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A Draw Back of Thought:  
On the Concept of Distraction in Kafka, Heidegger, and Benjamin

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## ABSTRACT

### A Draw Back of Thought:

### On the Concept of Distraction in Kafka, Heidegger, and Benjamin

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This dissertation examines and seeks to revitalize the concept of “distraction,” through an analysis of the changes it underwent in German-speaking philosophy, critical theory, and literature between the World Wars. Defying the sociological and psychological norms of the period, Franz Kafka, Martin Heidegger, and Walter Benjamin refused to treat distraction as a deficiency in attention. It did not afflict an individual subject but named the point at which subject ontology collapsed, in a revolutionary ontological, historical, and ultimately political movement. The first section of the thesis examines this radicalized distraction in light of two historical trends that converge in modernity. Beginning with Augustine’s conception of human experience as dissipation, one trend reaches a highpoint, and a reversal of value, in Jean de La Bruyère’s 17<sup>th</sup> century moral portrait, “le distrait.” The introduction to the thesis describes the positive powers that La Bruyère gives “the distracted one.” A second trend derives from fifth century Greek theories of mind. A review of this material shows a strong worry about distraction arising in Aristotle’s theory of “nous” and Parmenides’ ontology—where it is then repressed for

the sake of knowledge, being, and history conceived of as fate. Kafka, Heidegger, and Benjamin become interested in it for precisely the reason that Aristotle rejects it. The withdrawal of thought that occurs in “Zerstreuung” offers an unprecedented opportunity to leave foundationalism behind. Responding to Brentano and Husserl, they try to go beyond phenomenology’s insistence on a fixed transcendental reference point (psyche, consciousness, time) by means of this concept. Kafka finds in Zerstreuung an antidote to the eschatological framework governing the dreams of industrial society. Heidegger believes briefly in 1928 that Zerstreuung will solve the problem of the unity of being and time. Benjamin sees in Zerstreuung a possibility to free historical experience from the fetters of transcendental knowledge. For two of these writer-thinkers, Kafka and Benjamin, the withdrawal of thought that makes way for a different order is triggered by art and literature. At its center, the dissertation examines the close relationship between literary writing, cinema, and distraction.

for my parents

Schlachten unserer ältesten Geschichte werden jetzt erst geschlagen und mit glühendem Gesicht fällt der Nachbar mit der Nachricht Dir ins Haus.

Franz Kafka

## PREFACE

...what had I started to write...? All that comes to mind is a question: have the readings and arguments, illustrations and quotations collected here made writing a dissertation on distraction any less senseless an idea? I suppose it would be unseemly to answer this—

...if the answer is “no,” no need to have written the dissertation... if the answer is yes, no need to write the preface—

To avoid that sort of dilemma, let me try to ask the question more precisely. Does the method used—reading texts carefully, and although at times deflecting doubt about the readings’ probity into footnotes and bibliographical entries, always once again goading the reader’s attention onward along a scrupulously smoothed-out path—does the method, to cut to the chase... does the amount of care lavished on the idea not hamper rather than help its cause? After all, this is supposed to be a *plaidoyer* for an attitude that is more useless than useless...

The writer never digresses from his plan! The text picks up “distraction” on the first page and doesn’t put it down until the very last! It never loses track of its prey and even if from time to time it does, the resolve to catch it never crumbles. It is neither diverting nor particularly amusing, it must be admitted. It’s as though the writer had constructed a fantastic kaleidoscope but forgot to pour in the colored chips and spin. Here is a text aware to the nth degree and so unable to do its topic justice... aware of this too no doubt...

The project is not a child of haste. I originally thought of writing it under the pseudonym *Cognosticus Severus*. The tension between thinking severely and a thought severed from itself

seemed to me, before starting to write, to hit the problem of distraction on the head, not to mention leaving it wrapped up in pretty paper on the writer's doorstep. This harks back to a seductive model, Kierkegaard's, which has too much trouble shaking its idealist trappings, never abandoning its movement toward a higher unity, even for an instant. Instant is, after all, the counterpart of eternity... And *that* could not be the goal of *this* study of human frailty, although it does pay homage to it in the title... "on the concept of" ...

— there are ways out of this dilemma. And yet I won't repeat in this preface what Valéry says in the preface to *Idée Fixe*, namely, that the author "decided to match the disarray of a mind under pressure with the random to-and-fro, the natural disorder of a free and easy conversation; so he had to "write as one talks"—good advice perhaps, in the days when people knew how to talk" (6). Good advice, no doubt, in the days when people wanted to talk about disorderly intellectual modes—and what's more, to talk from within them—as if anything outside distraction was either impossible or a convenient lie. Some of the conversations from "those days"—by Kafka, Heidegger, and Benjamin, among others—form the basis for this study.

Distracted writing—if there is such a thing—often has one effect. It fascinates through a representation. Experiments in textual disintegration, as much today as one hundred years ago, can incite the most intense concentration. No, this technical motif—going back to Kant and the Jena romantics—boggling the mind in order to stimulate thought—spreading to Dada and other locales—invites absentmindedness into an intellectual poker game as a skill for the real player—*mind*. Then when the stakes are too high, mind sits it out; it folds as soon as it discovers that it is no longer the wagerer, but the *wagered*.

A truly dense work, thickly argued, full of heady demands and ponderous phrases, with few respites and fleeting ...this could be it, couldn't it? This sort of thing might live up to the



demands of the topic. One should keep that in mind while reading. On the present study's ponderousness: it is perhaps not so much a hindrance to distraction as training for it—

No one haunts the labyrinth of distraction so consistently as the student, so treating this topic in a doctoral dissertation is oddly fitting. Distraction is one of extremely few holdouts from early childhood that survives—intensifies!—no matter how long the schooling. It will not be educated. Ironic then that my immensely fertile years as a graduate student at Northwestern should bear this fruit, and, too, that this strange, disseminating outgrowth of my studies should accompany me out of studenthood.

\* \* \*

I owe a great debt to Samuel Weber and Peter Fenves, whose guidance during the writing and throughout my graduate career helped shape whatever ideas I was able in the end to formulate well. The year I spent as a DAAD Stipendiat at the Institut für Allgemeine und Vergleichende Literaturwissenschaft at the Goethe Universität in Frankfurt allowed me to spend irreplaceable time in Werner Hamacher's seminars and in his office hours. I owe thanks as well to David Ferris for pointing out this path in his seminars at the CUNY Graduate Center. Conversations with three friends—Anthony Adler, Andrew Libby, and Robert Ryder—were vital throughout the project. I hope they continue indefinitely. Finally, my great respect and gratitude go to Carolina Baffi, my example in many things...

## THESES

- I. I understand distraction as a gesture toward *the relationship of thought to non-being* and its variants: not-quite-being, more-than-being, not-yet-being, no-longer-being. Hence it is allied with figures such as presentiment, sublimity, clairvoyance, and recollection. As the advent of a mental nothing or a principle of disappearance, however, it tests the limits of even these marginal mental phenomena, tending away from phenomenology and ontology toward fantasy, literature, and art.
- II. It is difficult to isolate distraction as a philosopheme that emerged within a specific historical horizon, as though it were an empirical event in the history of thought—although it is surely this as well. To be precise, it is the mental corollary of historical horizons themselves, and so has no history of its own. As a tendency toward the limit of what is, *distraction is nearest when it escapes notice and most remote when attended to.*
- III. As the receding-approaching limit of thinking, *it haunts the “history of thought” and raises doubts about its legitimacy.* Although it haunts, it is not itself spectral, but rather the uncanny capacity to receive specters. When it speaks it says: here comes nothing, a not-yet, no-longer, or excess of what we think is.
- IV. A capacity to receive non-beings, or, inversely, an incapacity to think (if thinking is thinking being), *it resists becoming an object of thought.* While thought’s capacity to take itself as an object is arguably the central problem of philosophy, as well as its central hope—reflection—the problem of receiving distraction attracts little interest.

- V. As that which disengages moments or epochs of cognition (or experience), it is not strictly mental. *An irruption of the non-mental within the mental*, the inexperiencable (and the inexperienced: think of the intensity of a schoolchild's distraction) in experience, *it may occur when a moment or epoch releases its hold* on cherished intellectual structures, being-determining categories, and beings.
- VI. Although anti-historical, it is not therefore eternal, and yet it does not seem to go away (more correct might be to say that it brings "away" to mind). Formally, *it repeats an intermission in which history dispenses with continuity*. For beings and their relational structures this entails great risk. More than risk—it assumes an underlying discontinuum over which continuity has been draped like a shroud. Distraction is a reminder of the loose fit of historical "life" on the casket of its coherence.
- VII. To the tradition in which, beginning with Parmenides, thought and being are bound corresponds *a loose cluster of intimations of distraction that never concentrates itself into a "theory" about it*. One finds theories of laughter, boredom, forgetting, and of course of form, appearance, language, and so forth, but never a full-fledged "theory of distraction," notwithstanding Walter Benjamin's notes that bear this title.
- VIII. *It comes and goes yet no source can be found for its coming and going*. Aristotle alludes to this bizarre temporal hallmark. He establishes the paradox of an intermittent phenomenon whose phenomenality remains in question because its οὐσία—which should, as the source of its on-again off-again appearing, be eternal—is intermittent as well. It comes toward us but it lacks a "whence." This is the source of its incoherence as a concept and its duplicity as a word. One can read here a trace of Parmenides, who identified a ceaseless though sourceless coming and going as the primary milieu of mortals.

