities, forming a *unified* story. Homer's poetics eschew any one-to-one correspondence between *real* actions and their representations in favor of the selection of particular possibilities in view of their suitability to constitute an *aesthetic* whole: a totalized structure in which every single event represented appears as if it was either *necessary* or *likely* that it happened. Poetry imitates universals and dwells in proximity to philosophy because everything that it presents—whether it is something that has never happened or something that actually took place—is *presented* in light of a single action, which serializes poetic possibilities until they form something like a necessary syntax. The action that orients and determines the whole of the story prevents the potential dispersion of any text or of any discourse by configuring each of its components—each possibility—as necessary in advance. As Aristotle implies in his discussion of tragedy in Book VII, the result of the selection of those possibilities which would have likely or necessarily followed from one another is the

production of an organic whole, a single *muthos* has the right proportion, can be perceived as beautiful, and memorized with relative ease.[29]

Far from pointing in the direction of a thinking of contingency, the possibility (*ta dūnata*) that Aristotle singles out as the very mark of poetry's primacy and superiority vis-à-vis history can only be thought of as *actual*. The possibilities that poetry imitates are presented in such a way that the very production or the enactment of the singular overarching *action* necessarily follows from their syntactical arrangement. Each poetic event that is mimetically presented in a tragedy or an epic poem has already lost its particularity by virtue of the fact that it was chosen by the Aristotelian poet in view of its potential to generate a necessary or highly likely concatenation of circumstances that will bring forth the action that commands the work.

Conversely, for Aristotle, the poetics of history can only me thought as something akin to what Barthes calls "la masse indécise des événements" (Barthes 525) ("the indecisive mass of events"). Barthes here shows his Aristotelian vein when he thinks of the *matter* of history as being both "indecisive" and as having the character of a "mass." Aristotle would have agreed with Barthes: historical events—unlike poetic things—must be indecisive, since they are radically a-teleological: they vacillate and arrive on chance occasions. Insofar as they do not have the status of possibilities whose coming to be was either necessary or likely, they are marked by sheer arbitrariness. Aristotle would also agree with Barthes's characterization of the quantity of historical events as a "mass," ("*masse*") which follows from their very

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[29] For Aristotle's argument concerning aesthetic magnitudes and the question of proportion, see Aristotle (2006), in particular, Book VII. For a powerful reading of the implications of Aristotle's argument in Book VII for a thinking of the relation between literature and history, see Hamacher (2012) 170-77.

contingency. Indecisiveness determines historical events to be excessively, infinitely dispersed. The historian's language, unequipped with the poetic syntax of aesthetic totalization, cannot organize this random mass of accidents and occasions that seem to fall from nowhere. If we were to follow Aristotle, we would have to conclude that the writing of history is marked by the irrational compulsion to represent *what really happened*, devoid of any selection principles, and thus deprived of the more philosophical determination of actuality that characterizes poetry's possibilities. Historiography for Aristotle is radically non-aesthetic; it is a mode of writing that has not been in-formed in advance by the goal of bringing forth a whole story ruled by a single, sovereign action.

The significance of Aristotle's decision to oppose poetry to history in the *Poetics* should not be underestimated—even if we must remain skeptical of historical gestures that rely on the category of influence and its inevitable reliance on historical causality. That said, this brief Aristotelian excursus sheds light not only on Barthes's distinction between literature and history, but also on the broader contemporary debate concerning the possibility and impossibility of literary history. In undertaking this brief reading of Aristotle, my main goal was to show that Aristotle thinks poetry or "literature" on the side of a thoroughly aestheticized notion of possibility or of potentiality. By aestheticized, I mean that the possibility that is at stake in poetry for Aristotle is a possibility that has been purged of any relation to particularity, contingency, let alone impossibility. Although poetry works with possibilities and has the power to imitate things *otherwise* than they are or were, this is so only insofar as poetic imitation has already been in-formed and pre-figured in view to the production of a story that is ruled by a single, totalizing, action. The privilege that Aristotle

and an entire tradition of literary theory and criticism has granted to literature over history is related to a thinking of possibility that excludes the "possibility" that possibility might become *other*, suffer an alteration, be deviated from the course it has been given by the poet as a possibility that would have *necessarily* or *most likely* happened.

Furthermore, reading Barthes and Aristotle together suggests that Barthes's theory of literary history's autonomy and its unexamined assumptions can be seen as ultimately grounded in Aristotle's argument for the superiority of poetry over history. If this reading is plausible, then we could make the argument that the *Poetics* constitutes the first attempt to establish what would be called much later the "autonomy" of the aesthetic. Aristotle's *Poetics* affirms the essential distance that separates historiography from the more philosophical *praxis* of poetry precisely due to the latter's natural disposition towards beautiful instances of *aisthesis*. In Aristotle, aesthetics, poetry or literature, and possibility are brought together in an intimate relation that is meant to safeguard the praxis of linguistic production from the dispersion, the contamination, and the contingent character that historiography embodies. As opposed to the hetero-nomous, "indecisive" character that Aristotle and Barthes ascribe to the writing of historical events, aesthetic imitation gives itself the power of all powers and the most auto-nomous of laws: the Aristotelian poet exercises his or her prerogative to turn even that which *never was* into that which *could not but have been*.

I.5. The *Possibility* of Literary History

The trajectory of this chapter thus far has taken us backwards in chronological time, from a consideration of recent debates in the field of literary history to an analysis of several passages in Aristotle's *Poetics*. My schematic analysis of Aristotle's argument for the

superiority of poetry over history suggests that Aristotle's *Poetics* provides one of the first articulations in Western philosophy of a phenomenon that de Man calls in his later period, "aesthetic ideology."[30] The reading of Barthes serves as the mediating point between my survey of contemporary approaches to the question of literary history *today* and my reading of Aristotle's *Poetics*, since Barthes's argument for the separation of the historical and the "creative" part of the literary work implicitly relies on an Aristotelian understanding of the distinction between poetry and history. As we saw, such an opposition is predicated on the saturation of the field of possibilities by the modes of necessity or likelihood. The primacy of poetry over history depends on the ontological difference of the very things that these two discursive practices produce. Poetry produces an aestheticized possibility: a possibility that is teleologically determined in view of its seamless incorporation into the totalizing story or narrative that constitutes the literary work and that, in turn, is in-formed by an action whose unicity secures the story's wholeness. Historical *mimesis*, on the other hand, produces a radically non-aesthetic, amorphous, accidental aggregate of contingent and *real* facts.

Aristotle's model found its afterlife in all the twentieth-century formalisms and structuralisms—like that of the early Barthes—that understood the literary work as fundamentally a-historical in its core. If this is so, then we would imagine that, with the demise of formal or primarily aesthetic approaches to the literary text, the persistence of an Aristotelian configuration of poetic possibilities as solely possible in relation to their own presentation *as* necessary would be coming to an end. Indeed, the thoroughgoing historical orientation of much of contemporary criticism might be taken as an index of a major

[30] For an important essay of de Man's later period that addresses the question of aesthetic ideology, see de Man (1984) 239-62.

reversal, a sign that the claims of history—of contingency, of situatedness, of perspectivism, and of concreteness—that Aristotle's *Poetics* could not appreciate, have finally begun to be heard.

And yet, as Hamacher has powerfully argued, the very emergence of historicism and, by extension, of modern historiography, took place by way of a thorough aestheticization of history:

> Trotz der unverdrängbaren Rolle von *fortuna, chance*, und Zufall, die die Nachfolge von *tūche* und *automatīa* angetreten hatten, unterlag die Geschichtsschreibung wie ihre Theorie im allgemeinen einem offenbar unwiderstehlichen Zug zur Ästhetisierung und Teleologisierung ihrer Gegenstände und ihrer Darstellungsweise. (Hamacher 177)
> (In spite of the irreplaceable role of *fortuna*, *chance*, and accident, which succeeded *tūche* and *automatīa,* historiography, as well as its theory, was in general subjected to an irresistible move towards the aestheticization and teleologization of its objects and its ways of presentation.)

According to Hamacher, historicist thinkers such as Johann Gottfried Herder and Wilhelm von Humboldt reinvented history against Aristotle and yet in a manner entirely in keeping with his paradigm of poetic mimesis. Historicism transformed the structure of historiography from the re-presentation of what happened in its accidental mode, to the re-configuration of what happened in light of the "historical idea," which introduced aesthetic principles of selection and of teleological totalization into the field of historiography. The invention of historicism coincides with the displacement of *fortuna* as the primary mode of the

historicized in favor of the historicization of *possibilities* that, under the aegis of the historical idea, have already been purged of any contingency, of any possibility of *not being*. This purgation of contingency is at the basis of the claims that enabled the emerging discipline of history to justify itself as an epistemologically rigorous discipline.

In the next chapter, I will engage explicitly with the emergence of historicism in nineteenth-century Germany. To conclude this chapter, I want to follow Hamacher's claim by inquiring into the enduring legacy of an Aristotelian model of *aesthetic history* in contemporary literary criticism. I will do so by tracing the important, though often unremarked role that a notion of *necessary possibility* plays in the theoretical and methodological writings of three contemporary literary historians: Casanova, Hayot, and Greenblatt. I want to trace how these three literary critics rely on an unexamined notion of possibility that is already immunized against any accident: a possibility that cannot undergo any alteration, that cannot become other than itself, and that has excluded the task of reading for alterity as one of the crucial features of literary historiography. Insofar as this notion of possibility provides the ontological ground of their literary historical methodologies, I contend that their work is ill equipped to think and to practice literary history as a mode of "reading something other," as Colebrook eloquently phrases it. Although their work claims to be attuned to historical contingency, I would argue that their reliance on an aestheticized notion of the possible blocks the way for any consideration of a more robust notion of contingency. In spite of the fact that these three scholars understand their own approaches as critical of any form of "aesthetic ideology," I will show that their work continues the implicit teleologizing trend in historiography since the advent of German

historicism. As such, these literary historical models can be seen as an extension of the historicist tendency to configure the historical in a way that prevents the historian from having any encounter with difference.

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Since the publication in 1999 of *La république mondiale de lettres* (*The World Republic of Letters*), Casanova's theory of literary worlds has played an important role in methodological debates within the emergent field of world literature. In her 2005 article "Literature as World," Casanova returns to her concept of a "world republic of letters" in order to clarify the stakes of her major theoretical contribution to literary studies. I already cited a passage from Casanova's article where she explicitly states that the aim of the concept of the "world republic of letters" is to achieve the reconciliation of literature, history, and the world. According to Casanova, such a reconciliation is needed insofar as contemporary criticism remains caught up in a divide between internal and external criticism that either reduces the formal dimensions of the work of literature or negates literature's historical dimension:

> Is it possible to find the conceptual means with which to oppose the central postulate of internal, text-based literary criticism—the total rupture between text and world? Can we propose any theoretical and practical tools that could combat the governing principle of the autonomy of the text, or the alleged independence of the linguistic sphere? To date, the answers given to this crucial question, from postcolonial theory among others, seem to me to have established only a limited connection between the two supposedly

> incommensurate domains. (Casanova 71)

Casanova's concern seems to have a critic like early Barthes in mind when she invokes a notion of criticism that would assume something like the "alleged independence of the linguistic sphere." As we saw, Barthes did posit a discontinuity in the relation between literary history and history *tout court* and grounded this discontinuity in an ontological argument concerning the literary work's relative a-historicity, evoking a distinction between literature and history (between fiction and actuality) that harkens back to at least Aristotle. And yet, it would not be too difficult to argue that Casanova's account of the current critical scene as split between those who practice internal or formalist criticism and those who read according to more referential and political models is overly simplistic. Indeed, since the advent of post-structuralism in literary studies in North America criticism has been moving more and more against the theoretical direction that she characters as "the autonomy of the text." Even more problematic is the fact that, in positing this divide, Casanova reasserts a distinction that most critical theory—from Derridean deconstruction to de Manian allegorical readings, to cultural studies and new historicism—has worked hard to displace: the insistence on a stable inside/outside schema to characterize the relation between literary language and referentiality. This poses a major problem from the outset, which Casanova does not seem to address. If there were no such thing as a "total rupture between text and world"—if what she calls "internal, text-based literary criticism" had never argued for such radical separation, because it understands both textuality and the world in ways that are radically incompatible with Casanova's characterization—then what would her concept of the "World Republic of Letters" offer to the emergent field of world literary history?

At any rate, Casanova's literary criticism proceeds from the assumption that a way of reconciling internal and external criticism needs to be found. She posits the existence of a "world-literary space" as the dimension of literature where there is no absolute separation between aesthetic and politics, form and history: "Let us call this mediating area the 'world literary space.' It is no more than a tool that should be tested by concrete research, an instrument that might provide an account of the logic and history of literature, without falling into the trap of total autonomy" (Casanova 72). The word *total* here is crucial because, as its very name "World Republic of Letters" indicates, this space is only *relatively* autonomous, since it is connected to the global flows of capital and to the global political dynamics of rivaling nation states without being its mere mimetic representation or aesthetic duplicate: "Here, struggles of all sorts—political, social, national, gender, ethnic—come to be refracted, diluted, deformed or transformed according to a literary logic, and in literary forms" (Casanova 72). The relation between aesthetics and politics—between literature and history—is mediated through this world republic, which furnishes literature with its *matter*—"struggles of all sorts"—that literature then processes according to its own logic and in its own forms.

We could ask whether Casanova's account of the dynamics of politics and aesthetics does not betray an implicit commitment to the most common schema of vulgar Marxism: literature remains a representation—however refracted, diluted or transformed—of historical struggles that are properly speaking *non-literary* and even *non-textual*. To pursue this critique further, we could examine Casanova's own historical work, disclosing the ways in which her notion of world literature implicitly takes those regions of "reality" where *real* struggles occur

(society, economics, politics, etc.) as the "ultimate conceptual and semantic instance" ("*instance conceptuelle et sémantique dernière*") (Derrida 51) that in-forms the historical significance of a literary text.[31] Rather than taking this approach, I will limit my remarks on Casanova's work to a brief analysis of one passage from "Literature as World" where she discusses the ontological and epistemological status of the concept of the "World Republic of Letters." Speaking of this "world literary space," she states:

> It is also a 'hypothetical model' in Chomsky's sense—a body of statements whose working out (if risky) may itself help to formulate the object of description; that is, an internally coherent set of propositions. It should […] allow us to construct every case afresh; and to show with each one that it does not exist in isolation, but is a particular instance of the possible, an element in a group or family, which we could not have seen without having previously formulated an abstract model of all possibilities. (Casanova 72)

This passage exemplifies an ongoing trend in the theoretical humanities that is not exclusive to Casanova's work or even to literary studies: the embrace of the category of possibility as a kind of ontological foundation and as a source of epistemological validity. In this case, it is telling that Casanova recurs to the concept of possibility precisely in order to explain *how* the world literary space is possible. The concept of the world on which she relies is in keeping with the concept of a teleological, aesthetic, *necessary possibility*, which we saw at work in Aristotle. That world is an "abstract model" implies that the literary world itself does not

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[31] For a brief instance of this reduction of the historicity of literary texts to socio-economico-political dynamics, see the brief analysis of the Latin American Boom in Casanova (2005) 85-86.

have any concrete or factical existence. Instead, it is hypothetical in the literal sense of the world: it has to be posited *under* real literary facts in order to "allow us to construct each case afresh." Casanova's world literary history presupposes precisely the world as the archeo-teleological principle of any attempt to reconcile literature and history. The world achieves this reconciliation insofar as it is both an abstract model, and yet something more. For, in its very abstraction, the "world republic of letters" already contains "all possibilities" prefigured within its "internally coherent set of propositions." It is no surprise that the thinking of the world as a cohesive, unified system of possibilities that is at work here could stand comfortably in any of Leibniz's theological writings.[32] The *possible* world is the totality of possibilities. The world totalizes everything within its space, turning everything that occurs into a possible-necessary-possibility. Ultimately, Casanova's world literary history is a history of possibilities that were made possible by a necessity that itself relies on the very intangible weight of the world as an ontological foundation. Nothing that has the character of radical contingency could be accounted for within this model of world literary history.

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Within the emergent field of world literary studies, we find a more sophisticated approach to both the theory of the world and to the practice of a world literary history in the work of Eric Hayot, who presents his own work at times as a critique of historicism. For instance, in the introduction to *On Literary Worlds*, Hayot strongly denounces the effects that an unchecked historicist ideology continues to exert on the theory and practice of contemporary literary studies:

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[32] For a short exposition of Leibniz's thinking of the world, see Leibniz 289-91. For an important interpretation of this text, see Heidegger (1997).

> the ideology of a normative historicism structures the fabric of the literary profession, […] such a historicism makes certain kinds of scholarship essentially impossible. The existence of such an impossibility is at best a minor tragedy. More tragic is its quiet, continued existence, its silent domination of the ways we think, the ways we read, and the ways we train and teach students (Hayot 8).

The critique of "normative historicism" that animates Hayot's book unfolds through an exploration of a wide-range of theoretical, practical, and institutional concerns that lie at the center of the theory and practice of literary history. Of crucial importance among these is the issue regarding the pertinence of periodization in the discipline's methodology and institutional configuration. Hayot has no doubts about the deleterious effects that periodization continues to have in contemporary literary history, going so far as to argue that the insistence on periodization at all levels of literary academic practice constitutes a key element of historicism's inherent conservatism. To illustrate this, Hayot uses as an example the complicated status of modernism as a category of literary-historical analysis within contemporary literary studies:

> The ongoing dominance of a core version of modernism, relentlessly unmodified by the arrival of previously noncanonical authors from a variety of national and social locations, offers us a fairly clear example of how that process works in practice—even when most scholars agree that these new noncanonical authors *should* alter the core meaning of modernism! (Hayot 155)

Hayot expresses here a frustration that is common to literary scholars whose work engages non-Western European and non-Anglo-American literature. The persistence of a hegemonic understanding of "modernism" is predicated upon a set of practices that have effectively produced a mode of doing literary history that renders impossible the reconfiguration of the definitions, methods, and historical accounts that lie at the basis of the discipline. I am certainly in agreement with Hayot's claim that "normative historicism" stands in the way of a more theoretically robust and methodologically sound literary history. But I would add that literary history's deep-seated historicism is also related to the uncritical adoption of the categories of "possibility" and of "world" as central categories within contemporary literary theory. If so, then Hayot's critique of historicism would thus extend to his own work. Hayot's privileging of the concepts of "the world" and of "action" within the theoretical apparatus of his alternative to "normative" models of literary history betrays a commitment to the same aestheticizing tendencies that ground historicists interpretations of history *as* a gathering of teleologically-determined possibilities.

This much is clear if we turn to the first chapter of Hayot's book "The World and the Work of Art," where Hayot articulates the rudiments of his theory of the world-configuring capacity of literary works. Hayot relies on the concept of world proposed by Martin Heidegger in his seminal essay "Der Ursprung des Kunstwerkes" ("The Origin of the Work of Art") and on Jean-Luc Nancy's *La création du monde ou la mondalisation* (*The Creation of the World or Globalization*). Heidegger and Nancy allow Hayot to rethink literary worlding as a process that is both theoretical and material, providing a framework for rethinking the relation between the literary and the historical. Such a reconceptualization of

literary worlds allows for an interesting reconfiguration of literary history as a practice that makes explicit the implicit imbrication of language and reality that the literary world brings forth. And yet, the reader might be surprised to find that Hayot relies on Heidegger and Nancy in order to theorize his thinking of literary worlds. For Hayot pays no attention to what is perhaps the most crucial aspect of Heidegger and of Nancy's thinking of the world, namely, that the worldliness of the world can only be disclosed through a certain *impossibility of* the world, through an interruption in the functioning of the world. In some of his other texts, Nancy, following Georges Bataille and Maurice Blanchot (himself a remarkable reader of Heidegger), has called this interruption "désœuvrement," often translated into English by "inoperativity" or "worklessness."[33] In *La création du monde ou la mondalisation* (*The Creation of the World or Globalization*), Nancy also speaks of the world in terms of a "gap" ("*écart*") that places the world beyond "its own work" ("*son propre travail*") (Nancy 63). At the same time, it comes as no surprise that Hayot ignores this crucial aspect of Heidegger's thinking of the world, since he erroneously claims that "[t]he only work of art that he [Heidegger] discusses in 'The Origin of the Work of Art' is an anonymous Greek temple" (Hayot 27), thus ignoring Heidegger's extremely famous interpretation of Vincent van Gogh's 1886 painting *Een paar schoenen* (*A pair of shoes*). In his reading of van Gogh's painting, Heidegger claims that the singularity of the work of art lies in the fact that it does not "work" in any way that might be possibly accounted for by *worldly* models of activity and effectivity, which are themselves determined by the "serviceability" (*Dientlichkeit*) and the "entrustedness" (*Vertrauenheit*) of the objects that are used on our every-day dealings.

[33] See the first part of Nancy (2004).

The work of art is not a tool (*Zeug*). For the work of art is the being that brings not only the "being-tool" (*Zeugseins*) of a tool into its truth, but also it is the being that discloses the belonging of all tools to the world *as such*.[34] This oversight is symptomatic of the limits of Hayot's theorization of literary worlds and of literary "worlding" as the object and the process that world literary history is called upon to thematize. Because of his commitment to an understanding of literary history as a possibility that is predicated on the actuality of literary worlds, I would argue that Hayot's position is not that far away from the historicism whose pernicious effects for literary history he nonetheless effectively diagnoses.

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In a 1996 essay titled, "What is the History of Literature?" Stephen Greenblatt sets out to write an abridged history of "literature." His text takes the reader through the semantic, juridical, political, and socio-economic transformations that the English word "literature" underwent in England from the early modern period until the eighteenth-century. Greenblatt's essay provides a particularly compelling place from which to think about new historicism's relation to literary history, since asking the question about the historical status of literature implies an engagement, however oblique, with the question about the possibility of literary history.

Towards the middle of the essay, Greenblatt turns to the question of the possibility of literary history and writes the following provocative remarks:

> The stakes of literary history lie *always* in the relation between the contingencies that made the work of literature possible for those who created

[34] For Heidegger's interpretation of Van Gogh, see Heidegger (1950) 18-25.

> it and the contingencies that make it possible for ourselves. In this sense, literary history is *always* the history of the possibility of literature (Greenblatt 470, emphases added).

For Greenblatt, the modality of literary history is marked by the concepts of contingency and possibility. Contingency here implicitly designates the profoundly historical nature of the conditions that enabled the production of a possible *act* or instance of literature, both at the level of its emergence, as well as at the level of its reception by the historian. According to Greenblatt, "the possibility of literature" is historical precisely because the emergence in time of a work of literature never follows a predetermined, *necessary* trajectory that was already anticipated in advance and outlined *as such* in the structure or the essence of literary production. According to Greenblatt, the "space" of literary history is opened up in this seemingly precarious *relation* between contingencies. These contingences are multiple, so much so that perhaps they cannot be gathered into two poles, as Greenblatt seems to do, when he isolates the pole of production or creation and that of reception— writing and reading. Perhaps the reduction of these contingencies into a binary opposition could not occur without leaving history itself behind.

This passage appears towards the middle of his essay, which to this point had been mostly interested in tracing the ways in which the word "literature" was used in the late medieval and early modern periods in order to characterize those who, by virtue of being literate, could avoid being subjected to capital punishment. The possibility of literature as the kind of institution that we have come to know is itself the result of an innumerable set of contingencies, including the change in its relation to the penal law in early modern European

nation-states. To do literary history for Greenblatt requires the historian to acknowledge those contingencies that have already determined in advance the very possibilities that have been allotted to the historian.

And yet, Greenblatt's claim that "literary history is always the history of the possibility of literature" also says something more than what it seems to affirm at a surface level. On the one hand, to say that literary history is the history of the possibility of literature is to affirm that there can only be literary history within a historical field in which literature has acquired a number of specific functions that make this practice recognizable as a *literary* practice. To the extent that this recognition can take place, then the very contingency of the practice so identified as literary has been reduced, precisely through its identification *as* literature. On the other hand, Greenblatt's use of the adverb "always" could be read as implicitly making an argument from necessity: the history of literature *must be* so that literary history *may be*. The reappearance of necessity here is telling, in particular, because Greenblatt had already used this term in the previous sentence: "The stakes of literary history lie *always* in the relation between the contingencies that made the work of literature possible for those who created it and the contingencies that make it possible for ourselves" (Greenblatt 470, emphasis added). The sense of necessity here is intensified by the use of a noun like "stakes," which suggests that the issue at hand goes to the heart of the very existence and hence of the possibility of literary history. Greenblatt thinks of the possibility of literary history through the establishment of a relation between two sets of contingencies: the contingencies of the past that made literature possible and the contingencies of the present that make the past possibility of literature possible in the present *as* the literature that

was and perhaps no longer is. At stake in this moment in Greenblatt's essay are two distinct and yet intrinsically related arguments: first, the affirmation of a relation of necessity between the past and the present; second, the expulsion of contingency from the sphere of history through its conversion into possibility. These two moves are not only symmetrical; they are two sides of the same coin. A whole set of contingencies played a role in the possibility that something like literature came to be at any point in time. And manifold contingencies accompany the historian's attempt to grasp the history of literature at any point in time. Although those contingencies seem to mark the very historicity of literature, the possibility of literary history requires their reduction. These contingencies have to be eliminated from the relation that binds the present to the past, since this relation itself *must have* the character of necessity. Thus, the possibility of literary history, as Greenblatt conceives it, relies precisely on the overcoming of the danger of contingency. Only that which has overcome the chance of not being, its possible inexistence, its accidentality or impossibility, is possible, has existed and can be historicized. Literary history is *always* the history of literature; the necessity and the force of this chiasmic reversal presupposes that the contingencies that mark the past and the present have been thoroughly and necessarily converted into necessary possibilities. For Greenblatt, this conversion is precisely what is enacted every time the historian encounters the past. As a result, although these contingencies supposedly belong to everything historical encounter, the encounter itself *cannot* be contingent *if* the history of literature, or of anything else for that matter, is to give rise to history—literary or otherwise.

In the case of Greenblatt, the fact that he must necessarily convert contingency into possibility betrays his commitment to three historicist positions *par excellence*: 1. that the

present is *a priori* different from the past; and 2. that the historian's present provides the only position from which an adequate knowledge of the past can be obtained; and 3. that historical knowledge consists in the establishment of the past's difference from the present.[35] In the case of Casanova and Hayot, their commitment to thinking literary history as only possible on the basis of a concept of world defined as a "totality" of possibilities evacuates history of any discontinuity and of any opacity. Casanova and Hayot implicitly restrict history to the task of accounting for events that could only have the status of "worldly" possibilities—i.e., possibilities whose very possibility is safeguarded by their belonging to a totalizing and self-sustaining world, which has the power to bring *itself* into existence and to sustain itself by its own force. Whereas Greenblatt's new historicism repeats the privilege that historicism grants to the historian's present, the approaches of Casanova and Hayot repeat historicism's understanding of historical knowledge as dependent on the teleological relation between a particular historical phenomenon and a totality, which they call "world."

What would it mean to think of history without assuming that its historical objects have the status of a necessary possibility? What would it mean to think of literary history on the side of a contingency that is so radical that it insists and persists, through its opaque insistence, in the midst of its reduction by historical models that can only recognize and acknowledge that which appears to be necessarily possible? As I have tried to show in this last section, even practitioners of literary history who claim to be on the side of contingency like Greenblatt think and practice history *against* contingency; they attempt to domesticate contingency by turning it into a possibility that has been already preordained with a view

[35] For a similar critique of historicism that also applies to new historicism, see Goldberg and Menon (2005) 1609.

towards its necessary historicization. The debt that these literary critics have acquired with historicism comes to the fore in the ways in which they have to assume that their very fundamental concepts are intrinsically and necessarily possible, without being able to account for the sense and the legitimacy of their gesture. The world, or the relation between the present and the past, *must* have the character of an unshakeable possibility, if historical contingency is to be transformed into a possibility that can be historically narrated.

In the third section of this chapter I analyzed a short text of Walter Benjamin that sketches out the requirements for a literary history "worthy of its name." This *other* literary history challenges historicist and referential approaches to literary history by locating the labor of historical knowledge in the interpretation of the works themselves, rather than in the inscription of these works in their temporal context. Most importantly, Benjamin's *other* literary history requires that the historian relinquish the position from which the past appears as a correlate of its self-presence. Instead, the precondition for a historical experience lies in the interruption of the very movement that secures all possibilities against the danger of contingency—of not-being or of being *otherwise* than being—a movement that begins and end with the establishment of the historian as the very subject of history.

The trajectory of this chapter went from an interrogation of the possibility of literary history to an inquiry into the meaning of the notion of possibility at stake in debates about the crisis in the field. The reasons behind this shift should be by now clear. The fact that many literary historians and theorists of literary history presuppose a teleological concept of a necessary possibility in order to account for the meaning of history lays bare the challenges that an effort to rethink history in terms of an *ethics of historical reading* must continue to

confront. Key among these is the status of the concept of historicism. In this chapter, I have already made several gestures to the need for a more expansive notion of historicism that does not limit itself to challenge the historicist methodologies of contextualization and periodization, but that also uproots historicism from the ontological ground upon which it stands. We are now in a better position to name this ground: it is possibility itself which has determined from the beginning historicism's transformation of the contingency and accidentality of Aristotelian *historia* into a possible science of the possible.

For this reason, the next chapter turns to an analysis of historicism. My immediate goal in this chapter is to argue that what *occurs* with the emergence of historicism is the transposition of the aesthetic ideology that Aristotle establishes to distinguish poetry from history into the realm of historiography. To do so, I will pay specific attention to how the historicism of German historians such as von Humboldt and Ranke mobilizes the notion of the "historical idea" as the very condition of possibility of the reduction of contingency, which secures the possibility of historicism's way of practicing historiography as a science. The word "crisis" will remain the guiding thread throughout the next chapter—though this time around I will focus on the historicist undertones that inflect contemporary discourse on crisis in the field of history in general. And the overarching question of this chapter will also structure the following one: how could we sever the link between possibility and necessity that determines an entire strand of the history of the question concerning the possibility of history and of literary history? The task that emerges from this preliminary investigation implies opening up the question of possibility, with a view towards *another* possibility: an altered possibility, possibility *otherwise*, perhaps possibility *as* impossible.

CHAPTER TWO

The Closure of Historicism

> We are always coming up with the emphatic facts of history in our private experience, and verifying them here. All history becomes subjective; in other words, there is properly no history; only biography. Every mind must know the whole lesson for itself, —must go over the whole ground. What it does not see, what it does not live, it will not know. […] History must be this or it is nothing. Every law which the state enacts indicates a fact in human nature; that is all. We must see in ourselves the necessary reason of every fact, —see how it could and must be. So stand before every public and private work; before an oration of Burke, before a victory of Napoleon, […] and a Salem hanging of witches […]. We assume that we under like influence should be like affected, and should achieve the like; and we aim to master intellectually the steps, and reach the same height and or the same degradation, that our fellow, our proxy, has done. All inquiry into antiquity, —all curiosity respecting the Pyramids, the excavated cities, Stonehenge, the Ohio Circles, Mexico, Memphis, —is the desire to do away this wild, savage, and preposterous *There* or *Then*, and introduce in its place the *Here* and the *Now*.
>
> […]
>
> I am ashamed to see what a shallow village tale our so-called History is. How many times we must say Rome, and Paris, and Constantinople! What does Rome know of rat and lizard? What are Olympiads and Consulates to these neighbouring systems of being? Nay, what food or experience or succour have they for the Esquimaux seal-hunter, for the Kanàka in his canoe, for the fisherman, the stevedore, the porter? Broader and deeper we must write our annals, —from an ethical reformation, from an influx of the ever new, ever sanative conscience, —if we would trulier express our central and wide-related nature, instead of this old chronology of selfishness and pride to which we have too long lent our eyes.
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> Ralph Waldo Emerson, "History"[1]

[1] See Emerson (1983) 240-41, 256.

II.1. The *Sense* of a Closure

The previous chapter made a case for the fragility of the academic field known as literary history. As my limited survey showed, the critical consensus among theorists within the discipline is that literary history is in crisis, even if there are profound disagreements about how to address it. For instance, whereas Werner Hamacher, David Perkins, and Dave Ferris question the very possibility of literary history ever becoming a legitimate academic discipline, critics such as Pascale Casanova, Stephen Greenblatt, and Eric Hayot approach the field's crisis as a methodological problem that does not point to a more fundamental difficulty about its potential to become a discipline.[2] Given this divergence, I raised the following question in order to get a better sense of the underlying theoretical and conceptual differences that enable these critics to adjudicate the question of literary history one way or another: what concepts of literature and history, of their possible relation, and even of possibility are implicitly at work whenever they declare literary history to be possible or impossible?

Examining the conceptual foundations of this debate, I noticed that a quasi-Aristotelian approach to the notion of possibility (*ta dunata*) remains at work in many contemporary responses to the crisis of literary history. Through an analysis of Books VIII and IX of the *Poetics*, I sought to clarify the role that the concept of possibility plays in Aristotle's thinking of the relation between literature and history. I relied on the formula of "necessary possibility" in order to designate the privileged kind of possibility that obtains as soon as Aristotle installs a powerful teleology at the heart of poetic *mimesis*. The function of

[2] See Hamacher (2012) 182 , Perkins (1991) 17, Ferris (1993) xii, Casanova (2005) 72, Greenblatt (1997) 470, Hayot (2012) 52-53.

this teleology is to modalize the possibilities that a poem depicts as either necessary (*to anangkaion*) or probable (*to eikos*) in order to produce a poem with a homogenous syntactic arrangement or plot (*muthos*) composed of necessarily or probable possibilities (Aristotle 31). If the function of this teleology is to modalize *possibilities*, its end is to achieve the presentation of a unified, single *action* as the very ideal *arkhē* of poetic and aesthetic *mimesis* (Aristotle 32). As opposed to the kind of totality and unity of action that poetry's necessary possibilities afford, historiography remains as accidental as each of its *real* narrative instantiations, which are inevitably as accidental as the contingent events that make up the in-finity of historical time.

I will return to this crucial moment in Aristotle in the second section of this chapter; for now, I want to briefly restate how this Aristotelian schema relates to the problem of literary history as it is still debated today. In the previous chapter, I showed that the notion of the "necessary possible" informs how certain critics understand the term "possibility" in their engagements with the question of the possibility of literary history. But this mode of possibility also inflects their understanding of the notions of "history" and "literature," as well as their way of thinking the relation between these two ideas. After reading Aristotle, this should not come as a surprise, given that the *Poetics* marks the first moment in which the relation between history and literature becomes an explicit topic of *philosophical* reflection in Western culture. And the distinction that *Poetics* establishes between the entities that correspond to each of these two modes of composition relies on a kind of the possible—the necessary possible—that history, unlike poetry, cannot attain. The history of the relation between literature and history is thus already implicated in the history of the possible.

In order to argue for the actuality and pertinence of Aristotle's *Poetics* within debates in the theory of literary history, I showed that critics as divergent as Barthes, Greenblatt, Casanova, and Hayot rely on a quasi-Aristotelian model of necessary possibilities in their efforts to account for the field's possibility. On the one hand, we saw that Barthes locates the specificity of the literary in its intrinsic resistance *to* history, which he describes in an Aristotelian manner as "the indecisive mass of events" ("*la masse indécise des événements*" Barthes 525). As such, literary history for Barthes is possible, but only within the well-established boundaries that determine the relative historicity of the literary work. These historical limits are, in turn, determined by the *aesthetic* "hard core" ("*le noyau dur*" Barthes) of the literary work, whose *poiesis* is such that it cannot unfold through historical—i.e., accidental—interactions. Literariness for Barthes is thus *a*historical: the disclosure of the negative historicity of the literary work cannot be accounted for within literary history except as the blind spot of any historiography. On the other hand, we saw that critics like Casanova, Hayot, and Greenblatt also rely on concepts of "world" and "historical contingency" that are congruous with Aristotle's notion of a necessary possibility, even if they would certainly reject the Aristotelian gesture that deprives historiography of the possibility of ever yielding such a necessary possibility and thus belittles history in relation to poetry. Although Barthes may be more strictly speaking Aristotelian because of his *aesthetic* approach to the relation between literature and history, the literary histories of Casanova, Hayot, and Greenblatt also rely on notions of possibility that deprive the accidental, the contingent, and the impossible of any irreducibility or radicality. For these theorists, a mode of the necessary possible provides the condition of possibility as well as the desired outcome of any historiography.

In the previous chapter, I referred to critics such as Casanova and Hayot as *historicists* because of their tacit embrace of an idea of history that identifies historical knowledge with the domestication of contingency and the privileging of totality. In spite of the fact that these critics strongly reject traditional historical methodologies, I would argue that they remain indebted to historicism insofar as they take for granted the very *possibility of history*. In this context, this formula does not refer primarily to the issue of whether historical knowledge can be attained. Instead, I use this phrase to convey the sense in which historicism presupposes a schema of necessary possibilities in order to secure the possibility of a historical mode of comprehending the past. Such understanding is enacted precisely through the trans*formation* of historical contingency into a mode of historical possibility that provides the ground for the possibility of history. In this way, the *emergence* of historicism is also to be seen as a turning point in the *history of possibility*. By deciding that history *is* possible at the deepest level of its structure, indeed by giving history an ontological structure in the first place, historicism enacts a reversal of the Aristotelian decisive separation of history and poetry, which deprived the former of any affirmative relation to possibility other than as the "possibility" *of* accidentality. On these accounts, even the theoretical proposals for non-historicist literary histories put forward by critics such as Casanova and Hayot unfold within a ontologico-historical space that is both inaugurated and determined by the *closure of historicism*.

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Before I define what I mean by the word "closure" in relation to historicism, I want to take a moment to outline the structure of this chapter and account for its importance for

my overall project of theorizing *another*, *non*-historicist literary history. One of the working hypotheses that runs throughout this dissertation is that historicism remains the hegemonic historical framework not just in literary history, but in most fields of humanistic inquiry. That this remains the case in spite of the theoretical turn in the critical humanities should force us to rethink our assumptions about the relation between historiographical and theoretical scholarship in general, and about the reputed *de facto* anti-historicism of the latter. This chapter contributes to this task by redefining historicism in a way that clarifies how it is possible that many historians and theorists who claim to be opposed to historicism continue to rely on assumptions that are profoundly historicist. In order to achieve this redefinition, it is necessary to read the "history" of historicism against the grain of its own historicist reception and interpretation. However, this task is easier said than done, given that the most ambitious versions of historicism aspire to nothing less than to determine the historical *as such*. Even if we were to agree with Hayden White's argument against professional historians' conflation of their limited portion of the past with totality of the historical,[3] historicism would still remain the ontology that dictates the rules for the *scientific* or the disciplinary *elaboration* of the "regional ontology" of history.[4] If this is the case, then not only would a non-historicist approach to the "history" of historicism be *sensu stricto* impossible; it would also make no sense whatsoever to embark on the task of theorizing a non-historicist literary history. Is it *possible* to open the place of historical knowledge to a *different* way of thinking history that would no longer privilege the *necessary possible* as the precondition of any historiography? Conversely, is it *possible* to approach historical

[3] See White (2014) 9.
[4] On the notion of regional ontology, see paragraph 9 in Husserl (1976).

experience through a different framework than by way of a theory of action and an ethics of agency that not only presuppose the same ontological ground as historicism, but that also reaffirm the separation of theory from practice and entrench even further the "autonomy" of scholarly practices?

This chapter contributes indirectly to the project of proposing *another* idea of history by retracing the *closure of historicism*. The task of theorizing what I call an "ethics of historical reading" or *reading danger* requires taking into account the profound transformations that led to the consolidation of an *idea* of history that prescribes the originary conversion of contingency into possibility. Chief among these transformations is the invention of an *eidetics* of history that would secure the possibility of comprehending, understanding, and knowing the past. However, by "retracing" the closure of historicism, I do not mean to say that this chapter will offer a traditional, "historical" narrative of the processes through which historicism came to its own as the hegemonic theory of historical knowledge. Any such narrative is not only beyond the scope of my project, but also runs counter to its critical angle. For if we assume that historicism involves a claim about the very idea of history, and if history's own becoming an academic discipline is indebted to the historicist claims about the rules that determine the historical region, then any history of historicism that would be immediately recognizable within the parameters of academic historiography would implicitly reaffirm the historicism of history. The notion of "closure," which I take from Jacques Derrida, bypasses this difficulty by giving us a way of accounting for historical dynamics that are not reducible to a *real*—i.e., causal—understanding of historical time. Since I will explain this notion in detail later on in this section, for the time being I will limit myself to indicate

that, for Derrida, a "historical closure" designates the process of structural consolidation and historical inscription through which any complex *formation*—e.g., a discourse, an epoch, an institution, an idea, an organism, etc.—acquires a relatively stable semantic identity and emerges into space-time as a legible *entity*.[5] Rather than giving a linear story of historicism's emergence, maturation, and decline, to retrace its closure is to approach the *formation of the historicist formation* as a process that is at the same time structural and genetic. To do so requires examining the consolidation of historicism's decisive conceptual features, while also uncovering the historical sedimentations that enables these features to be read as the *marks* of "historicism" at any particular time and place in its genetic unfolding.

Of historicism's marks, I will only focus on two in this chapter: 1. historicism's elevation of change to the status of an axiom of historical being; and 2. historicism's invention of an *eidetics* of history. As I will argue, these two key elements of historicism encompass its account of the *reality* of historical beings (as change) and the *possibility* of historical knowledge (as the historical idea). Historicism comes to a close through the coordination of these two elements as part of a unified framework of history—a framework that enabled historiography in the nineteenth century to satisfy the *philosophical* conditions for scientific knowledge for the first time in the history of the West.[6] Derrida's notion of closure helps us to account for this process by pointing to the co-existence of contingency and structure that characterizes any *genesis*, including historicism's. Although the sheer singularity of historicism's emergence in any particular moment in time cannot be explained structurally, tracing historicism's closure enables us to determine the structural/historical

[5] See Derrida (1967) 25
[6] See Beiser (2011) 23

conditions of possibility for its emergence. Key among these is the notion of "necessary possibility" that Aristotle mobilizes in his *Poetics* to distinguish poetry from history. As we saw, this notion is also at the center of one of the earliest iterations of the metaphysical structure that Hamacher calls "ergontology," which is characterized by the co-belonging of action and knowledge within the same determination of the being of beings.[7] Aristotelian ergontology provided historicism with a pre-existing structure that enabled and nourished the very genesis of historicism. By affirming change as a historical *law* and by inventing an *eidetics of history*, historicism achieves closure as an intensification and a trans*formative* expansion of ergontology—itself a specific formation of Western ontology that comes to a close whenever *being-at-work* (*energeia*) emerges as the *telos* of all possibility and potency.

Since tracing historicism's closure requires grasping the crucial ontologico-historical decision that informs Aristotle's characterization of poetry as more philosophical than history, in the second section I go back to Aristotle's *Poetics* to briefly clarify what is at stake for historicism in this moment. As we will see, the notion of necessary possibility emerges as a way of *finitizing* the indeterminacy and the potential infinity of possibilities, rendering them necessary in relation to a complete, organized set of equally necessary or probable possibilities. The opposition between poetry and history in the *Poetics* is now to be seen as an opposition between an infinity capable of yielding a finite universality (poetry) and a finitude that remains infinite in its particularity (history). The very chiastic nature of this opposition already announces historicism's trans-*formative* iteration of this distinction that endows the writing of history with the power to *finitize* the infinite reality of the past through the

[7] See Hamacher (2012) 166-67.

construction of an historical eidetics of history modeled upon the necessary possibilities of poetry.

But the chiastic nature of this opposition also indicates an ambiguity at the core of the "necessary possible" that must be accounted for. To do so, I will examine Derrida's take on the "necessary possibility" of the accident, as exposed in his seminal essay "Signature Événement Context" ("Signature Event Context"). Reading Aristotle with Derrida yields a more complicated account of the opposition between poetry and history and of the status of the necessary possible as the principle that grounds this opposition. For Derrida's notion of the "necessary possible" reminds us that the identification of any finite structure with the logico-metaphysical value of *necessity*—in this case, poetry—*necessitates* that another finite structure be marked with *accidentality*—in this case, history—for its own constitution as the medium of composition and *mimesis* most alike philosophy. If this is so, then a certain *law of the accident* must have already been at work even in Aristotle's philosophy and at the very moment in which his ergontological investments are being asserted. The contingency, accidentality, and impossibility of historical *mimesis* thus provided the "necessary possibility" of an *other*, an alterity whose exclusion enabled the "necessary possibility" of poetry to come to its own. Derrida's insistence on the role that exteriority and accidentality play for the constitution of any interiority and necessity has implications for the status of historicism's closure that seem to run counter to the gist of my project. If the accidentality of history was *essential* for the possibility *of* poetry in Aristotle, if contingency and impossibility were already recognized precisely through their very debasement as less philosophical than poetry and philosophy, then we must ask whether affirming the outside—history as the site of the

accidental, the contingent, and the impossible—does not actually amount to a reaffirmation of the very idea of history that such a gesture seeks to displace. Moreover, if historicism expands Aristotelian ergontology to the realm of history by explicitly turning temporal mutability into a historical *axiom*, then we must take into account that the very *genesis* of historicism has already deprived us of a notion of the accident and the contingent that would be purely *outside* the idea of history. In order to think through this problem, this section ends with a brief excursus through an engagement with Derrida's notion of the "im-possible," which may help us to think about a mode of "possibility" that is neither that of the philosophy-poetry-history nor of the accident that already nourished the constitution of the former: a possible that not merely complicates but rather prevents the constitution of any totality—a possible that is only impossible.

After clarifying how I understand the notions of "closure" and "necessary possibility" in relation to Derrida's thinking, the rest of the chapter is devoted to retracing the closure of historicism. Section three proposes an interpretation of several moments from a key text in the history of historicism, Giambattista Vico's *Principi di Scienza Nuova d'intorno alla Comune Natura delle Nazioni* (*Principles of the New Science about the Common Nature of Nations*), which was published for the first time in 1725, and was subsequently revised in 1730 and 1744. Reading Vico with Aristotle in mind demonstrates the subterranean continuity that binds Vico's invention of an "eternal ideal history" to Aristotle's notion of a "necessary possibility." If Vico is regarded as the major precursor of German historicism, this is because his ergontological approach to history succeeded in overturning Aristotle's rejection of history by constructing a historical ontology that acknowledges the mutable

reality of historical beings and yet grounds history's *knowability* in an *eidetics of history* grounded on a theology of divine providence.

The fourth section of this chapter focuses on two canonical texts of German historicism, Leopold von Ranke's "*Idee der Universalhistorie*" and Wilhelm von Humboldt's *Über die Aufgabe des Geschichtsschreibers* (*On the Task of the Writer of History*). These two texts reiterate the Vichian closure of historicism while intensifying and consolidating the subjectivist and epistemological strains that were already present in Vico. Ranke's text lays bare the theodicy that sustains the accounts of historical reality that characterize traditional forms of historicism, which acknowledge that the reality of historical entities is marked by change in time and posit a *substantialist* notion of God as the *ens realissimum* that gathers the infinity of history into a totality. Ranke's theological ontology of history is supplemented by Humboldt's epistemology of history, which posits the existence of historical ideas that are *given* to the historian in order to write historiographies that bring forth in a finite form the same panoptic perspective that God has over the infinite totality of historical time.

The fifth and last section of this chapter provides a brief examination of the work of three contemporary historians of philosophy and philosophers of history who argue in favor of the historicist idea of history: Frederick Beiser, Louis O. Mink, and Frank Ankersmit. Their efforts to argue for the autonomy of historical understanding as a specific cognitive mode betray what we could call a *secularization* of historicism. But rather than challenging the theological substantialism of traditional historicism, these revisions of the historicist account of our knowledge of the past leave its basic premises intact. Not only do these thinkers reaffirm the link that historicism established between historical knowledge as

predicated upon the kind of coherence and totality that the Aristotelian notion of necessary possibilities was meant to ensure. More crucially still, their approaches to the "task of the historiographer" locate in the historian's subjectivity, indeed, in its very *ipseity*, the source and the site of the very *possibility* of historical comprehension. The secularization of historicism distills what is most essential about its essence. The reduction of historicism to an ontology of historiography that trans-*forms* historical realities into *possibilities* for the historian's consciousness modifies the past at its core: without ceasing to be *real*, every past event comes to be endowed with the stability of a *possibility* that is already assured about its possibility. Indeed, it is this hardening of the possible that provides the ontological ground for the emergence of historicism as a positivism. While eliminating the theological traces of German historicism, these philosophers retrace its closure by affirming that history is always a history *of* the self, tacitly purging from the idea of history the claims of *historical alterity*: the uncertain experience of *danger* in which history itself *may* come to be altered.

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When I refer to the "closure of historicism," I am relying on a concept of "closure" that Derrida mobilizes throughout his work, in particular in his early writings. In order to clarify the kind of "non-historicist" historical work that this notion accomplishes, it is crucial to keep in mind the distinction that Derrida establishes between an "end" (*fin*) and a "closure" (*clôture*) in *De la grammatologie* (*Of Grammatology*). This distinction is first thematized over the course of Derrida's argument about the historico-metaphysical configuration that he calls "the epoch of the sign" (*l'epoque du signe*), throughout *De la grammatologie*. Derrida:

Le signe et la divinité ont le même lieu et le même temps de naissance. L'époque du signe est essentiellement théologique. Elle ne *finira* peut-être jamais. Sa *clôture* historique est pourtant dessinée. Nous devons d'autant moins renoncer à ces concepts qu'ils nous sont indispensables pour ébranler aujourd'hui l'héritage dont ils font partie. À l'intérieur de la clôture, par un mouvement oblique et toujours périlleux, risquant sans cesse de retomber en-deçà de ce qu'il déconstruit, il faut entourer les concepts critiques d'un discours prudent et minutieux, marquer les conditions, le milieu et les limites de leur efficacité, désigner rigoureusement leur appartenance à la machine qu'ils permettent de déconstituer ; et du même coup la faille par laquelle se laisse entrevoir, encore innommable, la lueur de l'outre-clôture. (Derrida 24-25, emphases mine)

(The sign and the divinity have the same place and the same time of birth. The epoch of the sign is essentially theological. Perhaps it will never end. And yet its historical closure has been drawn. We must not in the least renounce the concepts that are indispensable for us today to shake the heritage to which they belong. Within the closure, by a movement that is oblique, always dangerous, risking without end to fall back on this side of what it deconstructs, it is necessary to encircle the critical concepts with a prudent and meticulous discourse, to mark the conditions, the milieu and the limits of their efficacy, to indicate rigorously their belonging to the machine that they allow to deconstitute; and at the same time the fault through which a

gleam of the beyond-the-closure lets itself be glimpsed, still unnamable.)

There would be much to say about how Derrida's explicit concerns in this passage relate to ours, especially in light of the fact that both "the epoch of the sign" and what we could call by analogy "the epoch of historicism" share the same theological foundations. According to Derrida, the history of metaphysics is inaugurated by the reduction of signs to the beings that they are supposed to represent. God is the name for the ultimate guarantor that ensures the successful enactment of this reduction of signs to meanings, referents, or to any other entities that do not have the intrinsic status of *re*presentations. Something similar could be said for the epoch of historicism. Not only would there be no historicism without the postulate of the idea of god—as we will see when we turn to Vico, Ranke, and Humboldt later on in this chapter. But also, historicism understands historiographies as representations of a *past* that was once *present* and is determined ontologically on the basis of the archi-metaphysical value of *presence*—the same value that, within "the epoch of the sign," relegates signs to the role of *re*-presentations of entities that are *present* in and to themselves.

We could prolong this thematic reading, but I would prefer to clarify why I find the distinction that Derrida makes in this passage between a "closure" and an "end" a useful one to begin to describe historicism's *genesis* in non-historicist terms. Derrida mobilizes these two notions as part of a claim that at first sounds rather striking, if not outright baffling: the epoch of the sign is *historically closed*, even if it may never come to an *end*. What would it mean for any entity or formation to have its "historical closure" drawn without having by the same token reached its end? Moreover, what idea or notion of history underlies Derrida's thinking of a *historical* closure, if the latter does not comport the *real* cessation of a process

within causal space-time? These two questions point to two issues that become entangled in Derrida's notion of closure: 1. the plurivocity of the notion of the limit; and 2. the different historical valences that correspond to these different kinds of limit. Although these two strands are indissociable, in what follows I will take up the ambiguity of the limit first, to then engage with the more specifically historical problem that is at stake in this distinction.

Upon immediate inspection, Derrida's distinction between "closure" and "end" seems to refers us back to another, perhaps more fundamental distinction, namely, that between two different kinds of limits. Indeed, Derrida's formulation of this distinction seems to presuppose that these two terms can be dissociated because they designate two modes of limits that are not co-extensive. At the most basic level, closure and ending would be different insofar as the latter does not follow *ipso facto* from the fulfillment of the former. In other words, for something to come to a close does not imply that this thing *must* have also come to an end. Moreover, not only are these two kinds of limits non-coincident, but Derrida also seems to posit an implicit hierarchization between them. To be sure, Derrida himself does not make this argument, but we could read the two short sentences "Elle ne finira peut-être jamais. Sa clôture historique est pourtant dessinée" ("Perhaps it will never end. And yet its historical closure has been drawn.") as implicitly arguing that "closures" constitute a more fundamental and broader kind of limit than "endings." For Derrida, the fact that something has not yet reached its end does not imply that the same thing is not already historically closed. We could easily reverse this claim and argue that closures are *necessary* conditions for endings, whereas endings are *sufficient* conditions for closure. We may know that something had attained closure because it came to an end, but from its

closure we cannot even assume that it will cease to be, let alone when it may reach its end.

That being said, a logical examination of Derrida's use of the terms "closure" and "end remains of limited help if we are to understand the theoretical and historical implications of Derrida's concept of closure. A more promising way of approaching this opposition would be to pay attention to the ontological aspects that are implicit in the semantic layers that inform these two words. For instance, the French word "*fin*," like the English term "end," implies a reference to space and time. Indeed, the "end" designates a specific moment with the spatio-temporal continuum, namely, the *terminus*, the limit or the boundary that demarcates the point in space and time after which a specific historical process, an organism, or even an idea, ceases to have spatio-temporal *reality*. Although the term "end" also designates a goal, this semantic valence can be easily understood within the same spatio-temporal register. For reaching a goal or fulfilling a purpose can always be construed as arriving to a limit that brings to an end a purposive movement. After reading their goal, teleological processes have no more reason to be. Regardless of whether we understand the end as a mere spatio-temporal division or as a qualified goal, Derrida's use of the opposition closure/end suggests that the latter are not only determined by their reference to space-time, but also by the mode of non-being that corresponds to space time: a *real* absence, a "void" that does not *fill up* any moment of space-time with any *quanta* of matter. To reach an end is to have no more *reality* left.

The word "*clôture*" or "closure" belongs to an etymological constellation and to layers of sedimented semantic content that differ from those that characterize the noun "end." As we will see, this divergence has implications for the ontologico-historical weight that Derrida

grants to closures. The French noun "*clôture*" comes from the Latin verb *claudo*, which means "to shut" or "to close" something that is open, but also to "conclude" or to "finish" in the sense of achieving or accomplishing something. Both inflections of the word leave no doubt as to the fact that "closures" involve a kind of limitation. And yet, the limits that correspond to closures do not refer exclusively or even primarily to spatio-temporal points that mark the boundaries of a continuous quantum of space-time, as it is the case with the "end." Therefore, closures do not necessarily imply the *real* cessation or the *factic* exhaustion of that which has been brought to a close. A door does not cease to occupy its space when it is shut, and bringing something like a painting to its conclusion does not mean that the painting's *reality* has been exhausted. These rather banal examples illustrate how closures seem to touch upon a thing's *possibility* more than its *reality*. When a painting reaches its closure its existence as a work of art is not finished but rather *modified* in such a way as to become actually *inaugurated* by its closure: a painting can only offer itself to be seen as *itself* if it has come to a close. The limits of closures are rather *delimitations* of the *ontological* structure of an entity, something closer to the establishment of its *ways of being* rather than the fixation of its spatio-temporal boundaries.

That closures, as opposed to ends, concern directly the possibilities of a being rather than its real measure, can be verified if we now turn to Derrida's use of the word "closure" as a philosophical motif or as a concept. Before *De la grammatologie*, Derrida had already mobilized the word "*clôture*" in several texts, most notably in "'Gènese et structure' et la phénoménologie" ("'Genesis and structure' and phenomenology") published in *L'écriture et la différence* (*Writing and Difference*). Derrida delivered this paper at a conference in Cerisy-

La-Salle in 1959 devoted to the work of Jean Hyppolite. This paper, in turn, was based on Derrida's 1954 master's thesis on the problem of genesis in Husserlian phenomenology.[8] In this text, Derrida thematizes the concept of closure in close relation to Husserl's arguments in paragraphs 72-75 of the first volume of *Ideen zu einer reinen Phänomenologie und phänomenologischen Philosophie* (*Ideas for a Pure Phenomenology and a Phenomenological Philosophy*). In these passages, Husserl seeks to specify the kind of "science" that phenomenology is by determining the differences between "concrete," "abstract," and "mathematical" eideitic sciences, thus securing phenomenology's status as a descriptive science of pure consciousness vis-à-vis the different modes of ideation that correspond to the natural sciences (abstract morphologization) and mathematics (pure formalization). Derrida introduces the notion of closure in order to tease out the implications of Husserl's argument in the *Ideen* that only mathematics is capable of achieving the closure of its own domain by fully determining axiomatically its manifold possible objects. Derrida: "Or qu'est-ce qui caractérise une telle multiciplité aux yeux de Husserl, et à cette époque? En un mot, la possibilité de la *cloture*" ("Now, what characterizes such a multiplicity for Husserl at this time? In one word, the possibility of *closure*") (Derrida 241). Derrida uses the term "clôture" here to characterize Husserl's claim about the specificity of mathematical axiomatization, which differs from the abstract eidetic typologies of the natural sciences and from phenomenology's concrete descriptions of the structures of transcendental consciousness by virtue of the fact that mathematics *exhausts* the *possibilities* of its manifold objects to such an

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[8] Derrida's master thesis was published only thirty-four year later, in 1990. For an account of its genesis, see the "Avertissement" in Derrida (1990) v-viii. For a recent account of the implications of Derrida's earliest work on Husserlian phenomenology for the question concerning the status of history, see the first chapter of Moati (2014).

extent that "nothing more" about them "remains open" ("*nichts mehr offen bleibt*"):

> Sie ist dadurch charakterisiert, daß eine *endliche Anzahl*, gegebenenfalls aus dem Wesen des jeweiligen Gebietes zu schöpfender *Begriffe und Sätze die Gesamtheit aller möglichen Gestaltungen des Gebietes in der Weise rein analytischer Notwendigkeit vollständig und eindeutig bestimmt,* so daß so in ihm *prinzipiell nichts mehr offen bleibt*. (Husserl § 72 152)
>
> (It [i.e., the mathematical manifold] is characterized by the fact that, when applicable out of the essence of the domain in question, a *finite number of concepts and propositions* become creative, *determining completely and unequivocally the totality of all possible configurations of the domain in the manner of pure analytic necessity*, so that thus *in principle nothing more remains open* in it.)

Full closure, according to the Husserl of the *Ideen*, can only be obtained through the kind of idealization that characterizes mathematics. For only the essence that belongs to the mathematical domain authorizes and, in a way, demands that its concepts be *creative*, that is, that they themselves produce in accordance to their own formal axioms the purely *ideal* objects that populate the mathematical domain. We can recognize here a much more sophisticated version of the Aristotelian schema of a "necessary possibility" that characterizes the rather less axiomatic but nonetheless exhaustive, organized totality that Aristotle has in mind as the epitome of poetical *labor*. What Derrida calls the "possibility of *closure*" ("*possibilité de la clôture*" Derrida 241) coincides with what Husserl identifies as the full determination of possibilities that occurs in the mathematical domain through the

intervention of its creative concepts. The *possibilities* of the field of mathematics are such that they are *finite*, completely determined and in a sense *finished*, even before they have been *realized*.

The brief detour through Husserl enables us to see how Derrida departs from Husserl while remaining true to the thought that closure is what obtains when all *possible* modes for the appearance of a phenomenon have been exhaustively determined. Indeed, Derrida's gesture vis-à-vis this early Husserlian schema of closure could be described as an expansion of the domain of the "closed"—or, better put, of the "close-*able*"—to encompass any formation that satisfies the sufficient conditions of a now *generalized* concept of structure. In other words, any internally differentiated configuration of marks that is endowed with a cohesive identity could be said to be *closed*. We are also now in a better position to understand why Derrida seems to assume that closures are not only ontologically and logically prior to endings, but that they also determine the history of any formation regardless of whether the formation in question has reached *its end*. According to any traditional historical schema, to trace a history with any kind of legitimacy requires that the thing whose history is being traced be already *finished*. Derrida's notion of a "*historical* closure," however, offers us a way of characterizing the historical significance of the finitude of all formations—a finitude that obtains when the possibilities that are allotted to any formation have already been determined either prior to its emergence into historical space-time or at any specific point of its historical existence. The historical closure of a structure implies that any coherent formation can only *have* a history on the basis of its finitude. In a way, structures are stillborn organisms; they *may* only reach *their end* at a particular point of

their *real* existence because they were already *done*.

Taking a cue from Derrida, I contend that if there were something like "an epoch of historicism," the latter would already be closed. This would be the case not so much because historicism has finally run out of time, but because the *possibilities* of historicism have already been exhausted. We could therefore reiterate Derrida's claim about the closure of Hegel's "absolute knowledge" ("*savoir absolu*") in the last pages of *La voix et le phénomène* by substituting "historicism" for the former:

> nous croyons tout simplement à [l'historicisme] comme *clôture*, sinon comme *fin* [RMdJ] de l'histoire. Nous y croyons littéralement. Et *qu'une telle clôture a eu lieu*. L'histoire de l'être comme présence, comme présence à soi dans [l'historicisme], comme conscience (de) soi dans l'infinité de la parousie, cette histoire est close. L'histoire de la présence est close, car 'histoire' n'a jamais voulu dire que cela : présentation (*Gegenwärtigung*) de l'être, production et recueillement de l'étant dans la présence, comme *savoir* et *maîtrise* [RMdJ]. (Derrida 115, emphases mine)
>
> (we simply believe in [historicism] as the *closure*, if not as the end of history. We literally believe in it. And *that such a closure has taken place*. The history of being as presence, as presence to itself in [historicism], as consciousness (of) itself in the infinity of parousia, this history is closed. The history of presence is closed, for 'history' has never meant anything but this: the presentation (*Gegenwärtigung*) of being, the production and withdrawal of beings within presence, as *knowledge* and *mastery* [RMdJ].)

