

Essays: 1993–1994

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On Bataille's relation to Nietzsche

Tell me: how did gold come to have the highest value?
Because it is uncommon and useless and shining and mellow in
lustre; it always bestows itself.

Only as an image of the highest virtue did gold come to
have the highest value. Gold-like gleams the glance of the river.
Gold-lustre makes peace between moon and sun.

The highest virtue is uncommon and useless, it is shining
and mellow in lustre: the highest virtue is a bestowing virtue.

Nietzsche, Thus Spoke Zarathustra

What is Bataille's relation to Nietzsche? This conventional terminology of the academy implies the possibility of linking two academic proper names in an equation of sorts, that will give balance to both sides, that will specify, in a strict and quantifiable way, how one of these quantities may be transformed or translated into the other, and give the conditions of an identity between two identities. Georges Bataille and Friedrich Nietzsche have made acutely apparent the difficulties of delimiting the boundaries of a proper name so I, rather than comparing proper names, shall put most effort into comparing two of their texts. A defence of this method—asking the relation of *The Accursed Share* to *The Genealogy of Morals*—is pointed to by Bataille, who writes, “If, as it appears to me, a book is communication, the author is only a link among many different readings.”¹ It would not be difficult to demonstrate, however, that the boundaries of texts are potentially as fluid as those of the proper name. Faced with the impossibility of the task, therefore, I shall not hesitate to introduce other texts without indicating in each case the relative place in the corpus that form in an obscure way the proper names Nietzsche and Bataille. The relation between these texts cannot be presented in the form of an equation, and I shall not proceed by marking a series of checks and crosses indicating correspondences and differences. Rather, I will try to show how these texts may be used to read each other in a mutually mirroring way, and then describe how they unravel their own impossible philosophical and political projects in a self-conscious way.

At this point in a discussion of Nietzsche *or* Bataille it is standard to issue a disclaimer stating that, the manifest intentions of the discussion aside, it would be opposed to the spirit of the names involved to claim to be reducing their works to the level of coherent and transparent reason, and in fact traitorous to be too concerned with respecting the texts at all.² Such remarks are something more than mere textual ornamentation, but I shall use the observation that *The Genealogy of Morals* and *The Accursed Share* are texts that show Nietzsche and Bataille, even if contradictorily, at the moments where they place *value* in a kind of reason and argument, to justify an interest in examining these texts and their arguments carefully. If there is a paradox involved here, then it is the necessity of pushing reason as far as it can go in order to describe the limits to projects of reason.³ I shall, then, begin with an outline of Bataille's theory of general economy.

Bataille begins with what he describes as a basic fact: that an organism will in general receive more energy than is necessary for its maintenance.⁴ The view of classical economy that the conditions of life are defined by the systems of distribution and utilisation of scarce resources is due to the mistaken assumption that the economy of the whole system is equivalent to the aggregate of individual and artificially isolated economic operations (the classical focus of

economists). Economics must begin not with the movement toward utility, but with the moment of consumption. Some of this excess energy may be utilised for the growth of the organism but what remains beyond the needs of growth must be spent *unproductively*. General economics is the name given to a theory of economy that, as opposed to restricted economy, begins with the question of expenditure (*dépense*).⁵ Society is faced with the inevitability of *dépense* and types of society are defined by their response to this inevitability. A typical “archaic” solution is seen in the potlatch—escalating exchange or destructive acts ritually undertaken by rival chiefs or tribes. Capitalism is singularly defined by the attempt to channel the totality of expenditure into growth—in other words, to defy *dépense*—but this attempt can never be completely successful, since it is a principle of general economics that the utilisation of resources always returns more energy than usefully required.

Pefanis describes general economics as based on “an antieconomic principle,” but this is more confusing than “useful”.⁶ To begin with the lesson of Lévi-Strauss, material exchange or expenditure can bring symbolic returns, and hence potlatch *is* the basis of an economy that brings returns to the giver.⁷ Bataille describes potlatch as bringing prestige to the chief, which is appropriated in the form of increased rank.⁸ He writes:

It is contradictory to try to be unlimited and limited at the same time, and the result is comedy: The gift does not mean anything from the standpoint of general economy; there is dissipation only for the giver.

Moreover, it turns out that the giver has only apparently lost. Not only does he have the power over the recipient that the gift has bestowed on him, but the recipient is obligated to nullify that power by repaying the gift.⁹

Potlatch, therefore, is not pure expenditure without return. A system of gift-exchange is, apparently, a system, without overall gain or loss. Furthermore, the psychology of giving can be brought within an economy of symbolic returns. But general economics is not merely the recognition that apparent loss may be subordinated within an economy of symbolic gains. Bataille’s critique of restricted economics is more than a critique of classical economic or utilitarian theory. General economics appears to depart from structuralism by claiming that the symbolic gain in prestige experienced by the giver is experienced paradoxically *as loss*.¹⁰ To understand this it is necessary to understand the implicit critique of structuralism contained in *The Accursed Share*.

What general economics provides that structuralism or a restricted economic approach cannot is the *impulse* that could lead to a phenomenon such as potlatch. Once it is accepted that expenditure is able to be brought within a realm of value and hence a symbolic economy, structuralism can calculate the distribution of goods of all kinds. But structuralism cannot explain, beyond uninteresting banalities about the expenditure of wealth implying even greater reserves of wealth, how the ideal of pure expenditure can *set in motion* a system of exchanges. The type of analysis I have represented here under the term “structuralism” must presume a system of pre-determined equivalences—it must already presume the economic relationship. What general

economics attempts to account for, as we shall see, is how the moment of *dépense* can be the *foundational act* of economy. The giver experiences the appropriation by interested reason of his expenditure as a loss because the appropriation is a contamination of the original motivation to expend.¹¹ As soon as the desire to expend becomes a desire to display expenditure it is reinscribed in an economy of use.

The waste is an ostentatious squandering to this end, with a view to a superiority over others that he attributes to himself by this means. But he misuses the negation he makes of the utility of the resources he wastes, bringing into contradiction not only himself but man's entire existence. The latter thus enters into an ambiguity where it remains: It places the value, the prestige and the truth of life in the negation of the servile use of possessions, but at the same time it makes a servile use of this negation.¹²

The paradox here is that potlatch requires others in order to be meaningful, but the only potlatch that escapes utility is the one that cannot be returned,¹³ the one that is solitary.¹⁴ Every potlatch that returns to the giver (that is, that is implicated in the system of prestige or, concretely, rank—is implicated in power) is only a delay of the inevitable and impossible true *dépense*, since the sum of energy produced is always greater...¹⁵

With the help of this rather schematic introduction, we will consider how Nietzsche's genealogical project may be viewed as congruent with the perspective of general economics. In the first essay of *The Genealogy of Morals* Nietzsche describes the beast lurking within the noble man, which is freed when he escapes the quietude of his own community.¹⁶ Nietzsche's description of the inevitable destruction wreaked by these good men bears more than a passing resemblance to *dépense*. Further support for such an interpretation is to be found in Nietzsche's characterisation of the degeneracy of the modern age as caused by the refusal to accept this aspect of humanity.¹⁷ We might say that Nietzsche phrases in terms of good and evil, and good and bad, what Bataille phrases in terms of modes of expenditure and the suppression of expenditure.

More interesting, however, is the second essay, "'Guilt,' 'bad conscience,' and related matters", which defines man as the animal with the right to make promises.¹⁸ The origin of the promise, for Nietzsche, is the economic contract, and the right to make promises derives from the achievement of calculability. Thus reason originates in the moment of genesis of exchange.¹⁹ Nietzsche, however, is tracing the genealogy of the *modern, sovereign* individual. How was man made calculable? It may commonly be presumed that the origin of punishment lies in the nature of its contemporary "function" or justification: that the sovereign individual is responsible for their actions, and hence "accountable". The reverse is in fact the case, and the sovereign individual is the outcome of a historical process of evolving arbitrary justifications of the practice of punishment.²⁰ Punishment was originally, according to Nietzsche, an economic matter, a question of the relation between creditor and debtor, based on an equivalence between monetary debt and flesh. If other payment was not possible, the archaic creditor had the right to extract an

“equivalent” from the body of the debtor.²¹ This is the origin of “accountability”. Hence for Nietzsche exchange is at the origin of punishment, of sovereignty, of reason, and practically of thought.²²

That Nietzsche agrees with Bataille on the centrality of economic considerations for all facets of human existence is one thing, but it is not the same thing as putting forward a theory of general economics. To do this, the argument of the *Genealogy* must account for this equivalence of punishment and wealth. Nietzsche does so by noting that this extraction of flesh is “a kind of pleasure.”²³ “There is no feast without cruelty,” writes Nietzsche, “Punishment, too, has its festive features.”²⁴ Cruelty is at the heart of economy: it is the equivalence of pain and wealth that guarantees the contract. The origin of morality is an exchange system that begins with the pleasure of useless consumption.²⁵

What Nietzsche adds to general economics as I have described it thus far is a sense of exactly *how* exchange constitutes the origin of reason, of justice, of the sovereign individual and the sovereign state, etc. If the *Genealogy* in some sense mirrors the economic argument of *The Accursed Share*, however, it is also true that Bataille’s text mirrors the genealogical argument presented by Nietzsche. Nietzsche decries the increasing tendency toward a preference in explanation—even in the natural sciences—for adaptation over activity.²⁶ This historical process is the effacement or the forgetting of general economics, if we allow that adaptation is a concept analogous to the maximisation of scarce resources.²⁷ Whereas Nietzsche recovers the memory of the general economy by tracing the origins of morality in punishment, Bataille performs the same operation by tracing the origins of industrial society in the potlatch and religious sacrifice. The individual loses their “intimacy” with themselves by entering into the world of things (which is also the world of knowledge, and of discourse, as Bataille uses the term), where what is essential is placed outside the self, and in capitalism man himself becomes a thing.²⁸ Religion, and in particular sacrifice, is an attempt to regain that intimacy, and moreover an example of the placement of the intimate, or the sovereign, in the external world. Through identification with the victim of sacrifice, in a logic that places *dépense* in a context of sacred exchange, the sacrificer attempts to expend himself to recover that intimacy. Sacrifice displays the logic described by general economics, and the distinction between the sacred and the profane depends upon the association of the sacred with the thing consumed. This, then, is the account given by general economics of the foundation of economy in the expeditive moment—it is an act of recovery of the always strangely lost originary sovereignty. If the *Genealogy* shows how exchange is the origin of reason, morality, etc., *The Accursed Share* shows the origin of exchange itself. On the other hand, it also shows the genealogy of *restricted* or classical economic thought in the desacralising movement of the Western history.²⁹

Sacrifice requires a victim to be taken from the order of things and through profitless destruction made to radiate intimacy as the accursed share.³⁰ For a thing, an external object, to take on this attribute it must be inscribed within a system of meaning, a discourse. But a discourse

is meaning in the service of utility—it is servile. As Nietzsche notes, ritual sacrifice was conducted not only to gain intimacy in expenditure, but was thought necessary for the maintenance of life.³¹ It is therefore also a form of restricted economy between the living and the ancestors or gods. Any attempt at externalising intimacy is only effective as a deception.³² This form of expenditure, like the potlatch, is undermined by its inevitable appropriation, and this can only constitute a form of delay (although it may be an unending delay) of the act of true *dépense*. The sacrificial economy consists of a debt that needs continually to be paid, as Nietzsche states:

But could they [the ancestors] ever be *fully* repaid? An anxious doubt remained and grew steadily, and every so often there occurred some major act of ‘redemption,’ some gigantic repayment of the creditor (the famous sacrifice of the first-born, for example; in any case blood, human blood).³³

Bataille’s examination of sacrifice as an attempt at regaining lost intimacy indicates that the question of expenditure is inextricably bound up with the problem of knowledge. Nietzsche, for example, presents his “philosophy” as sacrifice, as expenditure, or as incurring a cost:

We’ll make philosophy a dangerous thing, change the idea of it, teach a philosophy that is *dangerous to life*; what better service can be rendered to philosophy? The more expensive the idea, the more it will be cherished. If we unhesitatingly sacrifice ourselves to notions of “God,” “Country,” and “Freedom,” and if all of history is the smoke surrounding this kind of sacrifice, how can we show the primacy of the concept of “philosophy” over popular concepts like “God,” “Country,” and “Freedom,” except by making the former *more expensive* than the latter—showing that it demands still greater hecatombs?³⁴

Labor, including the labour of knowledge, ties man down to the order of things, and drags him away from his intimate self. Communication, as Bataille uses the term, occurs when this labouring subject, who in capitalist exploitation becomes an *object* of labour for others, is able to put their subjectivity at risk. Expenditure, as the moment outside of reason, is communication. Sacrifice is a model of the origin of communication because it is itself a *representation* of the moment when the subject, through identification with the consumed victim, is at risk.³⁵

The attempt is constantly made to make knowledge or reason into a sacred object. To the extent that knowledge is represented as greater than the order of things—and it must be represented this way because of the preceding argument that communication has its origin in the representation of the impossible, intimate moment—it shares the contradiction of sacrifice and rank (as the “product” of potlatch) of presenting the external as the intimate:

[T]he contradiction of potlatch is revealed not only throughout history [Bataille’s genealogical project³⁶], but more profoundly in the operations of thought. Generally, in sacrifice or in potlatch, in action (in history) or in contemplation (in thought), what we seek is always this semblance—which by definition we cannot grasp—that we vainly call the poetry, the depth or the intimacy of passion. We are necessarily deceived since we want to grasp this shadow.

We could not reach the final object of knowledge without the dissolution of knowledge, which aims to reduce its object to the condition of the subordinated and managed things. The ultimate problem of knowledge is the same as that of consumption. No one can both know and not be destroyed; no one can both consume wealth and increase it.³⁷

The sovereign moment, that moment when the intimacy that was never possessed is restored, must be beyond knowledge. Knowledge is servile because it is a labouring and a searching, and in this case seeking distances the object.³⁸ Sovereignty is the experience of NOTHING, the only possible experience of subjectivity in the dissolution of the self as object or thing, and simultaneously the forgetting of the entire *order* of things, the forgetting of... *everything*.³⁹

Nick Land argues that Bataille's account of sovereignty condemns discourse—writing implicated in an economy of utility—as in principle inferior to literature—the term that opposes discourse—that alone is capable of presenting the sovereign moment in writing.⁴⁰ Land is critical of recent readings of Bataille that confuse the relation of discourse to literature—for Land literature is explosively and excessively outside of reason or it is mere ornamentation of discourse. This radical opposition of discourse and literature is not a convincing reading of Bataille, for after all he wrote *The Accursed Share* and not just *The Story of the Eye*. Bataille states that because language is already servile the solitary path to sovereign experience must be beyond language (though not prior to it, as in a mystical return).⁴¹ This contemplative moment is far removed from the literature of excess.⁴² More significantly, even this contemplative moment must be the self-consciousness of nothing. Literature cannot be opposed to discourse, but instead represents the potential in any discourse for the absolute loss of meaning, the possibility of leading onto the absolute *non-savoir*.⁴³

The significance of the impossibility of the sovereign moment for the projects of Nietzsche and Bataille is manifest. They, and we, are faced with the impossibility of reason and the simultaneous impossibility of sovereignty. Reason can be taken so far and no further, and the exposition of sovereignty can barely be begun. How are the constructions of a general economy and a genealogical method to be understood in this context? I will suggest that the impossible compromise adopted in both these undertakings is to take reason to its limits, but *beginning* with the sovereign moment as the base. On the one hand this is to construct a self-deconstructing system from the sovereign moment of *dépense*, and on the other it is to begin a philosophy of history from the refusal of utility.⁴⁴ We can locate Bataille in the former movement and Nietzsche the latter or, as I have tried to suggest, we can see both authors as making both moves.

Another way of thinking about the possibility or impossibility of sovereignty and of rational projects is indicated by a comparison of *The Genealogy of Morals* and *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. Shapiro notes an ambivalence in the reception of *Zarathustra*, Nietzsche's "present" to humanity: for some it gives too little, it is suggestive but not "rational" enough to suggest a program; for others it gives too much, it is excessive and repetitious.⁴⁵ Bataille described Nietzsche's "project" in the following terms:

Nietzsche himself combated romanticism, but his hatred of Wagner led him to do so: he objected to the inflatedness and lack of rigour, combining as he did an intellectual severity and a depth of emotional life, but he remained completely on the side where calculation is unknown: Nietzsche's gift is the gift that nothing limits; it is the sovereign gift, that of subjectivity.⁴⁶

Nietzsche sought “sovereign thinking”.⁴⁷ Might it not be possible to see the *Genealogy* and *Zarathustra* as too *different* attempts at sovereign thinking: the former a consideration of history *beginning* with the sovereign refusal of utility, and the latter the intense and focused expenditure of energy in a continuous sovereign movement. In the *Genealogy* it is not so certain that Nietzsche remained completely on the side where calculation is unknown—it might be said that he presented the ubiquity of calculation where it had been assumed not to dwell. *Zarathustra* exudes the sovereign excess demanded by Land while the *Genealogy* uncovers the aporias of economy and reason through the “use” of “intellectual severity”. Obviously this is not a strict distinction, but it suggests two ways of coping with the impossibility of the sovereign moment. Both are inevitably subject to appropriative attempts: the *Genealogy* by a futile attempt at an encompassing reason or morality; while *Zarathustra* is incapable of extricating itself from the “impasse of power.”⁴⁸

Just as two moments of sovereign thinking may be located in Nietzsche, so there are two “admissible” political positions for Bataille: Nietzschean sovereignty and communism.⁴⁹ Nietzsche and communism both reject traditional sovereignty because it reduces man to labouring objects of exploitation. Whereas communism takes this as an outright rejection of sovereignty, Nietzsche cannot accept a society that would not recognise the fundamental importance of the experience of sovereignty. Richman aligns Bataille with the *Genealogy* as advocating a society “swept along by the force of change in a sovereign relinquishment of meaning and self.”⁵⁰ I think it would be more accurate to see these two “admissible” positions as an impossible choice for Bataille, who, aware of the impossibility of the sovereign moment, is unwilling to relinquish the possibility of a “productive” (that is, contradictorily, socially practical and useful) sovereign thinking. It is possible, in spite of the degree of self-consciousness with which Bataille conducts his undertaking, to read *The Accursed Share* as Bataille’s impossible (and perhaps comical) attempt to recover Nietzsche from his own *dépense* and “save” him for a practical politics.

Notes

¹Cited in Michele Richman, *Reading Georges Bataille: Beyond the Gift* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins, 1982), p. 130.

²For example, “To not betray Nietzsche one must not respect him. To make him an object of knowledge or even of fervour is first to make him an object, stifling a desire within a tomb.” Denis Hollier, *Against Architecture: The Writings of Georges Bataille*, trans. Betsy Wing (Cambridge and London: MIT, 1992), p. 26. For a similar remark on Bataille, see Julian Pefanis, *Heterology and the Postmodern: Bataille, Baudrillard, and Lyotard* (Durham and London: Duke, 1991), p. 57. At least Nick Land demonstrates an appropriate level of cynicism regarding his task:

There is no doubt that to season Bataille in preparation for his comfortable digestion by capital’s cultural machine is a piece of twisted prostitution of the kind he would fully have appreciated. The delicious obscenity! A writer who tried to help us to expend, stored away with all the others in our reserve of informatico-financial assets, in order to be pimped out into the career flows of the Western academies.

Nick Land, *The Thirst for Annihilation: Georges Bataille and Virulent Nihilism* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992), p. xii.

³Bataille describes nicely this paradox necessary to his own work:

My research aimed at the acquisition of a knowledge; it demanded coldness and calculation, but the knowledge acquired was that of an error, an error implied in the coldness that is inherent in all calculation. In other words, my work tended first of all to *increase* the sum of human resources, but its findings showed me that this accumulation was only a delay, a shrinking back from the inevitable term, where the accumulated wealth has value only in the instant.

Georges Bataille, *The Accursed Share: An Essay on General Economy, Volume I: Consumption*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Zone, 1991), pp. 10–1.

⁴*Ibid.*, p.21. This is exemplified by the Sun, the infinite giver without return, the origin and essence of wealth. See *ibid.*, p. 28.

⁵This project is utterly paradoxical, beginning with the semantics of an “economy” that does not begin with exchange and reason. Cf Jacques Derrida, *Given Time: I. Counterfeit Money*, trans. Peggy Kamuf Chicago and London: University of Chicago, 1992), p. 6:

What is economy? Among its irreducible predicates or semantic values, economy no doubt includes the values of law (*nomos*) and of home (*oikos*, home, property, family, the hearth, the fire indoors). *Nomos* does not signify the law in general, but also the law of distribution (*nemein*), the law of sharing or partition [*partage*], the law as partition (*moira*), the given or assigned part, participation. Another sort of tautology already implies the economic within the nomic as such. As soon as there is law there is partition: as soon as there is *nomos*, there is economy. Besides the values of law and home, of distribution and partition, economy implies the idea of exchange, of circulation, of return. The figure of the circle is obviously *at the centre*, if that can still be said of a circle. It stands at the centre of any problematic of *oikonomia*, as it does of any economic field: circular exchange, circulation of goods, products, monetary signs or merchandise, amortisation of expenditures, revenues, substitution of use values and exchange values.

Bataille might be said to be constructing an impossible “economic theory” that does not begin with the assumption of the circle, or that sees the originating act of economy as outside that circle.

⁶Pefanis, *Heterology and the Postmodern*, p. 3.

⁷Richman states that the “lesson” of *The Accursed Share* is that rationality impedes an awareness of the inextricability of the material and the symbolic (Richman, *Reading Georges Bataille*, p. 140). This inextricability may be a feature of *The Accursed Share*, but structuralist anthropology, which has always attempted to remain on rational territory, has as a major point this inextricability. Richman’s reading suffers in general from her emphasis on Bataille giving a critique of rationality and economics of a certain, out-dated, kind, thus de-emphasising the radicality of his critique, and de-emphasising *how* his theory unravels Bataille’s own project.

⁸Pefanis notes that Bataille employs a model of appropriation taken from Freud, and bearing the similarity that in the movement of appropriation the distinction between subject and object is dissolved (Pefanis, *Heterology and the Postmodern*, p. 41). We shall return to Bataille’s understanding of the subject/object dichotomy, and its dissolution in the moment of sovereignty.

⁹Bataille, *The Accursed Share, Volume I*, p. 70.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, pp. 70–1.

¹¹I use motivation here not in the sense of an intending subject, not even in the sense of the consciously or unconsciously intending subject of psychoanalysis. I am attempting, clumsily perhaps, to outline the pre-logical logic that sets in motion a system of exchange. The actual subject must always-already have been contaminated by a knowledge of the potential gains and losses of the multiple exchange systems that form the context into which s/he is placed. It is only at this point that the psychoanalytical sense of consciousness becomes relevant.

¹²*Ibid.*, p. 73.

¹³Nietzsche:

You thirst to become sacrifices and gifts yourselves; and that is why you thirst to heap up all riches in your soul.

Your soul aspires insatiably after treasures and jewels, because your virtue is insatiable in wanting to give.

Thus Spoke Zarathustra, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1961), p. 100.

¹⁴Furthermore, even a solitary potlatch may bring returns in an economy of personally apportioned gains and losses. A pure potlatch, therefore, would be a solitary affair, but also one that does not allow the giver to return something to themselves—it would need to be simultaneously experienced and forgotten at the moment of giving, and forgotten in a manner beyond the psychoanalytic understanding of forgetting. See Derrida, *Given Time*, ch.1, for an account of this logic of the gift in relation to Mauss.

¹⁵Bataille, *On Nietzsche*, trans. Bruce Boone (New York: Paragon House, 1992), p. 43. See also Derrida:

How does one conceive *at the same time* *différance* [we can see here the degree of Derrida’s debt to Bataille in the formulation of his neologism] as economic detour which aims to recapture the pleasure or presence calculatedly deferred (consciously or unconsciously) and on the other hand, *différance* as a relation to the impossible use of energy, an expenditure ‘without reserve,’ and, as in the death instinct, to all appearances, an interruption of all economy? It is obvious that one *cannot* think together the economic and the non-economic.

Derrida, “La différence,” cited in Richman, *Reading Georges Bataille*, pp. 143–4.

¹⁶Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Genealogy of Morals*, in *The Birth of Tragedy and The Genealogy of Morals*, trans. Francis Golffing (New York: Doubleday, 1956), p. 174.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, p. 176.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, pp. 189–90.

¹⁹Nietzsche has an interesting way of describing the conjunction of economic calculation and human calculability. The right to promise requires the ability to *remember*, while prior to this (in some sense) man had previously relied on the ability to forget to enable him to act in the world, to forget in the sense of not being conscious of the process of digestion, of being spared the noise and agitation caused by the work of the “lower organs” (*ibid.*). We may translate this into psychoanalytic terminology by stating that the right to make promises, the origin of exchange, demanded the ability to scrutinise mental processes that had previously needed to remain unconscious, or at least to impute this ability to humanity, and hence demanded the invention of a conscious, sovereign individual.

²⁰Arbitrary is used here in the sense that the discourse of justification and the attribution of moral functions to punishment, as they have evolved historically, have been unrelated to the forces underlying the practice of punishment.

²¹*Ibid.*, p. 195.

²²*Ibid.*, p. 202.

²³*Ibid.*, p. 196.

²⁴*Ibid.*, p. 198.

²⁵It is possible to push this equivalence between *The Genealogy of Morals* and *The Accursed Share* too far. Or at least to demonstrate this equivalence—or this congruence—fully would require more work than can be undertaken here. I hope that I have established, however, that the economic basis of Nietzsche’s argument depends on the pleasure of a kind of expenditure. The question that remains is whether the expenditure described—claimed by Nietzsche to have been the principal inducement to living: Nietzsche, *The Genealogy of Morals*, 199—constitutes an experience of loss only from the position of moral reason that is its outcome and the object of Nietzsche’s criticism. Bataille’s critique of classical economics suggested that it failed to consider that the origin of exchange might have been “the need to destroy and to lose”, but the question raised by a consideration of Nietzsche is the relation (logical, identical, historical?) between destruction and loss, for the only loss to the creditor was the unpaid debt. Bataille, *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927–39*, trans. Allan Stoekl (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1985), p. 121.

²⁶Nietzsche, *The Genealogy of Morals*, p. 211.

²⁷Gary Shapiro reads the *Genealogy*, which defines the economic relationship as constitutive of thought, as therefore rejecting the possibility of alternative economic logics, except prior to the legal subject, Gary Shapiro, *Alcyone: Nietzsche on Gifts, Noise, and Women* (Albany: SUNY, 1991), pp. 29–30. What Nietzsche and Bataille share, however, is not nostalgia for a pre-economic, pre-sovereign logic of exchange, but an interest in the genealogical effacement of the thought that the origins of economy lie in *dépense*.

²⁸Bataille, *The Accursed Share, Vol.I*, pp. 129–30.

²⁹Jean-Joseph Goux, “General Economics and Postmodern Capitalism”, *Yale French Studies* 78 (1990), pp. 207–8. I will not discuss here Goux’s interesting argument that Bataille partially comprehends but is unable to incorporate the elements of *dépense* in contemporary, and particularly very late, capitalism.

³⁰Bataille, *The Accursed Share, Vol.I*, p. 59.

³¹Nietzsche, *The Genealogy of Morals*, pp. 221–2.

³²Bataille, *The Accursed Share, Vol.I*, p. 189.

³³Nietzsche, *The Genealogy of Morals*, p. 222. It must once again be admitted that the congruence of Nietzsche and Bataille on this point may have been pushed too far. The effect is somewhat jarring, possibly because I have made the case too crudely. Nietzsche discovers that the sovereign act is necessary to overcome the servility of an overly-ritualised, substitutive sacrifice. But for Nietzsche the failure occurs as the result of the failure of the economic relationship of ancestor worship. He therefore follows the critique of restricted economy, and the failure is stated as a failure of economics, not a failure to achieve intimacy. Nietzsche and Bataille are making the same point only if Nietzsche sees the economics of sacrifice as an attempt to regain intimacy by producing an intimate link with the ancestors, and the impossibility of paying the debt to the ancestors as the result of the impossibility of making this link. On reflection, I think that it would be possible to demonstrate this.

³⁴Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, cited in Bataille, *On Nietzsche*, p. 6.

³⁵Bataille:

This difficulty [the necessity of living at the moment of the impression of death] proclaims the necessity of *spectacle*, or of *representation* in general, without the practice of which it would be possible for us to remain alien and ignorant in respect to death, just as beasts apparently are. Indeed, nothing is less animal than fiction, which is more or less separated from the real, from death.

“Hegel, Death and Sacrifice”. *Yale French Studies* 78 (1990), p. 20. The impossibility of experiencing and communicating death is the origin of representation. Shapiro writes that “the only way to understand the eternal recurrence would be the impossible utterance ‘I am dead’” (Shapiro, *Alcyone*, p. 20). The impossibility of experiencing or communicating this utterance makes representation an inevitable deferral of this problem. One might describe this thought of death as a variation on Derrida’s impossible forgetting.

This equivalence of death and nothing as the basis of representation is discussed by Bataille in terms of the experience of the meaning of death:

Death destroys what was supposed to be, what has become a present in ceasing to be. The obliteration of what was supposed to continue being leads to the error that consists in believing that what no longer exists nonetheless *is*, in some other form (that of a ghost, a double, a soul [...]). No one believes in the pure and simple disappearance of the one who was there. But this error does not carry the conviction that prevails in the world of consistent things. The error is in fact always accompanied by the consciousness of death. It never completely obliterates the consciousness of death.

The Accursed Share: An Essay on General Economy, Volumes II & III, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Zone, 1991), p. 216. Christianity wants both to retain the singularity of the moment of death and to place it within a moral economy, and this contradiction is a concrete representation of the essential ambiguity of the human relation to death. Death can be placed in such an economy only because of the possibility of representation. Nevertheless, the attempt to place death within a restricted economy of gains and losses is based on a deception.

³⁶I have used “project” self-consciously here, to indicate that, in so far as Nietzsche and Bataille are engaged in a project, they are engaged in a process of sacralising reason, and hence implicated in their own critiques, as they are both aware.

³⁷Bataille, *The Accursed Share, Vol.I*, pp.73–4.

³⁸Bataille, *The Accursed Share, Vol. II & III*, pp. 202–3, and Bataille, “Hegel, Death and Sacrifice”, pp.27–8.

³⁹Bataille, *The Accursed Share, Vol. II & III*, p. 440n. 6:

Needless to say, this NOTHING has little to do with *nothingness*. Nothingness is a metaphysical concept. The NOTHING I speak of is a datum of experience, and is considered here only in so far as experience implies it. No doubt the metaphysician may say that this NOTHING is what he has in mind when he speaks of *nothingness*. But the whole impetus of my thought demands that at the moment when this NOTHING becomes its object, it stops, it ceases to be, giving place to the unknowable of the moment. Of course, I admit that I valorise this NOTHING, but in valorising it I make NOTHING of it. It’s true that I confer on it—with an undeniable (but deeply comical solemnity)—the *sovereign* prerogative. But would *sovereign* be what the crowd imagines it to be? *Sovereign* is what you and I are—on one

condition, that we forget, forget *everything*... To speak of NOTHING is really only to repudiate the enslavement, reducing it to what it is (it is useful); it is finally only to deny the nonpractical value of thought, reducing it, beyond the useful, to insignificance, to the honest simplicity of imperfection, of that which dies and passes away.

The NOTHING is an experience, but it is beyond knowledge and a forgetting. Bataille describes the spontaneous arrival of tears at the witnessing of an apparently miraculous event as an example of that feeling of sovereignty that occurs with the experience of the impossible. Nevertheless, there is an implicit critique of phenomenology here (and a perhaps more explicit critique of existentialism), if we accept that phenomenology is the rigorous attempt (the most rigorous?) to objectively describe subjectivity, to describe (which is to say, to inscribe in the order of things) experience prior to knowledge. This is to describe NOTHING.

This critique of phenomenology is implicit also in Nietzsche's insistence that there is no being behind doing (Nietzsche, *The Genealogy of Morals*, pp. 178–9). This statement is intended to reveal the absurdity of holding the noble man responsible for his beastly actions (that is, the absurdity of denying the inevitability of *dépense*). It is absurd to reduce the individual to the calculating subject of a restricted economy, and, within limits, it is possible to see the eternal recurrence as repeating Bataille's logic of the sovereign moment as the death and truth of the subject: "if ever you wanted one moment twice, if ever you said: 'You please me, happiness, instant, moment!' then you wanted *everything* to return!" (Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, p. 332). That there is no being behind doing expresses simultaneously the two accounts of being offered by Bataille: on the one that men act in order to be (*Visions of Excess*, p. 171), and on the other that being is nowhere (cited in Land, *The Thirst for Annihilation*, p. 182).

⁴⁰Land, *The Thirst for Annihilation*, pp. 185–6.

⁴¹Bataille, *The Accursed Share, Vol. I*, p. 190.

⁴²Although I don't wish to deny that Bataille sees the possibility of the sovereign moment in this kind of literature—valorised by Land as beyond values—as well.

⁴³"Far from suppressing the dialectical synthesis, sovereignty enlists it in the sacrifice of meaning [...] Poetry and ecstasy are that which *in every discourse* can open onto the absolute loss of meaning, to the depths of absence of knowledge or game, to the loss of consciousness by which it is awakened with a toss of dice." Derrida, cited in Richman, p. 144. The justification as well as the critique of phenomenology is implied here. The attempt at phenomenological description is justified (as justified as any project) in so far as it leads to a self-consciousness of itself as an impossible project.

⁴⁴"The refusal to serve (to be useful) is the principle of Nietzsche's thought, as it is of his work. What turned Nietzsche away from God or from morality was not a personal desire for enjoyment but rather a protest that was directed, at the same time, against moralising (enslaving) sovereignty mired in Christianity, and to the order of things where reason viewed as an end confines subjective life together with thought." Bataille, *The Accursed Share, Vols. II & III*, p. 368. The refusal of utility. Hence Nietzsche begins the *Genealogy* with the refusal to associate the origin of morality with its "function" (*The Genealogy of Morals*, pp. 209–10). The origin of morality is an economy of wealth and punishment, but punishment as pleasure that escapes utility. Nietzsche begins with the sovereign moment.

⁴⁵Shapiro, *Alcyone*, pp. 53–4.

⁴⁶Bataille, *The Accursed Share, Vols. II & III*, p. 371.

⁴⁷*Ibid.*, pp. 380–1.

⁴⁸*Ibid.*, p. 401:

There is a glimmer of truth in Mann's impression [of the fascism contained in Nietzschean thought], perceiving the link between the impulses that led Germany to the monstrous, and disastrous, attitude of its wars and Nietzsche's thought,

open to the derangement of thought. The very form of this thought participates in the beginning of a disequilibrium, a rebellion, but Nietzsche himself felt the need for a restrained form [...] To his mind, it was crucial to deny Christian morality, which utterly condemns the animal play of strength. He sometimes did so inordinately, without having sorted out the concordant demands of prohibition and infraction (he fell into the impasse of power...).