IX. *Although it cannot be conceptualized, distraction can be illustrated.* Temporal

inconsistency, intrusion of the discontinuum into the seamless weave of the everyday, the unheard-of ability to receive what-is-not in an inability to think—these traits were given a seventeenth-century form in the popular character from La Bruyère’s *Caractères* later called “le distrait.”

X. In the twenties and thirties of the last century some aspects of distraction were exploited for the first time in literature, philosophy, and criticism. Kafka emphasized the thoughtless-one’s ability to shake loose from the means-ends logic of willing, Heidegger pointed to the freedom that the dispersing one—Dasein—enjoys with respect to its own ground, Benjamin imagined an internal diaspora that, brought about through artworks in new media, would lead to an uncommon politicization. Together *these tentative and partial reports on distraction contribute to an understanding of human being as one whose highest capacity is the dissolution of its faculties.*

XI. Philosophy, criticism, and art theory are traditionally concerned with principles of the formation of things. *Distraction seeks to account for their un-forming, disintegration, and ceasing to be.* It does so by positing a standing possibility for not thinking and a release from being.

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## Introduction

Every thinker abbreviates a history of thought into an image that can be read. Some images remain unchanged when they are absorbed from previous systems or other epochs or teachers. Some are elections of taste, some spring from deep convictions, some—perhaps most—slip into intellectual work through the scholar's inattention or the inattention of an age. Perhaps the greatest affront to historical truth, however, is not the abbreviated pseudo-history that is inevitably adduced, with more or less awareness, in philosophical systems or doctrines, critical theories or readings of texts, but rather the desire to present the syncretic, interested, and transient image as true. The truth of the relation between the most contemporary thinking and the past it claims in support of its timeliness is its image-character.

This does not mean however that the task of making images or genealogies should be abandoned. Nor should their problematical nature diminish the dignity of thinking just because it can no longer be conceived of as the act of an independent, spontaneous mind carrying on the tradition of independence and spontaneity. On the contrary: the historical image that accompanies the act of thinking can yield a sense of its direction and purpose, and of its limitations as well. More and more since at least Nietzsche this has been a priority in the humanities. We have become responsible, within certain limitations—one of which I hope to articulate here—for the intellectual-historical genealogies we receive or dream up in order to

think. Not since the end of the eighteenth century has the thought-historical lexicon grown so rapidly as it is growing today.

There is one complex exception to this rule, or in fact two. The history of the thought of thought, or as Deleuze called it, the history of images of thought, is a dubious case in which historical image and thought-act become extremely difficult to distinguish. Insofar as thinking routinely makes this difference, the difference between a now of present thinking and a history leading up to and preparing for it—by continuity or by a radical break—insofar as it demonstrates by means of the history that it is in fact thinking, and to the extent that it privately calls upon this genealogy in order to separate and identify thought with all the urgency of “the now” attached to it, the thought of thought falls into an unexpected stupidity about its own provenance. How can thought call its history into question if it can only actually think by relying upon such a history? What we think we do when we think can hardly be separated from the understanding of the project that we inherit or imagine belonged to other times or thinkers. Thus thinking will never be thought through. Phenomenology provided perhaps the most elaborate image of what it meant for the twentieth century to think, and much of subsequent thought has been taken up with extending it, correcting it, or imagining alternative modes with other models or precursors. Acts of thinking are historical in this sense. They call upon a history of images of thought in order to distinguish themselves and to ground their possibility in previous actualities. The history of thought affirms a continuous, though changing, reel of thought-images to which a present thinker adds another frame, different to be sure, yet holding passionately onto the verb “think.” In my thinking, this thought replicates the referent; the progressive nature of the movement, thinking “ahead” while leaving the other thought behind, confirms I am thinking,



still. Still thinking, acts of Geist fall within a Geistesgeschichte that runs from Anaxagoras's world-mind to Hegel's absolute spirit and beyond. To say "I think" is to evoke this continuum.

The second case is at first glance less philosophical and more unassuming. What do we think when we are confronted with the disintegration of thought? Can we produce a genealogy of absentmindedness, a history of distraction so that we can say we have thought it through? The fact is that such a thing has not yet been written. Someone might suggest, and rightly, that this case is not comparable to the history of images of thought and its paradoxes. There are many unwritten histories of unsung concepts. Why should thoughtlessness or distraction make a claim on our minds? As a mere fact the lack of a thorough study of it might not indicate anything more than a scholarly oversight, an accidental inattention. That it has not just recently but repeatedly been neglected over the course of the West's intellectual history would not necessarily prove it critical to recover it. Yet something in the way it has fallen into neglect hints to the contrary. "Inattention," "thoughtlessness," "Geistesabwesenheit," and other words that lay claim to this concept are the very words we use to describe its disappearance in intellectual history. The human sciences have left the concept unthought. Commonplace as it may seem at first, the idea that inattention has escaped our notice or absentmindedness has remained unthought or unthinkable in a conceptual history begs the question. In the circle that ensues when we begin to think of distraction, there must already be a concept, and thus a history, to be able to make the claim that it hasn't yet been thought of with any rigor, and yet one can find no great repressed tradition to turn to in order to unearth it. The circle in which we find distraction is not a hermeneutic circle.

The idea that a history of thought is required in order to know what thinking might be so that we can continue doing it, this self-replicating movement, develops out of the bond between

thinking and being that is made, or rather, compelled (Parmenides calls it “bondage” to “fate,” “μοῖρα”), in the fifth century BCE. This bond survives through time not only because of empirical events that came after it, the adoption of Aristotle by later ages as the master of their thought, for instance, but also because of the fate decreed for thought by Parmenides. Man is fated to think and to think being. It is no accident, in other words, that something like thinking again and again survives the twists and turns of history. If being survives—and survival is one of being’s secret names—thought survives along with it. Its conceptual kernel contains two unvarying principles: thought is bound to being by fate and thought survives death. The second derives from the first. It is just as important that thought continue beyond any singular thinker as it is that being outlive singular beings. As the soul once overcame death to live again, being and thinking overcome beings and thinkers to live on. These principles work together to project a thought-being construct—*νοῦς*, *intellectus activus*, *je pense*, *Geist*, *thought*, *mind*—beyond the passing of texts, schools, sciences, and epochs. And from the beginning the perdurance of thought corresponds perfectly to historical change. Put another way, since thought is of what-is, and thought’s temporal sign is “always,” changes in what-is bring along with them or follow from changes in thought. Whatever happens (historically), there will always be being (and not nothing) and thought (and not non-thought); true to their fate, thought will be attracted to what-is (now and always, despite particular differences) and will furthermore be accessible, however negatively or partially, to thinking. Change, in point of fact, preserves the correspondence between thought and being by which both remain recognizable through vocabularies, geographies, and political structures. Time and space come along with thought in this self-generating history, overcoming all obstacles to remain sayable and representable—in images, sentences, fashions, proofs—into a future that would otherwise be unforeseeable. Time and

space are the correlates of thought and being to the extent that all four of these terms, even where their significance has changed radically, where they come into contact with one another, their relationship has not.

Not-thinking tells another story, much more difficult to represent, a *Geistesabwesenheitsgeschichte*, a history of absentmindedness and a history that has to dispense with a controlling spirit or *Geist*; history absent mind is hardly recognizable as history. In such an account—a tale, legend, or yarn—it would not be clear how being and thought could continue to come together. Of course one can turn one’s thought to not-thinking—or one can claim to do this—but one does so usually at the risk of losing one’s “one-ness.” Strictly speaking, then, thoughtlessness can only be recognized from the perspective of *Geistesgeschichte*. It must be placed in a history in order to be cognized, and yet this converts it immediately into thought. From its own perspective nothing is thought—thought vanishes along with the thought of its own absence, stolen away before a cognition of absentmindedness can be synthesized. For this reason thoughtlessness appears to the history of thought as nothing to be concerned about. In light of its apparent triviality, two stubborn questions press on our consciousness: can I think about thought’s disappearance at all? Can an event that is neither being, nor a being, one that is furthermore not logically necessary but merely empirical, whose relationship to time is tenuous at best, not to mention the fact that it is an incident—for want of a better word—that has never been fully defined or theorized—can it be given a history that explains its survival, at least as a word or group of words, or even as a concept that represents a stable entity or process?

In the readings that follow, I will try to show that the answer is “no”; and yet in the course of my thinking on the problem of “distraction,” it became apparent that, at least at first, the answer needs to be given by means of a history that reaches back to fifth century Greece.