The task of this chapter is precisely to show that this substitution is legitimate, to demonstrate that the closure of historicism is analogous to the closure of absolute knowledge. The ground upon which this analogy rests is precisely the originary determination of being as presence. Historicism, not unlike the Hegelian Absolute, is an ontology that determines historical being in the horizon of an interpretation of time as *presence*; it is on the basis of such an interpretation that historical *reality* is always already transformed into something that *appears to* the *present* of consciousness, either as a modification of said consciousness (a *present-past*) or as a re-presentation of what was once present. Although the time of historicism may be infinite, *its* concept of time is nonetheless determined and is thus structurally finite. From the perspective of "historical closure," recent developments in historicism attest to an altogether different sense of its "actuality," namely, that the movement of *actualization* of historicism's possibles is already outlined, even if these possibilities have not yet been fully realized and even if their full realization may never take place. Every "new" historical iteration of historicism thus repeats with minor differences the first ontogenetic configuration of the historicist ontology by building upon the two marks that have characterized historicism since its inception: 1. the onto-theological determination of historical reality characterized by temporal mutability and a-temporal stability; and 2. the establishment of the *possibility* of comprehending historical realities through an *eidetics* of history, animated by the same ergontological principles that, from Aristotle to Husserl, locate in the process of totalization that turns possibilities into *necessary possibilities* the epitome of all creative *poiesis* as the unity of action and knowledge. Historicist ergontologies are thus ontologies of presence that privilege the *presence* of the historian as true site of history.

At the same time, there is another side to Derrida's notion of closure that complicates my account of this concept thus far. The passage from *De la grammatologie* that I quoted above ends with Derrida pointing to the structural ambivalence that belongs to the movement of closure and thus to the very structure of any structure or to *structurality* as such. This ambivalence is due to the fact that the movement of closure of any entity necessarily produces an outside of the structure that it encloses:

> À l'intérieur de la clôture, par un mouvement oblique et toujours périlleux, risquant sans cesse de retomber en-deçà de ce qu'il déconstruit, il faut entourer les concepts critiques d'un discours prudent et minutieux, marquer les conditions, le milieu et les limites de leur efficacité, désigner rigoureusement leur appartenance à la machine qu'ils permettent de déconstituer ; et du même coup la faille par laquelle se laisse entrevoir, encore innommable, la lueur de l'outre-clôture. (Derrida 25)
>
> (Within the closure, by a movement that is oblique, always dangerous, risking without end to fall back on this side of what it deconstructs, it is necessary to encircle the critical concepts with a prudent and meticulous discourse, to mark the conditions, the milieu and the limits of their efficacy, to indicate rigorously their belonging to the machine that they allow to deconstitute; and, at the same time, the fault through which a flash of the beyond-the-closure lets itself be glimpsed, still unnamable.)

This passage suggests that in order to trace the closure of any formation it is not enough to simply account for the genetico-structural constitution of the "critical concepts" that make

up the machinery and the very history of any formation. For, according to Derrida, the same movement that brings any structure to a close also generates an undetermined outside. Derrida refers to this outside by coining a neologism, "outre-clôture," which I translate as "beyond-the-closure," even if Derrida does not construct this noun by using the French "au-délà" or "beyond." In fact, It is telling that Derrida does not characterize this outside as lying beyond or *au-delà* of closure, but rather as being "outre-," that is, on the other side of the closure, which not unlike the case of the French noun "outre-mer," which is translated into English as "overseas." For what is "over," what lies on the other side of the closure of any structural formation, is actually included through its very exclusion into the constitution of any structure. The finitude of any formation may determine in advance its possible historical shapes. But no finitude can obtain without generating an outside that is paradoxically en-closed within the ambit of its closure by the very movement that brings it to a close. In "Derridabase," Geoffrey Bennington characterizes this movement as an invagination "that brings the outside back inside and [...] facilitates the understanding of the Derridean always-already" (Derrida 288). The "*toujours déjà*," ("always already") the French cousin of the Teutonic, Heideggerian formulas "*je schon*" ("each time already") and "*immer schon*" ("always already")[9] points to a notion of temporality that precedes and exceeds the *realist*—i.e., causalistic—time of historicist histories. At each moment in the fulfilled, concrete time of a

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[9] The first appearances of the "*je schon*" and the "*immer schon*"in Martin Heidegger's *magnum opus Sein und Zeit* is in fact in a German translation of a quote from Aquinas's *Summa Theologica*, where Aquinas in a way anticipates Heidegger's notion of the *pre*ontological (vor*ontologisches*) understanding of being that is presupposed in our dealings with beings, see Heidegger (2006) The "*pre-*" carries the force of the each time or the always-already as a mode of temporality that does not index succession, but rather has to be thought of coming before (*avant*) any identifiable point in space-time, including the beginning of any process.

formation, and within this very moment, its outside is always already *there*.

What are some of the implications of the ambiguity of historical closures for any attempt to retrace their contours? A consequence of this ambivalence would be that the history of any formation cannot be grasped as the mere *realization* of its finite number of *necessary possibilities*. For each moment in the history of any epoch, discourse, organism, or system is also an iteration of the exclusive inclusions that secured the identity of any of these formations. What Derrida calls the "overclosure" traverses the *static* constitution of a structure as much as its *genesis*, affecting with the same in-finite ambiguity not only the necessary possibilities that make up any structure but also every moment of their concrete realization. This ambivalence explains why Derrida characterizes the concepts that belong to a discursive formation as "critical concepts" ("*concepts critiques*" Derrida 241). Indeed, the ambivalence of these concepts goes hand in hand with their critical edge: they are both sites and agents of a *krinein* or a de-cision that separates what is possible for any formation from what is impossible to it. As such, each critical concept contributes to the trans*formation* of a potentially infinite number of possibilities into the closed totality of possibles that structures any formation. At the same time, these concepts register within their own conceptuality the traces of their own decision, enabling us to read the exclusion of the impossible that enabled a finite number of possibilities to be endowed with the character of the necessary possibilities that constitute the boundaries of any identity. My efforts to trace the closure of historicism in this chapter will reckon with this ambiguity by submitting two of historicism's critical concepts—the notion of change and the historical idea—to a double interrogation, asking both *how* these concepts contribute to historicism's closure and *what* they must have

necessarily excluded in order to have secured historicism's *own* possibility.

The importance of exposing the outside *within* any inside *must* not be understated: such a strategy remains crucial not only for any attempt to keep constituted entities accountable for the exclusions that enable their formation but also for any efforts to *concretely* trans-form the shape of any formation by reconfiguring *otherwise* its inside/outside boundaries.[10] In our case, this would take the form of tracing the history of historicism in such a way as to show how contingency and accidentality not only enable historicism's constitution, but also *change* historicism's own image from within. Although I recognize the importance of this task, I do not think that it exhausts the "work" of deconstruction. Bennington has eloquently characterized this limited understanding of deconstruction's project by arguing that its "point [...] is not to reintegrate remains into philosophy, but, by rendering explicit the quasi-transcendental conditions even of speculative philosophy, to introduce a radical nondialectizable alterity at the heart of the same" (Bennington 291).

Such an understanding of deconstruction as a reintegrative reading of totalities would also fail to account for another, more radical sense that could be read from Derrida's use of the nominal phrase "clôture historique" ("historical closure") in the passage from *De la grammatologie* that I quoted above. In order to render this "third" sense of historical closure more legible, a detour through the last two pages of "'Genèse et structure' et phénoménologie" will be helpful. Derrida concludes this essay by making an implicit gesture

[10] The work of Cathérine Malabou provides perhaps the most lucid example in the contemporary theoretical scene of this gesture, which attempts to think *alterity* as constitutive and as trans*formative* of the same while resisting the move to expose the same in its sameness to the radicality of a relation to the "wholly other." See chapter eleven in Malabou (2005) 85-95.

to two heterogeneous and asymmetrical *outsides* of totality: 1. the outside that characterizes the transcendental-phenomenological *epokhē*, which suspends the factic thesis of any formation in order to distil its sense, intuit the essences that determine this sense (which, from Husserl's later work onward, includes the *eidos* "historicity" or "*Geschichtlichkeit*"[11]) and clarify their modes of constitution; and 2. the sheer "opening itself ("*l'ouverture elle-même*") that coincides with what Derrida theorizes as historicity *as such* (Derrida 250-51). The irreducibility that Derrida introduces between these two outsides can best be seen from the heterogeneity of these two historicities. Whereas the phenomenological *suspension* is capable of retrieving the constituted *eidos* of a historical formation, the historicity of a sheer opening corresponds to the un-constituable infinity that inaugurates and overflows any totality (Derrida 252). Derrida acknowledges his debt to Husserl by recognizing that such an infinity characterizes Husserl's notion of *Telos* as the highest mode of historicity (Derrida 251). And yet, Derrida *trans*forms this openness to such an extent that it can no longer be thought on the basis of any form of *teleology* or of the teleology of *form*. The name that historicity acquires through this *trans*formation is that of the "question:" "Elle est la question de la possibilité de la question, l'ouverture même" ("It is the question of the possibility of the question, the opening itself") (Derrida 251). The historicity of an opening coincides with the opening of historicity, not as the teleological ground of the being-historical of all historical beings, but rather as the supplement (*an*-archic in a literal sense) of a question that *suspends* any question aiming to adjudicate the possibilities of a being, including the question of being

[11] On Husserl's differentiated concept of historicity, see the Appendix XXVI, titled "Stufen der Geschichtlichkeit. Erste Geschichtlichkeit" ("Stages of Historicity. First Historicity"), in Husserl (1976) 502-03.

itself. Historicity *as* the question of the possibility of the question puts the totality of ontologico-phenomenological questions (What *is* being? What *is* time? What *is* history? Etc. *How* is being given? *How* is time given? *How* is history given? Etc.) into question, turning their probabilities into uncertainties and their possibilities into impossibilities.

To this opening itself corresponds the phantasm of a closure *as such*, whose latest avatar in Derrida's thinking took the form of the "absolute immunity" ("*l'immunité absolue*") of an ultra-sovereign life to which "nothing would happen" (*"rien n'arriverait"*).[12] It is here that we find the third sense, if you will, of the phrase "clôture historique." A "historical closure" also designates the foreclosure of history (*genitivus obiectivus*) that obtains when the field of possibilities of a structure is so saturated by necessity that it closes itself off from the *chance* of historicity, i.e., from being interrogated. For this reason, in order to trace the closure of a structure it is not enough to insist on the co-belonging of inside and outside, since such co-belonging can always end up reaffirming the boundaries of a structure, rendering it all the more immune to its outside precisely by appropriating this outside as *its* outside. In order to respond to the possibility of a foreclosure of historicity, an accent must be placed on a certain *asymmetry* that pervades the relation between the impossible and the possible, the outside and the inside—an asymmetry that, following Bennington, we may say that *remains* asymmetrical, radically other, even after the structure to which it belongs by not belonging has registered the necessity of this exclusion for its own constitution. Only the remains *of* the other (*genitivus subiectivus et obiectivus*) that sur-vive their immolation may keep the idea of history open to unanticipatable *trans*-formations—transformations that

[12] This motif plays a major role in the second essay of *Voyous*: *Deux essais sur la raison*, in the context of a discussion of Husserl's notion of historicity. See Derrida (2003) 210.

exponentialize the form of any formation and the formation or *genesis* of form to the point of suspending the very possibility of form and the form of possibility. We can now see why Derrida insists on the unnamability of the "outre-clôture" or the "beyond-the-closure." Although what is on the other side of the closure is also within the closure, it still remains *unnamable*, unthinkable in terms of any of the conceptual forms that determine the field of possibilities of the structure in which it irrupts, which, for this very reason, is ultimately more *de*formed than *re*formed by its unnamable outside.

We are here attempting to interrogate the closure of historicism from *within* and *without*, enacting the perilous, risky mode of reading that Derrida outlines in the passage cited above from *De la grammatologie*. To read historicism from within is to unpack its armature and lay bare the exclusions that lead to the consolidation of this armature. At the same time, tracing historicism's closure from without involves the more difficult task of reading the historicist totality for glimpses of a history that *may* be on the other side of historicism as its sheer, infinite opening. The danger of this kind of reading is therefore threefold: there is the danger of failing to displace historicism by merely restating its concepts rather than exposing these concepts along with their constitutive exclusions. But there is also the more pernicious danger of assuming that historicism's grip on the historical has been effectively undone as soon as the armature of historicism has been changed by the strategic reinscription of its constitutive outsides. And there is the third danger of failing to interrogate these outsides, hardening their excessive movement by turning them into mere outsides *of* an inside, reducing the in-finity of *new* openings that marks the event of an im-possible inter-rogation to the mere metamorphosis of the same.

II.2. On (at Least) Four Possible Senses of the Possible: Aristotle with Derrida

As I indicated above, to retrace the closure of historicism we would do well to recall the main features of what I have been referring to in this chapter and the previous one as Aristotle's notion of "necessary possibilities." This formula is an attempt to capture how Aristotle in the *Poetics* not only characterizes poetry as the *mimesis* of *irrealia* or possibilities, but also determines these possibilities as necessary or probable (Arisotle 32). This particular way of investing possibilities with the value of necessity is crucial to understand Aristotle's claims about history being less philosophical than poetry. For Aristotle, poetry is more philosophical than historiography for two interrelated reasons: 1. since poetry deals with *possibilities*—unlike historical composition which imitates *realities*—the things that poetry poetizes have universality, whereas historical events are particular. From this follows that 2. whereas historiography is *forced* to imitate the past in its particularity by chronicling *real* occurrences in the aleatory sequence in which they befell, poetry is *free* to select a specific configuration of possibilities and to organize them in such a way so as to produce a totalized plot in which possibilities relate to one another in the mode of necessity or probability.

This argument is most clearly at work in Aristotle's laudatory references to Homer in Book VIII of the *Poetics*. For Aristotle, Homer did not compose the *Odyssey* "out of all the things that happened to the man, such as being wounded on Parnassus, or pretending to be insane at the calling up of soldiers, things of which none was *necessary* or *likely* to happen because of *another thing* that happened, but the *Odyssey* is organized around one action (*mian praxin*) of the sort we are speaking of, and similarly also with the *Iliad*" (Aristotle 31). The combination of particularity, arbitrariness, and infinity that characterizes historical events for

Aristotle explains why he regarded historiography as a less philosophical mode of *poiesis*.

If Book VIII of the *Poetics* mentions Homer as the privileged example of the ergontological *praxis* of necessary possibilities, it is in Book IX that Aristotle mobilizes this notion to dissociate poetry from history: history is less philosophical than poetry since the former deals with the particularity of what has really happened (*ta genomena*), whereas the latter imitates the universality of possibilities (*ta dunata*). However, the universality of poetry cannot be explained solely by recourse to the *irrealis* mode that declines the ontology of poetic possibilities. To account for the privilege of poetry vis-à-vis history we must also take into account the labor of teleological actualization of which poetic possibilities are capable. Although at an ontic level these possibilities are infinite—in the sense that they are not bound to any finite spatio-temporal position—at an ontological level their in-determinacy with regards to any position (*poion*) is what opens the door to their totalization via their modalization as necessary or likely possibilities. In other words, this modalization trans*forms* the infinity of possibilities into the finite, well-arranged series of possibilities that compose the unified plot in which only one action (*mian praxin*) is imitated. It is *for the sake* of attaining this unity of action that necessity *must* inform the possibilities of a poetic text in such a way that they are purged of any impossibility or *non-being* prior to their poetic inscription. Furthermore, the rule of the one action also requires the neutralization of both the possibility of poetic contingency and the contingency of poetic possibility: the possibility-*not*-to-be is not so much reduced in Aristotle's poetry as it is trans*formed*, under the aegis of the rhetorical mode of *eikos* argumentation, into a mode of possible probability—a probability-to-be.

The opposite is the case with the particular realities that history imitates. Each event in its particularity is *finite*—indeed, it is *past*. And yet, finite historical events unfold *in* and *as* the potential infinity of historical time. History is infinitely finite in Aristotle's *Poetics* because historical events, in spite of their particularity, remain in principle *innumerable*. Moreover, no law could ever determine the form and the order in which an entire series of historical events has unfolded, since the series is potentially infinite. Called upon to imitate what has happened in its ontic finitude and ontological infinity, historiography becomes a contradictory *activity*—a *poiesis* deprived of any *final* actualization by the *in*essentiality that characterizes its own domain. Already for Aristotle history is "just one damn thing after another:" a mode of narration that does not *possess* its own end. The unity of history thought in an Aristotelian way would be something akin to the aleatory co-incidence of *historia res aleatoriæ* and *historiam rerum aleatoriarum*. Hardly an *ergon*.

We can see from this exposition that there are at least two senses of the "possible" at work in Aristotle's understanding of the relation between poetry and history in the *Poetics*, even if Aristotle himself does not explore this ambiguity. First, historiography is possible in the sense that it happens. Aristotle would certainly not dispute that historical narratives and chronicles are written—in fact, he would not have devoted any attention to the poetics of history if historical writing were not an extant mode of discursive praxis. And yet, for Aristotle writing history is also in a way *impossible*. However, this impossibility refers us back to the more restricted sense of possibility that structures Aristotle's ergontological commitments. Indeed, history can be said to be impossible only with regard to a notion of possibility or of potency that is determined by the primacy of *energeia* and *entelecheia* over

dunamis. This privilege of the actual above the possible is ultimately grounded on the originary character of the unmoved *activity* of motion that is Aristotle's "Prime Mover."[13] From the perspective of this notion of possibility determined by the horizon of its actualization, the former notion of the possible as what may happen appears in its proper light as the concept of *chance* (*to automaton*), of what happens "in vain" or by way of incidental or contingent causes (*aition kata sumbebekos*), rather than as the direct result of a teleological motion generated by necessary causes; for this same reason, the mode of what occurs by chance is linked to indeterminacy and infinity, as opposed to the determinacy that characterizes totalities.[14] Although we may be tempted to regard these two kinds of possibilities as two different modes—i.e., the possibility of the accident and the necessity of a necessary possibility, respectively—we must also take into account their two-fold one-sided asymmetry: not only is the possibility of the accident derived from the necessity of a necessary possibility, but their very notions of possibility point to two different ways of the possible: the possible as what characterizes what may or may not occur because it cannot determine its own motion, and the more emphatic sense of the possible as what possesses its own limit within itself (*entelecheia*) and has achieved its own closure.

Throughout his work, Derrida never ceased to contest the tendency within Western philosophy to establish a strong dissociation between these two possibles. Derrida's challenge to the Aristotelian distinction of the accidental and the essential and of chance and necessity in fact leads him to formulate a different notion of the necessary possibility of the accident

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[13] See Aristotle (2002) 1071b 20-1072a 20 239-240. On the link between the Prime Mover and a concept of possibility that is linked to the status of ipseity and sovereignty, see Derrida (2003) 35-36 and Agamben (1995) 51-55.

[14] See Aristotle (2011) 195b 30-200b 59-69.

and of the structural import of chance. As I will show in this section, Derrida's formulation has important ramifications for how I trace the iterations of these structural divisions within the closure of historicism. Henry Staten has given one of the most concise formulations of Derrida's gesture vis-à-vis the Aristotelian separation of the essential and the accidental:

> Derrida's question with respect to this schema is so simple that it can scarcely be misunderstood and so radical in its implications that it can scarcely be understood. It is this: if essence is *always* exposed to the possibility of accidents, is this not then a necessary, rather than a chance, possibility, and if it is always and necessary possible, is it not then an *essential* possibility. (Staten 16)

Staten elegantly abridges Derrida's thinking process about the necessary accidental in three steps: a. If we assume that accidents *may always* occur, then we can also assume that b. there is a certain *necessity* to this possibility, otherwise the occurrence of accidents would be unexplainable. And since there is a certain necessity to this possibility, then c. accidents are *essential*. If the *task* of essence is to unify a domain of possible states of affairs by separating those that belong to this domain *by virtue of itself* or *as such* from those that could obtain only coincidentally or accidentally,[15] then Derrida's argument radicalizes this essentialist

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[15] In his early theodicy, Leibniz gives an account of the modalities that consolidates the ambiguities that remain at work in Aristotle by distinguishing between two different orders—*essence* and *existence*—that yield two different kinds of modes that modify the modalities—the *per se* and the *per accidens*. These distinctions enable Leibniz to acknowledge the necessity that belongs to things that are contingent (whose compossibility depends on the total series of possibles or the world that god has chosen), while at the same time preserving the propriety of true, essential necessity as what is necessary to be by itself or by its own definition and not on the basis of anything else. The fact that in Leibniz the necessity of necessity itself comes to expression through a Latin formula "*per se*" that indexes the act of

gesture. According to Derrida, the very fact that essence accounts for accident *qua* accidents by excluding them from the ambit of the essential implies that essence has already granted a place within its own structure to the possibility of the accident. On this account, accidents are to be thought as being necessarily essential and their possibility should rather be thought as necessary—a notion that necessarily confounds any traditional thinking about modalities.

Perhaps the clearest instantiation of Derrida's necessary possibility of the accident occurs in "Signature Événement Contexte" ("Signature Event Context"), during his well-known engagement with J.L. Austin's *How to do Things with Words*. While discussing Austin's criteria for determining the felicity or infelicity of performative utterances, Derrida invokes this *other* necessary possibility in order to radicalize Austin's thinking about the possibility of failure within speech act theory:

> […] la valeur du risque ou d'exposition à l'échec, bien qu'elle puisse affecter *a priori*, Austin le reconnaît, la totalité des actes conventionnels, n'est pas interrogée comme prédicat essential ou comme *loi*. Austin ne se demande pas quelles conséquences découlent du fait qu'un possible—qu'un risque possible—soit *toujours* possible, soit en quelque sorte une *possibilité nécessaire* [RMdJ]. Et si, une telle possibilité nécessaire de l'échec étant reconnue, celui-ci constitue encore un accident. Qu'est-ce qu'une réussite quand la possibilité de l'échec continue de constituer sa structure? (Derrida 385 emphases mine) (the value of risk or of the exposure to failure, even if it may affect *a priori*, as Austin acknowledges, the totality of conventional acts, it is not interrogated

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selfhood, shows the subterranean link that has always related the necessary to *ipseity*, to what has the power-to-be-itself-in-itself-by-itself. See Leibniz (2005) 53-59.

> as an essential predicate or as a *law*. Austin does not ask himself what consequences follow from the fact that a possible—a possible risk—may *always* be possible, may in a way be a *necessary possibility* [RMdJ]. And if, after recognizing such a necessary possibility of failure, the latter still constitutes an accident. What is success when the possibility of failure continuous to constitute its structure?)

Derrida acknowledges that Austin recognizes the *a priori* possibility that a performative may always fail; what he takes issue with is the fact that Austin does not take into account this possibility as an *essential* possibility, that is, as a *law* of performative utterances. Derrida's gesture could be described as a radicalization of the most profound innovations of Austin's project: the shift from theorizing language on the basis of logical, grammatical, and/or semantic analyses of propositions that describe a state of affairs, to an interrogation of language from the point of view of ordinary speech acts that are determined primarily by their illocutionary *force*, rather than by their semantic or referential functions.[16] Derrida's radicalization of Austin's project of an "ordinary language" analysis of the *force* of linguistic acts is twofold:

a. Derrida questions the grounds for Austin's hesitation to draw a conclusion that would seem to follow from his own premises, namely, that the necessary possibility of failure in any performative utterance is not a simple accident, but rather a *law* of performativity. What enables Austin to acknowledge the irreducibility of failure, while avoiding taking the next step and theorizing failure's radicality for any notion of ordinary language and

[16] See the first lecture in Austin (1975) 1-11

performativity? Derrida's answer to this question is that Austin's point of view is still informed by "teleological and ethical" commitments that require Austin to posit the "univocity of the utterance" as an "ideal" of theoretical coherence, presupposing the *possibility* "of a total context present to itself" ("téléologique et éthique (univocité de l'énoncé—dont il reconnaît ailleurs qu'elle reste un 'idéal' philosophique) [...] présence à soi d'un contexte total" Derrida 387). By focusing on Austin's exclusion of instances of performativity that he regards as "parasitic" or "non-serious,"[17] Derrida shows that Austin's separation of accidental speech acts from fulfilled ones relies on concepts like presence, truth, consciousness, identity, and intention, making his "ordinary" theory of language into another form of "logocentrism" (Derrida 392). This latent logocentrism explains why Austin must both recognize the *aprioricity* of accidents, while denying them full admission within his theory of performativity.

b. Derrida's interrogation of Austin is radical in another sense. We saw that the closure of performativity that occurs in Austin becomes legible through the conceptual pair felicity/infelicity, whose legitimacy is derived from historico-metaphysical values that seem to be at odds with Austin's project of establishing a theory of *ordinary* language. Derrida's deconstruction confounds this opposition by showing that, in its own terms, Austin's theory should lead to the recognition of the self-contradictory mode of "the necessary possibility of the accident" as being of the essence of any speech act. But Derrida does not end here; his next step is already announced in the form of two questions that he poses in the passage that I quoted above: "Et si, une telle possibilité nécessaire de l'échec étant reconnue, celui-ci

[17] On the "infelicities" of the performative, see Austin (1975) 14-45.

constitue encore un accident. Qu'est-ce qu'une réussite quand la possibilité de l'échec continue de constituer sa structure?" (Derrida 385). (And if, after recognizing such a necessary possibility of failure, the latter still constitutes an accident. What is success when the possibility of failure continues to constitute its structure?) These two questions are crucial to understand the radical import of Derrida's argument, since here Derrida is asking precisely about what happens to a structure once it becomes open to what it had previously excluded. It is significant that Derrida does not answer his own questions either affirmatively or negatively, preferring instead to prolong the kind of *dangerous* reading that always risks being accused of either leaving existing structures of exclusion intact, or dissolving all structures altogether. Derrida neither reduces the heterogeneity of the accident nor does he destroy the realm of essence by making it coincide *fully* with the accidental. Derrida's question rather asks whether an essence that shelters the inessential—the *Unwesen* of a necessary accident—should still be called an essence. And, more importantly, whether the co-belonging of the essential and the inessential renders infelicitous the very possibility of a felicitous speech act.

Imagining objections to his reading of Austin that in a quasi-nihilistic manner threatens to ruin the very possibility of a successful performative, Derrida responds with a "perhaps:" "Je dirai 'peut-être.' Il faut d'abord s'entendre ici sur ce qu'il en est du 'se produire' ou de l'événementialité d'un événement qui suppose dans son surgissement prétendument présent et singulier l'intervention d'un énoncé qui en lui-même ne peut être que de structure […] itérable" (Derrida 388) ("I would say 'perhaps.' Here, we must first of all agree on what is this "to produce itself" or the eventness of an event that supposes in its allegedly present and singular emergence the intervention of a statement that in itself cannot

but be of an iterable […] structure"). This "perhaps" acquires its full weight towards the very end of the essay, when Derrida, in a discussion of Austin's claim that signatures necessarily imply their "author" introduces a fourth notion of possibility that is perhaps not entirely reducible to the "necessary possibility" of the accident that he had introduced earlier:

> La singularité absolue d'un événement de signature se produit-elle jamais? Y a-t-il des signatures? Oui, bien sûr, tous les jours. Les effets de signature sont la chose la plus courante du monde. Mais la condition de possibilité de ces effets est simultanément, encore une fois, la condition de leur impossibilité, de l'impossibilité de leur rigureuse pureté (Derrida 391).
>
> (Does the absolute singularity of an event of signature ever produce itself? Are there signatures? Yes, of course, every day. Signature effects are the most ordinary thing in the world. But the condition of possibility of these effects is simultaneously, one more time, the condition of their impossibility, of the impossibility of their rigorous purity.)

The "perhaps" that marked Derrida's undecidable stance vis-à-vis the actuality of any successful performative acts finds here the closest thing to a justification. The essential is split open not so much by the revelation that the possibility of the accidental necessarily belongs to it, but rather by the "thought" that even the necessary possibility of the accident is not *purely* and *simply* possible. The impossible would have pre-ceded even the accident in its strange essentiality, ruining the purity and the necessity of its possibility, making the accident incapable of producing itself in *its own* accidentality as well as disabling in advance the structure's efforts to fully master the accidental by making it coincide fully with *its* outside.

That conditions of possibility are also conditions of impossibility affects not only the actuality of things whose occurrence we take for granted like signatures or even accidents. The impossibility of possibility also touches upon the ergontological schema of "auto-poiesis" or "self production" that constitutes something like the untouchable, inner core of possibility. Possibility as such and in all of its *modifications,* including the necessary possibility of the accident, would have begun by immunizing itself from the irruption of the impossible.

In *Politiques de l'amitié* (*Politics of Friendship*), Jacques Derrida takes a step further in clarifying the structure and the stakes of this auto-poetic possibility:

> Car un possible qui serait seulement possible (non impossible), un possible sûrement et certainement possible, d'avance accessible, ce serait un mauvais possible, un possible sans avenir, un possible déjà mis de côté, si on peut dire, assuré sur la vie. Ce serait un programme ou une causalité, un développement, un déroulement sans événement (Derrida 46).
> (For a possible that would only be possible (not impossible), a possible surely and certainly possible, accessible in advance, that would be a bad possible, a possible without future, a possible already cast aside, as it were, assured about life. That would be a program or causality, a development, an unfolding without event.)

If Aristotle's necessary possibility is constituted by the *telos* of its necessary totalization, what Derrida refers to in this passage could be characterized as a "possible possibility:" a possibility in which necessity occurs not at the *end* of a process of modalization, but rather from its very

beginning. Possibility *as such*, in the phantasm of its uncontaminated purity, erects itself as its own origin by assigning to itself and to anything that could be said to be possible the form of ipseity and the ipseity of form, reassuring that everything that *is* possible is *not* impossible.

This long excursus through Derrida's notions of closure and the necessary possible cast a different light on my investments in notions such as contingency, accidentality, and impossibility. It is now clear that the task of thinking the *possibility* of *another* history that may not turn its possibility into another affirmation of the unity of possibility, actuality, and necessity may well be impossible, at the very least uncertain. But I would argue that this impossibility is not necessarily to be seen as "nihilistic" or paralyzing, though they may sometimes be felt in such ways. Rather, this impossibility is *perhaps* the condition for experiencing and thinking history anew: not as an "unfolding without event" but rather as an event without unfolding: an event that brings to a halt the movement that would have insulated possibilities from any exposure to the *danger* of history's *otherwise*.

Rather than trying to retrieve a mode of the accidental that may resist the pull of historicism's ergontological thrust, the next three sections of this chapter show how the closure of historicism coincides with the trans*formation* of the infinity of historical accidentality into the law of chance. In doing so, my goal is to retrace the movement of closure that closed history itself from history, separating history from the in-finite chance of its historicity by transforming the narration of the past into a medium for the self-assertion of the self in the necessary power of its possible-possibility.

II.3. A Brief History *of* Ergontology: Historicism from Aristotle to Vico

By declaring history to be less philosophical than poetry, Aristotle ironically set the

stage for the arrival of historicism unto the scene of Western ergontology. Long before the emergence of the name "historicism" in late nineteenth century Germany, there were multiple attempts from scholars working in several disciplines—most notably in rhetoric and jurisprudence—to contest, if not reverse, Aristotle's decision that declared history to be a lesser form of poetics than the more philosophical genre of poetry writing. Although historicism has come to be associated with German philosophers and historians such as Humboldt and Ranke, the overcoming of the Aristotelian determination of history as a contingent, accidental, and impossible (self-contradictory) mode of poetics was already at works in the writings of sixteenth-century jurists such as François Baudoin, and, most notably, in the works of eighteenth-century Italian rhetorician Giambattista. According to intellectual historian Donald Kelley, Baudoin's major historical work, *De Institutione historiæ universæ et eius cum Jurisprudentia conjunctione* (*On the Method of Universal History and its Conjunctions with Jurisprudence*), published for the first time in 1561, already theorized a notion of history that presumed the universality of history under the heading of *historia integra* ("integral history"):

> By 'perfect,' 'integral,' 'universal,' or 'perpetual' history, Baudouin did not mean an aggregation of national histories fitted into an Augustinian world-plan; he meant the synthesized—and synchronized—view of history which could only be achieved by a philosophic scholar trained in the techniques of encyclopedic humanism. […] The unity of Baudouin's history bore a remarkable resemblance to the unity of Aristotelian drama; each was three-fold according to time, place, and action. 'History is universal,' said

> Baudouin, 'in terms of the times, the places, and actions.' The major difference was that, in this great 'amphitheater' of the world, man was both an actor and a spectator. More than that he was a judge; for, far from being an epistemological liability, his two-fold function as performer and observer gave him the most comprehensive view of this human drama. (Kelley 52).

Although the theory of the three unities of time, place, and action is a Renaissance invention, it is significant that Baudoin regarded historiography as capable of producing a unified action—the only one of the so-called Aristotelian unities that can actually be traced back, in all its normative force, to Aristotle's *Poetics*. Indeed, as we saw earlier, when Aristotle in Book VIII of the *Poetics* singles out Homer as the most excellent poet, he does so on the basis of an argument about the unity of action that Homeric poetry achieves in an exemplary manner (Aristotle 31). It is this precisely this kind of unity that Aristotle deemed historical narratives to be *incapable* of attaining, since he assumed that the universality of "necessary possibilities" is required in order for a narrative to have a totalized and unified plot capable of bringing forth a sovereign action. Baudoin's gesture is characteristic of a tendency, running through the Renaissance, to subvert the Aristotelian poetry/history divide by extending to historical particularities the status of the "necessary possibilities" that delimited the proper realm of an idealized, aesthetic poetry.[18]

Two centuries later, Vico consolidated the expansion of the Aristotelian paradigm of poetry's "necessary possibilities" to the historical field in his *magnum opus*, the *Scienza Nuova*. As the title indicates, Vico's goal in the *Scienza Nuova* is to establish a new science.

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[18] On the importance of the Renaissance for the achievement of history's autonomy as a discipline, see Levine (1999).

Vico's ambition is nothing less than to establish the study of human history as a science, in equal footing with the natural sciences and mathematics. In the preface to the third version of the *Scienza Nuova*, Vico leaves no doubts about the ambitions of his project. The preface takes the form of an ekphrasis; Vico presents the new science by way of a commentary on an etching that depicts the allegories of the trinity, metaphysics, Homer, and of the world of human affairs in an effort to convey the main intention behind his project, namely, to redress philosophy's longstanding reticence to engage in a philosophical manner with the multiplicity of historical facts:

> […] in the present work, with a new critical art that has hitherto been lacking, entering on the research of the truth concerning the authors of these same [gentile] nations (among which more than a thousand years had to pass in order to bring forth the writers with whom criticism has hitherto been concerned), philosophy undertakes to examine philology (that is, the doctrine of everything that depends on the human will; for example, all histories of languages, customs and deeds of peoples in war and peace), of which, because of the deplorable obscurity of causes and almost infinite variety of effects, philosophy has had almost a horror of treating; and reduces it to the form of a science by discovering in it the design of an ideal history traversed in time by the histories of all nations; so that, on account of this its second principal aspect, our Science may be considered a philosophy of authority (Vico 6).

The history that Vico sought to establish with his *Scienza Nuova* amounts to a hybrid: a philosophical philology that is equals parts philology and philosophy. As he makes clear in

this passage, accomplishing this task requires identifying the axioms, principles, and the methodology that might give the definite “form of a science” to the infinity of historical deeds. As we will see, Vico’s new science achieves this transformation primarily by way of three principles: a. To grasp the contingent *reality* of historical particularities as the result of the actions of *real* historical agents (individuals organized in families, societies, and nations), whose choices and inclinations betray a number of *constants* that provide the minimal condition for assuming that social life is structured rationally. b. To posit the idea of god as the ultimate condition of *possibility* for the reduction of “philology” to the “form of a science” (Vico 6). c. To establish an *eidetics* of history that enables the historian to modify the past’s reality in the manner of a possibility in order to disclose its *truth* in light of the teleological historicity of divine providence.

The philological component of this philosophical science is crucial if we are to understand its historical status, as well as its claims to novelty. Philology, for Vico, names the near infinity of the recorded facts of human civilization, reaching back to “the earliest antiquity” (Vico 85). The newness of Vico’s project is partly due to its philological point of departure. As he explains in Axiom 314, the new science of history cannot argue *more geometrico* if it is to accomplish its task; it must begin with its subject matter, namely, with “the natural law of nations” (Vico 82). But rather than simply positing the existence of such natural law, the new science must examine the almost infinite number of documents that are recorded in humanity’s historical archive in order to disclose some phenomena that remain invariable and can serve as proof that the natural law indeed holds *as* a law of human nature. Vico identifies three such invariants: the belief in religion, the institution of marriage, and

burial rites (Vico 86). Vico argues that a universal history of nations cannot fail to remark upon the fact that all human communities acknowledge a form of religion. In this regard, he takes as evidence for the universality of religious belief the fact that the oldest documents available from ancient civilizations are for the most part theological poems or theogonies that established the religious and moral foundations of their respective communities (Vico 6). Employing a deductive approach to the matter of universal history, Vico is able to establish the empirical rules—a sort of material or historical *a priori*—that are internal to the discipline of philology. On the basis of these philological principles, Vico then derives further events or principles that *must* obtain in any *possible* human history: for instance, god emerges as a saving, higher power due to humanity's finitude and corruption (Vico 89); human mortality—attested by the universality of burial rites—justifies the utilitarian drive for self-preservation that motivates human actions (Vico 90); the ubiquity of marriage extends the same drive for self-preservation from the individual to the species, to the community and, ultimately, to the nation, expanding the natural right to the security of property from the history of the individual to that of the entire species (Vico 90), and so on.

But these philological—i.e., human-historical—principles only find their true justification in the philosophical methodology that Vico develops in the *Scienza Nuova*. If the philosophical philology must begin with philology—i.e., with the history of the economy of civil life—it must nonetheless end in philosophy—i.e., metaphysics. The philosophical side of Vico's "philosophical philology" is composed of two "principal aspects" that are expressed by two different formulas: first, the science of history, according to Vico, "must […] be a rational civil theology of divine providence" (Vico 90). The postulation of this

principle is necessary in light of the fact that humanity's essential corruption, debility, and egotistic drive for self-preservation cannot secure the possibility for any human "to practice justice as a member of the society, of the family, the state, and finally of mankind" (Vico 90).[19] Not being able to practice justice out of their own accord, divine providence emerges as the necessary source of any possible *order* in human affairs. In this way, divine justice not only constitutes the *telos* of proper human action—i.e., the kind of action that is oriented towards the highest good—it also becomes the *effective* ground of the entire realm of human action under the guise of divine providence:

> Our new Science must therefore be a demonstration, so to speak, of the *historical fact of providence*, for it must be a history of the *forms of order* which, without human discernment or intent, and often against the designs of men, providence has given to this great city of the human race. For though this world has been created in time and particular, the orders established therein by providence are universal and eternal (Vico 91 emphases mine).

Vico's philosophical philology finds its proper place in the irreducible gap that separates the particularity of human action from the universality of divine providence. That said, the radicality of Vico's project can be easily misinterpreted if we do not grasp the relation that he establishes between the human and the divine *in its own* terms. This task is rendered more difficult by the weight of traditional historiographies of philosophy, from whose point of view Vico's new science can at best be seen as a transitional moment between Leibniz and Kant. Not unlike Leibniz, Vico's new history relies on a theodicy that sacralizes

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[19] On Vico's anti-Enlightenment philosophy of human nature, see Lila (1994).

the *order* of things, locating historical knowledge in the possibility of a serialization of what has happened. And yet, it is significant that Vico insists in a certain kind of autonomy of historical reality at the level of its sheer humanistic production or "creation." Although god *makes* the order of things, humans *make* these things themselves and oftentimes they do so in an order that may appear to contradict of confound the divine series prescribed by god. And yet, as Mark Lilla has argued, Vico was not an enlightened thinker who believed in the intrinsic rational nature of humanity; his own reliance on divine providence as the *site* of order indicates the extent to which he subscribes to divine authority, even in philological, i.e., human-made, matters.[20]

But in order to trace the closure of historicism that occurs in Vico's text we must shift our attention from the distinction between the divine and the human to how Vico qualifies the ontological status of divine providence itself. It is from this point that we begin to see the extent of Vico's innovation and the challenge that historicism posed to any ahistorical ontology. At first sight, we may be tempted to portray the full picture of Vico's understanding of historical reality as composed of two dimensions: historical *reality*, which is the province of humanity's creative agency, and historical *possibility*, which is determined by divine providence and constitutes the ground of history's knowability. God would thus name the *divine historicity* of any historical fact, a historicity that manifests itself as the totalizing *telos* that gathers human history and gives it *order* and *meaning*. However, Vico's own way of characterizing this opposition betrays his commitment to a *realist* divine ontology in which God not only decides on the *order* of things, but is also the being that has more being: the

[20] See the Introduction to Lilla (1993).

epitome of ontology or *ens realissimum*. Indeed, for Vico, not only god itself but its providence are "*facts*;" their facticity, moreover, must necessarily be of such a kind that no human could have *made* them. Thus, rather than opposing historical reality to its *unreal* possibility, Vico insists on the hyper*reality* of God as the ground of historical knowledge. Human freedom implies that human beings may not always act in conformity with divine justice and their corrupt and fallen inclinations almost certainly guarantee that this will be the case. And yet, Vico's god—not unlike Leibniz's[21]—has already arranged the *order* of human affairs *before* (ontologically, logically, and chronologically) any particular instance of human action has taken place. The goal of the new historical science is to demonstrate that this is indeed the *case*.

In Vico's empirico-transcendental account of the *reality* of history, historicism *as such* comes to a close, perhaps for the first time in the history of Western ontology. When examined from a historico-metaphysical perspective, the novelty of Vico's new science lies in the force with which it undertook the task of expanding the limits of onto-theology to encompass even the presumed infinity of *res gestæ*, of humanity's deeds. The onto-theological constitution of historical beings that characterizes the beginnings of historicism in Vico attains closure in the establishment of a discourse about historical realities that exhausts their possibilities: *each* historical entity in its sheer factuality *is* human made, and the *totality* that gathers all historical entities is made by god, the highest historical being, the historicity of all historical beings. Historical reality—or, as Vico calls it, *philology*—ceases to be thinkable only as the cumulative piling up of *accidents* that have occurred (Aristotle's *ta genomena*), and that,

[21] See Leibniz (2002) 164.

up to this point, philosophy could only acknowledge as its already internalized and domesticated other. With historicism, *res gestæ* becomes another ontological region capable of yielding knowledge that satisfies the "form of science" (Vico 6).

If the first "principal aspect" of Vico's philosophical philology—i.e., the postulate that human history amounts to "a rational civil theology of divine providence" (Vico 90) determines the constitution of historical reality, the second "principal aspect" achieves the same result for the writing of history. Indeed, the closure of historicism that occurs in Vico's *Scienza Nuova* not only decides on the onto-theological constitution of *res gestæ*, it also assigns an equally metaphysical status to *rerum gestarum*, i.e., to the *poetics* of history or historiography. The transformation of history into a valid object of metaphysics also requires the concomitant transformation of historical narration into the "form of science" (Vico 6). This change constitutes the keystone of the closure of historicism in Vico; it also highlights the profoundly conservative political tendencies that animate the project of the *Scienza Nuova*.[22] Although historical reality is both human and divine, there is still a discrepancy between the hidden, providential order of the world and the selfish, corrupt motivations that often lead humans to *act* in accordance with their free will and deviate from the path of divine justice. For Vico, this discrepancy is irreducible, since it is an effect of human nature. Vico's response to this is that the only mode of human *poiesis* that may bridge this gap lies in the historian's *practice* of writing history. In other words, it is only within the new science of philosophical philology, not in any project to attain the perfection of humanity through political emancipation, that the reality of human history and the hyper-reality of historical

[22] On the political conservativism of Vico's mature work, see chapter four in Lilla (1993).

divine providence can actually encounter each other. The second "principial aspect" of Vico's philosophical philology is aimed at closing the gap between the deviations of human history and the *telos* of providence by positing an interpretation of the task of the historian as "at the same time" describing "an *ideal eternal history traversed in time by the history of every nation* in its rise, progress, maturity, decline, and fall" (Vico 93, emphases mine).

This "idea eternal history" constitutes the transposition, at the level of *historiam rerum gestarum* of the principle of divine providence that we analyzed before. Like before, Vico's theory of a historicist historiography is marked by the same duality: historiography is a human action, a result of human being's capacity for apperception, and yet it is also grounded in an "ideal eternal history" whose origins are theological. And yet, at the level of knowledge, the discrepancy between human actions and divine providence disappears in principle from the theory of *rerum gestarum*: historical narratives, now molded in the "form of a science" (Vico 6), are capable of bringing to the fore "at the same time" universal human history and the eternal, divine history that determines its *true* course. In order to show how human knowledge ceases to be ontologically discontinuous with the idea of a theological history, Vico turns the very source of this discrepancy, namely, humanity, into the solution of this problem: "For the first indubitable principle above posited is that this world of nations has certainly been made by men, and its guise must therefore be found within the modifications of our human mind" (Vico 93). At the ontic level, the sheer fact that the history of nations is human-made provides the minimum condition of possibility of historical knowledge: there is continuity between those who *made* history and those who *write* it. But the writing of history requires "the modifications of our human mind." Vico's

historiography relies on an *eidetics* of history not only because it postulates an "ideal eternal history" as its condition of possibility, but also because it prescribes a method of modification or of modalization of the past that enables the historian to reenact the past not in the accidental order in which it happened but *as* it happens in the light of the idea. In order to do this, historians must take into account the *invariants* of their own nature, as well as the principle of providence and the postulate of an ideal history, and *modalize* their own experiences of the past that they are historicizing in order to uncover the eternal order of history within the relative accidentality that characterizes the history of nations. Through this process of modification or modalization, the reality of what happened becomes as it were a possibility *for* the historian. It is this modalization of the past's reality into a possibility that historians can modify by modifying *their own* consciousness that endows historical writing with the power of narrating causal developments in the unified manner that befits an eternal history, rather than chronicling their sheer successive happening.

In enacting this modalization of historical reality, Vico's historian acts like Aristotle's Homer, who selects the most necessary or probable possibilities in order to produce a unified plot ruled by one single action. Conversely, Vico's ideal of an eternal history occupies a position analogous to the action that Aristotle isolates in the *Poetics* as the mark of a truly aesthetic plot—a parallelism that is not insignificant, given that the paradigm for the unity of *praxis* in the *Poetics* is certainly the primacy that Aristotle's ascribes to the pure *energeia* of the Prime Mover, whose transcendentality, not unlike that of the Christian god, sustains the totality of being.[23] The introduction of the principle of divine providence into historiography

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[23] See Note 17.

goes hand in hand with Vico's reliance throughout the *Scienza Nuova* on the Neo-Platonist allegory of Homer as a divine poet; in fact, it is this allegory which provides the archetype for the ideal philosophical philologist.[24] The prominent role that Homer plays in the economy of Vico's project betrays the profound continuity that links Aristotle's *Poetics* to Vico's history, precisely at the moment when Vico is departing from the Aristotelian schema that relegates history to the realm of the accidental. The postulation of the theological principle of providence provides the ground for an *eidetics of history* that enables historiography finally to overcome the contingency, accidentality, and impossibility that Aristotle had assigned to history. In this way, Vico opened the door for a philosophical history and a poetic historiography written by a true Homer, capable of transforming the aleatoriness of human actions into the *necessary possibilities* that reveal the order that the world "'had, has and will have'" (Vico 91).

In Aristotle as in Vico, ergontology comes to a close. All differences notwithstanding, their texts retrace the determination of *poiesis* as the medium for the trans-*formation* of the in-finite accidentality of (historical) *reality* into an organized series of *possibilities* that are pre-disposed in advance to produce knowledge that has the character of *necessity*. Rather than a radical *trans*formation of ergontology, what occurs from Aristotle to Vico is rather the expansion and the consolidation of the Aristotelian paradigm of necessary possibilities, which determined the specificity of poetic *poiesis* as the kind of *mimesis* capable of bringing forth an organized, homogeneous narrative. If, for Aristotle, the necessary possibilities of poetry still had the infinite particularity of history *as* their outside, Vico's new science extends the model

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[24] On the neo-platonic motif of Homer as a theological figure, see Lamberton (1986).

of poetic *poiesis* to encompass areas of existence, like historical reality, long deemed incapable of affording any totality. The expansion of an Aristotelian model of the poetics of poetry to that of history enabled the eventual establishment of the academic discipline of history and the invention of historiographical method capable of trans*forming* each time the reality of history into the "form of a science" (Vico 6). After the *Scienza Nuova*, the past is seen in its reality as a totality of necessary possibilities. It is thus that the past is offered *to* the historian's present so that the latter can modify and make its truth emerge. And the historical idea, which Vico theorizes as the "ideal eternal history," provides the historian with a firm, essential hold on the past, preventing in advance the *chance* that the historian's method of reliving and modifying the past may lead to an infinite regress via a proliferation of historical *openings* that could not be closed.

Here lies historicism's biggest challenge. Any effort to theorize a history of the accident (let alone an ontology of the accident) must grapple with the fact that historicism's closure not only claims to exhaust the totality of the historical. For historicism also redraws the boundaries of ergontology by appropriating to its domain the very accidentality that used to be its internal outside. Any effort to deconstruct historicism must acknowledge the ways in which historicism determines how we think, perceive, feel, and name history. It is thus that historicism is *dated*; for it has taken place *as* an unavoidable trans*formation* of the very idea of history. As a consequence of the closure of historicism we cannot simply rely on notions like contingency and the accident as inherently non-historicist, without asking first whether what remains of the accident within the historicist closure has any traces of *alterity*.

II.4. Historical Change and the Historical Idea: Historicism in Ranke and Humboldt

My reading of a few key passages from the *Scienza Nuova* clarifies the ontologico-historical reasons why Vico is regarded as the main precursor of German historicism—even if my particular take on this commonplace of European intellectual history may seem rather novel. Beyond its *historicist* definition as a movement within German nineteenth-century intellectual history, historicism designates the penetration of ergontology into the arena of history. The closure of historicism produces an onto-logy of historical being that unifies historical events—*res gestæ*—and their epistemic elaboration—*rerum gestarum*—through a joint determination of the reality and the possibility of history as an empirico-transcendental structure in which both human and divine action constitute the *subjectivity* and the *substance*—the possibility and the reality—of the historical.

In this section, I want to retrace once more the closure of historicism that takes place in two crucial texts in the canon of the German historicist tradition: Ranke's "Idee der Universalhistorie" ("Idea of Universal History") and Humboldt's *Die Aufgabe des Geschichtsschreibers (The Task of the Writer of History)*. My goal in this section is to read these texts in order to grasp the Rankean and Humboldtian permutations of the historicist formation whose ontogenesis I traced in Vico's *Scienza Nuova*. As we will see, the historicist innovations of Ranke and Humboldt consolidate the ergontological transformation of historical reality by theorizing with more precision the two sides of history's ontological structure as delineated in Vico's system: the determination of history as the regional ontology that deals with human actions in their particularity, and the theorization of the notion of the historical idea as the possibility of historical knowledge. At the same time, the historicism

that is at work in Ranke's text not only consolidates Vico's, but also goes against the grain of some of its fundamental features. For instance, whereas Vico's relies on "philosophy" or metaphysics to secure the scientificity of his "philosophical philology," Ranke's theory of history attempts to establish the *autonomy* of history from philosophy itself. However, this rupture with philosophy does not actually modify historicism's ergontological structuration. In fact, historicism's separation from metaphysics intensifies the process of eradication of contingency, accidentality, and impossibility through the conversion of *change* into the very site and the medium for the *possibilization* of an idea of history whose possibility is not open to its impossibility. The *autonomy* of history from philosophy not only dissimulates its ontological origins, but also occludes historicism's enduring metaphysical function, namely, to immunize history *from* historicity by closing the door to the idea of history as the radical alterity of a sheer opening.

We can begin to get a sense of how Ranke understands the very idea of history if we turn to "Idee der Universalhistorie," a manuscript that dates from the early 1830s.[25] In this text, Ranke exposes his views on history, identifying the two main principles that determine his theory and practice of historiography. Ranke calls the first one the "active principle" (*thätiges Prinzip*). In order to elucidate this principle, Ranke stages a conflict between the different ways in which philosophy and history construe things: "[...] in der historischen Ansicht der Dinge ein thätiges Prinzip vorhanden sey, das sich stets der philosophischen

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[25] This text was established by Eberhard Kessel, who published it as part of a longer essay on Ranke's thoughts on universal history, "Rankes Idee der Universalhistorie," which appeared in *Historische Zeitschrift, Bd. 178, H. 2* (1954), pages 269-308. An English version of the text appears under a different title ("On the Character of Historical Science") in *The Theory and Practice of History: Leopold von Ranke*, edited by Georg G. Iggers.

Ansicht opponirt und sich unaufhörlich äußert; — die Frage ist, welches es sey, das eben dieser Äußerung zu Grunde liegt" (Ranke 295). ("[…] in the historical point of view of things there is an active principle that is constantly opposed to the philosophical point of view and that incessantly expresses itself—the question is, what might be the principle that lies at the ground of even this expression.") What is actively expressed through the opposition between the historical mode of configuring things and the philosophical is the fact that, for history, *temporal appearances* are the sole things that can fall under its mode of observation:

> Während, wie wir sahen, die Philosophie darauf ausgeht, die Historie sich zu unterwerfen, macht die Historie zuweilen ähnliche Ansprüche; sie will Ergebnisse der Philosophie nicht als Unbedingtes, nur als Erscheinung in der Zeit betrachten; sie nimmt an, daß die exacteste Philosophie in der Geschichte der Philosophie liege, d.h. daß in den von Zeit zu Zeit hervorgetretenen Theorien, wie sehr sie sich auch widersprechen, doch die dem menschlichen Geschlecht erkennbare absolute Wahrheit inne liege; sie geht hier noch einen Schritt weiter, sie nimmt an, daß die Philosophie, besonders in ihrer definierenden Manier, nur das Hervortreten der in der Sprache vorliegenden nazionalen Erkenntnis sey; sie spricht ihr dergestalt alle absolute Gültigkeit ab und begreift sie unter der andren Erscheinung. (295) (While, as we saw, philosophy aims to subjugate history, at times history makes similar claims; it wants to consider philosophy's results not as unconditional, but only as appearances in time; it assumes that the most

> exact philosophy lies in the history of philosophy, i.e., that the absolutely knowable truth of the human race still lies within the theories that come forward from time to time, however much they might also contradict each other; it goes one step further and presumes that philosophy, in particular, in its definitive manner, is only the emergence of the knowledge of extant national languages; in this way, it [history] denies it [philosophy] any absolute validity and grasps it as an appearance among other appearances)

History's active principle comes to the fore in the possibility that history might not only regard philosophical phenomena *historically*, but also pass judgment upon the *validity* of a particular philosophy in an equally "historical" manner. Through Ranke's staging of the struggle between philosophy and history emerges the *autonomy* of history as an independent ontology, as a way of presenting beings and determining their being that does not rely on any particular philosophical system in order to perceive its objects and to determine the validity or the truth of its perception. Furthermore, this passage points to something more than just the becoming-autonomous of history with respect to philosophy. The expression of history's active principle supposedly renders manifest history's capacity to dispense altogether with the idea of philosophy as the epitome of rational accomplishment. For historicist history, philosophy becomes another historically determined appearance, and, by extension, philosophy's claims to be the sole mode of engagement that can determine the structure and meaning of absolute validity becomes itself invalid. Philosophy ceases to be the site of validity and becomes valid only when it is proven to *have been* valid in its concrete existence as a particular philosophy, written in a concrete natural language and formulated within the

limits of a certain historical time and space. Under the aegis of historicist history, philosophical truths are only valid insofar as they can be observed through a historical lens. For Ranke, philosophy's accomplishments—the structures, systems, and methods for which philosophy claims the status of universal validity—are in fact particular realities whose validity relies on their effective dissemination and hegemonic influence. As such, philosophical validity becomes something that can be explained not in philosophy's own terms, but rather through the establishment of a causal nexus among events within the philosophical field that have taken place in historical time. History's determination of reality in accordance with the structure of "appearances in time" both deprives philosophy of the capacity to decide on the nature of reality as such and turns philosophy into a thoroughly historical thing, something that *is* only insofar as it is *in time* and thus partakes of the mutability that characterizes the temporal continuum. Historicism is capable of submitting philosophical phenomena to its mode of perception to such an extent that even the idea of philosophy's accomplishment—in Hegel's terms, the Absolute—is, according to Ranke, nothing but the linguistic externalization of a knowledge that already lies *as such* in the spirit of a nation or a people.

Ranke's characterization of history's "active principle" corresponds to an image of historicism that is still common today, which conflates historicisms with relativism. According to this view, historicism is a self-contradictory theory: by stating that all reality is historical, and by understanding history itself as mutable *temporal* appearances (*Erscheinung in der Zeit*), historicism ends up positing something like a historical, i.e., mutable theory of history. If history's active principle leads to the generalization of change, then we are indeed

authorized to ask whether any epistemic discourse or disciplinary formation could claim to know change *as such* with any legitimacy. Does not historicism's insistence on change and time as *constitutive* of historical reality force historicism to either forfeit its own historical status in order to become the ahistorical framework that explains historical change, or relinquish its theoretical ambitions and become a mere historical phenomenon? Historicism's axiomatization of change as a law of history came rigorously under scrutiny early on in the twentieth century by philosophers such as Husserl, who were eager to defend the possibility of a priori, absolutely valid knowledge against the historicist trend that swept the German universities in the second half of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth. Even proponents of historicism, such as Ankersmit, worry about the potential relativistic consequences of historicism. In *Meaning, Truth, and Reference in Historical Representation*, Ankersmit raises the question of whether historicism acknowledges any *subject*—understood in the sense of *hypokeimenon* or *Träger*, that is, as an invariable bearer of change:

> Not standstill but change was now conceived as the 'normal' situation. This will not surprise us, of course, if we recall the historicist thesis that phenomena are defined by their place in a process of development or change. Moreover, historicism did not hesitate to radicalize this idea in such a way that no aspect of a phenomenon was supposed to remain exempt from change. This raised the difficult problem of what might then count as the subject of change. [...] If change is radicalized in the way envisioned by historicism, what can then still count as its unchanging subject? (Ankersmit 10).

Ankersmit's is a rhetorical question; he is indeed fully aware of the fact that historicism does not simply radicalize change, but also formulates an eidetics of history built upon the concept of the "historical idea" to shore up historical knowledge against the threat of relativism (Ankersmit 26). We may still ask whether it is possible for historiography to know its object if its own structure is radically continuous with the temporal, changing phenomena that it is supposed to elaborate. If historicism refuses philosophical modes of argumentation, then what kind of validity and stability does it bring in order to grant some degree of coherence to its praxis? As we will see, Ranke's relativistic rejection of history is itself *relative* to the strict determination of historical realities as temporal appearances subjected to the law of change. Beyond this point, Ranke's theory of history in fact acknowledges the need for the invariable and the eternal in historiography. The second principle of history, which he calls its "life principle" ("*Lebensprinzip*") is meant to complement history's "active principle" by disclosing a mode of eternity that is equally constitutive of historical, i.e., temporal, reality:

> Während der Philosoph von seinem Felde aus die Historie betrachtend, das Unendliche bloß in dem Fortgang, der Entwicklung, der Totalität sucht, die Historie in jeder Existenz ein Unendliches an; in jedem Zustand, jedem Wesen ein Ewiges, aus Gott kommendes; — und dies ist ihr Lebensprinzip (Ranke 294-95).
>
> (While the philosopher contemplating from his field into history searches for the infinite merely in the process, the development, the totality; history [seeks] in each existence an infinite, in each circumstance, each being something eternal that comes from god—and that is its life principle.)

At first sight, one may think that Ranke's reintroduction of a principle of eternity amounts to a capitulation to philosophy's claims for absolutely valid knowledge. And yet, it is here where the boldness of Ranke's declaration of independence of history from philosophy can be most powerfully seen. Historicism not only refutes philosophy's claim to be capable of decreeing what is historical reality, it also contests philosophy's monopoly over the eternal by subscribing to a *theological* view of historical reality. This is Ranke's answer to how historical being, characterized by change, can enter into a meaningful relation with the historian in order to yield knowledge. History's "life principle," which takes ontological precedence over its "active principle," discloses that historical beings not only have the status of appearances in time, but also argues that each of these appearances constitutes an eternity that is expressive of the divine substance of god. Although history's own activity consists of grasping all beings as intra-temporal appearances, history's inner life and essence posits a monistic ontology in which god provides not just the ground, but the *actual* substance of the very existence of all temporal appearances. The life principle of history consists in the presupposition that each individually existing thing is in itself the concretization of the infinite eternity and the eternal infinity of the divine. The opposition between philosophy and history for Ranke thus boils down to a struggle between philosophy's attempt to find principles that enable infinity to be totalized and history's postulation of the immediate identity of the eternally infinity and infinite eternity of god and the individuality of each being and each context. The irony of this situation is that in order to emancipate history from philosophy—in particular, from Hegel's—Ranke has to have recourse to Spinoza's philosophy, pitting a god of immanence against the mediated totality of Hegel's god.

We can begin to account for the significance of this moment for the closure of historicism if we recognize the ontological import of Ranke's two principles of history. Cutting across the distinction between *res gestæ* and *rerum gestarum*, Ranke's onto-theological determination of historical reality intensifies the eradication of accidentality that already marked the advent of historicism in Vico's new science. From Ranke's point of view we can see the extent to which Vico remained "philosophical" in his history, rather than taking a properly theological leap and positing that each historical being *is* already in its very individuality a divine presence. Moreover, Ranke accomplishes another crucial moment in historicism's history by finally displacing the Aristotelian insistence on totality and finitude as the hallmarks of *poetics*. Ranke's theology allows history to challenge philosophy's insistence on totality by positing the constitution of historical beings as a divine infinity. It is only as such an infinity that the temporal constitution of historical reality can be reconciled with its eternal divine infinity. Thus, there are two distinct concepts of the infinite at work in Rankean historicism: the infinity of change, which is coterminous with the infinity of the temporal continuum, and the infinity that coincides with the eternity and god and which belongs to every entity by virtue of its sheer existence. Each historical being is a concrete instance of divine infinity.

It is in this way that change becomes structurally sacralized. Such a divinization of the historical individualities *qua* individuals leads to the highest degree of elimination of any traces of accidentality, contingency, and impossibility. Time and change themselves are instead the medium in which the infinite eternity of god manifests itself to the historian.

Against any Kantian spirit, Rankean history enacts a radical theologization of the onto-theological constitution of historical reality:

> Es ist nicht nothwendig, daß wir das Inwohnen des Ewigen in dem Einzelnen lange beweisen; dies ist der religiöse Grund, auf welchem unser Bemühen beruht; wir glauben, daß nichts sey ohne Gott; indem wir uns den Ansprüchen einer gewissen beschränkten Theologie entziehen,—bekennen wir doch, daß alles unser Bemühen aus einem höhern, aus einen religiösen Ursprung entquillt (295).
>
> We do not have to prove extensively that the eternal dwells in the singular; this is the religious ground on which our efforts depend; we believe that nothing is without god, while we withdraw ourselves from the claims of a certain, limited theology, we confess still that all our efforts spring out of a religious origin.