Bataille describes Nietzsche as slipping from his method, but is this not an inevitable slippage inherent in the method? The representation of the sovereign moment inevitably slips into the passing of that moment, and the excess of language becomes a crude attempt to grasp the ungraspable.

⁴⁹Bataille, *The Accursed Share, Vols. II & III*, p. 368.

⁵⁰Richman, *Reading Georges Bataille*, p. 71.

The crypto-liberalism of Richard Rorty and Jürgen Habermas

1993

Jürgen Habermas and Richard Rorty are two... “philosophers”. One of them thinks a philosopher is an expert in big topics like Reason, Society, etc. The other thinks a philosopher is someone who is too humble to presume to have answers to such questions and thus talks about something else (I’m not sure what).

Both Habermas and Rorty are interested in psychoanalysis *as* philosophers. That is, they are interested in the meaning of psychoanalysis for philosophy, and in particular for political philosophy. They think they are “dealing with” psychoanalysis, this is their conscious intention, and thus they wouldn’t think, at a conscious level, that the quotation I have given you from Jacques Derrida is about them.

Rorty and Habermas are two liberal political philosophers. The difference between them lies in how they deal with an unperceived contradiction in their political theories and the way in which they *avoid* thinking about psychoanalysis and the possibility of reason.

Rorty knows that the idea of the unconscious undermines notions of truth. He, unlike Habermas, he tells us, has discovered the contingency of truth, the impossibility of absolute truth, the inevitability of the possibility of irony. And what’s more he accepts it, and wishes merely to reflect upon the significance of this discovery—the contingency of truth—for political philosophy. And the conclusion Rorty comes to is that a liberal society needs a new understanding of the desirability of “openmindedness”. I quote:

This openmindedness should not be fostered because, as Scripture teaches, Truth is great and will prevail, nor because, as Milton suggests, Truth will always win in a free and open encounter. It should be fostered for its own sake. *A liberal society is one which is content to call “true” whatever the upshot of such encounters turns out to be.* That is why a liberal society is badly served by an attempt to supply it with “philosophical foundations.”

There is a question that comes to mind here, and it is the question that liberal political philosophers have usually felt it necessary to *try* to answer: What are the conditions of a “free and open encounter” and how and when may its “upshot” be determined? How Rorty and Habermas answer or fail to answer this question determines their political philosophies.

Rorty in fact refuses to answer this question. Rather, since he rejects philosophical foundations, he finds it pragmatic to evade such issues and justify liberal societies merely by historical comparison. These are questions “we” should evade, simply not answer and not even ask. Rorty is constantly telling us what “we” should do, that is, he is invoking the “we” of the future (but does he mean future?) members of a liberal society. But “we” may wonder what it means for a “liberal” society as a whole to evade certain questions. Doesn’t this already presume a consensus on certain (crucial) matters that it is the definition of a liberal society not to presume?

Rorty evades this question but it is an interesting one to think about in relation to his supposedly liberal ideas of morality. For Rorty morality is a local affair, it can only be justified by reference to other locally specific ideas, and, with an awareness of the contingency of truth, the only meaning left for morality is as the common language of a community. An *immoral* action is one that “we” wouldn’t do, or, if we did, would mean that we cease to be a member of the community—we would become “someone who doesn’t speak our language, even though she may once have appeared to do so.” This would appear to mean one of two things. It *may* mean that in this liberal society (... again, we wonder, of the future?) community is a matter of common language, that one may, without serious consequence, change communities, kind of like choosing between schools of thought, in which community membership would apparently no longer be a geographical matter. What kind of world would this be, and does it have anything to do with the real world, I hear you ask. On the other hand, it may mean that the immoral actor loses the right to have a voice in a more concrete sense, in an even more concrete sense than prisoners not being able to vote. This seems more like the real world, but less like liberalism.

Whichever of these fantasies is floating around in Rorty’s imagination, at whatever level of consciousness, the same question keeps returning: If the penalty for not speaking the language of the community is the loss of a voice in that community, how is that community able to discuss “in a free and open encounter” the conditions for judging someone’s actions immoral? Even if truth is contingent, isn’t it still necessary to find criteria for deciding who is to be listened to and in what way? But if speaking a different moral language leads to loss of voice, to censorship, how can it be described as a free and open encounter that sets the criteria for judging immorality, which is the same as deciding morality. Such a society would always need to presume that it already was free and open in order to judge the meanings of the words free and open. It is these meanings that are evaded by Rorty. This is the fundamental contradiction of the kind of liberalism proposed by Rorty and Habermas.

Habermas, in contrast to Rorty, is aware that a truly “liberal” society will always be faced with the possibility that it may be required to consider any conceivable question—that is, that it cannot rule out in advance asking or answering questions as a community. Moreover, he too wishes to assert that societies must accept as true the outcome of such encounters:

The goal is “providing a rational basis for the precepts of civilisation”: in other words, an organisation of social relation according to the principle that the validity of every norm of political consequence be made dependent on a consensus arrived at in communication free from domination.

Instead of avoiding defining the meaning of a free and open encounter, Habermas’ entire political philosophy is an attempt to state under what circumstances communication free from domination can occur. It is Habermas’ intention to ground a critique of ideology on the basis of the distinction between instrumental action and communicative action, communicative action being free from domination since the extent of the intentions of the actors is to achieve mutual understanding. In

Habermas' words, communicative action is action "in which motives of action and linguistically expressed intentions coincide."

The significance of psychoanalysis according to Habermas is that explanation occurs in the analytic situation through a self-reflective process—the same kind of process needed for a critique of ideology. Freud's "scientistic" error was not to fully realise or maintain the relation between understanding and explanation, tending to reduce to the latter. For the purposes of an extension of critique to a critique of ideology, psychoanalytic technique provides a paradigm. Just as metapsychology, according to Habermas, was derived from the techniques of the analytic situation, and not the reverse, so too the critique of ideology must be derived from the methods of communicative action.

Psychoanalysis may, for Habermas, be a model of a relationship based upon communicative action, but does it bring us any closer to understanding how a society utilising communicative action would work? Habermas' view of the unconscious is of motives for action that have been relegated from consciousness because of the repressive conditions of society. Communicative action, where motives and expressed intentions coincide, would therefore, he admits, only be possible in a "non-repressive society." But if truth and political norms can only be determined through the exercise of communicative action, then Habermas is faced with a circularity, precisely the circularity that Rorty chose not to address: the conditions of a free and open encounter, of communicative action, must be presupposed in order to come to a decision about what those conditions are. In Habermas' terms, it must first be presupposed that all speaking actors have no unconscious, instrumental motives in order to come to a true consensus about what the conditions of communication free from domination are.

In that case, liberals like Habermas and Rorty cannot even discuss these issues unless they implicitly presume to be speaking as the representatives of an already existing liberal society in a free and open encounter. And, in fact, Rorty and Habermas are both prepared to claim that, if they are not *in* a liberal utopia, they are in an approximation that is close enough as makes no practical difference. Although they think that this realisation is merely a consequence of their arguments, it is in fact a presupposition and the basis from which they are able to construct their respective political philosophies.

Thus it is no surprise that Rorty's liberal ironist society is no far-off ideal barely conceivable at some time in the distant future. On the contrary, he states that

I think that contemporary liberal society already contains the institutions for its own improvement [...] Indeed, my hunch is that Western social and political thought may have had the last *conceptual* revolution it needs.

For Rorty it is enough for him to reveal his hand. Habermas, however, does not want merely to state where his loyalties lie, but to justify them on rational grounds as well. Communicative action may only be possible in a non-repressive society, but Habermas wants to claim that the *degree* of "instinctual renunciation", that is, the extent of the unconscious part of the mind of the

members of a society, is dependent upon the level of the technical control of nature a society possesses. There are no prizes for guessing which societies are therefore closest to the ideal speech situation in Habermas' opinion.

But wait. Surely Habermas, a progressive, inheritor of the marxist critical theoretical tradition, the liberal conscience of Germany, is not claiming that we are already living in a rational utopia run according to the outcomes of free and open encounters? Well, though he did have *some* reservations about whether the U.N.'s methods of decision-making conformed *precisely* to the standards of communicative action, he did feel able to proclaim the Gulf War "justified." As with Rorty, it is the proximity of our institutions to the ideal that legitimates them—and his discourse. So in this case the outcome of communication free from domination was the murder of half a million people. Why *are* there still niggling doubts in my mind?

One thing that needs to be questioned in Habermas is the adequacy of his analogy with the psychoanalytic situation. Even if we grant to Habermas the doubtful point that the relationship between patient and analyst is a contract with the mutual aim of understanding, and agree with him that success in psychoanalytic treatment depends upon reflection by the analysand, it is still the case that the analyst must also be present to transcend the situation and interpret the distorted communications of the analysand. If no-one corresponds to the analyst of society, which seems a reasonable conclusion, then the existence of the unconscious, and the impossibility of a transparent presentation of the self to the self that the unconscious entails, would undermine the possibility of communicative action. But, on the other hand, who could fulfil such a transcendent role in society? The question this raises about Habermas is whether he sees the expert as capable of fulfilling this role. And, as Rorty notes, Habermas *is* willing to invoke "expert cultures" as the guides to transparent reason. Thus the only question about Habermas' view of a rational utopia is whether it is to be run by the current brand of mindless technocrats and capitalists or instead if we are to construe the body of Habermas' work as a repeated loud clearing of the throat and pointing at himself. And if it is a matter of relating this somehow to the real world, then, as Moishe Gonzales writes:

Notwithstanding their brilliant linguistic competence, intellectuals, by and large, remain mothballed in increasingly irrelevant universities while actors, businessmen, lawyers and the like run the country.

Now perhaps my example isn't fair. Habermas didn't know at the time the outcome of the Gulf War. He was misled by a lot of talk about a new world order, about the role of the UN in world affairs, and by a lot of public comparison of the moustaches of Hussein, Stalin and Hitler. But to admit *that* would be to admit that, technical mastery of nature aside, the world bears no resemblance to an ideal speech situation and that even intellectuals, those with linguistic competence, even the liberal conscience of Germany, can somehow be influenced by undetected instrumental intentions into believing that a world run by mass murderers is engaged in a rational debate about its own best interests.

What I've tried to show is that people like Habermas and Rorty, for all their liberal sentiments, present social theories that are profoundly conservative. That is, to articulate such a theory, it is necessary, consciously or unconsciously, to view the existing world as somehow and at some level essentially right, and thus, implicitly, to legitimate the status quo. And further that to present such theories it is necessary, consciously or unconsciously, to view psychoanalysis as no threat to an idea of reason and an idea of intentionality, and at some level to forget psychoanalysis entirely. Through reading the philosophers of consensus, of free and open encounters, of undistorted communication, it is possible to see that it is only from a dominating position of linguistic competence in an institutional structure that values such competence that people are able to imagine a world and themselves free from instrumental motives, and from the disruptive work of the unconscious.

The Wolf Man and the origins of psychoanalytic subjectivity

1993

I have often been faced with this objection: “Why, you tell me yourself that my illness is probably connected with my circumstances and the events of my life. You cannot alter these in any way. How do you propose to help me, then?” “And I have been able to make this reply: “No doubt fate would find it easier than I do to relieve you of your illness. But you will be able to convince yourself that much will be gained if we succeed in transforming your hysterical misery into common unhappiness.”

Sigmund Freud

I can think of few fates worse than having one's life and psychology reviewed and re-interpreted by countless generations of psychoanalysts. To me, this is a vision of Hell [...] a prison of mindless pretensions encasing a life.

Lila Kalinich

E. wants to keep track of the case that has become so famous—Freud's most famous case—and see how it ends [...] But it wasn't reasonable. Either one is in treatment or the treatment is over and one must leave the person alone. Contradictions also develop. E. has one opinion, S. another, and Gardiner a third [...] One becomes involved in a labyrinth of dependencies that contradict each other.

The Wolf Man

The three comments above are included not because they mirror the content of this paper but in spite of its content. It is worthwhile considering in the course of an abstract and theoretical discussion the meaning that psychoanalysis had for one particular subject. “The subject” was not a term employed by Freud. It is one that leads from the ground of psychoanalysis to the ground of philosophy, if we suppose an imaginary separation between the two. It might be thought that the relation that philosophy has with psychoanalysis is one of revealing (the presuppositions underlying psychoanalysis) or of constructing (the ground upon which psychoanalysis rests). And, indeed, the form of this essay might be described as a road back to origins: from psychoanalysis via the subject to philosophy. The guide along this road, furthermore, will be the question of origins itself, which will be traced as it appears in Freud’s case history, “From the History of an Infantile Neurosis.”¹ This question in the case history is formulated in terms of the status of the “primal scene”: is it fantasy or reality? This question is perhaps less important in actual clinical situations than it is for understanding the philosophical basis of a psychosocial theory of subjectivity. The relation of psychoanalysis to philosophy is not so simple, however, as has been drawn here, and psychoanalysis may also be said to put the assumptions of philosophy into question. The road through the question of origins (and specifically of the origin of the subject) is a questioning of both these domains. Psychosocial research attempts the explanation of social phenomena on the basis of a determinable linkage between social and psychical phenomena. Such research therefore requires a theory of intrapsychical representation, of subjective meaning, in order to understand the relation between experience and action in the most general sense. What will be considered here is the meaning and the limits of a theory of psychical structure, and the meaning and limits of a theory of the genesis of that structure. The question of reality versus fantasy is, I hope to demonstrate, the question of the origin of psychical representation, and it is this origin, and its meaning for a theory of the subject, that is pursued here. In so doing it will be necessary to consider various philosophical readings of Freudian theory and this will culminate in an imagined reading of phenomenology reading psychoanalysis.²

The Wolf Man’s chief complaint was that

the world was hidden in a veil, or that he was cut off from the world by a veil. This veil was torn only at one moment—when, after an enema, the contents of the bowel left the intestinal canal; and he then felt well and normal again.³

At the conclusion of the Wolf Man’s analysis in 1914 Freud gave his diagnosis as “a condition following on an obsessional neurosis which has come to an end spontaneously, but has left a

defect behind it after recovery.”⁴ It was Freud’s opinion that through any transformations in the Wolf Man’s psychical condition his earlier conditions were never thoroughly dissolved, and thus that the Wolf Man had over the course of his life added an increasing number of conflicting libidinal positions and neurotic and obsessional elements to his psychical make-up.⁵ From the beginning, then, it is possible to see that Freud’s explanation of the Wolf Man’s condition is framed as a tracing backwards through time of the sequence of and connections between its various elements. Understanding and treating the Wolf Man’s presenting condition is, firstly, a quest for its causal roots in an infantile neurosis and, secondly, a quest for the causes of his infantile neurosis. Cause here is to be understood as revealed when two elements can be provided: an accurate *description of the events* leading to the deflection of the Wolf Man’s psychical organisation into an obsessional neurotic position; and an *understanding of the processes* involved in the psychical reaction to those events such that the Wolf Man’s symptoms were the outcome. It is the problem of his pathology, of his obvious deviation from anything like a norm, that necessitates for Freud a search for originary cause.

The most obvious symptom of the Wolf Man’s infantile neurosis was a phobia of wolves. Just prior to his fourth birthday the Wolf Man had a dream that at the time produced acute anxiety. Both analyst and analysand soon came to the conclusion that this Wolf Dream was of critical importance in understanding the origin of this symptom and his neurosis. Here is the description of the dream given by Freud:

*“I dreamt that it was night and that I was lying in my bed. (My bed stood with its foot towards the window; in front of the window there was a row of old walnut trees. I know it was winter when I had the dream, and night-time.) Suddenly the window opened of its own accord, and I was terrified to see that some white wolves were sitting on the big walnut tree in front of the window. There were six or seven of them. The wolves were quite white, and looked more like foxes or sheep-dogs, for they had big tails like foxes and they had their ears pricked like dogs when they pay attention to something. In great terror, evidently of being eaten up by wolves, I screamed and woke up.”*⁶

According to the Wolf Man three elements of this dream stood out in his memory: the stillness of the wolves; their strained attention; and the powerful sense of reality the dream induced.⁷ The last of these elements, according to Freud, signifies that the dream refers to a real event. The Wolf Man thought that the opening windows represented his eyes opening and hence the witnessing of something. From the associations produced by the dream Freud reconstructs the following set of fragments of the dream’s meaning: *“A real occurrence—dating from a very early period—looking—immobility—sexual problems—castration—his father—something terrible.”*⁸ If the Wolf Man had been a witness to some obscured event, the strained attention of the wolves must have actually referred to himself, and Freud surmised that the stillness of the wolves must also be reversal: the Wolf Man had witnessed violent motion. The great anxiety produced by the dream must have been fear of castration, and Freud concluded that the order of the dream material mirrored the progress of the dreamer’s thoughts—which began with a wish for sexual satisfaction from the father, followed by a realisation (brought about by the representation of the scene of

satisfaction from the father) that this involved castration, and finally a consequent repression of the wish and a fear of the father.⁹

Freud came to the conclusion that the base of the Wolf Dream there lay a representation of a “primal scene.” This scene, while not *responsible* for his neurosis in any direct sense, was the point of origin in the development of the Wolf Man’s psychical organisation, and the point around which his unconscious thoughts constantly circled. Throughout the four years of analysis Freud managed to collect, through the Wolf Man’s associations, many details, with varying degrees of certainty in Freud’s mind, which enabled the reconstruction of this scene. Mahony collects these details scattered throughout the case history, to reconstruct Freud’s reconstruction in a single sentence:

[O]ne hot summer day, the 18-month-old Serge [i.e., Sergei Pankeiev, the Wolf Man], afflicted with malaria, was sleeping in a cot in his parents’ bedroom; there too the parents retired, half dressed, for a siesta; possibly at the height of fever at five in the afternoon Serge woke up and with strained attention watched his parents, half-dressed in white underclothes and kneeling on white bedclothes, having coitus *a tergo* three times; while noticing his parents’ genitalia, his father’s heavy breathing, and his mother’s facial enjoyment, the generally passive baby suddenly had a bowel movement and screamed, thereby interrupting the young couple.¹⁰

The Wolf Dream and this reconstructed primal scene are significant not only in the aetiology of the Wolf Man’s condition, but also as evidence in Freud’s battle with Jung and Adler over the existence of infantile sexuality.¹¹ The Wolf Man’s primal scene constituted one of those “pre-sexually sexual” moments that can influence psychical development after being triggered by later sexual events—deferred action. Consequently, much of “From the History of an Infantile Neurosis” is devoted to the questions of the reality of this scene and the validity of its reconstruction from the dream and other associations. To ascertain a theory of the subject in the Wolf Man’s case history it is necessary to carefully examine these arguments concerning the origins of the Wolf Man’s condition, both in order to reconstruct such a theory from Freud and to define the limitations of such a reconstruction.

Freud’s vacillations on the question of the status of the primal scene are often confusing, and constitute a repetition (in fact, a continuation) of his vacillations regarding the seduction theory.¹² One might summarise his position by saying that he believes that the Wolf Man almost certainly actually did witness the primal scene, but that it does not matter if it was only a primal fantasy. By primal fantasy Freud means, briefly, an unconscious memory of an event not from the life of the Wolf Man but from the “phylogenetic heritage” of archaic memories.¹³

Freud’s argument takes the form of a consideration of possible objections. For example, Freud asks rhetorically whether “any procedure could succeed in bringing into consciousness coherently and convincingly the details of a scene of this kind which had been experienced and understood in such circumstances.”¹⁴ His reply is a confirmation of the power of analysis. He contradicts himself, however, if we take this hypothetical question literally since, as he notes, one objection to reconstructions is that in general “these scenes from infancy are not produced during

the treatment as recollections, they are the products of construction.”¹⁵ Thus analysis *does not* necessarily succeed in bringing these reconstructions into *consciousness*. Furthermore, the Wolf Man himself states many years later that he was never able to recollect this primal scene.¹⁶ This is unimportant, however, since Freud claims that reconstructions made in analysis are equivalent to conscious recollection.¹⁷ After all, we might add, it is a standard part of dream interpretation to presume that dreams contain representations of memories and wishes the existence of which is denied by the ego: why should primal scenes be any different?

Nevertheless it *may* be significant that no recollection of the primal scene *ever* occurred, and this can be taken as a cue to examine more closely the evidence Freud provides in support of the reality of his reconstruction. Indeed, Mahony has suggested that the reconstruction is the outcome of the dynamics of the analytic situation and owes more to Freud’s desire than the Wolf Man’s memories. Freud himself, in his scrupulous desire to establish the reality of his discovery, admits that the material, if not the mechanism, of dreams is subject to orders, and that the sense of conviction felt by the analysand about the reconstruction made by the analyst may be the result of suggestion.¹⁸ The Wolf Man, too, notes that such suggestibility was one of the reasons for Freud’s rejection of cure by hypnosis, and thus that Freud was aware of both the power of suggestion and its ultimate impotence as a therapeutic technique.¹⁹ This raises questions about analytic technique and about Freud’s conduct during the analysis. The Wolf Man gives evidence of the familiarity of the relationship between himself and Freud, and himself suggests that this may have interfered with the analytic process. He claims that between Freud and himself the “transference” was too strong, that he too strongly identified with Freud and saw him as a father figure, and hence was unable to critically evaluate the products of analysis.²⁰ It is not unreasonable to suggest that the reason for this was not only Freud’s technique but also the specific nature of the Wolf Man’s obsessional condition. On the other hand this, and the Wolf Man’s comment that Freud set the termination date for the analysis because until then Freud hadn’t found “what he was after,”²¹ leads one to question the confidence with which Freud is able to make remarks such as the following:

There is no danger at all in communicating constructions [...] to the person under analysis; they never do any damage to the analysis if they are mistaken; but at the same time they are not put forward unless there is some prospect of reaching a nearer approximation to the truth by means of them.²²

Mahony considers Freud’s technique in terms of its effects on the patient’s treatment and on the theories Freud constructs around the patient’s symptoms, coming to the following reasonable conclusion:

With hindsight we estimate that the various noninterpreted measures and relaxation of clinical boundaries promoted the image of a seductive all-powerful father before a passive, gratified son, contributed to an iatrogenic paranoia, and intensified his castration anxieties and fears of annihilation.²³

Mahony questions the likelihood of the occurrence of the primal scene independently of the probability of its being reconstructed. On sociological, medical and modern psychoanalytical grounds, as well as the ground of “common sense,” he concludes that the primal scene as described by Freud is a virtual impossibility.²⁴ He states that it is possible to see Freud as attempting to persuade the reader of a scene that he imagined prior to his knowledge of both the Wolf Dream and the associations from which the scene is supposedly derived.

Even if we conclude that Freud’s reconstruction of the primal scene is implausible we are *not* then forced to agree with Adler or Jung. We are not forced to reject infantile sexuality, and we are not forced to conclude that primal fantasies are induced retrospectively by adult neurosis (rather than, say, primal realities producing neurosis), nor that the memory (conscious or unconscious) of a primal scene is always and in every case the product of archaic fantasy. It remains to be determined, though, what then was the meaning of the Wolf Dream, and how we are to explain the Wolf Man’s condition. The question of the origins of the Wolf Man’s “subjectivity” remains and, furthermore, it may still be addressed in Freudian terms, even if we reject Freud’s particular answer.

To suggest an alternative account of the case history it is necessary to consider an event given third greatest prominence by Freud, after the dream and the primal scene: the “seduction” of him by his sister at the age of 3¹/₄ years.²⁵ The sister, who was two years older than the Wolf Man, played with his penis in a fashion he later described as “systematic.”²⁶ The memory of this seduction was uncovered after some dreams involving aggression toward his sister and, significantly, tearing off her coverings, or veils.²⁷ Might Freud have underestimated the importance of this event for the interpretation of the Wolf Dream and the explanation of his condition? The Wolf Man himself later attributed the persistence of his psychological problems—which he referred to as his “Sister complex”—to the aggressiveness of his sister at the time of the seduction.²⁸ It must be asked whether Freud gave this event due prominence in the aetiology of the Wolf Man’s infantile neurosis, and I shall do this via a reading of a dream reported by Freud to have occurred in the patient’s youth, quoted here along with its interpretation:

In this earlier dream he saw the Devil dressed in black and in the upright posture with which the wolf and the lion had terrified him so much in their day. He was pointing with his out-stretched finger at a gigantic snail. The patient had soon guessed that this Devil was the Demon out of a well-known poem,* and that the dream itself was a version of a very popular picture representing the Demon in a love-scene with a girl. The snail was in the woman’s place, as being a perfect sexual symbol. Guided by the Demon’s pointing gesture, we were soon able to give as the dream’s meaning that the patient was longing for some one who should give him the last pieces of information that were still missing upon the riddle of sexual intercourse, just as his father had given him the first in the primal scene long before.²⁹

*[Lermontov’s “The Demon”.]³⁰

The first clue that this dream is about his sister is that the poet Lermontov was associated with her by his father.³¹ At the time of the dream the Wolf Man had himself idealised Lermontov (which might also have been a way of identifying with his sister).³² Rather than referring to the primal scene, might this not have referred to the seduction by his sister? If so, was his sister the Demon (the aggressive seducer) or the snail (the girl)? Which was *he*? One could interpret this dream in either way, or as indicating the ambivalence of his feelings toward his sister. The pointing Demon might be associated with the opened eyes and strained attention noted in the Wolf Dream (both imply a “looking”). But isn’t looking incompatible with the seduction scene in which he was a (passive) participant?

At this point it is worth considering the hypothesis of analysts Abraham and Torok, who allege that there were four significant scenes that determined the Wolf Man’s condition: (i) a seduction of the Wolf Man’s sister by their father; (ii) the seduction of the Wolf Man by his sister; (iii) the Wolf Man’s mentioning of the father-daughter seduction to adults; and (iv) a resulting scandal in which it was argued (by the mother, amongst others) that the Wolf Man was lying.³³ If we provisionally accept this hypothesis—as Freud asks us to do with *his* reconstructed primal scene—then this dream of the Demon could be construed as an overdetermined representation not only of his seduction by the sister, but of the sister’s seduction by the father. Moreover, the pointing gesture of the Demon could mean a desire for sexual knowledge or satisfaction from the father (Freud’s hypothesis about both this and the Wolf Dream), an accusative gesture from the father toward the brother and sister, a repetition of his own accusations against the father and sister, or a wish to express these accusations and be believed that his father was a demon.³⁴ Abraham and Torok argue that it was not the initial scene or the sexual event that was of prime importance, but its combination with the realisation that the Wolf Man was an object of fear for his parents. Consequently what was repressed was not so much the scene itself as the act of verbalisation (symptomatically expressed in his constipation). The veil that seemed to separate him from the world and the veil that he wished to tear off his sister might then be thought of as the symbolic expression of the desires for telling the truth and for recognition that he knows the truth, that were repressed because of a fear of the truth.³⁵

The translator of *The Wolf Man’s Magic Word* argues that whereas for Freud the aim is to search for that original push that (even if only through deferred responses) deflected the path of the Wolf Man’s development from normal (however carefully Freud avoided giving a definition for normal development) to pathological, for Abraham and Torok the Wolf Man’s development is the result of a set of inseparable events and the question of the origins of his subjectivity is displaced by an intra-psychic debate *about* what is real and what is imagined.³⁶ To understand how Abraham and Torok might be said to bring into question the Freudian conceptualisation of subjectivity it is necessary to consider their use of the Freudian concepts of introjection and incorporation, and their concept of a crypt.

Introjection (which comes originally from Ferenczi) is the process by which the self is expanded through the extension of auto-erotic cathexes to others.³⁷ It is the process of assimilation of objects that Freud describes as occurring in normal mourning. Abraham and Torok include in this the assimilation of the desires and instincts of the introjected objects, and they consider the Self as nothing other than this system of introjections.³⁸ Unlike Freud, they explicitly differentiate introjection and incorporation. The latter is the process that occurs when introjection is not possible because of an intense conflict between aggressive and libidinal desires directed at the object. Incorporation is a fantasmatic substitute, an instantaneous process rather than the labourious withdrawal of libidinal cathexis and assimilation that characterises introjection: it mimes introjection. Incorporation is a sealing of the loss of the object, but also a refusal to mourn that loss. The object is included inside the self only to exclude the loving of it as a part of the self. It is simultaneously outside and inside the self. It is excluded from the inside—a crypt—and a kind of “artificial unconscious,” creating an ego fractured in itself, incapable of introjection. The crypt is a space inside the self created in order to comprehend nothing within that space.³⁹

Abraham and Torok hypothesise, in short, that the intensity of ambivalence produced by the sequence of four events that they outline excluded introjection for the Wolf Man. Instead, he incorporated his sister and the other members of his family (and the analyst, among others), and his dreams became encoded dialogues of a radically fractured self. Mahony makes a suggestion similar to that of an artificial unconscious when he considers the possibility that the Wolf Man may have had a “false-self organisation.”⁴⁰ Further, he suggests that this may in part account for the failure of the Wolf Man’s treatment: part of the Wolf Man had a wish to comply with the analyst whom he so greatly identified with his father, while on the other hand he was able to remain critical and skeptical.⁴¹ It is proposed by these authors that the psychical organisation of the Wolf Man presents a challenge to any conventional psychoanalytical understanding of the subject. The conscious and unconscious parts of the mind may be thought of as in communication, but the crypt is in contact with the ego only in encoded form, and the desire placed within the crypt is excluded. Furthermore, the desires incorporated in the Wolf Man’s various crypts are the desires of others, and it is the encoded communication of these multiply incorporated desires that forms the Wolf Man’s subjectivity. If we understand the concept of subjectivity implying some kind of unity, or of a presence at some level of consciousness of the self to itself, then the mind of the Wolf Man as presented in these re-readings of the case history appears to defy that concept.

At this point we have strayed from Freud. It has been suggested that Freud’s analysis of the material was deficient, and hence an evaluation of the subject in Freud’s work was begun on the basis of psychoanalytic re-interpretations of the case history. The concepts that have been employed are vague and confusing, however, if we do not formulate more carefully the premises

from which Freud constructs his model. Freud's discussion of drives (or instincts) and representations, and their relation to questions of fantasy and reality will therefore be considered more closely.

Discussing Freud's paper "The Unconscious" (1915), Elliott states that for Freud a drive can only do work in the unconscious if it has gone through a "representational process."⁴² A representation is the psychical expression of a drive. The boundary between a drive and its corresponding representation might be thought of as framing for Freud the boundary between the physical and the psychical. This immediately raises a question, as Elliott does not fail to note: from where do representations originate, such that they take the form that they do?⁴³ In particular, if a neurotic can be shown through analysis to owe his symptoms to an organisation of unconscious representations, from where do these representations arise? This question guides Freud throughout the case history but it had concerned him long before 1914, and the history of this question in Freud's thought must be traced.

In order to do this I shall follow the argument of Laplanche and Pontalis in their paper "Fantasy and the Origins of Sexuality."⁴⁴ Before his claim to have rejected the theory in 1897, Freud explained the hysterical symptoms of his patients as the result of childhood seduction by an adult. According to the seduction theory the origins of fantasy come from both within and without, through the concept of deferred action: on the one hand the initial seduction before the child has sexual knowledge is the forcible entry of sexuality from the outside, but on the other it is only later, with puberty that the meaning of this seduction is able to produce a sense of unpleasure.⁴⁵ For this first scene to possess significance in the memory of the child, however, for it to produce such a level of excitation that it would need to be repressed later on, it would be necessary to presume that it already had meaning for the child. From the beginning, therefore, Freud was faced with the problem of explaining the origin of sexuality, and with it, the origin of its representation in fantasy. If analysis does not stop arbitrarily at a "first scene" and arbitrarily give it the name "cause," it faces an infinite regression, always needing to presume earlier scenes.⁴⁶

When Freud rejected the seduction theory he abandoned the search for a first scene. His turn toward the idea that the answer must lie in the constitution of the neurotic was precipitated not by a desire for the simplicity of a biological explanation, but because the only alternative was even less palatable and unsatisfactory: that fantasy was the retrospective product of the adult.⁴⁷ Nonetheless Freud turned to the idea of a spontaneous infantile sexuality. Laplanche and Pontalis argue, however, that underlying the seduction theory was the intuition of a "pre-subjective structure", an idea of how the subject was organised *prior to* its entry into the world of fantasy and representation, and transcending the event and the subject.⁴⁸

The case history of the Wolf Man shows, however, that Freud was never able to abandon the question of the origin of fantasy, and never able to fully abandon the seduction theory. Fantasy is both the manifest data of analysis and the latent content derived from analysis, leaving the

origin of fantasy to be determined.⁴⁹ Freud describes the phylogenetic heritage (i.e., the primal fantasies) as “remodelling” those experiences that do not conform with it, an attempt to once again found the structure of fantasy in something other than the event.⁵⁰ Brooks claims that Freud’s denial of the importance of the reality or otherwise of the primal scene was an “heroic gesture” that displaced the question of origins.⁵¹ The notion of hereditarily transmitted memories is implausible, however, and Laplanche and Pontalis consider that Freud’s references to a phylogenetic heritage are a vain attempt to avoid the same danger of infinite regression that undermined the seduction theory.⁵²

The question of the origin of the structure that responds to an experience can always be asked. It is therefore rather unfair to Freud to call it a false problem that can be easily overcome with a different reading of the material, such as we have suggested with regard to the importance of the sister. Thus Mahony, for example, asks whether the Wolf Man’s psychical organisation could be centred on the sister, as Abraham and Torok claim:

I am nevertheless driven to ask the inevitable question: Was the irreducible prime factor in the Wolf Man’s dynamic life a sister transference, or was not the latter a derivative of a mother transference? We must query whether the sister, important as she was, could be at the centre of his nuclear self.⁵³

Of course, if we concluded that the sister’s role was “derivative” we would be forced to ask how the mother could be at the centre: innately, or as the derivative of something else? The subject in the theory of Abraham and Torok is a set of introjections and incorporations, but what drive, what system of understanding, is responsible for these processes? Even by claiming that a *sequence* of events is important, or that the subject is in dialogue with itself, it can still be claimed that for an experience to be significant there must already be a set of representations attached to the drives for which the experience can be significant. What origin could be named other than a choice between primal fantasy and primal reality? Freud’s vacillation on the issue throughout his life appears in fact to be due to the realisation of the impossibility of this choice.

Perhaps it is the relation between drives and representations that needs to be examined in order to find a way out of this paradox. Is there another way to understand the drives than as what is expressed in fantasy? If the structure of the drives is a subjective intentionality inseparable from its object as represented in fantasy, then the drive must automatically intuit the object that will satisfy it. A drive is therefore the picture of its own satisfaction and the desire to make fantasy into reality. Laplanche and Pontalis argue, however, that for Freud fantasy *begins* when the satisfaction of a desire in infancy is *not* achieved—the satisfaction is then hallucinated as a substitute.⁵⁴ Hallucinated satisfaction first takes the form of auto-erotism, which in Laplanche and Pontalis’ reading becomes the moment at which desire becomes attached to an object—the self—and it is the same moment at which this object comes to exist; the same moment, therefore, at which representation begins. Fantasy forms from the pre-subjective desire that becomes attached to the first object of the infant’s existence. For the infant, however, the object “Self” is

undifferentiated from any background, and thus coincides with the object “World.” At the moment when the satisfaction of primordial desire is hallucinated, therefore, fantasy originates, representing both the object and the setting of the sexual drive. In this formulation of Freud’s theory of subjectivity, the subject, the object, the world, and fantasy all originate in the moment when a pre-subjective desire hallucinates its satisfaction in the primordial sexual moment.⁵⁵ Significantly, this account indicates in what way the “experience” of the child initially does not differentiate between fantasy and reality, and that the emergence of the latter is conditional upon the emergence of the former.