It is reasonable to admit that a conceptual history of absentmindedness has to be written from the perspective of *Geistesgeschichte*. For if we begin to wonder instead what it would look like if its history were written according to its own nature, or rather according to its lack of one, the response we get is incoherent or ludicrous. What would a history of thoughtlessness look like if it were not written into a continuum with other images of thought? What if it refused to borrow stability and permanence from thought at all, rejecting its temporal signature, always—*ἀεί*? If we admit the existence of unthought—and we must do this in order to study it, mustn't we?—if we admit its existence or at least its occurrence, we will also have to admit that *Geistesgeschichte*, within the parameters of this task, is inadequate, or perhaps worse, that it itself is drawn by the history of distraction onto shaky ground. If thoughtlessness exists it cannot be thought, if it occurs it cannot be conceived—yes, it affects *Geist* in its essence but falls out of the usual history written by it about it. One not unjustified response to this dilemma would be to concede that since it never makes itself known as existent, it doesn't exist, and if it doesn't exist we need not pay it any attention. Closely related problems are posed by the concept of stupidity: it reproduces itself in the one who approaches it. “It turns out,” Avital Ronell comments while writing about Musil's encounter with stupidity in her book on the subject, “to be as elusive as it is somehow present” (71). The following readings attempt to present a sort of etiology for the strange mixture of presence, or I would say “occurrence,” and elusiveness in the thought of distraction.

Most authors concur that distraction warrants little attention, and this reaction itself is of no small interest. Kant mentions *Zerstreuung* as affecting only empirical thought; reason is not

susceptible to it, and so it has no importance within reason's critique.<sup>1</sup> Ronell remarks: "The consistent untimeliness and out-of-placeness of the question, "What is stupidity?" is only

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<sup>1</sup> Empirical consciousness is "an sich zerstreut" (Kritik der reinen Vernunft B133). For an exposition of the fine lines between "Aufmerksamkeit," "Abstraktion," and "Distraction" in Kant's critical writings and in the *Anthropology*, see Gasché, "Über das Wegsehen." In the notes to the *Anthropologie* collected under the heading *Reflections*, Kant makes a record of his thoughts on distraction:

"*absence*: durch innere Ursache

distraction: durch äussere Empfindungen. Arbeit zerstreut. Zeitkürzungen zerstreuen, Geniessen.

Damit man nicht ausschweife: hauptaufmerksamkeit. Wovon wolte ich reden. *protensio*."

(Kant's handschriftlicher Nachlaß #524 p.27)

And then:

Man dissipirt sich willkürlich, man wird distrahirt unwillkürlich (Verliebt. Besorgt. Intriguen im Kopf. Beh sich selbst sehn.) Durch vielheit verschiedener in kurzer Zeit auf einander folgenden Beschäftigungen. Alles, was das Gemuth unwillkürlich beschäftigt, wenn es auch bloß der hang zu Einbildungen wäre, zerstreut. Durch Krankheit zerstreut, hypochondrisch. habituel zerstreute (scheinen narren) Leute sind in Geschäften nicht brauchbar. Newton, der glaubte, gespeiset zu haben.

Das nichts Denken (Gedankenlosigkeit) beh der Zerstreung bedeutet den unwillkürlichen Lauf der gedanken. (Ist eine Art von Traum. Solche Leute, vornehmlich Frauen, taugen nicht viel.)

(*absentia animi*, dagegen *praesence d'esprit*.)

intensified by the fact that it admits no resolute literary or scientific rejoinder. Barely philosophical, a detached satellite to meaningful discourses, the question orbits on its own” (Ronell 72). Like stupidity, distraction—or whatever a thing may be called for which “what is it?” is the most inappropriate question—seems merely empirical; it has no transcendental condition, strictly speaking. In this way the continuity of thought—despite the limits that Kant puts on our ability to intuit its sources—is maintained. This disturbance of “reason” affects only empirical individuals and not their conditions of possibility. It is an aberrance, a contamination, a fall. In contrast, from a quick look at the data, the history of thoughtlessness’ occurrence to thought looks both discontinuous and repetitive, without there ever being a clear reason or cause for its return. What is there to mark its reappearance is a worry about a nefarious nothing that steals away thought’s power, its relation to eternity and to being, and which often brings along with it a premonition that since it is not a being or a thought (reality’s exclusive vectors, for Parmenides) it can have no cause and no origin, and thus cannot be cognizable. Is it a causeless,

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Seine Gedanken sammeln 1. Nach einer (lebhaften.) willkürlichen Zerstreuung der Lustbarkeit oder Gesellschaft gibt neues Leben. (*boudoir.*) 2. Nach der todten Zerstreuung der Gedankenlosigkeit ist schwer und giebt einen Matten gebrauch. Abstrakte Kopfe sind zerstreut, empirische gut beh sich selbst. Zerstreut sehn beim Rechnen. Geldzählen. Reisen. In Gesellschaft. Beh einer Rede. Behm Lesen. Schwächt das Gedächtnis.  
(#525 p.27-8)

These remarks reveal a precise knowledge of the phenomenon. Notice, too, in the first set of notes, how in thinking about distraction it seems at one point to overcome him. He interrupts his work to write: “Wovon wollte ich reden.”

trackless nothing that snuffs out the spark of human thinking or is it a purely trivial, empirical event?

There is something self-defeating about insisting on a thought of distraction. Ronell: “Where I am trying to find the secret access code for a condition and experience of non-thinking, I run up against a relentless sense of failure” (64). It may be this self-defeating aspect, the illicitness verging on crime, the lack of access verging on the impenetrable that enticed thinkers in various fields in the early twentieth century to turn to it. In the most general terms, for Franz Kafka, Martin Heidegger, and Walter Benjamin distraction—and related words and concepts—both belonged and didn’t belong to the tradition they were watching—or so they thought—disintegrate. Thoughtlessness kills thought—if only for an instant of unspecifiable length—and this suggests both the reason for which it had been neglected and why at the same time it held a certain promise for these thinkers writing in and across the ductus of phenomenology.

This study presents the intermittent resurgence of something like distraction, from its repression in Greece to its reception in Europe between the World Wars. Distraction, *Zerstreuung*, inattention, and other related words or notions belong to a group of reflections on change in human nature and culture between one origin of “modernity” in the fifth and fourth century BCE and another in the early twentieth century CE. In Greece something like distraction is held back in the movement of thought away from what-is-not, τὸ μὴ ὄν, towards being, οὐσία. Chapter 1 deduces the origins of this repression from a line in Aristotle’s *De anima*, drawing other late Aristotelian texts into consideration. Then it traces Aristotle’s repression of something like distraction to a fragment of Parmenides’ poem in which human finitude is defined through an image of distraction. Chapters 3, 4, and 5 investigate a period in the 1920s and 30s that could be described as a crisis, in which thought turned away from itself and tried to capture

distraction. Finally, this introduction seeks to present the parameters within which something like distraction could be conceptualized, with constant reference to the section of La Bruyère's *Caractères* of 1688 on "le distrait."

### **Le Distrait**

He goes downstairs, opens the door to go out and then shuts it again. On the street he stops a passer-by to ask where he is and is not surprised to find that he is on his block standing in front of his own door. In this way the distracted one stumbles into literary history. Home when he is away and lost in the most familiar surroundings, La Bruyère's "le distrait" inadvertently—how else?—alludes to the precarious conditions under which the concept of distraction might become thinkable.

Although La Bruyère's highly popular compendium, *Les Caractères*, is very much a product of the late seventeenth century—its first edition appeared in 1688—the character called in retrospect "le distrait" is untimely in a heretofore unheard of manner. He belongs to his own time less than any other.<sup>2</sup> In this he is not unlike Perceval, that other, more profound figure in French literature, a type who arrives late to his own time and so must hurry to learn its rules. Raised by his mother in a hidden forest, ignorant of his father's knighthood and of his own nobility, Perceval sets off in ignorance to seek what he does not yet know. Though he begins innocent of the demands his epoch makes on young noblemen, he learns by success and failure to live in accord with his experience and not merely by applying his mother's moral maxims with

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<sup>2</sup> Nonetheless he quickly spawns a set of copies, including the main character of a popular play by the same name, *Le Distrait*, by Jean-François Regnard, first produced in 1697.



blind obedience in all cases, as he does at first. (La Bruyère is skeptical toward maxims as well—an extraordinary attitude in his epoch. “I did not wish to write any maxims, for they are like moral laws, and I acknowledge that I possess neither sufficient authority nor genius for a legislator” (*Characters* 1929 v). Instead he writes unauthorized sketches, crass portraits, illicit stories in fragments just long enough to give a glimpse of a character’s habits. The seventh portrait in the section “De l’homme” also abstains from maxims.) Like Perceval, “le distrait” enters a world for which he is unprepared, without maxims to guide him; unlike Perceval, however, he does not learn a thing from his experiences—he cannot be said to have them. He is innocent of the demand to experience made by his epoch. Without experiences, no matter how much he tries, he will never catch up to his contemporaries. Le distrait comes late to a time that is not his own. He is a rustic who leaves the simple world of peasants and farmers from which his name derives. Ménalque is a figure from the idyllic past, a fixture of the *dramatis personae* in Virgil’s *Eclogues* who plays pariah in late seventeenth-century Paris.

In the famous quarrel between the ancients and moderns La Bruyère was known for his enthusiastic support of the former. Translating Theophrastus’ *Characters* and placing his translation of the classical master’s text at the beginning of his own book, not to mention taking its title as his own, proves La Bruyère’s loyalty to classical models. With this book he meant to add another chapter onto Theophrastus. And yet the continuation of the classical in the modern becomes highly suspicious in the antics of Ménalque, who, as distracted, is not ancient, but also not yet modern (*Characters* 301). As a classical ideal—protagonist of the Virgilian idyll, a genre whose influence by La Bruyère’s time had reigned in the French literary imagination for hundreds of years—Ménalque represents a glorious past come to the present. And yet he comes

in order to be ridiculed for his inability to make a home there—a strange way to honor the ancients!