God is the *ens realissimum* of history and, for Ranke, belief in his divine presence is enough to justify the belonging of the eternal within the singular, of infinity within the historical individuality of any real event. The task of history is here consigned to its proper role as higher even than philosophy, comparable only with theology. For philosophy disregards what history assumes as its ground: that the eternal already dwells in the concrete. Far from an empiricist, positivistic account of historical reality, the essence of historicism consists of its often-ignored theology. The most extreme ground of historicism's characterization of historical being lies in the presupposition of God as the substance, substrate, and subject of all history.

And yet, Ranke's actual historiographical method is subtler—less theological and more "philosophical"—that we would otherwise assume given his firm assertion of dogmatic theological principles as foundation for history. Indeed, Ranke is forced to recognize the limits of human *finitude* and lapse into a certain Kantian position as soon as he has to account for the possibility of *actually* writing a truly universal history. After the elucidation of the two historical principles that I explained above, Ranke devotes the rest of his essay to an exploration of six methodological guidelines for the historian. In the last one, which deals with the possibility of constructing a historical "totality" ("*Auffassung der Totalität*"), Ranke surprisingly acknowledges that no historian could ever exhaust the totality of universal history:

> Je weiter wir gehen, um so schwerer ist ihr allerdings beyzukommen […]. Man sieht, wie unendlich schwer es mit der Universalhistorie wird. Welche unendliche Masse!—Wie differierende Bestrebungen! Welche Schwierigkeit, nur das Einzelne zu fassen! Da wir überdies vieles nicht wissen, wie wollen wir nur den Causalnexus allenthalben ergreifen; geschweige das Wesen der Totalität ergründen. Diese Aufgabe durchaus zu lösen, halte ich für unmöglich. Die Weltgeschichte weiß allein Gott. Wir erkennen die Widersprüche (301).
>
> (The further we go, the more difficult it is to accomplish [...]. One sees how infinitely hard is Universal History. Such an infinite Mass! Such divergent efforts! Such difficulties to merely grasp the individual! Moreover, given that we do not know much, how could we want to grasp causal connections

> everywhere; not to mention to ground the essence of totality. I hold for impossible the thorough accomplishment of this task. Only god knows world history. We know the contradictions.)

I am interested in what is at stake in this impossibility, which is indexed in terms of the relation between human being's finite capacity for knowledge and the infinity and eternity of god. At first sight, this passage seems to enact a reversal of Ranke's earlier claims concerning the identity of temporal mutability and eternal infinity within the onto-theological structure of historical reality. The failure of the historian to actually write a universal history establishes a separation between the human and the divine that breaks the unity of *res gestæ* and *rerum gestarum* by splintering historiography from within. Indeed, Ranke here concedes that god is not only the substance and substrate of history—the source of the essential determinations that underlie all historical appearances. God has also become the only possible *subject* of true universal history and the sole authentic historiographer. Whereas god admits of no distinction between historical deeds and their comprehension, human beings face a limit, an impossibility that determines the boundaries within which it would still be possible for a human historian to write a *partial* universal history. Not surprisingly, the sudden emergence of finitude in Ranke's text is related to the human's incapacity to measure the totality of historical time. That the ground for human finitude lies in the excessive asymmetry of infinity with regards to the possibility of a totalization of time is by Ranke's phrase "Je weiter wir gehen," or "The further we go." This *weiter* indicates Ranke's assumption that the tracing of historical time unfolds in the form of causal succession. The problem is not only mathematical, but also existential as well as pragmatic: not only is, for

Ranke, a totalized tracing of temporal succession mathematically impossible, since the infinity of time implies that there will always be more time to trace beyond any quanta of time that has been measured. This problem is pragmatic and existential: the memory of historians is as limited as their capacity to survey all of the sources that constitute the almost infinite archive of universal history. Because of the sublimity of its scope, because of the excessive quality of its quantity, the idea of a universal history can only find in god the ground of its possibility and the subject of its realization. Only god, according to Ranke, would be capable of achieving the thorough reduction of the infinity of time that would be necessary for the accomplishment of the idea of universal history.

Ranke's admission of a mode of impossibility at the heart of his history seems to challenge from within historicism's ergontological investments. And yet, rather than leading to the suspicion that what renders history *possible* is also what renders history impossible, Ranke's theological commitments lead him to turn this failure of human historical subjectivity into an affirmation of the primacy of the divinity. Ranke turns the human failure ever to write a universal history into the limit that consigns the possibility and impossibility of history to their proper spheres. At the same time, if God here functions as the threshold of the possibility and impossibility of history, this is so insofar as the delimitation of what lies outside the scope of human possibility at the same time determines human being's properly finite mode of historical knowledge. The possibility of finite historical knowledge can only be delimited through the exclusion of that possibility which remains impossible for the historian—namely, the possibility of intuiting the totality of historical time. In this way, Ranke brings historicism once more to a close, reintroducing the accidentality that his own

theology had negated. Thus conceived, history is finite in two different ways: 1. insofar as it is already accomplished in god; and 2. insofar as human histories must always be partial, relative, fragmented, incapable of ever grasping the whole of history. It is here that Rankean historicism attains its *proper* relativism: a historical relativism that is relative to god's absolute knowledge of history. By displacing the actualization of universal history unto a god that functions as the sole substance, substrate, and subject of history, Ranke shows his paradoxical commitments to a thinking of historical knowledge as a possible possibility or, what boils down to the same, a necessary possibility. Properly human, finite historical knowledge is ultimately secured against the *danger* of its impossibility by the divine principle of history. God's divine presence saturates the space that separates the impossible possibility and the necessary actuality of universal history, guaranteeing that human limitations will not *trans*form the divine fulfillment of universal history into a possible *impossibility*.

*

Ranke's theology of history moves within two opposite poles: the religious belief in the eternal infinity and the intrinsic divinity of historical individuals and the acknowledgement of human finitude, which prevents human beings from knowing universal history in all its richness. *Individuum est ineffabile*: Ranke's historicism admits one version of the aporia of history only to domesticate it, turning historiography into an infinite task whose possible possibility god has already ensured. If Ranke's reflections on universal history clarify historicism's postulate of the inexhaustibility of historical *realities*, Humboldt's classic *Über die Aufgabe des Geschichtsschreibers* (*On the Task of the Writer of History*) approaches the

task of the historian from the perspective of history's *possibility*. For Humboldt, the possibility of history is clearly linked to the presentation of an idea:

> Das Geschäft des Geschichtsschreibers in seiner letzten, aber einfachsten Auflösung ist Darstellung des Strebens einer Idee, Dasein in der Wirklichkeit zu gewinnen. Denn nicht immer gelingt ihr dies beim ersten Versuch, nicht selten auch artet sie aus, indem sie den entgegenwirkenden Stoff nicht rein zu bemeistern vermag. Zwei Dinge sind es, welche der Gang dieser Untersuchung festzuhalten getrachtet hat: daß in allem, was geschieht, eine nicht unmittelbar wahrnehmbare Idee waltet, daß aber diese Idee nur an den Begebenheiten selbst erkannt werden kann. Der Geschichtsschreiber [...] muß vor allen Dinge sich hüten, der Wirklichkeit eigenmächtig geschaffene Ideen anzubilden, oder auch nur über dem Suchen des Zusammenhanges des Ganzen etwas von dem lebendigen Reichtum des Einzelnen aufzuopfern. (Humboldt 22).
>
> (The enterprise of the historiographer in its ultimate but simplest resolution lies in the presentation of the striving of an idea to gain existence in actuality. For the idea does not always attain this in the first attempt. Quite often the idea also degenerates by not being able to purely master the counteractive matter. In the course this investigation, we have sought to hold fast to two things: that an idea that is not immediately perceptible rules in everything that occurs; but that this idea can only be known in occurrences. The historiographer […] must above all guard himself against fashioning arbitrary

> ideas of actuality, or also against sacrificing something from the living richness of the individual in the search for the context of the whole).

For Humboldt, the task of the historian cannot be accomplished without presupposing an *eidetics* of history. Humboldt's concept of the idea contains three essential predicates that determine its constitution: a. the historical idea is a principle of *formalization*; it has the power of forming or shaping the *matter* of history. b. The historical idea also has a *conatus* or a "*Streben*"—an intrinsic drive to self-actualization *in* the matter of history. Perhaps the most innovative aspect of Humboldt's concept of the idea follows from its conative dimension, namely, that c. the historical idea *qua* idea cannot have the status of an atemporal *eidos*, since the achievement of its ideality is bound to its historicity. Historical ideas have a movement in their interior that is ruled by the *telos* of their actualization in historical reality; this *telos* determines both the ideality and the historicity of the idea. As such, the historical idea cannot attain its highest degree of *actuality* and *ideality* until it is *realized* historically. Not only the idea's *historicity*, but also its own *eidetic* power is at stake in this possible actualization.

The importance that Humboldt ascribes to the historian can be understood only if we grasp the radicality of his theoretical proposal, which implicates both the idea's ideality and its historicity with the telos of its conatological movement of self-actualization. The task of the writer of history is precisely to ensure that historical ideas attain actualization in the midst of the reality of historical occurrences. Historians' possession of a concept of the historical idea is crucial, since only on the basis of such an concept can historians know *what* is their task and *how* it can be accomplished in a manner that is in keeping with the concept

of this task. For instance, by virtue of the *formal* character that belongs to the historical idea, the historian grasps that historiography ought to be practiced *as* a process of eidetic morphologization with the goal of reducing the infinity of historical *matter* by giving it a *form.* Only once a specific historical morphology has been achieved does the historical idea of this form attain its *actual realization*. The historian's efforts to bring an idea into existence may always fail since historical matter may pose too strong a resistance to the historian's attempt to form a *formation* from its matter. And yet, the possibility of writing historical narratives that *comprehend* organized wholes of historical reality rather than merely recount history's shapeless infinity not only presupposes the historical idea, but is also guaranteed by its unconditional ideality. The task of the historian is therefore unthinkable without the historical idea, even if the historical idea also depends on the historian for its own existence. There is no historical poetics and no historicism without the idea, since only the idea can give a shape from within to the infinity of time and make this infinity *graspable* in the limited time of a narrative. The idea is therefore the hypothesis of history in a literal sense of the term: the only element of historiography that *is* historical *without* being *in* history, that is, without being submitted to the material conditions of historical reality. The idea is history's unconditional *substance*.

And yet, in spite of its unconditional subtantiality, the idea *must* attain actuality *in* historical reality, becoming both substance and subject of its own history. How is this to be accomplished? It is here that the writing of history, that the *-grapher* (*-schreiber*) in the word "historio-grapher" ("*Geschichts-schreiber*"), comes to the fore in the economy of Humboldt's system, alongside the mode of givenness that Humboldt assigns to the idea, namely, its

presentation (*Darstellung*). The process to give a form to the matter of history is not accomplished in the medium of perception. *Pace* Ranke, Humboldt's historical idea cannot be directly perceived by coming into immediate contact with historico-theological individuals. Instead, the idea can only be *intuited*, not directly *felt*; and its intuition, in a Kantian fashion, is derived and discursive, not spontaneous and intellectual: the fact that the historian may always fail to produce the form of the matter of history points precisely to the limits of the intuitive powers of human subjectivity, which cannot unfold other than in the medium of language. But *contra* Kant, the discursivity that corresponds to the intuition of Humboldt's historical idea is not of a primarily *logical*, but rather a *poetic* (or narratological) nature. The historical idea unfolds in the medium of the historian's narrations of history.

Humboldt's notion of the historical idea aims to secure the epistemic status of historiography, while putting to rest any concerns that we may have about history due to the supposed relativity of historical knowledge. Humboldt's historical idea achieves these two tasks by expanding the realm of the historical to encompass not only the historical reality of individuals in space/time but also the striving of the idea to attain existence. It is by virtue of this teleological movement that drives the idea towards actualization that the idea discloses a historicity that does not have the character of any *intra*-historical fact, and an *eidetic* force that does away with the any idealistic understanding of ideas as entities that eternal, fixed, and devoid of movement. The historical idea secures not only the possibility but also the autonomy of historical modes of eidetic intuition by grounding historical knowledge in a being that is *historical* without having the status of a historical *appearance*. Anticipating the emergence of theories of historicity in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century German

thought, Humboldt's concept of the historical idea discloses something like a specifically *historical a priori* or history's transcendental. Indeed, the historical idea is in principle an almost nothing; it is the movement of history before historical chronology has even begun and thus a historical movement that has no historical reality. The historical idea is the movement of history's *possibility*, which may always fail to be realized, and whose successful realization can only take place in the medium of a historical narrative. Humboldt joins Vico in breaking with Aristotle while remaining paradoxically faithful to his ergontological poetics: the actualization of the historical idea, the energy of its *ergon*, is what unifies the matter of history by giving it the form of forms, namely, the form of a necessary linking of historical events, which reduces the heterogeneity and the infinity of the matter of historical time.

In Humboldt's characterization of the task of the historian, historicism comes again to a close through the consolidation of a *possibility* whose necessary actualization requires the idea's presentation as the imperceptible historical "*Walten*," as the eidetic principle of force, violence, or domination that *orders* the particularities of history. Humboldt's historicism achieves a decisive intensification of the ergontological investments that have determined the sense of the very notion of historical composition since at least Aristotle. Ascribing a much more crucial role to the figure of the historian and to the eidetic possibilities of narratological com-position, Humboldt's historicism reintroduces a certain image of contingency to the theory of history, which a historian such as Ranke only reluctantly acknowledged. The historical idea *may* always fail to appear; the historian may always fail to write history in a way that corresponds to the demands of the idea as the *a priori* of history. And yet, the

reintroduction of contingency and the possibility of failure signals an intensification of ergontology, rather than its undoing. It is true that, with Humboldt, the field of history attained a degree of solidity that enabled its theory to acknowledge more soberly than before the possibility of failure without relying too excessively on theological alibies. But Humboldt's historical idea is *capable* of handling the possibility of failing to become *actual* precisely because *its own* possibility is not endangered by this failure. Blamed on the resistance of historical matter or on the methodological failures of the historian, the failure of history is not thought to impinge upon the very modal structure of the historical idea. The idea *is* and *remains* possible, regardless of the failure or the success of its actual *presentation* in a historiography. The historicity that is at work in Humboldt's historical idea is a teleological history, the *Streben* or the drive of the idea amounts to a movement whose end the idea has already *anticipated*. This movement is therefore always already *closed*, regardless of whether it ever makes it to finishing line. It is by virtue of such a closure that the idea can be used as a presupposition of concrete historiographical work, which may or may not manage to present the idea and thus bring it to actuality. Historical narratives may be amorphous, but their abnormality does not *deform* the historical idea itself, whose self-possession as a possible-possibility does not depend on its actualization. The historical idea is the *ipseity* of history.

II.5. The *Actuality* of Historicism: Beiser, Mink, Ankersmit,

The historico-metaphysical "process" that I have been exploring under the name of the "closure of historicism" is far from being over. Moreover, my own effort to trace, with at least a minimal degree of validity, the genetic and structural closure of historicism remains incomplete because of its excessively theoretical partiality. The conceptual armature of

historicism, its iteration of the closure of Western ergontology, is but one aspect in which we can trace the diversity of historicism's ontogenetic movement. Another crucial aspect of the closure of historicism is linked to its institutionalization as the hegemonic theory of historiography in the field of professional history. The achievement of this process, in turn, coincides with the emergence of history as an autonomous academic discipline in the German university system during the nineteenth-century, a process that was led by historicists such as Ranke and Humboldt (the latter being the first Rector of Berlin's first university, later known as Humboldt University). For a historian of historicism like Beiser, the institutional transformation of the place of history in the academy is not only historicism's most enduring historical contribution, but also its defining feature, its essential predicate. Indeed, the destiny of historicism is so much bound to its institutional project that historicism's rise and decline should be understood in relation to the achievement of this end:

> There is, however, a much simpler explanation for the decline of historicism. Here we only need to recall the original project behind historicism: to have history recognized as a science. In attempting to achieve this goal the historicists were remarkably successful, at least in the sense that history became an autonomous faculty in universities, a recognized academic subject having the same prestige as the natural sciences. Skeptics only need to consider the remarkable rise of history as an academic discipline in Germany since the movement began in the middle of the eighteenth century. So the reason for historicism's demise is simple: having achieved what it set out to

> do, historicism did not exist need to exist anymore. On this reading, historicism was not an abject failure but an astonishing success. Indeed, since it continues to exercise such enormous influence, it never really died at all. It continues to live in all of us, and it is fair to say, as heirs of Meinecke's revolution, we are all historicists today (Beiser 25-26).

Even if I disagree with Beiser's account of the rise and fall of historicism, I find myself in agreement with his claim that historicism is everywhere *today*. Indeed, one way or another, we are all historicists. Historicism's pervasive ubiquity is precisely what makes it so difficult to think the idea of history *otherwise* than in a historicist manner.

That being said, it is my hope that this chapter's efforts to retrace a selected number of instances of historicism's closure have at least contributed to the task of clarifying in *non-*historicist terms the profound ontological mechanisms that continue to sustain historicism's barely perceptible hegemony over the historical field. My reading of Humboldt suggested that the minimum condition for the closure of historicism lies in the identification of the possibility of historical understanding with the form of ipseity—i.e., the power to secure the purity of the movement through which a possibility reaffirms itself in its own possibility, becoming a possibility that is originarily possible.

There are obviously significant differences between the different permutations in which *historical ipseity* is established. It is not my intention to argue that giving historical ipseity the name of god is the *same* as naming it the historical idea, just as calling it Reason or Spirit (*Geist*) is not the same as referring to it as Beyng (*Seyn*) or Capital (*Kapital*). For more positivist historians, this *historical ipseity* might even take the shape of a strange secularized

version of Ranke's faith in the solidity of each historical individual, whereas for historians who insist that history is closer to an art than a positive science, historical ipseity may take the form of a historical narrative that displays a quasi-Aristotelian poetics of necessary possibilities. Without denying this diversity, I would still argue that each of these formations partakes of the historicist gesture, which at this point appears perhaps more clearly as already being at work whenever history is identified with the reduction of the *multiple* to the simplicity and the unicity of the *one*. Historicism would come on its own every time history is identified as a mode of gathering the dispersed, as a way of incorporating differences within the closed domain of a finite formation. From this point of view, what lies on the other side of historicism's closure cannot even be given the names of the accidental or the contingent, since those names have come to designate the very *matter* of history in historicism and the objective ground for its autonomy vis-à-vis philosophy and the natural sciences. History: the gathering of accidents that transforms them into my possibilities.

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To conclude, I would like to turn briefly to the work of two contemporary theorists of history, Louis O. Mink and Frank Ankersmit. The work of Mink and Ankersmit has been at the forefront of debates concerning the status of historical knowledge, with special attention to the question whether history can satisfy contemporary criteria for scientificity. On my reading, Mink and Ankersmit allow us to trace two contemporary closures of historicism that emphasize the intrinsic link between the specificity of historical understanding and the possibility of comprehending a multiplicity in one single act. As we will see, in both cases, the grounds for this possibility are to be located in the structure of

subjectivity itself, which becomes the site of *historical ipseity*.

In an essay titled "The Autonomy of Historical Understanding," Mink defends the irreducibility of historical forms of comprehension from what he called in an earlier essay "the imperialism of methodologies" (Mink 54), most notably referring to post-war efforts in the North American academy to establish history on a logico-deductive, scientific basis. Towards the middle of this essay, Mink offer an elegant account of his views concerning the specificity of historical understanding with regards to scientific approaches that conflate understanding with explanation:

> The key to an alternate account of understanding is perhaps in the term 'context.' The minimal description of historical practice is that historians deal with complex events in terms of the interrelationship of their constituent events [...]. Even supposing that all of the facts of the case are established, there is still the problem of comprehending them in an act of judgment which manages to hold them together rather than reviewing them *seriatim*. This is something like, in fact, the sense in which one can *think* of a family as a group of related persons rather than as a set of persons plus their individual relations of kinship. [...] [I]t is neither a technique of proof nor an organon of discovery but a type of reflective judgment (Mink 77).

Context provides the key to historical understanding insofar as the specific cognitive acts that characterize the work of historiographers is precisely marked by the construction of totalities or wholes in a single act of judgment. Although Mink would perhaps not use the following term, the example that he gives here illustrates the specificity of the kind of *ideal* objectivity

that historians constitute through contextualization: given a set with a finite number of members displaying a recognizable pattern of resemblances, historians judge the whole to be prior than the parts and indeed take this whole as the entity whose identity can only be understood *in totum,* in its context. The crucial role that contextualization plays in historical *understanding* also explains why historians do not *explain* events in the same way in which the natural sciences do. Whereas historical interpretation has the character of an apperception or a judgment that reflects upon the very experience of the person who is judging, natural sciences explain phenomena by establishing the laws that account for its current existence and can also serve to predict with relative certainty whether the same phenomena would obtain under the same conditions.

Given Mink's insistence on linking history with the possibility of gathering a broader series of experiences or events into a unified group within one single act of judgment, it is not surprising that Mink's reflections on historiography and narrative in "History and Fiction as Modes of Comprehension" are decisively Aristotelian:

> Aristotle's observation that a play must have a beginning, a middle, and an end is not a trivially formal description but a corollary of his principle that a drama is an imitation of a *single* action, that is, that both action and mimesis must be capable of being understood as a single complex whole (Mink 49-50).

And after referring to Aristotle, he goes on to designate the cognitive activity that Aristotle's account of tragedy presupposes with the name of "comprehension," whose highest level involves

> the attempt to order together our knowledge into a single system—to comprehend the world as a totality. Of course this is an unattainable goal, but it is significant as an ideal aim against which partial consciousness can be judged. To put it differently, it is unattainable because such comprehension would be divine, but significant because the human project is to take God's place (Mink 50).

Although Mink admits to the impossibility for human beings to ever attain comprehension of the truly sublime, this impossibility provides the regulative ideal for the exercise of the kind of understanding that he calls comprehension, and which he explicitly links to the mode of understanding of history. Indeed, after specifying three modes of comprehension—i.e.,"theoretical," "categoreal" and "configurational" (Mink 51)—and identifying history with the configurational kind (Mink 51), Mink goes on to give as another theological example of what would provide the epitome of configurational comprehension: "The *totum simul* which Boethius regarded as God's knowledge of the world would of course be the highest degree of configurational comprehension" (53). As the "highest" mode possible of the kind of understanding that belongs to history, the example of god's comprehension of every being and every moment in each single act of its absolute actuality provides the *ideal* of historiography and thus the unattainable *telos* of the historian's narratives. Finally, this same ideal assigns to memory, as the faculty that produces images of what Mink calls a "discursive past," its role as the seat of selfhood and the condition of possibility of history. The possibility of the personal history of any human being just as much as the com-position of a

history of Ancient Mesopotamia is grounded in the *self's capacity* to tell a story from the present.

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Frank Ankersmit's *Meaning, Truth, and Reference in Historical Representation* provides perhaps the strongest defense of historicism of the Rankean and Humboldtian kind to be published in recent years. Ankersmit's project is ambitious: his twofold goal is to show that historicism constitutes the only valid ontology of history and to argue for the philosophy of history as an interesting field from which to pose again some of the fundamental questions of post-Wittgensteinean philosophy of language. But in order to show that German historicism contains a valuable ontology of historical knowledge, Ankersmit confronts the problem of the theological and metaphysical baggage that is part of the historicist tradition. For this reason, Ankersmit's project is precisely to provide a less theological, less metaphysical account of crucial historicist concepts like the "historical idea," since, according to Ankersmit, "however doubtful the ancestry of the notion of the historical idea may be, it remains indispensable for a proper understanding of the writing of history" (26).

We already saw above that Ankersmit acknowledges the criticisms of anti-historicists, such as Husserl, who claim that historicism is a contradictory theory due to its radicalization of change. According to Ankersmit, the historical idea solves the problem of how history can be known if everything that is historical is subjected to change. It does so by providing the necessary element that gives ontological stability to history without violating the fundamental principles of historicism, namely, that a. change is the unconditional condition of the factical existence of all historical beings; and that b. historical identities can only be

determined on the basis of what we could call a thing's historical positionality, i.e., its position or place within a particular process of development that is itself submitted to the unconditional force of change. As Ankersmit argues, the historical idea as Ranke and Humboldt conceive it functions as the "entelechy" of history, as the "ideal correlate" or the "eidetic content" that guarantees the identity of any historical phenomenon. But the idea accounts for the specific phenomenon that corresponds to it only because it is *exempted* from the law of change. Ankersmit: "…each historical 'thing' (a nation, epoch, civilization, etc.) is argued to posses a historical idea, an entelechy, so to speak—wholly specific to that thing alone, *which is not in turn subject to change*" (Ankersmit 11, emphases mine).

Is not the historical idea ultimately a relapse into a metaphysical flight of fancy that violates historicism's own definition of reality, since it is in principle exempt from change? The most important aspect of Ankersmit's update of Ranke's notion of the historical idea responds to the question posed above concerning the historical idea's own ontological and historical status. According to Ankersmit, scientific historians and philosophers of history have posed similar questions to historicism, claiming that the postulation of a historical idea constitutes a redundant and useless step in historical explanation insofar as no past reality could ever coincide with it. Against these charges, Ankersmit defends the viability of the historical idea by claiming that

> [w]e should not locate it [the historical idea] in the past itself—as the historicists mistakenly did themselves—nor should we reject it as a redundancy offending our realist belief in a parallelism of language and reality. Instead we must situate it in *the historian's language about the past*. It is

> not an entelechy determining the temporal development of historical objects but rather the principle structuring the historian's stories of the past. (Ankersmit 13, emphases mine)

The question concerning the historical idea's reality—the ground of the historicist claim about the possibility of knowing historical change by recourse to an instance that remains unchanged, without, for this reason, *ceasing to belong to the sphere of the historical*—finds its answer in a theory of historical representation's relative "autonomy" from the past that it represents. If the historical idea functions as the principle of identity that gathers together the manifold concrete elements that constitute a historical being's existence, this is only insofar as there is only "the *past*" in a deflated or weak sense. In other words, there is no "past" in the sense of a fixed referent against which the correctness of all historical narrative could be ultimately verified. Referring to the conclusion of Mink's "History and Fiction as Modes of Comprehension," Ankersmit writes:

> [h]owever, as Mink went on to point out, the past itself is not an 'untold story' against which we could check the reliability of all the stories historians tell us about it. 'Stories are not lived, but told,' as his well-known formula goes; stories are found not in the past itself but only in the books and articles the historians write about it. So Mink grants to stories—to historical narrative—an autonomy that disrupts the realist's parallelism thesis. (Ankersmit 13)

There is only the past *of* a particular historical phenomenon, and this particular past only has unity and identity—and receives, as it were, its essence and its reality, its very existence—as

the result of the historian's narrative intervention. The historical idea should ultimately be understood as a methodological function of both the ontological primacy that historicism grants to the historian's *present* and the epistemological primacy that historicism ascribes to the historian's discourse as what ultimately binds together the present and the past, allowing the past to *be* in the first place:

> [I]n history the focus is on the individual, since each historical text has its own individuality. Yes, *individuum est ineffabile* since the historical text's individuality can never be exhaustively defined. Yes, history always has to do with development, since this is the essential property of historical narratives. Yes, the historicist's main claim that a thing's history is in its past is correct, for its nature or identity is defined by a historical narrative. Yes, we have good reason to be skeptical about efforts to translate history into a science as long as there is no science of historical texts. Yes, *presenting a past object's historical idea may explain that object, because the narratives structured by the historical idea possess explanatory power*. And finally, *yes, the historian's breath permeates the past as presented by him, in much the same way that the pantheist God is present in His creation*. (Ankersmit 14, emphases mine).

It is therefore telling that Ankersmit characterizes the historian—and, more specifically, the historian's *language*—as a god capable of resurrecting the dead. In this image, Ankersmit's historicism achieves the crystallization of the historicist formation by determining the *present* as the instance that is capable of breathing life and soul into an otherwise dead past. The references to Spinoza and to Ranke's god, coupled with the

reinterpretation of the historical idea as a function of the autonomy of the historian's language, point to the strength of Ankersmit's secularizing gesture. But Ankersmit's secularism does not contest the theological foundations of historicism's determination of the very idea of history; he merely limits himself to transfer to historians and their present the *powers* and the *possibilities* of a quasi-divine agent who can bring back the dead *at will*. In this moment in Ankersmit's argument, historicism comes once more to a close. Ankersmit's account of historicism captures in the most crystalline form the critical concepts that determine historicism's closure and which this chapter has been tried to trace and interrogate. These can be summarized in the following three points: 1. an insistence on an quasi-Aristotelian approach to the *poetics* of *history* as a narrative form capable of achieving totalization and yielding historical knowledge; 2. an understanding of the historical idea as the non-real condition of possibility of historical knowledge; and 3. the privilege of the historian's *present* as the site from which the past can be accessed. If historicism's presence is as pervasive as Beiser argues, this is perhaps because historicism ultimately boils down to the affirmation of history as a domain that is determined by *presence*. If, as I have argued in this chapter, historicism is the ergontology of history, this is so because its sole task from its earliest ontogenetic instantiations to its current post-secular trans*formations* is to till the soil of the past in order to render its infinity finite. The *labor* of historicism is precisely to work the historical terrain until the principle of principles, until the ipseity or the "I can" that constitutes the self-present and self-enabling core of the self, the subject, the ego, and the will is capable of claiming even death as its *property*.

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In the wake of the closure of historicism, thinking history involves being confronted by an in-finite and uncertain task, namely, that of raising again the question of the possibility of *another* history and of *another* historicity. The process of tracing historicism's closure has at least prepared us to understand the *historical* reasons why uncertainty is structural to this task and why knowing this does not make the task any easier. For we have seen that the history of history is bound in a decisive way to the history of the possible. Furthermore, the facticity of their co-implication extends all the way to the co-determination of their essences and their transformations in the course of Western metaphysics. The closure of historicism—prepared in Aristotle's text and already achieved in full force in Vico's philosophical philology—requires each time the reinscription of *presence* (incarnated in God, or in the historian and its ideas, or in the autonomy of the language of historical discourse) as the horizon that gathers the infinity of historical time. Conversely, the closure of historicism also necessitates the teleological determination of possibility as leading to its fulfillment in *actuality* and *necessity*.

To think history *without* historicism from within historicism's closure is to raise the question of whether it is *possible* to think of history *otherwise*, i.e., other than as the name for the activity that gathers the dispersion of time, brings back to the present what has come pass, and secures the passage from contingency to possibility. Such a *trans*formed notion of history would also lead to an equally *trans*formed concept of historicity, which would no longer have the status of an essence, instead naming the dangerous force of an impossible alterity—an alterity *without* stability—that is at the furthest remove from the bond that links possibility and presence.

The next chapter turns to Walter Benjamin's theory of historical *danger* to think through this *other* history that, perhaps, no longer belongs to the order of the possible: a history in which the historian *must* be deprived of *its self* and its *possibilities*—including its *essential* historicity—as the condition of coming to contact with the past in truth.

CHAPTER THREE

Reading Danger: Walter Benjamin's "Phenomenology" of History

Hier wird es deutlich, wie nothwendig der Mensch, neben der monumentalischen und antiquarischen Art, die Vergangenheit zu betrachten, oft genug eine dritte *Art nöthig hat*, die kritische*: und zwar auch diese wiederum im Dienste des Lebens. Er muss die Kraft haben und von Zeit zu Zeit anwenden, eine Vergangenheit zu zerbrechen und auflösen, um leben zu können: dies erreicht er dadurch, dass er sie vor Gericht zieht, peinlich inquirirt, und endlich verurtheilt; jede Vergangenheit aber ist werth verurtheilt zu werden[…]. Mitunter aber verlangt eben dasselbe Leben, das die Vergessenheit braucht, die zeitweilige Vernichtung dieser Vergessenheit; dann soll es eben gerade klar werden, wie ungerecht die Existenz irgend eines Dinges, eines Privilegiums, einer Kaste, einer Dynastie zum Beispiel ist, wie sehr dieses Ding den Untergang verdient. Dann wird seine Vergangenheit* kritisch *betrachtet, dann greift man mit dem Messer an seine Wurzeln, dann schreitet man grausam über alle Pietäten hinweg. Es ist immer ein* gefährlicher, *nämlich für das Leben selbst* gefährlicher Prozess*: und Menschen oder Zeiten, die auf diese Weise dem Leben dienen, dass sie eine Vergangenheit richten und vernichten, sind immer* gefährliche *und* gefährdete *Menschen und Zeiten.*

Here, it becomes clear how often enough man, next to the monumental and the antiquarian ways of observing history, needs a *third* kind, the critical: and indeed this one also in the service of life. He must have the force to tear and dissolve a past and apply it from time to time in order to be able to live: he achieves this by dragging the past to the court, excruciatingly inquiring it, and finally judging it; but every past merits to be judged [...]. However, the very same life that needs forgetfulness occasionally requires the temporary annihilation of this forgetfulness; then it ought to become clear precisely how unjust the existence of any thing—for example, a privilege, a cast, a dynasty—is; how much these things deserve to go under. Then, is its past observed *critically*, then one seizes its roots with a knife, then one cruelly strides above all pieties. It is always a *dangerous process*, namely, *dangerous* for life itself: and men or times that serve life in this way, that judge and annihilate the past, are always *dangerous* and *endangered* men and times.

F. Nietzsche, "Vom Nutzen und Nachtheil der Historie für das Leben"[1]
("On the Use and Disadvantages of History for Life")

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[1] Nietzsche (1988) 269-70, emphases mine.

III.1. Historical Dangers: Nietzsche, Benjamin, and the Critique of Historicism

My epigraph comes from Friedrich Nietzsche's second untimely meditation, "Vom Nutzen und Nachtheil der Historie für das Leben" ("On the Use and Disadvantages of History for Life"), published in 1874. Readers familiar with this text probably remember the biting irony of its opening *captatio benevolentiæ* in which Nietzsche accuses himself as well as his German contemporaries of suffering from a "historical fever" ("*historischen Fieber*") and offers his text as an instrument to enable his audience to come to terms with their own sickness (Nietzsche 246). According to Nietzsche, this cultural ailment is the result of the metastatic growth that the discipline of history experienced in Germany during the nineteenth century, a period in which history was transformed from the handmaiden of every academic faculty into a "pure" and "sovereign" science (Nietzsche 257).[2] Nietzsche's text is thus a direct response to the institutional side of the process that I designated in the previous chapter as the *closure of historicism*. Although I analyzed this phenomenon from a historico-metaphysical position, Nietzsche's text bears witness to the massive impact that the emergence of historicism had on culture at large. For Nietzsche, historicism precipitated a prolonged bout of "historical fever" that successfully redirected the creative energies of the German cultural elite to the pursuit of historical knowledge as an end in itself. In this way, historicism goes against history, which for Nietzsche is bound to human action and often requires that the past be forgotten (Nietzsche 246). By forgetting forgetting itself, historicism brings about the deterioration of the "*plastic power*" ("*plastische Kraft*") of individuals and nations, diminishing their capacity to act, live, and create new history (Nietzsche 251).

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[2] For a brief account of the emergence of historicism and the transformation of the German university in the nineteenth century, see the introduction to Beiser (2014).

Nietzsche was certainly not the first to bemoan the deleterious effects of historicism on culture. Written more than thirty years before Nietzsche's text, Ralph Waldo Emerson's essay "History" had already passed a scathing judgment upon the situation of history in North America. Emerson's tone, if not his actual arguments, anticipates the color of Nietzsche's own diatribe: "I am ashamed to see what a shallow village tale our so-called History is" (Emerson 256). It is true that when Emerson and Nietzsche wrote their essays, the name "historicism" did not yet designate a relatively diffuse intellectual movement "unified" by a loosely shared set of propositions concerning the ontology of history. For historians Friedrich Jäger and Jörn Rüssen, Nietzsche's essay in fact marks the birthplace of a definition of historicism that became increasingly important in *fin-de-siècle* Germany: historicism as a way of engaging with the historical past that is not informed by any present or actual concerns (Jäger and Rüssen 5-6). Thus defined, Nietzsche and Emerson could be seen as critics of historicism *avant la lettre*.

It is thus not surprising that Nietzsche's second untimely meditation became a *locus classicus* for a strand of continental thought that has taken up the task of carrying out a radical critique of historicism. No doubt Nietzsche's text occupies this position in part because of the intensity of its diatribe, in part also because of the important place that his corpus occupies within the European philosophical canon. But there are also theoretical reasons that justify granting this text such a privileged role within continental theory of history. Key among these is the *critical* (in a post-Kantian sense of the term) import of Nietzsche's intervention. Indeed, Nietzsche's text anticipates and radicalizes in advance the critical project to which Wilhelm Dilthey would devote most of his energies, namely, the

"Kritik der historischen Vernunft" or the "critique of historical reason."[3] Within certain limits, Dilthey's label could be enlarged to characterize the efforts of thinkers as different as Edmund Husserl, Walter Benjamin, Martin Heidegger, Paul Ricœur, Jacques Derrida, and Michel Foucault, who sought in their own singular ways to theorize the transcendental or *quasi*-transcendental conditions of possibility of historical experience. At the same time, Nietzsche's critique of history in the second untimely meditation is not merely Kantian, since his goal is not simply to draw the boundaries within which historical experience—and the science that *knows* this experience—can be legitimately obtained and exercised.[4] Instead, Nietzsche's main task in this essay is threefold: 1. to affirm the dependency of history on what he calls "life" (*Leben*), which in the case of human life is primarily defined through a mode of action that is both "unhistorical" and "historical" ("*unhistorisch*" "*historisch*") (Nietzsche 245, 252); 2. to establish the limits within which human life needs history in order to further its own life (Nietzsche 253); and 3. to determine the *ways* in which history can be used, in spite of being in contradiction with life's unhistorical tendencies, *for the sake* of life (Nietzsche 256-57). Rather than granting history its *proper*, autonomous place within the columbarium of theoretical knowledge, Nietzsche's intervention seeks to reestablish the absolute axiological superiority of life with respect to history—an asymmetry that historicism seeks to subvert in favor of the latter. It is only on the basis of life's onto-axiological primacy that the "Kantian" question of the possibility of historical knowledge can be posed as a *critical*, i.e., as an irreducibly ethical and political question, rather than as a problem to be solved by an epistemically inflected theory of knowledge.

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[3] See Dilthey (1927), in particular 191-204.

[4] For a juxtaposition of Nietzsche's critique against Kant, see the first chapter in Deleuze (1962) 1-43.

The passage that I cited as my epigraph is taken from the last paragraph of the third section of Nietzsche's essay. Here, Nietzsche brings to an end his exposition of the three ways in which history can be exercised in the service of life: 1. the antiquarian, with its glance fixed on the past in order to "*preserve*" ("*bewahren*") as much of its *minutiæ* as possible (Nietzsche 268); 2. the monumental, whose backward glance is both *exemplarizing* and *impulsive*, compelled by the possibility that what was great in the past may occur again (Nietzsche 260); and 3. the critical, which *judges* the past on the basis of life's need of emancipation from history itself (Nietzsche 258). Although Nietzsche marks the limits of antiquarian and monumental modes of approaching the past, it is telling that only the *critical* mode of historical observation gets qualified as both "*dangerous*" ("*gefärhlich*") and "*endangered*" ("*gefährdete*"). In what consists the double character of this historical danger? And how does this danger stand with life's infinite unhistoricity, which provides the measure for its finite historicity?

To answer this question, we must begin by noting the specific kind of relation to the past that characterizes history in the critical mode. Nietzsche's choice of verbs to describe this relation are telling: "zerbrechen," to tear, to break, to fracture, or to shatter; "auflösen," to dissolve, to disintegrate, to resolve, or to cancel out; "richten," to judge, to correct, to redress, to straighten; and "vernichten," to annihilate, to destroy, to negate, to exterminate (Nietzsche 269-70). These four verbs leave no doubt about the "negative" charge that marks the relation that critical historians have with the past that they observe. The critical historian neither seeks to preserve the past nor to turn it into an example for what the present and the future could once more be. Instead, as the name already indicates, the *critical* historian relates

to the past by bringing it to a *crisis* in an instance of judgment. Crisis and critique should be heard here in close proximity to their Greek roots in the terms *krinein* and *krino*: critical judgments have the structure of a de-cision that makes a radical in-cision between the past and the present, preventing the historian from fully identifying with the past under observation. Moreover, critical judgments not only negate the past, but also annihilate it: *Richtung* (judgment) for Nietzsche is always a *Vernichtung* (annihilation). History becomes a tribunal in which the past is not so much judged for what is worth, but rather comes to be destroyed, since it had already been found guilty and thus worthy of a damning judgment: "jede Vergangenheit aber ist werth verurtheilt zu werden" (Nietzsche 269). ("but every past merits to be judged"). Here emerges the first way in which we should hear Nietzsche's use of the adjective "*gefährlich,*" "dangerous" or "perilous," in this untimely meditation. Critical history is *dangerous* because its mode of historicity stands as close as possible to the *un*historicity of life *in itself*, which demands nothing other than the total destruction of the past. The critical historian pays the highest service possible to life by severing the bond between the sheer *unhistorical* present that corresponds to life and any form of the past—whether monumentalized or transformed into an antiquarian relic. By *endangering* history, judgment becomes the medium for the liberation of life from the oppression of history. History is judged so that life can be freed from a past that does not deserve to exist.

Still, the contradictions of the concept of critical history are not limited to the strange kind of historicity that belongs to this notion as the *negative* mode of historical relation *par excellence*—as the *un*historical history. Contradiction here extends to the core of life itself. For, according to Nietzsche, the same life that impels the historian to *endanger* a

moment from the past for the sake of its liberation from history becomes *endangered* through this very destructive movement. The same holds for the critical *historians*, as well as for the *times* in which critical historians allow life to become the judge of history. How should we understand this dangerous *auto*-endangerment of life, time, and history? And what kind historicity would correspond to the precarious danger of a historical critique of the past, a critique that is historical only because it *destroys* all of history?

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I began unpacking Nietzsche's concept of critical history as a way of introducing the question that lies at the center of this chapter: what kind of history obtains when both the past that is historicized and the historians themselves are in danger? As we will see more clearly in a moment, both Nietzsche and Benjamin rely on the term "*gefärhlich*," "dangerous" or "perilous," in order to criticize historicism and propose a *non-historicist* theory of history. Since Benjamin quotes Nietzsche's untimely meditation in his famous theses on the concept of history,[5] we could even argue that Benjamin's notion of historical danger has a Nietzschean provenance. That said, I am not interested in accounting for the role that Nietzsche's early reflections on history could have played in Benjamin's thinking or in tracing the lines of influence that may connect these two thinkers.[6] Instead, this first section of the chapter engages with the notion of *danger* at work in Nietzsche and Benjamin as a way of theorizing the perilous *mode* in which *another* history—a *non-historicist* history—can be thought.

The previous chapter showed that historicism, from Giambattista Vico and Ludwig

[5] Of the six extant manuscripts of Benjamin's theses, five cite Nietzsche's second untimely meditation on history as an epigraph. See Benjamin (2000) 38, 65, 77, 85, 101.
[6] On the relation between Nietzsche and Benjamin, see McFarland (2013).

von Ranke to Louis O. Mink and Frank Ankersmit, interprets the idea of history by oscillating between a finite eidetics of historical knowledge and an infinite substantialist theology of historical being. History is thus understood as the human activity that gathers and organizes a portion of the infinity of historical time by recourse to historical ideas, in a manner analogous to god's infinite capacity to totalize not just a segment of the past, but all of historical time in the same *present*. In spite of their different approaches, my hypothesis is that both Nietzsche and Benjamin turn to the notion of danger in order to think about a different kind of in-finity: an infinity that is historical insofar as it remains indeterminate and structurally *open*; insofar as it resists any attempt to be totalized, to be given a form or be submitted to the informative power of any *telos*. A dangerous history for Benjamin is a destructive history—destructive of any form, including the form of destruction that corresponds to what Nietzsche calls the "plastic force" of life (Nietzsche 251). Benjamin's notion of the moment of danger reconfigures history as a history of abandonment: the structure of historical truth is dangerous because it prescribes historians to relinquish their own time—their present—to another time that remains *to come*. The moment of danger is radically open, it is the time of an exposure that remains structurally uncertain about *its own* possibility to be successfully exposed to its own becoming-historical.

Like Nietzsche, Benjamin saw historicism in an extremely negative light and sought to counter its hegemony by formulating a non-historicist theory of history based on the dialectical image. After an initial foray into the historical *force* of danger in Nietzsche and Benjamin, the rest of the chapter examines Benjamin's theory of history, focusing on his concept of the dialectical image. Although I will engage with several texts from Benjamin's

corpus, the chapter is structured around the following passage from "Konvolut N: Erkenntnistheoretisches, Theorie des Fortschritts" ("Convolute N: Knowledge-Theoretical, Theory of Progress") in *Das Passagen-Werk* (*The Arcades Project*), which offers the most condensed and compelling formulation of Benjamin's concept of the dialectical image:

> Was die Bilder von den 'Wesenheiten' der Phänomenologie unterscheidet, das ist ihr historischer Index. (Heidegger sucht vergeblich die Geschichte für die Phänomenologie abstrakt, durch die 'Geschichtlichkeit' zu retten). Diese Bilder sind durchaus abzugrenzen von den 'geisteswissenschaftlichen' Kategorien, dem sogenannten Habitus, dem Stil, etc. Der historische Index der Bilder sagt nämlich nicht nur, daß sie einer bestimmten Zeit angehören, er sagt vor allem, daß sie erst in einer bestimmten Zeit zur Lesbarkeit kommen. Und zwar ist dieses 'zur Lesbarkeit' gelangen ein bestimmter kritischer Punkt der Bewegung in ihrem Innern. Jede Gegenwart ist durch diejenigen Bilder bestimmt, die mit ihr synchronistisch sind: jedes Jetzt ist das Jetzt einer bestimmten Erkennbarkeit. In ihm ist die Wahrheit mit Zeit bis zum Zerspringen geladen. (Dies Zerspringen, nicht anderes, ist der Tod der Intentio, der also mit der Geburt der echten historischen Zeit, der Zeit der Wahrheit, zusammenfällt.) Nicht so ist es, daß das Vergangene sein Licht auf das Gegenwärtige oder das Gegenwärtige sein Licht auf das Vergangene wirft, sondern Bild ist dasjenige, worin das Gewesene mit dem Jetzt blitzthaft zu einer Konstellation zusammentritt. Mit andern Worten: Bild ist die Dialektik im Stillstand. Denn während die Beziehung der Gegenwart zur

Vergangenheit eine rein zeitliche ist, ist die des Gewesnen zum Jetzt eine dialektische: nicht zeitlicher, sondern bildlicher Natur. Nur dialektische Bilder sind echt geschichtliche, d.h. nicht archaische Bilder. Das gelesene Bild, will sagen das Bild im Jetzt der Erkennbarkeit trägt im höchsten Grade den Stempel des *kritischen*, *gefährlichen* Moments, welcher allem Lesen zugrunde liegt (N3,1 577-78, emphases mine).

(What separates images from the 'essentialities' of phenomenology is their historical index. (Heidegger seeks in vain to save history for phenomenology abstractly through 'historicity.') These images are to be thoroughly distinguished from the categories of the "human sciences," the so-called habitus, "style," etc. The historical index of images not only says, obviously, that they belong to a determined time; it says, above all, that they come to legibility only at a determined time. And, indeed, this acceding 'to legibility' is a determined critical point of the movement in their interior. Each present is determined by those images that are synchronic with it: each now is the now of a particular knowability. In it, truth is charged to the bursting point with time. (This point of explosion, and nothing else, is the death of the *intentio*, which thus coincides with the birth of genuine historical time, the time of truth.) It is not that what is past casts its light on what is present, or what is present its light on what is past; rather, image is that wherein what has been stands together like a flash with the now in a constellation. In other words: image is dialects at a standstill. For while the relation of the present to

> the past is purely temporal, the relation of what-has-been to the now is dialectical: not of a temporal, but of an imagistic nature. Only dialectical images are genuinely historical—that is, not archaic—images. The image that is read—which is to say, the image in the now of its knowability—carries to the highest degree the imprint of the critical, dangerous moment that lies at the ground of all reading.)

The second section of this chapter analyzes Benjamin's critical gestures vis-à-vis Heidegger in the passage quoted above and elsewhere in *Das Passagen-Werk*. My goal is to "reconstruct" Benjamin's confrontation with Heidegger, which never took place in any sustained form. If reading Benjamin with Nietzsche helps us to grasp the crucial role that danger plays in Benjamin's critique of historicism, reading Heidegger with Benjamin's eyes allows us to grasp the kind of *historical aprioricity* that Benjamin sought to theorize with his concept of the dialectical image. Although Benjamin acknowledges the radicality of Heidegger's thinking of temporality and historicity, he takes issue with the *secularizing*,[7] *reactionary*,[8] and *abstract*[9] tendencies that animate Heidegger's project of fundamental ontology. My interpretive hypothesis is that Benjamin's criticizes Heidegger because his concept of historicity requires the reduction of the "*weak* messianic force" ("*schwache messianische Kraft*" Benjamin (2010) 94) that, for Benjamin, marks the entire structure of historical knowledge. If, for Heidegger, history is *always* the history of *Dasein* or of *Dasein*'s relation to being or to beyng, then there would not be any place for the *alterity* of the Messiah. In order to flesh out Benjamin's threefold critical remarks about Heidegger's

[7] See Benjamin (1991) N8a,4 590.
[8] See Benjamin (1991) S1,6 676.
[9] See Benjamin (1991) N3,1 577.

working concept of history in *Sein und Zeit* (*Being and Time*), this section proposes a brief excursus through Heidegger's *magnum opus*, focusing primarily on the analysis of "*Vorlaufen*" ("running ahead") as the mode in which *Dasein* attains its proper or authentic relation to temporality.[10] In the mode of "running ahead," death emerges as the only "phenomenon" that constitutes the temporality of *Dasein*. As such, the "measure" of time can only be given in relation to death *as* an impossibility that resists any measurement. This notion of an authentic temporality determines Heidegger's notion of an equally authentic historicity,[11] establishing a chain that goes from *Dasein* to the *self* (*Selbst*),[12] which emerges in the mode of its authenticity in the experience of finding itself in the call of its conscience,[13] then to the people *(Volk)*, which resolutely decides to appropriate for itself its own tradition in the repetition (*Wiederholung*) of the *past possibilities* of other *Dasein*.[14] In spite of recognizing the (de)constitutive import of death *as* an impossibility *for Dasein*, Heidegger's account of temporality and historicity radicalizes the ipseity of *Dasein* as the place in which *possibility in itself*, as well as the possibility of history, is located. By reinscribing death *as* a possibility *of Dasein*—even if only *as* the possibility of the impossible—Heidegger would have refused the asymmetry of a *messianic* alterity that cannot be reduced to the status of a *possibility* of any being whatsoever, including the being who asks the question of being.

The task of trying to read Benjamin's confrontation with Heidegger recalls a verse from Hugo von Hofmannstahl's *Der Tor und Der Tod* (*The Gate and Death*) that Benjamin cites in *Das Passagen-Werk* "to read what was never written" ('*was nie geschrieben wurde, lesen'*

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[10] See Heidegger (2006) 262.
[11] See Heidegger (2006) 385.
[12] See Heidegger (2006) 267.
[13] See Heidegger (2006) 268.
[14] See Heidegger (2006) 384.

von Hofmannstahl, qtd. by Benjamin 524). However difficult this task may be, I would argue that it remains a necessary undertaking if we are to grasp why Benjamin proposes the concept of the dialectical image as an alternative to Heidegger's notion of historicity and thus as a way of thinking a more *historical* phenomenology of history than Heidegger's fundamental ontology. The third section of this chapter explores Benjamin's understanding of the historical time that corresponds to the dialectical image. Once more, we can begin to understand Benjamin's notion of historical time by contrasting it with Heidegger's understanding of the time of historicity. Rather than construing the time of history in terms of the proper *historicity* of *Dasein*—i.e., as "destiny" ("*Schiksal*), the name for the mode in which *Dasein* appropriates for itself its tradition in the *moment* of a *resolute decision*[15]—Benjamin argues that historical time is to be grasped from its transience, in the mode of a "now-time" (*Jetztzeit*) that for Heidegger would remain only thinkable from within a "vulgar" understanding of the concept of time.[16] Furthermore, Benjamin not only thinks historical time in terms of the "now," but also locates the historicity of this mode of time in what he calls in *Das Passagen-Werk* the "historical index" ("*historischen Index*" Benjamin (1991) N3,1 577) of the dialectical image, which he then renames in the theses alternatively as the "secret index" ("*heimlichen Index*" Benjamin (2010) 83) or the "temporal index" ("*zeitlichen Index*" Benjamin (2010) 94) of history. Benjamin thinks this index as a relation

[15] See Heidegger (2006) 394.

[16] To frame Benjamin's complicated gesture vis-à-vis Heidegger's radical reinterpretation of authentic temporality in opposition to the vulgar concept of time, see Heidegger (2006) 335-39, Benjamin (1991) N3,1 578, and Benjamin (2010) 95. Whereas Heidegger establishes a radical modal separation between the authenticity of the moment (*Augenblick*) and the inauthenticity and vulgarity of the now (*Jetzt*), Benjamin uses these two terms almost as synonyms: now of knowability (*Jetzt der Erkennbarkeit*) and moment of its knowability (*Augenblick seiner Erkennbarkeit*).

that splits the unit of every historical event. Historical events not only happen when they occurred, but also and primarily when their occurrence becomes *legible* to *another* time. The historical index determines the immediacy and the immanence of any moment of historical time as *relational*. Historical time itself *happens* as an event of reading and the historical events that are read occur not only when they happened, but above all when they attain legibility. The concepts of the "now of recognizability" ("*Jetzt der Erkennbarkeit*") and the "constellation" ("*Konstellation*") extend Benjamin's understanding of a historical-indexical relation between temporal moments in a way that transforms the totality of historical time into a medium of historical "legibility" (*Lesbarkeit*). However, the constellation itself is not something that is *present to* the historian's own "now." Instead, the "now" of the historian becomes inscribed *within* the constellation. As such, the Benjaminian historian—better stated, the historical reader—loses the privileged position that he or she occupies within historicism as the only subject or substance that is endowed with the *power* of gathering a manifold of historical moments within a single historiography. At the same time, the historical reader is not a *Dasein*; the possibility of historical legibility is not given within any existential structure but is instead historically determined by the past that it reads. Historians are *read* by the past just as much as they *read* it.

The last section in this chapter brings my examination of Benjamin's concept of the dialectical image to a close by paying attention to the relation that Benjamin establishes in the passage quoted above between time, truth, and danger in history. The radicality of Benjamin's definition of historical knowledge as a dangerous mode of reading can be best grasped if we reinscribe Benjamin's definition of truth as "the death of the intention" within

a post-phenomenological context. If truth is the death of the intention, then truth can only obtain in a state in which the historian is *incapable* not only of *constituting* historical objects, but also of even encountering them *within* the horizon of its *intentional* experience. This explains why the title of this chapter contains the name "Phenomenology" in scare quotes. Benjamin's theory of history opens unto a different understanding of historicity or of a historical *a priori* that exceeds the horizon of phenomenology insofar as its danger affects the very structure of historical horizonality. The dangerous truth of history irrupts *now*, depriving the historian of any temporal horizon. The imminence of the historical truth is such that it *may* always occur *to me* without ever being *my* possibility. Furthermore, the suspension of ipseity constitutes the mark that historical truth may have occurred: historical truth emerges in the limit experience that *trans*forms the *now* of the historian from a site of historical *legibility* into an allegorical image to is legible only to *another* now. If reading is the medium in which the truth of historical time is disclosed, then such a reading is *dangerous* because it requires that the historian undergo a process of radical dispossession as the condition of attaining the most intense historicity—an *im-possible*, in-finite historicity.

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Let us return to Nietzsche's untimely meditation concerning the self-endangering force of critical history. To grasp how Nietzsche's thinking of the double danger of history opens the door to a *non-historicist* thinking of historical in-finity, we must first understand how is it possible for life itself, for the historian, and for historical time to be not only dangerous *for* the historical past, but also equally endangered by the *force* of critique. To do so, we must begin by recalling that, from the beginning of his essay, Nietzsche argues that

human life in all its forms needs history in order to live healthily: "*das Unhistorische und das Historische ist gleichermaassen für die* Gesundheit *eines Einzelnen, eines Volkes und einer Cultur nöthig*" (Nietzsche 252, emphasis mine). ("*the unhistorical and the historical are needed in equal measure for the* health *of an individual, a people or a culture.*") The essay's opening comparison pitting animals and children (as living beings who lack any awareness of the past) against properly mature humans (whose existence is *temporal*) sets the stage for Nietzsche's broader argument about the specific kind of relation between life and history that obtains in *proper* human life (Nietzsche 248-50). For Nietzsche, this relation is one of auto-immunity, rather than of total immunity.[17] Life *as such* may be unhistorical; yet, human life, from the moment it becomes self-conscious, is irremediably *exposed* to the persistence of the past in the present. The intrinsic temporality of humanity accounts for a certain irreducibility of history. At the same time, the originary exposure of human life to the past explains why historicism is possible. Indeed, human life must have always already *needed* history if the historicist negation of life in the name of history is to take place.

If historicism threatens to extinguish the human capacity to *make* history, then Nietzsche's critical mode of observing the past represents the most extreme form of a non-historicist history. The critical historian practices a history in which the past only figures insofar as it is *judged* and destroyed through its judgment for the sake of the renewal of life's energy and activity. If historicism endangers the time of life—presumably the *present* (*Gegenwart*)—by making it coincide entirely with the past, critical history endangers the *past* (*Vergangenheit*) by annihilating it in order to release life into its own *un*historical *presentism*.

We are now in a better position to understand the ironic duplicity of the danger that

[17] On the distinction between autoimmunity and total immunity, see Derrida (2003) 210.

Nietzsche associates with critical history. Although historical judgments are made in the name of life and for the sake of its liberation, human life also *needs* history in order to live in its proper, human mode. For this reason, the absolute exercise of critical history would actually *destroy* the very life that it sought to liberate by destroying the past. The historians who judge the past critically are immediately exposed to the critical judgment of other historians. These historians—if they also do history in the service of life's one-sided, asymmetric unhistoricity—must deem their predecessors as unworthy of living and as deserving of critique as the past that they judged. Here lies the supreme irony of Nietzsche's concept of historical critique. Due to the prominent role that judgment plays within its structure, the critical mode of history appears to privilege the *present* of the historian as the only *instance* that can judge the past. And yet, the critical mode of history fails to secure the *present* of the historian the status of being the *proper* time in which life judges the past without exposing itself to being judged in turn. The present is as *endangered* as the past that it *endangers*. Life's attempt to free itself from the dead weight of history turns against itself: the judgers become judged; the present *must* go under. Moreover, in its critical transience, the present is not merely modified and preserved in the reservoir of a consciousness saturated by presence. As soon as the insuperable *unhistoricity* of life takes over the reins of historical judgment, the present no longer gives way to a present-past that could be retrieved.

To be sure, Nietzsche himself strives to contain the recursivity of this historical danger by delimiting the conditions for its deployment. Critical history unfolds within the bounds of a trans-critical moment that he describes as a kind of sporadic *kairos*: the force to destroy the past becomes necessary *only* "from time to time," at certain hyper-critical

moments in which history's burden on life is felt with acute intensity (Nietzsche 269). The *kairos* of critique and the normative concept of *health* (*Gesundheit*) are deployed as apparatuses that keep at bay the possible in-finitization of the destructive/destroyed "time" of life's recursive movement of endangered/endangering endangerment. For Nietzsche, critical history should not be exercised on every occasion, since human life cannot endanger itself all the time without ceasing to remain healthy. But Nietzsche's own hesitance acknowledges that human life could *always* put itself in a danger *without reserve*. In theorizing critical history, Nietzsche both liberates and shies away from a concept of life that would no longer be bound to the structure of self-preservation; a life that would only *be* alive in the midst of its immediate and infinite *trans*formation; a life that would have become indistinguishable from death. The danger of an absolute alteration of life would disrupt the economy of death that constitutes human life—an economy that secures the health of human life by incorporating both the historicity and the unhistoricity of life in measured doses. The *kairos* of the critical *now* seeks to cover over the fact that critique may always irrupt at any moment, at any *now*, regardless of its justification or its timeliness. The dangerous temporality of an imminent and destructive now *un*times the pre-judgment that allows the historian to *know* that the *proper* time to exercise critical judgment has arrived. In its savage *un*-historicity, the judgment of life *in itself* could only unfold in the pure discontinuity of sheer temporal transience. Only a time that is no more *in* the very moment of its irruption—only a free *now*—could measure the movement of life in its intense self-destruction. The time of historical critique is an *impossible* time, a now that cannot erect itself as the *form* and measure of time and instead must pass by and leave its non-place vacant for another now that may

come to occupy it and submit it to judgment. Historical critique for Nietzsche is linked to the abyss of an infinite self-critique in which the very *ipseity* of the time of life becomes perilously endangered.

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In February 2, 1940, Benjamin wrote a letter in French to Max Horkheimer to announce that he had finished writing his famous theses on history, *Über den Begriff der Geschichte* (*On the Concept of History*):

> Je viens d'achever un certain nombre de thèses sur le concept d'Histoire. [...]Elles constituent une première tentative de fixer un aspect de l'histoire qui doit établir une *scission irrémédiable* entre notre façon de voir et les survivances du *positivisme* qui, à mon avis, démarquent si profondément même ceux des concepts d'Histoire qui, en eux-mêmes, nous sont *les plus proches* et *les plus familiers* (Benjamin 1181, emphases mine).[18]
>
> (I just finished a certain number of theses on the concept of history. [...]They constitute a first attempt to fix an aspect of history that should establish an irremediable division between our way of seeing and the ways in which *positivism* survives, and which, in my opinion, so profoundly demarcate even those concepts of history that, in themselves, are *the closest* and the *most familiar* to us.)

According to Benjamin, his theses on history respond to a conceptual crisis brought about by positivism's survival (*"survivance"*) in the domain of history. What Benjamin here calls

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[18] This letter was not reproduced in the edition of Benjamin's correspondence edited by Theodor W. Adorno and Gershom Scholem. The letter is found in the supplements to *Das Passagen-Werk* included by Rolf Tiedemann, the main editor of Benjamin's collected works.

positivism is a synonym for historicism. This crisis in the theory of history is due to historicism's pervasive influence in the determination of historical concepts that, according to Benjamin, are the "closest" ("*les plus proches*") and the "most familiar" ("*les plus familiers*") to him and Horkheimer. That Benjamin here speaks in the plural "us" ("*nous*") should not be taken as a mere linguistic convention. This choice indicates the extent to which Benjamin regarded historicism as a threat not merely to his own intellectual practice, but also to that of philosophers like Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, with whom Benjamin collaborated closely during the last decade of his life. This threat is related to undecidability: historicism's survival makes it impossible for Benjamin to *know* whether his own historical concepts are historicist or not. As such, historicism's afterlife undoes Benjamin's own efforts to provide a non-historicist theory of history. The *critical* task of the theses is thus to draw a line separating historicism's enduring afterlife from Benjamin's own conceptual language by establishing an aspect of history that historicism could never digest.