As Laplanche and Pontalis are aware, even if this description clarifies the relation between drives and representations in Freudian theory, and hence answers many of the questions concerning the premises underlying the Freudian understanding of subjectivity, it leaves others unanswered. Fantasy is explained as the setting for desire that originates with auto-erotism but

as for knowing who is responsible for the setting, it is not enough for the psychoanalyst to rely on the resources of his sciences, nor on the support of myth. He must also become a philosopher.⁵⁶

With the entry of sexuality fantasy enters, and with the entry of fantasy comes the entry of reality, for in the first fantasy there is an equivalence of the Self and the World. Laplanche and Pontalis have, perhaps, enabled an understanding of the structure of psychical organisation at the most fundamental level as it is formulated by Freud. But everything remains to be answered. By what process does the World enter with the instigation of fantasy? That is, what structures the opening of the pre-subjective self to experience, what structures the genesis of fantasy and the World? To address these questions it is necessary, as Laplanche and Pontalis state, to turn to philosophy, and here I shall turn to a reading by Derrida of Husserlian phenomenology.⁵⁷

How could transcendental idealism inform the causal, empirical, psychologistic theory of psychoanalysis with which it appears directly opposed? What can phenomenology, which, as we all know, explains everything as derived from a pre-existing and presupposed intending subject, tell us about a genetic theory of the subject such as that of psychoanalysis? The point we have come to in our examination of the subject in psychoanalysis is that of asking two simultaneous questions: what is the genesis of the structure of the subject; and what is the structure of the genetic process which forms the subject? Derrida is able to elucidate the meaning of these questions and bring us closer to an understanding of the form an answer to them would take. Husserl points out the impossibility of a rigorous theory that presumes the independence of the concepts of structure and genesis. On the one hand, any genetic process may be described as having a structure.⁵⁸ On the other hand, if we imagine a structure as the outcome of a genetic process then genetic process is what escapes structure, it is what defines the openness of a supposedly closed structure.⁵⁹ Only a consideration of the meaning of structure *as such* and of genesis *as such* can show the common root at the base of these concepts. This “as such” is what defines phenomenology and it is this necessity that justifies the attempt at something like a

phenomenological reduction. Only a phenomenological critique, prior to any empirical inquiry, can answer the question implied in any structural or genetic theory: what is the nature of the “psychological thing”?⁶⁰ The structure uncovered after the reduction, the supposed structure of the essence of pure consciousness, differs from all other structural theories by being in principle and irreducibly not closed. One might say, with caution, that the openness of such a structure is structurally enclosed from the beginning.

The possibility or impossibility of performing the reduction is not the question of prime importance for us at the moment. For phenomenology to enlighten a structuralist psychology it is necessary to know whether or not a psychology can conduct an investigation into the meaning of genesis and structure as such while remaining open to the world, at least to the extent of a consideration of the substance that concerns it, the psychological or psychoanalytical “thing.” Can, in other words, an *a priori* psychology be constructed? Husserl claims that such a structural, phenomenological psychology can exist strictly *parallel* to transcendental phenomenology. But, as Derrida points out, parallel lines do not meet and are separated by a distance, even if an infinitely small one.⁶¹ The distance between a phenomenological psychology and phenomenology itself is constituted by a nothingness. This nothing is what permits, and necessitates, the reduction. To cross the distance from a psychological phenomenology to the phenomenological critique itself, it would be necessary to examine this nothing, but this is precisely the ground of a critique that has performed the reduction.

How are we to understand this nothing that prevents a closed structural psychology and necessitates a phenomenological reduction? We have encountered an idea of nothing already in this paper, when we noted that the crypt theorised by Abraham and Torok existed so that the Wolf Man could comprehend a form of nothing within a space inside the ego. This was not, I believe, merely a coincidence of language. To see this we must ask about the origin of the psychical structure as that which escapes it, and the nature of the psychoanalytical thing. Derrida discusses the terms that define that thing, which in France are capitalised: the Unconscious, the Self, Pleasure, etc. They are capitalised precisely so as to distinguish them from their everyday meanings and to establish them as the condition of those meanings.⁶² But to constitute the condition that permits a definition of psychical structure it is necessary that they account for its genesis as well. These terms remain phenomenal, however, and they are thus rooted in the world. The question of the meaning of these structural terms requires an understanding of their genesis. It is only the artifice of language that gives them the appearance of transphenomenality, and conceals the necessity of the reduction for the consideration of their meaning as such and in general. Abraham and Torok, however, attempt to produce a transphenomenal concept that is the mainspring of a certain psychoanalytical meaning.⁶³ Incorporation is intended not only as a variation of introjection but as underlying the process of introjection. The crypt might appear to the ego as the introjection of nothing (the language here is too simple, for how the crypt “appears” is precisely what must be investigated), and hence the analysis of a crypt may be thought identical

to the investigation of the meaning of introjection *as such*, that is, apart from the content of introjection. Incorporation, it will be remembered, is described as fantasy, and hence it is through the investigation of a fantasy that we may come closer to an understanding of “the thing introjection.” What would remain is the question of the meaning of the experience of nothing, and this is what Husserl suggests a structural or phenomenological psychology is incapable of.

So what is the meaning of genesis *as such* and structure *as such*, and what is the relationship between them in general? These are the final questions to which we come, but the answers must be deferred. To ask these questions is to ask about the possibility of the phenomenological reduction, since it is only after the reduction that we are able to talk about the meaning of these terms. But to ask about the possibility of the reduction is to ask whether the unity of the world permits the asking of “the question” in general.⁶⁴ This is the question of how the world is able to open itself up to permit questioning by the subject, including the questioning of the subject itself. It is to ask whether or not a gap opens up between the asking subject and the world. The opening of such a gap is the opening of a space for the formation of subjectivity. It is not difficult, therefore, to see that we have now returned to the problem posed at the end of the paper by Laplanche and Pontalis—the question of who is responsible for the setting of originary fantasy—for, as posed by them, this is the question of how the world opens itself up to a pre-subjective subject. The problem posed at the end of their paper, therefore, could be restated as the problem of the possibility of the reduction but, since this can be answered only after the reduction has been performed, it can receive no answer. Laplanche and Pontalis might also be said to have demonstrated, however, that transcendental idealism, the great philosophy of the subject, necessarily leads back to a pre-subjective ground.⁶⁵ Moreover, what is necessitated is an investigation into the possibility of questioning nonmeaning, the gap which permits questioning. This might be framed as a question of the possibility of investigating the meaning of one’s own death, the death of the questioning subject. The question of the genesis of the subject, then, implies the question of the structure of the subject, and furthermore, the question of the end of the subject.

One further problem should be mentioned which, perhaps, undermines the definitude with which phenomenology was said to be capable of enlightening the questions proposed as lying at the end of a psychoanalytical understanding of the subject. It is also a problem that psychoanalysis is perhaps more likely to point toward and to consider than phenomenology, although it would be going too far to say that psychoanalysis has spent much time doing so. It was noted earlier that the concept of drive in Freud straddled the physical and the psychical domains. In “From the History of an Infantile Neurosis” Freud suggests that the reactions of a child imply some kind of preparatory understanding that he likens to the instincts of animals.⁶⁶ Laplanche and Pontalis note that this association in Freud of primal fantasy rather than the drives with animal instincts indicates that he does not derive fantasy from the drives, he does not derive fantasy from biology.⁶⁷ What is interesting is that psychoanalysis, being linked by Freud with

medicine and certainly with science and empirical research, cannot afford the radical distinction between a human and a non-human structure of experience. As Derrida points out, however, phenomenology and the discourse of the subject in general have presupposed such a distinction.⁶⁸ The “as such” of Husserl is something specific to human experience from the outset. The assumption of a lack of continuity in the structures of experience might well be construed as an alien one, as an assumption that would not survive a strictly applied reduction, and as contaminating the phenomenological project from within. If Freud had associated the drives with animal instincts we might presume that this same distinction between the human and the non-human was retained, such that animals possessed only a biological resemblance to man, and were destined to remain the eternal Other. By associating animal instincts with primal fantasies, however, Freud creates a continuity between man and animal at the level of experience rather than biology. And he must do so because the question of the origin of representation seems pertinent for animals as well as people. The implication of Freud’s statement is the possibility of constructing philosophies of the subject that address the continuities and discontinuities of human and non-human experience. The exclusion of non-human experience is perhaps the last presupposition that needs to be removed from the philosophy of the subject, and the relation of the human to the non-human the last question to be addressed.

Notes

¹Sigmund Freud, “From the History of an Infantile Neurosis (The ‘Wolf Man’)”, *Case Histories II: Penguin Freud Library, Volume 9*, trans. James Strachey (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1979).

²This reading of phenomenology will be largely conducted via a reading of Derrida reading Husserl. I claim no exhaustive knowledge of either Husserl or Derrida.

³Freud, p. 311.

⁴*Ibid.*, pp. 234–5.

⁵*Ibid.*, p. 253, and p. 256.

⁶*Ibid.*, p. 258.

⁷*Ibid.*, p. 263.

⁸*Ibid.*, p. 265.

⁹*Ibid.*, pp. 266–7, and p. 274.

¹⁰Patrick J. Mahony, *Cries of the Wolf Man* (New York: International Universities Press, 1984), p. 50.

¹¹Freud claims (p. 233 n. 1) that the case history is the “objective” complement to his (presumably) polemical contribution to this debate in “On the History of the Psycho-Analytic Movement.”

¹²See Nicholas Rand and Maria Torok, “Questions to Freudian Psychoanalysis: Dream Interpretation, Reality, Fantasy,” *Critical Inquiry* 19 (Spring 1993), pp. 567–94.

¹³In this paper I shall not be concerned with the distinction made by some commentators on Freud between “fantasy” and “phantasy”, and I shall refer solely to the former.

¹⁴Freud, p. 270.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, p. 284.

¹⁶Karin Obholzer, *The Wolf-Man: Conversations with Freud’s Patient—Sixty Years Later* (New York: Continuum, 1982), pp. 36–40.

¹⁷Freud, p. 285.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, pp. 285–6.

¹⁹Obholzer, p. 38. The Wolf Man also tells an anecdote that he had heard in his youth about someone who was cured of a belief that there was a ticking watch in their chest by a doctor who, through sleight of hand, claimed to have removed the watch. When the Wolf Man asked another analyst if such a cure was possible he was told it could work. While Freud uses the easing of symptoms when a construct is

presented as evidence of the validity of the construct, the Wolf Man pointedly suggests that it is therefore possible for analysis to work in the same way as this doctor: that the pronouncement of the truth of constructs may lead to the appearance of a cure in the same way (*ibid.*, pp. 135–6).

²⁰*Ibid.*, p. 59.

²¹*Ibid.*, p. 40.

²²Freud, p. 247. Freud describes the patient's obsessional nature as an obstacle to certainty in the analysis (*ibid.*, p. 312, emphasis added):

We know how important doubt is to the physician who is analysing an obsessional neurosis [...] This same doubt enabled our patient to lie entrenched behind a respectful indifference and to allow the efforts of the treatment to slip past him for years together. Nothing changed, and *there was no way of convincing him*.

It would be possible to discuss much further than there is time for here Freud's remarks about his technique and the relation of his patient to the construction Freud offers up for him.

²³Mahony, p. 34.

²⁴*Ibid.*, ch. 3. Mahony, following Viderman, even considers that it might be the interpretation of the dream itself that led to a "fantasmatisation", a situation of mutual ardour placing the dream at the centre of the analysis, caused by the desire for improvement and the excitement of witnessing the birth of a new science (*ibid.*, p. 107).

²⁵To actually re-interpret the Wolf Man's case convincingly, of course, it would be necessary to introduce all his symptoms and account for them in a systematic fashion in relation to all the events described by Freud, and that are available from other sources. Such post-analytic re-interpretation could only be achieved very painstakingly, since there is no ability to test theories on the patient, and since the limitations of the sources must always be taken into consideration. Here I shall be mainly concerned with the attempts at re-interpretation of the Wolf Man case history by others and much material will be left out.

²⁶Obholzer, p. 37. It is not clear whether it was the way in which she played with him that was systematic or the way that she went about achieving the aim of doing so (possibly more than once?).

²⁷Freud, pp. 247–8. It will be recalled that the Wolf Man's complaint to Freud was that the world was hidden from him by a veil.

²⁸Obholzer, p. 36.

²⁹Freud, p. 306, emphasis added. Note the ambiguity regarding the origin of the interpretation of this dream—"we" gave the meaning, but with no description of how this came about.

³⁰The square brackets indicate that the footnote was by the editor of the English translation of the case history rather than by Freud.

³¹Freud discusses an incident where the Wolf Man wept at Lermontov's grave, obviously in unconscious mourning at the loss of his sister who had recently committed suicide (*ibid.*, p. 252). The suicide was after the dream, when the sister was 21 and the Wolf Man 19. See also "The Memoirs of the Wolf Man," in Muriel Gardiner (ed.), *The Wolf-Man and Sigmund Freud* (London: Hogarth, 1972), pp. 28ff.

³²Freud, p. 252. The Wolf Man refers to his "identification" with Lermontov (in Gardiner, pp. 20–1).

³³Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok, *The Wolf Man's Magic Word: A Cryptonymy*, trans. Nicholas Rand (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1986), pp. 20–1. It should be noted that this book employs a very unusual methodology (described ambivalently by Mahony as a “wild analysis”, p. 65) and that I consequently refer to it cautiously. While it seems to me that its construction of an alternative history for the Wolf Man explains certain things, and that the reconsideration of Freudian concept is significant, the way in which they “prove” their theories about the Wolf Man’s neurosis underlines what I stated above (note 25) about the difficulties of post-analytic re-interpretation.

³⁴It might thus be asked of Freud’s interpretation of the Wolf Dream why the sense of *reality* would be *emphasised* in the dream. Freud’s interpretation up until the introduction of the primal scene is compatible with the alternative history suggested by Abraham and Torok: “*A real occurrence—dating from a very early period [the “very” here might be thought of as Freud’s contribution]—looking—immobility—sexual problems—castration—his father—something terrible.*”

³⁵*Ibid.*, p. 21 and p. 40. Abraham and Torok demonstrate their hypothesis by claiming that because the object of repression for the Wolf Man is not an act or an event but words themselves in the context of a set of events, the Wolf Man must treat words unconsciously as objects. This leads them to develop an original method of dream interpretation—cryptonymy—that assumes that there are certain words which are absent from the Wolf Man’s pre-conscious. Cryptonymy depends upon the sounds of words in various languages and synonymical associations to reconstruct the absent parts of language from the Wolf Man’s dreams. Much of this method of interpretation requires quite an open mind to be accepted with the certainty they with which they seem to regard it. It leads to an interpretation of most of the Wolf Man’s reported dreams as being real and distorted or imagined dialogues between the members of his family and other significant people in his life about these events. It is my view that there is evidence obtainable from the material (Freud’s analysis, Brunswick’s analysis, and the interviews with Obholzer) in favour of a greater importance of the seduction scene and the possibility of a scandal involving the Wolf Man’s hearing about or witnessing a scene with the father and daughter that does not require the cryptonymic method, but all this cannot be provided here.

³⁶*Ibid.*, p. lvii.

³⁷Jacques Derrida, “Foreword. *Fors*: The English Words of Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok,” in *ibid.*, pp. xvi–xvii.

³⁸*Ibid.*, p. xv. This is quite similar to the position of Borch-Jacobsen, who argues that the subject (of desire) is nothing but the system of multiple identifications. He argues that identification is prior to the desiring subject, and that wish fulfilment is nothing other than the achievement of identification. The desire for identification, prior to desire, is thus not itself a desire or an “imitative instinct” (he quotes Freud on the desire “to be” as existing prior to the desire “to have”) but organises the system of desires. The subject, then, is nothing but the system of identifications and is therefore inherently multiple and unlocatable. This argument seems to run into problems when it tries to specify the meaning of a non-desiring mimetic desire at the origin of desire itself. The concept of incorporation as opposed to introjection might be thought of as a radicalisation of Borch-Jacobsen’s formulation of a multiple ego, since it is both a derivative form of

introjection and the condition of possibility for introjection to have meaning, as I hope to show. See Mikkel Borch-Jacobsen, *The Freudian Subject*, trans. Catherine Porter (Stanford: Stanford, 1988), chs. 1–2.

³⁹*Ibid.*, p. xix and p. 5. The combined assimilation and rejection of the incorporated object is inherently unstable, according to Abraham and Torok, and thus can only be maintained by a clandestinity within the ego. For nothing to be comprehended within the crypt it must communicate only in a secret code, different from the distortion imposed by the ego on the thoughts of the id. This is the basis of the Wolf Man's supposed treatment of words as objects, and thus of their interpretative methodology, cryptonymy.

⁴⁰Mahony, pp. 41. With the use of this concept he is following Winnicott. His formulation of the Wolf Man's false-self organisation is as follows:

In the case of the Freud's [*sic*] Wolf Man, various traumata might be seen to promote a precocious ego development, acute dissociation, splitting, and a defensive exploitation of pregenital instincts; from that conjunction arose the false-self organisation with severe obsessiveness.

⁴¹*Ibid.*, p. 106. This comes through in the Wolf Man's conversations with Obholzer. Mahony makes the following assessment of the treatment and the role of the undetected false-self organisation (p. 42):

But how much insight did the woeful patient receive throughout his various analyses? And how much was it rather a matter of establishing or re-establishing an archaic bond? A more adequate explanation is that the Wolf Man's seemingly adaptive functioning represented a readjustment of a false-self organisation without radically affecting the underlying pathology. Hence the compliance with the therapeutic wishes of a narcissistically invested transference object sustained a narcissistic self-organisation fixated at the stage of infantile grandiosity.

Abraham and Torok make a similar point when they state that the strength of the Wolf Man's transference to Freud was the incorporated sister repeating the scene in which she gave herself to her father (Abraham and Torok, p. 6). At the end of his book Mahony concludes that the Wolf Man's narcissistic and infantile organisation meant that the Wolf Man remained basically inaccessible to analysis (Mahony, p. 151). It should be noted, however, that all those who analysed or interviewed the Wolf Man—Freud, Brunswick, Gardiner, Eissler, Obholzer, and others—were, even if they had a personal liking for him, interested in his inner self for reasons of their own. The Wolf Man's sharp intelligence and obsessional disposition did not fail to detect this in every case, and it is therefore perhaps no surprise (and perhaps tragic also) that none were given unrestricted access to his mind.

⁴²Anthony Elliott, *Social Theory and Psychoanalysis in Transition: Self and Society from Freud to Kristeva* (Oxford and Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell, 1982), p. 24. For Borch-Jacobsen this establishes that there is a theory of the subject at the base of Freud's writings, since representations must represent to someone, even if this is claimed to be an unconscious someone. The unconscious is the subject (Borch-Jacobsen, p. 5).

⁴³Elliott, p. 26. Elliott follows Castoriadis in answering this question by postulating a "creative" unconscious. Drives in their most primitive form might be thought of as an affective response to painful and pleasurable stimuli, but to account for the form and content of representations it is necessary to presume an initial representation created *ex nihilo* (*ibid.*, pp. 27–7). The unconscious is the capacity to create representations. This is an attempt to account for the need to presume an initial attachment of drives to representations without resorting to a set of inherited representations. But the creation of representations out of nothing is not a solution to this problem, since if no cause can be found this must amount to one of two things. Either it is a presupposition that each subject uniquely begins with an arbitrary set of representations (since "creation" is merely a meaningless temporal displacement of "born with" if there is nothing to be said about *how* the individual came to have these representations), or else these initially

created representations may be generalised between people, which amounts to a position no less determinist than Freud's.

⁴⁴Jean Laplanche and Jean-Bertrand Pontalis, "Fantasy and the Origins of Sexuality," in Victor Burgin, James Donald and Cora Kaplan (eds.), *Formations of Fantasy* (London: Methuen, 1986).

⁴⁵*Ibid.*, p. 10.

⁴⁶Laplanche and Pontalis point out that the concept of myth does not solve this problem either (*ibid.*, pp. 11–2). Myth can only intrude upon the subject if a system of representation already exists for which the myth would be meaningful.

⁴⁷*Ibid.*, p. 12.

⁴⁸*Ibid.*, p. 14.

⁴⁹*Ibid.*, p. 15.

⁵⁰Freud, p. 363, and Laplanche and Pontalis, pp. 16–7.

⁵¹Peter Brooks, "Fictions of the Wolfman: Freud and Narrative Understanding," *Diacritics* 9 (1), 1979, pp. 77–8.

⁵²Laplanche and Pontalis, pp. 17–8. Culler notes Freud's remark that the reality or otherwise of the primal scene is unimportant, and accurately (though with different terminology than Freud would use) recounts why this could be considered so:

In one sense, however, Freud is right, for the two alternatives give us very similar narratives. If one opts for the production of the event by forces of signification, it becomes clear that the primal fantasy, as we might call it, can be efficacious only if the imagined event functions for the 4-year-old as a real event from his past. And if, on the other hand, we opt for the reality of the primal scene, we can see that this event could not have had the disastrous consequences it did unless the structures of signification which made it a trauma for the Wolfman and gave it irresistible explanatory power were so suited to it as to make it in some sense necessary.

Jonathan Culler, *The Pursuit of Signs: Semiotics, Literature, Deconstruction* (London, Melbourne and Henley: Routledge, 1981), p. 181. Whereas Brooks thinks Freud displaces the question of origins, Culler's interpretation might be said to state, rather more circumspectly, that this question is only displaced to the extent that *both* the alternatives are in danger of falling into the paradox of an infinite regression, and thus evading rather than displacing this question.

⁵³Mahony, p. 38.

⁵⁴Laplanche and Pontalis, p. 24.

⁵⁵*Ibid.*, pp. 25–6.

⁵⁶*Ibid.*, p. 27.

⁵⁷Derrida, "'Genesis and Structure' and Phenomenology," in *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (London and Henley: Routledge, 1978).

⁵⁸That is, unless we somehow imagine that genesis and structure can be separated on purely temporal grounds, but surely it is not unreasonable to ask about the structure of time or history. Social science is a question of "facts" no matter how reflective it claims to be, and as such any structural theory presupposes an idea of truth. A pre-phenomenological concept of structure is by definition closed, and thus it must enclose a rigorous concept of the truth that is its own validation. An account of the genesis of the structure necessarily displaces this account of truth as that which is outside it.

For as long as the phenomenological space has not been uncovered, and for as long as the transcendental description has not been undertaken, the problem of 'structure and genesis' seems to have no meaning. Neither the idea of structure, which isolates the different spheres of objective signification with respect for their static originality, nor the idea of genesis, which effects abusive transitions from one region to another, appears adequate to clarify the problem which is already Husserl's, that is, the problem of the *foundation of objectivity*.

Ibid., p. 159. See also note 59 below.

⁵⁹Derrida (p. 160) describes below why an account of structure grounded in an historical idea of truth is contradictory. The insistence by Husserl on an infinite idea of truth is not evidence that phenomenology is ahistorical, because this insistence is a critique of the essentially teleological and historical justifications for claims of universal truth made by structuralists. This is significant for those who think that it is possible to simply dismiss a theory of the subject in favour of an account of the historically constructed or structured consciousness. Phenomenology will always be able to ask of these reformulations for whom and in what way does the concept of historical construction have meaning:

Pure truth or the pretension to pure truth is missed in its *meaning* as soon as one attempts, as Dilthey does, to account for it from within a determined historical totality, that is, from within a factual totality, a finite totality all of whose manifestations and cultural productions are structurally solidary and coherent, and are all regulated by the same function, by the same finite unity of a total subjectivity. This meaning of truth, or of the pretension to truth, is the requirement of an absolute, infinite omni-temporality and universality, without limits of any kind. The Idea of truth, that is the Idea of philosophy or of science, is an infinite Idea, an Idea in the Kantian sense. Every totality, every finite structure is inadequate to it. Now the Idea or the project which animates and unifies every *determined* historical structure, every *Weltanschauung*, is *finite*: on the basis of the structural description of a *vision of the world* one can account for everything except the infinite opening to truth, that is, philosophy. Moreover, it is always something like an *opening* which will frustrate the structuralist project. What I can never understand, in a structure, is that by means of which it is not closed.

⁶⁰*Ibid.*

⁶¹*Ibid.*, p. 164.

⁶²Derrida, “Foreword” to Abraham and Torok, pp. xxxi–xxxii.

⁶³Abraham and Torok, cited in Derrida’s “Foreword” to Abraham and Torok, p. 117n. 6.

⁶⁴Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, pp. 167–8.

⁶⁵Cf., Derrida, “‘Eating Well,’ or the Calculation of the Subject: An Interview with Jacques Derrida,” in Eduardo Cadava, Peter Connor and Jean-Luc Nancy (eds.) *Who Comes After the Subject?* (New York and London: Routledge, 1991), pp. 101–2.

⁶⁶Freud, pp. 363–4.

⁶⁷Laplanche and Pontalis, p. 23.

⁶⁸Derrida, “‘Eating Well,’” p. 105.

Politics, community and the imaginary

I will even venture to say that ethics, politics, and responsibility, *if there are any*, will only even have begun with the experience and experiment of the aporia. When the path is clear and given, when a certain knowledge opens up the way in advance, the decision is already made, it might as well be said that there is none to make: irresponsibly, and in good conscience, one simply applies or implements a program. Perhaps, and this would be the objection, one never escapes the program. In that case, one must acknowledge this and stop talking with authority about moral or political responsibility. The condition of possibility of this thing called responsibility is a certain *experience and experiment of the possibility of the impossible*.

Jacques Derrida

I repeat, for Bataille, the question: Why “community”? The answer he gives is rather clear: “There exists a principle of insufficiency at the root of each being...”

Maurice Blanchot

There are two clichés which have become predominant within academic discourse to the extent of being at least perceived as hegemonic. The first is that “the subject is socially constructed.” The second is that “communism is dead.” Both these ideas are understood as events, as points which have been reached from which there is no return. The liberal dream of realising one’s subjective essence in a free society has vanished with the discovery of “power.” The marxist dream of realising communal essence receded with the revelation of the totalitarianism of post-revolutionary societies and vanished with their collapse. The crisis perceived in the conjunction of these two clichés is that this apparent end of the imagining of essence might signal the end of the possibility of politics. Thus a common response to this “crisis” and this perceived academic hegemony is to deny the validity of the clichés, even and especially to deny them on the basis of their apparent conclusion. This is a resistance to political thought, or to thinking in general, which occurs in the name of politics. It is a resistance which precludes engagement, closes off politics and reduces discourse to dogmatic schemas. To the extent that this is so such a response is irresponsible, and it is characterised by two denials: that (political) discourse is finite, and that we might be experiencing the death of the possibility of community.

A more responsible response, if there is one, is to ask how it is possible to move beyond the banality of these clichés, a process which is likely to discover that the supposed authorities for this recent wisdom speak in quite different tones. This is not to say that the work of these authors does not pose serious questions to political and academic orthodoxy, but rather that the seriousness of these questions implies the need, in fact the *political* responsibility, to deal seriously with what in fact has been said. Thus in this essay I attempt to draw the thread connecting the thoughts of subjectivity and society or community, of imagination and politics, in the works of several contemporary French thinkers. I begin, through the work of Blanchot and Bataille, with the question of what, in fact, we are to understand by the concept of “imagination.” Through this process the relation of imagination to the finitude of the subject, marked by the violence of the mortality of “the other,” becomes central. The “imagined” subject means a finite subject, or the finitude of the idea of the subject. The relation of the violence in finitude to discourse is considered through Derrida and Feldman, and then the significance of the thought of finitude for the possibility of ethics is investigated through Foucault’s “ethics.” Through Foucault’s concepts of an “aesthetic” ethics and of a pre-subjective “freedom,” the possibility of ethics in the wake of subjective finitude is considered. The possibility of politics, however, is dependent upon the possibility of a movement from “ethics” to society, that is, to the question of community. This is considered through the work of Nancy, and once again of Blanchot and

Derrida, returning also to the meaning of the death of the other. The possibility of politics that comes from this is, on the one hand, an exigency to a politics of politics, but perhaps such a politics prior to politics cannot expect a certain or absolute ground.

Taking “the subject” as an example, we can ask what it means to say that this thing, the subject, is imaginary or has been imagined. The implication of this question is that the subject that has been imagined is not only not present in the world, but also that it is not to be opposed to some *true* thing to which the term subject could still be applied. The subject is an imaginary object to be opposed not to some other true subject, for the essence of the act of calling a thing “subject” is something imagined. Furthermore, the question suggests that the imagination of the subject possesses an historical quality: the imagination of the subject is something that has been or must be relegated to history in favour of something surpassing or coming after the subject. In which case, it is reasonable to ask who it is that has imagined that they *know* rather than imagine the subject. Who is it that has imagined that they have refused to imagine the subject through a declaration of the subject’s imaginary essence? Is it possible that what is most imaginary in this schema is the narrative that suggests that the subject has been imagined and that it is possible to stop imagining the subject?¹ Likewise for “society,” or “culture,” or “community.” Does the concept of “the imaginary” itself grasp the essence of these things? Is an imaginary essence a ground for a concept of the subject or for its impossibility? Are imagination and knowledge opposed? These last questions shift the emphasis to the question of the essence of the imaginary itself.

According to everyday understandings, what we mean by an image is something present, but at a distance from the object imagined. The image comes *after* the object and is displaced from it. But the thing “image” is itself this distance from presence, this presence of absence. The essence of the thing contains this distance within it as essence. Maurice Blanchot imagines the essence of the imaginary via a metaphor that perhaps will turn out to be not just one metaphor among others—the corpse:

The image does not, at first glance, resemble the corpse, but the cadaver’s strangeness is perhaps also that of the image. What we call mortal remains escapes common categories. Something is there before us which is not really the living person, nor is it any reality at all. It is neither the same as the person who was alive, nor is it another person, nor is it anything else.²

But the image or reflection of the object seems, sometimes, also to be the ideal form of the object, as something more than the object of mere existence. The image appears to be the pure *form* without matter of the object. This, too, is reflected in the strangeness of the corpse. The corpse, possessing a certain finality or majesty, becomes “Someone” but “nothing in particular.” At the moment when the corpse appears most to have withdrawn to the strangeness of an absolute solitude, a moment when “the feeling of a relation between humans is destroyed,” when “the cadaverous presence is the presence of the unknown before us,” the “mourned deceased begins to *resemble himself*.”³ According to Blanchot, it is only upon the death of the person that this

resemblance begins, and hence the corpse is similar to nothing but itself. “The cadaver is its own image.”⁴ In the same way, even if the reflection perhaps *appears* as ideal form, the image is not the sense or the meaning of the object, except in the sense that the essence of the object is the withdrawal of sense or meaning, the withdrawal of resemblance, and hence always the image of nothing. The image of the object is always the image of that which has nothing to resemble. The finitude of the image and the finitude of the object are inseparable from the finitude given to the corpse by death, a death which “is sometimes truth’s elaboration in the world and sometimes the perpetuity of that which admits neither beginning nor end.”⁵ This is the sense of Blanchot’s two versions of the imaginary:

It is very true then, that [...] comprehension and knowing in man are linked to what we call finitude; but where is the finish? Granted, it is taken in or understood as the possibility which is death. But it is also “taken back” by this possibility inasmuch as in death the possibility which is death dies too.⁶

The imaginary is the “life-giving negation of the thing,” but as the thing at a distance. In the imaginary “all belonging to the world” is dissipated, and the image marks only the presence of an absence.⁷

As with so much of contemporary French thought, this thinking of the imaginary cannot be divorced from the work of Georges Bataille. Taking up, in the context of religion, the most conventional of oppositions, Bataille argues that the significance of the corpse is as the most complete affirmation of the spirit in opposition to the thingness of the body of the person. But this affirmation is possible only through the “impotence and absence” of death.⁸ For Bataille, this thought of the corpse is linked to sacrificial violence which, rather than reducing the victim to a thing, reveals the “sovereignty” of the victim by annihilating the worldly component of their being. Sacrifice is the attempt to “communicate” the finitude of existence, the insufficiency of the world of things, through the sacrifice of the image of a thing in the form of a corpse. Paradoxically, the truth of sacrifice is also its failure: there is no escape beyond the world of things and sacrifice can only be the dissolution of the world of things in favour of a realm of equally finite and insufficient *sacred* things. The root of the insufficiency of sacrifice is also what demands it, and the impossible essence of “intimacy,” that which sacrifice attempts to communicate, is also that which necessitates a relation between violence and finitude—“intimacy is violence.”⁹ There is “a violence at the heart of the awakening to the longing for intimacy.”¹⁰

This interrelation of the imaginary and the corpse, of death, violence, and the longing for something beyond the world of things (and for Bataille “things” are the sign of finitude), is already to suggest the question of the relation of violence and discourse. This question is precisely that addressed by Derrida in terms of the ethics of Levinas in the essay “Violence and Metaphysics.”¹¹ For Levinas only discourse, and specifically not “ontology” (whatever we make or Derrida makes of Levinas’ relegation of this term to something like the Same), opens up the space of infinite alterity within the Same, and thus only discourse, with its openness to the

possibility of the infinite other, is “righteous.” But, Derrida asks, does this suggestion that ethics is possible only on the condition of the opening of a space within the Same not imply an original violence—a violent rupture within the Same—within discourse?¹² This original violence in turn implies an inherent violence in any discourse on the presence of the present. If the opening to the infinite other is that least imaginary form of experience which is the guarantee and the demand of ethics prior to ethics, then it is the finitude of the experience of the subject—which is the finitude of the subject and the finitude of experience, a finitude “originally marked by death. Presence as violence is the meaning of finitude”¹³—which is this guarantee. But if violence is the truth of the finitude of discourse and the experience of the subject, then discourse can only tend toward justice if it takes the form of an originary demand for the truth of violence. The openness to the other is already an openness to the possibility of violence and to what exceeds, or is the excess that institutes and constitutes, discourse. Ethics cannot “take violence into account”—for violence is at the heart of the ethical demand—except in the sense of violence against violence, an ethical *economy* of violence, the calculation of the incalculable. Levinas’ ethical demand, in the face of Derrida’s analysis, mirrors Bataille’s sacrificial demand or, as Derrida puts it, “philosophy.”¹⁴

With these beginnings of a discourse on discourse, violence, and the imaginary, it is possible to question an apparent contradiction in Allen Feldman’s *Formations of Violence*. Feldman begins with a wish to understand violence as a “unified language,”¹⁵ and later writes of “the semantics of political violence,”¹⁶ yet he also insists that in its “material consequences” violence is located within the Lacanian Real.¹⁷ “Violence of a certain magnitude,” he writes, is capable of “opening the symbolic order,” but the exigencies to which the symbolic order is thus opened are not external to it but “inhabit this order in the form of its own effects.”¹⁸ These are the exigencies of history.¹⁹ And the violence within the symbolic order which constitutes its openness cannot be separated from the movement of history. While there may be an incommensurability between discourse and violence, the truth of discourse, of its finitude, is the effacement of violence, and the effacement of the finitude of discourse is the violence of discourse. When it serves as a “political rationalisation,” this effacement of the difference, the alterity, the violence, at the heart of discourse is described by Feldman as the “instrumental imaginary.”²⁰ The instrumental imaginary, even if it is an imaginary construction of violence, is the imagination of a political discourse unmarked by violence, a closed discourse of totality. This is the violence of the instrumental imaginary and the proof that Blanchot’s choice of the corpse as the image of the image was not arbitrary. The finitude of an instrumentally imagined political discourse, its truth and its end, is its dependence on a body without end. The death of the other, the equivalence between the imagination of and the death of the subject, reveals the impossibility of an infinite, closed, or total, political discourse.