For his own part, although La Bruyère traces a lineage for himself back through neo-classicism to the ethical scourges of antiquity, Terence, Menander, Theophrastus and his teacher Aristotle, he is nonetheless ambivalent about the project of renewing classicism, as much as he is resistant to the project of the “modernists.” He complains in the preface that “the learned” want nothing but the ancients; they have “no manner of concern for men with whom they converse, and disdain to make observations on modern manners.” The good of the present is lost on partisans of the ancients. “The history of the present time is insipid to them,” he writes (Characters 299). And yet, he goes on to criticize the modernists as well: “ladies and courtiers, on the contrary, and all who have most wit and least learning, indifferent to former ages, are curious after what passes before their eyes, are fond... of those who resemble themselves, but with whom they think they have no resemblance” (Characters 299-300). On one side of the stage the learned sit with their dreams of a golden past, on the other side sit the ladies with their modish wit, watching the present pass before the window while remaining aloof from it. And “the distracted one,” like the author, is ambivalent about past and present—he is as unable to take refuge in a golden past as he is to make a home in the present.<sup>3</sup> He passes before the eyes of

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<sup>3</sup> Roland Barthes formulates La Bruyère’s relationship to past and future slightly differently. He describes the “uneasiness” with which our modernity—Barthes’ modernity of 1963 (yet another crisis of the modern)—receives *Les Caractères*: “the world of La Bruyère is both *ours and different*,” he remarks. It is ours because we (we French) are so familiar with seventeenth century stereotypes that “we circulate quite comfortably among these old figures from our childhood.” It

the curious but they do not think he resembles them. It makes little difference, since he doesn't think so either: he doesn't even think he resembles himself. When he tries to dress like himself, he becomes a disheveled parody. On his way out, when looking in the mirror for a second time "with a little more attention," writes La Bruyère, le distrait "finds he is but half-shaved, that he has fastened his sword on the wrong side, that his stockings are hanging on his heels, and that his shirt is bulging out above his breeches" (*Characters* 1929 273) Just as he does not see himself in the image in the mirror, his companions in modernity do not see themselves in him. He has a rather strained relationship with time.

In contrast to either the champions of the moderns or the ancients, the distracted one finds nothing less interesting than to count the hours. "Once on a river he asked what o'clock it was; they hand him a watch, but it is scarcely in his hands when he forgets both time and the watch, and throws the latter into the river as a thing which bothers him" (*Characters* 1929 277). It is not a clock that will answer his question—he needs to ask, rather, not what o'clock it is, but what a clock is! Standing over the river, image of time as constant and reassuring change, Ménalque resists its imperative, sacrificing its modern counterpart, the clock, to it, preferring—perhaps, though we don't know this for sure—a time that—at least for him—does not flow. Kierkegaard wrote, responding to Cratylus, that the river of time could not even be stepped in once—not even

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is different for the very same reason; its topoi are too familiar, and so they are untimely, too worn out and anachronistic to represent "ourselves." His solution is unexpected—and correct. "Let us discuss everything in La Bruyère which concerns us little or not at all" (222-3). Although Barthes doesn't spend much time on him, Ménalque would be an archetypal aspect of *Les Caractères* that "concerns us little," since he is everywhere among us.

once. The distracted one eschews rivers altogether. A stranger to present and past, he ignores as well the image of flowing time that seems to connect them.

### **Phenomenological Description**

The few pages in La Bruyère's compendium that recount the exploits of the distracted one make up a prolegomenon to a phenomenology of distraction.

In La Bruyère's portrait *le distrait* never utters a word about himself. No self-reflection interrupts his going and coming. "The stupid cannot see themselves. No mirror has been invented in which they might reflect themselves. They ineluctably evade reflection" (Ronell 18). Whereas a professional fool has to be aware of his talents in order not to displease the king,<sup>4</sup> and a drunkard may repent of his excesses the next day (despite baroque depictions of a *menalcas ebrius*, in La Bruyère's version, *Ménalque* "forgets to drink at dinner" (Characters 1929 279)), the distracted one never has his distraction reflected back at him, no matter how many mirrors he looks into. There is nothing of the philosopher in him to lead him toward reflection on his own being. Nothing in the world directs his attention less than the imperative "γνώθι σεαυτόν," which is certainly one of the earliest moral maxims and is implied in every maxim of the seventeenth century. Know yourself, know that you are this way or that. And La Bruyère's *Caractères* provides this kind of knowledge in its portraits of types; it is a mirror into which the present can look to see itself. And yet in *Ménalque* we have a character who will never know

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<sup>4</sup> Various keys to *Les Caractères* claim that the model for this figure was "*le comte Charles de Brancas*" whose blundering does in fact make the Louis XIV laugh (Caractères 726).

himself; he will never even suppose that he should try, because, naturally, when it comes time for thinking about it, he is otherwise engaged.

Then who can say: “I am distracted”?

This phrase, were it to be said by someone (but who has ever actually said it?—perhaps no one), would be inadmissible insofar as the source of such a saying could only speak truthfully after it had vanished. Ménalque teaches that whoever says “I am distracted” is in fact not. It is a lie or a joke or an error, or else it is ironic. It is worthy of noting in this regard that distraction shares a linguistic peculiarity with irony. The distracted one, too, cannot speak of itself in its own words. It must be spoken of by someone else, or else it has to negate itself or get beyond itself if it wishes to point itself out in words. As with irony, the performative and constative versions of distraction are incompatible. There is a corollary to this linguistic rule: distraction has no present tense. Its temporal index is not a “now” in which essence and existence come together in speech. Speaking does not speak being when it speaks of distraction. When speaking is distracted, or the one speaking—if we don’t ourselves grow confused and lose our way here—it cannot say what it is. Like any sentence that makes a claim to represent self-knowledge, “I am distracted” wants to be said with the sanction of experience. Although languages point to such an experience as though it were something someone could be in—the nouns “Zerstreuung” and “distraction” attest to this; even a scatterbrain like *le distrait* seems to be in something like a state or condition—it is nothing like a state. How can distraction be experienced if it resists being located in time or space, or even having a rank or status of its own? No doubt we can have an experience of its effects, which can be drastic—the largest body of distraction-literature by far is written to respond to car accidents. A phenomenological description of it would start from the way its effects are encountered every day—

...subtle sensations tickle apperception and coax it toward interest, awareness—then, a slight feeling of shock: something occurred. Or, rather, something recently came to an end. I have been away, I have returned, and yet nothing seems to have come between these two moments—in which I was not—and, perhaps more astonishingly, nothing seems to have changed where I was and now am, again or still. This is another source of the discomfort that accompanies an investigation of distraction. Such an investigation has the character of a law applied retroactively, and the investigator becomes a kind of whistle-blower. Punishment is meted out *ex post facto* for a crime the law did not think to condemn until after it was committed. Although it happens repeatedly, the recognition of distraction has this retroactive quality each time. In distraction the breach of the law of continual thought cannot be foreseen or prohibited. This is another way of saying it is a crime for which the category of intent is irrelevant. One does not commit distraction and yet it has to become criminalizable because of its deleterious effects. In this way distraction poses a problem for the sphere of law, whether it be the application of a moral law to oneself, pronouncement of a maxim for the correction of the nobility, or the execution of the penal code. The law commits what by its own code must be a criminal act when it condemns the distracted one for neglect.

I experience my own distraction belatedly. Even the idea that it is unforeseeable comes to me second hand. Even if I reach out toward the very edges of my consciousness, I can as little predict its onset as I can call it down upon myself at will. That I will be distracted is a general truth but it is never true in particular. You can tell me that, but not when, you will become distracted. This vagueness penetrates its concept and for that reason anxiety surrounds its study. There is no experience of distraction insofar as distraction suspends experience; this much can be admitted. And yet it does not suspend experience, judgment, knowledge, either in the stoic sense

or the phenomenological sense, for the purposes of self-observation. Suspending thought in order to turn toward distraction, I never catch it in the act. “I was distracted” is a meaningful utterance, but only after I have dispensed with the referent, or rather after it has dispensed with me. One cannot let go of nothing! No eyewitnesses, it never goes beyond hearsay. I may confess to you guiltily that I was not paying attention, that I lost focus and did not catch all of what you were saying; still, such a confession has the authority that telling what occurred in a dream does. I ask myself “where have I been?” I did not leave my desk and these familiar things still surround me. It is not a “where” that I disappeared to, the bounded space of another place, another world or a dreamscape to which I momentarily disappeared.

And so it seems that distraction is inaccessible to phenomenology, which imagines essences residing in places, passageways leading to rooms with keys that open them. All other essences—including the essence or structure of thought or consciousness—make themselves available to phenomenology, at least ideally, and yet this one disposition remains inaccessible to the phenomenological epoché. After all, the basic gesture of the phenomenological reduction is to bracket out everyday life as a distraction to the progress of exact science. Formally, then, whereas phenomenological thought produces the “Einklammerung” of distractions, distraction produces the “Aussetzung” or “Suspendierung” of phenomenology, as a route back to the structures of thought. In such a non-teleological suspension, distractions would be released like furies back into thought; instead of leading backward in reduction it flies outward and radiates away. The “subjective side of Zerstörung,” Walter Benjamin called distraction (GS VII.2 678).<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Responding intuitively to this dilemma, Husserl makes use of a narrower concept of distraction.