Like Nietzsche, Benjamin turns to the lexicon of *Gefahr*—danger or peril—in order to propose an alternative to the historicist interpretation of the idea of history. In *Über den Begriff der Geschichte*, Benjamin confronts historicism by opposing Leopold von Ranke's formula "wie es eigentlich gewesen" ("as it actually/essentially/properly happened") to his own *dangerous* approach to historical knowledge: "Vergangenes historisch artikulieren heißt nicht, es erkennen, 'wie es denn eigentlich gewesen ist.' Es heißt, sich einer Erinnerung bemächtigen, wie sie im Augenblick einer Gefahr aufblitzt" (Benjamin 95) ("To articulate the past historically is not to know 'as it essentially happened.' It is to take possession of a

memory as it lights up in a moment of danger").[19] The split between historicism and what Benjamin calls in the theses "historical materialism" or "historical dialectics" comes to the fore even more clearly in the French version of this text, "Thèses sur le concept de l'histoire" ("Theses on the Concept of History"), in which Benjamin mentions Ranke by name and qualifies his definition of the task of the historian as a chimera: "'Décrire le passé tel qu'il a été' voilà, d'après Ranke la tâche de l'historien. C'est une définition toute chimérique" (Benjamin 62). ("'To describe the past just as it was' that, according to Ranke, is the task of the historian. It is a quite chimerical definition.")

Über den Begriff der Geschichte (*On the Concept of History*) gives us the starkest formulation of the place where, presumably, historicism and Benjamin's theory of history would part ways. Whereas historicism, according to Benjamin, understands the task of the historian as the representation of the past as it actually, properly, or essentially happened, Benjamin reconfigures the past as the "appropriation of a memory" that attains legibility in the mode of a "flash" and only at "the moment of a danger." Ranke's formula is often taken as proof of historicism's empiricist tendencies.[20] However, such an interpretation relies on a reading of the German adverb "*eigentlich*" that is rather narrow, since this word could be

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[19] Ranke coins his famous dictum "wie es eigentlich gewesen" in the Foreword to Part I of his *Geschichte der romanischen Volker von 1494 bis 1535* (*History of the Roman People from 1494 to 1535*): "Man hat der Historie das Amt, die Vergangenheit zu richten, die Mitwelt zum Nutzen zukünftiger Jahre zu belehren, beygemessen: so hoher Aemter unterwindet sich gegenwärtige Versuch nicht: er will bloss sagen, wie es eigentlich gewesen" (qtd. by Stroud 379). ("History has been given the function of straightening the past, of teaching contemporaries to be useful to future years: the following attempt does not take up such high functions: it will merely say how it essentially [has] been.") See Stroud (1987) 379-82.
[20] It is worth noting that Benjamin actually misquotes Ranke's dictum in a way that is not entirely insignificant. Whereas Benjamin writes "wie es denn eigentlich gewesen ist,"Ranke actually omits the helping verb "ist" that would have completed the third person past participle form of the German verb "*sein*" (to be), "*gewesen ist*" ("has been").

translated as "truly," "really," "actually," "properly," and even "essentially."[21] Indeed, as we saw in the previous chapter, the positivism of Ranke's historicism is inflected by theology in a profound manner: Ranke posits god as the ground for the intrinsic knowability of every individual event that has come to pass, even if he is aware that only god could attain a complete or perfect knowledge of history.[22] Moreover, the historicist historian is precisely *not* like the Aristotelian historian, who must chronicle events in the same aleatory sequence in which they took place. Instead, Ranke's dictum implies that the historian can only know what *actually* and *really* happened by bringing an *eidetic history* to bear upon the past. It is by virtue of the "historical idea" that the historicist historian is capable of what the Aristotelian chronicler could not have achieved, namely, to disclose the causal connections and teleological tendencies that account for the identity and coherence of human history in its particularity and concreteness.

The fact that Benjamin opposes Ranke's "as it essentially happened" to his history of the "moment of danger" reveals the crucial role that danger plays in Benjamin's theory of history. Indeed, Benjamin probably had danger in mind when he mentioned in his letter to Horkheimer that his theses are an attempt to elaborate an "aspect of history" that would enable him to distinguish his own way of conceiving historical knowledge from historicism. Danger ruins the theological *positivism* of historicism by reconfiguring the theological aspect of history in terms of a messianism that, as Werner Hamacher has argued, is radically opposed to the substantialist theology that informs historicism.[23] If historicism understands the past in its reality as a possible-possibility grounded in god, the messianism of Benjamin's

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[21] For a similar reading of Ranke's *dictum*, see Evans (1999) 14-15.
[22] See Ranke, ed. by Kessel (1954) 269-308.
[23] See Hamacher (2002)

history configures the past as an *impossible* possibility. The Benjaminian historian relates to the past not as something that *actually* happened, but as the site of a destruction in which historical events become graspable only *as* threatened with disappearance or *in* the very refusal of their own emergence. Danger also deprives the historian's present of the solidity of a theological foundation. The same recursivity that Nietzsche associates with danger obtains in Benjamin's schema: the messianic historian endangers the past as much as it is endangered by the past. Furthermore, once we approach Benjamin's theory of history from the moment of danger, we are in a better position to understand Benjamin's confession to Horkheimer concerning the survival of historicism. For all the concepts that Benjamin crafts in order to think history otherwise—"the dialectical image," "now-time," "constellation"—could be modulated in terms of the historicist "chimera" if they were not formulated in the *mode* of danger. For Benjamin, danger designates the *way* of a non-historicist history.

At the same time, Benjamin's letter to Horkheimer also clarifies why Benjamin at times talks about historicism in a positive light, as something to be *rescued*. Benjamin himself makes this claim in a passage from "Konvolut K: [Traumstadt und Traumhaus, Zukunftsträume, Anthropologischer Nihilismus, Jung]" ("Convolut K: Dream City and Dream House, Dreams of the Future, Anthropological Nihilism, Jung "), one of the most theoretically suggestive sections of *Das Passagen-Werk:*

> Die 'Kritik' des 19ten Jahrhunderts also, um es mit einem Wort zu sagen, hat hier einzusetzen. Nicht die an seinem Mechanismus und Maschinismus sondern an seinem narkotischen Historismus, seiner Maskensucht, in der doch ein Signal von wahrer historischer Existenz steckt, das die Surrealisten

> als die ersten aufgefangen haben. Dieses Signal zu dechiffrieren, damit hat der vorliegende Versuch es zu tun. (Benjamin K1a,6 493).
>
> (To say it in one word, the "critique" of the Nineteenth Century has therefore to be installed here. Not the [critique] of its mechanicism or of its "machinism," but instead of its narcotic historicism, its lust for masks, in which a signal of true historical existence still hides, which the Surrealists were the first ones to realize. The present attempt has to decipher this signal.)

If we read Benjamin's claim in the theses concerning historicism's chimera in light of Benjamin's characterization of historicism as a narcotic in his work of the Parisian arcades, a different, less one-sided image of Benjamin's relation to historicism begins to emerge. In the passage quoted above Benjamin not only identifies in the emergence of historicism the most decisive event in nineteenth century European history; he also insists that historicism is not to be taken as a mere illusion, a negation or a self-contradiction. Historicism for Benjamin is instead to be seen as a distorted image of what he calls a "true historical existence" (*wahrer historischer Existenz*), a distortion that calls for critique. On this account, historicism cannot be easily dismissed as a mere mystification, a sheer negative illusion, or a pure chimera. The historicist way may be a distortion or a perversion of the truth of historical existence; nonetheless, historicism sustains in its very structure a reference to a decisive dimension of history, which Benjamin sought to elaborate until his death in 1940.

III.2. History Secularized: Benjamin Reads Heidegger

To approach Benjamin's relation to historicism in a more nuanced manner, we would do well to triangulate this relation by introducing another relation, that of Benjamin

and phenomenology, more generally, and Heidegger, more specifically. The last two decades have seen a steady increase in the amount of attention that has been paid to Walter Benjamin's engagements with phenomenology and neo-Kantian thought. Scholars such as Werner Hamacher, Uwe Steiner, Peter Fenves, and Eli Friedlander have demonstrated that Benjamin's idiosyncratic work on political theory, literary and art criticism, and cultural history was always informed by a long-standing engagement with neo-Kantianism and with the early phenomenological movement.[24] As a result of their efforts, we now have a better idea of the intellectual landscape in which Benjamin's corpus took shape: we know, for instance, that Benjamin's career as a student was heavily impacted not only by his readings of Plato, Leibniz, and Kant, alongside Hermann Cohen, Ernst Bloch, and Franz Rosenzweig, but also by the teachings of Heinrich Rickert and Moritz Geiger, the essays of Paul Linke and Jean Héring, and the study of seminal texts of Edmund Husserl, such as *Philosophie als strenge Wissenschaft* (*Philosophy as Strict Science*), and, possibly, the *Logische Untersuchungen* (*Logical Investigations*) and the *Ideen zu einer reinen Phänomenologie und Phänomenologischen Philosophie*.

And yet, in spite of the recent attention that has been given to Benjamin's debt to neo-Kantian and phenomenological thought, Benjamin's relation to Martin Heidegger has been the subject of little scrutiny.[25] This asymmetrical relation (for we have no evidence that

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[24] See Hamacher (2002) 147-83, Hamacher (2011) 175-192, Steiner (200) 48-92, Fenves (2011), Friedlander (2012).

[25] The first edited volume in English on this relation was published this year, see Benjamin and Vardoulakis (2015). It is telling that none of the essays in the volume take up the task of giving an account of Benjamin's relation to Heidegger concerning the problem of history, which is the problem that draws Benjamin to Heidegger's *magnum opus* in the first place. For essays that deal with this issue, see Caygill (1994) 1-31, Reijen (1998), and Ibarlucía (2000) 111-41.

Heidegger was even aware of Benjamin's existence) seems to have been marked by Benjamin's aversion to, and fascination with, Heidegger; a tension that could have only been exacerbated by the uncanny way in which Benjamin's interests happened to converge with those of Heidegger at key points in their careers.[26] For instance, we know that Benjamin was critical of Heidegger's work as early as 1916, when he read the published version of Heidegger's 1915 *venia legendi* lecture on the concept of time in the human sciences—an encounter that took place around the same time as Benjamin himself was working on the question of historical time in the German *Trauerspiel*.[27] A few years later, Benjamin had to abandon his plan to write a habilitation thesis on Duns Scotus's theory of language after becoming aware that Heidegger had just published his habilitation on the doctrine of the categories of Duns Scotus.[28]

However, the moment of closest proximity between Benjamin and Heidegger remains rather unexplored in the secondary literature. I am referring to their strange convergence at the turn of the 1920s around the project of enacting a critique of historicism on the basis of a radical historicization of Husserlian phenomenology. Although Benjamin's theory of history has been the subject of numerous studies, we still lack a satisfactory account of the phenomenological concerns that informed Benjamin's approach to history in general, and, more specifically, of the extent to which his own theory of history was conceived as a response to Heidegger's thinking of "*Geschichtlichkeit*" or "historicity" as formulated in *Sein und Zeit*. And yet, Benjamin himself mentions not only Heidegger, but also the term "historicity" when he introduces his thinking of the "dialectical image" in *Das Passagen-*

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[26] See note five in Hamacher (2002) 181-82 and Fenves (2013) 365-371.
[27] See Benjamin's letter to Scholem from 11 November 1916 in Benjamin (1978) 129-30.
[28] See Benjamin's letter to Scholem from 1 December 1920 in Benjamin (1978) 244.

Werk. "Was die Bilder von den 'Wesenheiten' der Phänomenologie unterscheidet, das ist ihr historischer Index. (Heidegger sucht vergeblich die Geschichte für die Phänomenologie abstrakt, durch die 'Geschichtlichkeit' zu retten) (Benjamin N3,1 577). (What separates images from the 'essentialities' of phenomenology is their historical index. (Heidegger seeks in vain to save history for phenomenology abstractly through 'historicity.') How should we approach Benjamin's intense and yet opaque relation to Heidegger?

A good point of depature to examine Benjamin's relation to Heidegger as it pertains to the development of his theory of history is found in his correspondence with Gershom Scholem. In January 20, 1930, Benjamin wrote a long letter to Scholem in French in which he discusses his massive project on the history of nineteenth-century Paris. It is in this context that Benjamin tells his friend that his efforts to formulate a "theory of historical knowledge" would have to confront Heidegger's *Sein und Zeit*:

> Ce qui pour moi aujourd'hui semble une chose acquise, c'est que pour ce livre aussi bien que pour le "Trauerspiel" je ne pourrai pas me passer d'une introduction qui porte sur la théorie de la connaissance – et, cette fois surtout sur la théorie de la connaissance de l'histoire. C'est là que je trouverai sur mon chemin Heidegger et j'attends quelque scintillement de l'entre-choc de nos deux manières, très différentes, d'envisager l'histoire. (Benjamin 506) (What is today for me a given thing is that, for this book, just as for the *Trauerspiel*, I will not be able to do away with an introduction that deals with the theory of knowledge—and, this time above all, with the theory of historical knowledge. It is there where I will find Heidegger on my path and I

> expect some sparks from the clash of our two very different ways of envisaging history.)

The clash with Heidegger did not take place, or, at least, not in the way Benjamin expected. Benjamin never wrote his book on the arcades and, by extension, he never wrote the theoretical introduction to this book, where he would have confronted Heidegger's views on history. Thanks to the existence of another letter that Benjamin wrote to Scholem in April 1930, we know that Benjamin and Bertolt Brecht were organizing a reading group on *Sein und Zeit* with the explicit goal of "smashing to pieces" ("*zertrümmern*") Heidegger. But this reading group also never took place, and the correspondence between Benjamin and Brecht does not provide any clue that would allow us to surmise what might have been the gist of their critical, antagonistic, destructive reading of Heidegger.[29] The lack of any textual evidence of Benjamin's confrontation with Heidegger was not remedied by the posthumous publication of *The Arcades Project* in 1982. For among the thousands of pages of notes and citations that Benjamin amassed over the course of a decade of work at the Bibliothèque Nationale, there are only three explicit references to Heidegger. We are therefore in the difficult situation of having to assume that Benjamin's collision with Heidegger, if it took place, left only a few textual traces, a minimal archive that hardly amounts to Benjamin's explicit project of having an *Auseinandersetzung* with Heidegger's understanding of history.

In spite of the scarcity of textual evidence, the three passages from the *Arcades Project* in which Heidegger's name is explicitly mentioned furnish us with enough material to begin to reconstruct Benjamin's critical reception of *Being and Time*. I have already cited the opening lines of entry "N3,1" in "Konvolut N," where Benjamin asserts that Heidegger's

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[29] On the relation between Benjamin and Brecht, see Wizisla (2004).

attempt to “save” history for phenomenology remains a failure, due to the “abstraction” of the category of “historicity” (Benjamin N3,1 577). Consider now the following passage from “Konvolut S: [Malerei, Jugendstil, Neuheit]” (“Convolute S: Painting, Jugendstil, Novelty”):

> Lebenswichtiges Interesse, eine bestimmte Stelle der Entwicklung als Scheideweg zu erkennen. An einem solchen steht zur Zeit das neue geschichtliche Denken, das durch höhere Konkretheit, Rettung der Verfallszeiten, Revision der Periodisierung überhaupt und im Einzelnen charakterisiert ist und dessen Auswertung in reaktionärem oder revolutionäre(m) Sinne sich jetzt entscheidet. In diesem Sinne bekundet in den Schriften der Surrealisten und dem neuen Buche von Heidegger sich ein und dieselbe Krise in ihren beiden Lösungsmöglichkeiten. (Benjamin S1,6 676)
>
> (Of vital interest to recognize a determined place in a development as a crossroads. At the moment, the new historical thinking, which is characterized by a higher concreteness, the salvation of periods of decay, the revision of periodization in general and in individual cases, stands at such a place, and its utilization in a reactionary or a revolutionary sense is now being decided. In this regard, the one and the same crisis manifests itself in its two possible solutions in Heidegger’s new book and in the writings of the Surrealists.)

Recall that in a previous passage from his work on the Parisian arcades, Benjamin argued that Surrealism was the first movement to intimate that a “true historical existence” (“*wahrer*

historischen Existenz") lurked within historicism in spite of itself (Benjamin K1a, 6 493). If we read these two passages together an interesting image begins to emerge. Benjamin's own "now" seems to be marked by these two opposed modes of what he calls the "new historical thinking:" Heidegger's reactionary destruction of the history of metaphysics, and the Surrealists' revolutionary mobilization of a non-historicist temporality would constitute two ways in which history itself is undergoing a transformation in the direction of an intensification of its own historicity, away from the historicist chimera. At the same time, it is also important to keep in mind Benjamin's penetrating critiques of Aragon and Breton in "Konvolut N" to avoid reading this passage as if Benjamin's were choosing Surrealism's revolutionary "new history" over Heidegger.[30] What is telling about this passage for our purposes is the fact that Benjamin here gives his most positive assessment of the methodological principles that would follow from a Heideggerian approach to history: an attention to concreteness, a rejection of models of historical development that insist on periodicity, and the displacement of an image of historical time modeled on a wave in which some periods correspond to moments of decadence.

The third passage from the *Arcades Project* where Benjamin mentions Heidegger is perhaps the most difficult to interpret:

> Der Frage nachgehen, ob ein Zusammenhang zwischen der Säkularisation der Zeit im Raume und der allegorischen Anschauung besteht. Die erstere ist jedenfalls, wie an der letzten Schrift von Blanqui klar wird, im 'naturwissenschaftlichen Weltbild' der zweiten Jahrhunderthälfte versteckt.

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[30] For Benjamin's confrontation with Aragon, see entry "N1,9" in Benjamin (1982) 571-72. On Benjamin's relation to Surrealism, see Barck (2011) 386-99.

> (Säkularisierung der Geschichte bei Heidegger.) (Benjamin N8a,4 590).
>
> (To pursue the question of whether there is a common context for the secularization of time in space and the allegorical intuition. At any rate, the former is hidden in the "world-view" of the natural sciences, as it becomes clear in Blanqui's latter writings. (Secularization of history in Heidegger)).

What would it mean for history to be secularized in Heidegger's thinking? Is this parenthetical remark *legible* enough to have a meaning that could be ascertained? What is meant by this parenthesis, which contains a remark that barely amounts to a phrase? Is Benjamin trying to say that Heidegger *secularizes* history or does he think that Heidegger's thinking of history can help him to push further the question of the relation between the secularization of time (which is also a thorough spatialization of temporality) and the allegorical mode of intuition? Moreover, is Benjamin here referring to the Heidegger of *Sein und Zeit*—an already mature Heidegger who has left behind neo-Kantianism and Husserlian phenomenology—or to the early Heidegger of the conference on the concept of time in the science of history?

These questions cannot be settled with any degree of certainty. On the one hand, since Benjamin refers to the "'world view' of the natural sciences" as the context for the secularization of time, we could read this parenthetical remark as a positive nod to the author of *Sein und Zeit*, who had already challenged the pertinence of a mathematical understanding of time for the discipline of history in his 1915 *venia legendi* conference on historical time. This, however, would go against the grain of Benjamin's own rather critical impressions of

Heidegger's early work.[31] At the same time, nothing prevents us from reading this passage as an indication of Benjamin's suspicions about Heidegger's fundamental ontology as a secularization of history. This ambiguity is not dispelled if we turn to other passages from *Das Passagen-Werk* where Benjamin writes more explicitly about the theological dimension of history. For instance, in "Konvolut N," we find an entry that addresses Horkheimer's criticisms to Benjamin pertaining his notion of historical time. In a letter form March 16, 1937, Horkheimer takes issue with Benjamin's "idealistic" concept of the "incompleteness" ("*Unabgeschlossenheit*") of history because it does not include its opposite—"completeness" ("*Geschlossenheit*")—into a dialectical structure (Benjamin N8,1 588). By doing so, Horkheimer's argument is that Benjamin's theory of history misrecognizes the fact that injustices in the past *have truly happened* and cannot be modified, or rather could only be modified by recourse to a theologization of history that leads straight into the belief in the "last judgment" ("*jüngste Gericht*"). Here is Benjamin's response to Horkheimer:

> Das Korrektiv dieser Gedankengänge liegt in der Überlegung, daß die Geschichte nicht allein eine Wissenschaft sondern nicht minder eine Form des Eingedenkens ist. Was die Wissenschaft 'festgestellt' hat, kann das Eingedenken modifizieren. Das Eingedenken kann das Unabgeschlossene (das Glück) zu einem Abschlossenen und das Abgeschlossene (das Leid) zu einem Unabgeschlossenen machen. Das ist Theologie; aber im Eingedenken machen wir eine Erfahrung, die uns verbietet, die Geschichte grundsätzlich atheologisch zu begreifen, so wenig wir sie in unmittelbar theologischen Begriffen zu schreiben versuchen dürfen (Benjamin N8,1 589).

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[31] See note 27.

> (The corrective of this thought process lies in the thought that history is not just a science, but also not any less a form of commemoration. What science has fixed, commemoration can modify. Commemoration can make the incomplete (happiness) into something complete, and what is complete (pain) into something incomplete. That is theology, but in commemoration, we have an experience that prohibits us to grasp history as fundamentally atheological, as little as we may attempt to write it in immediate theological concepts").

By juxtaposing the science of history to the irreducible theological dimension of historical commemoration, this passage can help us to flesh out what informs Benjamin's concern about the secularization of history. Benjamin's insistence on the theological aspect of history is another attempt to counter the survival of a positivistic historicism, which takes the completeness of historical facts to be given "as they essentially happened" without incorporating into the facticity of the past its *legibility*, i.e., the past's relation to *another* time that may always *modify* it. Since the spokesperson for this version of a secular historicism is none other than Horkheimer himself, we have here a plausible explanation for why Benjamin refers to the survival of positivism in his letter to Horkheimer from February 1940. Secularization and historicism go hand in hand in their common construal of the historical past as fixed, established, and complete—a *factum perfectum* whose self-enclosure is thought on the basis of a spatialization of time where each temporal moment becomes a discrete point within a continuous stream of time-points. By circumscribing the historical past to its own self-enclosed intensification, by evacuating the structure of historical time of

any relationality, secularization and historicism deprive history of any messianic force. Historicism—in its secular or theological forms—relates to the past in its *reality*, whereas the theological history that Benjamin proposes relates to the past as a *possibility* that can be modified in commemoration. What Benjamin calls "theology" here is therefore not to be confused with the substantialist, subjectivist theology of historicism, even if such a theology could be seen as the semblance, within historicism, of the "true historical existence" that Benjamin associates with Messianic incompleteness (Benjamin K1a6, 493).

On this account, Benjamin's inscription of Heidegger's name in the context of a critique of historicism and of the secularization of history becomes even more enigmatic. For, on the one hand, it would be easy to show that Heidegger's project of a fundamental ontology is the most rigorous attempt to think time and history as *possibilities*, rather than as *real facts* or as *actualities*. From this point of view, Heidegger would stand side by side with Benjamin in a common critique of historicism, positivism, and of a certain secularization, which would foreclose in advance the possibility of asking the question of the meaning of being. And yet, on the other hand, we saw that Benjamin regarded Heidegger's notion of historicity as a *futile* attempt to think a *historical* phenomenology of history, since the concept of historicity remains too "abstract" and thus unhistorical due to its status as a phenomenological "essentiality" (*Wesenheit*). But I would also add that what Benjamin calls the reactionary element of Heidegger's thinking of history—which we could locate in Heidegger's identification of the proper historicity in the destiny of a people (*Volk*) that decides to repeat the possibilities of previous generations—also involves a secularization of history that, ironically, would place Heidegger on the side of historicism. In what follows, I

want to turn briefly to *Sein und Zeit* in order to read Heidegger's elaboration of the existential structures of historicity and temporality in light of the few critical remarks that Benjamin wrote in *Das Passagen-Werk*. My goal is to show Heidegger in the ambiguous light in which he appeared on Benjamin's own path: as a radical thinker of time and history as *possibilities* who nonetheless shares with historicism the rejection of the radical *alterity* of the messianic in favor of a thinking of history as a possibility *of Dasein*.

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The privilege of possibility over reality and actuality emerges already in the introduction of *Sein und Zeit*, where Heidegger makes the case for considering possibility as "higher" than actuality by way of a peculiar double gesture. Linking his own investigations to those of his former mentor, Edmund Husserl, Heidegger writes:

> Die folgenden Untersuchungen sind nur möglich geworden auf dem Boden, den *E. Husserl* gelegt, mit dessen *Logischen Untersuchungen* die Phänomenologie zum Durchbruch kam. Die Erläuterungen des Vorbegriffes der Phänomenologie zeigen an, daß ihr Wesentliches nicht darin liegt, als philosophische 'Richtung' *wirklich* zu sein. Höher als die Wirklichkeit steht die *Möglichkeit*. Das Verständnis der Phänomenologie liegt einzig im Ergreifen ihrer als Möglichkeit (Heidegger 38).
>
> (The following investigations only became possible out of the foundation that E. Husserl laid; in the *Logical Investigations* phenomenology had its breakthrough. The elucidations of the pre-concept of phenomenology show that what is essential to it does not lie in being *actual* as a philosophical

> "orientation." Higher than actuality stands *possibility.* The understanding of phenomenology lies solely in the grasping of it as possibility.)

When read in isolation, the sentence "Higher than actuality stands possibility" could be easily taken as the guiding thread of the entire argumentative structure of Heidegger's *magnum opus*. When restored to its context in this passage, the phrase becomes perhaps more interesting insofar as it suggests the extent to which Heidegger's own philosophical commitments to possibility at the time of the composition of *Sein und Zeit* are deeply linked to his own understanding of the significance of the phenomenological movement. This much is clear if we pay attention to Heidegger's own positioning of his project vis-à-vis Husserlian phenomenology. On the one hand, Heidegger here suggests that his own project was nourished by the very fertile soil of Husserlian phenomenology. And yet, he is also quick to point out that phenomenology shows itself in the clarity of its essence whenever it appears not as an *actual* philosophical school or as a factically accomplished or even accomplish*able* method, but rather when it acquires the character of *possibility*. On the other hand, grasping (*ergreifen*) phenomenology as a possibility implicates phenomenology in the very "thing itself"—namely, possibility—whose grasping would reveal phenomenology's essence. In other words, the possibility of grasping, of understanding phenomenology *as* a possibility is inextricable from understanding phenomenology as the way of disclosing possibility *as* possibility; and yet, phenomenology's self-understanding as a possibility, rather than as a philosophical orientation that is guided by the *telos* of its eventual actualization, presupposes the disclosure and the phenomenological attestation of the truth of the statement that possibility is higher than actuality. Seen in this opaque light, phenomenology appears not

only as the method that regards possibilities as higher than actualities, but that must also understand its own possibility as possible, as *not yet* accomplished, as a possibility *never* to be accomplished: a mere or pure possibility. Already at this point in Heidegger's text, possibility and phenomenology—the possibility of phenomenology and the "phenomenology" of possibility—name the abyssal radicality of un-actualiz*ability* and un-realiz*ability* at the heart of any *ability*, any possibility, and any possibility-to-be (*Seinkönnen*).

If, according to Heidegger, the very *sense* of phenomenology is linked to the disclosure of the primacy of possibility over actuality (and thus, over reality as well, since the latter presupposes the former at an ontological level), then Heidegger's account of the ontological structure of the discipline of history (*Historie*) must assume that the object of this "science" must have the character of a possibility. This argument is made in Paragraph 76, where Heidegger exposes the ontological structure of historiography by accounting for its emergence out of the authentic or proper (*eigentlichen*) historicity of *Dasein*:

> Die Umgrenzung des ursprünglichen Themas der Historie wird sich in Anmessung an die eigentliche Geschichtlichkeit und die ihr zugehörige Erschließung des Dagewesenen, die Wiederholung, vollziehen müssen. Diese versteht dagewesenes Dasein in seiner gewesenen eigentlichen Möglichkeit. Die 'Geburt' der Historie aus der eigentlichen Geschichtlichkeit bedeutet dann: die primäre Thematisierung des historischen Gegenstandes entwirft dagewesenes Dasein auf seine eigenste Existenzmöglichkeit. Historie soll also das *Mögliche* zum Thema haben? Steht nicht ihr ganzer 'Sinn' einzig nach den Tatsachen, nach dem, wie es tatsächlich gewesen ist? Allein, was beutet:

Dasein ist 'tatsächlich?' Wenn das Dasein eigentlich nur wirklich ist in her Existenz, dann konstituiert sich doch seine 'Tatsächlichkeit' gerade im entschlossenen Sichentwerfen auf ein gewähltes Seinkönnen. Das tatsächlich eigentlich Dagewesene ist dann aber die existenzielle Möglichkeit, in der sich Schicksal, Geschick und Welt-Geschichte faktisch bestimmen. Weil die Existenz je nur als faktisch geworfedene ist, wird die Historie die stille Kraft des Möglichen, um so eindringlicher erschließen, je einfacher und konkreter sie das In-der-Welt-gewesensein aus seiner Möglichkeit her versteht und ‚nur' darstellt (Heidegger 394).

(The delimitation of the originary theme of history must be accomplished at the measure of proper historicity and its corresponding disclosure of what-has-been-there, repetition. Historicity understands the *Dasein* that has-been-there in its proper past possibility. The 'birth' of history out of authentic historicity thus means: the primary thematization of historical objects projects the *Dasein* that has-been-there unto its most proper possibility of existence. Must history therefore have the *possible* as its theme? Doesn't its whole "meaning" stand in facts, in what factually has been? However, what does it mean that Dasein 'factually' [*tatsächlich*] is? If Dasein is 'properly' actual only in existence, its 'factuality' is, after all, constituted precisely by its resolute self-projection upon a chosen potentiality-of-being. What has 'factually' really been there, however, is then the existentiell possibility in which fate, destiny, and world history are factically determined. Because

> existence always is only factically thrown, historiography will disclose the silent force of the possible with greater penetration the more simply and concretely it understands having-been-in-the-world in terms of its possibility, and 'only' presents it as such.)

For Heidegger, the *fact* that history in the sense of historiography derives its legitimacy and its ontological foundation from the authentic historicity of *Dasein* means that the historicist determination of history '*wie es* eigentlich *gewesen'* contains a truth that historicism itself is not equipped to handle. A *proper*, *eigentlich* history, an *authentic* understanding of what *happens historically*, presupposes the disclosure of *Dasein*'s authentic or proper way of being-historical. It is only in the mode of *repetition*, in the dynamism of the most authentic "movement" that *Dasein* is capable of, that history emerges in its authentic facticity and that any true historicism could actually be articulated. This movement is *Dasein*'s innermost way of being because repetition does not imply the re*activation* or *what* previous *Daseins* did in the mode of *real* facts that could be memorized or commemorated. The history that is the *authentic* object of *Dasein*'s repetitive movement is the history of *how* a community of *Daseins*, how a generation or a people, *choose* certain possibilities-of-being *as their own* possibilities. Read this way, this passage appears in its proper light as a devastating critique of historicism. Ranke's "*wie es eigentlich gewesen*" fails to do justice not only to history in its authenticity, but above all to the very factuality or *Tatsächlichkeit* of historical phenomena, which is to be understood as emerging out of the *facticity* of *Dasein*—i.e., out of the resolute decisions in which *Dasein* achieves the *factic* determination of its innermost possibility, and out of the *decision* in which any *Dasein* determines its *possibility-to-be* in terms of the

possibility of taking up the *tradition* of the possibilities left behind by a generation or a people that has-been-there. It is only on the basis of *Dasein*'s constitution as possibility that the field of history and the discipline of historiography become possible. As such, history for Heidegger becomes a specific kind of relation in which "the silent force of the possible" ("*die stille Kraft des Möglichen*"), in which the force of a tradition constituted by the *possibilities* of *Daseins* who-have-been, irrupts in an imperceptible manner in the very core of *Dasein*'s time, in the moment of its highest resolution, of its decision-to-be *possibility*.

On the basis of this reading, we are in a better position to grasp Benjamin's ambiguous and tense relation with Heidegger. Heidegger submitted history to a radical destruction that disclosed the extent to which historicism remains unclear about its own foundations, which are to be sought in the historicity of *Dasein*. This historicity, moreover, is to be thought as a force of *possibility* that enables the irruption of other *possible* decisions that both *repeat* and *transform* the tradition of possibles that constitutes authentic history. Both Benjamin and Heidegger enact in their own ways a "Copernican revolution" in history by destroying the ergontology that, from Aristotle to the historicists, assigns to the historian the task of imitating, replicating, or representing the *past as it was*.

An even more uncanny resemblance between Benjamin and Heidegger emerges as soon as we shift our attention from Heidegger's understanding of historicity to that of temporality. This shift is required by the economy of Heidegger's own argument in *Sein und Zeit*, which not only construes history as the *concretization* of the temporal essence of *Dasein*,[32] but also locates in the proper or authentic mode of temporality the site in which

[32] See Heidegger (2006) 382.

possibility in itself comes to its own.[33] The point or the site in which the *possibilization* of possibility itself emerges is the "phenomenon" of death. In what follows, I will turn to a moment from paragraph § 53 in *Sein und Zeit,* where Heidegger's gives the most sustained account of death as the source of *Dasein*'s authentic temporality (and, by extension, historicity). By reinterpreting Heidegger's thinking of possibility, I seek to demonstrate why death remains the place in which Benjamin and Heidegger are closest to each other, while remaining at an immeasurable distance.

Readers familiar with Heidegger's *magnus opus* know that the question of death (*Der Tod*) emerges as soon as Heidegger interrogates the structure of *Dasein* from the point of view of its totalization. Since death is one of *Dasein's ends*—the other is its birth—and since the project of a fundamental ontology cannot go on without disclosing the total structure of the being that it interrogates, the question of death cannot be avoided. Moreover, it is only with regards to Dasein's ends that Heidegger can find the phenomenological attestation that would lend validity to his claim concerning the primacy of possibility above actuality. For death emerges as *the* possibility that *cannot* be actualized, let alone realized, by any *Dasein* and, for this reason, remains of the order of the *purely* possible. Although the analyses of death comprise the entire first chapter of the second part of the first projected volume of *Sein und Zeit* (the only one published), I want to limit my focus to one crucial paragraph from § 53 where Heidegger engages with the question of *Dasein*'s *authentic* or *proper* way of relating to death. Here is the passage:

> Das Sein zur Möglichkeit als Sein zum Tode soll aber zu *ihm* sich so verhalten, daß er sich in diesem Sein und für es *als* Möglichkeit enthüllt.

[33] Heidegger (2006) 262.

Solches Sein zur Möglichkeit fassen wir terminologisch als *Vorlaufen in die Möglichkeit*. Birgt diese Verhaltung aber nicht eine Näherung an das Mögliche in sich, und taucht mit der Nähe des Möglichen nicht seine Verwirklichung auf? Diese Näherung tendiert jedoch nicht auf ein besorgendes Verfügbarmachen eines Wirklichen, sondern im verstehenden Näherkommen wird die Möglichkeit des Möglichen nur ‚größer'. *Die nächste Nähe des Seins zum Tode als Möglichkeit ist einem Wirklichen so fern als möglich.* Je unverhüllter diese Möglichkeit verstanden wird, um so reiner dringt das Verstehen vor in die Möglichkeit *als die der Unmöglichkeit der Existenz überhaupt*. Der Tod als Möglichkeit gibt dem Dasein nichts zu 'Verwirklichendes' und nichts, was es als Wirkliches selbst sein könnte. Er ist die Möglichkeit der Unmöglichkeit jeglichen Verhaltens zu…, jedes Existierens. Im Vorlaufen in diese Möglichkeit wird sie 'immer größer', daß heißt sie enthüllt sich als solche, die überhaupt kein Maß, kein mehr oder minder kennt, sondern die Möglichkeit der maßlosen Unmöglichkeit der Existenz bedeutet. Ihrem Wesen nach bietet diese Möglichkeit keinen Anhalt, um auf etwas gespannt zu sein, das mögliche Wirkliche sich ‚auszumalen' und darob die Möglichkeit zu vergessen. Das Sein zum Tode als Vorlaufen in die Möglichkeit *ermöglicht* allererst diese Möglichkeit und macht sie als solche frei. (Heidegger 262)

(But being-towards-possibility as being-towards-death must comport to this being so that it uncovers itself in this being and for it *as* possibility. We grasp

terminologically such being-towards-possibility as *running-ahead-in-possibility*. But does not this comportment harbor a nearing to the possible in itself, and, in the nearness of the possible, does not arise its actualization? However, this nearing does not tend towards a concerned making-available of something actual; rather, in the coming-near that understands the possibility of the possible becomes only "greater." *The nearest nearing of being towards death as possibility is as far as possible from something actual.* The more uncovered this possibility is understood, the more purely the understanding penetrates in the possibility *as that of the impossibility of existence in general*. The more uncovered this possibility is understood, the more purely the understanding penetrates in the possibility *as that of the impossibility of existence in general*. Death as possibility gives *Dasein* nothing to "be realized" and nothing that, as actual, it itself could be. It is the possibility of the impossibility of every comportment to…, of every existing. In running-ahead-in-this-possibility, it becomes 'always greater,' that means, it uncovers itself as such [a possibility] that knows no measure, no more or less, but rather means the possibility of the measureless impossibility of existence. Its essence offers this possibility no evidence in order to be intent upon something, to 'depict' the possible-actual and forget in this way possibility. Being-towards-death as running-ahead-in-possibility *possibilitates* first of all this possibility and makes it as such free.)

Death emerges in Heidegger's thinking as the name for the possibility and, indeed, for the trans-categorial, ultra-existential necessity of a radical dissociation of possibility and actuality. As such, within the post-Kantian framework of modalities that Heidegger here both cites and radically subverts, the dissociation of possibility from actuality implies by the same token the absolute liberation of possibility from any real determination and from the entire ontic-ontological sphere of reality as such. This is so insofar as all real determinations of a being, the entire framework of "thing-like" or *res*-like determinations of any being, presupposes the modal determination of the *actuality* of this being. The reality of a thing—the positions that determine its specification—presupposes the *existence* or the actuality of the thing, *not* at any possible time (which is one of Kant's definitions of possibility) or at every possible time (which characterizes Kant's notion of necessity), but rather at a determined (*bestimmte*) time.[34] The fact that Heidegger regards the possibility of possibility to require the removal of possibility from the telos of actualization and from all real determinations of an entity is not to be taken as proof of death's abstraction, but rather the opposite: it is concreteness and facticity themselves that must be completely rethought in light of the discovery that the entire edifice of Western metaphysics rests on the forgetting of possibility *as* possibility. From the point of view of a philosophy that interrogates death as a pure possibility or a possibility *in itself*, any insistence on ontologies of actuality, *energeia*, effectivity, power, or *Macht* appears as an attempt to make possibility enter into the orbit of actuality and thus to become real. Any form of ergontology—including historicism—finds in Heidegger's analyses of proper death its most extreme and unsurpassable challenge.

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[34] See Kant's characterization of the schemas of possibility, actuality and necessity in Kant (1998) A145/B184 245.

But how does the being that Heidegger calls being-towards-death achieve this possibilization of possibility? It is telling that in this passage Heidegger appears to warn his reader against any easy conflation of the possibility of possibility with "the possible in itself" (*das Mögliche in sich*): "Birgt diese Verhaltung aber nicht eine Näherung an das Mögliche in sich, und taucht mit der Nähe des Möglichen nicht seine Verwirklichung auf?" (Heidegger 262) ("But doesn't this comportment hold [harbor] a nearing of the possible in itself and, with the nearness of the possible, doesn't arise its actualization?") Heidegger here seems to be worried about two possible misinterpretations of his claim that death amounts to a pure possibility: if being-towards-death comports to being-towards-possibility in such a way that it makes possibility itself *possible*, then it may always be possible to understand this possibility of the possible as "the possible in itself" ("*das Mögliche an sich*"). However, does not the very fact of grasping the possible *in itself* betray the possible by reintroducing its actualization? Traditionally, the "in itself" indicates that something is taken precisely as it *is in* and *by* itself, out of its own accord, without any regard for any *relation* that the possible might entertain with anything else but itself. In this case, to comport oneself to the possible *in itself* would imply that *Dasein* has a *way of being*—being-towards-death—that grants possibility its possibility, *without* any relation to actuality. And yet, regarded in its "in itself," the possible could nonetheless continue to be surreptitiously understood in terms of its actualization or realization. Heidegger's rhetorical question appears to be motivated precisely by the awareness that the "*in itself*" may always be interpreted as the assertion of the autonomous actuality of a being. Heidegger's task is therefore to dissociate "the possible in itself" that emerges through the mode of being-towards-death from any horizon of realization or

actualization. What irrupts in the experience of death is *another* ipseity: an ipseity that is only in, by, and for itself when it experiences its possibilities *as such*, that is, as incapable of being realized or actualized. Ipseity in being-towards-death is the possibility of the impossible.

But in order for Heidegger to think the possibility of possibility as something other than the restoration of the possible to its enclosed self-sameness, his own language has to undergo a decisive modification: "Diese Näherung tendiert jedoch nicht auf ein besorgendes Verfügbarmachen eines Wirklichen, sondern im verstehenden Näherkommen wird die Möglichkeit des Möglichen nur ‚größer'. *Die nächste Nähe des Seins zum Tode als Möglichkeit ist einem Wirklichen so fern als möglich*" (Heidegger 262). (However, this nearing does not tend towards a concerned making-available of something actual; rather, in the coming-near that understands the possibility of the possible becomes only "greater." *The nearest nearing of being towards death as possibility is as far as possible from something actual.*) Heidegger talks here about the "tendency" of the strange movement of the nearing of the possible in itself, a tendency that moves in the direction opposite to the affirmation of the self-sameness of the possible as implying the *actuality* of the possible *as* possible. This bizarre movement of approaching the possible is marked by an asymmetric infinity: the more one relates to the possible *as* possible, the more it becomes possible *in itself* and the less it becomes something that could ever be actualized. Not only does death have a movement, but this movement tends towards the possibilization of the possible in a way that can only be measured as an infinitely upward movement of intensification: the possible becomes always "greater" ("*größer*") in its possibility the more it is understood and penetrated *as* a possible-possibility.

Reinscribing the disclosure of "the possible in itself" within a "movement" marked by the non-dialectical dynamics of *Ent-fernung* or "de-distancing," Heidegger here smashes the mathematization of time, rewriting its kinetics in a way that is amenable to Benjamin's critique of the "secularization" of historical time. The "movement" of death *as* the possibility of the possible in itself has to be understood in terms of "de-distancing" in order to think together death as both the primary and most intimate *possibility* of *Dasein* as well as the *last* and most extreme *possible*, whose arrival brings about *the end* of *Dasein*. Death is thus nearer than anything that may be close by and further than anything that I may ever expect or await. The dynamics of this strange movement of "de-distancing" also provide Heidegger with the schema to dissociate the possible *in itself* from its surreptitious actualization: death is the *first* possible and the *last* possible, but its irruption can only arrive *after* the last actuality of *Dasein* has been realized. The formula "the possible in itself" harbors the threat of a misunderstanding that ought to be avoided only as long as the "in itself" continues to be understood in the horizon of an ontology of reality that understands non-relationality in equally ontic terms as a modification of a being that discloses its mode of being through its abstraction from any relation. The only "in itself" that could belong to the possible and determine the entire realm of its possibility would be something close to a relation of possibility to itself, in itself, and for itself. But in this relation possibility does not appropriate itself to itself, does not totalize itself or achieve itself. The becoming-greater of possibility, possibility's absolute intensity, implies precisely the opposite: that the self of possibility lies in its self-excess. Exceeding itself from itself, standing at a distance from itself while remaining *closer* to itself than spatio-temporal proximity may allow, possibility itself becomes possible.

The *mathesis* of possibility, the movement of its intensification, could therefore be expressed with the function n+1. Possibility's becoming greater is to be understood not merely in relation to the actual, but in relation to itself. The greatness of possibility lies in its excessive relation to its own excess: a relation that intensifies even excess itself, turning it into a possible excess and thus into the kind of excess that has not reached its last degree of intensification.

It is here that the non-place of *impossibility* as the most extreme meaning and significance of death begins to emerge:

> Je unverhüllter diese Möglichkeit verstanden wird, um so reiner dringt das Verstehen vor in die Möglichkeit *als die der Unmöglichkeit der Existenz überhaupt*. […]Im Vorlaufen in diese Möglichkeit wird sie 'immer größer', daß heißt sie enthüllt sich als solche, die überhaupt kein Maß, kein mehr oder minder kennt, sondern die Möglichkeit der maßlosen Unmöglichkeit der Existenz bedeutet (Heidegger 262).
>
> The more this possibility is understood as uncovered, the more purely the understanding penetrates in the possibility *as that of the impossibility of existence in general*. [...] In running-ahead-in-this-possibility, it becomes 'always greater,' that means, it uncovers itself as such [a possibility] that knows no measure, no more or less, but rather means the possibility of the measureless impossibility of existence.

When Heidegger describes impossibility as the meaning of death or as what death signifies, he is quick to characterize this impossibility in mathematical terms as measureless or

"*maßlos*." The meaning of death is nothing other than the impossibility of existence, and as such, it is an excess even beyond the excess that sustains possibility in its possibility and keeps it "greater" than itself. The intensification of possibility is to be grasped not as a movement of self-same immanence. Possibility is instead to be understood from its *end* as infinitely finite. The possibility of the possible—its infinite intensification with regard to *actuality* and to any possible degree of its own movement of possibilization—is itself grounded in the abyss of the impossible. We saw that if there is something like a "self" of possibility, this ipseity has to be rethought on the basis of death's tendency to intensify possibility in-finitely, making it become *always* greater. Possibility only relates to itself in a perpetual movement of non-correspondence, of asymmetric excess. And yet, this very movement is launched by impossibility, which possibilitates the movement of dehiscence that makes possibility *possible in itself*. The possibility of possibility is only possible *as* impossible, as finite, or as already dead in a certain way. This is how I suggest we should understand Heidegger's famous phrase about the "the possibility of the impossibility of existence." The possibility of impossibility does not make the impossible *possible* if by this we mean that the impossible would come to have a final measure or to be measured—even if its measure is only that of the n+1: the measure of an incomplete excess. The possibility of the impossible is rather to be seen as the infinite *tension* between two infinities: the infinity of possibility's perpetual excess and the infinity of that which cannot be measured at all.

In this impossible site, Benjamin and Heidegger stand as close to each other as possible. Perhaps the most compelling analogy between their positions is to be found in Heidegger's closing lines, where he rethinks the *essence* that corresponds to being-towards-

death in a non-eidetic manner, which brings to mind Benjamin's notion of truth as the "death of the intention" ("*Der Tod der* Intentio"):

> Ihrem Wesen nach bietet diese Möglichkeit keinen Anhalt, um auf etwas gespannt zu sein, das mögliche Wirkliche sich ‚auszumalen' und darob die Möglichkeit zu vergessen. Das Sein zum Tode als Vorlaufen in die Möglichkeit *ermöglicht* allererst diese Möglichkeit und macht sie als solche frei. (Heidegger 262)
>
> (Its essence offers this possibility no evidence to be intent upon something, to 'depict' the possible-actual and in this way forget possibility. Being-towards-death as running-ahead-in-possibility *possibilitates* first of all this possibility and makes it as such free.)

The essence of death *as* possibility discloses death in its proper, non-eidetic *a*phenomenality. If the essence of phenomenology lies in its being grasped as a possibility, then the grasping of death as a possibility allows us to wrest phenomenology away from its determination as an philosophy grounded on the transcendence of an ego-logical, conscious, intentional subjectivity. Authentic death is a possible that exceeds any horizon of anticipation or expectation, a possible that cannot be represented or depicted, a possible that is not a correlate to any possible modification of transcendental consciousness, a possible whose possibility has been divested of any intentionality. The truth of this essence is therefore not related to any possible *intuition*, but rather to the movement that renders "every comportment" and "every existing" *impossible*. As such, the essence of death is unlike any other essence, insofar as it only prescribes to the possible its *freedom* from any determination

as the unconditional condition of its *possibility*. The horizon in which authentic death is *experienced*—death as the possibility of the impossibility of existence—knows no measure and is, as such, free from any form of delimitation. Death in its in-finity dissolves any form of determination of the possible, including the determination of possibility as having a *form* or a *morphe* that would be prescribed by its *eidos* as the *terminus* of its actualization. The essence of death or the impossible *as such* opens up possibility to its possibility by destroying any image of the possible that may claim to be the *ultimate* form of possibility, revealing any such image as an improper metaphor of a death whose only sense lies in disfiguration. Death is Heidegger's name for the pure horizonality that keeps temporality and historicity *open*.

And yet, it is also at this moment that Benjamin and Heidegger part ways. From Benjamin's perspective, the analytic of *Dasein* remains a failed attempt to rethink historical knowledge from within a post-phenomenological framework, in spite of the radicality of Heidegger's understanding of history and time as free *possibilities*. For Heidegger, historical objectivity is to be understood as the factical determination of *Dasein*'s possibilities, which are only determined relative to the measurelessness and indeterminacy of the possibility of their impossibility or their finitude. *Dasein's* finite history demarcates itself each time against the in-finity of impossibility in the moment of a resolute decision, which enables *Dasein* to gather time and history into its own innermost being, configuring and setting in motion a way of existence that remains *its* highest possibility-to-be, its most authentic mode of being in itself for its own self. Heidegger's reinscription of impossibility *as such* within the structure of *Dasein*'s *Jemeinigkeit* or "mineness," his decision to turn even the abyss of death into a non-relation that belongs properly *only* to *Dasein*, implies the foreclosure of any radical

alterity beyond that of the asymmetric relation between *Dasein* and being itself. When read this way, Heidegger's thinking of history in *Sein und Zeit* emerges in its structural ambiguity: the most radical critique of historicism continues to think history within the purview of *ipseity*, of the *silent force of the possible*, and locates in *Dasein*'s *self* or in the existence of a *people* or a *generation* the proper site of historical action and historical knowledge. From the impossible standpoint of the absolute alterity of the messianic, Heidegger's history appears as a refusal of *alterity*. The *otherness* of messianic history prevents the theological historian from ever occupying a *Dasein*-like position, which is *capable* of retrieving and repeating the possibilities of *Daseins* that-have-been-there and are no more. Benjamin's historian instead relates to what-has-been *not* from the side of the possibility of its impossibility, but rather from the impossibility of its possibility. Benjamin's "tradition of the oppressed" is not constituted by the determined possibilities of a *people*, but is rather the site of an immemorial past that never took place. Moreover, this tradition is not activated through repetition, but is rather incorporated into the time of commemoration, a dangerous time in which an *endangered* history also *endangers* the historian with the threat of an in-determinate finitude. The in-finity at stake in Benjamin's thinking of history is so radical that it cannot be said to belong *to* the historian as *its* innermost limit, as the measureless horizon from which the historian appropriates for itself the *terms* of its infinite expropriation.

III.3. Benjamin's "Concrete" Phenomenology of History: The Historical Index

After getting a better sense of Benjamin's complicated relation to Heidegger's thinking of history, I want to turn now to Benjamin's understanding of thinking historical time. My goal in this section is to show how Benjamin's understanding of historical time

opens the door to a critique of historicism that does not rely on any instance of *ipseity*, like Heidegger's *Dasein*, but rather opens the door to a more radically dangerous and endangered concept of history that involves the impossibilization of any historical ipseity. Again, Benjamin's critique of Heidegger will be our guiding thread in the beginning of this section. Recall that Benjamin's most sustained exposition of the concept of the dialectical image occurs in "Konvolut N" in *Das Passagen-Werk*. Not surprisingly, he introduces the "historical index"—one of the crucial components of the dialectical image—in opposition to Heidegger's notion of historicity: "Was die Bilder von den 'Wesenheiten' der Phänomenologie unterscheidet, das ist ihr historischer Index. (Heidegger sucht vergeblich die Geschichte für die Phänomenologie abstrakt, durch die 'Geschichtlichkeit' zu retten). (Benjamin N3,1 577). ("What separates images from the 'essentialities' of phenomenology is their historical index. (Heidegger seeks in vain to save history for phenomenology abstractly through 'historicity.')") Benjamin here opposes his category of the "image" to what he calls the "essentialities of phenomenology" in a way that suggests that the abstraction of Heidegger's concept of "historicity" is due to its status as an phenomenological "essentiality," as opposed to Benjamin's image, whose concreteness is due to the fact that it is endowed with a historical index. However, there something ironic about Benjamin's gesture of qualifying historicity as *abstract,* given that Heidegger himself regarded the structure of historicity as the most "concrete" way of elaborating the facticity of *Dasein*.[35] In order to understand why Benjamin characterizes historicity as an "abstract" way of thinking a phenomenology of history, we must interrogate Benjamin's understanding of the concept of phenomenological "essentialities" or *Wesenheit*. To do so, we must pay attention to

[35] See Heidegger (2006) 382.

Benjamin's engagement with the work of another figure within the phenomenological movement. I am referring to Jean Héring, a student of Husserl during his Göttingen years, who published a treatise in the fourth volume of the *Jahrbuch für Philosophie und phänomenologische Forschung* titled *Bemerkungen über das Wesen, die Wesenheit, und die Idee* (*Remarks on Essence, Essentiality, and the Idea*). As the title suggests, Héring's treatise seeks to establish a methodological distinction between the phenomenological concepts of essence, essentiality, and idea—which Husserl often uses interchangeably—and to do so by recourse to the different functions that these categories have within phenomenological research. Although Héring's phenomenological work has been relatively ignored to this day, it could be shown that Héring's essay played an important role in shaping Benjamin's understanding of phenomenology. Although Benjamin does not cite Héring in *Das Passagen-Werk*, we know he was familiar with Héring's work because he cites this treatise in the preface to his book on the German baroque, precisely to borrow from Héring's formulation of the mode of access that characterizes essentialities in opposition to both essences and ideas.[36] Moreover, the fact that Benjamin uses the term "*Wesenheit*" in *Das Passagen-Werk* to characterize Heidegger's historicity points to the extent to which his own efforts to "save history for phenomenology" concretely with the concept of the dialectical image were informed by

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[36] See Benjamin (1991) 218. On Benjamin's use of Héring, see chapter two in Fenves (2011). I disagree with Fenves's characterization of Héring's essentiality as "an essence that is identical to the thing of which it is the essence" (Fenves 54), which ignores the fact that, according to Héring, the distinction between an essence and an essentiality is predicated on the irreducible indexicality of the former. Whereas essentialities prescribe themselves their own essences and the indexes that belong to their essences as the condition of their concretization, essences are immediately determined by the indexical relation of singular identity to an object. If we adhere to Fenves brief characterization of this distinction in Héring we cannot understand why Benjamin claim that Heidegger's historicity is an essentiality and, moreover, that because of this it is *abstract*—i.e., devoid of index.

Héring's work.[37] If we turn briefly to Héring's text, we can see why Benjamin regarded historicity as an abstract essentiality that is ill-suited to grasp history in its particularity and concreteness.

In the second chapter of his treatise, Héring establishes the most fundamental criterion to distinguish essentialities from essences:

> Die Wesenheit oder das *eidos*—so wollen wir sie von jetzt ab auch nennen—fristet nicht wie der Gegenstand ihr Dasein durch Teilhaben (*methexis*) an etwas außer ihr, welches ihr '*Wesen*' verleihen würde, so wie sie selbst dem Gegenstande, sondern sie schreibt sich selbst, wenn man so sagen darf, ihr Wesen vor. Die Bedingungen ihrer Möglichkeit liegen nicht außer ihr, sondern voll und ganz *in ihr selbst*. Sie ist und sie allein eine *Prote Ousia*. (Héring 23-24/510-11).
>
> (The essentiality or the *eidos*—as we want to call it from now on—does not carve out its existence like the object through participation (*methexis*) in something outside of it, which would lend it its "essence," as it itself [does] to the object, but rather it prescribes itself its essence, if we may say so. The conditions of its possibility do not lie outside of it, but rather fully and totally *in itself*. It and only it is a *prote ousia*.)

Although it would require more time to develop into a fuller argument, this passage from Héring's treatise can help us to grasp why Benjamin introduces the concept of the image by opposing it to Héring's essentialities, as the kind of non-empirical given to which

[37] The English translation of *Das Passagen-Werk* occludes the presence of Héring's terminology in Benjamin's thinking by translating the German word "Wesenheit" as "essence," rather than as "essentiality." See Benjamin (1999) 462.

Heidegger's historicity belongs. Whereas an essence for Héring is constituted by its relation *to* an object, the essentiality is a *first being*, a *causa sui* that determines its own existence by giving itself its own set of essences/indexes/objects. Conversely, whereas the condition of possibility of an essence presupposes its indexical relation to an objective correlate, essentialities are *free* from any external determination. As such, the *existence* of essentialities remains independent of their realization, which is moreover to be seen as an act of self-determination through the appropriation of an essence/index/object complex.

This passage can also help us to shed light on Benjamin's critique of Heidegger's notion of historicity. By bringing together Héring's notion of essentiality and Heidegger's "historicity," Benjamin interprets Heidegger's project against the grain of its own articulation in terms of the question of the meaning of being. For instance, the identification of historicity as an essentiality provides an alternative account of the primacy Heidegger grants to the *existentialia* that determine the structure of *Dasein,* one that highlights the traditional, phenomenological roots of Heidegger's project. The historicity of *Dasein* would qualify as an essentiality because its *aprioricity* is such that it determines in advance anything that may said to be historical, including the totality of possible historical objectivities. Historicity establishes *Dasein*'s innermost concrete possibility-to-be—i.e., its factical, free determination of itself through the resolute repetition of factically determined possibilities of *Daseins* that-have-been-there—as the condition of possibility of the historical *as such*. In grasping historicity as an essentiality, Benjamin also reverts Heidegger's claim about historicity as the *concrete* elaboration of the temporality of *Dasein*.[38] For Benjamin, historicity is just as

[38] See Heidegger (2006) 382.

"abstract" as temporality insofar as it establishes the law for the intuition of historical objects through its self-determination as the *eidos* that gathers the complex of essence/object/index that constitutes the *reality* of historical objects or the "existentiell" existence of historical phenomena. For this reason, Benjamin claims that historicity is ill equipped to account for the *possibility* of *historical* knowledge *as* historical. The transcendentality of essentialities removes historicity as the *law* of history from the temporal dimension of transience that for Benjamin remains an irreducible—and in this sense perhaps an *essential*—feature of any notion of history worthy of the name.

Unlike Heidegger's historicity, Benjamin's concept of the dialectical image is modeled upon Héring's notion of essence, which as we saw is always marked by an objective correlate. That Benjamin relies on Héring's notion of essence to think of the dialectical image as the only *a priori* structure that could enable a concrete "phenomenology" of history becomes clear as soon as we turn to Héring's exposition of the category of essence, which is defined precisely having an *index* as the condition of the *individualization* of essence itself. Héring introduces the index of an essence in the second paragraph of the first chapter of his treatise, titled "Das Wesen als Individuum" ("Essence as an Individual"):

> Nicht nur ist nämlich Wesen ein unselbständiger Gegenstand, der nicht ohne seine Träger existieren kann, wie etwa 'Bewegung' nicht ohne einen Träger der Bewegung, oder 'Farbe' nicht ohne Ausdehnungsmoment, sondern es ist selbst an und für sich und vor seiner Existenz mit einem bestimmten auf seinsen Gegenstand weisenden *Index* befahtet, es its *Wesen von a*. Und zwar ist diese Index stets ebenso voll bestimmt, wie der Gegenstand, auf der er

> hinweist, während z.B. das Phänomen der Bewegung ist was es ist, unabhängig von der Beziehung auf einen wenn auch so notwendigen Träger (Héring 11/498)
>
> (Not only is essence a dependent object that cannot exist without a bearer, as "movement" [cannot exist] without a bearer of movement or color without an element of extension; rather it is itself in and for itself and before its existence adhered to a determined index that points to its object. And indeed this index is always as fully determined as the object to which it indicates, whereas for example the phenomenon of movement is what it is independent of the relation to an albeit necessary bearer.)

The fact that all essences have an index means that the very structure of essence itself is marked by the essentiality "*relationality-to-an-object*," regardless of whether any determined essence and any determined object is being intuited at any determined moment by any concrete phenomenologist. But there is more crucial aspect to Héring's thinking of index that Benjamin also incorporates into his concept of the "historical index" of the dialectical image. For Héring, the essence's index makes it possible to distinguish between the *identity* or the sameness of a thing and its *equality* or equivalence to other things with which it shares the same essential predicates, without sharing *the same* index and therefore without sharing the same essence: "Zwei völlig gleiche (individuelle) Objekte haben zwei völlig gleiche Wesen, aber nicht identisch dasselbe; von zwei gleichen Blumen, zwei kongruenten Dreiecken hat eben jedes *sein* Wesen" (Héring 11/498). ("Two fully equal (individual) objects have two fully equal essences," but not the same identically; of two equal flowers, two

congruent triangles, each has even its essence). Héring's notion of index individuates essence itself, allowing the essence of a determined object x to be the *equivalent* to the essence of x1… xn, while, at the same time, being *only* the essence of *this* x1. By virtue of its index, Héring's concept of essence enables a different relation between spatio-temporal facticity and eidetic reduction than traditional Husserlian phenomenology. Within Héring's model, the structure of "essence" contains an element that is charged with the task of referring each determined essence to its determined object in its sheer spatio-temporal singularity, rather than through the determination of a totality of essential predicates that *excludes* the factic position of any object from its essential structure. For Héring, the eidetic identity *of* a determined thing becomes fully established at the level of essence only if the determination of the totality of predicates that make up *what* any thing *is* is supplemented by an index that relates a particular essence to *this* thing *as* it is given in its savage factuality. This is how Héring understands the task of phenomenology as going "to the things themselves" in order to "save phenomena."

As opposed to essentialities, which prescribe to themselves the eidetic/factic complex in which they exist concretely and remain *as* they *are* regardless of their concretion, essence for Héring is irreducibly bound to the singular spatio-temporal positionality of an object as that which makes *this* determined thing x1 be the *equivalent* of x2 without ever being *the same* thing.