This structure of an instrumentally imagined political discourse allows for the questioning of Feldman’s discourse on Irish violence. In a discussion of the tactic of hunger

striking, Feldman notes that the political efficacy of this sacrificially violent act is dependent upon “the capacity to effect a structural, ethical, and semiological break with all preceding and contemporary forms of violence.”²¹ The paradox he notes in this sacrificial structure is that the break with the continuity of violence is instituted only through a new violence, and violence thus “still remains the founding language of social representation.”²² Violence is “sublated” only through its “ritual repetition.”²³ Violence against violence, economy of violence. We might say that the implied failure of the hunger strike is that in the desire to overcome violence it can do nothing but demand a higher violence to negate all other violence, and the imaginary political discourse is reduced to the repetition of the same, i.e., violence. The delegitimation of violence is achieved only through the legitimisation of “a double interiorisation of violence: its containment and its reinscription as a cultural institution.”²⁴

Without claiming that Feldman is wrong, or even that the sacrificial logic of the hunger strike is faulty, we can ask whether it does not contain the dream of an infinite or total, non-instrumental, non-imagined, political discourse. Feldman’s discussion of the hunger strike can be contrasted to Bataille’s solution of the exigency of sacrifice. This exigency cannot be individual since the individual subject is incompatible with intimacy (which, it will be recalled, *is* violence for Bataille). Sacrifice is a constant demand for more destruction, for greater interruption of the world of things, for a more pure violence. But this demand must also be tempered, limited, contained, reinscribed. The amicable though anguished reconciliation of these “incompatible necessities” is not the figure of the hunger striker but the festival.²⁵ This contradictory necessity, demanded by the exigency of imagining the possibility of intimacy, the exigency of imagining the experience of the finitude of existence, and represented by the festival, is the essence of politics:

For the sake of a *real* community, of a social fact that is given as a thing—of a common operation in view of a future time—the festival is limited: it is itself integrated as a link in the concatenation of useful works.²⁶

The failure of this gesture, or its inevitable finitude, lies not in the inevitable return of the festival to violence, but in the inevitable *impossibility* of surrendering totally to violence, which would not be a hunger strike but death without thought of utility. It is that violence *against* violence, an *economy* of violence, is already a turn *away from* violence that marks the insufficiency of the festival. This is not to say that violent or murderous sacrifice is a necessity for some idea of cultural harmony, but that the dream of harmony, the dream of a political discourse without a violent relation specifically to the body, *may* already be a form of (perhaps “necessary”) instrumentally imagined political violence.

We have, perhaps, moved directly from a thinking of imagination and its relation to finitude and violence, to a thinking of the essence of politics in the face of this. But if we may provisionally

suggest that politics is the space opened up by the convergence of the problems of ethics and community, then the respective status of the subject and of “society” or community becomes crucial. Who is the finite subject of politics whose corpse stands as an imaginary shadow? To answer this question we will make use of, or possibly do violence to, the ethical subject which appears late in the discourse of Michel Foucault.

Foucault’s genealogical method consists in the investigation or the construction of three types of “historical ontology”: truth, power and, finally, ethics.²⁷ The subject for Foucault is a formation at the intersection of these historical ontologies, but it is the relationships, practices, and structures²⁸ of *power* that most *generally* describe the way in which Foucault understands the subject to be situated and constituted. The impossibility of the extrication of knowledge from a power which comes from everywhere is one indication that the subject is not an essence. The subject “is not given to us.” *From this fact* follows one consequence: “we have to create ourselves as a work of art.”²⁹ This is the foundation of Foucault’s “ethics” and the formulation that it is our task to understand. Thus Foucault’s ethical imperative appears to precede the concept of subjectivation and in fact to have the absence of a given subject as its *condition*.

This formulation of an imagined subject of ethics is obviously radically opposed to the subject of liberal philosophy whose ethical responsibility stems from an essence constituted as free. Yet Foucault does not exclude the concept of freedom from his account: “Freedom is the ontological condition of ethics. But ethics is the deliberate form assumed by freedom.”³⁰ If Foucault agrees with liberal accounts that liberty is an unavoidable precondition of any ethical account, then his analysis must differ in its account of freedom. The omnipresence of power in all discourses of truth is itself the truth of the absence of subjective essence, but the omnipresence of power in practice—but it should not be thought here that discourse and practice are opposed—is the truth of the impossibility of establishing or guaranteeing freedom through juridical or totalising measures: “Liberty is a *practice* [...] I think that it can never be inherent in the structure of things to guarantee the exercise of freedom. The guarantee of freedom is freedom.”³¹ For Foucault freedom is not the absence of power, nor is it an imagined power of the individual to negate power by creation *ex nihilo*.³² Liberty is a practice. What can it mean to say that the guarantee of freedom is freedom other than that there is an openness at the heart of the subject of power, that the guarantee of freedom is a resistance to existence that is at once internal to subjective finitude and infinitely exceeding and surpassing it? The possibility of ethics for Foucault must come from the freedom of a subject which “has” a desire beyond desire, a need beyond necessity (for need and desire already suppose an essence), to at once experience and exceed its own limits, to at once experience its constitution by an all-pervasive but finite power and to exceed all determination by the finite structures of power:

The relationship between power and freedom’s refusal to submit cannot therefore be separated [...] At the very heart of the power relationship, and constantly provoking it, are the recalcitrance of the will and the intransigence of freedom. Rather than speaking of an essential

freedom, it would be better to speak of an “agonism”—of a relationship which is at the same time reciprocal incitation and struggle.³³

Foucault’s freedom resembles that force which Bataille insists necessitates violent resistance to the “servitude” of a subject of the world of things, of a subject as a finite thing, and demands the gesture of sacrifice.³⁴ Foucault’s ethics is “aesthetic” to the extent that it does not depend upon the pretence of a universal moral system or the imagining of a total and universal subjective essence.³⁵ An ethics emerges from the thought of a relation to the finitude and mortality of the subject other than fear, since the practice that would result from such a fear could not be separated from the imagination of a subject beyond finitude and mortality.³⁶

This aesthetic ethics escapes mere narcissistic obsession with the truth of the subject’s desire or the truth of subjective essence because of the relation of finitude to power. The freedom that is the condition of this ethics is a freedom within a structure of power, a freedom that must already form a relation to the Other as power. The question of ethics for Foucault is the possibility of taking into account “the pleasure of the other,” a pleasure which must be opposed to the desire of the other as finite being.³⁷ An ethics based on the other’s desire could not be divorced from a hermeneutics which presumes the possibility of the subordination of the other to a form of knowledge.³⁸ Thus Foucault’s ethics is “an aesthetics of existence, the purposeful art of a freedom perceived as a power game.”³⁹ We might say that this ethics responds to two incompatible necessities beyond need in the following way: on the one hand, the impossibility of extricating the subject from power necessitates an engagement with power; on the other hand, the necessity of responding to the inability of freedom or power to guarantee a closed subject and hence the ethical demand to exceed the relationships of power that constitute the finite subject. Might it not even be the case that the structure of Bataille’s festival and the logic of the hunger strike diverge in their relation to something like a finite opposition between aesthetics and instrumentality?

Foucault’s account of ethics illuminates the significance of the finitude of discourse and the finitude of being for the question of politics. He describes his interest as consisting not of morality or politics, but at the most of “politics as an ethics.”⁴⁰ That is, his interest is in politics to the extent that it must be based upon the positing of a pre-subjective freedom that exceeds the finitude of political discourse. Politics is always limited when it is thought as a project enacted on the basis of a total theory. Thus Foucault’s political practice, to the extent that it consisted of a discourse, was to “problematise” the idea of the political, to “approach politics from behind.”⁴¹ The politico-ethical demand which Foucault is responding to in the problematisation of politics thus mirrors the ethics of ethics which Derrida draws from Levinas.

Foucault, therefore, recuperates an ethics from the finitude of imagined subjectivity, and views the essential political demand, or the demand prior to any politics, as the need to put politics itself into question. But what *kind* of demand is this? What kind of aesthetico-ethico-politics is it that the imaginary essence of subjectivity, that is, the essence of the subject as a distance from itself,

demands? What kind of relation to others is demanded by the finitude which marks experience in general? If the aesthetic ethics that Foucault derives is to be a politics, then a relation to something beyond the “individual” finite subject, if this formulation makes sense, a relation to something like a thought of community, must be able to be described. It is at this point that the coincidence of the concepts of freedom in the discourses of Foucault and Jean-Luc Nancy becomes significant, since for Nancy, too, freedom is not the absence of power but the “very resistance of the existence of the thing,” that on the basis of which power in general is possible, the power which reveals the finitude of power.⁴² But for Nancy if resistance is freedom, resistance is also the heart of community.⁴³

Nancy attempts to “communicate” with the experience of Bataille, in order to found a new political thought on the basis of the finitude of existence. For Nancy the foundation of a politics of community returns us to the very figure with which Blanchot made an example of imagination, that figure which was, perhaps, in the end, exemplary of nothing but itself. The exigency of community is revealed, according to Nancy, through the experience of the death of the other. Although this death exposes the subject, it is not the *recognition* of self that occurs with this experience, but the experience of the alterity of the *other*, and of the alterity *within* the self.⁴⁴ The death of the other reveals the infinite alterity within the subject, which might be said to be that which is therefore perceived as alike between ourselves and others, although this likeness cannot be the source of a common identity or communion. The finitude of the subject, its imaginary essence, implies that there can be no thought of a recuperation of the fullness of being in the group, for to suggest that there might be presence in the relation *between* people is nothing more than to suggest an *experience* of presence in this relation, an experience which can only *be* for an essential being, the subject. Rather, the finitude of the subject implies a finite community, for community can be nothing but the *exposition* of finitude:

It is the community of finite beings, and as such it is itself a *finite* community. In other words, not a limited community as opposed to an infinite or absolute community, but a community *of* finitude, because finitude “is” communitarian, and because finitude alone is communitarian.⁴⁵

This finite community resembles, perhaps, the structure of the festival outlined by Bataille. Nancy, however, without calling it a critique, distinguishes his thought of community from that of Bataille. He suggests that in the last analysis Bataille found irreconcilable the demands of community and of sovereignty and remained suspended between them.⁴⁶ What Bataille gave up in such a formulation of the problem of politics was the idea of *sharing* or of *shared sovereignty*.⁴⁷ This sharing is made possible—if sovereignty, the experience of the limit of the possible, can itself be described as “possible”—by the fact that “finite being always presents itself ‘together,’ hence severally; for finitude always presents itself in being-in-common and as this being itself.”⁴⁸ As finite Being cannot be itself, as it is always itself *and* other, the possibility of community is not only opened, but it is *the* possibility of the experience of the finitude of subjective essence, and *the* possibility of a non-imaginary politics.

But if sharing and community define the politics that Nancy is claiming is *the* political exigency, what is the political *project*, the political *economy*, that follows from this? In fact, Nancy concludes, community

cannot arise from the domain of *work*. One does not produce it, one experiences or one is constituted by it as the experience of finitude [...] Community necessarily takes place in what Blanchot has called “unworking,” referring to that which, before or beyond the work, withdraws from the work [...] Community is not the work of singular beings, nor can it claim them as its works, just as communication is not a work or even an operation of singular being, for community is simply their being—their being suspended upon its limit. Communication is the unworking of work that is social, economic, technical, and institutional.⁴⁹

Politics is “the sharing of community,” it is community ordering itself or destining itself to the unworking of its communication, “a community consciously undergoing the experience of its sharing.”⁵⁰ But this account of the “unworking” of community suggests that the concept of the “sharing” implied in the finitude of existence prematurely effaces the violence of this finitude. This “worklessness” of community is precisely its aneconomic essence, but even if we admit the violence in the idea of economy it is nevertheless the case that this aneconomic demand is inseparable from the sacrificial demand of Bataille: there is a demand for violence and destruction in the idea of “unworking.” To make of community a sharing of finitude is to deny the violence that opens the ethical and political demand, a violence which is indissociable from the rupture of change.⁵¹ Might it not even be the case that the structure of Bataille’s festival and Feldman’s logic of the hunger strike diverge in their relation to something like a finite opposition between sharing and violence?

For Blanchot, too, in his response to the work of Nancy, the opening toward an open, finite community occurs with the calling of the subject into question, which in turn occurs in the moment of that exemplary imaginary experience: the death of the other.⁵² For Blanchot the logic of sacrifice and its implicit violence is clearly present and emphasised in his comprehension of the finitude of community. Sacrifice is the exposing of an “infinite exigency” that “opens it to the others and separates it violently from itself.”⁵³ Sacrifice

finds the community by undoing it, by handing it over to time the dispenser, time that does not allow the community nor those who give themselves to it, any form of presence, thereby sending them back to a solitude which, far from protecting them, disperses them or dissipates itself without their finding themselves again or together [...] The absence of community is not the failure of community: absence belongs to community as its extreme moment or as the ordeal that exposes it to its necessary disappearance.⁵⁴

The sacrifice demanded by community is that of the imagination of subjectivity as presence, whether as individual presence or as intersubjectivity or communion. It is the abandoning of oneself to solitude in the face of irreducible alterity. *Community demands the sacrifice of the imagining of the presence of community.* This emphasis on the sacrifice of community does not contradict Nancy’s discussion of the sharing of community but brings it into focus. Paradoxically, it is the solitude of the experience of community which is required for Bataille’s “inner

experience,” for it is only in the face of others that the limit of this experience can be communicated. To experience sovereignty *alone* is already to fail to reach the limit, for the infinity of isolation somehow reaches its absolute *with others*. The impossible communication of this experience of finitude in solitude is Blanchot’s politics of community: “the only thing worthwhile is the transmission of the untransmittable.”⁵⁵

Nevertheless, we can ask why—if irreducible alterity is within the subject and constitutive of difference and distance of the subject from itself—there needs to be a community with *actual* others, and not merely a community of the self with “its own” other. Perhaps only because the experience of the death of the other within the self lacks the violence of sovereignty, but this is the point at which the image of the corpse seems to be nothing more than an image or example, for could not the most abstract and ephemeral contemplation be just as violent or forceful in its revelation of alterity and solitude? For Derrida it is this otherness constitutive of the subject which opens ethics, politics, and responsibility, through a call to gather itself together as the condition of an answer which this otherness always already demands.⁵⁶ Derrida takes seriously the suggestion that with the dissolution of the imagination of the presence of the subject or of the presence of community there might be no guarantee against what he calls the “worst.”⁵⁷ But at the same time he suggests that this relation to the other must always be already a relationship of friendship, a friendship that is a promise and an opening to the future, and to a democracy that is always to come.⁵⁸ Politics is the exigency of the immediate reconciliation of the contradictory imperatives to rigorously answer this call of the other for a democracy beyond calculation, and to rigorously calculate the possible.

For me the place of the political is the place of *negotiation* between, let’s say, the open set of present or presentable data such that I can attempt to analyse them (always a finite analysis), and this “democracy to come” which always remains inaccessible not just as a regulating ideal, but also because it is structured like a promise and like a relation to alterity, because it never possesses the identifiable form of the presence or of the presence to self. But the event of that promise takes place *here, now* in the singularity of the here-now [...] The here-now indicates that this is not simply a question of utopia. There is constant and concrete renewal of the democratic promise as there is of the relation to the other as such, of the relation to infinite distance, incalculable heterogeneity, etc.⁵⁹

The call of friendship which precedes all subjectivity and all responsibility is that which “provokes or convokes ‘conscience,’ and therefore opens up responsibility.”⁶⁰ But it is also a call which comes from the past as that which is presupposed before any contract, as the “preliminary consent” to the “minimal community” formed in the presupposition that the language of communication is held in common.⁶¹ If we inquire further for the final ground that this relationship to the Other is constituted by friendship or community, we may in the end be forced to rely upon “a clear and distinct certainty or by a theoretical judgment [which is not the same as a provisional judgment], that there can and must be responsibility or decision, be they ethical or political.”⁶²

Notes

¹Arguing against the suggestion that the subject is something that philosophers have imagined they understood but now interrogated and liquidated through a philosophy of suspicion, Derrida writes the following:

There has never been The Subject for anyone, that's what I wanted to begin by saying. The subject is a fable [...] but to concentrate on the elements of speech and *conventional* fiction that such a fable presupposes is not to stop taking it seriously.

Jacques Derrida, "'Eating Well,' or the Calculation of the Subject: An Interview with Jacques Derrida," in Eduardo Cadava, Peter Connor and Jean-Luc Nancy (eds.), *Who Comes After the Subject?* trans. Peter Connor and Avital Ronell (New York and London: Routledge, 1991), p. 102.

²Maurice Blanchot, "The Two Versions of the Imaginary," in *The Space of Literature*, trans. Ann Smock (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska, 1982), p. 256.

³*Ibid.*, p. 257.

⁴*Ibid.*, p. 258.

⁵*Ibid.*, p. 261.

⁶*Ibid.*

⁷*Ibid.*, p. 262.

⁸Georges Bataille, *Theory of Religion*, trans Robert Hurley (New York: Zone, 1989 [1973]), pp. 39–40.

⁹*Ibid.*, p. 51.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, p. 77.

¹¹Jacques Derrida, "Violence and Metaphysics: An Essay on the Thought of Emmanuel Levinas" (1964), in *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (London and Henley: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978). In this paper Derrida's essay will be examined for its contribution to an understanding of Derrida's thought even though the entire structure of the essay is an engagement with the thought of Levinas (and also of Heidegger). Cf. Robert Bernasconi, "Deconstruction and the Possibility of Ethics," in John Sallis (ed.), *Deconstruction and Philosophy: The Texts of Jacques Derrida* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago, 1987). If this therefore appears to be a strategy that strains the intention of Derrida's text, it can perhaps be justified by his evocation of the "violence of all commentary" (*ibid.*, p. 312n.7). On the other hand, the spirit of this paper perhaps already stands condemned by Bataille: "The spirit farthest removed from the virility necessary for joining *violence and consciousness* is the spirit of 'synthesis'" (Bataille, *Theory of Religion*, p. 109).

¹²Derrida, "Violence and Metaphysics," p. 116.

¹³*Ibid.*, p. 133.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, p. 117.

¹⁵Allen Feldman, *Formations of Violence: The Narrative of the Body and Political Terror in Northern Ireland* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago, 1991), p. 1.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, p. 68.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, p. 79. At this point a note on terminology is overdue, since the form of this paper has necessitated the use of contradictory and overlapping concepts from several authors in a fashion that perhaps suggests an erasure of difference. The several sets of concepts, however, function in similar ways within the contexts of the texts from which they originate, and in the generality of this paper become *approximately* interchangeable. Thus the Lacanian “Real” is roughly equivalent to Bataillean “inner experience” or “sovereignty,” and Levinas’ use of “discourse” means, in the context of this paper, something like “knowledge” for Bataille and the “symbolic order” for Lacan. In fact, in the context of its interrelation with knowledge, even Foucault’s concept of “power” is not as contrary to discourse, knowledge, and the symbolic order as it might at first appear.

¹⁸*Ibid.*

¹⁹Diachronic process, history, is at the heart of the political, yet space prevents the proper integration here of the theme of history in its relation to politics, the subject, narrative and discourse in general. An indication of the extension of these themes in such a direction is indicated in the following passage by Derrida, sections of which have already been cited (Derrida, “Violence and Metaphysics,” p. 133):

In the last analysis, if one wishes to determine violence as the necessity that the other not appear as what it is, that it not be respected except in, for, and by the same, that it be dissimulated by the same in the very freeing of its phenomenon, then time is violence. This movement of freeing absolute alterity in the absolute same is the movement of temporalisation in its most absolutely unconditioned universal form: the living present. If the living present, the absolute form of the opening of time to the other in itself, is the absolute form of egological life, and if egoity is the absolute form of experience, then the presence, the presence of the present, and the present of presence, are all originally and forever violent. The living present is originally marked by death. Presence as violence is the meaning of finitude, the meaning of meaning as history.

²⁰Feldman, *Formations of Violence*, p. 80.

²¹*Ibid.*, p. 260.

²²*Ibid.*

²³*Ibid.*

²⁴*Ibid.*

²⁵Bataille, *Theory of Religion*, p. 55.

²⁶*Ibid.*

²⁷Michel Foucault, “On the Genealogy of Ethics: An Overview of Work in Progress” (1983), in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1984), p. 351.

²⁸I say “structure” of power even though Foucault explicitly argues that power is not to be understood as a structure. Cf. Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1978), p. 93. I take Foucault’s objections to be a caution against understanding power monolithically by substantialising or totalising it. Foucault’s explicit remarks on the heterogeneity and the reversibility of power suggest, however, that it might be conceptualised structurally

as a system of differences. This is not to deny that Foucault's caution is appropriate, but to suggest that the giving of such a caution and the disavowal of something called structuralism do not necessarily absolve one from the questions of the essence of structure and its implications, and the question of the *possibility* of transcending something like a thought of structure. Cf. Jacques Derrida, "Afterword," in *Limited Inc.*, trans. Samuel Weber (Evanston: Northwestern, 1988), p. 149.

²⁹Foucault, "On the Genealogy of Ethics," p. 351.

³⁰Michel Foucault, "The Ethic of Care for the Self as a Practice of Freedom: An Interview with Michel Foucault on January 20, 1984," *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 12, 2–3 (1987), p. 115, translation altered.

³¹Michel Foucault, "Space, Knowledge, Power," *The Foucault Reader*, p. 245.

³²Foucault, "The Ethic of Care for the Self as a Practice of Freedom," p. 122:

On the other hand and inversely, I would say that if now I am interested, in fact, in the way in which the subject constitutes himself in an active fashion, by the practices of self, these practices are nevertheless not something that the individual invents by himself. They are patterns that he finds in his culture and which are proposed, suggested and imposed on him by his culture, his society and his social group.

³³Michel Foucault, "Afterword: The Subject and Power," in Hubert L. Dreyfus, and Paul Rabinow, *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics* (Hertfordshire: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1982), pp. 221–2. This account is similar to that of Derrida's discussion of a pre-ethical, pre-subjective responsibility which

assigns us our freedom without leaving it with us [...] It is assigned to us by the Other, from the Other, before any hope of reappropriation permits us to assume this responsibility in the space of what could be called *autonomy*. This experience is even the one in which the Other appears as such, that is, appears without appearing. That which comes before autonomy must, then, also *exceed* it, that is, succeed it, survive it, and indefinitely surpass it.

Jacques Derrida, "The Politics of Friendship," *Journal of Philosophy* 85 (1988), p. 634.

³⁴Cf. Ladelle McWhorter, "Asceticism/*Askesis*: Foucault's Thinking Historical Subjectivity," in Arleen B. Dallery and Charles E. Scott with P. Holley Roberts (eds.), *Ethics and Danger: Essays on Heidegger and Continental Thought* (Albany: SUNY, 1992). According to McWhorter, the self at the centre of Foucault's thought is constituted as the reaction against the notion of the constituted self as enduring Same. That is, that freedom is guaranteed by freedom means that it is guaranteed by the finitude of self, of knowledge, of power (*ibid.*, p. 252):

The thought of self in the centre of Foucault's discourse is the thought of transgression, a reversal of forces, a gradual or perhaps violent turning outward of the valences before turned in, like fingers pulling loose from a stone they have gripped too hard for too long.

³⁵On the distinction between "morality" and "ethics" in Foucault, see John Rajchman, *Truth and Eros: Foucault, Lacan and the Question of Ethics* (New York and London: Routledge, 1991), pp. 90ff. That the finitude of knowledge and not just the finitude of the subject (if we imagine for a moment that these are not the same thing) is the opening to ethics is indicated also by Derrida:

I would even say that it is to the extent that knowledge does not program everything in advance, to the extent that knowledge remains suspended and undecided as to action, to the extent that a responsible decision as such will never be measured by any form of knowledge, by a clear and distinct certainty or by a theoretical judgment, that there can and must be responsibility or decision, be they ethical or political.

Jacques Derrida, "Politics and Friendship: An Interview with Jacques Derrida," in E. Ann Kaplan and Michael Sprinker (eds.), *The Althusserian Legacy* (London and New York: Verso, 1993), p. 212.

³⁶Foucault, "The Ethic of Care for the Self as a Practice of Freedom," p. 120.

³⁷Foucault, "On the Genealogy of Ethics," p. 346.

³⁸*Ibid.* Hence the care for the self is already about one's place among others even if it remains "centred" on an imagined self. This care for the self is an ethics to the extent that it cannot be separated from this question of the relation to others. Cf. Foucault, "The Ethic of Care for the Self as a Practice of Freedom," p. 120: "It can be totally centred on the acceptance of death [...] even up to a certain point almost become a desire for death. It can be, at the same time, if not care for others, at least a care for one's self which will be beneficial to others."

It should be noted that these passages occur in the context of an historical discussion. While the liberation of passages from their context is a reasonable operation if undertaken with care, it is nonetheless in principle a matter of decisions about economy, and about degrees of violence to whatever is regarded, in this case, as Foucault's text.

³⁹Michel Foucault, *The Use of Pleasure: The History of Sexuality, Volume 2*, trans. Robert Hurley (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985), p. 253.

⁴⁰Michel Foucault, "Politics and Ethics: An Interview" (1983), in Paul Rabinow (ed.), *The Foucault Reader*, p. 375.

⁴¹*Ibid.*, pp. 375–6. Cf. Michel Foucault, "Polemics, Politics, and Problematisations: An Interview with Michel Foucault" (1984), in Paul Rabinow (ed.), *The Foucault Reader*, esp. p. 384.

⁴²Jean-Luc Nancy, cited in Christopher Fynsk, "Foreword: Experiences of Finitude," in Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, trans. Peter Connor, Lisa Garbus, Michael Holland, and Simona Sawhney (Minneapolis and Oxford: University of Minnesota, 1991), p. 154.n.28. Here is the full passage cited:

Freedom as the *force of the thing* as such, or as the force of the act of existing, does not designate a force opposed to or combined with the other forces of nature. It designates rather that on the basis of which there can exist relations of force as such, between humankind and nature and between human beings. It is the force of force in general, or the very resistance of the existence of the thing—its resistance to absorption in immanent Being or in the succession of changes. A transcendental force, consequently, but as a material effectivity. Because *existence* as such has its being (or its thing) in the act, or, if you will, in the *praxis* of existing, it is not possible not to recognise in it the effective character of a force, which implies for thought something like a transcendental materiality of force, or, if you prefer, an ontological materiality.

As Derrida states, in such an account of freedom as Nancy's (or Foucault's), there is "an opening that also resists subjectivation, that is to say, it resists the modern concept of freedom as subjective freedom." Derrida, "'Eating Well,' or the Calculation of the Subject," p. 107.

⁴³Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, p. 35.

⁴⁴*Ibid.*, pp. 33–4.

⁴⁵*Ibid.*, pp. 26–7.

⁴⁶*Ibid.*, p. 20. Nancy also suggests (*ibid.*, p. 21) that this impossible exigency to respond to two incompatible necessities can be detected in Bataille in the form of

an almost pure opposition between "desirable" *equality* and an imperious and capricious *freedom* quite like sovereignty, with which in fact it could be confused. It could never really be a question, for example, of freedom desiring desirable equality. That is, it was not a question of a community that would open up, in and of itself, at the heart of being-in-common, the areality of an ecstasy.

We might note, whatever we make of Nancy's suggestion of a convergence of equality and freedom in this text, that the convergence of freedom and sovereignty suggests once again the importance of Bataille in understanding the thought of Foucault.

⁴⁷*Ibid.*, p. 25.

⁴⁸*Ibid.*, p. 28.

⁴⁹*Ibid.*, p. 31.

⁵⁰*Ibid.*, p. 40.

⁵¹Nancy puts the following note at the end of the passage cited above, from page 31, which ends with the list of works which are unworked by “communication”:

I do not include the political here. In the form of the State, or the Party (if not the State-Party), it indeed seems to be of the order of a work. But it is perhaps at the heart of the political that communitarian unworking resists.

Ibid., p. 158n.26. This, perhaps, suggests an admission of the place of violence within the political economy or aneconomy of community. As resistance, the unworking of community presupposes violence, but as politics is work, this suggests a violence against community to be presupposed in all political projects, a violence against the original political demand. But in the complexities and paradoxes to which this leads is there not a sense of the return to the impossible reconciliation of incompatible necessities that Nancy questions in Bataille? Thus when Nancy makes of community not a work but a “task,” a “task at the heart of finitude” (*ibid.*, p. 35), a task which is *given* to us even as community is *given* to us, do we not have the right to ask about this distinction between task and work? It is perhaps mirrored by the contradiction of the sovereign need to escape utility, but once again the difference between the inner experience of sovereignty and the sharing of the finitude of community seems to disappear, leaving us with nothing but the work that remains always to be done and the necessary possibility of the impossible.

⁵²Maurice Blanchot, *The Unavowable Community*, trans. Pierre Joris (Barrytown: Station Hill, 1988), p. 9:

What, then, calls me into question most radically? Not my relation to myself as finite or as the consciousness of being before death or for death, but my presence for another who absents himself by dying. To remain present in the proximity of another who by dying removes himself definitively, to take upon myself another’s death as the only death that concerns me, this is what puts me beside myself, this is the only separation that can open me, in its very impossibility, to the Openness of a community. Georges Bataille: “A man alive, who sees a fellow-man die, can survive only *beside himself*.”

⁵³*Ibid.*, p. 15.

⁵⁴*Ibid.*

⁵⁵*Ibid.*, p. 18.

⁵⁶Derrida, “‘Eating Well,’ or the Calculation of the Subject,” pp. 100–1.

⁵⁷*Ibid.*, p. 104.

⁵⁸Derrida, “The Politics of Friendship,” p. 636.

⁵⁹Derrida, “Politics and Friendship,” p. 214. This invocation of utopia might lead to the suggestion that in essence there is little difference between Derrida’s position and Ricoeur’s, for whom utopia, the place which is nowhere, is the sign of the possibility of political imagination. Is not utopia for Ricoeur precisely that openness to think beyond power or the world of things toward a new political conception? Perhaps, except that the tendency in Ricoeur is to think that the possibility offered by imagination is to think beyond the distortion and blindness of ideological thinking, and hence toward a path of reason or truth. It would not be correct to say that for Ricoeur imagination *is* reason, but perhaps correct to say that imagination represents the infinite possibility of truth. For the thinkers we have been considering, however, who have in common the influence of Bataille, the political exigency is a turn toward the finitude of impossibility in whatever form that takes. Cf. Paul Ricoeur, *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia* (New York: Columbia, 1986), esp. pp 16–7, and p. 145. Thus in a final, perhaps more “empirical,” example of the way in which this is structured as the necessity but impossibility of responding to two contradictory necessities, there is Derrida’s discussion of the responsibility of Europeans today:

Yet here as elsewhere, the injunction seems double and contradictory for whoever is concerned about European cultural identity: if it is necessary to make sure that a centralising hegemony (the capital) not be reconstituted, it is also necessary, for all that, not to multiply the borders, i.e., the movements [*marches*] and margins [*marges*]. It is necessary not to cultivate for their own sake minority differences, untranslatable idiolects, national antagonisms, or the chauvinisms of idiom. Responsibility seems to consist today in renouncing neither of these two contradictory imperatives. One must therefore try to *invent* gestures, discourses, politico-institutional practices that inscribe the alliance of these two imperatives, of these two promises or contracts.

Jacques Derrida, *The Other Heading: Reflections on Today's Europe*, trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael B. Naas (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana, 1992), p. 44.

⁶⁰Derrida, "'Eating Well,' or the Calculation of the Subject," p. 110.

⁶¹Derrida, "The Politics of Friendship," p. 636.

⁶²Derrida, "Politics and Friendship," p. 212.

Preliminary reflections on Walter Benjamin

Introduction

The sources of the thought of Walter Benjamin are innumerable, and subsequent writers have not failed to trace these origins. The article by Dutton deals with his heritage in Marx, an emphasis which is to some extent evident in Buck-Morss. Buck-Morss also concentrates on Benjamin's incomplete Arcades project to the virtual exclusion of his earlier texts, even though these are undeniably sources for the theoretical framework of that project. I shall therefore present, by way of background to these two works and the Tiedemann article, some of the links between the earlier and later works of Benjamin, and his links to the work of the early German Romantics, and in particular Friedrich Schlegel, as this is one source which ties in with the course, enabling Benjamin's relation to philology to become visible. This will not be so much an intellectual history as the unfolding of a series of ideas across history, an account of how the thought of the Romantics and Benjamin forms a constellation across time, whose points are such ideas as the fragment, the idea, the allegory, language, translation, and history. The repetition in the formulation of these ideas is the structure of a paradox which is each time different.

Romanticism

Benjamin described Romanticism as the attempt to create a higher sphere where history and religion coincide, and this description could apply to the entire philological project of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.¹ As we have seen in Schwab, for the philologists and for the German Romantics (who were occasionally one and the same) India was the image of this coincidence, for what India represented to the Romantics was not merely the origins of European civilisation but also the true depths and origins of religious being, symbolised as the lost paradise or Golden Age, and symbolised more concretely in their interest in Sanskrit.² But rather than redescribe this importance of the East for the Romantics and philologists, I want instead to outline an aspect of the philosophy of Friedrich Schlegel which, perhaps, contains in miniature both the philosophical conception of the Romantics and this conception in its relation to their Orientalist interest. This aspect of Schlegel's philosophy is his account of the fragment as a mode of writing.