“Ich kann meine Aufmerksamkeit wandern lassen,” Husserl writes in *Ideen I*, “von dem eben

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gesehenen und beachteten Schreibtisch aus durch die ungesehenen Teile des Zimmers hinter meinem Rücken zur Veranda, in den Garten, zu den Kindern in der Laube, usw., zu all den Objekten, von denen ich gerade “weiß,” als da und dort in meiner unmittelbar bewußten Umgebung seined—ein Wissen, das nichts vom begrifflichen Denken hat und sich erst mit der Zuwendung der Aufmerksamkeit und auch nur partiell und meist sehr unvollkommen in ein klares Anschauen verwandelt” (49). These lines take a crucial step toward a thought of distraction, first in the contention that a clear Anschauung need not have a clear object. Distraction is anything but a clear object. Furthermore, in the episode that Husserl recounts or imagines, distraction is presented as much richer than simply “Wegsehen.” It takes in the essential “Umgebung” that forms the context of any single act of attention. Another step toward a thought of distraction is taken in the verb “lassen.” After a spell of effort at the writing table, the phenomenologist lets his attention wander to take in all he has closed out in order to write. Wandering attention corresponds to lassitude of the will. And still, the clear intuition of unclear objects, the multifarious surroundings, and the exhaustion of effort are defined here solely in contrast to the phenomenological will to remain attentive. It is still a “können” of the philosopher, still a relation to “Objekten” that have already been constituted by consciousness; it is still transformed into a clear intuition and still has “Wissen” as its aim even if “weiß” is bracketed by quotation marks in the passage.

But what of Husserl’s writing, beyond the picture of him writing at his desk that he paints for us in this passage? What of the passage itself, which appears to offer a view of the digression of his mind through the room he doesn’t really see, out the door behind his back, and into the garden. It also shows us the *Aufmerksamkeit* that precedes the little careless episode, and which,



I return from my trip nowhere. Time seems to have stood still—but it hasn't. What small measure of my absence I can take from the clock is inexplicable to me. After all, I was right here while I was not here. This is the moment—when time and space are returned to me—in which the truly phenomenological aspect of distraction becomes apparent. Upon returning to my writing, the classroom, the freeway, what was once familiar and part of my stream of experience suddenly appears contingent—on the nothing that put it there once again—the road I travel back to the world is a freeway in another sense. It is completely free of necessity. Insofar as I don't know where I've been, I don't know where the all went to, and for the not-yet time in which I am in the process of returning, before I "am" again and therefore "think," I am mystified about the world's origin. Thoughts begin with one question and proceed in this order: "Where did here come from?" followed by a memory of the instant before it vanished.

After the absence of Geist, world becomes the inexplicable cause of its own disappearance. Its being and its being in such and such a way seems unnecessary and uncaused. However briefly, the United States constitution, the relation of being to beings, the stapler, the desk, their relationship—time, even—lose their position and become unstapled from a continuum of sense. We greet each other cautiously, space, time, and I. If one could maintain this uncanny atmosphere one could make a theory out of it. Alas, it is more than fleeting. Distraction, although wandering, still manages to gather its adventures together for depiction. Blanchot would remind us that any writing that would in fact contain both attention and digression would be neither simply digressive nor merely attentive—a very good description, incidentally, of Husserl's writing style. It is "distractive," but to another degree: a virtually unaccountable interpenetration of dissipations and absorptions, and therefore often quite difficult to read.

seen from the perspective of the instant in which time is regained, is the perspective from which being, world, and experience appear, in coming to appear for the first time afresh, accidental. All that appears again suddenly appears contingent—on nothing.

In the classical formulation, inherited from Parmenides, being is thought's fate. Thought is fated to think being. Distraction, then, is a temporary release from this fate, and we can read some evidence of this release in Ménélaque's face: "When he answers you so pertinently, his eyes are fixed on your countenance, but it does not follow that he sees you; he looks neither at you nor at anyone, nor at anything in the world" (*Characters* 1929 276). Whatever the distracted one turns his eyes toward he colors with not-being; this is his unique privilege, as well as the threat that he poses to things and the world. Because of the terror he provokes, he is made into a harmless children's character. Looking into his unseeing eyes, however, you see your potential inexistence reflected there, a sight perhaps nearer to a child's experience, who has not yet learned to take continued existence for granted.

### **A Science of Distraction**

And so distraction—a largely unsatisfactory word that we will use for the sake of ease—is not a phenomenon that can be "reduced" to reveal a transcendental structure, nor does it correspond to an essentiality that the phenomenological "Blick" could capture. Nothing is more anathema to the phenomenological method than the scientist's own distraction. Although it cannot be seen in oneself, perhaps it can be seen in another.

An observer would have to distinguish the distracted one from several other types. Who is to say that when Ménélaque turns his glanceless glance on you he is not lost in the deepest and

most penetrating, even philosophical, thought? Perhaps he has simply bracketed your natural existence. Again, La Bruyère: “You would often take Ménélaque for what he is not, for an idiot; for he does not listen, and speaks still less; for a madman, because he talks to himself, and indulges in certain grimaces and involuntary motions of the head; for proud and discourteous, because when you bow to him, he may pass without looking at you, or look at you and not return your bow; for a man without any feeling, for he talks...of executions and the scaffold before a person whose father has been beheaded...” (Characters 1929 281). (Beheading is an appropriate emblem not only for his own mindlessness but also for the effect the distracted one has on observers: he is a mobile acephale, a guillotine of the mind.) Take it as neglect, stupidity, boredom, weakness of will, wickedness, hedonism, vanity, madness, fever—or genius, the symptoms resist diagnosis. Such dissimulation calls one of philosophy’s founding myths into doubt. Was Thales contemplating the being of beings when he fell into that well? Perhaps he was “nowhere” and the Thracian woman’s laugh gave birth to the myth that *she* did not understand...

In light of these remarks we can make a few claims about the experience of distraction. It cannot be experienced from the inside, by self-observers; for we never collect ourselves in time to report back on the facts. It cannot be studied from the outside, since the distracted one hides behind many masks. We have been told that there is such a thing and so we talk about it, make images of it, laugh when we see it, but we never really know when it is present, or for that matter, absent.

Laughter is the most common response when one suspects absentmindedness. In his theory of comedy Bergson places it close to the source of all comic effects.<sup>6</sup> But even this response is ambiguous. Ménélaque “enters the rooms at Versailles and passing under a chandelier, his wig gets hooked on one of the brackets and is left hanging, whilst all the courtiers stare and laugh. Ménélaque looks also, and laughs louder than any of them, staring in the meanwhile at all the company to see what man shows his ears and has lost his wig” (Characters 1929 275). How can we be certain from these double entendres and deflections that it exists? How can we be certain that when we see it, it is not we ourselves who have become distracted and have misconstrued the scene entirely? Furthermore, how can we make a study of it before we establish these basic facts?

To what science would the study of distraction belong? If it is a fact, we would have to discover in what its factuality consists, given that it is neither sensible nor supersensible. If it is not a phenomenon, since it doesn't appear, and not a noumenon, since it subtracts thought and doesn't enable it, to what branch of Wissenschaft can it be safely assigned? If it is not a faculty and not an object, what would it be? It doesn't seem to fit either of the two major divisions established by Aristotle, physics or metaphysics, second or first philosophy. Conversely, in today's intellectual universe too many sciences claim it: psychology, neuroscience, theology, ethics, educational theory, law, sociology, political theory, media theory, and others. And yet, the dispersion of the problem into many fields is a symptom of the underlying problem; its scattering

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<sup>6</sup> “Absentmindedness, indeed, is not perhaps the actual fountain-head of the comic, but surely it is contiguous to a stream of facts and fancies which flow straight from the fountainhead. It is situated, so to say, on one of the great natural watersheds of laughter” (Bergson 68).

into many disciplines hints at an inherent resistance to belonging to one or another. There is something general about distraction that resists classification as part of this or that science. If thought thinks by becoming its object, as Aristotle contends, or if thought thinks by intending its object, as Brentano, adapting from Aristotle, argues, then to think or to intend distraction, to make it an object of thought, would draw thought to pieces.

Everything human serves distraction; for this reason it is too superfluous to be mentioned. For philosophy distraction appears—if it appears at all—undeserving of serious attention. Although ubiquitous, it is neither phenomenon nor concept. Insofar as it eschews conceptuality it displays a fundamental apathy to the philosophical values of the lasting, the wide reaching, the identifiable, the circumscribable, the useful, systematic, or foundational—qualities toward which the questions why? what? where? when? how? tend. Being and being human, although awash in it, take no heed of it, since heeding holds within it a kernel of absentmindedness which it denies in order to begin. Raising distraction as a topic of investigation finds its closest analogue in an investigation of nothing. There is no going “zur Sache selbst.” Instead, an unorthodox method should be followed, not unlike that of an expert in paranormal phenomena or an astronomer picking out a planet among the bright lights of a distant galaxy. The undetectable mass makes its presence known through the wobbling of the masses beside it. At least some of the unexplained wobbling in philosophical concepts is to be attributed to distraction.