Equipped with such a notion of essence, Benjamin's dialectical image implies a "phenomenology" of history that would not merely be history of Dasein's historicity, a history of the authentic repetition of the possibilities of *Dasein* that-have-been-there. At the

same time, although Benjamin's "concrete" phenomenology of history is modeled on what Héring calls essence, Benjamin's image transforms Héring's static phenomenological model by *historicizing* the notion of index to such an extent that it no longer sits comfortably within any traditional phenomenological framework—whether realist or transcendental. Benjamin:

> Der historische Index der Bilder sagt nämlich nicht nur, daß sie einer bestimmten Zeit angehören, er sagt vor allem, daß sie erst in einer bestimmten Zeit zur Lesbarkeit kommen. Und zwar ist dieses 'zur Lesbarkeit' gelangen ein bestimmter kritischer Punkt der Bewegung in ihrem Innern. Jede Gegenwart ist durch diejenigen Bilder bestimmt, die mit ihr synchronistisch sind: jedes Jetzt ist das Jetzt einer bestimmten Erkennbarkeit. In ihm ist die Wahrheit mit Zeit bis zum Zerspringen geladen. (Dies Zerspringen, nicht anderes, ist der Tod der Intentio, der also mit der Geburt der echten historischen Zeit, der Zeit der Wahrheit, zusammenfällt.) (Benjamin N3,1 577-78)
>
> (The historical index of images not only says, obviously, that they belong to a determined time; it says, above all, that they come to legibility only at a determined time. And, indeed, this acceding 'to legibility' is a determined critical point of the movement in their interior. Each present is determined by those images that are synchronic with it: each now is the now of a determined knowability. In it, truth is charged to the bursting point with time. (This point of explosion, and nothing else, is the death of the *intentio*, which thus coincides with the birth of genuine historical time, the time of

truth.))

Unlike the index of Héring's essence, the index of Benjamin's image is historical because the kind of singularity and concreteness that corresponds to it is itself determined by *historical*, not merely mathematical, *time*. For Benjamin, the historicity of time incorporates the *legibility* of what has happened into the very structure of its happening. As such, historical events are *in* time not merely because they existed at the moment—for instance, in the date—in which they happened, but also because they become read at an equally determined moment. The dialectical image construes a temporality that is historical because it splits the irreducible singularity of any event, which becomes *as such* only at the moment of its *legibility*. For Benjamin, any concept of history that construes time as a continuum of discrete moments that have solidity or existence independent of their relation to other temporal moments would amount to an *a*-historical way of understanding time. Benjamin's approach to historical time requires instead the proliferation of the process of indexical determination that constitutes any individuality: a historical individuum comes to be *as such* not only at the moment of its *emergence*, but primarily once it enters into the time of historical legibility. The concept of historical index turns Benjamin's efforts to "save history for phenomenology" *concretely* into a radical practice of interpretation in which historical time itself becomes knowable only because of its legibility. To know history and to practice historiography is therefore to *read* time, that is, to grasp historical time itself from the site of its two-fold determination as a moment that *happened* and as a *read* moment.

The historical index of the dialectical image provides the blueprint for what is perhaps Benjamin's best-known contribution to the theory of history, the concept of "now-

time" or the "now of knowability." Since dialectical images construe historical phenomena in their concreteness not merely with regards to when they happened, but also to when they attain legibility, the moment of reading—the *now* in which an image is read—acquires a predominant, almost constitutive role within the very structure of history. And yet, at the same time, Benjamin paradoxically prevents the now from becoming *the* site in which historical meaning is fixed or determined. Instead, Benjamin regards the time of the now to be just as historically determined or *as* finite as the time that is read in the now. Reading is historical not just because it belongs to the structure of historical time, but above all because it is itself historically determined as an element or a moment within the movement of the dialectical image. Thus, the determination of the individuality of a historical event is not to be located solely on the past "as it essentially happened" or in the present that reads the past and gives it a meaning. The now of knowability is not the site of any presentist historicism, but is rather in itself determined by what may attain legibility in it.

It is only in the *pre*-originary coming together of the now of reading and the image of "what-has-been" (*das Gewesene*)—only in the mere possibility of an encounter between times—that historical truth is to be located. According to Benjamin, in the now of knowability "truth is charged to the bursting point with time" ("*die Wahrheit mit Zeit bis zum Zerspringen geladen*." Benjamin N3,1 578), because the notion of truth that corresponds to history is as marked by the dialectic relation between temporal moments that Benjamin theorizes through the image's historical index. The "dialectics" that belongs to the dialectical image is intrinsically linked to Benjamin's notion of reading as the operation that activates the knowability of truth or historical legibility. The time of reading is not successive: its

temporality is rather constituted by the discontinuous leap between times. The historicity of the image's index—its determination of historical individuals as *read* singularities—does not correspond to the image of time as a line or a stream of successive moments, which would mean that the moment immediately following an event would have a privileged relation to its legibility. The dialectical image decrees *a priori* that historical events *have* to be *read* to actually become what they are—i.e., historical—without necessarily determining in advance the exact *date* at which they will attain legibility. Historical truth is temporal, but its temporality cannot be thought on the basis of the time that characterizes the relation between the past (*Der Gegenwart*) and the present (*Die Vergangenheit*), which Benjamin characterizes as a "purely temporal" (*rein zeitliches*) relation, as opposed to the "dialectical" relation that obtains between "the now" (*das Jetzt*) and "what-has-been" (*das Gewesenen*). To understand this distinction we must bear in mind not only that the historical index configures a non-successive time, but also that Benjamin links historical truth to the undoing of consciousness in the moment that he designates as the "death of *intentio*." Historical truth requires the displacement of the ego as the site of *presence*. The historian does not recollect the past and the present by putting together the successive states of its own temporal affectation as it is modulated when the historian engages with the past, which would lead to the configuration of an analogical and continuous relation between the stream of temporal consciousness that constitutes the ego as the site of the living present and the historical relation between the past and the present of the historian's ego. Rather than indexing the present as the time of truth, Benjamin locates historical truth in a "now" that no longer has the status of a discrete point or an extension-less limit, without, by the same token, being

extended. The intensity of Benjamin's now of knowability is instead to be grasped as the temporal excess that configures the time of truth as the site for the irruption of an overflow of time that interrupts the time constituted by the mathematical extension and egological intension. This excessive intensity of time overtakes the historian's consciousness, deactivates the power of presence that turns time into *my* time. The *now* of truth—which is also the now of legibility and the moment of knowability—is instead submitted to the same movement of expropriation without reserve that Nietzsche uncovered in his thinking of critical history as a *dangerous* and *endangered* mode of relation to the past. When historians read history *now* they cease to be con-temporaneous with themselves. In the now, the innermost time of the historian becomes an *image* within a constellation—i.e., it becomes an allegory of itself. The now *passes by* itself, ceases to coincide with itself, becomes an allegory whose legibility places historians in the moment of *danger*, in the dangerous experience of not being able to *own* their own experiences *as* their possessions. The conversion of the now into an allegorical image is the price to be paid for gaining admission to the devastated "timescape" of historical truth.

III.4. A *Dangerous* Truth: Against Historicism

To conclude, I want to turn to Benjamin's theses on history to develop the concept of truth that Benjamin proposes in the well-known passage on the dialectical image from *Das Passagen-Werk* that I discussed above. In the fifth thesis, Benjamin retrieves his thinking of the dialectical image in an explicit confrontation with historicism's understanding of truth:

> Das wahre Bild der Vergangenheit *huscht* vorbei. Nur als Bild, das auf Nimmerwiedersehen im Augenblick seiner Erkennbarkeit eben aufblitzt, ist

> die Vergangenheit festzuhalten. 'Die Wahrheit wird uns nicht davonlaufen'—dieses Wort, das von Gottfried Keller stammt, bezeichnet im Geschichtsbild des Historismus genau die Stelle, an der es vom historischen Materialismus durchschlagen wird. Denn es ist ein unwi<e>derbringliches Bild der Vergangenheit, das mit jeder Gegenwart zu verschwinden droht, die sich nicht als in ihm gemeint erkannte. (Die frohe Botschaft, die der Historiker der Vergangenheit mit fliegenden Pulsen bringt, kommt aus einem Munde, der vielleicht schon im Augenblick, da er sich auftut, ins Leere spricht)" (Benjamin 95).
>
> The true image of the past *flits* by. The past is to be held only as an image that flashes up just now onto never-again-to-be-seen in the moment of its knowability. 'Truth will not outrun us'—this phrase from Gottfried Keller points to the exact place in historicism's image of history in which historical materialism will smash it. For it is an irretrievable image of the past, which threatens to disappear with every present that did not knew itself as meant [intended] in it. (The happy message that the historian's fleeting pulse brings to the past comes from a mouth that perhaps already speaks into emptiness the moment that it is opened).

Benjamin here indicates "the exact place" ("*genaue die Stelle*") where historical materialism must "smash" ("*durchschlagen*") historicism's "image of history" ("*Geschichtsbild*"). This place bears the name "truth" ("*Wahrheit*"). According to Benjamin, historical truth is *not* to be understood, like Gottfried Keller's *dictum* suggests, as something that could "outrun" or "run

away from" ("*davonlaufen*") the historian. And yet, as we saw in the previous section, Benjamin's objection to Keller does not stem from an interpretation of historical truth as something that either would be *immediately* and unavoidably accessible to the historian or that would be *eternal* or a-temporal.

Benjamin does not offer any explicit indications as to how to read this phrase, other than as an illustration of historicism's misguided conception of historical truth. But where exactly lies historicism's blunder? I would argue that Benjamin's critique of historicism ultimately targets historicism's interpretation of historical failure. More specifically, Benjamin challenges historicism's understanding of the relation between the historian's *possible* failure to grasp the truth of the past and the structure of historical truth itself. An account of historicism's interpretation of historical truth could be read off from Keller' phrase provided that the latter be interpreted along the following two lines:

a. "Truth will not outrun us," implicitly states the opposite of what it explicitly affirms. As a proposition, this phrase is ambiguous, hovering between a constative and a performative utterance. To be more precise, the phrase seems to be both at once: it represents a future state of affairs in the indicative mood ("truth will not outrun us"), while also allowing something like a negative imperative or a prohibitive to be heard ("truth, *you* will not outrun us"). The performative dimension of this sentence undermines its constative value and becomes the condition for any factual assertion concerning the truth of history. For the kind of knowledge *about* truth that this sentence proffers—in this case, the fact that truth will not run away—relies on truth's becoming the correlate of the historian's commanding address. Implicit in this quasi-encrypted performative is thus an equally

encrypted apostrophe. Keller issues truth a command concerning its modality: "You shall not outrun us;" "you shall not escape our grasp;" "you will be available." This phrase ultimately issues an order: historical truth *ought* to *be*—and that means, historical truth must be *possible*.

But there is a further equivocation, another turn of phrase, which cuts across the ambiguity between this phrase's constative and performative uses. On the one hand, Keller can only state that truth will not escape because he has already managed to fix the modal status of truth through his performative address. And yet, the performative force that addresses truth concerning its innermost modal constitution betrays the weakness of whoever places itself as capable of issuing orders to truth. The command turns into a confession of the historian's weakness; "Truth will not outrun us" finally can be read as stating the opposite of what it was intended to posit and assert, but in an altogether *different* way: the phrase admits that truth *could* always pass by without being grasped by the historian. Truth could always be missed. History itself might always be *impossible*. Failure to grasp truth is a possibility *of* truth and, as such, it belongs to the structure of historical truth. Truth may be beyond the reach of the historian. By the same token, this possibility can also be seen as an impossibility *of* truth, provided that we understand it as a *possible* privation *for* the historian. The historian *could* always miss the truth. The confessional turn of this aberrant sentence transforms its command that history be essentially determined *as* a possibility into a tacit acknowledgment of the historian's *incapacity* to always grasp the truth.

b. In the phrase, "Truth will not out*run* ["davon*laufen*"] us," the "*laufen*" in the verb "*davonlaufen*" indicates the extent to which Keller's dictum exemplifies historicism's understanding of the temporality of truth as *temporal*, not as *dialectical* in Benjamin's sense

of the term. Truth unfolds in spatio-temporal extension, following the traditional shape of succession. By extension, Keller's phrase could be read as implicitly postulating an interpretation of the moment in which the historian grasps historical truth as an *intra*-temporal occurrence or as another moment within a time understood as the succession of instants or moments. Within this framework, all instances of historical truth would imply a coordination of the historian's present with the present in which the truth of the past is seized. Likewise, all failure to grasp historical truth must be understood through the representation of historical truth's time as a *present-past* that is essentially *retrievable*, in spite of the possibility that the historian might also *fail* to actualize the past's essential retrievability. Historical truth may be impossible; moreover, this impossibility is to be understood as historian's failure to bring back the truth of the past into the present. Seen from the perspective of historical truth's temporality, truth's impossibility implies that the historian's present may not always be in synchronicity with the truth's present. There might be a disjunction or a *discontinuity* between the historian's present and historical truth's present-past. Furthermore, the extensive-character of historical truth's present-past—the fact that historical truth *runs* a course—means that every moment in which the past's truth is missed renders the latter more inaccessible. The further it continues to recede into the past, the more difficult it is for the historian to retrieve historical truth, to bring it back into present from the always moving, constantly receding present-past in which it is lodged. Historicism interprets the impossibility of historical truth as the possibility of a dislocation between the past that is historicized and the present time of the historian. Keller's phrase yields an account of historicism's understanding of the modality of historical truth as a

possibility that nonetheless stands in relation to an *impossibility*, which is construed as the historian's possible failure to grasp the truth of history. Furthermore, this phrase postulates an interpretation of the difference between these two modes—possibility and impossibility—as a *real* or *concrete* separation. This allows for a distinction between the retrieval of the past as the actualization of the possibility of historical truth, from the failure to do so, which consigns historical truth to *its* impossibility. The *reality* of this difference relies on time; more specifically, on an interpretation of historical truth's temporality that leaves open the door for the possibility of a temporal disjunction or *discontinuity* between the historian's present and the past's truth.

I have dwelled on this moment in *Über den Begriff der Geschichte* because I am interested in taking seriously Benjamin's claim in his letter to Horkheimer concerning the difficulties implicit in any attempt to separate a non-historicist interpretation of historical concepts from their pervasive historicist determination. My reading of Keller's phrase confirms Benjamin's diagnosis about historicism's survival. Neither is historicism oblivious to the historian's possible *failure* to retrieve the truth, nor does historicism fail to think of a possible *discontinuity* between the historian's present and the time of truth. For this reason, to launch a critique of historicism requires something more than merely conceptualizing historical time as discontinuous, and something else than thinking the *mode* of history in terms of a traditional concept of contingency. Discontinuity and contingency by themselves would not suffice to finally draw a limit on historicism's pervasive afterlife and thus displace its persistence within the theory of history.

And yet, Benjamin's claim in thesis five is precisely that Keller's illustration of the

historicist interpretation of historical truth points to the exact place where a non-historicist, messianic historical materialism could finally part ways with positivism. How is this so? The fifth thesis of *Über den Begriff der Geschichte* allow us not only to measure the proximity between Benjamin's historical materialism and historicism, but also to see how Benjamin struggles against this proximity in an effort to enact an internal critique of historicism. The underlying complicity between these two conceptions of history might explain why Benjamin uses a language that closely resembles Keller's in order to distance his own concept of history from that of historical positivism. Consider the fact that thesis five opens with the following statement: "The true image of the past *flits* by" ("*Das wahre Bild der Vergangenheit* huscht *vorbei*"). At first sight, it would seem as if this phrase amounts to a slightly modified repetition of Keller's notion of historical truth as something that could run away from the historian. But, in fact, Benjamin's claim is the opposite: the historian can hold onto the past only if the past is taken as an "image" that "flits by." The image is the *true* historical articulation of the past, the past's true mode of presentation, precisely because it passes by the historian, because the historian only grasps it fleeting transience. Moreover, Benjamin's argument regarding the movement that belongs to the image should not be read as suggesting that he takes the image as something that moves *in* space-time. Such an interpretation would then open the door to an understanding of the image's flitting-by as the spatio-temporal discontinuity that grounds historicism's understanding of history's impossibility *as* the historian's possible failure to grasp the image. Instead, I take Benjamin as arguing here for a more complicated state of affairs, namely, for a view that: a. takes *disappearance* as something that belongs to the image-structure of the past; and b.

reinterprets the image's movement as something that cannot be understood in strict spatio-temporal terms as an extended motion. Only if the past is grasped as something that appears *in* disappearance can the past be read and known in a way that Benjamin would qualify as truly *historical*.

Already from this point we can see a slight, albeit significant, shift in emphasis between historicism and Benjamin's position. Historicism understands truth's flight or running away as the possibility of history's impossibility, i.e., as the source of the historian's possible failure to seize hold of the past's truth. For Benjamin, the image's fleeting subtraction from the historian's intuitive power points instead to an *aporia* at the heart of the past's true historical articulation. The past cannot be conceived of as something that can be recuperated and, at the same time, be true since the genuine way of relating to the past in its truth implies grasping it in its *passing*, in its movement of sheer transience. For this reason, Benjamin characterizes the past *as* irretrievable or irrecoverable. The singularity of the past consists in the legible imparting of its disappearance to the historian's now. To say that the past's flitting by—a movement that cannot be quantitatively measured and that, instead, has the character of a cut or a *punctum*—belongs to the structure of the past's true form *as* an image, implies that the past's *disappearance* constitutes a moment, if not *the* moment, of the past's historical legibility and knowability. The past must be paradoxically grasped *from* the moment of its irrecuperability if it is to be taken as an image at all. Irretrievability belongs so much to the past's "grasp-ability" that the mode of holding the past that might correspond to its true image-like structure must be thought of as a holding onto the past *as* something that is *gone*. It is only from the place of its radical *annihilation*, which also marks the moment

of the past's completion, that the latter appears as an image, i.e., as the objective correlate of what Benjamin in *Das Passagen-Werk* calls "the time of truth" ("*der Zeit der Wahrheit*").

If historicism understands the knowability of history as a possibility that may always turn out to be impossible, Benjamin understand *impossibility* as marking every single moment of the historical knowability. Benjamin's critique of historicism interrupts the realist ergontology that determines the modality of historical knowledge in relation to the historian's *concrete* success or failure to grasp the past, pointing to a more intimate relation between the possibility—i.e., the holding onto the past's image—and the impossibility—i.e., the irretrievable disappearance—of historical knowledge. The second sentence in thesis five explicates the image's fleeting-by "movement" in a way that intensifies the aporetic "belonging together" within the past's image-structure of its knowability and its disappearance: "The past is to be held only as an image that flashes up *just now onto never-again-to-be-seen* in the moment of its knowability" ("*Nur als Bild, das* auf Nimmerwiedersehen *im Augenblick seiner Erkennbarkeit* eben *aufblitzt, ist die Vergangenheit festzuhalten*" Benjamin 95). I italicize the phrases "onto never-again-to-be-seen" and "just now" to bring the reader's attention to these two formulations, which I offer as very provisional and insufficient attempts to read these two almost untranslatable moments in Benjamin's theoretical proposal. How should we read "*auf Nimmerwiedersehen*," and how should we hear the "*eben*" that qualifies the image's flashing up in the moment of danger?

The English translation of this passage in the *Selected Writings* effaces Benjamin's aporetic understanding of the relation between the knowability and the disappearance of the image. This effacement is primarily enacted through the introduction of the conjunction

"and," which is nowhere to be found in the German original: "The past can be seized only as an image that flashes up at the moment of its recognizability, *and* is never seen again" (Benjamin 390, emphases mine). The translation establishes a temporal disjunction that separates the moment in which the image can be known from the moment in which it disappears. As such, this rendering of this passage interprets Benjamin in a historicist vein, precisely what Benjamin is trying to displace. The translation construes the image as something that is not to be seen ever again only *after* it has been re-cognized. The moment of knowledge would constitute the moment in which the past is brought to a close and can be removed from time. On this account, whenever an image flashes up before the historian, the time would have come for the historian to separate the past from passing-away, for the "*Vergangenheit*" to cease to exist in its "*vergehen,*" in its process of infinite decay, and become *das Gewesene*—the past as something that *has passed*, a fulfilled ruin that has been removed from its enduring ruination.

The English translation in question also effaces the modifier, "*eben*," which Benjamin invokes in order to qualify the flashing up that belongs to the image. The German "eben," like the English "even," belongs broadly speaking to a spatial register. It is often invoked in a topological, a topographical, or a morphological sense as designating a surface's smoothness, a landscape's plainness, or a figure's linearity. The word "eben" in German is also used in a more temporal sense, as a modifier that indicates that an occasion, an event, or a happening has taken place at a precise moment. This latter use also has a correlate in the English formulations, "even now" or "just now." If read as a time-adverb modifying the image's flashing up, Benjamin's use of "eben" would then direct our attention to the intensive

character of this event. The flashing up of the image is not a progressive, extended movement, but rather it is only something that occurs in a moment. Moreover, the word "eben" could also be read as establishing an intimate connection between the two sides that come together in this flash: disappearance and knowability.

The interpretation of the image's disappearance as something that can only *come after* the historian seizes it reasserts succession as the temporal schema that determines the relation between knowability and its disappearance. This translation construes these two moments not only as logical contradictories, but also as mutually repulsive forces. The moment of knowability and the image's disappearance would be opposed in such a way that they cannot happen simultaneously. For this reason, the belonging together of these two moments in the image must be thought of as the result of a temporal process, and not as a disjunction that marks the entire structure and movement of the image. If we take the published English translation at its word, then Benjamin understands true historical reading as a process that requires that an image of the past moves *out of* its non-appearance and *enters* into the moment of its knowability *without* disappearing. The goal animating this successive movement would be the reconciliation of these logico-existential contradictories, their incorporation as moments in a process ruled by the image's *real* grasp-ability. For the sake of its legibility and knowability, the image must leave behind its irretrievability, its "never-again-to-be-seen," and enter *into* the moment in which it appears as something that can be known. The image of the past that flashes up would be an image that *comes from* its "never-again-to-be-seen," *into* the "moment of its knowability."

This interpretation, however, is misguided. Benjamin's messianic history may indeed

posit a certain fulfillability—the sheer possibility of completion—as a minimal condition of thinking historical time. Furthermore, the index of the image does imply that historical events only become as such once they are read. And yet, the moment of reading itself, for Benjamin, remains the site of a dangerous *aporia*. The English translation of this passage effaces the *danger* that marks historical truth as the disjunctive coming-together of knowability and disappearance—of knowability *in* disappearance—which is precisely the aspect of history that historicism cannot digest. The reduction of the irreducible danger that pervades historical knowledge emerges with clarity when we remark that the published English translation renders the phrase "*auf Nimmerwiedersehen*" as "and is never seen again." A more literal translation would be, "Onto never-again-to-be-seen." The German phrase is a colloquial expression that could be translated by the English idiom: "good riddance." "*Auf Nimmerwiedersehen*" is the negative form of another everyday German idiom, "*auf Wiedersehen*," and which could be translated into English as "see you again."[39] A translation that would reproduce the idiomatic charge of this sentence in English would thus yield the following reading: "The past is to be held only as an image that flashes up good riddance in the moment of its knowability." The image is such that the historian must greet it by *parting* from it. Not only does the historian encounter the image *as* unrepeatable; in the very moment of encounter, the historian greets the image's *unrepeatability*, grasping it from the point in which it will no longer have been. To conceive of the past in relation to historical truth involves for Benjamin the cognition of the past as an image that primarily offers to read the event of its irrecuperability, its subtraction from a notion of time in which temporal moments are essentially retrievable by consciousness.

[39] I am very grateful to Arvi-Anti Särkelä for pointing this out to me in conversation.

What would it mean to understand the image as flashing up "good riddance," as appearing precisely by "uttering" an ab-solute "goodbye?" Implicit in the structure of the image is a certain nothing—an almost *nihil*—as the condition of its singularity and irretrievability. The past *is* passing, the impossibility of its retrieval in the present pervades the truth of the past. The past *cannot* be, in the sense of being in the present *as* a present-past. The past's non-negative annihilation, its almost nothing, its ephemerality and transience belong so much to the structure of historical truth that only when the past is taken as an image that takes leave of the historian's intentional horizon can it be grasped, held, preserved, known, or read. For Benjamin, the *entire* structure of historical knowledge is therefore marked by the *danger* of irretrievability and incompletion. Danger is not a preamble to historical knowledge, but rather historical knowledge happens *in* danger and as an endangered knowledge of an equally endangered past.

Towards the end of his essay, "Jetzt: Walter Benjamin zur historicher Zeit" ("Now: Walter Benjamin on Historical Time"), Werner Hamacher provides a powerful formulation of the centrality that "danger" occupies as a motif in Benjamin's thinking of history:

> Wenn Erinnerung nur im Augenblick der Gefahr aufblitzt, dann in der Gefahr, *auf Nimmerwiedersehen* zu verschwinden. Daß die Gefahr der Index der Einmaligkeit, Unwillkürlichkeit und Echtheit der Erinnerung ist und damit zugleich Index des möglichen Mißlingens von Erinnerung und Geschichte, macht es aber unmöglich, sie als bloß äußerliche Drohung zu verstehen. Sie gehört im Gegenteil so sehr in die innerste Struktur historischer Erkenntnis, daß diese in jedem einzelnen Fall nicht nur

> Erkenntnis *in* der Gefahr ist, sondern Erkenntnis *aus* der Gefahr sein muß. Wer sich erinnert, erinnert sich in der Gefahr, sich nicht zu erinnern, von einer Vergangenheit beansprucht zu werden, das Versäumte und nach Vervollständigung Verlangende abermals zu versäumen und mit den Ansprüchen der Vergangenheit ihre geschichtlichen Möglichkeiten und damit Geschichte überhaupt zu verfehlen. (Hamacher 176-177)
> (If remembering only flashes up in a moment of danger, it is the danger of disappearing 'never to be seen again'. If danger is the index of uniqueness, involuntariness and authenticity of remembering, and thus also an index of the possible failure of remembering and history, then danger cannot be understood as being a mere external threat. On the contrary, danger belongs to the innermost structure of historical cognition to such a degree that it is, in each singular case, not merely cognition *in* the danger but also cognition *out of* that danger. Whoever remembers, remembers at the risk of not remembering, of not being demanded by a past, at the risk of missing the missed and that which demands completion all over again, and at the risk of missing, together with the claims of the past, their historical possibilities and thus history in general.)[40]

For Hamacher, Benjamin's concept of history not only situates historical knowledge *in* the moment of danger, but also construes the former as irrupting *out of* the peril of history's impossibility. Impossibility constitutes the unstable, transient, ruined *basis* for historical knowledge; not something that affects history form the outside with the threat of its

[40] Translated by N. Rosenthal, published in Benjamin (2005) 65.

impossibility, but rather its internal condition. And yet, the recognition of the intrinsic character of danger for history does not authorize grasping this danger as history's negativity. Historical knowledge does not relate to historical danger as *its* impossibility, as an impossibility that has already been domesticated and transformed into a possibility. The movement through which historical knowledge irrupts *out of* danger does not leave danger behind but rather intensifies the perilousness of historical legibility.

Historical reading is therefore not a process that unfolds as a modification of the historian's *consciousness*. Only by lingering in the moment of danger are historical readers singularized. Reading is an impossible experience that deprives historians of the power of *possibility* that characterizes the structure of transcendental consciousness. The historicity of danger configures history *otherwise* by placing the accent on the irreducibly historical force of the unforeseen, of that which no historical reader can anticipate or retain. As such, danger lays bare the limits of a notion of experience grounded on the irreducibility of first-person accounts as the schema of all valid experience. Rather than comprehending past events through historical ideas in order to establish their *historical significance* in relation to their *totalizing* context, the dangerous historians must first of all read the text of the past primarily in search of the very possibility of their own reading, which is not given as a possibility prior to the moment of reading and which remains dangerously uncertain even after reading has taken place. The danger of reading registers the historical weight that traverses what Benjamin would regard as the truly historical relation to the past: the now relates to the past historically because its own identity and stability as a now remains *at stake* as it relates to the past. Moreover, the relation that emerges in historical reading is deeply asymmetrical. In a

way, the textual traces of "what has been" (*das Gewesene*) have already configured the place of their reading and thus it is the past that calls upon a reader to voice its historical claims. In the time-space of *reading danger*, historical texts become the site for encounters—what Benjamin calls a "constellation"—in which both the reader and the text that is read enter into a relation that expels them from their so-called "historical" context. It is *in* this encounter and *as* this encounter itself that a non-historicist concept of historical *truth* emerges that breaks away with the traditional framework of *adequatio*—including its phenomenological radicalization, grounded on the principle of principles that states that all evidence is constituted *by* transcendental subjectivity in its givenness *to* consciousness.[41] Historical truth is rather the mark of *danger*; its emergence attests to the historicity of the relation through which the reader becomes inextricably entangled with the historical text. To *know* history in its dangerous truth thus requires being touched by a "past" that eschews the form of the present and the self-presence of consciousness: a past that appears in a *now* that cannot be retrieved or repeated. The concept of historical danger configures historical time as a structurally open medium for the legible approach of *dangerous* and *endangered* possibilities, that is, for the *chance* of encountering possibilities that *may* always be *other* than themselves.[42] Danger colors the event of the im-possible in which the very idea of history

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[41] See § 24 in Husserl (1976).

[42] To begin to approach what may be at stake in substituting the term "chance" for "possibility," we would do well to cite the following brief, almost fleeting, moment in the prologue to *Feu la cendre* (*Cinders*): "Vint un jour la possibilité, *il faut dire la chance* de cette gramophonie" (Derrida 9) ("One day, the possibility, I must say the chance of this gramophony arrived"). What are the sense and the origin of the injunction that compels Derrida to substitute possibility for chance? Moreover, this substitution is itself twofold: on the one hand, it marks, makes explicit, exposes the law that commands this substitution. On the other hand, by exposing the law that commands the substitution it suspends not only this very substitution, but also its law. For the use of the French "il faut" construction in

ceases to designate the transformation of contingency into possibility, opening up to the *chance* of undeterminable *trans*-figurations. In this way, doing history may become once more a hyper-political and a hyper-ethical experience.

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such a sentence can also always imply that what must be done has not been done yet and may never be doable in the first place.

CODA

Another History, Another Historicity

> History is demanding.
> It is difficult, it makes demands. Saying that it 'makes demands' implies that history can be positioned as the sender, the *destinateur*, of prescriptive sentences, sentences the addressee and the referent of which can vary.
> History is also demanded.
> Here history is no longer the sender of prescriptions, but their referent: this time sender and addressee are variable. A third possibility would make of history the addressee of a demand, that, for example, it deliver up its meaning or its secrets, leaving sender and referent unspecified.
> […]
> Further, if the simplicity or propriety of the name 'history' were to be questioned, in other words if it were to be positioned as addressee and referent of a *new* demand (a demand as to its meaning in these pragmatic scenes), and if it were to be shown that neither that addressee nor that referent were stable, but divided (at least into the standard ambiguity according to which 'history' names both a specific discourse and the referent of that discourse); and if then the word were itself 'historicized' and the specificity of that 'specific' discourse were shown to be problematic (with respect to the division between 'truth' and 'fiction,' for example), then the reappropriation of these divisions to each occurrence of the word 'history' in all the possible permutations of the pragmatic scene would generate a proliferation of possibilities, each of which would in some sense inhabit all the others, and all further sentences, such as these, which attempted to position as their referent one or more of the pragmatic possibilities thus generated.

Geoffrey Bennington, "Demanding History"[1]

[1] See Bennington (1994) 61-62, emphases mine.

Earlier this year, a collective of literary scholars working in the field of Victorian studies published the "Manifesto of the V21 Collective: Ten Theses." Part Benjaminian, part Lutheran, the "Ten Theses" of the Victorian Studies for the Twenty-First Century Collective bemoan the hegemony of historical methodologies in the sub-field of Victorian Studies. Not surprisingly, the main target of the Collective's critique is *historicism*:

> 1. Victorian Studies has fallen prey to *positivist historicism*: a mode of inquiry that aims to do little more than exhaustively describe, preserve, and display the past. Among its symptoms are a fetishization of the archival; an aspiration to definitively map the DNA of the period; an attempt to reconstruct the past *wie es eigentlich gewesen*; an endless accumulation of mere information. At its worst, positivist historicism devolves into show-and-tell epistemologies and bland antiquarianism. Its primary affective mode is the amused chuckle. Its primary institutional mode is the instrumentalist evisceration of humanistic ways of knowing (V21 Collective).

From its opening thetic salvo, the manifesto of the V21 Collective reiterates some of the main features of Walter Benjamin's critique of historicism, such as the rejection of Leopold von Ranke's historicist motto and or identification of historicism with the positivism of instrumentalist reason, whose scientist worldview transforms history from a form of remembrance and commemoration to an exclusively scientific pursuit.[2] The traces of a certain Benjaminian approach to history become even stronger as soon as the tenor of the manifesto shifts from critique to construction. According to the members of the V21 Collective, the displacement of historicism should lead to "a new openness to *presentism*: an

[2] See Benjamin (2010) 95 and (1982) N8a,4 590.

awareness that our interest in the period is motivated by certain features of our own moment" (V21 Collective). This *presentism* should be grafted unto what the authors designate as a theoretical formalism, which would

> trade such riskless *factism* for bold arguments and synthetic thinking, arguments that engage with and challenge multi-field and multi-disciplinary conversations. This is already happening; it must happen more. Such projects will be open to formalisms that are not primarily beholden to historical frames. They will use evidence reflexively. They will *theorize*. (V21 Collective, emphases mine)

Militantly arguing against the predominance of historicism in the field of Victorian Studies, the V21 Collective offers a *theoretical* counter-proposal that would lead to the reconfiguration of the sub-discipline in terms that would not necessarily be *historical*. As such, this manifesto constitutes perhaps the most recent iteration of the debate between literary theorists and literary historians concerning the place of historical understanding in the study of culture—a debate that I analyzed extensively in the first chapter of this dissertation. I have already suggested that the terms in which this debate has been traditionally posed have prevented scholars from shedding light on the relation between poetics, historiography and historicism, let alone coming to terms with the problem of historicism. To ask the *question* of historicism, to interrogate its claims to determine the entire field of the historical, in fact requires setting aside the antagonistic formulation of this problem in terms of the history/theory divide. In this respect, the manifesto equivocates: although its authors argue that "framing 'theory' as a monolithic other is intellectually lazy

and allows positivist historicism to become ever-more habitual and unreflective" (V21 Collective), their own proposal reaffirms this lazy opposition by taking not only historicism but history itself as the self-evident *other* of theoretical, i.e., non-historical, formalisms. In this respect, the authors of the manifesto reiterate the theory/history divide that continues to frame mainstream scholarly debates within the North American academy concerning the role of history in literary and cultural studies since the advent of "theory" in the early 1970s.

If we read the "Manifesto of the V21 Collective: Ten Theses" in terms of the pragmatic scenario that Geoffrey Bennington outlines in the opening paragraphs of "Demanding History," then these "Ten Theses" appear in their performative light as a series of attempts to place a theoretical "demand" upon history. And yet, theory here does not interrogate history in order to *know* it; the theory in whose name these critics write only demands the interruption of history's uninterrupted hegemony within Victorian studies, and presumably in literary and cultural studies more generally. Not unlike the Nietzsche of the second untimely meditation on history, the authors of the "Ten Theses" utter these thetic statements from a position of knowledge: they *already know* what *is* historicism and what constitutes "historical frames" of knowledge. Their sole objective is to liberate theory's *presentism* from the dead weight of historicism and its "factist" approach to the past.

Failing to interrogate history as well as historicism, the manifesto's call for an end to the historicist hegemony within Victorian studies reasserts inadvertently some of historicism's constitutive features, from the positive valorization of "formalism" to the privileging of the critic's present as the temporal instance that determines the historical significance of the past. The fact that the authors of this manifesto propose the notions of

formalism and presentism as alternatives to historicism indicates the extent to which historicism continues to be taken for granted even by some of its fiercest opponents. After engaging with some of the foundational figures of historicism in the second chapter of this dissertation, I showed that historicism is to be seen as: a. an *eidetics* of history that privileges the historian's *present* as the time that constitutes historical time; and b. as an *ergontological secularization* of a substantialist theology that transposes the divine power to reduce infinity to the historian's *activity*—above all, in its narration or representational faculties. Historicism's *eidetics* is also a narratological formalism: every instantiation of a historical idea, every concretization of the *eidos* "history," takes the form of the "form" or the *morphē* of historical matter, whose epistemic e*labor*ation unfolds by means of narrative. Historical ideas do not have historical *reality* except through their actualization within a narrative that supposedly reduces the infinity of historical time by establishing the limits in relation to which historical facts can be serialized and thus acquire an always finite—i.e., *totalized*—meaning. Historical ideas account for historicism's understanding of the very *possibility* of historical knowledge and, as such, their positivity cannot be confused with the positivity of the historical *facts*, whose *knowability* these ideas enable only insofar as they transcend the totality of historico-empirical facts. Historicism is not only a historical *positivism*—and, by extension a form of historical empiricism—but also a historical *formalism*: historicism is best understood as the first theoretical doctrine of historical being, as the first attempt to account for the *possibility* of history *tout court* by way of the possibility of a *historical a priori*.

Conversely, although historicism often takes the form of a narrow engagement with the past to the detriment of the present, it remains the case that historicism posits the

historian's subjectivity—its ego, consciousness, or even its language—as the site of history's knowability. Historical ideas are both *historical* and *eidetic* objects because they only *exist* in their givenness to a consciousness: they are *in* history only insofar as they *exist* only for a human consciousness, which is not submitted unconditionally to the axiom of change that conditions the factic existence of all other historical realities. If consciousness is both historical and unhistorical, if the historian's own language and representational capabilities enjoy a certain *autonomy* vis-à-vis the past that is historicized,[3] this autonomy is located in the transcendence of the historian's present with regards to historical time. As such, the historical idea is ontologically grafted unto the historian's *present*. Historicism secures the possibility of historical knowledge by investing the historian's subjectivity with the metaphysical value of *presence*: the historian's time, language, and representations are the only dimensions that can *gather* the past since only the historian's *lived present* provides the medium for the concrete realization of the non-real historical *eidos*, whose task is to totalize the in-finity of historical time. Frank Ankersmit's claim that the historicist historian acts in the mode of an *imitatio dei* by breathing life back into the dead past lays bare the extent to which historicism amounts to a secularized theology of history. Historicism transfers god's powers to the historian: if god is capable of totalizing the infinity of time absolutely, the historian is capable of *relatively* unifying the dispersion of history *in the present*.

By rushing to draw a limit around historicism, the authors of the V21 Collective Manifesto turn their backs on the historicism that continues to inform their own supposedly anti-historicist approach to their field of study, ignoring the fact that *theoretical formalism* and *presentism* constitute two fundamental aspects of the structure of historicism.

[3] See Ankersmit (2012) 12-14.

Demanding that historicism be put to an *end*, the authors of this manifesto would have forgotten to interrogate its *closure*, remaining deeply entrenched within the limits of a historicism that they assume to have already left behind *in* theory. The situation of this manifesto recalls Benjamin's claim in a letter to Max Horkheimer, where Benjamin characterizes his theses on the concept of history as an attempt to draw a line around "the survival of positivism, which, in my opinion, profoundly demarcates even those concepts of History that, in themselves, are the closest and the most familiar to us" ("*les survivances du positivisme qui, à mon avis, démarquent si profondément même ceux des concepts d'Histoire qui, en eux-mêmes, nous sont les plus proches et les plus familiers*" Benjamin 1181).

Is it possible to *criticize* historicism, to establish a decisive separation between a historicist and a non-historicist approach to the task of the historian? Although I share the V21 Collective's concern regarding historicism's hegemony within literary and cultural studies, I believe that in order to challenge historicism we must submit the ontologico-historical presuppositions that determined historicism's theoretical constitution and contributed to its institutional success to a more radical interrogation. Indeed, the first three chapters of this dissertation made precisely the opposite gesture to that of the V21 Collective manifesto: rather than demanding historicism's *end* on the basis of a superficial understanding of its historicity, I sought to interrogate what I have called *the closure of historicism* by examining some of *sites* in which its fundamental concepts were established. Aristotle's distinction between poetic composition and historiography in the *Poetics* provided the ontologico-historical backdrop for retracing a non-historicist history of historicism, insofar as Aristotle's text establishes the conditions for both the possibility and the

impossibility of historicism.[4] By depriving historical events of the teleologiz*ability* that enables a work of poetry to constitute itself as a *totality* of *necessary possibilities* that imitate one single *action*, Aristotle determines historiography as a *praxis* that is just as contingent and aleatory as the *impossible realities* that it imitates, which are impossible *not* because they could not *actually have happened*, but rather because their happening exceeds the purview of any *form*. Historicism comes to its own through the dissolution of the notion of history that informs Aristotle's metaphysics. But the dissolution of the Aristotelian model, as my reading of Giambattista Vico's *Scienza Nuova* clarified, was achieved with the help of Aristotle's own conceptual tools: historicism is Aristotelian in spirit in spite of going against the *letter* of Aristotle's actual text. Historicism's idea of history turns historical narratives into the site for the presentation of historical realities that have already yielded to the power of an *ideal form*. Historicism's idea of history is thus in itself an *eidetic* notion of history; the possibility of representing the past as it essentially happened relies on the trans*formation* of the historical as capable of idealization. Under the *aegis* of historicism, contingency becomes change and is erected into a historical *axiom*; accidentality loses the alterity of its interruptive force and enters into the structure of historicist *knowability* as the mark of the singularity of historical individualities, which the historian can nonetheless subsume under the historical idea; historical time itself ceases to marked by a *amorphous* infinity and becomes totalizable.

With the advent of historicism, history itself ceased to be *impossible*, becoming another site for the expansion of what Werner Hamacher has called "ergontology,"[5] a decisive inflection of Western metaphysics that reasserts the Aristotelian determination of

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[4] See Aristotle (2006) 31-32
[5] See Hamacher (2012) 165

actuality as the *telos* of the potential, while transforming actuality itself into a *real* principle of *effectivity*. Given historicism's ergontological elaboration of the historical field, one may be tempted to turn to what we may call a "*dunami*tological" approach to history—i.e., a history that would not be determined by the *energy of actuality* but rather by the *power of possibility*—as the only possible grounds for a radical critique of historicism. Indeed, the very task of thinking *another* possibility for history would seem to require privileging the modal categories of possibility and potentiality over actuality, reality, and effectivity.

And yet, the previous three chapters have shown that substituting actuality for possibility is not enough to counter the historicist closure of the historical field. Already in the first chapter, I showed that an Aristotelian notion of "necessary possibility," which imagines itself to be deprived of any relation to contingency, accidentality, and impossibility, continues to inform the work of contemporary literary theorists and historians who claim to either be against historicism or to be on the side of historical contingency, such as Eric Hayot and Stephen Greenblatt, respectively. This phenomenon is not exclusive to literary historians. Whenever such a concept of the possible comes back to the surface, the *closure of historicism* is reenacted at an even more profound ontological level. If historicism achieves itself through the recuperation of the historical for the project of presenting the primacy of *action* as the principle of historical change, this ergontological determination of history is nonetheless enabled by the prior determination of the possibility of historicism as a form of *ipseity* or a possible-possibility—i.e., a possibility that is determined by its power over itself, by its capacity to determine its own modal status as a possibility.

A few months before the publication of V21 Collective manifesto, professional historians David Armitage and Jo Guldi published *The History Manifesto* with the goal of confronting what they see as a historical "crisis" regarding the role of history in contemporary society. As we will see, *The History Manifesto* vividly reenacts the closure of historicism by excluding contingency from the domain of the possibility of history. As expected from a book with the words "the" and "manifesto" in the title, the book opens by making an explicit reference to Marx's and Engels's classic:

> A spectre is haunting our time: the spectre of the short term. We live in a moment of accelerating crisis that is characterized by the shortage of long-term thinking. Even as rising sea-levels threaten low-lying communities and coastal regions, the world's cities stockpile waste, and human actions poison the oceans, earth, and groundwater for future generations. We face rising economic inequality within nations even as inequalities between countries abate while international hierarchies revert to conditions not seen since the late eighteenth century, when China last dominated the global economy. Where, we might ask, is safety, where is freedom? What place will our children call home? There is no public office of the long term that you can call for answers about who, if anyone, is preparing to respond to these epochal changes (Guldi and Armitage 1).

One does not have to be a literary scholar to figure out how the story of crisis that *The History Manifesto* narrates will end:

> (When was the last time a historian was seconded to Downing Street or to the White House from their academic post, let alone consulted for the World Bank or advised the UN Secretary-General?) It may be little wonder, then, that we have a crisis of global governance, that we are all at the mercy of unregulated financial markets, and that anthropogenic climate change threatens our political stability and the survival of species. To put these challenges in perspective, and to combat the short-termism of our time, we urgently need the wide-angle, long-range views only historians can provide. Historians of the word, unite! There is a world to win—before it's too late. (Guldi and Armitage 125).

At the level of theme and form, *The History Manifesto* presents a rather compact, even a closed narrative. Indeed, the overarching argument of Guldi and Armitage is already contained in the book's opening and closing rewriting of *The Communist Manifesto*. Not unlike Marx's proletarian, the guild of professional historians—supposedly long deprived of any political power—must find a way of reestablishing the "public office of the long term" (Guldi and Armitage 1) if the world is to be saved from the impending catastrophes of growing inequality and ecological devastation. Historians would be the only scholars capable of supplying governments with the necessary expertise to curtail the longitudinal crises that the planet faces, provided that they harness the epistemological prowess of "big data" and return to history's longstanding vocation as the discipline that focuses on "long term" processes of change and transformation. *The History Manifesto* tells the story of a double historical crisis: a crisis of the academic discipline known as "history" and a global crisis

caused to a large extent by the disciplinary crisis that the authors seek to counter. These two-fold crises have their origin in what the authors call "short-termism," a cultural tendency that is not reducible to the historical disciplines, but which has resulted in a transformation, we could even say a disfiguration, of history's own self-image. According to Guldi and Armitage, "short-termism" in the field of history owes its origin, among other factors, to the emergence and predominance of "micro-history" within the field—a shift spurred by the impact upon historical research of theories of post-modernity, "feminism," the civil rights movement, postcolonialism, and the political radicalism that marked the 60s and 70s. It is only with the advent of "short-termism" that we witness "the retreat of historians from the public sphere" (Guldi and Armitage 11) and, by extension, the increasing incapacity of politicians to deal with the crises that mark life in an epoch of rising economic inequality and climate change.

Guldi and Armitage not only seek political power for their profession; they understand history itself as intrinsically determined by the *power* of power itself: "The sword of history has two edges, one that cuts open new possibilities in the future, and one that cuts through the noise, contradictions, and lies of the past" (Guldi and Armitage 13). The metaphor of the sword of history emblematizes the sovereignty of history, the fact that history wins on both sides, cutting through accidents and opening possibilities in the same blow. The god of this historical theology would be Janus, who looks forward and backwards *at the same time*, setting up the record of the past *straight* while opening up "new possibilities in the future." The possibilities that history inaugurates are not crooked, bent, or queer; they are rather determined in the intrinsic straightness of their futurity by the historian's clarification of the past. If history opens possibilities, this is so because history itself is not

only possible *in itself*, but also capable of establishing a definitive scission, a decisive cut, between its own time—a present that remains invulnerable in its own presence while submitting the past and the future to the violence of its trans*formative* agency.

That historians seeking political power and public prestige might commend themselves to the god of beginnings and ends in order to ensure the power of their practice is not that extraordinary. What is perhaps more surprising is the fact that this gesture recurs even in the work of historians whose fields are as far-removed as imaginable from any position of political power or policy-making. Consider the following passage from Jonas Grethlein's *Experience and Teleology in Ancient Historiography*:

> While we are exposed to the vagaries of the future in our lives, the past offers a closed realm. Hermeneutics reminds us that there is no definitive narrative of the past, that different angles are possible and that the further processing of time will continue to open new ones, but, within the retrospect of a single narrative, all the openness and insecurity that make life just as troublesome as exciting can be banned. The look back permits us to master the contingencies to which we are subject in life, to replace vulnerability with sovereignty. Teleology can thus serve as a means of coping with temporality (Grethlein 5).

The irony at work in this passage seems to extend beyond the control of Grethlein's more explicit intention. Indeed, it is telling that Grethlein's exploration of historiography in Ancient Greece, while informed by the most recent trends in the phenomenology of history and intellectual history, stands in the service of an idea of history that implies the *mastery of contingency*. While admitting the phenomenological-hermeneutical argument concerning the

open-ended nature of historical narratives, he asserts an untenable belief in the possibility of isolating a *single* narrative, whose discrete limits enable the historian to ban "insecurity" from history. In this rather anti-Nietzschean moment, Grethlein brings historicism to a *close*; the backward glance of history becomes determined as a praxis that enables vulnerability to be substituted by sovereignty, depriving life of its vivacity through the purgation of the uncertain, in-finite, and *dangerous* openness that characterizes temporality.

Is it possible to think of *another* history that would not constitute itself by exorcising vulnerability, contingency, and impossibility from the historical? As the two examples mentioned above suggest, the liberation of history from its historicist determination will not be merely achieved through the displacement of history's positivist empiricism, the suspension of its eidetic formalism, or even through the substitution of actuality for possibility as the modal determination of history. Each of these measures, regardless of how necessary or salutary they may be in themselves or at any concrete juncture, may always provide new conditions for the reassertion of *ipseity* as the *arkhē* and/or the *telos* of history. Not only does ipseity—*as* a name for the principle that unifies power, possibility, self-sameness, and selfhood—constitute itself as sovereign, it also achieves this self-constitution of itself in its innermost possibility. For this reason, the movement in which ipseity comes to be itself by securing the possibility of *its own self* cannot be conceived of by analogy with any *realist* ontology that posits a transitive "movement" in order to account for the passage from the possibility of something to its actualization. Ipseity becomes *actual* only in its pure *possibility-to-be-itself-for-itself*. The sovereign energy of ipseity coincides fully with ipseity's *power* to master *itself* by possibilitizing *its* (own) *self*.

Moreover, the fact that possibility may have already determined itself *as* a *possible*-possibility or in accordance to the *form* of *ipseity*, touches upon the very status of the question concerning the possibility of *another* history. Insofar as this question interrogates history regarding *its* possibility, it always runs the *danger* of reiterating the historicist determination of the historical as another domain in which the sovereignty of ipseity can affirm itself. On the one hand, answering the question of the possibility of *another* history affirmatively could always amount to the reaffirmation of the *possibility* of a *pure* non-historicist history. But such a history would only be capable of giving itself to itself in the clarity of its non-historicist essence by sustaining itself in a relation to *its own* (non-historicist) *self* before, during, and after entering into any other relation to any mode of history, including the historicism from which it would have *successfully* departed. However, such a felicitous understanding of the possibility of a non-historicist history would ultimately reassert historicism *otherwise*, without ever opening up history to a history and a historicity *otherwise* than historicism. For even a trans*formed* history—perhaps a post-historicist history—would remain in a surreptitious continuity with historicism as long as it understands itself *as* possible, and as long as it comprehends *its* possibility *as* a possible-possibility that has been purged from any relation to impossibility precisely by having become the site in which a non-historicist history affirms *itself*. On the other hand, a negative answer to this question could always be understood as an acknowledgment of the uncriticizability of historicism: as if the historicist determination of history had to be left intact; as if we were forced to admit that historicism is the only way in which history can be written, thought, and experienced. In both cases, the outcome would be an intensification of

the *closure of historicism*. We are perhaps now in a better position to understand why Benjamin was so concerned about the surreptitious way in which historicism continues to survive even after having been submitted to critique. For the critique of historicism may always result in a win-win situation for historicism, which would either acquire even the power of reasserting itself *beyond* its closure or which would continue to determine the historical from *within* its closed domain.

That said, the very persistence of this *danger*—i.e., the danger of reaffirming historicism while retracing its limits—provides a way of addressing this double bind. The fact that historicism may always reassert itself through the determination of history as a *pure* possibility that is devoid of any alterity points to the need to interrogate the history of possibility and the possibility of history *together*. The question of whether another history and another historicity are possible also demands thinking another possibility—not possibility *otherwise*, but an *otherwise* than the possible-possible or ipseity. For this reason, I would argue that a theory of history that seeks to displace historicism must avoid approaching the notion of possibility as a mere categorial or logical modification of the structure of historical knowledge. Instead, the task of thinking history and possibility otherwise requires not only that we retrace the *closure of possibility*, but also that we understand how the *closure of historicism* is already prefigured, as it were, in the genesis and the structure of ipseity. Each time the phantasmatic self-affirmation of a possible-possibility occurs the history of ipseity comes to a close. The closure of possibility not only establishes the conditions for the closure of historicism but also emerges as a critical moment within the "movement" that scans the history of historicism.

In the third chapter, I turned to Walter Benjamin and Martin Heidegger in order to examine how their "phenomenologies" of history attempt in their own singular ways to sever the link between ergontology and ipseity by untethering possibility from actuality, thus opening up the possibility of *another* possibility and of *another* history. Within the philosophical tradition, Heidegger's *Sein und Zeit* (*Being and Time*) contains the most sustained effort to radically challenge the ergontological determination of Western metaphysics and the concomitant determination of possibility as a form of *ipseity*.[6] Interrupting both the teleology that inscribes actuality at the very *arkhē* of possibility and the primacy of *self-relation* within the constitution of possibility *itself*, Heidegger's analysis of "being-towards-death" (*Sein zum Todes*) discloses a possibility that no longer functions either as the modality of a phenomenon or as the name for the capacity of an *autos* to be primarily *by itself* and *with its own self* by mastering alterity. The possibility at stake in *Dasein*'s proper (*eigentlich*) way of relating to *its* death only becomes a possible-possibility—i.e., a *pure* possibility that is *outside* the circular movement of ergontological determination—to the extent that it enters into a relation with impossibility. If experienced in its proper way, death interrupts *Dasein*'s relation to itself either as a possibility that can be actualized or even as a pure possibility that would be possible in itself *prior* to entering into a relation with its limit or its impossibility. Death—i.e., the most extreme form of possibility of which *Dasein* is capable—is to be understood only as the possibility *of* the impossible. Impossibility determines so much the structure of possibility that it is only *as* impossible that possibility becomes possible *itself* in the first place. The structure of ipseity after *Sein und Zeit* cannot be

[6] The following pages refer back to the passage from *Sein und Zeit* discussed in the previous chapter, see Heidegger (2006) 262.

conceived of as a possible-possibility, but rather as a possible-*im*possible-possibility, a possibility that unhinges *Dasein* from every single one of its ergontological determinations and that prevents *Dasein* from understanding its own possibilities as *un*marked by impossibility.

For Heidegger, *Dasein*'s power cannot *be* the power of possibility without being power *in* impossibility. However, this does not mean that *Dasein*'s ipseity is so powerful that it even has power *over* the impossible. Instead, the formula "the possibility of impossibility" signifies the *finitude* of all power. The possibility of the impossible *frees* the latter to its *proper*—i.e., unbound and measureless—impossibility, rather than trans*forming* even the impossible into a possibility. The highest determination of power remains intrinsically marked by weakness, since power only comes to its own *there* were it collides with its limit—with what no power could ever accomplish, experience, or even relate to in a *relative* manner, which would convert death into a correlate of *Dasein*'s possibility. Not only is *Dasein* incapable of intending death; it cannot even assure itself that it *possesses* the proper way of relating to death. For turning the proper relation to death into a possession of *Dasein* would deprive death of its imminent non-relationality. Even if death is understood in its propriety as the *possibility* of the impossible, this way of understanding death does not trans*form* it into a phenomenon. Death eschews not only the phenomenality of form and the form of phenomenality, but also the plasticity of any form as much as the form of plasticity.[7] As it is

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[7] Cathérine Malabou's notion of plasticity, including its most extreme form of destructive plasticity, reaffirms a notion of ipseity that is intrinsically devoid of radical alterity. As such, her work remains within the limits of the possible, without truly engaging with the difficulties that open up in the wake of Heidegger's thinking of death *as* impossible, and in subsequent thinkers, most notably Emmanuel Levinas, Maurice Blanchot, and Jacques Derrida. For Malabou's notion of destructive plasticity, see chapter 6 in Malabou (2009).

measureless and boundless, death is also *amorphous*; when it becomes a possibility of *Dasein*, death is not brought back to the purview of a form but is rather set free from any form and from any determination. The possibility that belongs to death is radically separated from the energy of any actuality as well as from the potency of any potentiality that could give itself to itself and assert itself as a possible-possibility. If death could be understood as a *possible* experience of *Dasein,* then its *ability* to be experienced would have to be understood precisely in terms of the possibility of the impossible. Death can only have the status of an improper, unpresentable experience: an experience that is lived only in the mode of a *not yet*, which nonetheless conditions everything of which *Dasein* may be capable of at any precise *moment* of its existence. The sheer incommensurability of death measures out the time of *Dasein*; the *not yet* of death as a possibility *trans*forms the time of *Dasein* to such an extent that time itself becomes Dasein's most *proper* possibility-to-be: time is always already *my time*. And yet, this time can only be measured in its intensive excess—a time that is always greater, always expanding—in relation to the *never* of death *as* impossibility. *Dasein*'s proper temporality and historicity only emerges in the gathering of possibility and impossibility, the not yet and the never. The collision of these two modes—their disjointed co-belonging— turns time and history into infinitely finite structures: finite, insofar as their end has already been prescribed; infinite, insofar as the end will never be experienced *as such* and will thus remains forever outstanding. *Dasein* is only *capable* of death on the condition that it lets itself be claimed by death. *Dasein* lets death *be* through a "movement" that *runs ahead* towards the moment of death's arrival, and at the same time understands the structural and unsurpassable contingency of *its own* proleptic movement: to experience death *as* a possibility is to run

ahead towards death and yet also and always to arrive *before* death, never in its own moment and movement. Death is impossible.

Besides clarifying the reading of the Heideggerian motif of "being-towards-death" that I offered in the previous chapter, I hope that this brief excursus through Heidegger's thinking on the possibility of the impossible attest to my project's debt to Heidegger's radical interrogation of the Western metaphysical tradition. Perhaps more than any other thinker in the twentieth century, Heidegger has given us the resources to understand why the possibility of *another* history is bound up with the possibility of *another* possibility. Conversely, Heidegger has also enabled us to understand why the *trans*formation of possibility beyond its ergontological determination is at the same time a rethinking of possibility as radically *historical*. After Heidegger, possibility has a history not merely because we may always construct a narrative of the different ways in which possibility has been understood, but primarily because the possibility of possibility itself coincides with its historicity, i.e., with the infinity of its exposure to *its own* finitude. The possibility of another history is thus bound up with another history of possibility—a history of the *historicity* of possibility, of its radical openness to unforeseen alterations and to its unanticipatable end.

The deconstruction of historicism that I have sketched out in the previous three chapters unfolds within the shadow cast by Heidegger's thinking of time and history as possible impossibilities. At the same time, my reading of Benjamin's "phenomenology" of history as a form of "reading danger" pointed out some of the limits of Heidegger's thinking of historicity in *Sein und Zeit*. Key among these is the constitutive character that Heidegger ascribes to *Dasein* for the becoming-historical of historical objectivities. For Benjamin, the

historian is not a *Dasein*, which implies among other things that the historian has no privileged relation to historical time vis-à-vis the past that it historicizes. The time in which the Benjaminian historian encounters historical truth is not the moment (*Augenblick*) of a resolute decision that gathers the threefold ecstasies of historical time. The intensity of the "now of knowability" (*Jetzt der Erkennbarkeit*) arrests the time of succession, emergence, and becoming without unifying or totalizing time through its interruptive force. The now is instead just as affected by transience as the past that summons the now to its fleeting existence—or to its almost inexistence—for the sake of having the chance to attain legibility. When Benjamin writes in *Über den Begriff der Geschichte* (*On the Concept of History*) that the historian "perhaps" ("*vielleicht*") speaks into a void at the precise "moment" (*Augenblick*) that it brings "good news" ("*frohe Botschaft*") to the past, he is not only emphasizing the irreducibility of transience for the constitution of the "true image of the past" ("*wahre Bild der Vergangenheit*") (Benjamin 95). Since the "now" that reads is one element within the structure of the historical or the messianic index of time—since the now is not a now without becoming the temporal site for the legibility of "what has been" (*das Gewesene*)—the historian is always at danger of *losing* even the "weakness" of its minimal messianic power and thus of losing itself in missing the past that called it into being. The danger of this "perhaps" constitutes the *modality* of historical truth for Benjamin and affects both the past as well as the now, depriving them of even the minimal form of stability that characterizes the resoluteness of *Dasein*'s call of conscience and of *Dasein*'s historical repetitions. For Heidegger and Benjamin, the possibility of history must be understood beyond its historicist, ergontological determination, which ultimately secures our access to the past by investing the

historian's *present* with the informative, intentional power of an *eidos*. And yet, Heidegger's notions of *proper* temporality and historicity reinforce the relative primacy of *Dasein* as the site in which time and history are gathered and become *possible*, though always against the backdrop of their abyssal impossibility.

Benjamin's inchoate criticisms of Heidegger's concept of history anticipate those formulated by thinkers such as Emmanuel Lévinas,[8] Maurice Blanchot, and Jacques Derrida. Interrogating the call for "another history" ("*une autre histoire*") that characterizes the "ethics of revolt" ("*éthique de la révolte*") proposed by Guy Lardreau and Christian Jambet in *L'ange* (*The Angel*),[9] Blanchot writes the following fragment towards the very end of *L'écriture du désastre* (*The Writing of Disaster*) that address the question of how *another* history could be thought:

> Et qu'en serait-il de l'*autre* histoire, si son trait est de n'être pas une histoire, ni au sens de *Historie*, ni au sens de *Geschichte* (qui implique l'idée de rassemblement), et aussi en ce qu'en elle rien n'advient de présent, que nul événement ou avènement ne la mesure ou ne la scande, qu'étrangère à la succession toujours linéaire, même lorsque celle-ci est enchevêtrée, zigzagante autant que dialectique, elle est déploiement d'une pluralité qui n'est pas celle du monde ou du nombre : histoire en trop, histoire 'secrète', séparée, qui suppose la fin de l'histoire visible, alors qu'elle se prive de toute idée de commencement et de fin : toujours en rapport avec un inconnu qui exige l'utopie du tout connaître, parce qu'il la déborde—inconnu qui ne se lie pas à

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[8] See Levinas (2009) 306.
[9] See Lardreau and Jambet (1976) 47.

l'irrationnel par-delà la raison, ni même à un irrationnel de la raison : peut-être retour à un *autre* sens dans le travail laborieux de la "désignification." L'*autre* histoire serait une histoire feinte, ce qui ne veut pas dire un pur rien, mais appelant toujours le vide d'un non-lieu, un manque où elle manque à elle-même : incroyable parce qu'elle est en défaut par rapport à toute croyance (Blanchot 209-10).

(And what would it be of this *other* history, if its trait is to not be a history, either in the sense of *Historie*, or in the sense of *Geschichte* (which implies the idea of gathering), and also that nothing present arrives in it, that no event or arrival measures it or scans it, that, foreign to an always linear succession—even if it is intertwined or zigzagging or dialectical—it is the deployment of a plurality which is not that of the world or of number: too much history, a "secret" history, separated, which supposes the end of visible history, while it deprives itself of any idea of beginning and end: always in relation to an unknown that demands the utopia of all knowing, because it overflows it—an unknown that is not bound to the irrational that is beyond reason, nor even to an irrational of reason: perhaps the return to *another* sense in the laborious work of "designification." The *other* history would be a feigned history, which does not mean a pure nothing, but always invoking the void of a non-place, an absence in which absence is absent from itself: incredible, because it is at fault in relation to all belief.)