Fragments in Schlegel

The Romantic interest in a lost Golden Age reflects a general feature of their outlook, a feature held in common with Idealism: namely, the “task of completion,” or the idea of the end of division.³ The originality of the Romantic project was that completion was understood as singular and finite. This paradox of a finite completion, or alternatively a finite absolute, was resolved in the Romantic mind with the idea of *art* as philosophy, expressed in Schlegel’s statement that poetry and philosophy are “individuals.”⁴ For Schlegel the kind of writing adequate to this idea is the fragment. As a style of writing the “fragment” suggests a self-contained whole, but it also suggests an incompleteness or at least an openness to the whole of which *it* is the broken part. A fragment *by* Schlegel states that a “fragment, like a miniature work of art, has to be entirely isolated from the surrounding world and be complete in itself like a porcupine.”⁵ For Schlegel a fragment is not merely an aphorism. Rather, a fragment demands a maximum of systematicity, which is the source of its completion, or totality. Thus he favours system over the stitching of unconnected pieces—rhapsody. As Gasché states formulaically, for Schlegel “fragment=system=work=individual.”⁶ The fragment is infinite, but this infinity is contained only as the *anticipation* of a final synthesis. “[A]ll individuals are systems at least in embryo and tendency,” Schlegel writes, and thus the fragment as a totality is a historical form, in that its completion is a process of unfolding rather than immediate.⁷

India in Schlegel⁸

Ideas and concepts in Schlegel

Now this language of system and fragment can be translated into the Kantian language of concept and idea. For Schlegel another name for a fragment is an “idea.” Ideas, like fragments, point beyond themselves to a higher unity, the absolute, in which ideas become one, yet ideas are themselves systematic, autonomous wholes. Ideas, however, can not be presented as themselves, but only through the employment of an inferior category, through concepts. While the totality of ideas forms the absolute, ideas are not the broken fragments of that whole except in so far as they contain that whole within themselves, and *are* that whole in miniature. Ideas are fragments in so far as they are whole, and fragmentation is the *condition* of the wholeness of the idea.⁹ This fragmentation is displayed in the necessity of fragments to be represented by concepts, but concepts “perfected to the point of irony, an absolute synthesis of absolute antitheses.”¹⁰ Ideas are, therefore, the outcome of a relation of extremes, a formula often found in Benjamin. But the work which produces the idea from this absolute synthesis of antitheses is exalted above itself.¹¹

That is, the idea embodied in the work exists in some sense only in the silence between the antithetical concepts, and the synthesis is also the destruction of the idea.

In formulating Schlegel's position in this way, we have gone beyond Benjamin's understanding of that position. According to Benjamin, Schlegel's error was that "he did not investigate the Absolute systematically, but instead sought to grasp the system absolutely."¹² For this reason, because for Schlegel this *transcendence* of the idea was *not* also its absence, Benjamin criticised Schlegel as a mystic. For the Romantics, according to Benjamin, the absolute or—what amounts to the same thing—the truth, *was* the artwork, and hence the Romantic transcendence becomes secular and profane. What Benjamin criticised was that for Schlegel the totality of ideas, the final unity, was in fact attainable and not itself a fragment. For Benjamin the absolute must be absolutely transcendent, and the totality of the idea absolutely fragmented. Whether or not Schlegel manages to some extent to elude this criticism, we see a repetition of this logic of fragment and system, idea and concept, in Benjamin himself.

Allegory in the Trauerspiel

Benjamin's dissertation on seventeenth century German Tragedies of Fate uses the same Kantian terminology of the idea and the concept, and once again they are employed in relation to concepts of fragmentation and the work. In these plays, psychological motivation is often virtually abandoned, as the characters' lives are determined by their total subjection to exterior powers, to fate, the *emblem* of which is usually a piece of stage property.¹³ The "staginess" of these plays is for Benjamin *integral* to their allegorical nature. The emblem is the sign of a discontinuity and of a distance between the image of the characters' lives and its meaning. The allegory of the play is of life as illusion which, when dissipated, reveals nothing.¹⁴ If the play is about life, then it is about the way in which life is *more* like a play than it is like life as commonly understood according to the idea of nature. Thus the emblem is not the *explanation* of the lives of the characters but its sign, or rather, it is this explanation only in its "desolate, sorrowful dispersal [...] It is as something incomplete and imperfect that the objects stare out from the allegorical structure."¹⁵ The emblem is the making visible of fate, but the principle of such allegory is "fragmentation in the graphic aspects."¹⁶ It is the sign of the *impossibility* of explaining fate as much as of its fragmented presence. The emblem symbolises history as death, history as, in a phrase echoed in the Arcades project, "petrified, primordial landscape."¹⁷

Ideas and concepts in Benjamin

If the *content* of this dissertation concerned fragmentation and discontinuity, then this is reflected, non-accidentally, in the method outlined in his "Epistemo-critical prologue." His opening line brings to the fore the question of representation.¹⁸ Benjamin writes that the danger in determining

philosophy according to a “system” is that it threatens to become a spider’s web for whom truth comes “flying in from outside,”¹⁹ echoing Schlegel’s criticism that for many writers philosophical systems become a “regiment of soldiers on parade.”²⁰ Benjamin states that representation is a digression, and method too ought to take the form of a digression *from* the idea at the centre of the work. Truth is to be grasped in the minute details, in “fragments of thought” whose value is *greater* the less direct their relationship to the idea.²¹ Thus it is that for Benjamin truth and knowledge are opposed.

The fallacy of knowledge is to construct systems of concepts according to the principle of accumulation. Knowledge tries to *possess* the truth by incorporating concepts *into* its system, by imagining that truth emerges as the correct *sequence* of concepts. In speech gestures are used to give the impression of a continuous sequence, but the writer should not use stylistic features to give such an impression. Rather, the “sober prose” of the writer, as Benjamin again echoes Schlegel, has its essence in the realisation that it must “stop and restart with every new sentence.”²² Truth is that which emerges “bodied forth in the dance of represented ideas.”²³ Like Schlegel, Benjamin believes systems *have* validity, but only where inspired by *ideas* rather than concepts. That is, systems are valid where they reflect, through their digressive method, the autonomy and *discontinuous* structure of ideas. Rather than being a type of sequence or possession, truth is illuminated most brightly with the burning of the husk which carries it.²⁴ Though knowledge sees truth in the form, in fact truth is expressed in the *destruction* of the form which ostensibly contains it. This echoes Schlegel’s statement that “[e]verything that does not annihilate itself is not free and is worth nothing.”²⁵

But if ideas are to be valued *over* concepts, this is so only if it is realised, firstly, that concepts are the concrete form which enable the empirical phenomena of the world to “participate in the existence of ideas,” and, secondly and crucially, that ideas are mediated *solely* through their representation as a configuration of concepts: “Ideas are to objects as constellations are to stars,” Benjamin writes.²⁶ That is, ideas neither *are* concepts nor are the laws that *govern* concepts. Ideas are composed of concepts which form its points: the idea is thus subdivided by its component concepts—the idea is the *representation* of this subdivision. Concepts are the points which represent the idea in the form of a constellation. But ideas themselves are referred to as suns, and truth is nothing but the configuration, the harmonious relationship, of ideas as suns. Truth is contained in the idea only to the extent that truth is the harmonious relation between ideas, that truth is the constellation of ideas. Thus if truth is *in* the idea, it is as the harmonious discontinuity of the concepts which form its constellation.²⁷ The error of the Romantic’s, according to Benjamin, was to ignore the discontinuous finitude of truth, its “linguistic character,” to make of truth something whole *and* graspable, absolute *and* secular.²⁸ Philosophy is not a continuum, for the ideas from which it is composed exist in *irreducible* multiplicity. Ideas are what, following Leibniz, Benjamin refers to as *monads*: the idea is whole, but whole in the sense of carrying within it its extremes and its entire *history*, and, in an indistinct way, the idea

carries all the other ideas in it as well. Each idea carries the image of all the others, in *the same way* as it carries its past and its future.²⁹

Language in the Romantics

If the Romantics claimed to *grasp* the absolute, at least they rejected the direct intellectual or ecstatic intuition of the absolute espoused by the mystics. Rather, Schlegel looks for what Benjamin calls, paradoxically, a “non-intuitive intuition,” and which Schlegel finds, despite Benjamin’s criticisms, in language.³⁰ It is in language that, for Schlegel, as well as for Benjamin, the relation between idea and fragment is at once exemplified and actualised. The unit of meaning, the word, is the system in miniature, but it is also *allegorical* in structure. Meaning is the allegory of reality, which is non-being and absolute freedom, according to Schlegel.³¹ In the unfolding of its meaning the word empties itself, pointing to the infinite, but the infinite as that which is communicated only by this emptying, this self-annihilation *of* the word. It is this allegorical and linguistic structure which is revealed when Schlegel writes that only that which annihilates itself is not nothing, a statement which symbolises the non-intuitive intuition.

Language in Benjamin

Benjamin and the Romantics had in common a belief that the world is not merely like language, it *is* language. For Schlegel’s friend Novalis language encompassed the universe, in the sense that every object and every subject, natural or artificial, is involved in a communication and is therefore a form of language.³² For Benjamin, identically, language, as expression and as communication, is coextensive with “absolutely everything.”³³ But the point here is to grasp what Benjamin means by communication and expression, and, hence, by language itself. Thus I will turn to an early paper by Benjamin called “On Language as Such and On the Languages of Man.”

Benjamin makes a distinction between that which is communicated *in* language and that *through* language. What is communicated through language is meaning—information or content—but this is precisely what is not communicated *in* language. But neither is it language *itself* which is communicated—language is not the direct transmission of an essence. What is communicated in language is something that must be distinguished *from* language, without being an “object,” a meaning, in the “empirical world.” It would seem that what must be distinguished is something in language itself. Language communicates something in itself but distinguished from itself, and thus leading away from itself, and it is for this reason that the idea of the direct communication of a linguistic essence is “the abyss” over which linguistic theory is suspended.³⁴ Language itself is the *capacity* for communication. What is distinguished *from* language as that which is communicated in it is, therefore, something which is *not* this capacity. What is communicated in language is that there is something for which the capacity for communication

is inadequate. In short, and paradoxically, what is communicated in language is the inadequacy of the capacity for communication to communicate that which is incommunicable. In slightly different language, if language distinguishes within itself the expressible and the inexpressible, it is the *inexpressible* which is communicable, for this is *transmitted* as the *distinguishing within language* of that area which is *not* expressible as meaning or content, that area which cannot be expressed.

According to Benjamin it is the language of revelation which claims to transcend this distinction between the communicable and the incommunicable, as it speaks the word of God which, as the language of creation, did not distinguish between the thing and its communication. All art, however, distinguishing himself from the Romantics, even if it has as its aim the communication of incommunicability, does not reach the ultimate essence where language and mind are one, and is confined to the world of things. Art remains, therefore, finite and within itself must distinguish the language of God as its incommunicable communication. Although God made things knowable in their names, even in art man can name them only according to knowledge and not according to truth.³⁵ Language, therefore, is the *communication* of communicability, but the *symbol* of incommunicability. In the unity of the movement of language the word of God “unfolds,” but this unfolding is never complete in any human manifestation of language.³⁶

Translation in Benjamin

The importance of translation is already emphasised in Benjamin’s paper on language. If the word of God unfolds in the unity of movement of languages, then translation is not a question of similarities between one language or another, but the *sign* of the continuum *between* languages that is the foundation of what is a *transformation* from one language to another.³⁷ That is, it is not in something common to all languages that the possibility of translation is founded, except as an inadequacy common to all languages, an inadequacy which leads away from all human language to the language of God. Translation, if we may formulate this in analogous terms to Benjamin’s formulation of language, is the communication of translatability, and the symbol of untranslatability.

In Benjamin’s famous essay on translation, this question of what, if anything, is held in common in all languages which makes translation possible is developed further, in terms of the “*kinship*” between languages. Kinship, he notes, does not necessarily involve likeness.³⁸ In a similar formulation to the language essay, Benjamin writes that what a literary work communicates of importance is not its information, and therefore the task of the translator is something other than the transmission of the information in the text in another language. Translation is not the reproduction of the original but its transformation. Why this is so is dependent upon his understanding of language. The inadequacy of any human language has been

referred to. Meaning, he writes, is not found in “independence” in the words or sentences, but is in a state of flux.³⁹ That is, because language is only inadequately capable of representing ideas, the units of meaning of language are incapable of attaining the wholeness and autonomy of ideas. Only the sum of the “modes of intention” of the various languages is capable of producing the pure meaning of an idea. The unit of meaning achieves autonomy only in the harmony achieved by the totality of the *translations* of this unit. That is, the word becomes the idea only in what Benjamin refers to as “pure language.”⁴⁰ But, unsurprisingly, pure language is inaccessible, and translation becomes the symbol or allegory which leads beyond itself. All actual translation is an *allegory* for the *ideal* translation into pure language. But, in a familiarly paradoxical formulation, translation does not achieve this status as allegory from the truth of its possibility, but rather translation points the way beyond itself through “the element that does not lend itself to translation.”⁴¹ If pure language is the *condition* for the possibility of translation at all, then the *possibility* of translation is revealed specifically through the extent to which translation is *impossible*.

The concrete recommendation Benjamin makes to translators is not to reproduce the meaning but to literally render the syntax. Strangely, this makes *words* the element of primary importance, for if the syntax is translated literally then the *failure* of the *words* to be translated literally is brought into relief.⁴² The good translation is thus the one in which meaning is not only not emphasised, but in fact disappears between the gaps in the meaning of words, thus pointing to the emptiness of meaning in human language. By treating the word as an individual, translation reveals its fragmentation. While a work lies untranslated, one may become complacent in the knowledge of the apparent meaning revealed by the work, but the emptiness of language revealed in translation is the symbol of pure language. The pure language exists in the work only in a fragmentary, concealed, and symbolised form. The more a work is mere information, the *less* it is translatable, because the less a work *depends* upon the *inadequacy* of its language, the less the translation is able to symbolise pure language. That is, the more the text consists of what we would normally think of as transparent content, the less the translation is able to signify its own untranslatability. Translatability is increased the greater the untranslatable element in a work. Translation can never afford to ignore meaning, but in the truly translatable work meaning can be touched only fleetingly.⁴³ Thus Benjamin returns once again to the sacred text, which in principle ought to be totally translatable for it is equated with truth, but this must also mean that it is totally untranslatable, for as truth it must already be pure language. Benjamin states that the sacred text must “already contains its translation between the lines,” and thus we see that the truth for Benjamin is the truth of translation. That is, truth is the revelation of translation’s impossibility and the inevitability of the abyss between truth and its representation. The sacred text is the only text *empty* of meaning, which is its truth. It is “the ideal of all translation” because it is the truth for which translation is the symbol.⁴⁴

The afterlife of the original

Benjamin's account of translation is given depth through the language of life and history in which it is couched. He argues that the original work, in changing what it signifies over time, ought to be considered as possessing life, and in fact that *everything* which *has* a history should be considered as possessing life in the same way. What is interesting, however, is how Benjamin understands this concept of life, for he is not thereby arguing that everything which possesses history be considered according to the metaphor of nature. Rather, and conversely, he states that all natural life should be considered from the "more encompassing life of history."⁴⁵ If this removes the original literary work from an understanding as possessing life thought of as a natural continuum of existence, this is doubly so in the translation since this represents not the continued life of the original but its "afterlife."⁴⁶ The presumption that languages possess a natural unity is mythical, and it is the translatability of the work which overcomes this thought of the original as an integrated natural whole. "Fragments of a vessel," Benjamin writes in regard to translation, "in order to be articulated together must follow one another in the smallest detail."⁴⁷

In the same way a translation, instead of resembling the meaning of the original, must lovingly and in detail incorporate the original's mode of signification, thus making both the original and the translation recognisable as fragments of a greater language, just as fragments are the broken parts of a vessel.⁴⁸

If the original is whole, it is so not according to common understandings of nature but with an openness which is the possibility of its translation.⁴⁹ That the significance of the original is historically variable, and thus that each age demands its own translation, implies that the openness of the original is a historical phenomenon. Translation, through the untranslatable element of the original, points away from natural linguistic unity, to the non-subjective, non-empirical aim of language. The afterlife of the text actualised by its translation is by definition that which "is thoroughly on the other side of natural life."⁵⁰ De Man formulates this by saying that the *history* of the original is the *illusion* it produces of a life which is only ever an afterlife. The history of the literary work is neither human nor natural because history, in the form of the afterlife, reproduces Benjamin's structure of language as fragmented and discontinuous.⁵¹ Thus if, in what follows, I argue that for Benjamin history can be understood as translation, it should not be forgotten that in Benjamin's formulation translation is *already* intimately involved with history.

The Arcades project

This background will, hopefully, help to make clear in what way the problematics of language and translation inform Benjamin's methodology of historical understanding in his uncompleted Arcades project. It is possible to imagine that these earlier problematics have little relevance to the "historical materialist" for whom the "dialectical image" appeared to be the organising figure,

and both Niranjana and Buck-Morss make the case, in different ways, that his understanding of history ought not be based on his conception of language. What I will suggest, however, is that in Benjamin's historical method there is a repetition of the structure I have described for language, and that for him not only may language and history be considered a metaphor for each other, but language is *central* to his view of history.

Benjamin states that the Arcades project deals with "the expressive character of the earliest industrial products, the earliest industrial structures, the earliest machines, as well as the earliest department stores, advertisements etc."⁵² In writing of the "expressive character" of these objects, Benjamin is engaging with the vulgar marxist view that culture is determined by economy—what is of interest to Benjamin is the way in which these objects, which are both cultural and economic, are the *expression* of the emerging nineteenth century industrial society in which they appear. Benjamin describes such industrial objects, the Paris arcades for example, as having a *form* corresponding to such an expression. That is, he wished to "detect the crystal of the total event in the analysis of the small, individual moment," but this form is not something static.⁵³ In tracing the "origin" of the form of the arcades Benjamin is not searching for its root cause, but tracing the course of its historical "unfolding." The causes of this form are merely that which allows its emergence and that which is reflected in its unfolding, "like a leaf unfolding forth from itself the entire wealth of the empirical plant kingdom."⁵⁴

Such a discussion of the unfolding of forms as an expression of history might give the impression of history as a stable continuum, and that historical method recaptures the past by understanding how the forms of the past communicated to the *past* world. Benjamin, however, was virulently against "historicism," which attempted to capture the truth of the past through "empathic" methods. The forms of the early industrial products did not occur through a continuous progression from pre-industrial to industrial. Rather, those early forms of the industrial mimicked the past in a way which brought the past and the present into a configuration as antitheses, and the industrial form was the synthesis of these extremes, but the synthesis as "petrified nature."⁵⁵ If this was the content of Benjamin's investigation, then historicism was not a method adequate to it. To understand such nineteenth century forms in Benjamin's twentieth century present it was necessary to see *in what way* the past forms a relation to the present rather than assuming that that relation was one of continuity for which narrative was the appropriate mode. In a familiar formulation, and one that already points to the way in which for Benjamin historical understanding is a matter of translation, Benjamin wrote that "[h]istorical 'understanding' [...] is to be viewed primarily as an *afterlife*."⁵⁶ For this reason Benjamin formulated his idea of the "dialectical image."

The dialectical image

Susan Buck-Morss explains the idea of the dialectical image through an opposition between two types of logic: linear logic and visual logic. With this distinction she is opposing a logic inherent in language and a logic of the image. Thus, she says, with the dialectical image “nineteenth-century objects were to be made visible as the origin of the present.”⁵⁷ While we can agree that Benjamin’s idea of history as discontinuous rules out presenting it as a line, it is necessary to inquire further into the relation of image to language; and, secondly, it is necessary to ask whether Buck-Morss’s description of Benjamin’s historical writing as a making *visible* of the *origin* of the present is sufficiently detached from such a linear logic. Buck-Morss’s account is, perhaps, too close to a statement that the present casts light on the past, which Benjamin rejected just as firmly as the thesis that the past cast light on the present. Benjamin talks instead of the Then and the Now as two radically discontinuous moments. It is the moment when the Then leaps forth into the Now, when they “come into a constellation like a flash of lightning,” that one sees the dialectical image.⁵⁸ Similarly, he writes, “When thinking reaches a standstill in a constellation saturated with tensions, the dialectical image appears. This image is the caesura in the movement of thought.”⁵⁹ The term “image” is appropriate here to the sense in which what is involved is a *freezing* of historical movement.⁶⁰ Rather than constituting a visual *logic*, the dialectical image here brings to mind Benjamin’s distinction between knowledge and truth, where the movement of thought would correspond to knowledge, the organisation of concepts, and the caesura in the movement of thought, the dialectical image, would correspond to truth, that set of antithetical ideas arranged in a constellation as a discontinuous whole. If the dialectical image reveals an origin, it is because it exhibits “the discontinuity which exists within” historical phenomena.⁶¹ The dialectical image thus points beyond itself to its truth in the greater whole—society—because the fragmentation inherent to the historical form is revealed only through its treatment as an individual, as a *monad*. The arcade contains the crystal of the total event of nineteenth-century capitalism in the sense in which the monad contains “the image of the world.”⁶²

The arcade, therefore, is expressive of the way in which meaning empties in the unfolding of its form. It is because of the inevitability that that process of unfolding is interrupted that it is capable of revealing the fragmentation at the core of the more general social wish image. Myth is the imagination that the unfolding of historical forms is a process which achieves completion, the illusion that history is a life rather than an afterlife. The creation of the dialectical image is not the completion of what was interrupted, for it can only be called the *rescue* of an object from the past if it is acknowledged that the object rescued, the fossil, is “already irretrievably lost.”⁶³ And in fact the arcades were a form which were *always* already lost, for Benjamin writes, “All of this is the Arcade in our eyes. And nothing of all this has it ever been.”⁶⁴ If, as Buck-Morss writes, in the dialectical image the *objects* of the nineteenth-century are made visible as an origin, this is so *only* to the extent that, in the unfolding of the forms of those objects, they are emptied of meaning, disappear, and are *forgotten*. The past “flits” by: as an image it cannot be seized but

only recognised before it disappears and is never seen again.⁶⁵ What is made visible by the dialectical image is that if the unfolding form of the object expresses its origin, then the fact that form is always unfolding and never unfolded means the image is never capable of achieving satisfaction, and the process of unfolding is at once a depotentiation, an emptying of content. The origin and the end of the unfolding of the image is thus necessarily interruption, discontinuity, fragmentation, forgetting. This structure of the image is therefore identical to Benjamin's account of translation as the actualisation of the unfolding of human languages toward the pure language, an unfolding which once again is always a process without end other than in finitude and discontinuity. If the dialectical image is a making visible, then it may be so only as a seeing *of reading*, translation *as allegory*.⁶⁶ For this reason, in a statement which would be surprising to Buck-Morss, Benjamin states of dialectical images that "the place one happens upon them is language."⁶⁷ The essence of the image, the essence of history, is found to have the structure of linguistic being outlined in "The Task of the Translator." History is translation, but only if this is understood as the communication of translatability and the symbol of untranslatability. Thus I will end with two quotations, the first about Benjamin and the second by him, which indicate that if history is translation, philology is still relevant, but as that which itself must be repeated differently:

The preservation of mystical forms of thought meant for him not their resurrection but their transformation—just as, in the seventeenth century, allegorical technique preserved the pagan deities by transforming them into emblematic fragments, presenting them as ruins. Philology, the painstaking study of the fragmentary documents of the past, was an act of transforming memory, of translation.⁶⁸

The historical method is a philological one founded by the book of life. "Read what was never written," it says in Hofmannsthal. The reader to think of here is the true historian.⁶⁹

Notes

¹Walter Benjamin, cited in Marcus Paul Bullock, *Romanticism and Marxism: The Philosophical Development of Literary Theory and Literary History in Walter Benjamin and Friedrich Schlegel* (New York: Peter Lang, 1987), p. 87.

²Wilhelm Halbfass, *India and Europe: An Essay in Understanding* (Albany: SUNY, 1988), p. 72.

³Rodolphe Gasché, "Foreword: Ideality in Fragmentation," in Friedrich Schlegel, *Philosophical Fragments*, trans. Peter Firchow (Minneapolis and Oxford: University of Minnesota, 1991), pp. x–xi.

⁴Schlegel, *Philosophical Fragments*, Athenaeum Fragment 415, p. 83.

⁵*Ibid.*, Athenaeum Fragment 206, p. 45.

⁶Gasché, "Foreword," pp. xi–xii.

⁷Schlegel, *Philosophical Fragments*, Athenaeum Fragment 242, p. 51.

⁸Schlegel's view of the philosophy and religion of India can be seen to mirror his own understanding of philosophy as a finite absolute. In *On the Language and Wisdom of the Indians* Schlegel considers the Indian doctrine of Emanation as a philosophical intervention into the "unfathomable abyss [...] between the idea of infinite perfection in the creative essence and the visible imperfection of the world around." Emanation is the filling of this abyss, for according to this doctrine every object is reunited with its divine origin as a limited and obscure reflection of the divine essence. That is, every object is a whole and every object is a fragment leading beyond its own limit to the absolute. As this divine origin lies also in man, his task becomes the reunion and reincorporation of the origin, and it is thus no surprise that the Golden Age be sought in an India understood philosophically in this manner. See Schlegel, in Burton Feldman and Robert D. Richardson, *The Rise of Modern Mythology, 1680–1860* (Bloomington and London: Indiana, 1972), p. 359. If Schlegel's faith that this age was to be found in India and in the Sanskrit linguistic heritage waned (see Raymond Schwab, *The Oriental Renaissance: Europe's Rediscovery of India and the East, 1680–1880* [New York: Columbia, 1984], p. 175), this is partly because the doctrine of emanation found the absolute of the creative essence not merely in the perfected work of art but in everything whatsoever. Emanation and pantheism have as a consequence, according to Schlegel, the weakening and attenuation of the feeling of infinity. The absolute is dissolved, becomes a shadow in the form of the concept of one and all, "so difficult as it is to distinguish from nothing." Such a dispersal of infinity, which places it everywhere, makes it "empty and void of meaning." Schlegel, cited in Wilhelm Halbfass, *India and Europe*, pp. 77–8. Thus if we are justified in saying that the Romantics made the

absolute finite through the doctrine that it is attainable in language, in the fragment or the work, then Schlegel's criticism of Indian philosophy is that it makes the absolute *too* finite, since it located absolutely everywhere and is absolutely dispersed to the point of emptiness. It is interesting to reflect on Schlegel's conception of the error of the Indians in the light of Benjamin's conception of the error of Schlegel.

⁹Gasché, "Foreword," pp. xxvii–xxviii.

¹⁰Schlegel, *Philosophical Fragments*, Athenaeum Fragment 121, p. 33.

¹¹*Ibid.*, Athenaeum Fragment 297, p. 59.

¹²Benjamin, cited in Gasché, "The Sober Absolute: On Benjamin and the Early Romantics," *Studies in Romanticism* 11 (1992), p. 442.

¹³Charles Rosen, "The Ruins of Walter Benjamin," in Gary Smith (ed.), *On Walter Benjamin: Critical Essays and Recollections* (Cambridge, Mass., and London: MIT, 1988), pp. 145–6.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, p. 149.

¹⁵Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, trans. John Osborne (London: New Left Books, 1977), p. 186.

¹⁶*Ibid.*

¹⁷*Ibid.*, p. 166.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, p. 27. "It is characteristic of philosophical writing that it must continually confront the question of representation."

¹⁹*Ibid.*, p. 28.

²⁰Schlegel, *Philosophical Fragments*, Athenaeum Fragment 46, p. 23.

²¹Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, p. 29.

²²*Ibid.*, p. 29.

²³*Ibid.*

²⁴*Ibid.*, pp. 31–2.

²⁵Schlegel, cited in Bullock, *Romanticism and Marxism*, p. 42.

²⁶Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, p. 34.

²⁷*Ibid.*, p. 37.

²⁸*Ibid.*, p. 38. Cf. Schlegel, *Philosophical Fragments*, Ideas 15, p. 95: "Every particular conception of God is mere gossip. But the idea of God is the Idea of ideas."

²⁹Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, pp. 47–8.

³⁰Gasché, "The Sober Absolute," pp. 442–3.

³¹Bullock, *Romanticism and Marxism*, p. 41.

³²Pfefferkorn, Kristin, *Novalis: A Romantic's Theory of Language and Poetry* (New Haven and London: Yale, 1988), p. 4.

³³Benjamin, "On Language as Such and On the Language of Man," in *One Way Street and Other Writings*, trans. Edmund Jephcott and Kingsley Shorter (New York and London: Verso, 1979), p. 107.

³⁴*Ibid.*, p. 108.

³⁵*Ibid.*, p. 115.

³⁶*Ibid.*, p. 123.

³⁷*Ibid.*, p. 117.

³⁸Benjamin, "The Task of the Translator," in *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn (London: Fontana: 1973), p. 74.

³⁹*Ibid.*, p. 75.

⁴⁰*Ibid.*

⁴¹*Ibid.*, p. 76.

⁴²*Ibid.*, p. 79. "For if the sentence is the wall before the language of the original, literalness is the arcade."

⁴³*Ibid.*, p. 81.

⁴⁴*Ibid.*, p. 82.

⁴⁵*Ibid.*, p. 72.

⁴⁶*Ibid.*

⁴⁷Paul de Man, "Conclusions: Walter Benjamin's 'The Task of the Translator,'" in *The Resistance to Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1986), p. 90. This translation is different from that of Harry Zohn in *Illuminations*.

⁴⁸See Benjamin, "The Task of the Translator," p. 79, and de Man, "Conclusions," p. 91 for the broken parts that form this fragment of translation.

⁴⁹Gasché, "Saturnine Vision and the Question of Difference: Reflections on Walter Benjamin's Theory of Language," *Studies in Twentieth Century Literature* 11 (1986), p. 77.

⁵⁰*Ibid.*, p. 78.

⁵¹De Man, "Conclusions," p. 92.

⁵²Benjamin, "N [Re the Theory of Knowledge, Theory of Progress]," in Gary Smith (ed.), *Benjamin: Philosophy, Aesthetics, History* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago, 1989), entry N 1a, 7, p. 47. Also cited in Rolf Tiedemann, "Dialectics at a Standstill," in Gary Smith (ed.), *On Walter Benjamin: Critical Essays and Recollections* (Cambridge, Mass., and London: MIT, 1988), p. 279. See also "N," entry N 1a, 6, pp. 46–7.

⁵³Benjamin, "N," entry N 2, 6, p. 48.

⁵⁴*Ibid.*, entry N 2a, 4, p. 50. Also cited in Tiedemann, "Dialectics at a Standstill," p. 280.

⁵⁵Susan Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project* (Cambridge, Mass., and London: MIT, 1989), p. 159.

⁵⁶Benjamin, "N," entry N 2, 3, p. 47, emphasis added.

⁵⁷Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing*, pp. 218 although, note that this is where she mentions progress.

⁵⁸Benjamin, "N," entry N 2a, 3, p. 49.

⁵⁹*Ibid.*, entry N 10a, 3, p. 67. While incapable of representation, and therefore incapable of being experienced, ideas, and aesthetic ideas in particular, are that which produce the movement of thought by their absence.

- ⁶⁰Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing*, p. 159.
- ⁶¹Benjamin, "N," entry N 9, 4, p. 63.
- ⁶²Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, p. 48.
- ⁶³Benjamin, "N," entry N 9, 7, p. 64.
- ⁶⁴Eva Geulen, "Forgetting Benjamin," *Telos* 91 (1992), p. 160.
- ⁶⁵Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," in *Illuminations*, Thesis V, p. 247.
- ⁶⁶Timothy Bahti, "Theories of Knowledge: Fate and Forgetting in the Early Works of Walter Benjamin," *Studies in Twentieth Century Literature* 11 (1986), pp. 63–4.
- ⁶⁷Benjamin, "N," entry N 2a, 3, p. 49.
- ⁶⁸Rosen, "The Ruins of Walter Benjamin," p. 170.
- ⁶⁹Benjamin, cited in Bahti, "History as Rhetorical Enactment: Walter Benjamin's Theses 'On the Concept of History,'" *Diacritics* 9, 3 (1979), p. 13.

Unfolding Romantic history: critique of fragmented reason

Please... Leave poor German Romanticism alone!

Paul Piccone

Without pinpointing an actual instant Michel Foucault, in *The Order of Things*, reflects upon the turn of the nineteenth century as a moment in the history of science. It is not that he merely happens to mark this moment, for his intention in suspending history at this point is to *disrupt* the supposed continuity of scientific progress. By contrasting the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries, Foucault aims to retrospectively unfold an epoch emerging in the history of language as an object of study: whereas previously interpretation aimed to locate, etymologically, the divine Word, the union of world and God at the origin of language; in the later epoch interpretation “reveals” that we are governed and paralysed by language, that we cannot get beyond language by getting behind it, but can only uncover “language in its crude being.”¹ In short, it was no longer believed that the truth of language lay beyond or before language in its historical (and divine) origin, but in the *form* of language itself. With this account of the origins of philology and linguistics, Foucault draws another, more general, historical conclusion: “*Philology, as the analysis of what is said in the depths of discourse, has become the modern form of criticism.*”² The turn of the nineteenth century is a significant moment in the history of the present in similar fashion for those who write on early German Romanticism, but from the perspective of criticism rather than philology.³ The Romanticism of the *Athenaeum*, which ran from 1798–1800, and particularly of Friedrich Schlegel, provides an opportunity to explore Foucault’s linkage of philology and criticism but, rather than reproducing his history of philology, by taking *criticism* as the focal point. Such a history of Romantic literary criticism requires a demonstration of its intimate relations with Orientalism, religion, and history. In short, if this moment signifies the opening of the history of the present, then it is because criticism has become the modern form of philology.

I

A commonly held picture of German Romanticism paints it as a reactionary mystical subjectivism, while a commonly held alternative paints it as a radical break with the past, an embrace of a new type of historical consciousness, supportive of the French Revolution and sceptical of dogmatic religion. What makes the early Romanticism of Novalis and the Schlegels so characteristic is the impossibility of accepting or rejecting either of these interpretations.⁴ To get beyond such contradictory assessments requires more than viewing Romanticism in terms of its historical significance, or its “positive and negative sides,” but to take seriously its philosophical concepts and draw out their intentions.⁵ Following the path of Friedrich Schlegel’s

work on a philosophical theory of criticism is the most fruitful way to attempt such a project.⁶ This theory emerged at the end of the eighteenth century in response to and as a critique of neoclassical aesthetic theory, and as such a *parallel* with Foucault's account of the development of philology is immediately apparent. Foucault writes that whereas "Classical knowledge was profoundly nominalist," and that this view was legitimated on the basis of a theory of language that depended upon the claim of an original God-given system of names, from the nineteenth century "language began to fold in upon itself," becoming "one object of knowledge among others."⁷ Similarly, the neoclassical aesthetic theory was a codified, hierarchised system, a theory of Art, and the legitimacy of this system was established through Classical art, taken as its origin. Schlegel, then, intended to liberate the *work of art* from Art as the classification of works—the work of art had to become *the* object, a whole in itself, a poetic unity. The significance of this parallel is indicated by the fact that Schlegel's intention of folding the work in upon itself had as its prime target what the historical legitimation of the neoclassical *ars poetica* was intended to insure—that behind art lay reality, that art was a form of the *representation* of reality, that it was mimetic.⁸

In fact, Schlegel's first paper on ancient Greek poetry adopted a neoclassical aesthetic, but he rejected this even before it had been published.⁹ What led him away from neoclassicism was the question of classification: whereas in neoclassicism genre is immutably given, Schlegel wished to make of genre a philosophical and aesthetic problem.