Since it is, strictly speaking, unthinkable and without existence, and yet it hovers around the process of concept-formation, intervenes in the understanding of being, and has been considered existence’s main modality, distraction has to be recognized not by its substance or qualities, but by the disturbance it creates in the study of that which depends on it.

### **Some Senses of Distraction**

Distraction is said in many ways. This is the formula by which Aristotle presents a word's ambiguity so that it becomes a starting point for philosophizing. Although much of the time he is satisfied to let the multiplicity of referents and meanings stand, he also intends to rigorously isolate the multiple senses of a word into well-defined *logoi* with fixed horizons. It is important to note, when saying this, that for Aristotle the multiplicity of a word is not a deceptive homonymy as it had been for Plato; rather, a word's polysemy demonstrates the necessity for thought. It calls into action nous's power to distinguish differences within the same—the greatest human pleasure, as the first line of the *Metaphysics* declares—and making lexical differences then becomes a desideratum of intellectual investigation.

For Aristotle in the *Metaphysics* the ambiguity of a word is evident in variations in its everyday usage as well as in the technical parlance of previous philosophers. Given the changes that have occurred since the *Metaphysics* and partly on the basis of it, several dimensions of ambiguity would have to be added. A word, we now say, is also said in several languages (this is less a proper ambiguity in a word than an inscrutable foreignness between signifiers that translation attempts to domesticate), in divergent contexts, texts, and times, and with different values in disciplines that correspond to many spheres of knowledge. This admission opens a path toward a résumé of the word's uses, meanings, and translations, as well as to the historical changes that have determined it.

Nonetheless, because of its tendency to evoke dispersion, disappearance, and nothingness, “distraction”—perhaps more than any other word—has trouble being a word. Every

use is a misuse. Over the course of our particular misuse of it, the word should be heard as deeply equivocal.

Here is what a philosophically-minded philologist might say about “distraction”:<sup>7</sup> in an ignominious beginning in fifth and fourth century Greece, when  $\nu\omicron\upsilon\varsigma$  was given a rigorous determination, questions about certain lapses in  $\nu\omicron\upsilon\varsigma$  became unavoidable. Because, given the strict logic within which Plato and Aristotle were working—the Eleatic logic of being and not-being—certain of these lapses threatened the stability of the system, they leapt over them or

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<sup>7</sup> Here is what a philosophically minded philologist *does* say about distraction, insofar as it can be compared to the German phrase “geteilte Aufmerksamkeit”: “Welche Philologie wird dieser Überschrift—“*geteilte Aufmerksamkeit*”—gerecht? Eine Philologie der Demarkation? Oder erst die Demarkation der Philologie?” Following the implications of this question, Thomas Schestag goes on to ruin the possibility of reading it, by uncovering within the philologist’s “love of words” an original willful, almost desperate act. Gathering words together out of a logographic diaspora precedes reading them, and still before this, gathering up a single word out of a graphematic scattering letter by letter into a word precedes even seeing it. Seeing, and then reading, consists in ceasing to perceive the disparate marks that make the word up, which can only be accomplished by repressing an original dispersal of attention. “geteilte Aufmerksamkeit” is then the a priori that through a negation enables a word to become a word through the “Wille zur Zeichen” (11). In a series of intricate readings Schestag imagines a wild philology that loves strewing marks more than it loves gathering them, “de-marking” instead of “demarcating.” This eccentric science consists, as Schestag both theorizes it and practices it, in allowing words to cease being “wards” of their own textual and historical integrity.

buried them. Already in its inception Christianity recalls these lapses out of oblivion, though under new moral and geographical aspects, which may be read in the choice put to Hellenistic and Palestinian Jews by Christ's early followers. In Luther's translation: "Wer nicht mit mir ist, der ist gegen mich; und wer nicht mit mir sammelt, der zerstreut [σκοπίζει]" (Matthew 12.30).<sup>8</sup> Matthew, the great Torah scholar among the Gospel writers, puts the choice in precisely the terms that a Greek-speaking Jew of the time would understand. Jesus's threat of dispersal evokes this line from the Septuagint's Genesis: "καὶ διέσπειρεν αὐτοὺς κύριος ἐκεῖθεν ἐπὶ πρόσωπον πάσης τῆς γῆς" – "and the lord diasporized them from there onto the face of the whole earth" (Septuaginta Genesis 11.8). For Greek-speaking Jews of the first century CE the threat that dispersal posed to religious and political unity, family livelihood, and life itself was all too familiar. In the Christian sect, geographical diaspora turns into the threat of affective dispersal, the loss of the love of Christ and of the ecclesiastical neighbor on which the community was based. Worldliness, the diaspora every Christian carries with her in her heart, is an offshoot of the original decision on dispersal—"collect with me or disperse." A secular notion of mental distraction would have to take this theological and communitarian origin into account. What's more, a secular notion cannot remain deaf to the Christian spirit in which *saeculum* is said, attending to the diversion from "the way" already at work in the notion of "secularity." "Secular distraction" is, in other words, a pleonasm. *animi remissio*, *otiositas*, *sensualitas*, *saecularitas*, these are the medieval theological coordinates by which worldly—and therefore

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<sup>8</sup> This line is repeated verbatim at Luke 11.23 and so has been considered among the authentic sayings of Jesus.



still always Christian—distraction—at least insofar as it denotes diversion from the one way and dispersal into the world—sets its course (Vernay 1346).

The seventeenth century seems to be a turning point in the understanding of distraction. Between Pascal, who in his revival and transformation of Augustine's battle against concupiscence, invents the modern notion of "diversion," and in so doing establishes a central place for amusement in the life of the faithful, and La Bruyère, who invents or gathers together the elements of the modern notion of distraction as absentmindedness, the deviation from the past occurs. One would be tempted to say that Pascal showed the seventeenth century that diversion was the universal theological circumstance of mankind and La Bruyère showed the eighteenth century how a secular man of manners could give himself over to it completely. One age's tragedy is the next's comedy. But this is not quite correct. Whether due to the influence of Jansenism or the bloody religious wars and the weakening of the Roman church, whether growing out of his mathematical reflections on probability or out of his religious convictions, Pascal makes the connection between diversion and mortality that will haunt the concept of distraction throughout its subsequent history. The theological meaning is not so present in La Bruyère's distraction, although traces of death can be found there as well.

At some point I will cease to be of the world; only then will I become who I am not now and never will be while I am living in time. Only after the very end will I be immortal. The thought of this limit is so painful that, according to Pascal, I trade it for a myriad of smaller sufferings. In diverting myself I stop thinking for once about the moment in which I will stop thinking forever. The thought of finitude inspires humanity to eradicate thought altogether. "*Divertissement*. — La mort est plus aisée à supporter sans y penser, que la pensée de la mort sans peril" — "Diversion. Death is easier to bear without thinking about it than the thought of

death without danger” (#218) (my translation). In the moment of dying, when it has become a real possibility, the thought of death is easily accepted. This is similar, perhaps, to the way in which Kafka’s man from the country can ask his final question or the prisoner in the penal machine “understands” when the end becomes impossible to avoid. Everything up to this point, however, is evasion. And yet the final thought, if its object is death, must also be “of nothing”; for the last thought would be of the making of thinking into nothing. This, the death of thought that occurs only with the true thought of death, plays an obvious role in Pascal’s desire to collect his “Pensée.” Is there any thought in this collection that doesn’t work against death and by resisting it gesture directly toward the coming withdrawal of all thinking?<sup>9</sup> The following pensée sets out the dependence of thought on death in Pascalian terms. “L’homme est visiblement fait pour penser; c’est toute sa dignité et tout son mérite, et tout son devoir est de penser comme il faut. Or l’ordre de la pensée est de commencer par soi, et par son auteur et sa fin” (#210). “Man is obviously made for thinking; it is all his dignity and all his merit, and all his duty is to think as he should. Now, the order of thought is to begin with oneself, and with one’s maker, and with one’s end.”

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<sup>9</sup> An illustration of the complicated relationship between diversion from the thought of death and distraction at or in the death of thought can be found in the Talmud. It is reported in this haggadic story that King David, who in Psalm 39 begs the Lord to tell him the time of his death, received the answer: you will die on the Sabbath. As a result, every Sabbath he studied Torah the whole day. On the appointed Sabbath the angel of death arrived, but could not entice him away from his reading, so he went into the garden and made a rustling noise. David became distracted from his reading and died (The Babylonian Talmud 30a-b).

Insofar as thought begins by sending itself out towards its end, toward the end of thought along with the thinker, it never shakes the thought of death, throughout the contemplative life. The *Pensée* can be thought of as an attempt to recognize this fact and even perhaps to speed the process along. About distraction, however, Pascal does not write as if it were a withdrawal of thought altogether—a final withdrawal, akin to a free giving of divine grace, is permitted only in death, which is still thought of as a transition point, despite the nearly absolute difficulty of preparing for it in this world. His term is diversion, “divertissement,” a repetition, with differences, of Augustine’s “aversi sumus, perversi sumus” (4.16). Instead of a dispersal of mind and a detachment from objects of the world, for Pascal diversion indicates a deep absorption in one thing that he calls in one pensée “the hunt.”