For Blanchot, the mere fact of the invoking the thought of an*other* history would appear to involve, if not require, a commitment to thinking the impossible. We are almost forced to reach such a conclusion by the very way in which the passage unfolds. Opening in the mode of a question, the rather long initial sentence writes itself through a series of quasi-negations that suddenly, midway through the phrase, give way to a rather strange affirmation about this *other* history. As if Blanchot were suggesting—in a meontological parody of Parmenides's poem—that there is only one *possible* path that might enable us to at least begin to clarify what would be at stake in thinking such an altered history. This path would unfold in the mode of a *via negativa*, which Blanchot here designates with the name "désignification" or "designification." Only by taking distance from the ways in which we commonly, and not so commonly, understand the meaning of history, only by taking up the task and the potentially infinite and laborious path of designification, would we perhaps be in a position to relate *otherwise* to history by registering the imparting of a *different* sense of history: a history *without* history, a history *otherwise* than historical.

Since gaining admission to this *viæ negativa* is not at all guaranteed, perhaps all we could do is position ourselves in relation to its receding, trembling threshold. To do so, it would be necessary to first take into account the more or less affirmative instances and recognizable places that Blanchot alludes to in this passage, given that these instances provide the positive backdrop—the marks of archived significations, historical in a traditional sense—from which the *alterity* of this *other* history may deviate. That said, we must keep in mind that this procedure is not only provisional, but also potentially misleading. For Blanchot's insistence on the numerical aporia that marks this other history—as a plurality

that is both "innumerable" and "unworldly"—should warn us against the thought of being able to *measure* the alterity of this other history as the *differential* that would obtain between the positivity of a calcified, stable notion of history and the deviations of this history's alterity. In other words, the infinity of what Blanchot calls "designification" should not be taken lightly: "designification" might not be a method—a path that we go through—in order to reach our destination, in order to experience the transformation of our sense of history.

The "otherwise than" history that Blanchot sketches out in this passage would have to overflow the distinction that Heidegger establishes in the fifth chapter of *Sein und Zeit* between the ontological primacy of *Geschichte* over and above the derivative import of what Heidegger calls *Historie*, a term that he uses to refer to the scientific or the academic discipline of historiography.[10] The primacy of *Geschichte* with regards to *Historie* finds its ground in the existential analytic of *Dasein*, more specifically, in the unity of the ecstatic temporality that *constitutes* Dasein in its proper light as a singularity in the experience of running ahead (*Vorlaufen*) and as the singular-community of the people (*Volk*) whose relation to time discloses the most concrete mode of the historical as the free repetition of the *Dasein's* past possibilities. For Heidegger, the German word "*Geschichte*" lends itself better than the term "*Historie*" to express the existential dynamism of history understood as an irreducible aspect of *Dasein*'s existence. The reasons for why this is so become clear if we examine the etymology and the semantic history that is layered in these two terms. The German "*Historie*" remits us to the Greek nouns *historia* and *histor*, which designate in a very general sense an inquiry and the inquirer or the knower, respectively. Moreover, if we follow

[10] See Heidegger (2006) 392.

Émile Benveniste and trace the etymology of the Greek lexeme *histor* through a broader Indo-European etymology that goes from the Sanskrit *vettar* to the Proto-Indo-European theme **weyd*,[11] then the emphasis on vision and witness that characterizes this theme becomes even more salient: to be a *histor* is to *see*, and thus to *know*. It is not a coincidence that the Greek noun *eidos* and the Latin *video* all can be traced back to this root, for there is a latent eidetic valence to the term "*Historie*." As opposed to this, the German noun *Geschichte* comes from the past participle of the verb "*schicken*," which in current German means to send or to destine, but which earlier had a broader range of significations, which included the sense of taking care of something, of bring order to a thing, of composing, instructing, instituting, or constituting something. The verb "*schicken*" therefore had a strong foundational or constitutive valence, which can be still be heard to a certain extent in the contemporary German word for destiny, "*Schicksal*." Not unlike Blanchot, Heidegger's attempt to separate *Historie* from *Geschichte* seems to be informed by a concern with the relation between history and vision—be it factual or eidetic. The history that is visible is a history that can always be narrated, it can always be retrieved to the light of our present since it is ultimately a correlate to the *lumen naturale* of subjectivity. In this sense, *Historie* is always history in the sense of historiography. But this history for Heidegger can only be legitimately exercised—and here legitimacy does not refer to any criterion of epistemic validity, but rather of existential-ontological justification—if it is thought of on the basis of the destiny that consigns *Dasein* to its intrinsic-ecstatic finitude. The destiny *of Dasein* is *finite* insofar as it is marked by the mortality not only of each singular *Dasein*, but also of every generation and of each people. But this destiny is by the same token *infinite*, since

[11] See the second volume of Benveniste (1969) 173-74.

Dasein can never transform its finitude into an *actual* totality. Finitude is abyssal: the decisions, repetitions, and affirmations of *Dasein* all unfold in the abyss of the impossible from which possibility in itself proceeds.

For Blanchot, to think of another history would involve not only thinking beyond the *eidetic* charge implicit in the historiographical understanding of history, it would also require severing the disjunctive co-belonging of the *not yet* and the *never* and of the *possibility* and the *impossibility* of *Dasein*, which are at stake in Heidegger's thinking of death in *Sein und Zeit*. If *death* enters into the ambit of *Dasein* as the *not yet* that gives *Dasein its* time and *its* possibilities, Blanchot's *other history* ruins even the possibility of turning death's deferral into the basis for the determination of *my* possibilities. Death will never be mine, not even in the mode of not-yet-being-here. The impossibility of death is radically separated from any possible. Like an island, for Blanchot the impossibility of death deploys the infinity that belongs to a plurality that cannot be measured, not even by its measurelessness. Of this infinity, we could say the same thing that Blanchot says when he describes the infinity of disaster's threat in the opening fragment of *L'écriture du désastre* as having "in a certain way broken all limits." ("*l'infini de la menace a d'une certaine manière rompu toute limite*" Blanchot 7). The pluralization of this impossible suspends any relation that "I" may have to it and indeed neutralizes the entire structure of *Jemeinigkeit* that, for Heidegger, turns even the impossible into *Dasein*'s innermost constitution as pure *Seinkönnen*, as sheer possibility-to-be. But this plural impossibility also neutralizes itself own relation to itself and is therefore never impossible *as such* or *in itself*, but only plurally—i.e., infinitely—impossible. As an absence that is absent even to its own absence—that misses itself and passes itself by,

infinitizing itself through this non-coincidence by breaking the limits of its own specular self-correspondence—the plurality of Blanchot's *other* history infinitizes infinity beyond any Cantorian theological fantasy.[12] Blanchot's disaster, the highest of all limits, breaks all limits without erecting itself as the *only* and *last* limit. An archipelagic—i.e., plural—separation, Blanchot's *other* history severs the link between history and any form of gathering, collection or recollection, elevating historical knowledge to the impossible place, the non-place or the "utopia" of discontinuous infinities. The *other* history, which is a history of designification, deprives even death of its meaning as "my" impossible, demanding that history be thought as an excess that *cannot* be gathered, not even in the form of the always relative and limited gathering of the sheer discontinuity of what has happened..

In a passage from the second essay of *Voyous*: *Deux essais sur la raison* (*Rogues: Two Essays on Reason*), Derrida enumerates a series of demands that a thinking of the event would have to be accountable to if it is to do justice to the name "historicity:"

> Un événement prévu est déjà présent, déjà présentable, il est déjà arrivé et neutralisé dans son irruption. Partout où il y a de l'horizon et où l'on voit venir depuis une téléologie et l'horizon idéal, idéel, c'est-à-dire depuis le voir ou le savoir d'un *eidos*, partout où de l'idéalité sera possible (et il n'y aurait ni science, ni langage, ni technique, sachons-le, ni expérience en général, sans la production de quelque idéalité), partout cette idéalité horizontale, partout l'horizon de cette idéalité aura d'avance neutralisé l'événement et donc ce que dans *une historicité digne de ce nom*, requiert l'événementialité de l'événement. Im-prévisible, un événement digne de ce nom ne doit pas seulement excéder

[12] On Cantor's theological notion of absolute infinity, see Jané (1995) 375-402.

tout idéalisme téléologique, toute ruse de la raison téléologique qui se dissimulerait ce qui peut lui arriver et affecter son ipséité de façon auto-immunitaire—et c'est la raison même qui nous commande de le dire, loin d'abandonner cette pensée de l'événement à quelque obscur irrationalisme. L'événement doit s'annoncer comme im-possible, il doit donc s'annoncer sans prévenir, s'annoncer sans s'annoncer, sans horizon d'attente, sans telos, sans formation, sans forme ou préformation téléologique. D'où son caractère toujours monstrueux, imprésentable, et montrable comme immontrable. Donc jamais comme tel. Un événement ou une invention ne sont possibles que comme im-possibles. C'est-à-dire nulle part comme tels, le 'comme tel' phénoménologique ou ontologique annulant cette expérience de l'im-possible qui n'apparaît ou ne s'annonce jamais comme tel. (Derrida 197-98)
(A foreseen event is already present, already presentable, it has already arrived and been neutralized in its irruption. Everywhere where there is a horizon and where one sees something coming from a teleology and an eidetic, ideal horizon, that is to say, from the seeing or the knowing of an *eidos*, everywhere where ideality will be possible (and there would be no science, or language, or technics, let us be clear, without the production of some ideality), everywhere this horizontal ideality, everywhere the horizon of this ideality will have already neutralized the event and thus that which in a *historicity worthy of its name* requires the eventuality of the event. Unforeseeable, an event worthy of its name must not only exceed all teleological idealism, all the ruses of

> teleological reason which would dissimulate everything that could happen to it and affect its ipseity in an auto-immune way—and we are ordered to say this by reason itself, far from abandoning this thinking of the event to some obscure irrationalism. The event must announce itself as im-possible, it must therefore announce itself without forewarning, announce itself without announcing itself, without any horizon of expectation, without telos, without formation, without form or teleological preformation. This explains its always-monstrous character, unpresentable, and showable as unshowable. Therefore never as such. An event or an invention are not possible other than as im-possibles. That is to say, never as such, the phenomenological or the ontological as such annul this experience of the im-possible that never appears or announces itself as such.)

Like Blanchot, Derrida radically decouples history form visibility *as such* and from the *as such* of a vision informed by an *eidos*. When Derrida invokes in this passage a "historicity worthy of its name" ("*une historicité digne de son nom*"), he brings to mind Benjamin's criticisms of Heidegger's notion of historicity in *Das Passagen-Werk*.[13] A historicity that would be historical cannot have the status of an essentiality or an *eidos*, nor can it be thought of as a transcendental in a categorial or perhaps even in an existential sense. Historicity is not *mine*, it does not enter into any horizon of anticipation not even as the limit of what I can expect, and is therefore nothing with regards to which I may be able to move towards. The notion of historicity that would be worthy of its name would be a historicity that would be in itself an event. Rather than attaching historicity to the events that happen in order to characterize

[13] See Benjamin (1982) N3,1 577-78.

their historical meaning, historicity itself should be seen as an event, in accordance to Derrida's understanding of the event; historicity is thus im-possible. The only historicity that is historical is the impossible historicity *of* the impossible. This historicity ruins in advance the entire epistemic-ontological structure of historical knowledge, including the historicist determination of the idea of history. Configuring historicity as im-possible, Derrida links this *other* historicity to the experience of the im-possible, which is just as much an im-possible experience in that it ruins the condition that enable experience to become a theme of phenomenological investigation.

Derrida's call for *another* historicity invites us to think the historical not as the reappropriation of the past, but rather as the event in which historical *ipseity* becomes *in itself* im-possible. The becoming impossible of ipseity exposes perhaps a self-without-possibility or a self-in-impossibility, a ruined, eccentric self that is outside the reach of any totality and recalcitrant to any form of capture. The *alteration* of historicity therefore involves an infinite and radical *alteration* of ipseity as the unconditional condition for experiencing history in its impossible historicity. The dislocation of the self from the sovereignty of its auto-possibilitizing movement, the dissociation of the self from the ipseity, may perhaps constitute an event that would be worthy of being called *historical*. If the closure of historicism saturated the field of the historical with the structure of the possible-possible, the *other* history that I have tried to elaborate in these pages would insist in the impossible-impossibility of history. In this sense, history is not over and to a certain extent it has not yet begun—the beginning and the end of history would have to be rethought on the basis of the plural, infinite, impossibility of limits. And the most intensive historicity could only

correspond to the gestures that seek to keep history historical, i.e., open to the arrival of *another* history that may always lead to alterations that could hardly be said to belong to history, making the name history lose its significance and acquires an opacity that would be all the more historical the more it poses the *question* of history without any assurances and without any reserve.

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Part Two

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Reading Now: Spanish Caribbean Literary Modernism

CHAPTER FOUR

Julia De Burgos's History of Survival: "¡Dadme mi número!"

Der Tod als Möglichkeit […]ist die Möglichkeit der Unmöglichkeit jeglichen Verhaltens zu…, jedes Existierens. Im Vorlaufen in diese Möglichkeit wird sie 'immer größer', daß heißt sie enthüllt sich als solche, die überhaupt kein Maß, kein mehr oder minder kennt, sondern die Möglichkeit der maßlosen Unmöglichkeit der Existenz bedeutet. [...] Das Sein zum Tode als Vorlaufen in die Möglichkeit ermöglicht allererst diese Möglichkeit und macht sie als solche frei.

(Death as possibility is the possibility of the impossibility of every comportment to..., of every existing. In running ahead in this possibility it becomes "always greater," that means, it uncovers itself as such that in general knows no measure, no more or less, but rather signifies the possibility of the measureless impossibility of existence. Being-towards-death as running ahead in possibility first possibilitizes this possibility and makes it as such free.)

Martin Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit* (*Being and Time*)[1]

L'être-pour-la-mort est patience; non-anticipation; une durée malgré soi, modalité de l'obéissance: la temporalité de temps comme obéissance.

(Being-towards-death is patience; non-anticipation; a duration in spite of itself, modality of obedience: the temporality of time as obedience.)

Emmanuel Levinas, *Autrement qu'être ou au-delà de l'essence*[2]
(*Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*)

La survivance, c'est la vie au-delà de la vie, la vie plus que la vie, […] la survie, ce n'est pas simplement ce qui reste, c'est la vie la plus intense possible.

(Survival is life beyond life, life (no)more than life, […] survival is not simply what remains, it is the most intense life possible.)

Jacques Derrida, *Apprendre à vivre enfin*[3]
(*Learning to Live Finally*)

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[1] See Heidegger (2006) 262.
[2] See Levinas (1976) 89.
[3] See Derrida (2005) 54-55.

IV.1. *Reading* Julia de Burgos *Now*

In her prologue to *Cartas a Consuelo* (*Letters to Consuelo*), the recently published edition of Julia de Burgos's letters to her sister, Consuelo Burgos, Lena Burgos-Lafuente expresses her hope that the publication of de Burgos's epistolary exchange may enable the *corpus* of the Puerto Rican poet to become legible once again:

> Puede que la lectura de estas cartas ayude a desandar un poco esa De Burgos mítica, heroica, e inclementemente monumental que nos hemos labrado y contra la cual apuesta en ocasiones su escritura. Quizás se trate de entrever, en esa ficción del yo que es la correspondencia, dónde se cruzan la Julia de las *chinelitas*, la *batita* y el *traje de medio luto* con la Julia hermética, la empleada de la oficina de Rockefeller con la articulista de *Pueblos Hispánicos*, la Julia prosoviética con la de gesto anarquista, la que esculpe versos populares con la vanguardista, la sarcástica con la melancólica. El ejercicio permitiría advertir la contigüidad entre sus don juanes violadores, la ironía de su nada, su denuncia del orden burgués, el peso de su negatividad, la densidad de su apuesta filosófica y la imprudencia de su deseo. Tal vez así sea posible recuperar la textura política de su palabra literaria. Tal vez así podamos volver a leer a Julia. (Burgos-Lafuente xxix)
>
> (Reading these letters may help to undo a little that mythical, heroic and mercilessly monumental de Burgos that we have forged for ourselves and against which her own writing wagers on occasion. Perhaps it is a matter of catching a glimpse in the correspondence—in this fiction of the I—of the

> place in which the Julia of the *little sandals*, the *little robe* and the *half-mourning dress* and the hermetic Julia cross each other, the op-ed contributor to *Pueblos Hispánicos* [*Hispanic Peoples*] and Rockefeller's clerk, the prosoviet and the anarchist Julia, the composer of popular verses and the avant-gardist, the sarcastic and the melancholic. This exercise may allow us to take note of the contiguity between her rapist Don Juans, the irony of her nothing, the weight of her negativity, the density of her philosophical wager, and the imprudence of her desire. In this way, we may perhaps recover the political texture of her literary word. In this way, we may perhaps read Julia again.)

How does a body of work become *illegible*? What are the conditions that make impossible the reading of a *corpus poeticum* such as de Burgos's? According to Burgos-Lafuente, the enduring illegibility of de Burgos's work is an aftereffect of her reception, which has successfully trans*formed* her life into a myth and her work into a cultural monument. The irony at the heart of this failed reception becomes salient as soon as we grasp the discrepancy between what Burgos-Lafuente characterizes as the loss of "political texture" ("*textura política*") of de Burgos's "literary word" ("*la palabra literaria*") and the ubiquity of her name, her life-story, and her poems in the Puerto Rican, Caribbean, and US Latina/o diasporic cultural imaginary. Taking a cue from Burgos-Lafuente, we may argue that there is a correlation between the expansion of de Burgos's fame across the region and her increasing illegibility. Moreover, it is significant that Burgos-Lafuente deploys the more tactile metaphor of "texture" to indicate what has been lost in the monumentalizing and mythologizing reception of De Burgos's poetry. The loss of "texture" that Burgos-Lafuente

descries entails the leveling down of her *corpus*, its purgation of elements that may generate friction or that may sit uncomfortably within the sanctioned narratives that have contributed to her monumentalization. De Burgos's enshrinement as the leading voice in the Puerto Rican poetic pantheon has turned the experience of reading her poetry into a fairly innocuous ritual of cultural affirmation that reasserts an already-established identity, rather than call this identity into question.

Against this strain in her reception, Burgos-Lafuente calls for a more *textured* reading of de Burgos's life and work. To read *for* texture would require setting aside the standard narratives of literary and cultural history in favor of a practice of reading that is attuned to the irreducibility of differences and discontinuities, to the gaps and contradictions that lend a text its singular *texture*. To read de Burgos's writings in such a way that may do justice to the texture of her "literary word" would require *touching* her *corpus* anew—finding ways of reading that may resist the temptation to neutralize the patchiness and the messiness of her life and her work by producing a homogenous story out of her excessive life.

But there is something even more ironic in Burgos-Lafuente's description of de Burgos's reception. For not only does she bemoan the lack of a more textured reception of de Burgos's *corpus*; she also qualifies this texture as being specifically *political*. Now, at first sight this claim flies in the face of the overwhelmingly political nature of de Burgos's critical reception. Consider the fact that since her tragic death in 1954 her poetry has been read in terms of the struggle for Puerto Rican independence and that, to this day, de Burgos's name continues to function as a symbol of the Puerto Rican nationalist movement.[4] Later on in the 1970s, the feminist, proletarian, and Afro-Caribbean dimensions of de Burgos's poetry were

[4] See González (1954) 24, Rivera Villegas (1996)167, and Shigaki (1994), 270.

rescued by some of the leading figures of the "Generación del 70" (70's Generation), such as Rosario Ferré and Manuel Ramos Otero.[5] In time, de Burgos became not only one of the major symbols of Puerto Rican nationalism, but also a foundational figure in the construction of an alternative Puerto Rican literary canon that challenged traditional narratives regarding the constitution of the island's literary field as the patriarchal and Euro-centric defense of the island's Hispanic cultural roots in the face of Anglo-Saxon assimilation.[6] At the same time, the figure of de Burgos has played a crucial role in the formation of a pan-Caribbean, Latino diasporic identity in urban centers such as New York City, where de Burgos lived in exile from 1940 until her death fourteen years later, at the age of thirty-nine. Vanessa Pérez Rosario's *Becoming Julia De Burgos*—the first monographic study of the poet published in English by a North American academic press—emphasizes the hemispheric quality and the nomadic character of de Burgos's poetry against her cooptation as a foundational figure for any nation-building project: "As time passes, her story is co-opted and serves the nation as well as the diaspora. Yet understanding Burgos's life and works requires understanding her struggle against hegemony and her enduring belief that political action will enable radical democratic principles of social justice and equality to shape a better world" (Pérez Rosario 4). The fact that, to this day, de Burgos functions both as a symbol of hegemonic Puerto Rican nationalism and as a counter-hegemonic, exilic figure that sits uncomfortably within the borders of the Puerto Rican nation attests to the complexity of her life and her poetry. At the same time, the political malleability of the figure of de Burgos begs the question of precisely *how* her reception has managed to neutralize the

[5] See Ferré (1986)147-52 and Ramos Otero (1979).
[6] See Gelpí (1997) 251-54 and Portalatín Rivera (2015) 75-136.

"political texture of her literary word" (*la textura política de su palabra literaria* Burgos-Lafuente xxix), as Burgos-Lafuente claims. What would it mean for us to recover in our reading of de Burgos precisely the aspect of her work that has been the main focus of her reception? Perhaps a similar correlation as the one we saw above obtains also at this level: the *more* critics continue to insist on the political import of de Burgos's life and works, the *less* political her reception actually becomes.

Although Burgos-Lafuente does not mention Walter Benjamin or historicism by name, her assessment of the de-politicized nature of the reception of de Burgos resonates with Benjamin's critique of historicism in *Das Passagen-Werk* (*The Arcades Project*) as a de-politicized theory of history. In one of the entries toward the middle of "Konvolut N: Erkenntnistheoretisches, Theorie des Fortschritts" ("Convolut N: Knowledge-Theoretical, Theory of Progress"), Benjamin relates the undoing of historicism to the possibility of a more genuine form of political experience: "Es ist das Eigenste der dialektischen Erfahrung, den Schein des Immer-Gleichen, ja auch nur der Wiederholung in der Geschichte zu zerstreuen. Die echte politische Erfahrung ist von diesem Schein absolut frei." (Benjamin N9,5 591) ("What is proper to dialectical experience is to dispel the semblance of the always-equal, indeed even of repetition, in history. Authentic political experience is absolutely free of this semblance.") Benjamin's notion of "dialectical experience" designates the historical and political experience that would obtain once historicism is displaced and history is rethought in terms of the dialectical image. The dialectics that corresponds to the image is also at stake in what this passage characterizes as a true or genuine *political* experience, which is by the same token a *historical* experience. The experience that corresponds to the image

challenges the conceptual schemas of continuity and repetition that structure historicism's understanding of historical time by loosening up their grip on the theory of history and the methodology of historiography.

The verb "zerstreuen," which could be translated as "dispelling," "dissembling," "disseminating," or "scattering," is crucial if we are to understand the kind of politics that informs Benjamin's critique of historicism and his notion of the dialectical image. To do history *politically* requires postulating an image of historical time as disseminated—aleatory, differential, non-causal. The historical index of the dialectical image, analyzed in detail in the third chapter, does not presuppose a causal bond between the two times that make up its structure. Nor does the dialectical image require its homogenization through the postulation of an ontological continuity and/or a spatio-temporal contiguity between the time in which an event occurred and the time in which it attains legibility. Instead, the dialectical image configures the politics of history and the historicity of politics as the *dis*jointed and *dis*junctive encounter between the now of reading (*das Jetzt*) and what-has-been (*das Gewesene*). My capacity to read the past dialectically—politically, and thus historically—is not predicated on any form of homogeneity between my present and the past, which would enable me to reconstruct the causal chain of intra-temporal historical events that lead from the past to my time or vice-versa. The dispersal of time implies that whatever becomes legible at any determined moment in history may never become legible ever again. The dialectical image opens up the possibility of understanding the politics of history and the historicity of the political in terms of the *singularity* and the exceptional *fragility* of an encounter between times. This political encounter with history remains unthinkable as long as historicism

continues to determine the contours of the very idea of history by postulating equivalence, rather than singularity, at the heart of the structure of historical time. For history to become a political matter, *historicism must be brought to a close*.

Benjamin's understanding of the political charge of historiography can help us to make sense of Burgos-Lafuente's claim regarding the neutralization of the "political texture" of de Burgos's poetry. For Benjamin reminds us that in order to read again the singularly political color and timbre of de Burgos's *corpus* something more than repeating the same stories about de Burgos's exemplary political commitments is in order. Another passage from *Das Passagen-Werk*, this time from "Konvolut K: Traumstadt und Traumhaus, Zukunftstäume, Anthropologischer Nihilismus, Jung" ("Convolut K: Dreamcity and Dreamhouse, Dreams of the Future, Anthropological Nihilism, Jung"), could help us to understand this "something more" that would be required for de Burgos's writings to become once more a matter of political and historical concern:

> Die kopernikanische Wendung in der geschichtlichen Anschauung ist diese: man hielt für den fixen Punkt das 'Gewesene' und sah die Gegenwart bemüht, an dieses Feste die Erkenntnis tastend heranzuführen. Nun soll sich dieses Verhältnis umkehren und das Gewesene zum dialektischen Umschlag, zum Einfall des erwachten Bewußstseins werden. Die Politik erhält den Primat über die Geschichte. Die Fakten werden etwas, was uns soeben erst zustieß, sie festzustellen ist die Sache der Erinnerung. (Benjamin K1,2 490-91).
>
> (The Copernican turn in historical intuition is this: one held 'what has been'

> as the fixed point and saw the present as struggling to lead knowledge tentatively to this stronghold. Now this relation must be reverted and what has been must become the dialectical turnover, the incursion of awakened consciousness. Politics maintains primacy over history. Facts become something that befall upon us just now; to fix them is the matter of memory.)

For Benjamin, the task of acknowledging the irreducibly political nature of our engagements with the past requires nothing less than a Copernican turn within the theory of historical knowledge. But Benjamin's Copernican turn is not merely the reproduction of Kant's, which Kant himself summarizes in the preface to the second edition of the *Kritik der reinen Vernunft* (*Critique of Pure Reason*) with the following formula: "[…]wir nämlich von den Dingen nur das a priori erkennen, was wir selbst in sie legen" (Kant B xviii, 22) ("namely, *a priori* we only know of things what we ourselves put in them.") In order to grasp the past as a "dialectical turnover" it is not enough to merely subvert the primacy that historicism grants to the past with regards to the present and install the present *in* its presence as the site in which the knowability of historical things resides. The relation between "what has been" and the "now" of "awakened consciousness" is *other* than the Kantian understanding of the correlation between subjectivity and *its* objects of experience, whose own experienceability is a function of the determination of the subject and its cognitive faculties. To *know* the past historically for Benjamin is not to activate conceptual determinations—*a priori* rules of cognition—that are implicit from the very fact that I must posit myself as *present* to myself for any unity between mind and world to obtain. Benjamin's Copernican turn in historical

intuition displaces the role that transcendental philosophy grants to subjectivity and intentionality as the constitutive features of the very structure of intuition in favor of a thoroughly *historical*—and, thus, *political*—mode of intuition, which could scarcely be reconciled with any traditional notion of "intuition." Rather than taking place within the medium of *eidetic* or *aesthetic* vision, historical intuition unfolds in the *atopos* or in the *utopia* that I would call "*reading now*." What is "intuited" in the moment of reading is not a determination of the past that was once present to the historian and that can be retained and recalled infinitely; historical intuition instead has the character of an event that only happens *now* to *me* for the first time and that would not happen again. The past appears in its irretrievability as something that cannot find its space-time in the time of succession, which levels down the very *texture* of historical events and trans*forms* them into occurrences that are always-equal ("*Immer-Gleichen*") to each other insofar as they are all informed by the form of presence.

This explains why, for Benjamin, politics maintains its primacy over history the more history itself is understood and practiced *historically*. Historical experience is a hyper-political experience because the emergence of "what-has-been" in the now interrupts the hegemonic configuration of historical time on the basis of the temporality of the ego and/or the regulative telos of progress. For Benjamin, the time of consciousness elevated to the form of both historicity and temporality imprints upon historical time the non-historical, non-dialectical form of pure mathematical *extension*. The political charge of the now—what we may call its *politicity*—is irreducibly bound to the *intensive* singularization of the now's non-eidetic *historicity*. The past is only historical because it is political, and it is only political

because it irrupts into the horizon of the time that emerges continuously out of the sheer spontaneity of the subject and its faculties and *interrupts* the continuous unfolding of this successive time. The only *historical* time that could be said to be *mine* is not the time of my subjective self-determination as a conscious, self-present ego, but rather the time that is only given to me from the *chance* encounter with an image of the past. For this reason, "my" time could only have the character of a historical event, that is, it could only be determined *now* as a singularity in relation to *another* time, to a *past* that, in turn, lacks any substantiality beyond its encounter with my time. My singularity as a reader or as a historian is always determined out of the irretrievability of a past; any "*weak*, messianic power" ("*schwache* messianische Kraft") that I may ever have is only given to me and made possible *by* the claim-to-legibility of *this* singular image of the past.[7] What Benjamin calls "dialectics" throughout *Das Passagen-Werk* has little to do with a Hegelian schema of the negation of negation and instead designates the infinite alterity that marks the encounter between heterogeneous times. Rather than enacting the self's return to itself, Benjamin's dialectics names the *leap* of time and the *time* in which this leap takes place: dialectics designates the dispersal and the displacement of the hegemonic determination of time in accordance with the form of numerical extension. The time of the leap is the *intensive*, i.e., non-successive time of the dialectical image; the time in which the past and the now may perhaps *touch* one another.

To invoke the tactile metaphor that Burgos-Lafuente deploys to talk about what has been lost in the reception of de Burgos, Benjamin's understanding of the time of reading—which is also the time of the politics of history and of the historicity of politics—would also

[7] See Benjamin (2009) 94.

be a *textured* time: the time of a disjointed, discontinuous encounter between two times that *touch* each other without ever lying right next to each other. The only time that could ever touch *me* and thus be said to be *my* time is the time that becomes legible in the alterity of the past. For Benjamin, reading is historical and political because it challenges both the *hegemony* that the form of successive continuity continues to exert upon our understanding of history and because it understands that this schema of *continuity* provides the very transcendental form of all forms of political and historical hegemony. The hegemony of succession and the continuity of hegemony also constitute the transcendental reservoir of *historicism*. Historicism asserts the continuity between the present and the past because it takes subjectivity as the form that in*forms* both the past and the present, safeguarding the possibility historical knowledge on the basis of an axiomatization of time that decrees the ontological homogeneity of all intra-temporal moments. The continuity that belongs to succession also secures the privilege of the narrative form within historicism's conception of historiography. The pure formality of narrative enables the configuration of stories that are *equivalent* or *isomorphic* to any other story, in spite of their differences in historico-semantic content, since the very unfolding of these narratives is predicated on the elimination of heterogeneity within time and its concomitant formation in accordance to the "semblance of the always-equal" ("*den Schein des Immer-Gleichen*" Benjamin N9,5 591). What is reestablished through the domination of this semblance of equivalence is the power of *ipseity* as the form that in*forms* anything that could be said to be historical or temporal within historicism.

I started this chapter with Burgos-Lafuente's claim about the loss of the "political

texture" of de Burgos's "literary word" because I agree with her assessment of Burgos's reception. Moreover, I take this loss as an indication of the *catastrophic* character of de Burgos's reception. In describing her reception as "catastrophic," I do not wish to deny the fact that de Burgos's enduring presence within the Caribbean cultural and political imaginary is the result of the labor of many writers, artists, critics, historians, activists, and even politicians who have fought to safeguard her legacy. Indeed, the construction of a myth and the erection of a monument out of the life and the works of de Burgos have enabled her name to escape from the oblivion, the disrepute, or the anonymity to which her legacy might have otherwise been destined. That said, I would like to raise the question of the price that has been paid to *preserve* de Burgos's name as an important part of the cultural heritage of the Puerto Rican nation or as an emblem of the counter-hegemonic Spanish-Caribbean, Latino/a diaspora. The trans*formation* of de Burgos into the legacy of a culture may have kept her *alive*, but it has perhaps prevented her *survival*. As Derrida reminds us in the third passage that I quoted as my epigraph, to survive is not simply to remain alive or to live on in the sense of persisting in the immanence of *one's own* existence (Derrida 54-55). When Derrida writes of survival that it is "the most intense life possible" ("*la vie la plus intense possible*" Derrida 55), he suggests that the only life that could belong to survival is a life that is expelled from any circular movement of appropriation. To survive is to live beyond the course of life and thus beyond birth and death understood as the boundaries that determine the form of life—the limits of any *curriculum vitæ*. In its in-finity, the life of survival exceeds the life that unfolds within *my* birth and *my* death, becoming a life that is only lived *in* and *from* an other whose infinite alterity prevents it from ever become merely *my* other.

How could we read de Burgos's so that something in her name—so that the "political texture of her literary word" ("*la textura política de su palabra literaria*" Burgos-Lafuente) may survive? A reading that would not seek to preserve de Burgos's legacy and instead would seek to preserve its survival must *intensify* what remains most alive in de Burgos's to the point that her writings are allowed to *leap* beyond their time, delimited by the boundaries of its birth and its death, and irrupt into our time, *perhaps* altering its course. A similar understanding of the historicity of reading and of reception informs Benjamin's understanding of catastrophe as a historical concept. In *Das Passagen-Werk*, Benjamin argues forcefully against cultural preservation as the most catastrophic—therefore, unhistorical—form of reception that can befall upon a historical object. Consider the following passage from "Konvolut N:"

> Wovor werden die Phänomene gerettet? Nicht nur, und nicht sowohl vor dem Verruf und der Mißachtung in die sie geraten sind als vor der Katastrophe wie eine bestimmte Art ihrer Überlieferung, ihre 'Würdigung als Erbe' sie sehr oft darstellt.—Sie werden durch die Aufweisung des Sprungs in ihnen gerettet.—Es gibt eine Überlieferung, die Katastrophe ist. (Benjamin N9,4 591).
>
> (From what are phenomena saved? Not only and not so much from the disrepute and the disregard in which they have fallen as from the catastrophe as the way in which a determined form of their tradition, their 'evaluation as heritage,' very often presents them [phenomena].—They are saved through the exhibition of the leap in them.— There is a tradition that is catastrophe.)

In this passage, Benjamin refers to the task of the dialectical historian as the "salvation," "redemption" or "rescue" of the past from its catastrophic tradition. For Benjamin, to treat historical objects as the "cultural goods" of a people or a community amounts to a less historical way of relating to history than merely forgetting or utterly disregarding the past. Whereas historical lacunae or misjudgments may always be remedied through historiographical labor, the transformation of the past into an object of aesthetic evaluation and cultural possession transforms historical writing itself into the means for the establishment of a thoroughly de-politicized and therefore un-historical relation to history.

Later on in "Konvolut N," Benjamin provides a more succinct definition of catastrophe that finds its counterpart in the notion of the "critical moment," analyzed in the previous chapter: "Definitionen historischer Grundbegriffe: Die Katastrophe—die Gelegenheit verpaßt haben; der kritische Augenblick—der status quo droht erhalten zu bleiben; der Fortschritt—die erste revolutionäre Maßnahme" (Benjamin N10,2 593). ("Definitions of fundamental historical concepts: catastrophe—to have missed the opportunity; the critical moment—the *status quo* threatens to be preserved; progress—the first revolutionary measure"). If catastrophe is to have missed the opportunity, then catastrophe is to have missed "the critical moment" or the perilous moment of *danger*, since it is only in the moment of danger that the *status quo*—"the semblance of the always-equal" ("*den Schein des Immer-Gleichen*" Benjamin N9,5 591)—appears as a threat that concerns me as much as the image of the past that I am reading. To read in the moment of danger opens the door to a *trans*formation of what seems to have the character of *necessity*—repetition and equivalence as the law of history's non-rhythmic movement—into a *contingency*. In the

moment of danger the catastrophe of continuity appears as something that *may* continue—or *perhaps* not. For this reason, what Benjamin calls "progress" should not be understood as the *elimination* of the danger that pervades historical reading. Instead, progress is the first revolutionary step insofar as it is a step *into* the perilous moment of danger, which opens up the *chance* that the past may give itself to be read *otherwise*.

To read the past *otherwise*—to enable the past to *survive*; to be *touched* by the past in such a way that the very fabric of our now *may* become enmeshed in the texture of what-has-been—is not to uncover historical contents that that have not yet been discovered. To write history in a way that challenges the historicist determination of historiography as a depoliticized, humanist, aesthetic, culturalist form of apology—to *rescue* the past from catastrophe—is to *endanger* the past by wrenching it from any temporal continuum. *Reading now:* another name for *reading danger*. The critical, dangerous moment provides the time—i.e., the now—in which the past may be rescued insofar as it does not safeguard the past from endangerment, but rather *exposes* the past to the danger of historicity by *exhibiting* the *leap* (*Sprung*) that, within the past, enables this image of the past to depart from the homogenizing totality, from the period or the epoch in which it had been circumscribed. By exhibiting the past in its leaping, discontinuous movement, the reading that takes place *in* the critical moment of danger enables the *past* to *pass* above or below the course of its homogeneous—i.e., subjective, intentional, totalizing and totalitarian—time.

History survives catastrophe by *leaping* beyond time and thus by *untiming* itself. Survival is historical only in its excessive movement of subtraction that removes an image of what-has-been from the time of succession, bringing historical continuity to a halt,

transforming historical reading into a medium for the dissolution of tradition, locating the knowledge of the past in the blanks and the gaps that persist within any historical narrative: "Die Würdigung oder Apologie [...] legt nur auf diejenigen Elemente des Werkes wert, die schon in seine Nachwirkung eingegangen sind. Ihr entgehen die Stellen, an denen die Überlieferung abbricht und damit ihre Schroffen und Zacken, die dem einen Halt bieten, der über sie hinausgelangen will" (Benjamin N9a,5 592). ("Evaluation or apology places value only on those elements of a work that have already entered into its aftermath. The places in which tradition breaks off—hence, its crags and its peaks, which offer a hold to whomever wants to get outside of it [tradition]—evade it [evaluation].") To free the past and the present from their historicist, catastrophic determination requires writing historiographies that present history in its syncopated, discontinuous rhythm—*trans*formed *histories*, whose historicity and politicity irrupts only there where tradition *may* be interrupted.

If we are to recover the political texture of de Burgos's poetry, if we are to read her writings *anew* and intensify her life to the point of sur-vival, we must attempt to go beyond her apologetic, monumentalizing reception. We must allow de Burgos's *corpus* to *flee* from the scene of her catastrophic reception, as we undo the calcified histories that continue to determine the *present* of those who have been convoked by her name and her figure to this day. Only through the destruction of tradition, only by reading de Burgos *dangerously* may her time, her life and her texts leap into our time; only thus would our *now* perhaps encounter hers and read in her image the cipher of its own *trans*formation.

IV.2. Anniversary Laws, Calendar Blows: 1914-2014

All throughout the Spanish-speaking Caribbean—from San Juan to La Habana and from Santo Domingo to Nueva York—scholars, writers, activists, and politicians have come together on numerous occasions during the past year to commemorate the centenary of Julia de Burgos's birth. The celebration of her legacy has had the merit of acquainting a new generation of readers with the *loci classici* of her *corpus* and with the major stations of her life. Born in the city of Carolina, Puerto Rico in February 17, 1914, de Burgos was the eldest of the thirteen children of Francisco Burgos Hans and Paula García—a racially mixed couple of poor farmers. The extent of their poverty is attested by their loss of six children due to malnutrition. During her childhood, her family moved from the countryside to the slums of the city of Carolina, where de Burgos attended elementary school and achieved academic distinction, earning upon graduation a scholarship to attend the prestigious University High School. After obtaining her teacher's certification at the University of Puerto Rico, de Burgos taught in the public education system for a year, before marrying Rubén Rodríguez Beauchamp and beginning an intense career as a political activist and writer. By twenty-two she was already elected as the Secretary General of the female branch of the Puerto Rican Nationalist Party. During this time she would be know for her impassioned speeches in favor of Puerto Rican independence and her political poetry. Before migrating to New York in 1940 at the age of 25, de Burgos had already published two widely acclaimed poetry volumes: *Poema en veinte surcos* (*Poem in Twenty Furrows*), which appeared in 1938, and *Canción de la verdad sencilla* (*Song of the Simple Truth*), published in 1939. A previous, self-published poetry collection that circulated in the island in 1937 under the title *Poemas*

exactos a mí misma (*Poems Exact to Myself*) remains lost to this day. Soon after divorcing her husband in 1937, de Burgos began a relationship with Juan Jiménes Grullón, one of the leaders of the opposition movement to Dominican dictator, Rafael Leonidas Trujillo. De Burgos left the island for New York to join her partner in 1940 and soon they embarked to La Habana, where Jimenés Grullón planned continue his clandestine revolutionary activities against the Trujillo regime and de Burgos intended to study law and philosophy and write one poetry volume per year.[8] By the end of 1940, de Burgos had already finished writing *El mar y tú* (*The Sea and You*)—which would only see the light of day posthumously in 1954 and immediately became her *chef d'œuvre*—and started writing another poetry volume, *Campo* (*Countryside*), which she never managed to prepare for publication. Her relationship with Jimenes- Grullón began to deteriorate during their stay in Cuba due to the pressures of his parents, who could not accept de Burgos as a daughter-in-law because of her low-class origins, her marital status as a divorcée, her Afro-Caribbean roots, and her bohemian, libertine lifestyle. In 1942, de Burgos left La Habana at Jimenes- Grullón's request and returned to New York, where she resumed her activism within the Latino leftist community, becoming a writer for the communist Spanish-language publication, *Pueblos Hispanos*. She remarried a fellow Puerto Rican émigré, whom she divorced a few years later. Her last years were marked by enduring poverty and alcoholism. In July 6, 1953 she suffered from a collapse while walking in the Spanish Harlem and died that same day. With no one to claim her body, she was given a common burial in Hart Island, New York's only potter field. She would never return to Puerto Rico after leaving the island in 1940 and she never published another poetry volume while she was alive.

[8] See the letter to Consuelo Burgos from September 25, 1940 in de Burgos (2014) 69.

Given the particularities of her life story, it is not surprising that the figure of de Burgos has lent itself more easily than any other author within the Puerto Rican canon to the foundationalist gestures that structure historicist narrations of the past. Reading in the tragic errancy of her life the destiny of entire communities, de Burgos's poetry has become a broadly shared cultural possession. And barring a few exceptions, the celebrations surrounding the centenary of her birth have for the most part contributed to the poet's monumentalizing reception.

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How does de Burgos give itself to be read *now*, now that the euphoria related to the celebration of her centenary has begun to subside? Arriving belatedly to the scene of commemoration, this chapter proposes a displacement in the normative structure of anniversary celebrations as highly ritualized forms of remembrance. This section carries out this displacement by interrogating what I call the "law of the anniversary" taking a cue from Jacques Derrida's *Schibboleth. Pour Paul Celan* (*Shibbotleth: For Paul Celan*), where Derrida engages extensively with the motif of "the anniversary date" ("*la date anniversaire*") in the poetry of Paul Celan. Traditionally understood, anniversaries are marked by the occurrence of a specific *event*, which determines the very *matter* that is at stake in the celebration of any anniversary. And yet, anniversaries require the return of the *date* in which the event that is commemorated took place in *another* time. This other date marks the fulfillment of a determined extension of time that is shaped like a ring—a segment of time in which the beginning and the end co-incide. Derrida's exposition of the structure of the anniversary focuses on the iterability of the anniversary *date*, which constitutes the condition of

possibility for the legibility of the *historical* singularity that is commemorated whenever an anniversary is celebrated. The iterability of anniversary dates designates the intrinsic divisibility and repeatability that marks the irretrievable singularity of any event even before it has occurred and has been inscribed in the texture of time and memory. The date must be somehow repeatable if the singularity of what happened on *its* time is to be commemorated. Finally, the iterability of dates discloses the performative force of the calendar. Rather than being a mere technology for counting the cardinality or the ordinality of historical time or for fixing the differential values that specify certain dates in relation to their significance for any individual or a community, the calendar's counting is *performative* in two different ways: a. it seals the singularity of an event with a date in a way that is analogous to the relation that obtains between an entity and its "proper name" and b. it determines in advance the *other* date in which what is remembered in an anniversary is to be commemorated.

For the most part, anniversary commemorations tend to focus almost exclusively on the issue of *who* or *what* is being commemorated, to the detriment of any consideration of the *how* of the commemoration or of the *way* in which anniversaries occur. Disregarding the conditions of possibility of any anniversary—the annular shape of time, the iterability of the date, and the performative force of *dateability*—anniversaries become another occasion for the reaffirmation of historicism's determination of the very idea of history. Rather than enacting a simple reversal and considering de Burgos's anniversary from the point of view of its conditions of possibility, this chapter seeks to show how de Burgos's poetry pushes to an extreme the performative structures of iterability and dateability that make anniversaries possible, demanding a radically different mode of remembrance. I will do so by reading one

of the key poems in de Burgos's corpus, "¡Dadme mi número!" ("Give me my number!"), published in the second part of de Burgos's *El mar y tú* (*The Sea and You*), titled "Poemas para un naufragio" ("Poems for a Shipwreck"). In this poem, the poetic voice interpellates the dead, demanding to be given her "number." Traditionally read by critics as a "modern" *ersatz* of the voice's proper name or as the ordinal digit that determines her position in the long line of mortals who await their death, the motif of the number and its demand have been taken for granted by critics. Reinterpreting the number that the poetic voice demands as the *date* of her *death*, I show that the poetic voice's petition should not be understood as a form of expectation or anticipation of the effective or *actual* arrival of her turn to die. Instead, she petitions for something even more fundamental, namely, for being granted the *very* possibility of dying by finding her place within the *finite* series or the *closed* set in which the mortals experience themselves in their mortality. Since her demand for the number demands to be read as a petition for the possibility of death and for death as a possibility, the poetic voice who utters "¡Dadme mi número!" seems to be deprived of the most (a)fundamental form of possibility, namely, *her own* death, which Martin Heidegger characterizes in *Sein und Zeit* (*Being and Time*) as "the possibility of the measureless impossibility of existence" ("*die Möglichkeit der maßlosen Unmöglichkeit der Existenz*" Heidegger 262). The poem is uttered from the non-site of a radical devastation—of an impossibility that has severed all ties to possibility. Separated from death, incapable of running ahead or leaping towards the date of her death, deprived of her finitude, the poetic voice in "¡Dadme mi número!" exposes a notion of survival that can no longer be understood as a form of life determined by its relation to a *proper* death. In this poem, death itself ceases

to signify the absolute limit of *my* life and acquires an intensity and a movement that installs the poetic voice in the non-place of an in-finite living-dying. This *other* death resonates with the passage from Emmanuel Levinas that I quoted in my epigraph, where Levinas reconfigures Heidegger's "being-towards-death" ("*Sein zum Tode*") as the "patience" of "non-anticipation" in which time no longer *belongs* to the self but rather occurs in spite of the self itself, dispossessing the self of its sovereignty, and locating its ipseity only in the passivity of its non-relative assignation or consignation to the other (Levinas 89). In "¡Dadme mi número!," Burgos invites us to think of a death that will not cease to occur, an enduring dying *without* death that can only be remedied by the gift of *another*—but another whose alterity is such that it *may* never be in a position to respond to the voice's demand and bring the infinite of dying to an end.

The infinity of death produces a *crisis* in the iterability that secures the possibility of anniversary rituals and the mode of historical survival that corresponds to this particular form of commemoration. The poet's infinite dying exponentializes time to the point of destroying its annularity, ruining the possibility that the date in which something began will *necessarily* give itself to another, analogous date—a possibility that secures the production of a historical singularity through its commemoration. This poem also demands that we rethink survival as a hyperbolic condition that leaps beyond any notion of time that would be delimited by birth and death. Thinking survival in the non-site of a radical devastation, from an enduring deprivation of privation itself, the time of survival severs its bonds with the time of life, becoming thinkable only as the untiming of the homogeneous time of historicism through its *trans*formation into the dangerous time of an infinite historicity.

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Is it possible to celebrate de Burgos's centenary while honoring the clamorous demands for silence, dispersal, and solitude that pervade her poetry? At first sight, anniversary rituals appear to be structured by the goal of celebrating the survival of the past in the present. Indeed, survival seems to be on the side the law of the anniversary, which provides the norm for the constitution of a community unified around the task of commemorating an event in the past. Does the event of de Burgos's writing enter into the structure of the kind of memory that gets activated in anniversary rituals?

In *Glas*, Derrida interrogates whether an anniversary ritual remains possible in the wake of the recognition of the hyperbolic character of any gift—beginning with the gift of time: "Comment l'événement d'un anniversaire est-il possible maintenant? Qu'est-ce qui se donne dans un anniversaire?" (Derrida 270). ("How is the event of an anniversary possible now? What gives itself in an anniversary?") A decade later, Derrida returns to this question in *Schibboleth* (*Shibboleth*). Engaging with the crucial role of dates in the poetry of the German-Jewish author, Derrida provides an account of the structure of the anniversary that highlights the "singular power of gathering" ("*pouvoir de rassemblement singulier*") that characterizes the "anniversary date" ("*la date anniversaire*") (Derrida 49). Anniversary dates are endowed with a singular capacity to recollect, congregate, or convoke a multiplicity of times and bodies around a singular instant, around a moment that left its mark in the very fabric of time. The date provides the minimal pre-*text* for the celebration of an anniversary because no community of remembrance could ever constitute itself without being touched by the date, without being assigned to the labor of historical recollection by the date's power: "Celle ci [la

date anniversaire] donne accès à la mémoire, à l'avenir de la date, à son proper avenir, mais aussi au poème" (Derrida 49). ("This [the anniversary date] gives access to memory, to the coming of the date, to its own coming, but also to the poem.")

In *Schibboleth*, Derrida seems to respond to the questions that he himself had posed a decade earlier in *Glas* by locating in the date and its singular gathering power both the condition of possibility of anniversary remembrance and what gives itself in any anniversary:

> Assignant ou consignant la singularité absolue, elles doivent se dé-marquer simultanément, *à la fois,* et d'elles-mêmes, par la possibilité de la commémoration. Elles ne sont en effet marquantes que dans la mesure où leur lisibilité annonce la possibilité d'un retour. Non pas le retour absolu de cela même qui ne peut pas revenir : une naissance ou une circoncision n'ont lieu qu'une fois, c'est l'évidence même. Mais la revenance spectrale de cela même qui, *unique fois au monde*, ne reviendra jamais. *Une date est un spectre* (Derrida 37, emphases mine).
>
> (Assigning or consigning absolute singularity, they [dates] must de-marcate themselves simultaneously, *at the same time*, and from themselves, through the possibility of commemoration. In fact, they do not mark except to the extent that their legibility announces the possibility of a return. Not the absolute return of even that which cannot come back: birth or circumcision only take place once, it is evidence itself. But the spectral return of even that which—*unique time in the world*—will never return. *A date is a specter*.)

In this passage, Derrida elaborates the aporia implicit in the date's capacity to inaugurate the

work of commemoration. We saw that, according to Derrida, dates make possible anniversary rituals because of the capacity to constitute a community of remembrance around the event that they designate or *mark*. In this respect, dates are a kind of number that functions much like a proper name inasmuch as their sense lies exclusively in their always-singular indexicality—in the way in which they pick out an irreplaceable temporal *individuum*, an irretrievable occasion, or an unrepeatable event. It is in this respect that anniversary dates are *marking* ("*marquantes*") marks, as Derrida refers to them in this passage. The date is a number that ciphers a singularity: not a numbering number, but rather a number that *names* an absolute singularity and, in so doing, *assigns* this individuum to itself, appropriating this singularity unto itself as the date's *own* meaning.

Dates are also *marked* marks. Derrida does not draw this distinction explicitly in this passage, but he suggests the possibility of doing so when he juxtaposes the verbs "assigning" ("*assignant*") and "consigning" ("*consignant*"). Whereas the verb "assigner" in French means primarily the act of addressing someone at a fixed point in time and place, the verb "consigner" has a broader semantic range that extends from issuing orders to inscribing or recording something down. Conversely, whereas "to assign" belongs to an exclusively active register, "to consign" in French also comports the kind of uncanny passivity—beyond the active/passive distinction—that characterizes writing or inscription. The fact that, for Derrida, the anniversary date both assigns and consigns an absolute singularity could be therefore read as an affirmation of the hetero-affective structure of dates. The absolute singularity of an event is *assigned* to a date by this date itself, but only because the date has already been *con-signed* to this event by the absolutely singular occurrence of this event on

this specific date. The date *marks* only because it was already *marked* by what it marks: anniversary dates bear witness to the taking place of *this* unrepeatable occasion.

At the same time, the hetero-affection of dates does not imply that the events that mark them exist on their own *prior* to undergoing designation. This explains why dates do not accomplish their semantic function in an act of intuition: the empty indexicality of a specific date does not fulfill itself through the presentation of the date's object or referent—of the event that occurred in this date—to any consciousness whatsoever. What befalls on a date occurs at the margins of presence: past events are not to be intuited through their dates, but rather *read* from them. When Derrida concludes this passage by affirming the spectrality of dates, he is also implicitly affirming the irretrievability and the radical non-presence of the events to which any anniversary date refers. Whatever its referent, a date only refers to an event because that event was never present *to* it. Rather than asserting any parallelism or a strong correlation between the date and its event, the relation between the two is one of radical asymmetry. The date never coincided with its event, not even in the moment of its inaugural baptism: dates arrive to the scene of nomination once their referents are gone. The event that becomes dated belongs to a past that has lost any status as a source or an arkhē of recollection since it only appears in its unpresentable spectrality.

Finally, Derrida also argues that the date must also *de-marcate* itself from itself in order to enact the "singular power of gathering" that enables it both to mark and to be marked by an event. But how should we understand this *de*-marcation? Paying heed to Derrida's hyphenation of the word, we could read the "de-marcation" as the subtraction of the date from the scene in which it becomes a marking-marked mark. The de-marcation of

the date implies its interruption: the date must leave its proper place, undergo expropriation, withdraw from its relation to the event to which it refers if it is to function as a mark of this event. This explains why Derrida not only links the very power of the mark to its de-marcation, but also claims that the separation of the date from itself can only occur by way of the "possibility of commemoration" (*la possibilité de la commemoration* Derrida 37), another name for the iterability of the date. Rethinking the singularity of any date in terms of the law of iterability, Derrida suggests that any *singular* date *must* leave the time-space that belongs to it and leap into another date if it is to be legible *as* the singular date that it is. The hyper-transcendentality of iterability implies that all dates must have been already expelled from themselves before marking and being marked by an *actual* event. If the singularity of the date's *referent* is due to the fact that it belongs to a *past* that remains irretrievable from the very moment in which it is dated, the singularity of the *date* in itself lies in the possibility of being commemorated by *another* date in the *future*. The anniversary date sets in motion the work of memory by mobilizing the spectrality of *past events*—which are not only illegible but also remain so precisely by giving themselves to be read in their dates *as* illegible—and the legibility of the past—which comes from a *future date* that must have already commemorated the anniversary date for the latter to be able to constitute itself as the date in which an absolute singularity left its mark in the calendar. The aporia of the anniversary lies in the tension between the singularity of its referent, which has the character of an absolute past, and the singularity of its mark, which is only granted its singularity from a legibility that comes from the future. Dates are specters because their ex-trinsic interior registers the irreconcilable pull of a past that cannot be retrieved and a future that wrenches the past from

its proper boundaries and forces even its opacity to appear as opaque in the time of the *now*. Rather than dissolving the differend between the iterable legibility of futurity and the unrepeatable illegibility of the past, the spectrality of the date sustains the tension of these two irreconcilable demands: the future forces the past to return in another time, but the past returns in the date of its commemoration only *as* a specter, never in its presence. Not only is the past *impossible*, but it gives itself to be *read* in its impossibility through its inscription *in* a date that comes from the future.

Derrida's analysis of the role of dates in anniversary rituals locates in the date's hetero-auto-affectability the very source of the time of commemoration. The question emerges, however, as to whether there is anything that guarantees the *actualization* of the "possibility of commemoration," which enables the date to demarcate itself from itself and exercise its performative capacity to *mark* time and to be marked by it. According to Derrida, the "singular power of gathering" that characterizes the date is ultimately grounded in the existence of a "code" that ensures the repetition of a date in another date.

> Mais cette revenance du retour impossible se marque dans la date, elle se scelle ou spécifie dans l'anneau de l'anniversaire assuré par le code. Par exemple par le calendrier. […] La première inscription d'une date signifie cette possibilité : ce qui ne peut pas revenir reviendra comme tel, non pas seulement dans la mémoire, comme tout souvenir, mais aussi à la même date, à une date en tout cas analogue, par exemple chaque 13 février… Et chaque fois, à la même date sera commémorée la date de ce qui ne saurait revenir. Celle-ci aura signée ou scellée l'unique, le non-répétable ; mais pour le faire,

> elle aura dû se donner à lire dans une forme suffisamment codée, lisible, déchiffrable pour que dans l'analogie de l'anneau anniversaire (le 13 février 1962 est analogue au 13 février 1936) l'indéchiffrable apparaisse, fût-ce comme indéchiffrable. (Derrida 37-38)
>
> (But the coming back of the impossible return marks itself in the date; it seals or specifies itself in the anniversary ring, guaranteed by the code. For example, by the calendar. [...] The first inscription of a date signifies this possibility: what cannot come back will come back as such, not only to memory, like all memories, but also to the same date, at any rate to an analogous date, for example, every February 13... And each time, the date of that which would not know to return will be commemorated on the same date. The latter will have signed or sealed the unique, the non-repeatable; but in order to do so it will have to give itself to be read in a form that is coded, readable, decipherable enough for the undecipherable to appear in the analogy of the anniversary ring (February 13 1962 is analogous to the February 13 1936), be it as undecipherable.)

Besides being a technology for the notation of historico-chronological time in its sheer, numerical cardinality or ordinality, the calendar enables the presentation of historical time in its intensive singularization as the iterable *date* that *names* a historico-temporal individuum. Already in *Glas*, Derrida had hinted at the calendar's power by coining a rather remarkable turn of phrase: "*coup de calendrier*" or "calendar blow" (Derrida 123). The calendar strikes time in at least two different ways—though these two blows of the calendar ultimately occur

at the same time. On the one hand, the calendar submits time to the form of dateability by welding together a temporal moment to its date. But, on the other hand, the very notation of a date already implies that a silent, imperceptible blow has been dealt to the future date that will *read* and *commemorate* the date that marked and was marked by an event that happened on its some date in the past. The force of the calendar constitutes the source of the date's power: it is the calendar which guarantees that another date from the future has already come without having arrived yet, safeguarding the possibility of commemoration. To celebrate an anniversary is to be dealt a blow by a date, to be assigned by its force to remember even that which cannot return and which returns on the occasion of its anniversary only in the clarity of its *dated* opacity, in its *legible* illegibility. The calendar therefore preserves the annularity of time, which guarantees that two analogous dates will touch each other and that the possibility of commemoration will be actualized. The calendar safeguards the sovereignty of the law of the anniversary, which decrees that those who have been *struck* by its blows ought to engage in the work of ritualized commemoration.

IV.3. *Out*-dated: "¡Dadme mi número!"

What *remains* of Julia de Burgos now that her centenary is over? Because of the force of the calendar, the annularity of time, and the power of gathering that characterizes anniversary dates we already know in advance that another commemoration—another anniversary—is in store, regardless of whether we are able to partake of it. De Burgos's anniversary has already been assigned *its* time in the calendar. The law of all anniversaries as Jacques Derrida exposes it in *Schibboleth* (*Shibboleth*) dictates that the return of the anniversary date offers the past to be read even to the point of consigning its illegibility,

opacity irretrievability and unrepeatability. The power of the date is such that it makes even the specter of what never was in the present appear to another future date *as* a specter—deprived of presence and outside the form of the present.

To celebrate the anniversary of de Burgos's in a way that may recover what Lena Burgos-Lafuente calls the "political texture of her literary word" ("*la textura política de su palabra literaria*" Burgos Lafuente xxix) would require acknowledging the spectrality of her return in our time—a spectrality that marks itself and gives itself to be read in de Burgos's own poetry. To begin to do so, we would do well to focus on the moments in her corpus that pose the greatest challenge to the monumentalizing reception that continues to condition de Burgos's legibility in our time. In this section, I will focus on one such moment, which takes the form of a poem published in the second part of *El mar y tú* (*The Sea and You*), titled "¡Dadme mi número!" ("Give me my number!"). As I will argue, this poem calls into question the very hetero-auto-affective structure of the date *as* a number that *names* a historico-temporal singularity. In her demand for her number, the poetic voice in this poem brings to a crisis the calendar's capacity to imprint upon time the form of annularity, which safeguards the analogy between the two dates by enabling the beginning and the end of any segment of time to constitute themselves in their spiraling movement. If calendar blows secure what Derrida calls the "possibility of commemoration" ("*la possibilité de la commémoration*" Derrida 37)—a possibility that Walter Benjamin theorizes in *Das Passagen-Werk* as the historical index of the image: the time of an encounter between times (Benjamin 577)—de Burgos's poem explodes the very annularity that secures commemoration in its possible-possibility. If the annularity of time guarantees the possibility

of the anniversary through the spectral touching of two dates, de Burgos's poem unleashes a mode of dispossession that precisely renders radically uncertain the possibility that the time of any beginning will come back, however spectrally, in another analogous time. If the power of the date safeguards the very possibility of an encounter between times, what occurs *in* and *as* de Burgos's poem is a loss of the date that deprives the latter of its power to secure its commemoration. By staging the infinite solitude that irrupts as soon as the date becomes *imposisible*, de Burgos's poem allegorizes the danger that is part and parcel of any "historicity worthy of its *name*" ("*une historicité digne de son nom*"): the danger that marks a time that has lost the power to secure its own legacy, a time whose survival comes only from the *other*.[9]

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El mar y tú is widely considered by critics as de Burgos's masterpiece; its poems unleash with unparalleled force and clarity the clamor of silence, solitude, and death that was already audible in her first two poetry volumes: *Poema en veinte surcos* (*Poem in Twenty Furrows*) and *Canción de la verdad sencilla* (*Song of the Simple Truth*), published in 1938 and 1939 respectively.[10] Although the epistolary exchange with her sister shows that de Burgos had already finished writing *El mar y tú* by the beginning of 1941, the book was only published in 1954 under the title, *El mar y tú. Otros Poemas* (*The Sea and You and Other Poems*). In its posthumous publication, the volume is composed of three parts: the first one is titled "Velas sobre el pecho del mar" ("Sails Upon the Sea's Chest"), the second, "Poemas para un naufragio" ("Poems for a Shipwreck"), and the third is titled "Otros poemas" ("Other Poems"). The third section, however, includes poems that de Burgos wrote after

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[9] See Derrida (2003) 198

[10] See González (2004) xlvi, Jiménez de Báez (1961) 192, López-Baralt (2004) 240.

leaving La Habana in 1942 and which she did not intend to publish in this volume, but which her sister, who oversaw the publication of *El mar y tú. Otros Poemas* soon after the poet's death in 1953, decided to include.[11]

In his beautiful essay on *El mar y tú*, "Julia de Burgos y el instante doloroso del mundo" ("Julia de Burgos and the Painful Instant of the World"), literary critic Rubén Ríos-Ávila characterizes this volume as a "prophetic" text, in which de Burgos anticipates the end of her romantic relation with Juan Jimenes-Grullón, which forced her to leave Cuba in 1942 and return to her North American exile (Ríos-Ávila 91). A letter from January 7, 1941 that de Burgos wrote to her sister reveals the extent to which the tensions with Jimenes-Grullón marked the last part of the writing process of *El mar y tú*:

> Mi Consuelín querida:
>
> En realidad no te había escrito porque no tenía ánimo para ello. He pasado las Navidades más perras de mi vida. Juan se fue una semana antes de Noche Buena para el interior, regresó el día mismo a dormir, pues estaba muy cansado. Se fue el 25, y esta es la hora en que no hemos podido reunirnos todavía. […]
>
> He escrito los poemas más trágicos de mi vida, y he tenido días negros en los que he pensado hasta en el suicidio. Los padres de Juan no le han hablado nada de mí, pero le tiran puyitas a los amigos, a Bosch, etc. … Pero estoy

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[11] In a letter that de Burgos sent to her sister on March 24 1941, Burgos outlines her plans for the publication of *El mar y tú*: "El libro lo dividí en dos partes—no sé si ya te lo dije. 1. "Velas sobre el pecho del mar" (que son todos los poemas de sueño y de amor) 2. "Poemas para un naufragio" (poemas torturados y trágicos). 3. Tiene el libro 30 poemas." (de Burgos 107) ("I divided the book in two parts—I do not know if I already told you. 1. "Sails Upon the Sea's Chest" (all of which are poems of love and dreams) 2. "Poems for a Shipwreck (tortured and tragic poems). 3. The book has 30 poems.")