We already have so many theories about poetical genres. Why have we no concept yet of poetical genre? Perhaps then we would have to make do with a single theory of poetical genres.¹⁰

That is, Schlegel was drawn to ask, first, what it means to divide poetry into genres, and secondly, for a *concept* of genre at all, something deemed unnecessary by the neoclassicists, for whom genre is merely that division inherited from antiquity (even if the substance of this inheritance is the subject of internal disputation). The first stage of such an inquiry is the following: "Should poetry simply be divided up? Or should it remain one and indivisible? Or fluctuate between division and union?"¹¹ The beginnings of Schlegel's answer can be seen in two further fragments:

In poetry too every whole can be a part and every part really a whole.¹²

A classification is a definition that contains a system of definitions.¹³

One is tempted to conclude that all of Schlegel's conclusions follow from these two short statements. Their first consequence is to make definition into a system, that is, to bring German idealism and aesthetics into relation, to move from "a pragmatic to a philosophical theory of the poetical genres."¹⁴ Classification can no longer consist merely of a division according to identity and difference within a hierarchy. If every part is a whole and every whole a part, then this implies that genre is something like a Leibnizian monad.¹⁵ The system of genres is not merely the form of art, and its works the content, for in constituting a *system* classification is already content,

already the *work* of definition. The question necessarily becomes what Schlegel intends by “system.”¹⁶

The implication thus far is that aesthetics is inflected toward philosophy, but this must not be misunderstood as the subsumption of art by philosophy. For if Schlegel was fighting neoclassical orthodoxy with one hand, with the other he was battling what he saw as the Kantian subsumption of art to reason and understanding. As is clear from his attitude to the classification of poetry, for Schlegel art was not opposed to philosophy by a lack of systematicity. Against the views of many philosophers, a system cannot be merely a “regiment of soldiers on parade.”¹⁷ Hence it is not mere love of contradiction that led Schlegel to write that “It’s equally fatal for the mind to have a system and to have none. It will simply have to decide to combine the two.”¹⁸ That every part must be a whole indicates that for Schlegel the task of classification coincides with the task of completion, but that every whole can also be a part implies that such completion can only occur in a finite and singular fashion.¹⁹ Thus in the Romantic version of idealism the systematic and the wholly non-systematic are united, and the site of their unity cannot be a universal and absolute reason. Rather, the work of art is this site, and it is a unity which is each time singular. If Schlegel’s is a philosophical aesthetics, it is because his is also an aesthetic philosophy.²⁰

Although the system is the idea of totality, “even the greatest system is merely a fragment.”²¹ This is the consequence of Schlegel’s aesthetico-philosophical theory for, as Benjamin puts it, ideas “are to objects as constellations are to stars.”²² If it is Schlegel’s demand that each classification have a systematic concept adequate to it, then this implies that classification refers to an idea whose totality transcends the concepts through which it is constituted. Schlegel’s notions of idea and concept are derived from Kantian idealism but tailored to his aesthetic philosophy. In Kant aesthetical ideas are given a special place, as that which produces thought beyond the expressive capability of words and concepts, and in so doing bring ideas in general into the movement of thought.²³ The source of such aesthetical ideas, according to Kant, was the imagination, and Schlegel believed that this category was subordinated in Kant to those categories proper to philosophy: reason and understanding.²⁴ But the finitude of Kantian reason implied, then, that aesthetics could have no relation to the infinite, which for Schlegel rendered both reason and aesthetics meaningless and pointless.²⁵ Thus Schlegel aimed to establish the autonomy of the imagination above and beyond all reason. His notion of “idea” which, like Kant’s, transcends the concepts through which it is presented, reflects the union of the system and its opposite:

An idea is a concept perfected to the point of irony, an absolute synthesis of absolute antitheses, the continual self-creating interchange of two conflicting thoughts.²⁶

Classification, in that it contains a system and refers to an idea, bears a relation to the infinite, and for Schlegel the idea is that which lies concealed in the work.²⁷ The question of genre, therefore, leads to a consideration of the work in its singularity, and to the historical limits of any

division of works. Unlike Kant, the aesthetic is defined precisely *by* its relation to the infinite, and this infinitisation of classification is simultaneously its dissolution. But the idea, as the absolute, is incapable of being directly experienced, and the mode of writing adopted by the Romantics—the fragment—symbolises the idea, not as that which lies behind the fragment, but as the condition of presentation of the idea. Fragmentation is the condition of the system because it is constitutive of universality itself. As Gasché puts it, “Only because the absolute is the fragment is there an absolute—absolute individuality.”²⁸

The historicity of the system-as-fragment is indicated on the one hand by Schlegel’s references to philology. Familiarly, Schlegel writes in one fragment that the “more poetry becomes science, the more it also becomes art.” Thus the poet must also be a philosopher and, if he is to be “more than a mere contriver and artisan,” will “have to become a philologist as well.”²⁹ For Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy, the fact that *ancient* texts now often exist only in fragmented form is not merely incidental, and philology and fragmentation are linked by the concept of the *ruin*.³⁰ Furthermore, and against neoclassical views, if there is anything in ancient literature which speaks directly to the present and commands the modern artist, it *is* this fragmentation: “Many of the works of the ancients have become fragments. Many modern works are fragments as soon as they are written.”³¹ On the other hand, “as yet *no* genre exists that is fragmentary both in form and content.”³² Although ancient and modern works exist as fragments, there is as yet nothing fragmentary.³³ This contradiction demonstrates that for Schlegel the fragmentation of the system constitutes its historicity not only through a link to philological ruin, but also as an openness to the future within the work: hence Schlegel uses the term “fragment” synonymously with “project.”³⁴ The idea is that which as yet and always-already remains unrealised. Every real entity is historical, and “all systems [are] individuals just as all individuals are systems *at least in embryo and tendency*.”³⁵

II

If the fragment is the idea in presentation, and the idea springs from the “imagination,” then the fragment brings into view the general question of the relation of Romantic idealism to “consciousness,” the Kantian location of the imagination. The fragment, therefore, is a locus for discussion of the relation of the subject to “reflection” (the “central epistemological category of German idealist philosophy”³⁶), and such a discussion will lead from a consideration of the system-fragment to Schlegel’s aesthetic theory proper. For Fichte, out of whose philosophy came the philosophy of the Romantics, the subject and the object represent equally valid standpoints, two irreducible and mutually supporting systems.³⁷ The subject was the subject of reflection, and reflection was therefore a finite process whereby the subject continually reappropriates its own objectifications until they yield self-consciousness in the form of the absolute ego. In short, for Fichte reflection is finite and the subject transcendental. The one modification by Schlegel to the

Fichtean scheme, according to Benjamin, was to make reflection itself, rather than the subject, the centre of the system.³⁸ Rather than a progressive thinking of the self, reflection becomes a thinking of thought in itself. In so doing Schlegel achieved an early version of the decentring of the subject, for reflection takes subjectivity itself as an object, and thus subject and object dissolve in the reflective process. Reflection becomes an infinite process, an “ever-intensifying emptying of phenomenality toward appearance.”³⁹

The consequences of a concept of infinite reflection for a theory of art are obvious: if reflection cannot be contained within the subject, what has the subject as creator to do with the work? Benjamin writes that “such pure thinking of the thought of the I leads only to eternal self-mirroring, to an eternal series of mirror-images.” If the work bears a relation to thought but thought which expands beyond all limit, then thinking becomes the formation of a “formless thought, which is directed towards the Absolute.”⁴⁰ The freedom of the imagination is absolute only on condition that reflection is infinite. The Romantics conceive of the work of art not as the expression of a subjectivity, but as the surpassing of all subjectivity, not in the name of reason, but rather of the absolute singularity of the reflection of creative freedom.⁴¹ In fact, we can go so far as to say that the medium of reflection is no longer the self but art, and that the *work* becomes the “centre of reflection.”⁴²

If nature is defined to include a subjective and finite ego, a psychological concept of consciousness, then nature cannot be the origin of art for the Romantics. Yet Schlegel writes that, just as “a child is only a thing which wants to become a human being, so a poem is only a product of nature which wants to become a work of art.”⁴³ And Novalis writes that “The true origin is Nature Poetry. The end is the second beginning—and it is Art Poetry.”⁴⁴ But although it might appear that the thrust of these is that nature is the origin of poetry, it is just as legitimate to think that poetry is the essence of nature. Thus Novalis does not write that the true origin of poetry is nature, but that Nature Poetry is the true origin. This suggests that, in sharing a status as origin, nature may in some sense be poetry. And, according to Schlegel, the poem is nature in that it resembles a child, suggesting that system which is an individual in *embryo* and tendency. Poetry is the condition of being in tendency toward Art, and Nature is as such marked by this tendency as its direction. If nature is an origin, it is an irretrievable origin. The completion of nature lies in art, and this is also its dissolution, a second beginning.

That the subject as nature is dissolved in the reflective medium of art is demonstrated effectively by A. W. Schlegel’s discussion of manner and style. Manner, an intimate, personal operation, reintroduces nature (he derives manner from *manus*, “the conducting of the hands”). Style is the preferred term for August Wilhelm, for it relates not to the self but beyond it, to the *stylus* used by the ancients as a writing implement. “This one does not belong to us, it is a tool for our free activity. The quality of the stylus certainly determines that of our written character, but we have chosen it ourselves and can exchange it for another.”⁴⁵ Thus style is both subjective and objective, and neither, for it is freely chosen but what it produces exceeds the writer’s reason

and subjectivity. The subject, therefore, is not an adequate category for the intuition of the absolute, but the absolute must be intuited, for the Romantic objection is precisely that the beautiful exists *in relation to the infinite*. As A. W. Schlegel's remarks suggest, perhaps, this "non-intuitive intuition"—as Benjamin calls it, in a paradoxical formulation that follows directly from the dissolution of the subject in reflection—is to be found in *language*.⁴⁶ From a consideration of system and classification as idea, as that which lies *beyond* language, we are led, via the fragment, back to the word, the concept, as the essence of the Absolute:

For the term, the concept, contains for him the seed of the system; it was, at bottom, nothing other than a preformed System itself. Schlegel's thinking is an *absolutely conceptual*, that is, linguistic thinking. Reflection is an intentional act of the absolute comprehension of the System and the adequate expression for this act is the concept.⁴⁷

And it for this reason that, from Schlegel's initial consideration of the concept of genre, we are led to literary criticism (which was what the Romantics meant when they referred to criticism) as the site where aesthetics meets philology.

III

Benjamin refers to the methodological innovation of the Romantics, a criticism which is neither idealist nor neoclassical, neither a rationalism nor the subjectivism of a "cult of genial creativity,"⁴⁸ as "immanent critique."⁴⁹ This anti-subjectivism applies as much to the critic as to the artist, for if the "critique of a work is [...] its reflection," then this is not the reflection of the critical self, but "the unfolding, the germination" of the immanent core of the work.⁵⁰ If reflection implies a subjectivity, then "the subject of reflection is the work of art itself," and, although an external process, criticism does not reflect *upon* a work, but rather intends "the unfolding of the reflection [...] *in* a work."⁵¹ Subjectivity, if we insist on retaining the term, is explicitly a non-egological phenomenon, and reflection is not the character of the ego but a process of unfolding of the idea within the work.

Unfolding, however, contains the metaphoric overtones of organicity, and hence the question of the relation of art and nature for the Romantics returns. One way to view this question is to explore what the following fragment by Schlegel, which can be seen as a statement of the aim of critical reflection, intends: "Every good poem must be wholly intentional and wholly instinctive. That is how it becomes ideal."⁵² The problematic of instinct versus intention is one that crops up regularly among the early Romantics, and Novalis' account would suggest that they can be identified with the natural and artistic spheres respectively: "*Today spirit is instinct, it is a spirit of nature; it ought to become a spirit of reason, spirit through reflection and through art.*"⁵³ Instinct is clearly associated with nature, and reflection with true art, but this is art as what it ought to become, the immanent tendency of art. Thus if art is at present natural and instinctive, it is as a dream in the process of unfolding to awakening.⁵⁴ When Schlegel refers in a fragment

to the “real author” of Homeric poetry not as Homer but as Nature, he is *rejecting* the notion of creativity as a subjective consciousness. In this fragment, which begins as follows, instinct, through naïveté and irony, is as much a part of the essence of poetry as intention which, although it is the freedom of creation, requires instinct as the truth of its singularity:

Naïve is what is or seems to be natural, individual, or classical to the point of irony, or else to the point of continuously fluctuating between self-creation and self-destruction. If its simply instinctive, then it's childlike, childish or silly; if it's merely intentional, then it gives rise to affectation. The beautiful, poetical, ideal naïve must combine intention and instinct. The essence of intention in this sense is freedom, though intention isn't consciousness by a long shot.⁵⁵

If criticism is the unfolding of reflection in a work, the unfolding of the immanent idea of the work, then the organicity of this process is a reflection of the systematicity of the work. Schlegel remarks that “The more organic something is, the more systematic it is.—the system is not so much a *species* of form as the *essence* of the work itself.”⁵⁶ Systematicity is the essence of the work, and thus if criticism is the completion of the work, this is not through its placement in a formal scheme, a classificatory system, on the basis of the similarity of its form to the model of its genre (in which case criticism would also be an account of the failures of the work as its differences from its designated generic model). Rather, criticism is the completion of the essence of the work. “Criticism is not to judge works by a general ideal but to search out the individual idea in each work.”⁵⁷ Although it is not the task of criticism to compare the work to a species of form, this does not mean that Romantic criticism was not interested in form altogether. On the contrary, that the work is the centre of reflection *implies* that the task of completion consists of uncovering the immanent *form* of the work. But as form is not a question of correspondence to an ahistorical model, neither is it to be understood as a rigid structure. As form constitutes the essence of the work, as the structure of its immanent tendencies, then it is perhaps better understood, as McCole suggests, as a *constellation of formal moments*.⁵⁸ The form of the work is precisely what is unfolded in the critical movement. The form is the limited expression of the absolute of the work, and the task of criticism is reflection upon the form as the infinitisation of its idea, as Weber writes:

If criticism arises (*ensteht*) out of the work and in this sense depends on it, the work in turn refers to an idea of absolute reflection which, however, it restricts and dissimulates precisely *by giving it shape*. This restriction is lifted and reflection reinstated through the process of criticism.⁵⁹

Weber's account, following Benjamin's, however, immediately suggests a contradiction in the Romantic concept of criticism—how can the absolute be *restricted* by the form of the work? If reflection in the work is limited, then criticism, reflection that goes *beyond* the work, is necessary for reflection to be infinite.⁶⁰ But if neither the work nor the critique is subjectively finite, and yet the idea of the work is singular, how can criticism *objectively complete* the work? How can criticism be the unfolding of reflection *in* rather than *upon* a work, *unless the idea of the work and the idea of criticism are fundamentally continuous*? If criticism is the completion of the form

of the work, therefore, it is also its dissolution into the absolute idea of criticism, the medium of art. Where form is finite, criticism renders the absolute. The work achieves completion only “at the price of its ruin.”⁶¹

That criticism is the task of unfolding the idea of the work contained in its *form* raises a more general problem: by rendering the absolute finite, the Romantic concept of criticism brings to the fore the relation of art to the divine. If the idea achieves infinity through dissolution into the medium of art, does not the work—as in neoclassicism—become subordinated to a divine Art. And does not the absolute therefore become profane, a divine formalism? The idea of the work is dissolved into the Idea of ideas, but for Schlegel this is God.⁶² Does not Schlegel’s “liberal formalism” at the level of the individual work, therefore, dissolve into a “radical mystical formalism” at the level of the absolute, as Benjamin puts it?⁶³

This contradiction is illustrated by two of Schlegel’s geometrical metaphors for philosophy. In an essay on Lessing, he compared the “paradox of philosophical life” with the parabola, whose lines can “only appear as a fragment because one of their centres lies in infinity.”⁶⁴ Philosophy, because of the absence of a single, unified centre, in other words because it is aesthetic or linguistic, and because the absolute is singular each time, is destined, within the finitude of appearance, to incompleteness and fragmentation. Criticism, as philosophical aesthetics, reveals the idea of the work, but this idea appears *finitely* in the form of the work *and* in criticism, because it transcends both. On the other hand, a fragment by Schlegel states that “Philosophy is an ellipse. The one centre, which we are closer to at present, is the rule of reason. The other is the idea of the universe, and it is here that philosophy and religion intersect.”⁶⁵ Here philosophy is the *encompassment* of reason and an idea outside reason, the universe. Schlegel still rejects a philosophy that would imagine itself as a circle with reason or understanding as its centre (this would correspond to the idea of a system as a regiment of soldiers). Although it has more than one centre and these are separated, however, philosophy remains a whole. There thus appears a change in the attainability of wholeness which corresponds with an inflection of philosophy toward religion rather than aesthetics.⁶⁶ Of course, a parabola is *itself* an ellipse, but an ellipse with one centre taken to infinity, and in fact Schlegel appears to have taken a centre from infinity and returned it to the profane world. The problem, therefore, is whether the Romantic concept of criticism is posed as an idea (an ideal), or as a concept, attainable and actual, and whether this difference has meaning.

Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy suggest that, to understand this apparent contradiction as a necessary paradox, Schlegel’s interest in religion beyond mere reason be understood as “*religion within the limits of art*.”⁶⁷ If the form of the work contains the idea, then it is reflection upon the form that exposes the idea, but this critical exposition is an account of, as they say, “the formation of form,” the unfolding of form itself.⁶⁸ Criticism is thus the dissolution of form into the medium of “formation,” and the absolute is identified with *unfolding as such*, beyond any actual form. In this account, which must self-reflectively involve the dissolution of the form of criticism (thus

raising once again the status of irony), actual works, actual forms, become suspended moments. It is their condition of suspension which insures the fragmentation of the work, and it is *through* the fragmentation of their form that works *symbolise* the absolute, symbolise unfolding as such, as their origin and their dissolution. It is through symbolisation that profane meaning is transcended. Thus Schlegel refers to “symbolic forms” and to “allegory” as the “means whereby the appearance of the finite is brought together with the truth of the infinite and thus dissolved away in it.”⁶⁹ This is precisely the meaning, also, of the very last Athenaeum Fragment, number 451, where unfolding as such is a chain of inner revolutions, a chain of suspended moments.

Universality is the successive satiation of all forms and substances. Universality can attain harmony only through the conjunction of poetry and philosophy; and even the greatest, most universal works of isolated poetry and philosophy seem to lack this final synthesis. They come to a stop, still imperfect but close to the goal of harmony. The life of the Universal Spirit is an unbroken chain of inner revolutions; all individuals—that is, all original and eternal ones—live in him. He is a genuine polytheist and bears within himself all Olympus.⁷⁰

IV

The dissolution of the form of the work, therefore, is *into* the medium of reflection, the progressive unfolding of art, which Benjamin refers to as “the idea of a continuum of forms.”⁷¹ The continuum of forms is identical to has been referred to here as the idea of unfolding as such. The continuum of forms is the condition for and guarantee of Romantic criticism, for it is the assumption of the possibility of objectively immanent critique. But that art consists of the unfolding of a continuum of forms implies that Romantic criticism cannot, unlike neoclassical criticism, be satisfied with placing the work of art in its allotted position. Criticism, reflecting upon the finitude of the work of the present, is an anticipation of the “invisible work” signalled there—Romantic criticism is an unfolding of the future.⁷² And if this is the radical mystical formalism of Romantic criticism, then it is so because of a recognition that the origin of any classification in the present does not lie only in its history: “*How* we ought to classify is something that we often learn from the Ancients; but we ourselves must add the basis for the classification in a mystical way.”⁷³ If Romantic criticism is philological it is also projective, and for the same reasons.⁷⁴ This programmatic aspect of criticism is realised in Schlegel’s well-known description of *romantic poetry* as “a progressive, universal poetry,” for the “romantic kind of poetry is the only one that is more than a kind, that is, as it were, poetry itself: for in a certain sense all poetry is or should be romantic.”⁷⁵ As the “perfect harmony of artistic and natural poetry,” romantic poetry contains the union and division of philosophy and poetry, and of poetry as such and the genres of poetry.⁷⁶ And although criticism is the unfolding of this form, such poetry “can be exhausted by no theory and only a divinatory criticism would dare try to characterise its ideal. It alone is infinite, just as it alone is free.”⁷⁷ Profane criticism cannot characterise its ideal—that is, criticism must abandon the last vestiges of a pretension to classification and itself become ideal.

Criticism of romantic poetry can only succeed if it is romantic poetry which, consequently, “should describe itself, and always be simultaneously poetry and the poetry of poetry.”⁷⁸

But if romantic poetry is the division and union of the work and criticism, then it is also their dissolution, either as a formal structure, or as an object capable of being classified.⁷⁹ Thus the “keystone” of romantic poetry has the form neither of the poem nor criticism, but is “the philosophy of the novel.”⁸⁰ As such, romantic poetry would have to be its own description and its own critique:

Such a theory of the novel would have to be itself a novel that would reflect imaginatively every eternal tone of the imagination and would again confound the chaos of the world of knights. The things of the past would live in it in new forms.⁸¹

As work *and* criticism, the novel is the unfolding of the forms of the past, implying that it is the dissolution of genre also because of its ability to mirror the styles and divisions of history. The novel is the form which can “reflect on itself at will, [...] mirror back any given stage of consciousness, in ever new reflections, from a higher position.”⁸² The novel is therefore the expression of unfolding as such, and the mirror of nature *only* in so far as nature is nothing more than the continuum of forms itself.

That the novel is constituted by the absolute demand of reflection, and that this demand is envisaged by Schlegel as the re-living of the forms and genres of the past, must not be misunderstood. If this is a call to excess above and beyond reason, it is not an abandonment of seriousness or a celebration of instinct. For Schlegel, unlike for Fichte, reflection is infinite, and hence an infinite demand, and it is led beyond reason because it must take itself and the continuum of forms as objects of reflection. Thus Blanchot writes that “Romanticism is excessive, but its first excess is an excess of thought.”⁸³ Although it is plural and variegated, it is not ornate.⁸⁴ The inseparability of the work and its critique, the legitimation of the work as critique, is an absolute sobriety.⁸⁵ Benjamin’s point was that the absolute sobriety demanded for a reflection *of* and *upon* the continuum of forms was in fact a demand for a discontinuous form:

The writing style of the novel should not form a continuum, it must be a structure articulated in each of its periods. Each small piece must be detached, limited, its own whole.⁸⁶

There is, in fact, a fragment in which Schlegel admits that the essence of a critique of the continuum of forms must be entirely systematic, yet discontinuous and finite, and it is perhaps more surprising than it ought to be that this fragment concerns the writing of history:

There are works, particularly comprehensive historical works, that in all their individual component parts are beautifully and attractively written, but as wholes are unpleasant and monotonous. To avoid this, the coloration, tone, and even the style would have to be changed and made strikingly different in each of the various large blocks that make up the whole; in this way, the work would become not only more variegated, but also more systematic. It is clear that this kind of regular alternation is not the result of chance; here the artist has to know precisely what he wants to do in order to be able to do it. But it is equally clear that it would be premature to call a work of poetry or prose art before these works have reached the point of being completely structured. The possibility that genius could be made superfluous by this

requirement is something that needn't worry us, since the leap from the most vivid recognition and clearest perception of what needs to be done to its actual accomplishment will always be infinite.⁸⁷

V

Having followed Romantic criticism to the point at which it intersects the writing of history, we must return to Foucault. Foucault writes of an historical event—the demotion of language. A consequence of the transition from language as descended from the divine Word, to language as one object among others, is drawn in terms of a shift in the philosophy of history immanent to the study of language. After this transition, the question was no longer the external origin of language: language and external history were untied, leaving behind the philological study of the history of the structures of languages.⁸⁸ According to Foucault, there were three “compensations” for this demotion of language, the last of which is “the appearance of literature, of literature as such.”⁸⁹ The entire Romantic philosophico-critical project can be seen as the inauguration of this “compensation,” for Foucault describes the advent of literature as a break “with the whole definition of *genres* as forms adapted to an order of representations.”⁹⁰ Concerned with itself as a manifestation of language, literature curves back upon itself, “as if its discourse could have no other content than the expression *of its own form; it addresses itself to itself as a writing subjectivity*.”⁹¹ Foucault’s account of literature, therefore, follows exactly the Romantic conception of the work as the subject of reflection. “Folded back upon the enigma of its own origin and existing wholly in reference to the pure act of writing,” he concludes, literature “has nothing to say but itself, nothing to do but shine in the brightness of its own being.”⁹² Foucault’s remarks, taken as a statement about Romanticism as a moment of suspension in the unfolding of the present, are supported by Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy, who speak of the ideal of the genre of literature as “perfect closure upon itself.”⁹³ The fact of this curvature upon itself, the closure of the ellipse, means that, although they are twin figures, “literature is the contestation of philology.”⁹⁴

It is at this point that we must question Foucault’s account, in so far at least as it applies to early German Romanticism. Or, rather, we must complicate it substantially. Apart from the emergence of literature, the other compensations for the demotion of language, according to Foucault, are the recognition of its significance for scientific discourse, and the critical value placed upon its study as a container of history, “an ineluctable memory which does not even know itself as memory.”⁹⁵ To the Romantics, however, science, criticism, and history, are inseparable from art. Literature is precisely the transcendence of the classifications of poetry and criticism and, as we have seen, the consequence of this is that the artist is at once scientist, philosopher, critic, *and* philologist.⁹⁶ Furthermore, this should be understood to mean that science, criticism, and philosophy are subsumed by literature, and that this occurs not through

the development of an ahistorical symbolic logic, but in the same movement as their subsumption to philology. All of these compensations, then, are for the Romantics one compensation, and this is so precisely because literature and philology are indivisible. Literature *is* an incorporation, but if it is a closure then it is at once an expansion to infinity. The closure of language upon itself is at once the encompassment of the universe by language.⁹⁷

This infinite expansion of literature can be demonstrated in a way that allows for an exploration of the Romantic interest in Orientalism. Schlegel flirted early on with a Romanticised conception of pantheism, and saw it even as “the system of pure reason.”⁹⁸ He eventually decided, however, that it depended upon a “merely abstract and negative concept of infinity,” the consequence of which was that “the deep living feeling of infinity [...] must [...] dissolve itself in this shadow and false concept of the one and all, so difficult as it is to distinguish from nothing.”⁹⁹ We might say, however, that it is this very ambiguity about the nature of the infinite that characterises Schlegel’s entire philosophy, and that Benjamin’s critique was of Romanticism’s inability to recognise the inevitability of this negative, abstract side of the infinite. Romanticism, as a consequence of the ambiguity of the absolute, always hangs precipitously over the abyss of its dissolution into the infinite. The *Athenaeum* lives only at the moment of its auto-sacrifice. And this abyss is depicted implicitly in Novalis’ statement that “Philosophy is the *theory of poetry*. Philosophy teaches us what poetry is, that poetry is the one and the all.”¹⁰⁰ Novalis’ statement differs from Schlegel’s understanding of pantheism only because, if the one and the all is philosophical, then it is also for Novalis necessarily poetic. This can be interpreted in two ways, which *may* be the same thing. On the one hand, that poetry is the one and all could mean that poetry, that is, Literature, provides the only access to the infinite. The singularity of each truly romantic poem, then, Schlegel’s *polytheism*, would be confirmed rather than the pantheism he flirts with and eventually opposes.¹⁰¹ On the other hand, it could mean that the character of the infinite is essentially poetic, that is, that the Idea of ideas retains essentially and eternally the fragmentation that stamps it as still an idea. In this case Novalis is giving us a statement about the finitude of nature, even in the moments in which it is most fully experienced—or observed, as Novalis would say. If these interpretations are both correct, then it is because the discontinuous form of romantic poetry is the symbol for both the continuity and discontinuity, the unfolding and the destruction, of the continuum of forms. The poet is the reflective observer *par excellence*, because the form of the world can never be anything other than the unfolding of poetic forms. Whatever the case, it is evident that the closure upon itself of language or literature (for these are in essence unified at the site of philology and translation) is at once the infection of all thought with the consequences of this closure. It is evident also that Schlegel’s rejection of pantheism was based upon his perception that it twice ignored the significance of language and literature: firstly, by making the absolute universally present and absolutely profane, that is, by failing to render it linguistic; and secondly, by failing to locate the absolute in the singularity of the ideal work of art.

It is possible to do more, however, than merely note that the “compensations” of which Foucault speaks encompass, for Schlegel, that for which they are compensating. In his *Dialogue on Poetry*, which appeared in the *Athenaeum* in 1800, Schlegel offers a reflection of his interest in Orientalism, for he writes of the earth as “that one poem of the Godhead of which we too are part and flower.” Furthermore, if nature is “the first, original poetry without which there would be no poetry of the word,” it is because it is “the unformed and unconscious poetry that stirs in the plant and shines in the light.”¹⁰² Here is a repetition of Novalis’ account of the poetic structure of nature, leaning heavily toward Indic pantheism. Where Schlegel associates grammar and natural science, Foucault assumes that this is because throughout “the Classical age” words were merely privileged elements of the natural order.¹⁰³ The history of philology, then, would be the history of the dislodgment of language from nature. But, for Schlegel, the “ever-welling spring of poetry and imagination,” the freedom of the absolute, is precisely the “unfathomable abyss” between the idea of infinite perfection and the imperfection of the visible world.¹⁰⁴ If the abyss referred to in this discussion of the doctrine of emanation is moral, then it is also and perhaps even especially the linguistic abyss, for the philosophical and philological were inseparable in the Romantics’ Orientalist interest.¹⁰⁵ If the doctrine of emanation is best seen as a “system of reunion with the divine essence,”¹⁰⁶ therefore, then to reunite the poetry of the letter with the “unformed and unconscious poetry” of nature requires a new, infinite poem.¹⁰⁷ And this is precisely Schlegel’s view.

Such a poetry would be “the dissolution of all form in the process of symbolisation,”¹⁰⁸ and hence this “allegory” of divine being, this “artwork of nature,” would contain and conceal “the seeds of all other poems.”¹⁰⁹ The novel, as we have seen, is the culmination of the process of unfolding by being the expression of unfolding as such, by subsuming all styles and genres within itself. Schlegel refers in similar terms to this infinite poem, but in this case it is described in terms of the need for a *new mythology*. Mythology was the centre of ancient poetry but modern poetry, he argues, lacks such a “focal point.”¹¹⁰ It is more than coincidence that Halbfass describes India as a “focal point”¹¹¹ within German Romanticism, for already in 1800 Schlegel had written that “we must look for the pinnacle of Romanticism” there.¹¹² The Orient was, according to Schlegel, “the actual source of all languages, all the thoughts and poems of the human spirit.”¹¹³ Language, poetry and myth were clearly associated by the Romantics, and A. W. Schlegel wrote that “mythology is nature in a poetic garment,” and that myth, “like language, is a general, a necessary product of the human poetic power, an arche-poetry of humanity.”¹¹⁴ Mythology and poetry are one and inseparable, Schlegel writes, and if ancient poetry was a single, indivisible, perfect poem, can such poetry live once more, and in a greater and more beautiful way? Schlegel’s two conclusions on this matter follow logically: first, that *philology* is “one of the essentials for a universal and progressive religion”¹¹⁵; and second, that

to accelerate the genesis of the new mythology, the other mythologies must also be reawakened according to the measure of their profundity, their beauty, and their form [...] *In the Orient, we must look for the most sublime form of the Romantic.*¹¹⁶

But it is precisely this formulation of a new mythology, this new religion derived from criticism and hence a reformulation of *mimesis*, this overcoming of the question of the origin of language in favour of language as the finite structure for the presentation of the infinite, according to Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy, that “ultimately lead to a general linguistics.”¹¹⁷ In which case, rather than literature and philology being the opposing consequences of and compensations for the separation of language from external history, this development in the history of the study of language is entirely a consequence of *the union of philology and literature at the site of religion and Orientalism*. It was because India represented to Schlegel not only original, mythical nature, not only original language, but original nature *as linguistic and mythological* that pantheism was ever able to suggest itself as a “system of pure reason.”¹¹⁸

VI

Schwab argues that the consequence of the discovery of Sanskrit was that the history of languages was no longer a matter of religion.¹¹⁹ Foucault essentially agrees with this account of the historiography of languages, but argues that it would be false and inadequate to explain this development on the basis of this most important discovery of Orientalism.¹²⁰ Nonetheless, he sees the analyses of Oriental languages by Schlegel and Bopp, and their critiques of Classical views, as making “understandable” that “the new philology” questioned the internal structure rather than the relative value of languages.¹²¹ But Foucault’s account of Schlegel’s work *itself* indicates that Sanskrit was more than merely an *example* of a language of the structured, organised, inflectional type (as opposed to the fragmented, mechanical “agglomeration of atoms” represented by Chinese at the other pole of Schlegel’s scheme).¹²² And Schwab himself tells us that although Schlegel “gave up” (but not until 1808) the idea that Sanskrit was the most ancient language and the idea that the ancient was the simplest, it is clear (since he retained the belief that the earliest must be the most intelligent) that the position of Sanskrit in relation to Chinese, and in fact in relation to all known languages, was privileged and exceptional *because* of its internal structure.¹²³ The *value* of Sanskrit is that the complexity yet flexibility of its structure is the measure of its ability to *reflect upon the complexity of ideas in their historicity*. It is here that the importance of *translation* can be seen, for it could plausibly be argued that this problematic subsumes literature and philology as the site that reveals the *adequacy* or otherwise of languages as media for ideas, for the absolute.

It is thus clear, too, that *Sanskrit*, to the extent that it serves as a name for the unification of literature, philology, and translation around the question of the absolute, is very much a *religious* problem as well—the internal history of language is encompassed by criticism and translation because this internal history is *itself* a medium of reflection, another continuum of forms, a means to access the absolute. If language has become an object, then, it has become an object of reflection. As such, the being of language, the object *par excellence*, is constituted as a

distance from the subject. But if the subject is not the ego but the work, the poem, then the reflective essence of poetry is a distance within itself, the distance constituted by language as a structure and a product of history. Sanskrit is privileged and exceptional, and its literature is privileged and exceptional, because of its almost illimitable proximity (and *not* its identity, for Romantic religion is progressive *because* the origin is irretrievably absent) to the Absolute *as structure and history*. Sanskrit poetry is divine *because* the structure of the language is *soberly poetic*.