To be truly happy one would have to become immortal; since this is not possible one allows oneself to become “diverted” into a kind of thinking that blots out the impossible, thought-destroying thought of finitude (#214). Anything can become its object, the smaller and more trivial the better. The triviality of the object stands in inverse proportion to the magnitude of that which it must block out. The detail, the nuance, a move in a the game, a bet, a rabbit to hunt, all sorts of frivolities make up its stock and trade. “The slightest thing, like pushing a ball with a billiard cue, will be enough to divert him” (#205, p.1142). Although he does not associate distraction with the mindlessness that corresponds to the true thought of death here, Pascal does identify at least two of the traits that will determine our understanding of distraction in this study—as far, that is, as we are able to think about it. Firstly, thought depends on its end, its finitude is its power. All it has is given by this end; it lives for it and dies in it, having fulfilled its ambitions when it snuffs itself out. Such an interpretation has obvious Heideggerian overtones—being-towards-death is Pascalian to the core. Be that as it may, for our purposes the

extinguishing of thought that becomes, through a dialectical reversal, the ground for thinking is an important structure that Pascal discovers. It is of course “diversion” that blots out the coming extinction, and keeps human beings from real thought. Thus “divertissement” covers the death of thought like a veil. Life is thinking, either divertedly or in full cognizance of the coming end.

It will be clear from this description of Pascalian diversion that La Bruyère’s idea, although it obviously, in part, takes up and responds to Pascal’s theory, is also a departure from it. Le distrait is either not diverted enough to become absorbed in nuances, or else he is so diverted by everything at once that diversion no longer has any meaning. Instead of absorbing himself in a tiny part of the world that emblemizes world’s worthlessness, and thus gesturing toward the riches of the next world, the world possesses le distrait so completely that it expresses its overwhelming riches through his noetic disappearance.

The distraction embodied in “le distrait” is perhaps best understood by stating what it is not. Distraction forgets but is not equivalent to forgetting, inasmuch as it is not epistemic. It is like a mood but leaves no mental locale for moods to play out their changes (Mut, Gemut). Neither an attitude, since it is not “ad”—towards—anything, nor a disposition, since it dispossesses the bearer of any former position, it moreover resists being contrasted with intention, desire, and other images of internal means to external ends.<sup>10</sup> Flight from the world it

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<sup>10</sup> Blanchot’s “other attention” comes very close to what I mean by “distraction,” although it has little to do with the customary opposition between the two words. He exposes the idea first in a complaint about Simon Weil’s discussion with herself in her notebooks. What she calls a “hidden God,” the truth that must be kept secret and striven for, Blanchot deracinates from the terms of a traditional ontotheology. Weil’s thought of the secret deity in thought is better

also cannot be since as we have seen it embraces the whole world when it ceases to recognize any single object in it. It is not equivalent to mourning; the past that the melancholic clutches tightly runs through the distracted one's fingers. Sleep is alien to it, since it only occurs in one who is awake, and yet in some ways it reminds us of sleep. No character from the everyday looks more like Ménalque than the sleepwalker. Hannah Arendt, who assumes the worst of not-thinking, makes this connection directly. "Unthinking men are like sleepwalkers" (The Life of the Mind 191). Not all types of unthinking however—that of Ménalque for example, but there are other cases; Chaplin's little tramp comes to mind—permit evil acts like the ones she

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expressed this way: "It may be (and are we not continually having this experience) that the further thought goes toward expressing itself, the more it must maintain a reserve somewhere within itself, something like a place that would be a kind of uninhabited, uninhabitable non-thought, *a thought that would not allow itself to be thought*" (The Infinite Conversation 119).

The thought that does not allow itself to be thought is an emptiness like an affliction (Plato will say something similar in the *Sophist*) on the "hither side of attention." Attention's extreme limit is impersonal, in contrast to "personal attention." "The other attention is as though idle and unoccupied" and as such it is "the reception of what escapes attention" (121). Werner Hamacher brings to light a related "gegen sich selbst veränderte ... Aufmerksamkeit" ("Bogengebete" 21) through a reading of a favorite line of Benjamin's from Malebranche, "Attention is the natural prayer of the soul." Attention is a prayer, prayer is language, and so language is a prayer to a future other that might receive it and for an other language that would translate it. Attention prays not in secret to a personal God but in public, in every utterance, to a future that empties attention of its fixation on the present.

scrutinizes in *Eichmann in Jerusalem*. Actual sleepwalkers, one might argue, cannot be under the control of anything but the incoherent dream-world that misdirects their steps. In this sense too distraction is not simply a neglect of attention about which reproaches could be made but is rather a lack of a higher order. Not thinking—this is the most surprising detail—does not belong to the life of the mind. It is after all an imitation or foretaste of mind's ultimate death. More than this—it is not mental at all. In pure thoughtlessness the non-mental irrupts within the mental. Without a doubt it implies a lack of autonomy, but not every lack of autonomy becomes servitude to others or lays itself open to conquest by facile ideologies. One could argue that the banality of thought that gives way to evil is not absentmindedness—but is rather thought itself, that which is constantly subjugated to higher principles to which it does not have access but which it can only follow. In this situation, when we say that men like Eichmann acted “without thinking,” we mean of course that thinking means thinking critically about the principles of thought, that it pushes against the limits of the system of thought that seeks to direct it totally. As Kafka will show, as did Kant—the condition of the possibility of thought is a set of principles that withdraw themselves from view. Thus human thought is always amenable to having those principles revealed, be it in a simple or a complex form. Arendt's unthinking one, we might say, accepts revealed principles too readily. Unlike the zombie or the maniac—both of whom serve hard and fast rules of thought and action—the distracted one is useless as a servant of other's wishes. The maniac receives inspiration from the gods, the zombie commands from the devil, but the distracted one is under nobody's control. Not even an unconscious can be called upon to answer for its errancy: in Ménélaque everything stored up for the future is discharged. No code is inscribed, no keys are hidden. The only secret hidden in plain sight is the nothing from which everything comes. In this way it has similarities with Heidegger's *Angst* or Langeweil. In fact,

along Heidegger's *Denkweg*, "Zerstreuung" falls directly between these two landmarks, a middle-point in his attempts to articulate the philosophical mode of access to the ontological difference and to world.

What should we make of so many "nots" and "nothings"? Is distraction perhaps the return of an all-devouring nihilism? To this one can only say again "no," with the proviso that saying no to nihilism is not nihilistic—as if one could will it away too! Instead "no" distributes and transforms its effects. A nihilist wills nothing into being, but will is nothing to the distracted one. He wills neither something nor nothing, he simply does not will. Nihilism crashes through existence annihilating things; distraction tricks the will with a tiny "I don't think so," and as a result it bumps almost harmlessly into things. "If he walks about, he feels something strike him all at once in the stomach or in the face, and he cannot imagine what it is" (Characters 1929 274). The one harmed is the distracted one himself. One provokes *horror vacui* the other laughter. Put another way, a negative relationship between intellect and will holds in distraction. For that reason Aquinas makes no extended treatment of it. His *intellectus agens* must overcome many obstacles in its will to approach the divine, but it is never set completely out of action until the day it arrives in paradise. In the meantime the demonic reigns. The closest theological analogue to distraction in a non-Christian setting, *daimones* in the Greek understanding exercise an "occult power, a force that drives man onward where no agent can be named" (Burkert, Greek Religion 180).

## Organization of the Text

The present study takes place between two lines, one from Book 3 of Aristotle's *De anima*—“τοῦ δὲ μὴ ἀεὶ νοεῖν τὸ αἴτιον ἐπισκεπτεόν” “Of the not-always-thinking, however, the cause must be investigated” (430a5-6)—and one from a set of notes made by Walter Benjamin in or around 1936—“Reproduzierbarkeit – Zerstreung – Politisierung” (GS VII.2 679). These lines and their widely divergent intentions mark out the two poles between which the history of the concept of distraction plays itself out in the Western tradition. Theological echoes, however, are audible in both. Benjamin's reads like a citation out of Genesis. The three movements, reproducibility—distribution—politicization, are preceded in Genesis by the expulsion from paradise. They are the highpoints of Hebrew or Judaic experience after the fall, comprising God's curse as well as his promise. Kafka's literary depictions and private reflections on “Zerstreung” also begin from the expulsion. They fall somewhere between Aristotle and Benjamin, Christianity and Judaism, between science's drive towards knowledge and literature's freedom for self-contradiction and stupidity.

In this rather telegraphic line Benjamin is not thinking directly of religion; he is thinking, rather, of artworks and their fall into repetition and inauthenticity (reproducibility), their subsequent availability for wider distribution (Zerstreung, for the sake of distraction, entertainment) into a diaspora that no longer dreams of future concentration, and the political community that results: a non-dense mass. His line echoes the biblical schema because there is something in the myth of original Jewish experience that he wants to emphasize. The historical community envisioned in Genesis lives up to the book's Hebrew title and first word: *bereshit*, “in the beginning...” The sequence reproducibility-diaspora-politicization is the rule in the beginning, before the ascendancy of Mosaic law. Paradise lies behind, nothing ahead. Except for



the inevitabilities of personal death and suffering, the way forward is undetermined. Abraham is promised countless offspring but nothing more is said about the institutions that they will construct or the principles by which they will organize. Before the law, a series of negative experiences with the wrathful creator-god—expulsion, flood, destruction, scattering—leave the children of Adam and Eve to live loosely and wander.