> triunfando. Ellos se quedan todavía en la Habana, y yo me voy al lado de Juan (de Burgos 91).
>
> (My Dear Little Consuelo:
>
> Truth be told, I had not written to you because I was not in the right mood. I have spent the worst Christmas of my life. A week before Christmas's eve, Juan left to go to the interior and he returned on that exact day to sleep, since he was too tired. He left on the 25 and to this day we have not yet had a reunion. […] I have written the most tragic poems of my life and I have had dark days in which I have thought about suicide. Juan's parents do not say anything about me, but they throw little darts to friends, to Bosch, etc. … But I am winning. They still remain in La Habana and I go along with Juan.)

When de Burgos mentions to her sister that she had just composed her most tragic lines she is most likely referring to the poems that are gathered in the second part of *El mar y tú*, "Poemas para un naufragio," in which the poem "¡Dadme mi número!" appears. At this point in time, de Burgos still hoped that the bond with Jimenes-Grullón would survive the opposition of his parents to their relation. Although the second part of *El mar y tú* is usually read as an attestation of de Burgos's heartbreak, I agree with Ríos-Ávila when he argues that the intensity of de Burgos's expectancy of death should make us think twice about taking death as a mere metaphor for the impending failure of her romantic relationship:

> La muerte cobra en este libro una dimensión autónoma, que rebasa el contenido específico de la decepción amorosa, para convertirse en una fuerza ponderosa que domina la voluntad misma de la escritura. […] Hay, hasta

> podría argumentarse, una vocación de muerte en muchos de estos poemas, una profecía reiterada del lugar de la muerte como el futuro desde donde la poesía adquiere su sentido pleno, como el lugar donde se escucha el llamado de la escritura (Ríos-Ávila 91).
>
> (Death acquires in this book an autonomous dimension that goes beyond the specific content of failed love and transforms itself into a powerful force that dominates the very will to write. […] We could even argue that there is a vocation of death in many of these poems, a reiterated prophecy of the place of death as the future from which poetry acquires the fullness of its sense, as the place from which the call to write is heard.)

If death becomes autonomous in *El mar y tú*, according to Ríos-Ávila, this is precisely due to the extreme absoluteness that it acquires in poems such as "¡Dadme mi número!." This volume configures death as the uttermost limit that demarcates the totality of the time-space in which poetic inscription unfolds: death is the limit from which the very *kerygma* of de Burgos's poetry proceeds, the site that determines the ultimate significance of poetic expression.

But how does death irrupt in its autonomy and absoluteness in *El mar y tú*? And what is the relation between the "vocation of death" that, according to Ríos-Ávila, characterizes the very composition of this poetry volume and the possibility of survival? In its demand for the number, de Burgos's "¡Dadme mi número!" presents a limit case to Ríos-Ávila's interpretation by depicting the poetic voice—who also happens to be a poet—as being deprived of even the very experience of being called by death:

¡Dadme mi número!	"Give Me My Number!"
Qué es lo que esperan? ¿No me llaman? ¿Me han olvidado entre las yerbas mis camaradas más sencillos, todos los muertos de la tierra?	What are you waiting for? You don't call me? Have you forgotten me among the grass my most simple comrades, all the dead of the earth?
¿Por qué no suenan sus campanas? Ya para el salto estoy dispuesta. ¿Acaso quieren más cadáveres de sueños muertos de inocencia?	Why don't your bells toll? I am already ready for the leap. Perhaps you want more corpses of dreams dead of innocence?
¿Acaso quieren más escombros de más goteadas primaveras, más ojos secos en las nubes, más rostro herido en las tormentas?	Perhaps you want more rubble of more drizzly springs more dry eyes in the clouds, more wounded face in the storms?
¿Quieren el féretro del viento agazapado entre mis greñas? ¿Quieren el ansia del arroyo, muerta en mi muerte de poeta?	You want the wind's casket huddled within my mop of hair? You want the creek's urge dead in my poet's death?
¿Quieren el sol desmantelado, ya consumido en mis arterias? ¿Quieren la sombra de mi sombra, donde no quede ni una estrella? (de Burgos 196)	You want the sun dismantled already consumed in my arteries? You want the shadow of my shadow, where not even a star is left?

The poem's first five stanzas confront the reader with a series of apparently rhetorical questions, which are interrupted only by a single verse in the grammatical form of an affirmative proposition: "Ya para el salto estoy dispuesta." ("I am already ready for the leap.") This verse/sentence emerges solitary, like an island, in the midst of the sea of questions that unfolds *in* and *as* the opening stanzas of this poem. But this line is affirmative not only in a grammatical sense; its affirmative character is rather lodged most intensely in what this line *signifies*, beyond its mere semantic content. For this line conveys the poetic voice's readiness for the leap as the poet's anticipated response to the call of death, which only those who are

already dead—her "most simple comrades" ("*camaradas más sencillos*")—could utter. The poet's resolute affirmation of her preparedness to answer to the call of the dead by leaping into death and joining them affirms the poet's capacity, willingness, and even desire to be fully measured, to be granted her most extreme and yet most intimate limit. On this reading, this affirmative line seems to evoke Martin Heidegger's notion of "running ahead" ("*Vorlaufen*") in *Sein und Zeit* as the authentic way of understanding death as a possibility that cannot be actualized (Heidegger 262). The affirmation of *her* self in its ipseity, as well as all of the poet's utterances that either affirm or deny something about something, is only secured in its possibility on the basis of the poet's self-affirmation of her readiness to be towards death.

The last four stanzas of the poem repeat the title of the poem, "¡Dadme mi número!" ("Give me my number!"), indicating a shift in the poem's register from posing questions to voicing an exigency:

<table>
<tr><td>Casi no puedo con el mundo,
Que azota entero a mi conciencia…</td><td>I can barely handle the world,
which whips, entire, my consciousness…</td></tr>
<tr><td>¡Dadme mi número! No quiero
que hasta el amor se me desprenda…</td><td>Give me my number! I don't want
even love to detach itself from me…</td></tr>
<tr><td>(Unido sueño que me sigue
como a mis pasos va la huella.)</td><td>(United dream that follows me
as footprints go with my steps)</td></tr>
<tr><td>¡Dadme mi número, porque si no,
me moriré después de muerta!
(de Burgos 196-97)</td><td>Give me my number, for if not,
I will die after I am dead!</td></tr>
</table>

The tragic tone of this poem and the intensity of its demand for the arrival of the moment of death have consolidated its position as one of *loci classici* of de Burgos's *corpus*. For Ríos-Ávila, this poem embodies the "wager" that characterizes de Burgos's poetic production after

her exile, a "wager for an act of prestidigitation through which the presence of the body, which is barely tolerable, clamors and wishes for its disappearance in each verse" *("apuesta por un acto de prestidigitación mediante el cual la presencia casi intolerable del cuerpo clama, anhela en cada verso, la llegada de su desaparición*." Ríos-Ávila 95), In demanding "a place in the front of the line of those who wait impatiently their turn to die" *("un puesto de avanzada en la fila de los que esperan impacientemente el turno de morir.*" Ríos-Ávila 93) "¡Dadme mi número!" voices a claim that would coincide with the very clamor that traverses de Burgos's poetic word. Commenting also on the relation between numbers and death in "¡Dadme mi número!," Mercedes López-Baralt argues that this poem "deprives death of all solemnity, treating it from an ironic, prosaic perspective by proposing an allegory in which waiting for death becomes as it were a matter of waiting one's turn in a bureaucratic office. And she insists on claiming hers with impatient urgency" ("*despoja a la muerte de toda solemnidad, tratándola desde un prosaísmo irónico, al proponer la alegoría de su espera como si de hacer turno en una oficina burocrática se tratara. E insiste en reclamar el suyo con urgencia impaciencia.*" López-Baralt 241).

These two interpretations of de Burgos's poem coincide in one fundamental aspect: they both assume that the number that the poetic voice demands is an *ordinal* number, i.e., a number that *assigns* to a member of a set its place within a series, rather than a number that simply *counts* the multiples that compose any given set. This explains why both critics understand the poet's relation to death by framing this relation within an "allegorical" scene that depicts the poetic voice waiting for her turn to die. From this follows yet another other similarity between these two interpretations, namely, that for both these poets the number

that is at stake in de Burgos's poem must also function analogously or metaphorically as a *substitute* for the proper name of the poet. The structure of the number in de Burgos's poem is thus determined by both ordinality and nominality: the number both assigns the poet to her place in the line of those who await death, and also names her. That said, assignation and nomination can only coincide in the same number within the framework of the allegorical scene of waiting in line that Ríos-Ávila and López-Baralt read into de Burgos's poem. It is only if we assume that she is indeed waiting for her turn to die that the position of the poet in this mortal series becomes her name—a possibility that would be actualized as soon as *her* number is read out loud. The number that the poetic voice demands throughout "¡Dadme mi número!" would therefore be both an ordinal and a nominal number, or an ordinal number that functions as a proper name—i.e., an *improper* form of a proper name.

Although I agree with some aspects of this interpretation, I want to offer a different reading of the motif of the number in this poem that takes into account the poet's *demand* for the number precisely *as* a demand or a petition. This demand is already formulated explicitly in the very title of the poem, and is reiterated twice in the concluding four stanzas. Moreover, the last repetition of this demand consolidates the metaphorical relation between the act of appellation and of ordinal enumeration:

¿Qué es lo que esperan? ¿No me llaman?
¿Me han olvidado entre las yerbas
mis camaradas más sencillos,
todos los muertos de la tierra?

[…]

¡Dadme mi número, porque si no,
me moriré después de muerta!
(de Burgos 197)

What are you waiting for? You don't call me?
Have you forgotten me among the grass
my most simple comrades,
all the dead of the earth?

[…]

Give me my number, for it not,
I will die after I am dead!

The last stanza secures the metaphorical chain that links the poet's name to her number by affirming their common referent: the interruption of death by way of death or the death of dying. Being called by the dead is equal is to being given one's number—to be claimed for death by the dead in such a way that one may cease to continue to die being already dead. This non-specular doubling—the allegorical irony of an interruption of death attained by death itself—splits death in its very core, dividing the extremity of its *utopia* and installing an infinite tension at its core. This tension could be analyzed as a conflict between two deaths: the infinity of dying that informs the poetic voice's demand and the death of dying itself. Moreover, the fourth stanza of de Burgos's poem gives a name to the first mode of death outlined above: it is a poet's death ("*muerte de poeta*"):

> ¿Quieren el féretro del viento
> agazapado entre mis greñas?
> ¿Quieren el ansia del arroyo,
> muerta en mi muerte de poeta?
> (de Burgos 196)

> You want the wind's casket
> huddled within my mop of hair?
> You want the brook's thirst
> dead in my poet's death?

The poetic word in "¡Dadme mi número!" inflicts blows of a strange, ironic lethality: poetry kills both the poet and what the poet poetizes, while consigning both to the certainty of a continuous and infinite dy*ing*. The poem's last line affirms this certainty: the poet *knows* that unless she is given her number, unless she is called, she will continue to die after having died of a "poet's death."

It is significant that the image that de Burgos's chose to characterize the kind of death that is proper to poetry is that of a brook or a rivulet whose longing or yearning has been emptied out. This is so for various reasons, beginning with the fact that the image of the river occupies a privileged position in the tropological repertoire of de Burgos. In fact, these two verses from "¡Dadme mi número!" recall the opening stanza of de Burgos's most

famous poem, "Río Grande de Loíza," published in her first poetry collection, *Poema en veinte surcos* (*Poem in Twenty Furrows*):

¡Río Grande de Loíza!... Alárgate en mi espíritu y deja que mi alma se pierda en tus riachuelos, para buscar la fuente que te robó de niño y en un ímpetu loco te devolvió al sendero. (de Burgos 55)	Río Grande de Loíza!... Expand yourself in my spirit and let my soul lose itself in your brooks, to search the source that stole you as a child and in a mad impetus returned you to the trail.

The contrast of these two relations between the poet and the river could not be more striking, even if both are underwritten by the same tropological structure, i.e., chiasmus. "Río Grande de Loíza" opens with an apostrophe: the poet addresses the river in its absence—in this sense, it is a truly *apo*-stophic poem—inviting or commanding the river to extend itself in the medium of her spirit. Rather than killing the river through her address, the spirit of the poet in fact becomes the river *of* the river or the river *itself*: the constant unfolding of spirit enables the finite extension of the river to be enlarged and expanded unto infinity. At the same time, the spirit of the poet loses itself in the process of welcoming the river in its expansion. The soul of the poet, another name for her spirit, becomes the medium in which the river can search for its own origins, go back to its source. The chiasmus preserves the minimal difference between the poet and the river while allowing the poet to surrender herself to the river and enabling the river to extend itself in the poet's spirit to the extent of perhaps being able to finding itself in the other.

While just as chiastic, the relation that obtains between the poet and the brook in "¡Dadme mi número!" is decisively tragic, if not elegiac. If in "Río Grande de Loíza" the spirit of the poet fosters the river's *expansion* to the point of enabling the river to go in search of its origin, in "¡Dadme mi número!" the poet can only enable the infinite *extension* of the river's death. This infinitization of death occurs through the annihilation of the river's

"ansia"—its thirst, yearning or "longing." Poetry condemns the river as well as the poet to the sameness of a death that is infinite and yet devoid of any alterity. In "¡Dadme mi número!," to write poetry is not only to be dead while continuing to die of the *same* death; it is also to bring death to whatever enters into the ambit of the poetic word as well as to continue to kill what has already been destroyed. The exigency for the number/name of death is thus a demand for the *end* of poetic dying, which levels down death and deprives it of its alterity by neutralizing death's extremity—condemning the poet to the fatality of dying as a homogeneous and homogenizing infinite cycle.

Before continuing on this line of analysis, I want to return to my original claim about the status of this poem's demand *as* a demand. How can we read or hear this demand without rushing to supply *what* the demand demands, thus filling up and negating the void—the almost nothing—that structures the demanding, exacting language of de Burgos's poem? How can we acknowledge and honor the demand of the poetic voice, which seems to emerge out of her enduring dispossession—out of the fact that she is deprived of the very possibility of bringing an end to the continuity of dying? How can we listen to a demand that stems from a non-dialectizable nothing that is beyond all negativity and all lack? Given the difficulty of this task, it is not surprising that most readings of "¡Dadme mi número!" have rendered illegible the singularity of this poem's petition and its aberrant performativity. One way in which this happens is by interpreting this poem as an all-too-familiar allegory in which the poet waits for her turn to die. This reading does not pay heed to the demanding sense of the poet's petition, which acquires full significance only if we grant that the poetic voice is not in *possession* of her number, that is, of the possibility of bringing death to death.

Being deprived of her number/name, the poet is also deprived of the very possibility of hearing the call of the dead and thus of dying *her own* death.

This sense of a radical loss is already at work from the very first line of the poem, in which the poetic voice asks the following two questions: "¿Qué es lo que esperan? No me llamán?" (de Burgos 196) ("What are you waiting for? You don't call me?) Recall also that these questions are explicitly addressed to the poet's "most simple comrades / all the dead of the earth" ("*camaradas más sencillos / todos los muertos de la tierra*" de Burgos 196). I will return to theses lines in more detail in a second, for the time being I want to simply insist on the fact that de Burgos's poem begins by staging the poet's incapacity to hear the call of the dead. Being incapable of hearing their call, the poet is also deprived of the very *possibility* of awaiting the arrival of *her* final death, of the death of her dying. As such, rather than waiting for her turn to die, the poet's incessant demand attests to an impossible facticity, which is overwhelmingly marked by the poet's incapacity to access the line of the dead, in which Ríos-Ávila and López-Baralt had already placed her. This line would be the domain in which human beings become mortal by knowing themselves as radically finite through the anticipation of death as their *ultimate* end—as an end that cannot be surpassed. Rather than simply waiting to die, the poetic voice in "¡Dadme mi número!" waits for the gift of being able to anticipate her death in the first place. As such, the mode of "waiting" that unfolds *in* and *as* this poem belongs to a *different* order than any form of expectation or anticipation that we may associate with an understanding of death as a *possibility*. Only those who already have *their* number—only those who have been given *their* place in the line of death, even if they don't know *when* exactly the will be called; only those who have been given the *name* by

which the dead will call them—can both anticipate and expect *their* death. If we read "¡Dadme mi número!" as an allegory of the poet's anticipation or expectation of the moment of death, we deny the radical dispossession that clamors in and through the poetic voice's utterances. Moreover, such a reading not only places the reader among the dead people whom the poet addresses, but also grants death to the poem itself by silencing the very silence that speaks imperceptibly in its lines.

The poet's demand for the number of her death is precisely a demand for the sheer *possibility* of death. Earlier, I suggested that the line "Ya para el salto estoy dispuesta." ("I am already ready for the leap.") could be taken as an indication of the poet's resolute readiness for death, in a way that resonates with the kind of "relation" to death that Heidegger calls "*Vorlaufen*" in *Sein und Zeit*: the running ahead or the leap in which *Dasein* understands death in its *authenticity* as "the possibility of impossibility" ("*die Möglichkeit der Unmöglichkeit*" Heidegger 262). Indeed, I would suggest that Heidegger's distinction between an authentic and an inauthentic understanding of death can help us to grasp the radicality of de Burgos's philosophical wager in "¡Dadme mi número!." Running ahead or *Vorlaufen*—usually translated into English as "anticipation"—names a proper or authentic way of understanding death insofar as it discloses death *as* a possibility that cannot be actualized. Severing the ties between possibility and actuality, authentic death liberates a notion of "pure" possibility, a possibility *itself* whose infinity can only be delimited by the non-actualizable absoluteness of death *as such*—as an impossibility that "knows no measure." As such, running ahead into death *qua* possibility—being-towards-death—reveals the meaning of death as the possibility *of* the impossible. The opposite is the case with the kind

of relationship to death that Heidegger calls "*Erwartung*" or "expectation," in which death appears to *Dasein* as a possibility whose own possibility is already determined by the horizon of its actualization (Heidegger 261-62). Expecting death's arrival reinscribes death within the homogeneity of the time of ergontological consciousness, turning death into an object that an ego can intend and intuit; as opposed to running ahead towards death, which grants death its proper discontinuity and recognizes death's *utopia*—death's exorbitant excess with regards to the time-space of consciousness and subjectivity.

When it comes to death and to dying, the complexity of de Burgos's poem is such that it overflows Heidegger's schema. Indeed, the poetic voice's demand for the number/name of her death betrays an understanding of death that seems to be both *irreducible*, and *prior* to Heidegger's existential disclosure of the meaning of death *as* the innermost possibility of *Dasein*. We saw that death is modified into a possibility that can be actualized when understood in the mode of an improper expectation (which, for Heidegger, ultimately means that death is robbed of its possibility), as opposed to the proper understanding of death as the possibility of *impossibility*. However, this distinction itself understands death *as* a possibility of *Dasein*: the disclosure of death in its authenticity discloses possibility in its proper light as the very existence of *Dasein*: "Der Tod ist *eigenste* Möglichkeit des Daseins" (Heidegger 263). ("Death is the *proper* possibility of *Dasein*.") As opposed to this, the poet who petitions for her number/name of death in "¡Dadme mi número!" does not understand death as *her* possibility, not even as the *possibility* that is only hers precisely because she cannot actualize it and thus experience it in its realization. If there is something akin to a being-towards-death in de Burgos's poem, this is perhaps closer to

Emmanuel Levinas's inversion of this Heideggerian motif in *Autrement qu'être ou au-delà de l'essence* than to Heidegger's own formulation: "L'être-pour-la-mort est patience; non-anticipation; une durée malgré soi, modalité de l'obéissance: la temporalité de temps comme obéissance" (Levinas 96). (Being-towards-death is patience; non-anticipation; a duration in spite of itself, modality of obedience: the temporality of time as obedience.) Rather than running ahead towards death, rather than anticipating *death* in its impossibility, the poetic voice in "¡Dadme mi número!" registers the imperceptible and unexperienceable blow of *death* as sheer impossibility. In a lecture that Levinas delivered in 1960, titled "Au-delà du possible" ("Beyond the Possible"), we find a formulation that is perhaps even closer to what I would argue is at stake in de Burgos's poem. For Levinas, the instant of death is both imminent and exceptional precisely because "within life, it is the impossibility of all possibility (and not the possibility of the impossibility ~~of all possibility~~ {as Heidegger would have it.})" ("*dans la vie il l'impossibilité de toute possibilité (et non pas la possibilité de l'impossibilité ~~de toute possibilité~~ {comme le veut Heidegger}.*)" Levinas 306) Bereft of all possibility, the poet is deprived of even the mere possibility of dying *of* her own, final death.

Dispossessed of *her own* death, the poet in de Burgos's poem is not a *Dasein*. The persistence of her demand for the number of death casts the second verse of the first stanza in its proper, *ironic* light. When the poet states "I am already ready for the leap" ("*Ya para el salto estoy dispuesta*" de Burgos 196), she is not attesting to her capacity to liberate the possibility of her own death as the possibility of the impossible; instead, this affirmation is a confession of her infinite impotence. The poet *cannot* take the leap of death *by herself*, in spite of being already ready for it. Whereas for Heidegger the most proper possibility of

Dasein—authentic death—is something that *Dasein alone* can possibilitate for itself (Heidegger 363), the poetic voice in "¡Dadme mi número! becomes more acutely aware of the ab-solute infinity of her impotence the more she affirms her readiness to die *at last*. In de Burgos's poem, to-be-towards-death is to be incapable of anticipating death; the poem is uttered from a dimension that seems to be marked by what Levinas calls "patience," whose time is not the ecstatic temporality that proceeds from the unsurpassable futurity of my death, but rather the time that *passes by* in the moment in which experience itself becomes impossible, when all futural projections are foreclosed. And yet, the poet in Burgos's poem assumes her dispossession with an impatience that would perhaps be foreign to Levinas's thinking: hers is not the time of an obligation that constitutes her ipseity and subjectivity as always already responsible for the other. The defiant tone that marks the poem in its entirety goes in hand with the performative dimension of its demanding language: the poem does not assent to an obligation but rather conveys the poet's *exigency*, her wish to enter into the space in which the impossibility of death will finally become *possible* for her.

Ironically, the intensity of the poetic voice's demand can be read most forcefully not in the stanzas in which she actually utters this demand, but rather in the first five stanzas in where she interrogates her dead comrades about their delay in claiming her for death. From her opening questions—"¿Qué es lo que esperan? ¿No me llaman? (de Burgos 196) ("What are you waiting for? You don't call me? ")—the poetic seems to interpellate her only possible addressee, namely, the dead ones, who are the only ones who could give the poet her number and grant her access to the domain of those who can anticipate their own final death. However, this opening interpellation amounts to an apostrophe in the literal sense of the

term: the poet turns to addressees—a plurality of them, constituted in the form of a community or a collective of the dead—who are not there. The apostrophe that traverses this poem in its entirety betrays the poetic's voice enduring and ironic abandonment: the opening interrogation seeks to performatively conjure up an addressee that is gone. The poetic voice is not only deprived of the number of death, and thus of the possibility of dying her own death. Her highest poverty consists in the fact that she is deprived of any relation to her very comrades who may give the poetic voice her number in the first place. Not only does the poem portray a relation to death prior to any constitution of a mortal self, the poem also installs us in a dimension prior to the determination of a subject or of an ipseity who is called or claimed by another. Addressing an absence, the poetic voice goes on to utter a series of questions whose status remains radically unstable. Neither auto-interrogations, nor questions posed to the poet's supposed community of dead ones, these questions demand and beg for an end to the eternity of dying, which can only be granted by the others, by the dead ones, who are gone.

The performativity of the poem's initial questions is a weak one; its power is measured by its incapacity to produce the community of the dead comrades through its interpellation. This weakness modulates the language of the poet's demand, depriving it of its imperative valence and turning the poet's demand for her number into a petition or even a prayer: the poet is not only incapable of giving herself her own number, she cannot even constitute a community of mortals to which she could demand the gift of her death. Of this poem, we could say what Werner Hamacher has argued recently in his essay "On the Right to Have Rights: Human Rights; Marx and Arendt" regarding the unstable status of the

language of prayer:

> Even before any possibility of a concordance with others, this language enounces (*bekundet*)—but it does not express—the mere existence of a separation (*Unterschieds*) from others and even insists on this separation in an attempt to bring it to bear as such. When this language turns itself as a petition to an other, it even goes ahead of the other and is a petition without this other that could fulfill it; a petition before it, which merely opens up a place for the other without being able to decide on whether this place is occupied or remains vacant [...]. It is not the speech of a being in command of language but rather of a being without substance that petitions for language, a *zōōn logon euchomenon*. (Hamacher 201)

The questions that constitute the first five stanzas of Burgos's poem unfold in the infinite distance that separates the poet and her comrades. All appearances to the contrary, these questions are neither rhetorical nor interrogative statements that pressupose an answer: their very questionability lies in their immediate modification as a weak address to the other. Following Hamacher, the only plausible function of these questions is to open up a space for the possible arrival of the other, without having the power to decree or to anticipate whether this other will ever come or not. The poetic voice's interrogatory becomes an *inter-rogatory*, her language is a request, a petition, a prayer or a rogation for the *inter*—for being in-between and being-among her dead comrades. The poet's demand is a demand for relationality—a demand that is also a petition for language, for being listened to and for listening to the call of the dead. The desperation that sets the tone of this poem emerges out

of the structural insecurity of the non-place that poetic voice occupies. The continuity of her petition is uttered from a distance so radically infinite that the poet is incapable of knowing whether her prayers have been answered or not. This uncertainty, in turn, cannot but generate further petitions—more questions that are always structurally capable of not being heard by those who could only answer them. Questions that interrogate questions, demands that demand the chance of being able to voice a demand—the poetic voice continues to die her poet's death in a desperate attempt to finally stumble upon the dead one who may answer her pleas.

In the infinity of this demand/prayer, irrupts the most intense solitude. The failure of the poetic voice to interpellate its dead comrades implies the poet's concomitant failure to interpellate herself *as* someone who truly belongs to the community of "all the dead of the earth." In order for the poet to interpellate herself as a truly mortal, finite being she must be in possession of the number of her death—she must know the number that *measures out* the totality of her life. The devastation that unfolds in this poem not only deprives the poet of any auto-constitution by taking herself as the addressee of her own questions; the same applies to the poem itself, which cannot erect itself in a moment of textual auto-telic reflexivity as the instance that is capable of granting the poet the number of her death. And the same would also applies to us as readers: to read "¡Dadme mi número!" is to bear witness to what cannot be witnessed without betraying the event that we are called to witness—the most radical of dispossessions and the most enduring of solitudes.

Thus far, I have followed traditional readings of the status of the number in Julia de Burgos's poem by assuming that the number functions as an *ordinal* number that also *names*

the poet. However, I want conclude my reading of this poem of de Burgos's by departing from the allegorical scene of waiting in line to be called to die and place the number in a different context. What if the number did not simply indicate the position of the poet in the line of those who wait to die, but instead designated and indicated the singularity of a moment in time, for example a *date* in the calendar. If the demand for the number is the demand for the date of her death, then how should we understand the *time* in which this poem unfolds? We might be tempted to blunt the radicality of this poem by reinscribing the demand for the date of death within an all-too familiar context: after all, it is well known that a key dimension of our mortality implies the fact that we never know *when* exactly we are going to die. And yet, the exceptionality of this poem—its intense historicity and politicity—does not lie in the rather banal demand to be given the *exact* number of death, to be told *when* one would die or to be sentenced to death. Instead, the petition for the *date* of death is precisely a demand to be able to *anticipate* the moment of death. It is only on the basis of this moment that the infinite dispersion of time can be gathered. The *date* of death, in its sheer indeterminacy, is nonetheless determined by its capacity to invest the time of a life or of an existence with the possibility of a beginning and an end. The date of *death* must leap beyond any other *date* within the extension of a life in order to stand in relation to the date of *birth* as the limits that determine the very annularity of time, the ring-like structure that enables the beginning and the end to touch each other. The demand for the date of death is thus a not a demand for the arrival of the actual date of death, but rather for having death, time, and language as *possibilities*. As such, the situation in which this voice finds itself is one of an enduring deprivation, an infinite distance from the ambit of ipseity, which can

only be granted by other. The self that appears in de Burgos's poem is not even a being-towards-death; a self *without* ipseity, an impossible self whose voice itself unfolds in an impossible medium that cannot be transformed into the dimension in which the voice constitutes itself in itself and as such. It is in this way that the poem is written and read—incapable of writing itself and of reading itself as well as, above all, incapable of decreeing to the other that it ought to respond or even to listen to her plea and deliver the number/name/date of death. Absolved, without responsibility—in the literal sense of being deprived of the possibility of any response—the poem *survives*: it gives itself to be read and entrusts its own survival upon an other who *may* or *may not* respond to the demand, which is also and always a prayer—to be read.

IV.4. Intense Homage

In his essay, "Dos instantes de Julia de Burgos: su concepción del tiempo" ("Two Instants of Julia de Burgos: Her Conception of Time"), Elpidio Laguna-Díaz argues that de Burgos's poetry is informed by an intensive notion of time that is heterogeneous to the time of extension and of numbers and which is ultimately anchored in a form of life—de Burgos's own existence—that only recognizes itself in the split and doubled instant of birth/death:

> Para Julia su tiempo lo marcan instantes que son en sí mismos 'estados del alma'. Alma que sólo vivió una hora entre dos instantes básicos: 17 de febrero y 6 de julio, o de Julia, que es lo mismo. De ahí que ese tiempo interior no pueda ser vulnerado por el tiempo que pasa 'sucesivamente', siempre igual.

> […] Entre dos instantes básicos, nacimiento y muerte, se distiende la vida de la Julia íntima (Laguna-Díaz 40-41).
>
> (For Julia, her time is marked by instants that are in themselves 'states of the soul.' A soul hat only lived for one hour between two basic instants: February 17 and July 6, or Julia 6, which is the same. From this follows that this interior time cannot be vulnerated by the time that passes 'successively,' always the same. […] Between these two basic instants, birth and death, the life of intimate Julia distends itself.)

I am taken by Laguna-Díaz's brilliant gesture of rewriting July 6—the date of de Burgos's death—as Julia 6: the date that marks the moment in which Julia de Burgos died appears here precisely as a number *marked* by the singularity of her death. Her death would have turned this date into *her* date—a time that is named and marked by the event of her passing away. At the same time, this gesture is also made possible by the proximity between the name and the proper name "Julia:" the sheer accident of this co-incidence gives to read the very inscription of time in the for of a date that designates the irreducible singularity of death. For Laguna Díaz, this date has the character of an instant: its time is not extensive—it does not flow or succeed—but rather leaps beyond the river of time and joins February 17—the date of de Burgos's birth.

Not only it is undeniable that de Burgos lived and died, but it is also always possible to privilege the time of intimacy and interiority as a time of a *pure* intensity—a time that is not touched by the *vulgar* time that is measured in numbers. And yet, how could we read de Burgos's demand for the *number* of her death—a demand that places the poet in the non-

space of an enduring ex-timacy and ex-propriation? Is the intimacy of de Burgos's inner sentiment the dimension in which she *survives*—living a life above and beyond the life that unfolds between the moments of her birth and death? If de Burgos survives, her survival would not guaranteed solely by the intensity of the way in which she felt and lived her time. No self can guarantee its own survival, and much less a poet whose work registers the aporetic, impossible experience of being dispossessed of dispossession itself, deprived of the very possibility of death and thus of possibility itself.

In 1977, a Puerto Rican poet named Anjelamaría Dávila published a poetry volume titled *Animal fiero y tierno* (*Fierce and Tender Animal*) in which she included a poem titled "Homenaje" ("Homage") that is dedicated to de Burgos:

Homenaje

Julia, yo vi tu claridad
y vi el abismo insondable de tu entraña.
vi tus oscuras vísceras con estrellas dormidas.
vi cómo deshojabas el misterio
para quedarte a solas
con pistilos y estambres luminosos,
enjugando los pétalos con lágrimas.
yo vi con cuánto asombro adolorido
te enfrentabas al mundo.
yo vi cómo el silencio
no pudo amordazar tu lengua transparente;
lo silenciaste a golpe limpio de ola
poblándolo de células palabras,
vi cómo las palabras
son agua y son torrente por tu boca.

Julia, como viviste para la claridad, te fuiste desvivida;
tal vez yo pueda ser un mucho tu pariente,
sobrina, nieta, hija, hermana, compañera
por la vena de sangre, río luz que se expande
saltando por el tiempo;
de tu tumba a mi oído
de tu vida quebrada hasta mis pájaros
de tu oído silente hasta mi canción titubeante

Homage

Julia, I saw your clarity
and the unfathomable abyss of your entrail,
saw your dark bowels with dormant stars,
saw how you stripped the leaves of the mystery
to remain alone
with a luminous pistil and stamen,
wiping off the petals with tears.
I saw with how much aching astonishment
you confronted the world
I saw how silence
Could not muzzle your transparent tongue
You silenced it with pure blows of waves
Populating it with words cells
I saw how words
Are water and a torrent by your mouth.

Julia, since you lived for clarity, you left unlived;
Perhaps I could be much your relative:
Niece, granddaughter, daughter, sister, companion
Through the vein of blood, a river in expansion
leaping through time;
from your tomb to my ear
from your broken life to my birds
from your silent ear to my stammering song

de tus alas cortadas hasta mis cicatrices
de tus flores al viento como estrellas
desde nuestro dolor,
hay mucho espacio mudo de fronteras continuas
hay mucha sombra y mucha canción rota;
hay mucha historia.
(Dávila 33-34)

from your clipped wings to my scars
from your flowers, moved by the wind like stars
from our pain
there is much mute space of continuous borders
there is much shadow and much broken song,
there is much history.

The concluding lines of Dávila's poem suggest the intensity that marks historical encounters: "hay mucha historia" ("there is much history"). Indeed, an excess of history surrounds de Burgos is life and poetry: the repetition of the same stories continues to determine how de Burgos appears in our present. And yet, Dávila also seems to point to a different understanding of an excessive history—a history that is excessive precisely because it unfolds in the leap that makes two times touch one another, expelling them from time and making them "leap through time" ("*saltando por el tiempo*").

*

Rather than asking *which* aspect or figure of de Burgos's ought to be commemorated in her centenary, or rather than interrogating *how* de Burgos's time relates to our time and thus continues to *survive* to this day, my reading of de Burgos's has sought to not take for granted de Burgos's *survival* in our current moment. By suspending the historicist frameworks that enable us to take for granted the immediacy of the legibility of de Burgos's poetry in our current moment, this chapter attempted to set in motion the *aporia* that traverses what I call *reading danger*: a form of reading that is historical precisely because it can only receive its own determination from what *may* offer itself to be *read now*.

Perhaps if we were to be touched by de Burgos's poetry *otherwise*, her poetry and her life may become once more a source of wonder and a catalyst for further questions. There is

no way of telling in advance who or what may or may not be *touched* in this moment of *touching otherwise*—the danger that traverses *reading* is such that both what is read and whoever reads may end up infinitely altered in and through their very encounter. For this reason, a textured reading would have to be attuned not only to the friction generated by the differences that inhabit the presumed identity of a proper name or a singular signature. It would also have to remain open to the *chance* that it may have *nothing* to encounter—not because nothing gives itself to be read, but rather because both the reader and the text that is read may always be reduced to *nothing* or to *almost nothing* through their very encounter. Here lies the supreme fragility and indeed the *historicity* of reading: the infinity of an encounter may always *trans*form those who have entered into its non-space to such an extent that they may be radically expelled from the domain of their *ipseity*. The event of such an expropriation would deprive both the reader and the text that is read of their power to be *the same* as they were before their encounter—they may not be *the same* not only in the relatively banal sense that they have *become-other* than they used to be, but primarily because they would no longer be capable of coinciding with themselves enough to even be themselves.

CHAPTER FIVE

Caribbean Histories of the Archi-Body: "*La barque ouverte*" and *"Close Up"*

Si la academia me pidiera un informe hoy… Si la academia me pidiera un informe, que podría darle que ya no tuviera la estructura arcaica de un discurso formalizador*, y* que no da nada*. […] En la estructura del informe se produce la captura del sujeto; el académico se realiza como hombre, como humano en el acto de informar, de someterse a una forma sin forma, general, objetiva, universal, sin trazos del sujeto autobiográfico.*

[…]

El animal en la literatura marca siempre el lugar de una tensión de lo indecible de lo humano que nos dice más de lo humano que de lo animal. Por un lado, el animal entra en la literatura para ser olvidado, y negado. Hasta cierto punto. Por otro, es también su persistencia en lo humano lo que insiste a través de su presencia. El animal siempre parece decirnos que no somos 'humanos, demasiado humanos.'

(If the academy asked me for a report today, if the academy asked me for a report, what could I give it that would not have the archaic structure of a *formalizing* discourse, *that gives nothing*. […] In the structure of the report the capture of the subject is produced, the academic achieves itself as a man, as a human, in the very act of informing, of submitting himself to a form without form, general, objective, universal, without any traces of the autobiographical subject.

[…]

The animal in literature always marks the place of the tension of the human's unsayable, which tells us more about the human than the animal. On the one hand, the animal enters literature in order to be forgotten and negated. Up to a certain point. On the other hand, what insists through the animal's presence is also its persistence in the human. The animal always seems to tell us that we are not 'human, too human.')

Mara Negrón, "De la animalidad no hay salida…"
("No Exit From Animality")[1]

[1] See Negrón (2009) 28, 33.

VI.1. Animal Aporias: Mara Negrón reads Franz Kafka

Since a dissertation cannot but take the *form* of an academic report and be written primarily for the consumption of the academy, it seems befitting to open the last chapter of this dissertation by citing these two passages from the opening chapter of Mara Negrón's eponymous volume *De la animalidad no hay salida… Ensayos sobre animalidad, cuerpo y ciudad* (*No Exit from Animality: Essays on Animality, the Body, and the City*).[2] The first passage I quoted above reproduces the opening lines of the first chapter in Negrón's book, which examines the aporias of animality through a reading of Franz Kafka's "Ein Bericht für eine Akademie" ("A Report to an Academy"). Kafka's short story, originally published in 1917, is framed around a scene that is very familiar to most academics. I am referring to the theatrics of delivering a conference paper or, more specifically, a keynote address. The story takes the form of a speech delivered by a character named Rotpeper—a former ape who became a human during captivity. Invited by an unnamed scientific academy "to submit a report on my former apish life" ("*einen Bericht über mein äffisches Vorleben einzureichen*." Kafka 322), Rotpeter begins his address by acknowledging the impossibility of delivering the report that the academy solicited in the *terms* in which they demanded it:

> In diesem Sinne kann ich leider der Aufforderung nicht nachkommen. Nahezu fünf Jahre trennen mich von Affentum, eine Zeit, kurz vielleicht am Kalender gemessen, unendlich lang aber durchzugaloppieren, so wie es getan habe, streckenweise begleitet von vortrefflichen Menschen, Ratschlägen,

[2] Until her death in 2012, Mara Negrón was one of the most lucid philosophical voices in cultural and political debates in Puerto Rico and the Caribbean, crafting a sui-generis form of cultural critique that was deeply marked by French feminism, poststructuralism, and Caribbean literature and history.

> Beifall und Orchestralmusik, aber im Grunde allein, den alle Begleitung hielt sich, um im Bilde zu bleiben, weit vor der Barriere. Diese Leistung wäre unmöglich gewesen, wenn ich eigensinnig hätte an meinem Ursprung, an den Erinnerungen der Jugend festhalten wollen. Gerade Verzicht auf jeden Eigensinn war das oberste Gebot, das ich mir auferlegt hatte; ich, freier Affe, fügte mich diesem Joch. Dadurch verschlossen sich mir aber ihrerseits die Erinnerungen immer mehr. (Kafka 322)
> (Unfortunately, in this sense, I cannot satisfy your demand. Nearly five years separate me from apedom, perhaps a short time when measured by a calendar, but infinitely long to gallop through, as I have done it, accompanied in part by excellent men, counsel, acclamation and orchestral music, but in principle alone, since all company must keep itself far, in front of the barrier, in order to remain an image. This achievement would have been impossible if I would have obstinately wanted to hold fast to my origin, to the memories of youth. Indeed, renouncing all obstinacy was the highest commandment that I had to impose upon myself; I, a free ape, submitted myself to this yoke. But as a result, memories in turn close themselves to me evermore.)

The process of anthropogenesis having been accomplished, Rotpeter cannot satisfy the conditions set forth by the scientific academy because he can no longer remember his former life *as* an ape. By placing himself under the “yoke” of humanity, Rotpeter acquired the same distance that separates all human beings from their past as apes, which accounts for the

tension that Rotpeter establishes between two temporal orders: an extended time that can be chronologically measured with an a calendar, and an unquantifiable, infinitely intensive time that irrupts as soon as a limit is trespassed and the distance that separates two moments becomes an abyss.

In order to have something to report to the academy, Rotpeter must rely on "foreign reports" ("*fremde Berichte*" Kafka 323). These stories narrated by those who knew him before or during his transformation into a human allow Rotpeper to begin to fill this void and produce a narrative about his own process of anthropogenesis. Thanks to these stories, we are able to read Rotpeper's retelling an account of his origins and find out that he comes from the Gold Coast, known today as Ghana, that he was shot and captured by hunters and taken on board to a ship where he finally awoke to find himself in captivity, confined within the narrow limits of a cage. Most importantly, we learn that his sole "feeling" ("*Gefühl*") throughout his captivity could be summarized in one formula: "Kein Ausweg" (Kafka 325) ("No exit"). And yet, as Rotpeper himself makes clear, his "old apish truth" ("*alte Affenwarheit*") can only be expressed in a human language and is therefore betrayed by the very medium in which it can be communicated:

> In alledem aber doch nur das eine Gefühl: kein Ausweg. Ich kann natürlich das damals affenmäßig Gefühlte heute nur mit Menschenworten nachzeichnen und verzeichne es infolgedessen, aber wenn ich auch die alte Affenwahrheit nicht mehr erreichen kann, wenigstens in der Richtung meiner Schilderung liegt sie, daran ist kein Zweifel. (Kafka 325)
>
> (But in all of this only the one feeling: no exit. Naturally, today I can only

> trace my apish feeling with human words and consequently distort it, but even if I cannot reach any more my old apish truth, there is no doubt that at least this truth lies in the direction of my portrayal.)

Glossing this passage, Negrón mobilizes the lexicon of translation to account for what is at stake in this moment of Kafka's story:

> La traducción de 'la verdad simiesca' es un proceso insatisfactorio. La búsqueda de una salida se relaciona con esa problemática de la transcripción y la representación de algo irrepresentable. Ese algo irrepresentable es el origen de la humanidad y sería propiamente lo que recubre la figura del origen. El relato de Kafka habla, performa, imita lo irrepresentable. (Negrón 33)
> (The translation of the 'apish truth' is unsatisfactory. The search for an exit is related to the problem of transcribing and representing something unrepresentable. This something unrepresentable is the origin of humanity, which is what would cover up properly the figure of the origin. Kafka's story speaks, performs, imitates the unrepresentable.)

As Negrón points out, the "report" that the academy solicits can only be delivered by producing an "unreportable" residue: Rotpeper can only tell his story by parting ways with the very truth of the self whose transformation he is asked to narrate. Negrón reads Kafka's story as a poignant exploration of the limits of metaphor, translation, and representation; limits that become more legible as soon as what is metaphorized, translated, or represented is not of the order of any event but of the order of an *origin*. Kafka's story exposes the *aporia* of the origin: on the one hand, the origin is subtracted from any medium in which it may

present itself—be it language, materiality, visibility, etc. The origin can only be a metaphor, or better, a metonymy of the origin, and every trope invested with the semantic value of the originary is ultimately a metaphor for an origin that is never present *as such*. On the other hand, the absolute effacement of the origin writes itself metonymically, becoming a text that at least has a minimal form of legibility: the legibility of what perhaps remains illegible when read. It is not merely that the translation from ape to human generates a residue; the residue was always already the only status that the origin may have ever had. Kafka's story thematizes the necessity of metaphor in every translation, while also disclosing the impossibility for any metaphor—and, by extension, for any translation—to fully bring into its language what *comes before* its very emergence as a language, namely, the origin of language. Finally, the story suggests that the untranslatable, nonmetaphorical residue is in a certain way the result of this failure to translate, and, paradoxically, it is also that which generates more translations. A translating metaphor is paradoxically most necessary when a complete correspondence between the translated and the translating, that is, when a felicitous metaphor cannot be had. Every translation generates its own irreducible kernel of resistance to translation; in the case of Kafka's story this kernel becomes the *locus* of animality as the origin of humanity. The former ape cannot bring to language the truth of his animality in any straightforward, *certain* manner. And yet, his animality remains the kind of truth to which the former ape cannot choose *not* to relate.

According to Negrón, animality remains inscribed as an opaque mark, as an inscrutable layer that is laminated to the very foundations of the human. At the same time, her claim concerning the persistence of animality does not take the form of an ontological

argument for a mode of primitive or originary animality that has supposedly endured in time, remaining hidden underneath our human skin: an animality that would have been *present to itself* and already constituted as such *before* the advent of the human. To think animality after Kafka and after Negrón is to situate ourselves in the place of the following *aporia*: animality can be said to exist as such, i.e., in accordance to its essence, only after the event of its metaphorical translation. It in this sense that animality is historical; its historicity is marked by infinite expropriation. Animality is always betrayed animality; its proper, animal self is constituted through its violent transplantation into the foreign soil of the human. And yet, animality resists, and persists through its resistance, in the midst of such transpositions, which can never fully and successfully domesticate the animal by reducing it to one of the poles in the conceptual binary human/animal. Animality "is" thus only as an inaccessible excess that resists its capture by any form, any report, or any narrative.

Another instance of translation and of the untranslatable emerges as soon as we consider the title of Kafka's story with the eyes of Negrón's language—that is, as soon as we read "Ein Bericht für eine Akademie" as "Un reporte para una academia." The passage of Kafka's title from German into Spanish turns the word "*Bericht*" ("report") into the noun "*informe*." The passage from Negrón's essay that I quoted as my first epigraph mobilizes this scene of translation to introduce the question of *form* into Kafka's story. In this way, Negrón to a certain extent intensifies the metaphysical investments that are already implicit in Kafka's literary exploration of anthropogenesis at the limits of narrative and witness. Ironically, the Spanish noun "*informe*" perhaps captures more accurately the process of formation that is at stake in Rotpeter's "*Bericht*:" each iteration of the former ape's narrative

is a retracing of the genesis of the form of humanity out of a non-human-animal material support. Conversely, by questioning whether she may be *able* to give the academy anything that would not have the form of an "informe" Negrón puts herself in the position of Rotpeper, as a body that is accountable to the academy's "human, too human" language. Negrón is thus forced to confess from the beginning that the demands of the academy may not be answerable in any other *form* than in those prescribed and sanctioned by academic discourse.

If we follow Negrón, there is a form of academic anthropogenesis that marks those who belong to academic spaces, imprinting upon their reading and their writing the traits of particularly intense processes of disciplinary subjectivation. It is precisely this process of imprinting or of in-formation that generates a situation in which the proliferation of academic "*informes*" in fact "gives nothing" to the academy. Since something is indeed given whenever a text is written, Negrón must certainly have had in mind a more emphatic and robust sense of what would it mean to actually *give* something to somebody. To write for the academy in the very form of academic discourse is to give *nothing* since it is only to produce another text for immediate consumption—a text whose reception would generate no friction, let alone require or even demand the transformation of the medium in which it is received. Understood in this way, a paper that gives *nothing* also *gives* nothing: not only does it offer nothing "new" in terms of factual content, but it also does not generate new conditions of inscription and legibility, *altering* academic discourse itself in ways that may be unrecognizable, inventing *another* idiom. To write an academic "informe" is thus to reassert the proper boundaries of academic discourse, rather than to interrogate the closure of

academic language and expose it to the danger of becoming something else.

To this claim of Negrón, I would add that historicism has provided one of the strongest and most pervasive grammars for the composition of normative and normalized academic "informes" or reports, since its advent as an institutional phenomenon in mid-nineteenth century Germany. To the extent that most scholarship in the humanities and qualitative social sciences takes contextualization and periodization as conditions *sine qua non* of academic knowledge, and to the extent that literary text and works of art continue to be "read" by subsuming some of their singular traits within second-order concepts that are presumed to be historical, historicism continues to determine the conditions in which academic work is written and read.

*

I began this chapter citing Negrón's work as a way of paying homage to her lasting contributions to the theorization of sexuality, embodiment, gender, animality, and power in the Caribbean. I also find Negrón's way of engaging with the paradoxical status of animality in Kafka's story to be paradigmatic for my own attempt in this chapter to produce something *other* than an academic report. My goal in this chapter to is read Giannina Braschi's "Close Up" as an allegory of embodiment. "Close-Up" is the first part of *Yo-Yo Boing!*, a 1998 novel written by Puerto Rican diasporic writer Giannina Braschi. My reading of Braschi takes a cue from Negrón's way of elucidating the terms of this animal aporia. To anticipate the main contours of my reading, I contend that Braschi's "Close-Up" sets in motion an ambivalent allegory of body assumption. The ambivalence of this allegory is one of the most provocative aspects of Braschi's contribution to contemporary conversations about the body in

Caribbean art and culture. The body in Braschi is not determined in advance as the site of colonial, neo-colonial, racial, heteronormative, or neo-liberal structural articulations of violence; nor is it taken as an inherent source of political resistance or as the unavoidable site for the articulation of claims concerning individual or collective freedom. Braschi's work with the body instead makes explicit what oftentimes remains implicit in contemporary approaches to the question of embodiment in the Caribbean, asking us to consider the violence that is at work in the processes that invest the body with the value of a materiality that is vulnerable, but also capable of resistance and even of fighting back against its aggressors. These violent processes of investment give shape to the body *qua* body, turning it into the apt bearer or the support of the unfolding of dynamics that are often taken to be extra-corporeal or immaterial. At the same time, "Close-Up" also stages the ways in which the very process of embodiment generates an improper, excessive, and opaque body that resists its delimitation within a more proper, transparent form. Finally, the most challenging aspect of Braschi's allegory perhaps lies in her attempts to show how the production of an improper materiality remains part and parcel of a process that seems to end in a "felicitous" performance of normative embodiment. The body, in all its rebelliousness and opacity, is called to become the driving engine of a self in search of solidifying its boundaries.

Braschi's text thus invites us to rethink the ways in which we approach Caribbean bodies as either always already in need of overcoming their unnatural dispossession or as inherent sources of anti-normative political energies. These two ways of taking the body into account fail to do justice to the expropriation that is structural to embodiment, while also neglecting the ways in which abjection and negativity often remain the very hidden resources

of a politics of propriety and purity. Such a politics of purity not only renders more difficult the task of reconfiguring the concrete and often painfully destructive contexts in which Caribbean bodies are already inscribed. It also forces these bodies to continue to bear the heavy, though transparent, sign of an abjection that is all too easily identifiable, consigning the alterity of these bodies to be systematically deprived of any opacity for the sake of their identification as other.

V.2. (Caribbean) Embodiments

It would seem as if a certain irony—a proliferating, disorienting, and uncoordinated doubling—becomes inevitable the moment one begins to speak *about* "the body." Consider, for instance, the following passage from Judith Butler's *Bodies that Matter: on the Discursive Limits of* "*Sex*:" "The body in the mirror does not represent a body that is, as it were, before the mirror: the mirror, even as it is instigated by that unrepresentable body 'before' the mirror, produces that body as its delirious effect—a delirium, by the way, which we are compelled to live" (Butler 91). Butler's rewriting of Lacan's mirror stage complicates the conceptual and "concrete" boundaries that are often invoked to separate the body and the psyche, the flesh and the soul, the material and the immaterial. Not only is it the case that the body and the mirror are co-implicated even before their boundaries have been demarcated. More importantly, the dynamics of their co-implication are already laden with values that *matter* each time their differentiation is at stake. In this particular passage, the body's difference is presumably marked by its capacity to *instigate* the mirror, just as the mirror is characterized by its *productive* abilities. This de-marcartion takes place *before* the body and the mirror become differentiated in their productive encounter, which generates

the body-in-the-mirror—a specular body. Because of its capacity to instigate, the body seems to fall on the side of the material, just as the mirror would be on the side of form due to its productive powers. Butler's account of the relation between the body and the mirror thus seems to be in agreement with Aristotle's understanding of the dynamics of this odd "couple," as exposed in his *Physics*. Recall that the material, for Aristotle, is that which "yearns for and stretches out toward it ["the divine and good and sovereign" (Aristotle 45) that is, the form] by its own nature […] as does the female for the male or the ugly for the beautiful" (Aristotle 45-46). Notice the irony implicit in this passage's rendition of the relation between materiality and embodiment. Aristotle's account of the material indexes a heteronormative understanding of sexual desire between female and male bodies at the same time as it decouples matter *as such* from any embodiment. What is material *may* or *may not* assume a body, yet its very intelligibility as material requires that the material be referenced to a sexed-gendered body, indeed, to a corporeal dyad endowed with a desire whose shape is determined as a teleological movement from opacity to intelligibility, from the resistance of matter to the tranquility of unencumbered sense.

This crucial moment in Aristotle allows us to take measure of the irony that Butler deploys in her concise somagenic allegory. For to "instigate" something—as Butler writes—is not the same as to "yearn for" that thing; instigation and yearning could almost be read as opposite relations: the former on the side of activity, the latter perhaps of passivity. Even if Butler's characterization of the body recalls the Aristotelian thinking of matter and form, she nonetheless reverses the trajectory of Aristotle's understanding of this relation, undoing the simple opposition between passivity and activity that underscores Aristotle's thinking of a

phantasmatically female-embodied matter. As a result, neither the body nor the mirror could be read as simply yearning or as merely productive. The body *instigates* the mirror to representation, but this only results in an intensification of the body's unrepresentability through its lack of correspondence to any of its representations. Indeed, we could say that, for Butler, the body instigates the mirror to representation precisely to elude *its own* incarnated visibility, to attest that it is both *in* the mirror and yet also *beyond* the reach of any of its representations. And if the mirror fails to reflect or to represent the body, this is, ironically, due to the *success* of the mirror's wild generativity, which is not governed by the *telos* of a merely mimetic *poiesis*. Paradoxically, the mirror *produces* the very body in its unrepresentability by re-producing its allegorical reflections, generating a plurality of disjointed re-presentations that correspond and do not correspond to the unrepresentable body. Finally, the body-in-the-mirror becomes perhaps the most unstable term in this triad. An improper reflection, the specular body ceases to function as a perceptual image, or even as a linguistic sign, becoming a double-trope: an allegory that only conveys its nullity and a muted apostrophe, silently turned towards the unrepresentable body—its only referent, impossibly lost.

Such would be embodiment's delirium.

And yet, the triad here is really a foursome: the delirium described above is also incarnated as the elusive corporeality of an individual that is "compelled" to live the dense, intricate weaving of these disorienting, asymmetric relations that *are* its body, without ever being *the* body or even *its* body in any fully determined way. Although the source of this compulsion may not be traced to a final legislator, its inevitability amounts to what we could

call a *law* of embodied life. This law informs what Athena Athanasiou has recently called "the central aporia of body politics," which she formulates in the following terms: "we lay claim to our bodies as our own, even as we recognize that we cannot ever own our bodies. Our bodies are beyond themselves" (Butler and Athanasiou 55).

The recognition of the impropriety of the body has been a powerful catalyst in shifting the stakes of the politics of embodiment in many minoritarian discourses, away from strong claims concerning the restoration of the *body proper* towards a body politics of relationality that insists on the body's impropriety and vulnerability as being intrinsic to embodiment's political import. Within Caribbean studies, critics such as Guillermina de Ferrari and Valérie Loichot have argued recently for the political potentialities of contending with the aporia of body politics. They both read Caribbean literature as mobilizing the body's materiality in an effort to stage decolonial resignification. For de Ferrari, this symbolic struggle generates what she calls, borrowing from Édouard Glissant, a "Body of Relation," a way of writing the body that enables Caribbean authors to undo "local colonial subjectivities" and "establish their own Caribbean poetics within the framework established by the creative violence of history, *which they transcend nonetheless*" (de Ferrari 22, emphases added). Loichot's work, which also builds upon Glissant's theoretical innovations, coincides with de Ferrari's claim that Caribbean authors both occupy and transcend the scene of originary violence that marks the singularity of Caribbean dispossession: "Caribbean writers eat back at these representations by reclaiming images of pathological eating as culturally productive […], by entrapping Western readers in their own trap, by practicing literary cannibalism, and eventually, by establishing a literature in a *postcannibalistic moment* outside

antagonistic and revengeful relations" (Loichot x, emphases added).

In this section, I want to turn to Édouard Glissant's "*La barque ouverte*" ("The Open Boat") and Giannina Braschi's "Close-Up" as two texts that take up the difficult task of giving an account of the painful historicity of embodiment in a context like the Caribbean—marked by some of the most acute forms of world-historical dispossession. In their own ways, Glissant and Braschi configure the complex dynamics of body assumption, exposing the always contingent and yet determinant ways in which dispossession itself becomes embodied. At the same time, this chapter also poses several critical questions in order to challenge the optimistic conclusions that seem to follow from the Glissantian allegory of embodiment, and on which the critical interventions of De Ferrari and Loichot are based. As we saw, in the passages quoted above these two critics mobilize Glissant's theory of relation to sketch out a way of writing the Caribbean body that would "transcend" the violence of colonialism, leaving behind the antagonistic dynamics that characterize recognitive struggles in the region. To be clear, my goal is not simply to question whether attaining such transcendence, or being in a "postcannibalistic" moment, is possible. Instead, I am interested in asking about the constitutive exclusions that might condition the production of this particular form of a relational Caribbean body. What exclusions and decisions concerning which bodies *matter* and which do not matter is at work in the theoretical elaboration of this fully relational body that would be presumably capable of assuming its embodied dispossession, of transcending the pain of its immemorial expropriation and the sedimented history of its past struggles and "antagonistic relations?" What occurs to the body's impropriety, to the body's proliferating multiplicity and a-locality, when its very unstable

and destabilizing *materiality* is taken as the vehicle for the attainment of a relation of exteriority or posteriority vis-à-vis the very modes of violence that grant the body access to its innermost intimate corporeality?[3] For the sake of which bodies, and to the expense of which bodies, is such a "Body of Relation" constituted?

In the next two sections of this chapter, I will address these questions through a reading of Glissant's "*La barque ouverte*" ("The Open Boat") and Giannina Braschi's "Close-Up." First, I will focus on the status of the body in Glissant's text, the first chapter of his major theoretical work, *Poétique de la relation* (*Poetics of Relation*). Like Derek Walcott's poem "The Sea is History," Glissant's "*La barque ouverte*" constitutes an attempt to stage one of the primal scenes *par excellence* of Antillean history: the genesis of Afro-Caribbean peoples in the traumatic "experience" of the Middle Passage. As I will argue below, Glissant's allegory of Afro-Caribbean origins not only poeticizes the originary dispossession of Caribbean bodies; it also accounts for the singularity of Caribbean worlding through the erasure of the abject materiality of the body of the slave-boat—the place of emergence of the Afro-Caribbean's vulnerable and vulnerated body and thus one of the major sources of what Glissant calls "relation." I then will turn to Braschi's "Close Up," the first part of her 1998 performance novel *Yo-Yo Boing!*, in order to consider a different allegory of bodily assumption, one which moves within the orbit of Glissant's thinking of relation and "opacity" while staging a more terrifying return of materiality, of the *other* body, which resists and troubles the body that is constituted through the dynamics of *stable* expropriations and appropriations.

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[3] For the notion of materiality that is implicit in this section, see the introduction in Butler (1993).

My working hypothesis is that Glissant's notion of relation, in spite its radicality, nonetheless neutralizes the *danger* that the wild, aberrant materiality *without* matter of what I would call the *arche-body* might return in our time in such a way that would shatter, rather than reinforce, the very possibility of formulating an *epic* history of Caribbean origins. In spite of his insistence on the *opacity* that constitutes relation, Glissant's account of the emergence of an Afro-Caribbean body politic that is open to the non-totalizing totality of the world requires the exclusion of a spectral "body," whose avatar is the figure of Medusa—an uncanny maternality whose material effects threaten the interrupt the transformation of historical trauma into the opacity that persists in the historical present of the Caribbean without threatening *this* present in its solidity. As opposed to Glissant's story of successful embodiment, Braschi's allegory of opaque embodiment exposes the unworldliness of the arche-body, undoing the very communitarian telos that seems to determine Glissant's history of opacity, opening up to *another* history of the body, and to *another body* altogether.