Language, therefore, through criticism, *returns* to religion. Criticism returns to Schlegel's statement that God is the Idea of ideas, but now with the conviction that the totality of all works is a work.¹²⁴ And if the culmination of Romantic criticism is absolute sobriety, then the Romantic concept of religion must take the form Schlegel gives it in the name of language: "In the world of language or, what is much the same, the world of art and culture, religion necessarily assumes the guise of a mythology or a *bible*."¹²⁵ The absolutely sober, absolutely critical and self-critical novel, for the Romantics, in that it is the marriage of literature and philology, can only be a bible. The ambiguity, the contradiction perhaps, is that this form, whose origin is absolute freedom and infinite reflection upon unfolding as such, is the dissolution of form, a work (and therefore discontinuous in its ideal) and yet somehow also itself an unfolding. As such, Schlegel may not avoid the entirely negative and abstract concept of infinity that so bothers him.¹²⁶

VII

After spending so long treating early Romanticism as a moment in history, it is only reasonable to allow a word on the Romantic view of history. Gasché agrees with Foucault that the moment of Romanticism is the opening of an epoch, and that this is the epoch of criticism, the epoch of absolute sobriety.¹²⁷ If Romanticism is the unfolding of the present as the epoch of criticism-as-philology, however, then this is as the absolute union of language, history, and religion. And, true to the Romantic desire to create its future from its own absolute freedom, it is no surprise that Benjamin saw the "centrepoint of early Romanticism" as the generation of the thinking and living of a higher sphere in which *religion and history coincide*.¹²⁸ All the concepts of Romantic criticism imply a philosophy of history, and Benjamin considered history, along with art, as the sphere of fulfilment of the absolute medium of reflection. Thus history is not a compartment of the Romantic system of philosophy, but itself a form of the medium of reflection.¹²⁹ In a posthumous fragment Schlegel wrote that "Critique of philosophy and philology are the same thing."¹³⁰ This might be understood to be saying that criticism of the system of the idea and criticism of the history of the idea are identical. They are identical because they both imply everything that is suggested by criticism as the unfolding of the idea.¹³¹ Although this process may have a non-temporal aspect, the unfolding of the continuum of forms is history.

But what are the forms of history, beyond the stereotypical interpretations of Romanticism as a belief in a Golden Age at the origin¹³² and a steady future progress to infinite perfection?¹³³ Schlegel frequently refers to various epochs of history, usually characterised according to their poetry, but it would be a mistake to view his philosophy of history as the classification and arrangement of a sequence of epochs. Or, rather, if the question of the form of history is put in terms of epochs, then the Romantic concept of form must be recalled carefully. For it will be remembered that the form of the works was described not as a rigid structure but as a constellation of formal moments. The form of the work is this constellation of genres, of suspensions of the continuum in the frozen instant that is the work in its actuality. The form of history, then, must also be seen as moments of suspension within a continuum of forms. The epochs of history are not rigid and wholly self-contained structures, but the structure of history is the unfolding of forms which exist as ideas only through their suspension.¹³⁴ The poetry that defines each epoch exists to a greater or lesser degree in every epoch. And although we have explained this concept of historical form on the basis of the concept of literary form, it is plausible to suggest that the idea of the form of the work as a structure of suspended moments *depended upon* two things: first, the association by the Romantics of literary history and history in general; and second, this immanent Romantic concept of the epoch as the suspended moment of historical form.

It is possible to see the self-creation of Schlegel's position in the history of the present, fragmented epoch, as the confirmation of one of his own fragments: "The poetising philosopher, the philosophising poet, is a prophet. A didactic poem should be and tends to become prophetic."¹³⁵ Our present would then be, more or less, the outcome of the tendency of his system taken as embryonic prophecy. According to Schlegel's own conception of history, however, it would be an error to see the Romantic moment as a clean break, a moment of historical presence, or the beginning of a new era. Early Romanticism is an idea in history, the unfolding of which began before Schlegel, and the completion of which lies in the future. The name "Schlegel" or the term "early Romanticism," no matter how systematic the exposition, is, according to the ideas these names signify themselves, nothing more than an idea, a suspended moment. It is only if such a suspension is possible, only if the epoch can become an idea, that the history of the present can be referred to as the epoch of criticism-as-philology. It is only as the ideal of reflection, as criticism, that such a moment exists. This is the final meaning of the fragment by Schlegel that states, "The historian is a prophet facing backwards."¹³⁶

Notes

¹Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (London and New York: Tavistock and Routledge, 1970), p. 298.

²*Ibid.*, emphasis added

³Thus, for example, the following two quotations, the first by Samuel Weber, in “Criticism Underway: Walter Benjamin’s *Romantic Concept of Criticism*,” in Kenneth R. Johnston, Gilbert Chaitin, Karen Hanson and Herbert Marks (eds.), *Romantic Revolutions: Criticism and Theory* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana, 1990), p. 309:

This double aspect of romantic critical theory—the elevation of the individual work to a highly organised, autonomous structure with its own intrinsic laws and the elevation of the critical process as the culmination and continuation of those laws, above and beyond the original work—allows Schlegel and Novalis to be considered the founders of modern criticism.

The second, no less relevant, is by Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy in *The Literary Absolute: The Theory of Literature in German Romanticism*, trans. Philip Barnard and Cheryl Lester (Albany: SUNY, 1988), p. 111:

In this manner, if the properly idealistic direction of Schelling’s philosophy of art leads, beyond all *Bildung* and indeed beyond all *Darstellung*, toward a pure *revelation* of the Absolute absent from all form, criticism’s inverse direction leads toward a penetration to the heart of the formative process, and toward the reconstitution of its efficacy. One can easily see that this direction is no less idealistic than the first. One could say that it opposes to—or imposes upon—an idealism of manifestation another idealism, the idealism that is always at work in our modernity, even and especially where a “materialism,” a “structuralism,” or a “machinism” seems uppermost: the idealism of production, of the conditions of production and of the exhibition of the conditions of production. Romantic criticism thus decidedly opens the entire history that leads to the present.

⁴Thus Maurice Blanchot can write the following in *The Infinite Conversation*, trans. Susan Hanson (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota, 1993), p. 352:

This particular way of seeing things expresses a deliberate choice. One decides to consider certain traits as unimportant, while considering others as the only authentic ones: to consider the taste for religion accidental and the desire for revolt essential; to consider the concern with the past episodic and the refusal of tradition, the appeal to the new, and the consciousness of being modern as determinant; to consider nationalist penchants as a momentary trait and as decisive the pure subjectivity that has no father land. And finally, if all these traits are recognised as being equally necessary, inasmuch as they are opposed to one another, what then becomes the dominant tone is not the ideological meaning of any one of them in particular, but rather their opposition: the necessity of contradiction, the scission and the fact of being divided [...] Thereby characterised as the requirement or the experience of contradiction, romanticism does no more than confirm its vocation of disorder—menace for some, promise for others, and for still others, futile threat or sterile promise.

On the political attitudes of the early Romantics see Ernst Behler, *German Romantic Literary Theory* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge, 1993), p. 4, pp. 54–71, and p. 300.

⁵Walter Benjamin, cited in Rodolphe Gasché, “The Sober Absolute: On Benjamin and the Early Romantics,” *Studies in Romanticism* 31 (4), 1992, p. 436.

⁶One of the first to recognise this and to attempt to do so was Walter Benjamin, whose early thesis unfortunately remains untranslated. This paper is as much a reconstruction of Benjamin’s thesis as it is a reconstruction from Schlegel’s fragments. Benjamin’s encounter with the work of Schlegel and Novalis in the *Athenaeum* was his most important early intellectual influence, and its effects repercuss throughout his

later work. See John McCole *Walter Benjamin and the Antinomies of Tradition* (Ithaca and London: Cornell, 1993), pp. 81–2. Fortunately several good accounts of the work exist in English (see the Weber and Gasché articles already referred to, and McCole, ch. 2), and other works are clearly heavily influenced by it, such as Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy's *The Literary Absolute*, and Peter Szondi, *On Textual Understanding and Other Essays*, trans. Harvey Mendelsohn (Manchester: Manchester, 1986, chs. 4 and 5. See also Marcus Paul Bullock, *Romanticism and Marxism: The Philosophical Development of Literary Theory and Literary History in Walter Benjamin and Friedrich Schlegel* (New York: Peter Lang, 1987).

⁷Foucault, *The Order of Things*, p. 296.

⁸See Behler, *German Romantic Literary Theory*, pp. 1–3.

⁹McCole, *Walter Benjamin and the Antinomies of Tradition*, p. 84.

¹⁰Friedrich Schlegel, *Philosophical Fragments*, trans. Peter Firchow (Minneapolis and Oxford: University of Minnesota, 1991), p. 8, Critical Fragment 62. The Critical Fragments were Schlegel's first set of published fragments, and were followed by the Athenaeum Fragments and the Ideas.

¹¹*Ibid.*, p. 90, Athenaeum Fragment 434.

¹²*Ibid.*, p. 2, Critical Fragment 14.

¹³*Ibid.*, p. 31, Athenaeum Fragment 113.

¹⁴Szondi, *On Textual Understanding*, p. 78.

¹⁵Cf., for example, Walter Benjamin's description of the *idea* as a monad, which would apply also to the Schlegelian notion of "idea" (*The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, trans. John Osborne [London and New York: Verso, 1977], p. 47):

Philosophical history, the science of the origin, is the form which, in the remotest extremes and the apparent excesses of the process of development, reveals the configuration of the idea [...] For in the science of philosophy the concept of being is not satisfied by the phenomenon until it has absorbed all its history. In such investigations the historical perspective can be extended, into the past or the future, without being subject to any limits of principle. This gives the idea its total scope. And its structure is a monadological one, imposed by totality in contrast to its own inalienable isolation. The idea is a monad. The being that enters into it, with its past and subsequent history, brings—concealed in its own form—an indistinct abbreviation of the rest of the world of ideas, just as, according to Leibniz's *Discourse on Metaphysics* (1686), every single monad contains, in an indistinct way, all the others. The idea is a monad—the pre-stabilised representation of phenomena resides within it, as in their objective interpretation.

¹⁶Furthermore, it is clear that in disrupting the neoclassical dependence upon Antiquity as the truth and origin of its division into genres, Schlegel is dissolving the timelessness of these divisions. In fact he raises, at a fundamental level and in an almost "Foucaultian" manner, the whole question of classification and history: "Genuine classification is historical, as much from the point of view of knowledge (*principio cognoscendi*) as from the point of view of existence (*principio existendi*)" (Szondi, *On Textual Understanding*, p. 83). That history infects the classifications of both knowledge and existence implies that the *essence* of classification, as part and whole, and as definition and system of definitions, is subject to history, and Schlegel duly states: "All systems are historical, and vice versa" (*ibid.*, p. 84).

¹⁷Schlegel, *Philosophical Fragments*, p. 23, Athenaeum Fragment 46.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, p. 24, Athenaeum Fragment 53. Already in the Critical Fragments Schlegel had written (*ibid.*, p. 14, Critical Fragment 115), "The whole history of modern poetry is a running commentary on the following brief philosophical text: all art should become science and all science art; poetry and philosophy should be made one."

¹⁹Rodolphe Gasché, "Foreword: Ideality in Fragmentation," in *ibid.*, pp. x–xi.

²⁰Thus, in the "Earliest System-Programme of German Idealism," a manuscript in Hegel's handwriting but whose author was probably Schelling, we read that "*the philosophy of the Spirit is an aesthetic philosophy*" (cited in Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy, *The Literary Absolute*, p. 34, emphasis in original). This is an early indication of how such an aesthetic philosophy relates to religious questions. But, on the other hand, Schlegel writes "Spirit is natural philosophy," *Philosophical Fragments* p. 10, Critical Fragment 82. Are these statements merely contradictory? We should, perhaps, avoid too hasty a conclusion that "natural philosophy" refers to a concept of life, or to the concept *as* life, *as organism*, for Schlegel's concept of natural philosophy, as evidenced by numerous other fragments, extends beyond the organic to the physical, and even and especially the chemical (the art of joining and dividing). But even if we grant that the system and the organism cannot be kept entirely apart, it must be remembered that what is then at stake is the beautiful life, the life *of* and life *as* a work of art. In which case, we are faced with the possibility that for Schlegel life is not merely represented by art, but forms the system through which the concept of life must be understood. We shall return to these questions. Cf. Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy, *The Literary Absolute*, pp. 34–5.

²¹Schlegel, cited in Gasché, "Foreword," *Philosophical Fragments*, pp. xi–xii.

²²Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, p. 34.

²³Gasché, "Foreword," *Philosophical Fragments*, pp. xiv–xv. See esp. *ibid.*, pp. xviii ff. on Kant's notions of idea and concept.

²⁴Behler, *German Romantic Literary Theory*, p. 77.

²⁵*Ibid.*, p. 80. See Schlegel, *Philosophical Fragments*, p. 94, Idea 3: "Only in relation to the infinite is there meaning and purpose; whatever lacks such a relation is absolutely meaningless and pointless."

²⁶Schlegel, *Philosophical Fragments*, p. 33, Athenaeum Fragment 121. Irony is itself a complex and important concept for Schlegel, and another variation on the structure of the idea, of the system, of the fragment. Schlegel referred to irony as "the form of paradox" (*ibid.*, p. 6, Critical Fragment 48), and as "the clear consciousness of eternal agility, of an infinitely teeming chaos" (*ibid.*, p. 100, Idea 69). Irony thus springs from that chaotic, contradictory and absolutely free imaginative source beyond all subjectivity, as demonstrated also by Novalis' description: "What Friedrich Schlegel characterises so sharply as irony is actually, as I see it, the result of and akin to true reflection—the veritable presence of the spirit." Novalis, in Leslie A. Willson (ed.), *German Romantic Criticism* (New York: Continuum, 1982), from his collection of fragments, "Pollen," no. 29. If irony is the form of the spirit, then the spirit is ironic in essence. Benjamin (cited in Weber, "Criticism Underway," p. 314) explains the relation between criticism and irony as follows:

How does irony's destruction of illusion in artistic form relate to the destruction of the work through criticism? Criticism sacrifices the work utterly to the will of the One Coherent Context (*um des Einen Zusammenhanges willen*). [Formal irony] on the contrary, does not merely not destroy the work that it attacks, it tends to render it indestructible [...] Formal irony is not, like fortitude or rectitude, an intentional behaviour of the author. It can not, as is usually done, be considered the index of a subjective lack of limits; rather it must be valued as an objective moment in the work itself. It represents the paradoxical attempt (*Versuch*) to continue building a structure even through demolition (*Sie stellt den paradoxen Versuch dar, am Gebilde noch durch Abbruch zu bauen*): through the effort to demonstrate the work's relation to the idea in the work itself.

²⁷Gasché, "Foreword," *Philosophical Fragments*, pp. xxviii–xxix.

²⁸*Ibid.*, p. xxx.

²⁹Schlegel, *Philosophical Fragments*, p. 54, Athenaeum Fragment 255.

³⁰Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy, *The Literary Absolute*, p. 42. This is supported by Schlegel's frequent remarks linking system to chaos as its origin, such as: "Only that confusion out of which a world can arise is a chaos" (cited in Szondi, *On Textual Understanding*, p. 68), or the following, posthumous fragment 1048 (cited in Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy, *The Literary Absolute*, p. 121): "This metaphysics should proceed through several cycles, ever greater and longer. Once the end has been reached, it should start again from the beginning, alternating between chaos and system, preparing chaos for the system, then a new chaos. (This procedure very philosophical.)"

³¹Schlegel, *Philosophical Fragments*, p. 21, Athenaeum Fragment 24.

³²*Ibid.*, p. 27, Athenaeum Fragment 77, emphasis added.

³³Cf. Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy, *The Literary Absolute*, p. 48.

³⁴Gasché, "Foreword," *Philosophical Fragments*, p. xii.

³⁵Schlegel, *Philosophical Fragments*, p. 51, Athenaeum Fragment 242, emphasis added.

³⁶McCole, *Walter Benjamin and the Antinomies of Tradition*, p. 91.

³⁷Behler, *German Romantic Literary Theory*, p. 21.

³⁸McCole, *Walter Benjamin and the Antinomies of Tradition*, pp. 91–2.

³⁹Szondi, *On Textual Understanding*, p. 63.

⁴⁰Benjamin, cited in Weber, "Criticism Underway," p. 311.

⁴¹Cf. Novalis, cited in Behler, *German Romantic Literary Theory*, p. 202:

If there is an independent representative power—which simply represents in order to represent—to represent in order to represent—then it is a *free* representation. This simply indicates that not the object as such but the *ego* as base of the activity should determine the activity. The work of art thereby assumes a free, autonomous, ideal character—an imposing spirit—for it is a *visible* product of an ego. —The ego, however, posits itself as an infinite ego—and since it has to posit itself as an infinitely representing ego, it posits itself as free, as a distinctly representing ego.

⁴²Benjamin, cited in Weber, "Criticism Underway," p. 310. The consequence of such a concept of reflection is that the work of art is the demand for the annihilation, the sacrifice, of the finite subjectivity of the artist who, therefore, forms a higher caste (artists "are Brahmins"), ennobled not by birth but by "free self-consecration" (Schlegel, *Philosophical Fragments*, p. 106, Idea 131, and p. 108, Idea 146). If "truth is an intentionless state of being, made up of ideas," as Benjamin puts it, then "truth is *the death of intention*" (*The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, p. 36, emphasis added). Art is divine auto-sacrifice, and in this process the artist becomes the "mediator" of divine poetry. Sacrifice is the term linking the aesthetic and the religious, a link constituted not on theological grounds, but as the consequence of Romantic speculative idealism (see Schlegel, *Philosophical Fragments*, p. 98, Idea 44, and Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy, *The Literary Absolute*, p. 70).

⁴³Schlegel, *Philosophical Fragments*, p. 2, Critical Fragment 21.

⁴⁴Novalis, in Willson, *German Romantic Criticism*, p. 70, Logological Fragment 50.

⁴⁵A. W. Schlegel, cited in Behler, *German Romantic Literary Theory*, p. 86.

⁴⁶Benjamin, cited in Gasché, "The Sober Absolute," p. 442.

⁴⁷Benjamin, cited in *ibid.*

⁴⁸McCole, *Walter Benjamin and the Antinomies of Tradition*, p. 89.

⁴⁹Benjamin, cited in *ibid.*

⁵⁰Benjamin, cited in *ibid.*, p. 90.

⁵¹Benjamin, cited in *ibid.*, p. 93, emphasis in original.

⁵²Schlegel, *Philosophical Fragments*, p. 3, Critical Fragment 23.

⁵³Novalis, cited in Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation*, p. 354, emphasis in original.

⁵⁴If awakening may be interpreted as the metaphorical tendency of reflection and the end of infinite reflection, and as the demand of a progressive but fragmented poetry, then we can imagine that the following fragment by Novalis is an account of what spirit, through reflection and through art, intends (*Philosophical Fragments*, p. 58, Athenaeum Fragment 288): “We are close to waking when we dream about dreaming.” This is confirmed once further by Novalis in terms of the opposition of instinct and intention, although this time the metaphor for reflection is observation (cited in Behler, *German Romantic Literary Theory*, p. 203): “Instinct is art *without intention*—art without knowing how and what one is doing. Instinct can be transformed into art—by *observing* the activity of art.” Observation is a category from Novalis’ philosophy of nature, which Benjamin uses to introduce Romantic criticism. According to Benjamin, observation may be translated into criticism, but only by aestheticising and historicising it (that is, Novalis’ association of observation and nature evokes, with all Schlegel’s objections to this in mind, a type of *pantheism*). Observation becomes criticism only when the object is artistic activity. See McCole, *Walter Benjamin and the Antinomies of Tradition*, pp. 94–5, for an account of observation in Novalis and Benjamin’s use of it.

⁵⁵Schlegel, *Philosophical Fragments*, p. 24, Athenaeum Fragment 51.

⁵⁶Schlegel, *Literary Notebooks*, cited in Gasché, “Foreword,” *Philosophical Fragments*, p. xii. Also, in *ibid.*, is the following remark: “A system alone is properly a work.”

⁵⁷Schlegel, *Literary Notebooks*, cited in McCole, *Walter Benjamin and the Antinomies of Tradition*, p. 96. Also, in *ibid.*, the following: “Criticism compares a work with its own ideal.”

⁵⁸McCole, *Walter Benjamin and the Antinomies of Tradition*, p. 97. McCole is probably following Benjamin here, and he notes that “moment” as a concept characteristic of German idealism refers “to the tendency to produce motion (‘momentum’), it signifies the dynamic features of a point in logical development” (*ibid.*). We shall have reason to return to the concept of form as a constellation of moments when we turn more specifically to the Romantic philosophy of history.

⁵⁹Weber, “Criticism Underway,” p. 312, emphasis added.

⁶⁰*Ibid.*, p. 313:

The problem remains, however, of explaining just how such a general idea of reflection can *limit itself* in individual works and still remain pure reflection. The problem is clear to the romantics, as the following remark of Novalis, cited by Benjamin, indicates: “A work is formed when it is sharply limited everywhere, but within its limits limitless [...] everywhere the same and yet sublimely beyond itself (76). As individuation of the general medium of reflection, the individual work can fulfil its function only in so far as it is driven out of and beyond itself, and thus comes to be dissolved in—and into—the critical process. The ‘value’ of the work can thus be measured by the degree to which it allows this process (that is, criticism) to take place—by the degree to which it is “criticisable.”

⁶¹Benjamin, cited in McCole, *Walter Benjamin and the Antinomies of Tradition*, p. 99. Cf. Gasché, “The Sober Absolute,” p. 444.

⁶²Schlegel, *Philosophical Fragments*, p. 95, Idea 15.

⁶³McCole, *Walter Benjamin and the Antinomies of Tradition*, p. 102.

⁶⁴Schlegel, cited in Bullock, *Romanticism and Marxism*, p. 37.

⁶⁵Schlegel, *Philosophical Fragments*, p. 104, Idea 117.

⁶⁶At this point the question of the historical variance of Schlegel's views, even across the three volumes of the *Athenaeum*, becomes significant. The tone of his third series of fragments, the Ideas, is definitely more "theological" and less "aesthetic" than the earlier series, although this distinction is in no way absolute. These differences are indicated some years later by Schlegel himself, in a way that suggests just this problem may have been in his mind (cited in Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy, *The Literary Absolute*, p. 75, emphasis added):

In their beginnings (in the earliest issues of the *Athenaeum*), criticism and universality are the predominant goal; in the following issues, the spirit of mysticism is the most essential. One should not be upset by the word: it indicates the announcement of the Mysteries of art and science, which, without such Mysteries, would not deserve their names. But above all, it indicates the most vigorous defense of symbolic forms and their necessity, *against profane meaning*.

⁶⁷Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy, *The Literary Absolute*, p. 77.

⁶⁸*Ibid.*

⁶⁹Schlegel, cited in Bullock, *Romanticism and Marxism*, p. 44. Such "symbolic forms" are clearly a defence against the possibility of something like a symbolic logic. Foucault argues that at the point when language became a philological object, and the possibility of a universal language legitimated by a divine and ancient origin was ruled out, the development of a symbolism whose intention was a transparency to reason became inevitable (Foucault, *The Order of Things*, p. 297). Symbolic forms, then, can be seen as a denial of the possibility of symbolism transparent to thought, precisely on the grounds that to attain the absolute requires a relation to history (as the unfolding of symbolic form), even if that relation is not an identity constituted at the origin.

⁷⁰Schlegel, *Philosophical Fragments*, p. 93.

⁷¹Benjamin, cited in McCole, *Walter Benjamin and the Antinomies of Tradition*, p. 101.

⁷²Benjamin, cited in *ibid.*, p. 103.

⁷³Schlegel, *Fragments on Literature and Poetry* 190, cited in Szondi, *On Textual Understanding*, pp. 84–5.

⁷⁴See, for example, Athenaeum Fragment 22, in Schlegel, *Philosophical Fragments*, pp. 20–1:

A project is the subjective embryo of a developing object. A perfect project should be at once completely subjective and completely objective, should be an indivisible and living individual. In its origin: completely subjective and original, only possible in precisely this sense; in its character: completely objective, physically and morally necessary. The feeling for projects—which one might call fragments of the future—is distinguishable from the feeling for fragments of the past only by its direction: progressive in the former, regressive in the latter. What is essential is to be able to idealise and realise objects immediately and simultaneously: to complete them and in part carry them out within oneself. Since transcendental is precisely whatever relates to the joining or separating of the ideal and the real, one might very well say that the feeling for fragments and projects is the transcendental element of the historical spirit.

⁷⁵*Ibid.*, pp. 31–2, Athenaeum Fragment 116. Cf. Schlegel, "Letter About the Novel," in Willson, *German Romantic Criticism*, p. 108, where he writes of the novel as the expression of romantic poetry in the following terms:

[T]he romantic is not so much a literary genre as an element of poetry that may be more or less dominant or recessive, but never entirely absent. It must be clear to you why, according to my views, I postulate that all poetry should be romantic and why I detest the novel as far as it claims to be a separate genre.

⁷⁶*Ibid.*, p. 53, Athenaeum Fragment 252

⁷⁷Schlegel, *Philosophical Fragments*, pp. 31–2, Athenaeum Fragment 116. And this is so *because* romantic poetry is “still in the state of becoming; that, in fact, is its real essence: that it should forever be becoming and never be perfected” (*ibid.*).

⁷⁸*Ibid.*, pp. 50–1, Athenaeum Fragment 238.

⁷⁹If the work is the auto-sacrifice of the creative subject, therefore, criticism is the sacrifice of the work. And, we might add, the auto-sacrifice of critique.

⁸⁰*Ibid.*, p. 53, Athenaeum Fragment 252. In this fragment Schlegel writes that, therefore, “to the ephemeral, unenthusiastic dilettantes, who are ignorant of the best poets of all types, this kind of poetics would seem very much like a book of trigonometry to a child who just wants to draw pictures.” Furthermore, in his “Letter About the Novel,” he states that if the novel is incapable of being fitted to any genre, it is because its individuality as a mixture of forms make it “*already an exception*” (in Willson, *German Romantic Criticism*, pp. 108–9, emphasis added). As that which is always-already an exception, even *naming* the novel is, we might think, to approach the idea too closely with tools of classification. That is why Schlegel detests the novel in so far as it claims to be a genre. These are, of course, the only tools with which the Romantics themselves believed the idea could be approached at all, and this is precisely the dilemma that the novel names.

⁸¹Schlegel, “Letter About the Novel,” in Willson, *German Romantic Criticism*, p. 109.

⁸²Benjamin, cited in McCole, *Walter Benjamin and the Antinomies of Tradition*, p. 104.

⁸³Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation*, p. 353

⁸⁴Cf. Gasché, “The Sober Absolute,” p. 449.

⁸⁵Cf. McCole, *Walter Benjamin and the Antinomies of Tradition*, p. 105.

⁸⁶Benjamin, cited in Weber, “Criticism Underway,” p. 316.

⁸⁷Schlegel, *Philosophical Fragments*, pp. 89–90, Athenaeum Fragment 432. It might be thought that Schlegel is advocating a patchwork of styles as an empiricist type of historical relativism, but McCole explains clearly the connections of this type of philological discontinuity to the conventional historicist method (*Walter Benjamin and the Antinomies of Tradition*, p. 97):

The overtones of historicist past-mindedness are unmistakable: criticism seeks to understand rather than to judge. Indeed, the romantic concept of criticism did help lay the basis for the cardinal principle of philology propagated by the historical school, which sought to understand the past “as it really was.” But the decisive moment in the romantic conception which was lost in the historicists’ first commandment of abstinence is just what Benjamin [writing on Schlegel] insists on most firmly: the past work is incomplete and criticism, in completing the work, goes beyond it. In fact, because the work always points beyond itself, criticism can be faithful to the work *only* by doing so.

Furthermore, Schlegel argues quite explicitly and convincingly against just these types of empiricism and historicism, and in favour of a theorised yet historically open method that anticipates Foucault admirably (*Philosophical Fragments*, p. 49, Athenaeum Fragment 226):

Since people are always so much against hypotheses, they should try sometime to begin studying history without one. It’s impossible to say that a thing is, without saying what it is. In the very process of thinking of facts, one relates them to concepts, and, surely, it is not a matter of indifference to which. If one is aware of this, then it is possible to determine and choose consciously among all the possible concepts the necessary one to which facts of all kinds should be related. If one refuses to recognise this, then the choice is surrendered to instinct, chance, or fate; and so one flatters oneself that one has established a pure solid empiricism quite a posteriori, when what one actually has is an a priori outlook that’s highly one-sided, dogmatic, and transcendental.

⁸⁸Foucault, *The Order of Things*, p. 294. This is an echo of Raymond Schwab’s account, which attributes this development to Bopp, the philologist upon whom Foucault concentrates. Cf. *The Oriental*

Renaissance: Europe's Rediscovery of India and the East, 1680–1880, trans. Gene Patterson-Black and Victor Reinking (New York: Columbia, 1984), p. 179.

⁸⁹Foucault, *The Order of Things*, pp. 296–399.

⁹⁰*Ibid.*, p. 300.

⁹¹*Ibid.*, emphasis added.

⁹²*Ibid.* This account of literature as folded in upon itself, as the expression of its own form, as the emptying of phenomenality into the *brightness* of literature's own being, suggests the final words of Benjamin's dissertation, which criticise the Romantics for failing to sufficiently acknowledge that in this folding, this shining, there is also a destruction, a silence and a darkening. If this is the absolute, it is also the loss of the absolute. Gasché includes Benjamin's remarks in his comment ("The Sober Absolute," pp. 451–2):

Benjamin concludes. "This can be illustrated in an image as the production of blinding brilliancy [*Blendung*] in the work. This brilliancy—the sober light—extinguishes the plurality of the works. It is the Idea." (119). These final lines of Benjamin's dissertation, speak a final critical word about romantic criticism. The sober light of the prosaic Absolute that criticism exhibits in all works is a blinding light. It is so dazzling that it becomes deceptive. In its brilliancy, all differences fade absolutely. Its spell, the fascination it exerts, is that of the *fact*—of the Absolute become secular.

⁹³Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy, *The Literary Absolute*, p. 11. And is this not confirmed, they argue, by the following well-known fragment? "A fragment, like a miniature work of art, has to be entirely isolated from the surrounding world and be complete in itself like a porcupine" (Schlegel, *Philosophical Fragments*, p. 45, Athenaeum Fragment 206.

⁹⁴Foucault, *The Order of Things*, p. 300.

⁹⁵*Ibid.*, p. 297.

⁹⁶Cf. Schlegel, *Philosophical Fragments*, p. 54, Athenaeum Fragment 255. Also, *ibid.*, pp. 81–2, Athenaeum Fragment 404, emphasis added, indicates that the union of philosophy and philology with poetry does not indicate a diminution of their sobriety:

There is no philologist without philology in the original sense of the word; that is, without interest in grammar. *Philology is a logical emotion, the counterpart of philosophy*, enthusiasm for chemical knowledge; for grammar is surely only the philosophical part of the universal art of dividing and joining. *By the artistic development of this sense, we arrive at criticism*, whose substance can only be the classical and absolutely eternal.

⁹⁷Thus, for example, Pfefferkorn states that for Novalis language *literally* encompasses the universe (Kristin Pfefferkorn, *Novalis: A Romantic's Theory of Language and Poetry* [New Haven and London: Yale, 1988], p. 4). Novalis put this more abstractly when he wrote that "The world is a *universal trope* of the [human] mind—a symbolic image of it." Cited in Behler, *German Romantic Literary Theory*, p. 198.

⁹⁸Schlegel, cited in Wilhelm Halbfass, *India and Europe: An Essay on Understanding* (Albany: SUNY, 1988), p. 79.

⁹⁹Schlegel, cited in *ibid.*, p. 77. Thus Schlegel rejected Buddhism because he concluded that the essence of its doctrine was "that everything is nothing" (*ibid.*).

¹⁰⁰Novalis, cited in Behler, *German Romantic Literary Theory*, pp. 193–4.

¹⁰¹Cf. Schlegel, *Philosophical Fragments*, p. 93, Athenaeum Fragment 451.

¹⁰²Schlegel, *Dialogue on Poetry*, cited in Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy, *The Literary Absolute*, pp. 92–3.

¹⁰³Foucault, *The Order of Things*, p. 280.

¹⁰⁴Schlegel, *On the Language and Wisdom of the Indians*, in Burton Feldman and Robert D. Richardson, *The Rise of Modern Mythology, 1680–1860* (Bloomington and London: Indiana, 1972), p. 359.

¹⁰⁵This linguistic abyss was described by Hamann in a letter to Herder in 1784 (cited in Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation*, p. 461 n. 2, emphasis in original): “Were I as eloquent as Demosthenes, I could not but repeat three times, as a single word: reason is language, logos. This is the marrow-filled bone that I am gnawing, and will until my death. A profundity that remains still obscure to me, and I await the angel of the Apocalypse who would deign to bring me the key to such an abyss.”

¹⁰⁶Schlegel, *On the Language and Wisdom of the Indians*, in *ibid.*, emphasis added.

¹⁰⁷This reference to the unconscious is itself significant. If “unformed” refers to a poetry before poetry, a longing for an original form from which the unfolding of form unfolds, then “unconscious” indicates not “instinct,” but a divine pre-subjectivity. But, as Ricarda Huch writes, the source of religion for the Romantics was “in the unconscious or in the Orient” (cited in Schwab, *The Oriental Renaissance*, p. 219). In the *Dialogue on Poetry*, however, nature is both unconscious poetry and the poem of the Godhead. Thus we can conclude that for Schlegel the source of religion is the Orient as the absolutely unconscious, as divine pre-subjectivity, the truth of the moment prior to and inaugurating freedom and the unfolding of form.

¹⁰⁸Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy, *The Literary Absolute*, p. 94.

¹⁰⁹Schlegel, *Dialogue on Poetry*, cited in Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy, *The Literary Absolute*, p. 93.

¹¹⁰Schlegel, “Talk on Mythology,” in Willson, *German Romantic Criticism*, p. 96.

¹¹¹Halbfass, *India and Europe*, p. 72.

¹¹²Schlegel, cited in *ibid.*, p. 75.

¹¹³Schlegel, cited in *ibid.*

¹¹⁴A. W. Schlegel, cited in Behler, *German Romantic Literary Theory*, pp. 158–9.

¹¹⁵Schlegel, *Philosophical Fragments*, p. 49, Athenaeum Fragment 231. If this suggests the description of romantic poetry as universal, progressive poetry, then this is more than coincidence, for this religious call is the outcome of nothing other than Romantic criticism in association with its philological and Oriental interests. It is reflected in the second conclusion, where the new mythology reawakens all the old mythologies, suggesting Schlegel’s statement that in the novel, which is at once the theory of the novel, the forms of the past would live again.

¹¹⁶Schlegel, “Talk on Mythology,” in Willson, *German Romantic Criticism*, pp. 100–1, emphasis added.

¹¹⁷Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy, *The Literary Absolute*, p. 93–4.

¹¹⁸Thus, in *On the Language and Wisdom of the Indians*, Schlegel notes “some truly marvellous concordances” between mythology and language “which cannot be attributed to pure chance,” and hence formed “an incontestable relationship” (Schlegel, cited in Schwab, *The Oriental Renaissance*, pp. 168–9).

¹¹⁹Schwab, *The Oriental Renaissance*, p. 168.

¹²⁰Foucault, *The Order of Things*, p. 252.

¹²¹*Ibid.*, p. 285.

¹²²*Ibid.*, pp. 283–4.

¹²³Schwab, *The Oriental Renaissance*, p. 175. Foucault himself (*The Order of Things*, p. 284, emphasis added) cites Schlegel as arguing that in the inflectional system (as opposed to the system of combinations represented by Chinese) “each root is like a living and productive germ, every modification of circumstance or degree being produced by internal changes; freer scope is thus given to its development, and its rich productiveness is in truth *almost illimitable*.” Whereas Chinese is static and unchanging, therefore, the *value* of the inflectional type is precisely the historical adaptability of its structure, its complete difference from anything like a divine Word reflected only in the fallen languages of man. And it is clearly a question of value when Schlegel also writes (and Foucault cites) that the structure of Sanskrit is “highly organised, formed by inflection, or the change and transposition of its primary radical signs, carried through every ramification of meaning and expression, and not by the merely mechanical process of annexing words or particles to the same lifeless and unproductive root.”

¹²⁴Cf. Gasché, “The Sober Absolute,” p. 447.

¹²⁵Schlegel, *Philosophical Fragments*, p. 97, Idea 38, emphasis added.

¹²⁶At least Benjamin thinks so, for does not the absolutely critical and sober imply an absolutely negative absolute? Cf. Gasché, “The Sober Absolute,” p. 453. Blanchot discusses this problem in the following terms (*The Infinite Conversation*, p. 358):

From these and many other contradictions in whose midst romanticism unfolds—contradictions that will contribute to making literature no longer a response, but a question—let us, in ending, retain this one: the romantic art that concentrates creative truth in the freedom of the subject also defines for itself the ambition of a total book, a kind of Bible, perpetually growing, that will not represent the real but replace it, for the whole can only be affirmed in the non-objective sphere of the work. This Book, say all the great romantics, will be the novel. Schlegel: “*The novel is the romantic book*.” Novalis: “*The novel alone is able to absolutise the world, for the idea of the whole must dominate and entirely shape the esthetic work*.”

¹²⁷Gasché, “The Sober Absolute,” p. 450. Cf. Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy, *The Literary Absolute*, p. 110.

¹²⁸Benjamin, cited in Bullock, *Romanticism and Marxism*, p. 87.

¹²⁹Cf. McCole, *Walter Benjamin and the Antinomies of Tradition*, pp. 106–7.

¹³⁰Schlegel, cited in Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy, *The Literary Absolute*, p. 147 n. 16.

¹³¹They could also be read another way, which does not contradict the first, and also effectively indicates how Romantic criticism might be thought to open the present epoch of criticism-as-philology. That is, that critique of philosophy and philology are the same thing could be understood as the suggestion that critique of the being of the idea, and critique of the language (as structure) of the idea, are the same thing. The task of bringing together (but only after and through taking each concept to its extreme) system and history, being and structure, at the site of language, is precisely Foucault’s characterisation of the modern age. This extraordinary passage by Foucault—the modern equivalent, perhaps, of Novalis’ *Monologue*—is worth citing, even in its great length, and deserves far more than the inadequate treatment

it has received here. In its conclusion, it suggests that, however problematic, there remains a task of completion (*The Order of Things*, pp. 298–9):

Thus the methods of interpretation of modern thought are opposed by the techniques of formalisation: the first claiming to make language speak as it were below itself, and as near as possible to what is being said in it, without it; the second claiming to control any language that may arise, and to impose upon it from above the law of what it is possible to say. Interpretation and formalisation have become the two great forms of analysis of our time—in fact, we know no others. But do we know what the relations of exegesis and formalisation are? Are we capable of controlling and mastering them? For if exegesis leads us not so much towards a primal discourse as towards the naked existence of something like a language, will it not be obliged to express only the pure forms of language even before it has taken on a meaning? And in order to formalise what we suppose to be a language, is it not necessary to have practised some minimum of exegesis, and at least interpreted all those mute forms as having the intention of meaning something? It is true that the division between interpretation and formalisation presses upon us and dominates us today. But it is not rigorous enough: the fork it forms has not been driven far enough down into our culture, its two branches are too contemporaneous enough for us to be able to say even that it is prescribing a simple option or that it is inviting us to choose between the past, which believed in meaning, and the present (the future), which has discovered the significant. In fact, it is a matter of two correlative techniques whose common ground of possibility is formed by the being of language, as it was constituted on the threshold of the modern age. The critical elevation of language, which was a compensation for its subsidence within the object, implied that it had been brought nearer both to an act of knowing, pure of all words, and to the unconscious element in our discourse. It had to be either made transparent to the forms of knowledge, or thrust down into the contents of the unconscious. This certainly explains the nineteenth century's double advance, on the one hand towards formalism in thought and on the other towards the discovery of the unconscious—towards Russell and Freud. It also explains the tendency of one to move towards the other, and of these two directions to cross: the attempt, for example, to discover the pure forms that are imposed upon our unconscious before all content; or again, the endeavour to raise the ground of experience, the sense of being, the lived horizon of all our knowledge to the level of our discourse. It is here that structuralism and phenomenology find, together with the arrangements proper to them, the general space that defines their *common ground*.

¹³²Effectively refuted by Schlegel's criticism of neoclassicism that "*one must be essentially modern to have of antiquity a transcendental point of view*" (cited in Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation*, p. 356, emphasis in original).

¹³³Benjamin criticised the idea that, by referring to romantic poetry and religion as progressive and universal, Schlegel was intending anything like a modern theory of steady improvement. For an account of Benjamin's critique, see McCole, *Walter Benjamin and the Antinomies of Tradition*. Behler, too, criticises this view (*German Romantic Literary Theory*, p. 303). For two fragments criticising "progress" that strongly support Benjamin's case see Schlegel, *Philosophical Fragments*, p. 60, Athenaeum Fragment 303, and p. 65, Athenaeum Fragment 326.

¹³⁴See Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy, *The Literary Absolute*, pp. 109–10.

¹³⁵Schlegel, *Philosophical Fragments*, p. 52, Athenaeum Fragment 249.

¹³⁶*Ibid.*, p. 27, Athenaeum Fragment 80.

On the young Marx

1994

Only when real, individual man resumes the abstract citizen into himself and as an individual man has become a *species-being* in his empirical life, his individual work and his individual relationships, only when man has recognised and organised his *forces propres* as *social forces* so that social force is no longer separated from him in the form of *political* force, only then will human emancipation be completed.

On the Jewish Question

For Germany, the *criticism of religion* has been essentially completed, and the criticism of religion is the prerequisite of all criticism.

Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right

All these consequences are contained in this characteristic, that the worker is related to the *product of his labour* as to an *alien* object. For it is clear that, according to this premise, the more the worker exerts himself in his work, the more powerful the alien, objective world becomes which he brings into being over against himself, the poorer he and his inner world become, and the less they belong to him. It is the same in religion. The more man puts into God, the less he retains within himself. The worker places his life in the object; but now it no longer belongs to him, but to the object.

Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts

Introduction

Orthodox dialectical materialism has it that the “three sources” of Marxism are English political economy, French socialism and classical German philosophy. It has been suggested, however, that the criticism of religion referred to in the first line of Marx’s “Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right” refers to the critique of Hegelianism by the Young Hegelians and especially by Feuerbach.¹ This would indicate that, as the “prerequisite” of *all* criticism, and hence of Marxism, the *third* of these sources is privileged. But if Marx was praising the Young Hegelian attempt to reground philosophy through their critique of theology, he was equally castigating their failure to broaden their concepts of criticism and religion and hence redirect their critique to the core of Hegel’s philosophy. This is the philosophical project—to the extent that he *ever* considered his project as defined *within* philosophy—of the early writings of Marx. It thus appears that in order to comprehend the significance of these writings, it is essential to understand the relation of Marx to Hegel, and this is reflected in the emphases of the various commentaries on these writings. What they also reflect, however, in the profusion of contradictory interpretations, is the difficulty of arriving at definite conclusions about this relation. Rather than argue for one meaning over all others, I will attempt to come to grips with this issue through a presentation of the views of four such commentators.

Raya Dunayevskaya

The authority for the position taken by the official Soviet ideologues toward the early writings of Marx derives from the constant repetition of a line Marx wrote forty years later, when he claimed that Hegel’s philosophy “must be inverted, in order to discover the rational kernel within the mystical shell.”² If the four commentaries we are going to consider possess anything in common, it is their status as a reaction to the “vulgar materialism” of the dialectical materialist interpretation. Dunayevskaya wishes to defend both Hegel and her reconstruction of an early Hegelian Marx against this interpretation. The trouble with the notion of the three sources, according to Dunayevskaya, is that it fails to acknowledge the extent to which *Hegel* was already the product of these same sources.³ If a critique of Hegel is necessary to bridge criticism of religion and criticism in general, this is because the categories for the critique of Hegel must encompass not just religion and philosophy, but politics and economics as well. But Marx’s view of the need to extend the criticism of religion is already obvious in “On the Jewish Question,”

and the category that crosses the boundaries of these four areas is already singled out—alienation, or estrangement.

On Dunayevskaya's reading of early Marx, the error of the Young Hegelians was not to see the *breadth* of Hegel's thought. If Hegel is the ideologist and apologist for the Prussian state, this reflects the incorporation of the political economists of civil society within his theologico-philosophical history. Bauer's mistake is thus to take a narrow view of religion as an autonomous sphere and as a problem independent of the "state as such."⁴ Removal of "religion" as a formal-political element of state functioning will not succeed in *secularising* the state. Turning theological questions into secular ones means for Marx asking how the "defect" of religion reflects the general presuppositions of political reality or, in fact, how this reflects the defect within the distinction between politics and society.⁵ The "individual" postulated by Hegel and by the civil society economists is *divided* into a political (i.e., communally oriented) and a social (i.e., private, egoistically oriented) individual.⁶ If religion reveals man's "estrangement" by virtue of the fact that he is putting the ground of himself outside himself, then this is merely a reflection of the inevitable estrangement of this divided individual. True emancipation cannot mean liberation from any narrow conception of religion, but only transcendence of this estrangement between man's individual being and his species being:

Only when real, individual man resumes the abstract citizen into himself and as an individual man has become a *species-being* in his empirical life, his individual work and his individual relationships, only when man has recognised and organised his *forces propres* as *social forces* so that social force is no longer separated from him in the form of *political* force, only then will human emancipation be completed.⁷

On the basis of the early and continued importance of the concept of alienation Dunayevskaya concludes that "Marx was *organically* a dialectician."⁸ Although Marx's critique of Hegel was more fundamental than that of the Young Hegelians, his method did not depart from that of Hegel. Marx's advance, according to Dunayevskaya, was to transform the subject of history from the "Idea" or "man's consciousness," to "man" himself.⁹ History is then not the dialectical process of advancement to Absolute Knowledge, of increasing self-consciousness, but the history of the emancipation of man as an individual *and* social (or species) being. It is the transcendence of *this* alienation that defines Marx's communism as a "humanism."¹⁰ For Dunayevskaya the Marxian-humanistic project was already announced in 1843 when Marx wrote that "*All* emancipation is *reduction* of the human world and of relationships to *man himself*."¹¹

Lucio Colletti

Hegel's "idealism" derives from three propositions: that empirical reality is finite, and therefore lacks being; that it is the task of *philosophy* to ground being beyond the finitude of this "reality"; and that this creative task is at the same time *destructive* of the finite world.¹² If the finite lacks

being, it can be grasped only through the idea of the infinite, but the infinite itself exists only in its participation in, its *realisation* of, worldly reality. Although by definition finite and infinite are opposites, in Hegel's philosophy they are not *separated*. Thus if Hegel's philosophy is the ultimate validation of "reason," this must be understood as the coincidence of opposites, or "dialectical contradiction," and thus precisely in opposition to logic, or the "intellect."¹³ Hegel's reason, and the rationality he locates in history, is dialectical in the sense that the finite—civil society, the family, individuals—is significant as the *expression* of the infinite—the idea of the state, of world history—which is both above the finite and nothing but the finite in its totality. In his first critique of Hegel Marx observes that it is this philosophy of "rationality," in which the analytical abstractions (the ideas) become the motor force of history, that underlies Hegel's political "compromise." This is the inversion of subject and predicate that defines Hegel's mysticism, says Marx.¹⁴

With this background, it is possible to understand Colletti's critique of dialectical materialism. Dialectical materialism, Colletti observes, sees Hegel's *method* as the "rational kernel" of his philosophy, whereas his *system*, the edifice built on these rational foundations, forms his "mystical shell."¹⁵ In retaining Hegel's method, dialectical materialists wish merely to substitute for Hegel's system of concepts, a "dialectics of *nature*," of things—a materialism. Where Hegel, for example, explained history as the product of the force of contradiction within the Idea, dialectical materialists explain history as the unfolding of the contradictions within the mode of production.¹⁶ But as for Hegel the Idea, the infinite, *is* its manifestation in material reality, these two accounts are identical not only in their "method," but in their mystical content also. Just as for Hegel the rationality of history is the progression toward the unity of universality and individuality, of objective and subjective freedom,¹⁷ so too in "On the Jewish Question" emancipation is the unification of the individual and the species, of the social force and the political force.

Colletti's critique of this account, on the grounds that it reproduces *without change* all the mystifications attributed to Hegelianism, has relevance also to Dunayevskaya, despite her intentions to equally differentiate herself from dialectical materialism. Dunayevskaya objects to the vulgar materialism that would merely replace Hegel's Idea with a Marxian "nature," but in fact she too grants authority to the Hegelian method, but only when applied, not too man's consciousness, but to *man*—that is, to *human nature*. For Dunayevskaya, as for the dialectical materialists, as for Hegel, according to Colletti, history is a process with an ideal subject. What she claims Marx and Hegel bear in common, what she sees as the force of history, what she imagined she held over as an irrepressible force against state socialism was, whether it is called the Absolute or Humanism or Communism, the negation of the negation.¹⁸ To Colletti, this is the mystical element common to all interpretations inspired by the early Marx taken as Hegelian.

Leonard Wessell

If Dunayevskaya is suggestive of a Marxism elaborated from Marx's early writings, and Colletti points toward the "mystical" elements in such a Marxism, then the unusual interpretation of Wessell offers an account of the origins, within a literary-philosophical context, of these elements. If Hegel's philosophy was a reaction to Kant, Wessell argues, it was equally a response to German Romanticism. That is, Hegel opposed both the Kantian understanding of reason as irrevocably finite, and the Romantic response to this to posit philosophy as subordinate to absolute creativity, the absolute as the absolute transcendence of reason (through religion, but more particularly, aesthetics). Hegel was sympathetic to the Romantic longing for access to the infinite but, as already noted, for Hegel only philosophy itself was capable of the reconciliation of subjective and objective freedom. Hegel took from the Romantics the principle that the *unification* of finite and infinite, universal and particular, the real and the ideal, was simultaneously the *destruction* or *annihilation* of these distinctions.

In his early chapters, Wessell makes the case that Marx, too, was, in his youth, sympathetic to Romantic longings and wished for philosophy the realisation and transcendence of "irony."¹⁹ Like Hegel, however, he envisioned the realisation of Romantic "irony" in the realm of the rational. Hegel had been unable to achieve the synthesis of the real and the ideal, because in Hegel's hands the instrument of philosophy had, despite his intentions, turned in upon itself and away from reality.²⁰ Marx's project, in this light, becomes the reconciliation of Romanticism and Hegelianism, and the creative transcendence of irony becomes the "*material* principle of philosophy."²¹

The mystical basis of Marx's early writings noted by Colletti thus becomes "mythopoetic," the notion of "species-being" representing the inauguration of Marx's ironic philosophy and a secularisation of Hegel's identification of the state and the divine.²² Hegel's theological estrangement (of man from God) becomes the gulf between man as a particular, social being and as a communal, political species. But although "On the Jewish Question" posited the transcendence of this estrangement as the road to redemption, it did not indicate how the gathering of these "*forces propres*" would abolish this alienation.²³ If Marx wished to retain both the Hegelian faith in rationality and the Romantic critique of philosophy, he needed a principle of rationality beyond the Romantic critique. It is only in Marx's second critique of Hegel that he envisioned a solution to this problem: "*You cannot transcend [aufheben] philosophy without realising [verwirklichen] it.*"²⁴ This statement is significant for two reasons. Firstly, following the Romantics, the "task" of philosophy becomes criticism. But criticism becomes, not a religious criticism or a criticism of religion, but the criticism of history.²⁵ Secondly, it points toward the conclusion of this critique that the locus of rationality lies in the realisation of philosophy—the subject of history becomes not the Idea but the *proletariat*. "Philosophy cannot realise itself without the transcendence [*Aufhebung*] of the proletariat, and the proletariat cannot transcend itself without the realisation [*Verwirklichung*] of philosophy."²⁶

Why the proletariat? Wessell argues that the proletariat becomes the dialectical subject of history because Marx renders this class as the realisation of absolute negation, because for Marx the historical essence of the proletariat is “*I am nothing and I should be everything.*”²⁷ The mysticism in Marx’s Hegelianism, identified by Colletti, is explained by Wessell as the investment of the proletariat with the Romantic idea, the absolute synthesis necessitating the absolute destruction and transcendence of the antitheses or “contradictions” of capitalism.²⁸

Louis Althusser

Evidence that Marxism is the synthesis of Romanticism and Hegelianism is perhaps even more clear in the “Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts,”²⁹ yet it is undoubtedly a drawback of Wessell’s argument that his analysis of Marxism essentially terminates with Marx’s critique of the *Philosophy of Right*. Colletti, for example, *distances* the “Manuscripts” from Marx’s earlier writings—and from the humanist idealism of Marxists like Dunayevskaya—on the grounds that “human nature” is radically redefined as a “series of relationships.”³⁰ Thus Marx writes “My *own* existence *is* social activity.”³¹ And Althusser agrees that the “specific feature” of the “Manuscripts” is that for the first time Marx encounters political economy “as such.”³² He is critical, however, of the attempt to reconcile Marx’s early writings with his “mature” work, and the “Manuscripts” certainly contain plenty of material for a humanist or even Romantic reading.³³ In the “Manuscripts” Marx could still write of communism as equal to “naturalism” and “humanism,” and of the “movement of history” as the “act of creation of communism.”³⁴ Marx’s “idealism” at this stage couldn’t be clearer than in his remarks that “man” is the “ideal totality,” and that although it is true “that thought and being are *distinct* [...] at the same time they are in *unity* with one another.”³⁵

Althusser is equally critical, however, of the decomposition of the text into those elements that are “already materialist” and those that are “still idealist.”³⁶ Such a methodology is implicitly or explicitly “teleological,” seeing Marx’s development as the product of the internal force of an “immanent” structure. That is, if this method is dialectical, that is because it is Hegelian.³⁷ Althusser’s critique of methodologies of interpretation, therefore, reflects his reading of Marxism as a philosophy and a critique in general. His method of analysing the early writings has two characteristics. *First*, rather than searching for immanent tendencies in the text, he looks for the core problem that animated and unified Marx’s thought at this time. Consequently he does not see the “Manuscripts” as the lumping of Marx’s idealist critique of Hegel with his discovery of political economy. Instead, the “Manuscripts” represent Marx’s attempt to grapple with *Feuerbach’s* idealist inversion of Hegel. Marx writes:

Feuerbach therefore conceives the negation of the negation *only* as a contradiction of philosophy with itself, as philosophy which affirms theology (supersession, etc.) after having superseded it and hence affirms it in opposition to itself.³⁸

His critique of Feuerbach, therefore, brings into orbit the inversion of Hegel and the “empirical reality” of political economy because “what is at stake in this double rupture, first with Hegel, then with Feuerbach, is the very meaning of the word philosophy.”³⁹

The *second* aspect of Althusser’s refusal of “immanency” is to treat the early writings as “ideology”—that is, his demand for a Marxist analysis of Marx’s texts insists upon locating their “motor principle” outside the text itself.⁴⁰ Just as the ideology of Germany had advanced *because* of the *backwardness* of that which is external to it (it’s politics and economy)⁴¹, *so too* Marx’s “advance” over Feuerbach and Hegel was, according to Althusser, a “retreat.”⁴² Marx’s “discovery” of political economy, of real objects, of real history, may have been an advance over the Young Hegelians, but in reality it was a *return* to *Hegel’s* sources. The mistake of Marx’s interpreter’s is to criticise the Hegelian philosophy of History, yet to return to the teleology of the dialectic in the very moment of their confirmation of Marx’s critique.⁴³ Marx was not writing a new chapter in the history of philosophy so much as rediscovering in Hegel the impossibility of a history *of* or a history *as* “philosophy” as such.⁴⁴

If the “Manuscripts” represent more than just the confluence of material and ideal elements, it is nonetheless the case that in elaborating his theory of alienation Marx is making the philosophical economic and the economic philosophical:

All these consequences are contained in this characteristic, that the worker is related to the *product of his labour* as to an *alien* object. For it is clear that, according to this premise, the more the worker exerts himself in his work, the more powerful the alien, objective world becomes which he brings into being over against himself, the poorer he and his inner world become, and the less they belong to him. It is the same in religion. The more man puts into God, the less he retains within himself. The worker places his life in the object; but now it no longer belongs to him, but to the object.⁴⁵

This passage makes good Marx’s assertion that the criticism of religion is the premise of all criticism, for just as Marx criticised Bauer for making an abstract category—religion—into the *cause* of social problems, so too here Marx criticises “crude and unthinking communism” that imagines the similarly abstract concept of “private property” is the cause of the alienation of the worker.⁴⁶ Private property, in fact, depends upon the separation of man from man, upon the possession by man of egoistic instincts, of the desire for exchange and profit *as a separate individual*. Marx’s conclusion is that although a glance at history suggests that it is the development of property relations that is responsible for the condition of the worker, in fact a philosophical account of the *concept* of private property shows it to be the *consequence* of alienated labour.⁴⁷ If this is a *philosophical* account of economics and, moreover, one that locates something like an origin in “alienation,” with all that implies and all Marx says explicitly about “human nature,” how can Althusser see in this account *anything other* than the “philosophy” and the “humanism” he condemns?

If the section on “Estranged Labour” is Marx’s original contribution in the “Manuscripts,” then it’s significance can only be discovered in the concluding section, Marx’s

third and final critique of Hegel. Marx's *true* debt to Hegel, Althusser argues, cannot be seen if it is assumed that Marx's materialist achievement was in making "man" rather than the "idea" the subject of history. Althusser's "retreat" from the humanism of Dunayevskaya is to reassert the value in the fact that for Hegel "man" is that which is *not* the subject of history. It is not "man" that is alienated for Hegel, but "Spirit."⁴⁸ But "Spirit" is nothing more than the Idea *as subject*, nothing more than the teleological process itself. So if "Spirit" is the Idea alienated from itself, it is the alienation inherent in the teleological process of history itself. If there is a subject of history at all, it is nothing more than alienated process: "*it is the process itself which is a subject in so far as it does not have a subject.*"⁴⁹ As Marx says of Hegel's account of this "process": "self-consciousness has superseded and taken back into itself this alienation and objectivity, and is therefore *at home* in its *other-being as such.*"⁵⁰ The subject is nothing more than a being at home in its own alienation. Marx's retreat in this case is therefore from Feuerbach (and all those who wish to make "man" the subject of history) to Hegel, to whom he owes "the concept of a process *without a subject.*"⁵¹ Hegel's error, as Marx states, was nevertheless to make of this process, even in affirming its alienated status, a subject: "a *subject* which *alienates* itself and returns to itself from alienation, while at the same time re-absorbing this alienation, and the subject as this process; pure, *ceaseless* revolving within itself."⁵²

The error of dialectical materialism noted by Colletti—that it returns the dialectic to *nature*—is thus nothing other than the error pointed out by Marx—that the Hegelian dialectic leaps suddenly from a faith in abstract rationality to a Romantic belief in intuition. If Wessell had examined the "Manuscripts," therefore, although he may have found more evidence for Marx's Romantic residue, he would also have found in Marx a critique of Romantic mysticism. If the subject returns to itself *in* alienation, claims Marx, if the ceaseless advance of abstraction culminates in a return of intuition, of "*mystical feeling,*" this is because the Hegelian philosophy displays Romantic "*boredom, the longing for a content.*"⁵³ But nature, taken abstractly, in its alienation, is "*nothing* for man [...] *devoid of sense.*"⁵⁴ But devoid of sense implies devoid of rationality—the Idea collapses and the absolute "end" of Hegelianism becomes nothing more than "the confirmation of abstraction."⁵⁵ Marx's advance on Hegel, according to Althusser, is to relate Hegel's formal structure to political economy, which in its own confirmation of abstraction assumes that exchange, or private property, is the fundamental subject of the process of history. If history is a process without a subject—and this is finally Althusser's justification for the claim that Marx's historical process is not teleological—then there "*is no such thing as a process except in relations.*"⁵⁶ "Alienation" and "relations" constitute the analytical core of history conceived as a process without a subject.

Conclusion

It might appear that the order of presentation, and the associations made between the texts of Marx and various interpretations, itself suggests a logic of progression, a teleology, culminating in a vindication of Althusser's reading of the young Marx and a confirmation of the type of Marxism he reads out of it. In fact, the last pages of the "Manuscripts" are anything but clear. Quotations from Hegel are piled up with little or no commentary, and it can be certain neither how Marx understood them, nor what his attitude was to them. Thus, for example, Marx appears to be critical of Hegel's invocation of nature, but it is unclear whether Hegel's error is to reduce nature to a meaningless abstraction, or to fetishise nature in spite of the *implicit* conclusions of Hegel's own philosophy. And if the latter is true, it is not possible to read into this a refutation by Marx of the significance of the category "nature" to his concept of history. Thus although the presentation of the concept of "species-being" here concentrated on Marx's "On the Jewish Question," it is in fact in the "Manuscripts" that Marx takes up and develops Feuerbach's notion. Similar questions of interpretation can be raised about the other concepts, such as "subject" and "teleology," that according to Althusser Marx rejects. In the end, even if the logic of Althusser's brand of Marxism were accepted, it may only be possible to derive it from Marx's *actual texts* if it is allowed that Althusser is giving expression to the texts' immanent tendencies. This is, of course, precisely what Althusser's Marxism forbids us to do.

Notes

¹Leonard P. Wessell, *Karl Marx, Romantic Irony and the Proletariat: The Mythopoetic Origins of Marxism* (Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State, 1979), p. 175.

²Karl Marx, "Postface to the Second Edition" (1873), *Capital, Volume I*, trans. Ernest Mandel (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976), p. 103.

³Thus, for example, she notes the considerable importance of the French Revolution to Hegel's thought, and cites early remarks by him that followed a reading of the same English political economists that sparked Marx's thought in the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*. Hegel writes in these unpublished notes, for example, that "The more mechanised labour becomes, the less value it has and the more the individual must toil," in Raya Dunayevskaya, *Marxism and Freedom from 1776 until Today*, 3rd edn. (New Jersey: Humanities, 1971), pp.33–4. As the "greatest bourgeois philosopher," then, Hegel too "stood on the basis of classical economics" (p. 46), whose failing was to see only the negative side of labour, rather than the positive "creativity" (p. 34) of the proletariat. Marx, however, argues that, since the only labour recognised by Hegel is "*abstract mental* labour," i.e., philosophy, his error is, rather, to see "only the positive and not the negative side of labour." Marx takes this as a consequence of his adopting the (idealised) standpoint of "modern political economy." Marx, "Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts" (1844), *Early Writings*, trans. Rodney Livingstone and Gregor Benton (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1975), p. 386.

⁴Marx, "On the Jewish Question" (1843), *Early Writings*, p. 216.

⁵*Ibid.*, p. 217.

⁶This rather peculiar association of "society" with individualism, particularism, egoism, and "free" economic exchange derives from Hegel's acceptance of the distinction between the realm of politics as the realm of mutual (public) interest and the realm of *civil society* as the realm of conflicting (private) interests. That is, he accepted this distinction as analytically viable, although for him civil society and the family were reconciled with and subordinated to the "idea" of the state, and more broadly, world history.

⁷*Ibid.*, p. 234.

⁸Dunayevskaya, *Marxism and Freedom*, p. 57.

⁹*Ibid.*, p. 38.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, pp. 58–9.

¹¹Marx, "On the Jewish Question," p. 234.

¹²Lucio Colletti, *From Rousseau to Lenin: Studies in Ideology and Society* (London: New Left Books, 1972), p. 111.

¹³*Ibid.*, p. 112, and p. 125.

¹⁴Marx, “Critique of Hegel’s Doctrine of the State” (1843), *Early Writings*, p. 65ff. On p. 63 Marx summarises his interpretation of Hegel’s view of the relation of idea and “empirical reality”:

Thus empirical reality is accepted as it is; it is even declared to be rational. However, it is not rational by virtue of its own reason, but because the empirical fact in its empirical existence has a meaning other than itself. The fact which serves as a starting-point is not seen as such but as a mystical result. The real becomes a mere phenomenon, but the Idea has no content over and above this phenomenon. The Idea moreover, has no goal beyond the logical one to “become explicit as infinite real mind.”

Cf. Colletti, “Introduction” to Marx, *Early Writings*, pp. 18–28. The idea of the inversion of subject and predicate comes from Feuerbach.

¹⁵Colletti, *From Rousseau to Lenin*, p. 121.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, pp. 122–3.

¹⁷Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, trans. H. B. Nisbet (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge, 1991), § 258, p. 276.

¹⁸Dunayevskaya, *Marxism and Freedom*, p. 66.

¹⁹Irony designates for the Romantics the creative and destructive principle that realises the coincidence of opposites. Clearly this presentation is entirely too schematic, but the romantic notion of irony as both an *idealism* and beyond reason is indicated in the following fragment by the leading early Romantic, Friedrich Schlegel: “An idea is a concept perfected to the point of irony, an absolute synthesis of absolute antitheses, the continual self-creating interchange of two conflicting thoughts.” Friedrich Schlegel, *Philosophical Fragments* (Minneapolis and Oxford: University of Minnesota, 1991), Athenaeum Fragment 121, p. 33.

²⁰Wessell demonstrates the moment of this recognition within Hegel himself. Hegel admits that despite his historico-theologico-philosophical conception of increasing consciousness of the Idea, history shows a decline in religious life and feeling. In response, Hegel claims that philosophy forms a sanctuary apart from these practical and worldly questions. If we take as Hegel’s distinction from Romanticism that he privileged philosophy as the road to the Absolute, then this is an admission of failure. Wessell, *Karl Marx, Romantic Irony, and the Proletariat*, pp. 123–5.

²¹*Ibid.*, p. 146.

²²*Ibid.*, p. 172. The concept of “species-being” actually derives from Feuerbach.

²³*Ibid.*, pp. 174–5.

²⁴Marx, “Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right. Introduction,” p. 250, emphasis in original.

²⁵*Ibid.*, pp. 244–5:

It is therefore the *task of history*, once the *other-world of truth* has vanished, to establish the *truth of this world*. It is the immediate *task of philosophy*, which is in the service of history, to unmask self-estrangement in its *unholy forms* once the *holy form* of human self-estrangement has been unmasked. Thus the criticism of heaven turns into the criticism of earth, the *criticism of religion* into the *criticism of law* and the *criticism of theology* into the *criticism of politics*.

²⁶*Ibid.*, p. 257.

²⁷*Ibid.*, p. 254.

²⁸Wessell, *Karl Marx, Romantic Irony, and the Proletariat*, pp. 191–7.

²⁹Cf. the following remark, which seemingly unites directly the critique of Hegel (and by extension the Young Hegelians), and Schlegel's "idea" as the ironic synthesis of antitheses (Marx, "Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts," p. 354):

It can be seen how subjectivism and objectivism, spiritualism and materialism, activity and passivity [*Leiden*], lose their antithetical character, and hence their existence as such antitheses, only in the social condition; it can be seen how the resolution of the *theoretical* antitheses themselves is possible *only* in a *practical* way, only through the practical energy of man, and how their resolution is for that reason by no means only a problem of knowledge, but a *real* problem of life, a problem which *philosophy* was unable to solve precisely because it treated it as a *purely* theoretical problem.

³⁰Colletti, "Introduction," p. 52.

³¹Marx, "Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts," p. 350.

³²Louis Althusser, "The '1844 Manuscripts' of Karl Marx," in *For Marx* (London: Allen Lane, 1969), pp. 156–7.

³³Dunayevskaya exhibits traits of "Romanticism" when in discussing the "Manuscripts" she refers to alienation as the absence from labour of the "creative function" present originally "under primitive communism" (*Marxism and Freedom*, p. 56). Against her interpretation we could cite Marx's directive that "We must avoid repeating the mistake of the political economist, who bases his explanations on some imaginary primordial condition" (Marx, "Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts," p. 323).

³⁴Marx, "Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts," p. 348.

³⁵*Ibid.*, p. 351.

³⁶Althusser, "'On the Young Marx,'" in *For Marx*, p. 58.

³⁷*Ibid.*, p. 60. Lucien Goldmann provides an explicit example of such a dialectical, teleological account of Marx's development, when he argues that the discovery of the proletariat as a revolutionary force was necessary for the "effective realisation" of the "immanent" account already present in the "Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of the State." Goldmann, "Philosophy and Sociology in Marx's Early Writings," in Tom Bottomore (ed.), *Interpretations of Marx* (Oxford and New York: Basil Blackwell, 1988), p. 163.

³⁸Marx, "Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts," p. 382.

³⁹Althusser, "Feuerbach's 'Philosophical Manifestoes,'" in *For Marx*, p. 48.

⁴⁰Althusser, "'On the Young Marx,'" pp. 62–3.

⁴¹Marx, "Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right," pp. 249–50. Cf. Marx, "Postface to the Second Edition," *Capital*, p. 98.

⁴²Althusser, "'On the Young Marx,'" pp. 76–8.

⁴³Althusser, "Marx's Relation to Hegel," in *Montesquieu, Rousseau, Marx: Politics and History* (London: Verso, 1972), p. 181.

⁴⁴Cf. Althusser, "'On the Young Marx,'" pp. 82–3n. But although in "'On the Young Marx'" Althusser opposes decomposing the "Manuscripts" into those elements that are already materialist and those that are still idealist, he seems to allow Hegelian, teleological, immanentist elements to creep into his later reading in "The '1844 Manuscripts' of Karl Marx." There, although Althusser has defined the problem of the "Manuscripts" as the meaning of the word "philosophy," he still argues that there is a sense in which

they are still “philosophical [...] in *the same sense* as that to which Marx later linked *an absolute condemnation*” (p. 158).

⁴⁵Marx, “Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts,” p. 324.

⁴⁶*Ibid.*, p. 346.

⁴⁷*Ibid.*, pp. 331–2.

⁴⁸Althusser, “Marx’s Relation to Hegel,” p. 182.

⁴⁹*Ibid.*, p. 184, emphasis in original.

⁵⁰Marx, “Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts,” p. 392.

⁵¹Althusser, “Marx’s Relation to Hegel,” p. 182.

⁵²Marx, “Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts,” p. 396.

⁵³*Ibid.*, p. 398.

⁵⁴*Ibid.*, pp. 398–9.

⁵⁵*Ibid.*, p. 399.

⁵⁶Althusser, “Marx’s Relation to Hegel,” pp. 185–6, emphasis in original.

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