V.3. The Caribbean's Two Bodies: Glissant's *Boat*

In "*La barque ouverte*," Glissant tells a story of Afro-Caribbean origins, relying on different permutations of the "*gouffre*"—the "gulf" or the "abyss"—in order to describe the "experience" of the Middle Passage. "*Le terrifiant est du gouffre, trois fois noué à l'inconnu*" (Glissant 18) ("The terrifying belongs to the gulf, three times knotted to the unknown"). Glissant identifies three manifestations of the gulf, which scan and trace the coerced displacement of millions of Africans from their native continent to the Caribbean Basin and beyond. The three avatars or incarnations of the gulf are: 1. the "boat-matrix," which transported the Africans who were deported to the Caribbean; 2. the "sea-abyss," which

swallowed millions of Africans who were thrown overboard the slave ships; and finally 3. what Glissant calls the "pale murmor" ("*rumeur pâle*" Glissant 18), which incarnates the absolute unknowability faced by those who remained alive inside the boat. These three abysses are united by the fact that their "terrifying" dimension is linked to what Glissant calls "the unknown" ("*l'inconnu*"). At the same time, they differ from each other because of the singular ways in which they affect with terror the African bodies that are forced to encounter these figures of the abyss. The different degrees of intensity of terror correspond to an intensification of unknowability. The terrifying unknown, incarnated in the three avatars of the gulf, communicates with what Glissant calls throughout the text a "non-world" ("*non-monde*"). For, according to Glissant, the most terrifying dimension of the Middle Passage lies in the ways in which it deprived African slaves of any sense of orientation and any horizon of anticipation, ruining the very conditions of proper experience and thus the very possibility of having a world or being in a world (Glissant 17).

Among these three figures of the terrifying abyss, the first one—the "boat-matrix"—merits a special consideration due to its re-productive, we might even say "maternal," function.[4] For indeed, inside the boat, what is generated or "inaugurated" is precisely the Afro-Caribbean body. Glissant:

> *Une fois donc, inaugurale, quand tu tombes dans le ventre de la barque. […] Le ventre de cette barque-ci te dissout, te précipite dans un non-monde où tu cries. Cette barque est une matrice, le gouffre-matrice. Génératrice de ta clameur. Productrice aussi de toute unanimité à venir. Car si tu es seul dans cette*

[4] For a path-breaking approach to the uncanniness of a maternal function, which is anything but "natural," see Marder (2011), especially the Introduction.

> *souffrance, tu partages l'inconnu avec quelques-uns, que tu ne connais pas encore. Cette barque est ta matrice, un moule, qui t'expulse pourtant. Enceinte d'autant de morts que de vivants en sursis* (Glissant 18).
>
> (Inaugural, at first, when you fall into the belly/womb of the boat. [...] The belly/womb of this boat dissolves you, precipitates you into a non-world where you cry. This boat is a matrix, a gulf-matrix. Generator of your clamor. Producer, as well, of all unanimity to come. For if you are alone in this suffering, you share the unknown with some, whom you do not yet know. This boat is your matrix, a mold, which expulses you nonetheless. Pregnant with as many dead as living in abeyance.)

Although this passage is concerned with allegorizing the genesis of the Afro-Caribbean body in the experience of the Middle Passage, we can easily see that there seem to be at least two bodies at stake here: the bodies engendered in the boat, and the boat itself, whose anatomy and topology betrays the marks of an animal, if not human, body. At stake here would be two heterogeneous bodies: the matrix-like body of an abyssal, generative boat, and the generated Afro-Caribbean bodies.

And yet, can we legitimately say that this boat is a body? Before approaching this question, we would have to take stock of Glissant's characterization of the boat as a *terrifying gulf-matrix* and modify our question so that is reflects the extent to which this boat—and here we must note that the French noun "*barque*" is feminine—can be hardly read as anything other than a *female* body. Is Glissant's boat not another iteration of that classic *topos* of Western mythology and philosophy, namely, the figure of the paralyzing, excessive,

destructive, and yet generative woman? Is the terrifying boat-gulf an avatar of pregnant Medusa, as Glissant himself seems to suggest later on in "*La barque ouverte*"?[5] Furthermore, I suggest that we read the French noun "*ventre*" not only as "belly," but more so as "womb," in order to emphasize the strange relation of unstable and equivocal referentiality that Glissant's boat entertains with the female body. Glissant's boat seems to be on the side of the female insofar as it is itself a "*matrice*" or a "matrix," a word whose etymology remits us to the Latin *matrix*, which designates primarily the female progenitor, and which is presumably composed of the Latin nouns *mater* (mother) and *nutrix* (wetnurse). The relation of reference that Glissant establishes between the boat and the female body is further reinforced by the fact that the word "*matrice*" in French is used commonly to designate the uterus or the womb.

At the same time, perhaps we should not rush to ascribe to this boat the kind of corporeality that is proper of concrete bodies, whose sexes and genders would be presumably assignable on the basis of anatomical features or citational practices. Although such identification would be reassuring, it would not be attuned to Glissant's characterization of the bizarre materiality of the slave-boat's womb and of the irony at the heart of its generative and productive capacities. Even if Glissant's way of writing this boat's materialization cites a set of conventions that enable its recognition as a female-marked body, the force of Glissant's gesture lies in the way in which it prevents any straightforward identification between the generativity of this boat and modes of biological generation or cultural production that are normatively regarded as the province of female bodies.

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[5] Glissant (1990) 18: "*La face la plus médusante du gouffre* […]" ("The most "medusing" face of the abyss").

Consider, for instance, the fact that this boat-matrix destroys just as much as it produces. Indeed its generativity proceeds by way of destruction: “Le ventre de cette barque-ci te dissout, te précipite dans un non-monde où tu cries. Cette barque est une matrice, le gouffre-matrice. Génératrice de ta clameur. Productrice aussi de toute unanimité à venir” (Glissant 18) (“The belly/womb of this boat dissolves you, precipitates you into a non-world where you cry. This boat is a matrix, a gulf-matrix. Generator of your clamor. Producer, as well, of all unanimity to come.”) The boat’s womb “dissolves” the African bodies that enter into its cavity, robbing them of their world and plunging them into a non-world. The cry that here marks the loss of the world and the entrance into the non-world is the reversal of the cry that signals the entrance of a new born child into the world. Rather than giving birth in a genetic movement that is traditionally conceived as a moment of emergence into the light of the world, the boat gives death while keeping the bodies that it destroys paradoxically alive: it removes these African bodies from the cosmos and from any imaginable *life-world*, robbing them of any proper relation to their own proper selves while also sustaining their life in an unworldly state of abeyance. The boat is a dispossessing depository, a dispositive that de-poses life and disposes of all the lives that are inside of it by plunging them deeper into its intensive a-cosmic womb.

The boat dispossesses, but it does so by *giving* dispossession, according dispossession as the sole possible possession of these African bodies. For Glissant’s boat is also productive, generative—and its generative capabilities are “generous” enough to encompass even

"death."[6] The peculiar status of the cries of these bodies' provides the best example of the boat's strange re-productive powers. The cry of these African bodies indicates their radical dispossession, their being born unto death—stillborn, yet animate, and, above all, wordless. This cry is the only possible language, the minimal language of a life that has been expropriated, divested of all properties: the language of a life that has fallen outside of any community, any sociality, and any world. And yet, according to Glissant, the dispossessing and dispossessed cry of these African bodies is also *their* clamor; the cry coincides with the vigorous voicing of a claim that already announces the formation of a political community and a people. "Génératrice de ta clameur. Productrice aussi de toute unanimité à venir. Car si tu es seul dans cette souffrance, tu partages l'inconnu avec quelques-uns, que tu ne connais pas encore" (Glissant 18, emphasis added). ("Generator of your clamor. Producer, as well, of all unanimity to come. For if you are alone in this suffering, you share the unknown with some, whom you do not yet know.") At the threshold of normative, linguistic, human existence, these bodies can only possess the poor language that clamors—that is, that *ex-poses*—their dispossession. But this poor language already anticipates a future that would be marked by what Glissant calls here the "unanimity to come" ("*unanimité à venir*" Glissant 18). This unanimity signals the transformation of the common, impoverished language of the clamoring cry into a more capacious common language that contains and unfolds the relations that form the world of the Afro-Caribbean peoples. The boat generates a minimal linguistic community out of these dispossessed, crying bodies that seem to only share their cry but, in fact, only have in common their *inability* to even *share* their cry. The boat not

[6] On the issue of a modality of productive power whose generativity is exercised through the production of dispossession, privation, repression and death, see Butler's discussion of Foucault's notion of power in Butler (1993) 22. Also, see Mbembe (2003) 11-40.

only gives birth to the Afro-Caribbean body; it also gives birth to an inchoate and deconstituted body politic united by the common "experience" of dispossession.

As Glissant's allegory unfolds, the boat will be superseded by the other two figures of the terrifying gulf, until the very end of the text where the boat makes a return. But before the boat reappears, Glissant's text will have traced the transformation of the exceptionality and isolation of each crying African body into the formation of a people. This process occurs precisely through a change in the very nature of the experience of the unknown gulf: "Car si cette experience ["du gouffre"] a fait de toi, victime originelle flottant aux abysses de la mer, une exception, elle s'est rendue commune pour faire de nous, les descendants, un peuple parmi d'autres. Les peuples ne vivent pas d'exception" (Glissant 20). (For if this experience [of the gulf] made you—the original victim floating in the abysses of the sea—an exception, it has made itself common to make out of us—the descendants—a people among other [peoples]. Peoples do not live out of exceptions.) The becoming-common of the experience of the unknown gulf is signaled through a shift in its affective, embodied register: the abysses cease to terrify. The unknown becomes known *as* unknown through a different mode of experiencing the gulf, namely, the experience of the return of a constitutive loss—the return not of a memory, but of forgetting, of the very obliteration of memory—that no longer terrifies: "Nous nous connaissons en foule, dans l'inconnu qui ne terrifie pas. Nous crions le cri de poésie. Nos barques sont ouvertes, pour tous nous les naviguons" (Glissant 21). ("We know ourselves *en masse*, in the unknown that does not terrify. We cry the cry of poetry. Our boats are open, we sail them for all.") "*La barque ouverte*" thus traces the transformation of the materiality of this boat, from the generator of dispossession that singularizes and isolates

into the very plural body of the Antillean world. The dynamics of this process signal the strange work of appropriation that Glissant thinks under the name of relation: the appropriation *of* and *to* a constitutive absence through the establishment of a discontinuous continuity with an opaque past that cannot be remembered. The non-world of the boat, just as the unworldliness of the crying African bodies, gives rise to another mode of cry—the cry of poetry—and to a different boat—the open boat. The forgetting of the slave boat, and its return as the open boat that sails into the unknown that does not terrify, is thus a crucial moment in the chaotic process of becoming in which the non-world of an originary expropriation of Afro-Caribbeans becomes the Antillean world.

Although there is much more to be said about Glissant's notion of Caribbean worlding, I want to conclude my reading of Glissant by going back to the boat-matrix. The transformation of the slave boat into an open boat is part of the movement of Glissant's relation, which remarks on the loss of origin that marks Caribbean life and insists on the inaccessibility of the very memory of the history of violence that produced such originary expropriation. And yet, the return of the boat as a plurality of open boats suggests that, for the sake of the emergence of a Caribbean world, the boat-matrix must become the "open" boat: a vessel that is no longer aberrantly generative, destructively productive, and, above all, no longer abjectively terrifying. Glissant's notion of relation might paradoxically require the suspension of *another* relation, one that may be prior to the relations that take place within the world: the relation to the painfully generative materiality that produced these very dispossessed bodies and whose major incarnation in Glissant's allegory is precisely the abyssal boat-matrix. The body of the slave-boat perhaps *cannot matter* for the Caribbean to amount

to a world, regardless of how multiple and chaotic this world may be. In spite of his insistence on the enduring opacity of history, Glissant's allegory of Caribbean origination remains committed to a historicist epic principle that requires forecloses the door to the spectral return of the aberrantly "maternal" body of the slave boat, whose improper, metaphorical appearance would interrupt the movement of appropriation that determines the configuration of a properly Caribbean world, and paradoxically keep the Caribbean open to *historical danger*.

V.4. Braschi's History of the Body: "Close-Up"

From her 1988 award-winning poetry collection, *El imperio de los sueños* (*The Empire of Dreams*), to her 2012 "performance novel," *United States of Banana*, Braschi's literary production defies generic categories. This is particularly true of her 1998 novel *Yo-Yo Boing!*. Hailed as the first Spanglish novel published in the US and nominated for the Pulitzer Prize, the book is often singled out for its innovative use of code-switching, which blurs the lines between Spanish, English, and Spanglish to such an extent that the text can hardly be recognized as having been written in any of these "natural" languages. *Yo-Yo Boing!*'s critical acclaim solidified Braschi's status as a leading voice in the contemporary Latina avant-garde literary scene, where she is often identified as a strong proponent of a postmodern aesthetics and of a poetics and a politics of hybridity.[7]

In this section I want to focus on "Close-Up," the first section of *Yo-Yo Boing!*. In

[7] See van Haesendonck (2008) 159-201.

this text, Braschi explicitly allegorizes the process of assuming a body, marked by the re-emergence of figures of opacity that trouble the main character's attempts to assume a more desirable body, a body that would lend itself better to the pleasures afforded by a more immediate visibility and a less encumbered recognition. I propose a reading of Braschi's "Close-Up" as a powerful exploration of the limits of embodiment: a text that stages a process of body assumption, while also raises the question concerning the kinds of bodies that the self can and must appropriate as its own in order to be a self at all.

At first sight, "Close-Up" seems to be a relatively simple text. Unlike the bulk of *Yo-Yo Boing!*, the text is written fully in Spanish and it portrays only one character—a woman, who remains nameless throughout the story. The "story" takes place in her apartment and most of the action transpires in the bathroom, where the main character defecates, urinates, and menstruates; rids her body of all of its dead skin and exfoliates her face, removing all the blackheads, pimples, and hair; applies makeup and then erupts in a song composed of the five Spanish vowels. In the process of telling this "story," which has the shape of a progressively spiritualized movement of body assumption, "Close-Up" raises crucial questions about the status of the body, the relation between the human and the animal or between the body and the soul and about the possibility of fully owning one's body. Braschi succeeds in turning these quotidian rituals of grooming and of beautification into the site for an exploration of the dynamics of abjection and identification that are at work in the performance of an intelligible body. Finally, by taking the body as both a locus of opacity and resistance, and as the medium of identification and recognition, Braschi's text points to some of the most enduring questions concerning the ontological status of the body and the

temporality of embodiment.

The intense corporeality of "Close-Up" is at work since its opening lines:

> Comienza por ponerse en cuatro patas, gatea como una niña, pero es un animal con trompa feroz, un elefante. Y poco a poco, se le va desencajando el cuello, y poco a poco, le crece el cuello, una pulgada, luego dos pulgadas, luego cinco pulgadas, hasta que su cabeza se aleja tanto y tanto del suelo, casi diría que toca el techo de la casa donde habita, casi diría que da golpes contra el techo, ya no cabe su cabeza en esta casa, ha crecido tanto y tanto. Y de repente descubre que lo que le ha crecido no es su cabeza sino su cuello. Es, entonces, definitivamente, una jirafa. Pero se va jorobando, se le van encogiendo los huesos de las manos y de los pies, hay una conmoción en su cuerpo, estallan bombas por todas partes […], intenta parar la rebelión, pero es en balde y en vano. Le da por abrirse las nalgas, […] abrirse todo su culo, de dejar que salga esa otra parte de su cuerpo, esas piedrecitas marrones[…] (Braschi 3).
>
> (*SHE STARTS ON* all fours, crawling like a child, but she is a wild animal with a great big trunk, an elephant. And little by little her neck starts popping, and little by little her neck starts growing, one inch, then two inches, then five inches, until her head inches its way so far from the floor that she'd almost swear it reaches the ceiling and she'd almost swear it's grown so big and so fast that it doesn't fit inside the house anymore. And then it dawns on her that what has grown is not her head but her neck,

> which means that she must be a giraffe. Then she starts hunching over, the bones in her hands and feet start crackling, there's a rumbling throughout her body, bombs exploding [...], she tries in vain to allay the uprising. She feels like spreading her cheeks [...], opening wide, releasing that other part of her body, those brown pebbles [...].)[8]

Is the main character's body the body of an adult female human, or that of a child, or of an animal? if the latter, is it an elephant or a giraffe? is the most bodily part of her body to be located in her bowels and their uncontrollable, violent movements? or is the body of the body to be located in the minimal self who is subjected to the sudden emergence of a violence that is neither outside not inside her body—a violence that erupts from within her body and is nonetheless experienced as other, as a part of her body that is not yet herself?

"Close-Up" begins by tracing and retracing the boundaries that grant generic discreteness and distinguishability to a body, confounding the very conceptual status of the names that operate as identity poles in any attempt to determine the generic identity of a body within a morphological continuum. Its opening sentences seem to follow a regressive movement: from standing up to being in the floor, from adulthood to childhood to animality, from the expansion of its body to its contraction, leading to the excretion of feces and urine. Not only is the body staging a rebellion, but this rebellion discloses the plurality of bodies that are already found within the body of the main character, including the excrement, which the narrator explicitly labels as "the *other* part of the body." I want to emphasize the sense of alterity and of alteration that pervades these opening scenes, for it

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[8] All translations of "Close-Up" are by Tess OD'wyer, Braschi's translator. An English version of "Close-Up" was published as "Oh-Oh" in Braschi (1998).

suggests vividly that the main character's body is somehow other to herself, recalcitrant to her own attempts to master these embodied processes.

The situation in these opening lines provides a stark contrast to what occurs in the last sequence of this allegory whose beginning we could locate in the following passage that appears near the end of the text:

> Pero era necesario sentir la pesadez y la amargura del cuerpo, sentir el barrote y el látigo, para luego volar como los pájaros, y cantar, como nunca antes lo había hecho, con el tono exacto del color de la música, y que ésta, proyectada en su garganta, y llena de illusion febril, comunicara el esplendor de su agonía liberada (Braschi 14).
>
> (But it was necessary to feel the heaviness and the bitterness of her body, to feel the whip and the bar, in order to later soar like birds and sing as she had never sung before, in perfect tone with the color of the music, which, emerging from her mouth full of feverish illusion, would communicate the splendor of her liberated agony.)

The two passages from "Close-Up" that I quoted above are separated by several narrative sequences in which the narrator presents the main character's attempts to purify or beautify different parts of her body. I do not have enough space to carefully plot out every single sequence within the broader movement of this narrative of embodiment. That said, it could be easily shown that the allegory's trajectory towards the main's character assumption of a proper body is composed of several stages, each of which is structured dialectically. At the beginning of this section I briefly catalogued the actions that the main character carries out

in Braschi's text: the main character goes from defecating and ejecting bodily fluids through her anus and genitals, to removing dead skin from her body, to then turning her face into a *tabula rasa* of sorts by removing all her facial excrescences in preparation for the application of make-up, in an attempt to procure for herself a more properly human and normatively feminine *visage*. The trajectory of this process unfolds in a somewhat predictable manner: the main character begins by attempting to subdue or at least control several processes that are internal to her body; she then turns her attention to her skin, which occupies a liminal position concerning the inside and the outside of the body; finally, she focuses on her face, the part of the body that is most thoroughly intertwined with the self's identity and, as such, the target of the most intense normative pressures and of the main character's strongest libidinal investments and violent gestures.

Most relevant for this discussion is the fact that, in each of these steps, the main character begins by identifying a part of her body that must be eliminated. It is here that the body emerges and reemerges as a *locus* of opacity and as a site of resistance to the main character's attempts to constrain the supposed spontaneity of its aberrant movement. It is also at this moment that the uncanny effects of the ambivalent dynamics of identification and abjection are most strongly registered in the text. Since these abject bodily outgrowths stand in the way of the main character's efforts to attain the body that she desires they have to be thoroughly delimited, if not eliminated. But the very mechanism of identifying the body's zones of abjection generates in the main character a perverse desire for those parts of the body that she cannot recognize as her own. Far from leading to any reconciliation or to a recognition of the ambivalent nature of these dynamics, the main character's attachment to

her abjection becomes the driving impulse behind her continuing efforts to procure for herself a proper body. When taken together, each of these steps along the story of embodiment in "Close-Up" yield the image of an spiraling movement that allows the main character to continuously attain a higher degree of control over her body by drawing more stable boundaries between the parts of her body which are abject and those which can be homogenized.

The opening lines of Braschi's text stage a body in deterritorialization. The main character is thus presented from the get-go as passively undergoing a series of "generic" perhaps even "gender troubles," as being affected by unexplainable occurrences that confuse her own *genus* and blur the boundaries between the inside and the outside of her body. If the processes paraphrased above constitute the main character's itinerary towards assuming her body, it is in the second passage quoted above that the success of this process is attained. In this passage, the narrator reconfigures the unfolding of this allegory of embodiment by retroactively granting a direction to what had occurred until this moment in the text. The sense of the allegory is made explicit the moment the main character realizes the significance of her corporeal suffering. This moment of awareness leads to a sort of retrospective reterritorialization of the main's character deterritorialized body. More so than merely coming to terms with her past, this passage stages the main character's attainment of a proper understanding of her body's rebelliousness, as well as of the painful disciplinary processes of domestication, purification, and beautification to which she had to submit her body. She can grasp the necessity of all the pain that she inflicted on her own body, since she now understands that these grooming and cosmetic rituals allowed her to become conscious of

her body *as* a body. Once the boundaries of her body have been successfully drawn, once her body has been rid of all of its "weight" and "deadness," she is then in a position to "soar like birds and sing as she had never sung before…, which… would communicate the splendor of her liberated agony." The deterritorialized body is shown to have been teleologically oriented all along towards its own disciplining. The body-in-discipline, in turn, stands in a purposive relation to the main character's becoming self-conscious, which coincides with her entrance into the realm of linguistic expression. Thus the very possibility of attaining these two properly subjective positions necessitated going through the experience of feeling "the heaviness and the bitterness of her body, …the whip and the bar."

The second passage quoted above not only reconfigures and reorganizes what had occurred in "Close-Up" until this point by giving meaning to all the painful events that her body had suffered. It also determines the trajectory of the text until its very ending, when the five Spanish vowels, "a," "e," "i," "o," "u," which compose the main character's song, join together in a linguistic apotheosis:

> […] todas, cada una a su nivel, se sienten completamente potentes y vigorosas, completan su misión de engrandecerse en la producción de su nombre, en la complementación, en el desarrollo de todo su vigor[…], están hechas de formas que han producido formas, han estrechado la mesura de sus formas, han ejercitado músculos, han escuchado la contracción de sus tripas […] control supremo de uno mismo sobre su propia muerte que observa cerrando los ojos […] en la unión con el cuerpo del cuerpo que se muere y se abre y se apaga y se divide y se cierra de todas partes y por todas partes lleno

de permanencias (Braschi 17).

(And all of them, each and every one at its own level, feel completely potent and vigorous and fulfill their mission of exalting the production of her name, in complementing and developing all her vigor, […] they are formed by forms that have formed forms, they have tightened the measure of her forms, exercised her muscles, heard the grumbling in her belly, […]attentive to the movement it makes when opening and closing, the supreme control of herself over her own death, watching this death while closing her eyes, in the union of the body with the body, dying and opening, contracting and fading, dividing and closing itself off from everything, on all sides, full of permanencies.)

From the moment the main character comes to see in the overcoming of her body's negativity the condition of her capacity to attain self-consciousness and become a *zōon logon echon*, a living being who has speech, the text appears to leave behind all conflict and all resistance, giving way to a smooth, unfettered singing. She has managed to traverse the desert of her body's opacity and resistance, overcoming her body's very deadness. Because of this, she is now able to enter into the space of language, where meanings can be exchanged, sense can be imparted, and all the contradictions of matter resolve in the formation of forms.

V.5. Other Beginnings: Archiving the Body

If we were to take this reading of "Close-Up" at face value, we could conclude by saying that Braschi's text provides an illustration of the processes through which the body becomes accessible *as* a body: as a materiality that has been thoroughly idealized, and as a

body that has been rendered completely transparent and homogeneous. The allegory of embodiment requires the overcoming of the body's opacity as the necessary condition for any successful instance of body assumption.

And yet, the teleological reading of this text remains uncontested only to the extent that we do not pay sufficient attention to certain aspects of the text that complicate any straightforward interpretation of this text's figuration of embodiment as a process that succeeds in evacuating the body of all opacity. The complications are announced from the very beginning of "Close-Up." Braschi's text begins with "the beginning:" the first word of the text is "*comienza*," the third-person indicative form of the Spanish verb "to begin." As mentioned above, the text opens with the main character on her four legs, crawling throughout her apartment in a way that makes her resemble a girl, although, if we are to believe the narrator, she has, in fact, become an animal, more precisely an "elephant." The fact that the narrative voice begins by uttering the word "*comienza*" doubles the text's beginning, bringing together in one stroke two incommensurable beginnings: the "textual event" of the text's beginning, and the text's *re*presentation of the main character as she begins to perform a thoroughly embodied gesture, namely, crawling. This crawling movement itself indexes, at a more figural level, another supposedly extra-textual beginning, i.e., the emergence of humanity through the adoption of an erect posture. The main character begins the process that will end when she attains a more a proper body by becoming an animal, or, at the very least, by descending into a previous degree of corporeal existence that is marked by a different psycho-motoric economy. The beginning of the text, which coincides with the beginning of the main character's crawling, could thus be read as

an attempt to recover a beginning that precedes any possible human beginning: the origin of the *anthropos*.

Here, it would be important to keep in mind that, according to the narrator, the main character is not "brought" down to a crawling position by some sort of involuntary corporeal process. The English translation, in spite its virtuosity, simplifies things too much when it translates the phrase "*Comienza por ponerse en cuatro patas*" as "She starts on all fours," thus reducing some of the complexity of the Spanish verbal construction "*comienza por ponerse*," which could be literally rendered as "she begins by putting herself," "she begins by setting herself," or "she begins by bringing herself" to an all-fours position. The difference between the English and the Spanish versions of the text might seem rather small, though I would argue that this is no small detail. For the original emphasizes the main character's agency (she does not simply start, but she begins *by crawling*, she brings herself to a crawl), foregrounding the fact that what is being depicted in this beginning has the character of a performance. Moreover, the original text inscribes an undecidability concerning the status of this performance, allowing it to be read as an involuntary movement, as a willed action, or perhaps as a gesture that cannot be described altogether in terms of consciousness and volition.

Regardless of the status of this crawling beginning, its inaugural power seems to be ratified by the fact that her body only begins to exhibit the traits of a roguish animality after she has assumed a crawling position. The strong relation between her initial crawling and the irruption of the body as a site of resistance is then confirmed in the next few sentences, which as we saw depict her body's incapacity to control its bowel movements, in a moment

that recalls her body's supposedly involuntary metamorphoses from a human to an elephant and then to a giraffe.

If this reading is correct and the beginning of this text already has the character of a performance, then we must add that the performativity at stake in the main character's crawling is not simply that of a body in movement. Here we have an instance of a more radical kind of performance, namely, that of a series of ritualized, corporeal gestures that are meant to produce the very reality to which they supposedly refer. The reality or referent engendered through this crawling performance would be precisely that of her body's previous existence as a non-human body. Braschi's text opens with the main character's crawling in an attempt to conjure the body's animality. The uncontrollable bowel movements, facial contortions, involuntary metamorphoses and inhuman mutations that constitute most of the "action" that happens in the text can be interpreted as staged effects that follow from that initial *fiat*, from the main's character's gesture to recall corporeally her own history of becoming a proper woman out of an animality that can only be access through its inaccessibility. On this reading, the body has already been domesticated from the very beginning of this text, which could be said to have the character of a repetition or of a textual representation of an attempt to corporeally reenact the processes that enabled the delimitation of the body's boundaries.

Does this imply that nothing remains of the body's opacity in Braschi's novel? Far from it. In spite of beginning with the beginning, "Close-Up" opens unto to a history of the body that cannot be located at any moment in space and time. The text's status as a repetition of the main character's history of embodiment shows the extent to which the text

can be read as an attempt to establish a relation to a more originary mode of bodily existence. The latter can only be accessed by means of a performative catachresis, i.e., through a set of gestures and rituals that cite and, at the same time, disfigure the origin they purport to translate. The catachresis of the origin is disseminated throughout the entire trajectory of the allegory of body assumption in "Close-Up." This allegory showcases its most intensely allegorical, i.e., interruptive, import when it enables the text to be read as an attempt to "archive" a loss so originary than it could not have been registered by the main character. This loss is the loss of the *other* body. The main's character crawling descent unto animality betrays the desire to bear witness to a body in full impropriety, to have access to an impossible body *before* its entanglement with and by the self. From its very beginning, the allegory of embodiment in "Close-Up" has paradoxically excluded the only body that its entire movement supposedly aimed to recover. Marking a point of radical opacity whose affective register and effective impacts cannot be anticipated in advance, Braschi's work with *the other body* invites us to contend with the ethical saliencies of those relations that unfold in the "non-world," relations that only come to *matter* as non-dialectizable, irreducible abjections and which may be the only relations that keep the body unconditionally open and *ex-posed* to the *danger* of an uncertain history that remains to come.

POSTSCRIPT

Reading—the Time of Survival: Two Poems of Jorge Luis Borges

Unlesbarkeit dieser
Welt. Alles döppelt.

Die starken Uhren
geben der Spaltstunde recht,
heiser.

Du, in dein Tiefstes geklemmt,
entsteigst dir
für immer.

Illegibility of this
world. All doubles.

The strong clocks
accord the tense hour,
hoarsely.

You, clamped in your deepest,
climb out yourself
for ever.

Paul Celan, “Unlesbarkeit” (“Illegibility”)[1]

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[1] Celan (1975) II/338.

Throughout this dissertation, I have tried to elaborate a concept or a notion of reading that would be irreducibly *historical*. As I have argued, the historicity of reading should not be understood as a mere element within the epistemological edifice of the discipline of history. This understanding of the historicity of reading is insufficient for several reasons, first of all because the notion of historicity that underwrites this approach is in itself insufficient. The historicity of historicity itself is neutralized as soon as it is taken as a concept that signifies either the quality of being-historical that characterizes historical objects or the essence or the *eidos* of historical phenomena. A non-eidetic historicity—what Derrida calls in *Voyous* "a historicity worthy of its name" ("*une historicité digne de son nom*" Derrida 198)—designates the radical *exposure* that not only opens up each historical being to but also, and most importantly, keeps this opening *open*. Historicity inflicts a wound on the open wound of history; it affects anything that could be said to be historical with the incapacity of being able to *close* their own history out of their own accord. The historicity of reading finds in this perilous opening of openness—in the impossibility of possibility—the non-site of its irruption. Historical overtures are dangerous primarily because they *dispossess* historical beings, which become historical only on the condition that they are unable to anticipate their own end. Historicity irrupts whenever the possibility of *leaping* ahead to one's end or even of *knowing* with any degree of certainty that one *has* an end becomes uncertain. Reading acquires its historical charge whenever it is *trans*formed in such a way that it no longer can be taken as the means for knowing the past, and instead becomes the dimension in which the exposure of the past exposes itself to the dangerous *chance* that its own future legibility will not arrive.

Addressed to the reader, Jorge Luis Borges's poem "A quien esta leyéndome" ("To Whom Is Reading Me") stages in a rather explicit manner the *force* of reading that I have been trying to elaborate throughout in this dissertation. This poem appears in *El otro, el mismo* (*The Other, the Same*), a poetry volume published in 1962 that contains several poems in which Borges meditates intensely on the question of death and its relation to time.

A quien está leyéndome

Eres invulnerable. ¿No te han dado
los números que rigen tu destino
certidumbre de polvo? ¿No es acaso
tu irreversible tiempo el de aquel río
en cuyo espejo Heráclito vio el símbolo
de su fugacidad? Te espera el mármol
que no leerás. En él ya están escritos
la fecha, la ciudad y el epitafio.
Sueños del tiempo son también los otros,
no firme bronce ni acendrado oro;
el universo es, como tú, Proteo.
Sombra, irás a la sombra que te aguarda
fatal en el confín de tu jornada:
piensa que de algún modo ya estás muerto.
(Borges 374)

To Whom Is Reading Me

You are invulnerable. Haven't
the numbers that rule your destiny
given you the certainty of dust? Isn't
your irreversible time perhaps that of that river
in whose mirror Heraclitus saw the symbol
of his fleetingness. Marble awaits you
that you'll not read. In it are already written
the date, the city, and the epitaph.
Others too are dreams of time,
not firm bronze or purified gold;
the universe is, like you, Proteus.
Shadow, you'll go to the shadow that awaits you
fatal in the confine of your journey:
think that somehow you are already dead.

This poem belongs to a venerable tradition in lyric poetry that is characterized by the predominance of apostrophe—a trope that is used not only to address inanimate objects, but also to interpellate explicitly or implicitly the reader of a poem. That said, the apostrophes that Borges's poem mobilizes would sit rather uncomfortably within any traditional understanding of the role of address in the lyric. As a trope, apostrophe occupies an important place within the lyric because it is the figure that correlates most directly to the performative force of the poetic voice, which becomes manifest most powerfully through the gesture of *addressing* something or someone, rather than through the uttering of phrases that *state* something about something. The moment of address allows the poetic voice to

incorporate within the texture of its utterances an *outside* to which the voice addresses itself—whether an object, another voice, or the reader. Whenever it addresses explicitly the reader of a poem, apostrophe becomes a trope that figures the very condition of possibility of the *transmission* of poetic expression by anticipating the continuity of a poem in the reader's reactivation of the utterances of the poetic voice. Address stages the mediation of another voice—the voice of reading—in the very immediacy of the auto-presentation of the lyrical "I" who enounces a poem and utters an apostrophe. By apostrophizing the reader, the poetic voice establishes a relation to an *other* that is also a *relation* to itself at a distance from itself, however minimal this distance may be. Whether explicitly or not, a *relation* of address appears to condition any *successful* instance of poetic im-parting.

Borges's poem, "A quien está leyéndome" ("To Whom Is Reading Me"), plunges the schema of lyrical address that I sketched out above into a crisis; the poem corrodes the poetic voice to such an extent that the directionality of the relation of writer/reader becomes irremediably blurry, undecidable. Indeed, we could say of this poem what Peggy Kamuf says about her *Book of Addresses* in the introduction: Borges's poem, like Kamuf's book, "suspends the certainty of voice: active or passive" (Kamuf 2-3). This is the case in spite of the hyper-apostrophaic nature of Borges's poem, "A quien está leyéndome" ("To Whom Is Reading Me"), which could be easily read as activating a very traditional notion of lyrical address. For instance, from the first line of the poem, the addressee appears in its singularity *as* a "you" who occupies a rather passive position: "Eres invulnerable. ¿No *te* han dado / los números que rigen tu destino / certidumbre de polvo?" (Borges 374) ("You are invulnerable? Haven't / the numbers that rule your destiny / given you the certainty of dust"). And before the

beginning of the poem *proper*—in the *parergon* of its title—the poem presents itself in the first person: "A quien está leyéndo*me*" ("To Whom is Reading *Me*"). *A prima facie*, the poems appears to have successfully established an I-Thou relation between itself and its reader before the first line of the poem has been uttered.

The dialogical and almost personal character of the relation between the written poem and the reader is achieved through the totalizing circularity that characterizes the semantic movement of the poem's title. The title begins with the Spanish letter "A," which must be read semantically as the preposition "*a*," whose rough equivalent in English is the particle "to." This preposition harkens back to the Latin "*ad*" and shares with it the same semantic function. In this context, "*a*" or "to" imparts a sense of direction to a movement, indicating that whatever happens to be moving tends *towards* something or somebody. By contrast, the Latin particle "*ab*"—its contradictory—designates the opposite: something moves away from something, increasing its distance from its point of reference.

Moreover, the preposition "*a*" is here the first term of a pronominal phrase that is declined in the *dative*, "A quien" or, in English, "to whom." The poem thus begins by giving itself, by dedicating or consigning itself to an unspecified someone or somebody. The substantive or the subject of this address, moreover, is only specified by means of a pronominal phrase, and thus through its impersonal substitution. The indeterminacy that afflicts the addressee is remedied by the next two words, which identify the "who" that the poem itself addresses as *its reader*. However, the poem is not addressed to any reader whatsoever or to the reader in general, as it is perhaps the case with "Au lecteur" ("To the reader"), the opening poem of Charles Baudelaire's groundbreaking *Les fleurs du mal*. Nor is

the poem addressed to the "Reader," understood as an idea, an allegorical figure or a literary *topos*. The title of the poem leaves no doubt about the fact that its address intends the addressee in its irreplaceable *singularity*. The poem is therefore dedicated *only* to the *singular* reader who *is reading* the title *now*: "A quien *está leyéndo*me" ("To whom *is reading* me"). The poem does not invoke any future or *possible* reader, nor does it evoke *past* readers, now long gone; as the use of the present progressive tense indicates, the voice addresses *only* the reader who reads what the voice says in the very moment of its utterance: the reader who is *reading now*. From the very beginning, from the letter "A," the "you" who reads the title is incorporated into the voice of the "I" to such an extent that it becomes almost indistinguishable from the "I" that utters this title. The encounter between the writer and the reader, between the "I" or the "me" and the "you," occurs in a beginning that comes *before* the beginning of the poem *proper*, a beginning that con-figures the relation within which the lyric of apostrophe and the apostrophe of the lyric *may* actually unfold.

Moreover, there is an untranslatable idiomaticity at work in the Spanish title that gives it a weight and a disruptive force that can be hardly replicated in translation. For it so happens that the beginning *before* the beginning of this poem—the title that constitutes the relation between the poem and the reader by handing the poem itself over to the reader in an archi-dative movement of originary avowal—begins with the first letter of the alphabet: "A." Even if the *telos* of *semiosis* forces us to read the first word/letter of the title as a preposition, it remains the case that the opening grapheme of the title is indistinguishable from the Spanish letter "a." Unlike the case with the English "to," the German "zu," or even the French "à," the Spanish "a" can always be read as referring to the letter that initiates the alphabet and

that functions metaphorically as the most primitive movement of language. As if language itself, beginning with the letter that inaugurates the series of letters, was *always already* the medium of an *imparting*, of an offering *to* the other that is *each time* unique and unrepeatable. The initial "A" repeats in an allegorical form the beginning of language itself as a beginning that is *due to the other* in its *entirety*. Language empties itself out, becomes the site of an *almost nothing* that is radically open and devastated: a minimal *nothing* that can only have the character of an *in-definite* and *in-finite* relation-to-the-other.

The intensity of this archi-dative "A" does not leave the lyric voice untouched. The title of the poem registers the impact of this *strange* imparting that troubles the status of passivity and activity just as much as the distinction between writing/speaking and reading, and does so precisely at the moment in which the poem is most invested in interpellating the reader in its *indexical* singularity as the reader who is *now* in the process of read*ing* the poem. To grasp how the title of Borges's poem registers this complication, we must focus for a moment on its syntactical dimension. The title begins with the pronominal phrase "A quien" ("To Whom") and ends with the first person *dative* Spanish pronoun "*me*" ("me") inscribed as a suffix to the gerund of the verb "*leer*" ("to read") "*leyendo*" ("reading"): "A quien está leyendo*me*" ("To whom is reading me"). We may never know why Borges chose this particular rendition of the poem's title over other possibilities, for instance the more colloquial "A quien *me* está leyendo," which encompasses the verbal phrase "está leyendo" within a vocative syntagm in which the first person dative pronoun "me" is located *before* the verb. Instead, Borges placed the linguistic mark that indicates the emergence of the poem in its "reflexive," auto-deictic self as an appendix, as it were, to the verbal phrase whose

rhetorical function is precisely to singularize the *other* that the poem addresses: the addressee is not only a reader, and a reader who is *reading now*, but it is above all a *reader* who is now reading *me*. As if the poem where never an "I" but a "me," and thus needed the other to *read* its writing in order to *exist* as itself. Rather than asserting a homogenous "I-you" relation or the vertical asymmetry that links an "I" to a "whom," the title establishes a horizontal relation between a "whom" and a "me," between two selves that are only themselves in the *dative*. These selves require the prior presence of each other in their singularity to become whom they may have always been: the reader is in need of being addressed just as much as the written poem is in need of an always singular reading in order to have been written at all. The beginning and the end of the title—"A quien" and "…-me" ("To whom" and "me")—become invaginated within each other in a spiraling movement that excludes the secured, fixed, established positions of the "I" and the "you" from the *scene of reading*.

The title of Borges's poem mobilizes an apostrophe that enables the establishment of improper selves—selves that are marked immediately by the mediation of their relation to each other, which inscribes the other in themselves unto infinity. These selves are *more* than one self and more than themselves; they are selves that can only be declined in the *dative*, not in the *nominative* or the *accusative*. The "you" and the "I" are to be seen as the aftereffects of the movement of hetero-auto-donation that allows the written *me*—the poem—to relate to itself only when it is read by a reader, who, in turn, comes to occupy the singular place of an always singular legibility only after being hailed as a "whom," after being *addressed* by a text that is not-yet-*me*—since it will only be a "me" once the reader begins to read it—and that, for this reason, will never be an "I." The title of Borges's poem *trans*forms the structure of

address that traditionally marks the lyric by depriving the addresser and the addressee, the written and the reader, of any subjective solidity. Moreover, their intimate relation does not consolidate in the form of a community. Conversely, their minimal self is only an self that comes *from* the other and remains only *possible* on the structurally uncertain and thus always impossible occasion of the *advent* of another—an other who may read, but who may always never arrive. Most importantly still, the only *possibility* that is allotted to this self lies in the minimal power of renouncing to the power of possibility that constitutes the ergontological determination of the structure of ipseity *as such*. A self *without* ipseity, the possibility that traverses the relation between the reader and the written is only thinkable as the *chance* of giving itself over *to* the other. This self-alteration alters and suspends the *ipse* of the self itself, freeing itself from its own investment in its auto-position and freeing the other from being determined by the gift of a self *without reserve*. This minimal self can only offer itself to be read by *any* other who may come to occupy the time-space of legibility, even if this other may *never* come.

The title of Borges's poem *allegorizes* the performative force of poetic address to such an extent that it transforms the very nature of reading and writing, which cannot be approached anymore as means for the communication of statements that say something about something or of phrases that convey an affective charge. The allegorization of address turns reading and writing into *purely contaminated* modes of relation: they are pure because no *other* relation precedes the determination of reading/writing as the *medium* in which the relata are constituted (the reader and what/who is read, the writer and what/who is written, the reader and the writer). They are contaminated because these *relata* are kept open to

further *trans*formations, which prevents any of them from claiming for themselves the status of deciding the *terms* of the relation.

However, between the title and the body of the poem lies an abyss—the blank of a discontinuity that corrodes even the non-relative relation that the title establishes through its address. If the *title* of the poem allegorizes language as such by undoing all its semantic determinations and exposing language as the medium in which a self emerges in the immediacy of its relation to the *other*, then the poem *proper* allegorizes even this allegory, unleashing an illegibility that threatens the reader's capacity to read itself *in* the written. This discontinuity becomes legible through a rather striking shift in the tone and register that colors the poem's structure of address. Whereas the title of the poem declines both its addressee—the reader—and itself in the *dative*, the first line of the poem modifies the relation between the addressee and the addresser, which now unfolds in a strictly *nominative* register: "Eres invulnerable." (Borges 374) ("You are invulnerable."). Moreover, the asymmetry between the poetic voice and the reader positions the latter in an *accusative* pole: the reader emerges in the poem insofar as it is *subjected* to the poetic voice's pronouncements. The title of the poem remains a *parergon* to the poem's *ergon*, like an island whose shores the poetic voice will never be able to reach. What occurs in the very first sentence in the first line of the poem is the abandonment of the time-space of an *undetermined* relation in favor of the determinacy of a finite finitude.

The irony of the poetic voice's address lies in the declaration of the reader's invulnerability. The voice cannot touch the reader, because the reader is untouchable. In fact, the voice addresses the reader *as* untouchable and in order to reassert its untouchability.

But if the reader is invulnerable, this is only due to the fact that the reader has already been struck by death. This much is stated in the following three sentences that unfold in the first seven lines of the poem:

Eres invulnerable. ¿No te han dado	You are invulnerable. Haven't
los números que rigen tu destino	the numbers that rule your destiny
certidumbre de polvo? ¿No es acaso	given you the certainty of dust? Isn't
tu irreversible tiempo el de aquel río	your irreversible time perhaps that of that river
en cuyo espejo Heráclito vio el símbolo	in whose mirror Heraclitus saw the symbol
de su fugacidad? Te espera el mármol	of his fleetingness. Marble awaits you
que no leerás. (Borges 374)	that you'll not read.

The two questions that the poetic voice poses to the reader acquire their rhetorical force precisely *as* rhetorical questions when read in light of the lapidary sentence that immediately follows them. This sentence is lapidary in a double sense, just as much as it is doubly sententious. On the one hand, the sentence sentences to death by anticipating the impending *end* of the reader *as* reader. The lapidary tone of the sentence delivers the referent that underlies this trope. The illegible marble that awaits the reader is a metaphor of a gravestone, which in Spanish is usually designated by the noun "*lápida*." *Lápidas* are surfaces of inscription: they bear the name of the person who is buried underneath them as well as any epitaph. The only text that the reader will never read is the gravestone—a text that is impossible in a structural manner. Even if the dead reader had chosen an epitaph prior to dying, it remains the case that the reader will never be able to read this epitaph in the *actuality* of its concrete realization, in the singularity of its engraving. The sentence "Te espera el mármol que no leerás." ("Marble awaits you that you'll not read.") leaps from its place within the diachronic order of the poem and becomes a metaphor that reiterates and expands the opening sentence, "Eres invulnerable." ("You are invulnerable.") The reader cannot be touched because its end has already been decreed, because it has been forced to

confront its impossibility: the illegibility that awaits at the end of the time of reading, which coincides entirely with the time of life.

The rhetorical questions that precede this lapidary sentence had already prepared the ground for its enunciation. The first question evokes the oldest philosophy of time in Western metaphysics—Aristotle's *Physics*[2]—alongside a numerological, perhaps even Kabbalistic, approach to the future. The situation in Borges's poem is the exact opposite of what we saw in Julia de Burgos's "!Dadme mi número!" ("Give Me My Number!"). In Borges's poem, the gift of death has already taken place; the destiny of the reader has been decreed with certainty, or to be more precise, the reader reads with the certainty that dust awaits. A classic metaphor for death, the appearance of dust in this question must be read in relation to the numbers that have given dust—i.e., death—to the reader with the certainty of destiny. These numbers, not unlike the number that the poetic voice in de Burgos's poem demands, have a double function: they *name* metaphorically the moment of death *as* dust, and they number the *series* of moments that constitute the time of life leading to the advent of destiny. As such, the dispersion of this "certainty of dust" ("*certidumbre de polvo*") stands in a metaphorical chain with the solidity of the "marble" ("mármol") that appears in the sentence that follows up this brief sequence of rhetorical questions. The contrast between the oxymoronic dispersion of a dust that nonetheless remains the *locus* of the highest certainty and the solidity of an illegible marble figures the dynamism that characterizes the "movement" from the gift of the moment of death in the mode of its anticipation to its

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[2] Recall that Aristotle defines time as the number of change in the *Physics*, establishing a distinction between "numbering number" (*"ἀριθμός ἀριθμοῦμεν" arithmōs arithmoūmen*) and a "numbered number" (*"ἀριθμός ἀριθμούμενον" arithmōs arithmoūmenon*). See Aristotle (1957) 219b.

impossible actualization. Whereas dust shatters and scatters throughout the time of life the illegible solidity of marble, marble gathers once more the dust that had already been given to the reader *in* and *as* the time of the reader's life. The gift of death/dust is the gift of finitude as destiny. This gift, as it were, turns the impossibility of an absolutely illegible marble gravestone into the possibility of an impossibly scattered dust.

The third rhetorical question consolidates the relation between time, number, death, and destiny by invoking Heraclitus and the image of the river—the *topos par excellence* for the inexorability of time and change: "No es acaso / tu irreversible tiempo el de aquel río / en cuyo espejo Heráclito vio el símbolo / de su fugacidad?" (Borges 374) ("Isn't / your irreversible time perhaps that of that river / in whose mirror Heraclitus saw the symbol / of his fleetingness.") A collusion of at least two classic images takes place in these lines: Heraclitus becomes Narcissus, the river of time becomes a mirror that enables the philosopher to encounter his own transience. Before the scattering of dust is gathered in the absolute solidity of an opaque marble—before the possibility of impossibility becomes impossible—dust undergoes another metamorphosis, taking the shape of a mirror. A pure and supple surface, the mirror emerges as the metaphor of time in its infinity and transience as an infinity that is *understood*. The specularity at stake in this moment yields only a negative reflection: no ego-logical consciousness could ever constitute itself in the encounter with the mirror of time because the only thing that this mirror reflects is the sheer transience of the time of life. Each moment in the river/mirror of time takes place in its moment and remains irretrievable in a posterior moment. If the numbers of death—which are already inscribed in the marble—have already granted to the reader the gift of destiny in the form of

a scattered and yet certain dust, then the transformation of dust into a mirror *gives* even this dust to be seen *as* dust, giving rise to the possibility of *theorizing* finitude. And yet the inscription of death's numbers *as* numbers—the *proper* manifestation of the limit from which the reader's destiny is determined—will remain forever illegible to the reader.

From the moment in which the poem affirms the reader's incapacity to read the *lápida* that will cover the reader's tomb, a double question cannot but pose itself: on the one hand, *who* is the future reader who will be able to read the text the reader will never be able to read; on the other hand, *what* will give itself to be *read* in this mortuary, lapidary text. The concluding lines of the poem turn around these two questions:

[…] En él ya están escritos	In it are already written
la fecha, la ciudad y el epitafio.	the date, the city, and the epitaph.
Sueños del tiempo son también los otros,	Others too are dreams of time,
no firme bronce ni acendrado oro;	not firm bronze or purified gold;
el universo es, como tú, Proteo.	the universe is, like you, Proteus.
Sombra, irás a la sombra que te aguarda	Shadow, you'll go to the shadow that awaits you
fatal en el confín de tu jornada:	fatal in the confine of your journey:
piensa que de algún modo ya estás muerto.	think that somehow you are already dead.

The inscription of this marble gravestone takes place in a strange time that seems to correspond at first sight to the temporality of the grammatical tense known as the future anterior. To support of this reading we could point to the fact that the verse in which the poetic voice declares the reader's inability to read this marble is written in the *future* tense, whereas the opening verses in the fragment quoted above—which specify *what* is inscribed in this marble gravestone—are written in the *past*. However, upon closer inspection, the temporality of the inscription of this marble is shown to be more complicated. In fact, the collision of future and past that takes place in these two moments in the poem explodes the temporality of grammar and its intrinsic relation to the time of consciousness, both of which

are grounded in the *presence* of the *present* as the zero-degree of time that enables the partition of time between the future and the past. Indeed, the futurity of this marble text is such that it will always remain *to come* for and to the reader: the legibility of this marble is not something that will arrive in the reader's future; rather, the reading of this ultimate text is *futural* only insofar as it cannot arrive in the present. Likewise, the fact that the marble has already been inscribed does not mean that the reader will ever be able to access what is written in this text through recollection or through any form of memory. The inscription of this marble belongs to the *past* precisely because it was *never* present—remaining forever in the non-dimension of what is immemorial, of what cannot be remembered or recollected. The time of this engraved marble is thus marked by the disjointed co-incidence of a past that was *never* be present and a future that eludes presence by remaining forever *to come*.

It is also worth noting the order in which the poetic voice lists the things that have already been written in the tomb's *lápida*. First among these is the *date* of death, immediately followed by the *city* in which the reader will have died, and then the *epitaph*. The fact that this series ends with the epitaph confirms that this marble stone is indeed a gravestone that bear witness to the arrival of the moment of death; the *date* and the *city* thus appear as crystallizations of historical time and space that are always singular, since they are only determined by the unrepeatability of death's arrival. Moreover, it is not surprising that the figure of the other emerges precisely at this moment in the poem, once finitude has been disclosed as the ground of the reader's invulnerability and after the poem has disclosed the identity of *what* is written in the marble gravestone has been exposed. For only somebody *else*, only an *other*, would have the power able to read the inscription of the numbers that

ruled the reader's destiny—beginning with the number of numbers, the *date* of death. The next line in the poem registers, or perhaps even anticipates, a possible response to the poetic voice's declaration of the reader's incapacity to read this lapidary text. By apodictically declaring that "Others are also dreams of time" ("*Sueños del tiempo también son los otros*," Borges 374), the poetic voice closes the door to the possibility of granting the others who read the date of the reader's death a power or a solidity that the reader does not have. In fact, according to the poetic voice, there is no Other. All others who survive the death of any reader of this poem are in a position to read the *lápida* that covers the tomb of *this* singular reader. And yet, all others are just as finite—just as incapable of reading their own *lápidas*—as *this* reader who is now reading Borges's poem.

Time reappears again in the poem after the poetic voice affirms the ontological homogeneity between the reader addressed in the poem and every *other* reader who may survive the singular death of this singularly addressed reader. However, if time appeared before as the text in which the reader—like Heraclitus—caught a glimpse of finitude, now time appears as the source of the ontological illusion that constitutes the dream-like existence of every other who is not the reader whom the poetic voice addresses. Moreover, the poetic voice expands the ontological homogeneity between the reader and the others so that it acquires truly cosmic dimensions, encompassing the universe as a whole. Everything that is—a table, a rock, a giraffe, human being, a galaxy—*is* insofar as it is *time* and is therefore incapable of mastering its *end*, of reading the *number* of numbers that is written in its *lápida*. The universe is an illusion not because it is not real, but because it cannot attain its end in the presence of its present; as such, the entire universe remains in a state of infinite

mutability as long as it continues to be alive. That said, the illusion that time produces at this point in the poem is ultimately compatible with the knowledge that the narcissistic Heraclitus was able to glean in the river-mirror of time. For the only knowledge that time can afford consists in the symbolic presentation of fleetingness. It is from the point of view of this fleetingness that the disclosure of the temporality of the entire universe acquires its status as a transcendental illusion. No wonder Proteus appears towards the end of Borges's poem as the allegory that allegorizes all the other allegories that we have encountered so far in this text. As the very incarnated exposition of trans*formation*, Proteus constitutes the emblem of the illusion that everything that is *is* temporal. Not unlike time, Proteus appears to have no boundaries; both are seemingly capable of turning every possible limit they may encounter into the beginning of another transformation—of another temporal phase. But precisely because they *know* no limits, they also cannot even anticipate the possibility—always latent—that the infinity of their own metamorphoses might ever be interrupted.

And yet, even Proteus—the allegory of all allegories—must go under, undergo another modification, submit itself to its own movement of metamorphic substitution. The place of Proteus, which coincided with the place of the reader, becomes now occupied by the two shadows that the poetic voice invokes as the last metaphors of the reader that the poem offers. However, the last three lines of the poem seem to assert a strange movement of homogenization that appears to go against the grain of everything that the poetic voice has affirmed before regarding the discontinuity between the legible time of life and the illegibility of the lapidary text of death. This homogeneity of this movement lies in the identity of its two *termini*: the reader—who is declared to be a shadow—moves inexorably towards the

shadow—i.e., death—which awaits at the very edge of the reader's journey. The continuity between a reader who is a shadow and the penumbra of the reader's fatal destination explains why the concluding line of the poem entreats—but also possibly commands—all possible readers to regard themselves as being already dead: "Piensa que de algún modo ya estás muerto" (Borges 374), ("Think that somehow you are already dead.") Indeed, the reader is in a way already dead since the reader is already a shadow—since the reader's gravestone has already been engraved with a date, a city, and an epitaph, regardless of the fact that no reader will ever be able to read this most extremely *extimate* of texts. Rather than a principle of becoming, of life, and of virtuality, each one of Proteus's transformations—including its own displacement in Borges's poem—appears now as an attempt to cover up for the enduring homogeneity of the time of life *as* the time of death. The fact that the time in which life unfolds coincides with death is not to be seen as an aftereffect of the installment of succession *as* the rule of time as such. Protean temporality—whose metaphor *par excellence* is Heraclitus's river—is not successive. Rather, it is wholly discontinuous, to such an extent that time is truly irreversible: no one can ever swim twice in the same river. And yet, the sheer fact that this river flows incessantly and, above all, the fact that each of its irretrievable moments is equal to the death that lies at its end, discloses Heraclitean transience as the site of an enduring catastrophe—of an endless turning from the same death to the same death.

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Who is the speaker in or of Borges's "A quien esta leyéndome" (To Whom Is Reading Me)? If we follow the gist of its declarations and its questions, we would be forced to conclude that the poetic voice in Borges's poem comes from nowhere. We could begin to

determine this "nowhere" negatively if we bear in mind the fact that the poetic voice seems to set itself outside of the universe in its entirety by the sheer fact that it is able to declare that the universe as a whole is protean, like the reader. If everything within the universe, if the universe itself is in the same position as the reader—incapable of reading its own gravestone and thus irreducibly *finite*—and if the poetic voice is in a position to utter death as the limit that determines the extension of the cosmos in the totality of its finitely infinite transformations, then this voice is perhaps exempted enough from mortality to be able to expose it. The condition of being mortal implies not being able to read one's own death. Indeed, the poetic voice itself seems to proceed from the very gravestone that appears in the poem as the reader's illegible text: the voice is the voice of death, the voice of the shadow that awaits the shadow that the reader already is—a voice that cannot die because it is already dead to death and death of death. As if of Borges's poem were a response to Julia de Burgos's "!Dadme mi número!," as if the utterances of the poetic voice in "A quien está leyéndome" could be read as trying to reassure the poetic voice of de Burgos's poem that the number of her death has indeed been written and that she will move slowly towards the shadow that awaits her. And yet, it is not clear whether the poetic voice in Borges's poem could actually satisfy the demand of the poet in de Burgos's poem to be removed from her continuous dying. For the shadow that lies at the end of the entire journey of the cosmos is ultimately the shadow of death. Is this death the *same* as the death that constitutes the entirety of the time of the reader of Borges's poem? Is this death that comes at the *end* of life's journey the same death that de Burgos's poem poeticizes as the very condition of writing poetry? Is the same death that is already lived in every moment of life the death that waits at the end of life?

Is there no possibility of a *trans*formation of death that would lead to the interruption of its hegemonic continuity, from the beginning to the end of the time of life?

In a poem titled "Final de año" ("Year's End") Borges seems to be meditating on this question. Written when he was only 23 years old and published in his first poetry volume, *Fervor de Buenos Aires* (*Fervor of Buenos Aires*), "Final de año" takes the celebration of New Year's Eve as a pretext to interrogate whether anything remains untouched by the infinite transience of time:

Final de año	Year's end
Ni la minucia guarismal de remplazar un tres por un dos	Neither the numeric minutae of replacing a three for a two,
ni esa metáfora baldía	nor that barren metaphor
que convoca un año agonizante y otro que surge	convoking an agonizing year and another emerging
ni el cumplimiento de un enrevesado plazo astronómico	nor the fulfillment of an intricate astronomical term
socavan con cataclismos de bajadas y gritos	undermine with cataclysms of descents and screams
la altiplanicie de la media noche serena	the high plateau of the serene midnight
y en agorería fantástica	and in fantastic auguries
nos hacen aguardar las doce campanadas oscuras.	make us wait the twelve dark bell strokes.
La causa verdadera	The true cause
es la sospecha universal y borrosa	is our universal and blurry suspicion
de las metafísicas posibilidades del Tiempo,	of the metaphysical possibilities of Time,
es el azoramiento ante el milagro	it is the excitement at the miracle
de que a despecho de alternativas tan infinitas	that despite such infinite alternatives
pueda persistir algo en nosotros	something may persist in us,
inmóvil. (qtd. in Cajero Vázquez 267)	immobile.

The conclusion of the poem suggests a possible answer to the question posed implicitly in the first eight stanzas of the poem: we celebrate the coming of a new year because we remain inadvertently enthralled by the miracle that something persists in the midst's of the infinite possibilities and contingencies that *is* time.

When he republished *Fervor de Buenos Aires* in 1969, Borges had already made significant revisions to this poem in keeping with the general shift that his poetic language

experienced, away from the baroque intricacy of his early production and closer to the clarity and simplicity that characterizes his "mature" work. But the changes between the original version and its final revision are not simply of a rhetorical nature; they go to the very heart of Borges's understanding of time:

Final de año	Year's End
Ni el pormenor simbólico	Neither the symbolic detail
de remplazar un tres por un dos	of replacing a three for a two,
ni esa metáfora baldía	nor that barren metaphor
que convoca un lapso que muere y otro que surge	that convokes one term dying and another emerging
ni el cumplimiento de un proceso astronómico	nor the fulfillment of an astronomical process
aturden y socavan	muddle and undermine
la altiplanicie de esta noche	the high plateau of this night
y nos obligan a esperar	and force us to wait
las doce irreparables campanadas.	for the twelve irreparable strokes of the bell.
La causa verdadera	The true cause
es la sospecha general y borrosa	is our murky and pervasive suspicion
del enigma del Tiempo;	of the enigma of Time,
es el asombro ante el milagro	it is our awe at the miracle
de que a despecho de infinitos azares	that, in spite of infinite chances
de que a despecho de que somos	that, in spite of us being
las gotas del río de Heráclito,	the drops of Heraclitus' river,
perdure algo en nosotros:	something in us endures:
inmóvil,	immobile,
algo que no encontró lo que buscaba.	something that did not find what it was looking for.
(Borges 33)	

A slight but significant shift occurs in the second part of Borges's poem, indicated by the substitution of the verse that described time in terms of an infinite of possibilities for a verse that mobilizes the now familiar allegory of Heraclitus's river is indicative of this shift. The miracle of time does not lie in the fact that something actually *persists* in spite of all the possibilities that could have been produced in its place. Rather, what is truly miraculous is that something *perdures*, indeed, that there is something like duration in spite of the fact that our very existence is akin to the drops of Heraclitus's always-discontinuous river. The last

line of the final version of Borges's poem not only confirms this shift in the poem's understanding of time and duration; it also destroys the major conceptual images of time within Western metaphysics, from the Aristotelian definition of time as "the number of change" and the commonplace image of time as the Heraclitean stream or a flow, to the notion of time as a transcendental form of experience. If the first version of the poem identified in persistence of immobility the source of the miracle that underlies New Year's Eve rituals, the final version of this poem *trans*forms this immobility as that which *remains* and *perdures* only because it failed to reach its *telos*, to find the object of its search. If something survives time—if something is capable of *un*timing the time of the Heraclitean river, whose meaning "A quién está leyéndome" locates in the continuity of the catastrophic movement from death to death—it is *perhaps* only the abyssal opening that ensues in the aftermath of a search failed for one's end. The immobility that perdures is therefore not a possibility that has found itself, that has secured its own status as a possibility by being able to see itself in the mirror of time and grasping the symbol of its essentially fleeting possibility. This immobility is thus anything from eternal, in a traditional sense of the term: it is rather the cipher of a motility that eludes both the discontinuous movement of Heraclitean temporality and the continuity that characterizes the temporality of consciousness in all its forms—including the time that comes to its own at the closure of historicism. The last line of this poem points in the direction of *another* time: a time that is marked by the shattering of the very mirror of time. A shattered time, an infinity *without* becoming; this time is the time of what *survives* of time after its failure to come to terms with itself. A time that is radically open—remaining eminently *historical*.

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