As Chapter 3 attempts to show, Benjamin's trio "reproducibility – distraction/distribution/diaspora – politicization," represents a similar movement. At first it seems that the technical potential to duplicate artworks would be an obstacle to politicization. It could breed a lazy bourgeoisie that never leaves the living room and has culture brought to itself on a television tray. The middle term brings the two seemingly contradictory movements into contact. Ironically, it does so through distance. *Zerstreuung*, distribution to the point of "Zerfall," a modern reproduction of the "Sündenfall"—now not produced once and for all but infinitely reproduced—ensures that the reproducible artwork politicizes, resisting fascism and its will to total concentration. It does so by luring world-citizens away from the center into uninhabitable spaces. This need not incite a new policy of "manifest destiny," since destiny in this scheme could never manifest in imperialism. A scattered political body happens most commonly, Benjamin would say, within a modern metropolis, inside the "mass." Insisting on dispersal, in any case, means imagining a very unusual political theory, which has perhaps only one model, the community of Genesis that forms, or deforms, immediately after the destruction of Babel. A distracted group should not be able to say: "Wohlauf, laßt uns eine Stadt und einen Turm bauen, dessen Spitze bis an den Himmel reiche, damit wir uns einen Namen machen; denn wir werden sonst zerstreut in alle Länder" (Genesis 11.4, Luther transl.). A community in *Zerstreuung* turns its back on tower, wall, and the will to unify itself under a collective name. Reproducibility and

Zerstreung are meant to produce a politics without groups, a “community with nothing in common,” as Blanchot puts it, whose political relationship occurs in and through distraction. Their distance is all they have in common. Parmenides’ philosophical poem—the most important forerunner to Aristotle’s writing on νοῦς—gives an unprecedented glimpse of such an uncommon community, in an image of the βροτοί or mortals of wandering mind, πλάκτος νόος.

That this peculiar if not also sacrilegious collectivity might have a chance of existing, indeed that it might already exist, is prefigured in a footnote to the first word of *Le Distrait*. In it La Bruyère sets forth the character’s tendency toward “Politisierung.” First, however, it should be noted that many of the character’s reflexes are naturally political. Le distrait “meets a prince face to face” in the street but does not step aside to let him pass. He sends a letter to a duke requesting his provision of hay and to a farmer he sends a letter that begins “My Lord” (Characters 1929 277) “He calls his footman very seriously ‘Sir’” (Characters 1929 282). This rather destructive egalitarianism, however inadvertent, may only herald the demise of feudalism and the beginning of other modes of social distinction, stratification by wealth for example. Yet, with respect to capitalism he is also progressive. He gambles his money away without remorse and fails to notice when his servants violently rob him. These revolutionary gestures notwithstanding, the deeper politics of le distrait lie elsewhere. La Bruyère uses the first footnote as a warning: unlike other characters in the anthology, le distrait “is not so much a particular character as a collection [*recueil*] of acts of distraction. There cannot be too large a number of them, if they are pleasing; as far as tastes are different, one can choose” (my translation) (Escola Ed. Caractères 399). Ménéalque is not a single being, but rather a *recueil* of missteps, mistakes, and stupidities that belong to a multitude of “characters”—to all. The distracted one is truly a

democratic character it seems; as a set of characteristics, he belongs to all, accompanying and compatible with other vices and virtues. Not only this. As the footnote indicates, no particular character commits these acts, and so no particular character and no society can be held accountable for their moral lassitude. It is, strictly speaking, nobody's fault and therefore it is everybody's deliverance from virtue ethics. Distraction in general has this atypical characteristic: it is ubiquitous but not specifically attributable. La Bruyère says that its characteristics differ with taste—what other vice differs within itself in this way? Can it still be called a single nameable, reprehensible, and so correctable vice? It disperses across persons, whether good or evil, characters, beings, subjects, citizens, classes, and so on—all possible designations. Insofar as it pertains to no one in particular and at the same time to everyone, its morality is transpersonal; it moves between “characters,” and in this way it marks out a community without unity in either space or time, an absolutely inclusive aggregation.<sup>11</sup> At any moment a diaspora of *distracts* cuts indiscriminately across otherwise constituted senates, armies, student bodies, congregations, families, nations, globes. In addition, only in all possible moments counted together does the inconsistent plurality constitute a *recueil*. In short, the drama of *le distrait* violates not one but all three neoclassical unities of plot, time, and action. There cannot, as La

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<sup>11</sup> That this inclusive community already exists was observed by a twentieth-century *Hanswurst* and prophet of middle America, of the middle class, and of the middling part of the soul. Homer Simpson recognizes that distraction has become so inclusive that the word no longer has much meaning. He reflects: “Distracted, that’s a funny word. Does anyone ever get ‘tracted?” (Kirkland).

Bruyère warns readers, be too large a number of distractions—indeed the count would be infinite.

Behind Aristotle’s statement—“of the not always thinking the cause must be investigated”—god, theos, underwrites human thought through his temporal signature: always, *ἀεί*. Not-always-thinking is, therefore, a direct challenge to god, thought, and being, and thus to the unity of the sciences that study them, first and second philosophy. Put in extreme terms, if nous does not always think, nature, human nature, and god cannot be reconciled. Through a reading of his late work, I try to show in Chapter 1 why Aristotle puts something like distraction out of commission in order to ground the sciences in nous and finally in a god.

Partly in contrast and partly in sympathy with Aristotle’s method and goals, Martin Heidegger turns to the problem of not-thinking when he endeavors to refound philosophy as queen of the sciences in the 1920s. As Chapter 3 demonstrates, Heidegger, at least at first, repeats Aristotle’s gesture. Near the very end of the published version of *Sein und Zeit* readers are urged to undergo an “Entwöhnung” out of “dem Man” that involves ridding the self of the “Zerstreuungen” of everyday life to return to them with a new, resolute attitude: *entschlossen*. In this way both Aristotle and Heidegger pin the foundation of the human sciences on a turn away from distraction. Just after the publication of *Being and Time*, however, Heidegger returns to the figure of distraction-dispersal in his lectures on Leibniz from 1928. Here he recognizes that the “transcendence problem” of *Being and Time* might be solved by imagining a more fundamental *Zerstreuung*.

And what about fiction, where we imagine distraction would find a proper home? Roland Barthes contends that in its disintegrating language and fragmenting rather than narrative mode

*Les Caractères* should be considered a forerunner to avant-garde poetic forms (234). For different reasons the section on le distraït could also be considered an anticipation of Kafka's fiction. Note the tone of this passage, not to mention its structure. It is shaped like a joke: "He comes out of the *Palais de Justice*, and finding a carriage waiting at the bottom of the great staircase, he thinks it is his own and enters it; the coachman touches the horses with his whip, and supposes all the while he is driving his master home; Ménalque jumps out, crosses the courtyard, mounts the stairs, and passes through the ante-chamber and ordinary rooms into the study; but nothing is strange or new to him; he sits down, takes a rest, and feels himself at home. When the real master of the house arrives..." (Characters 1929 274-5). The rest is easy to imagine. Ménalque welcomes the master of the house into the man's own study with all the courtesy one would expect of a seventeenth century aristocrat. If we were told that these scenes took place in *The Trial* or *The Castle* we would not be particularly surprised. Here are Kafka's "ordinary rooms" made extraordinary by their unfamiliar familiarity. Here is a city in which all roads lead to the palace of justice, which is the best place to commit a crime and go unnoticed. Here, too, is a society of interchangeable masters, where nothing can be out of place enough to require explanation, and in this fact consists all the terrible strangeness of that which has not been seen before. The master welcomed home by a stranger sitting in his place might well be called "K." More than these similarities however, the question of justice haunts this section of *Caractères*. Justice is a question, however, that will not be resolved in the *Palais de Justice*, but rather in the distribution of things: from coachman and masters to the privacy of private property and the supposedly protected inner space of the home to the architecture of space itself. To repeat: "If he walks about, he feels something strike him all at once in the stomach or in the face" (Characters 1929 274). The world's architecture often strikes Kafka characters unjustly, as

though they had not been born to live in it. In Chapter 4 I argue that the only possible response for Kafka's characters is often distraction.

In one of his youthful exercises Jean Paul sums up the relationship of distraction to fiction. At the end of a long monologue, the distracted one—*der Zerstreute*—speaks out about his predicament. In these pages he had intended to describe his inner life, the experience of a distracted one. “Aber wahrhaftig ich vergess' es in den Tod, das Bild eines Zerstreuten dem denkenden Leser zu geben und es ist sonst wider meine Art” (753). The exercise, entitled “Schilderung eines Zerstreuten,” suggests the problem that Kafka's fiction tries to avoid. He will not repeat the leitmotif of the distracted one in yet another *Bild*, even if it is the image of a distracted one complaining about the impossibility of self-representation. Instead of representing the unrepresentable, Kafka reproduces the conditions under which distraction occurs. Kafka seems to take seriously an interdiction that Benjamin puts most directly in a note: “Die Schilderung des Verwirrten ist nicht das selbe wie eine Verwirrte Schilderung” (GS I.2 666). Yet Kafka resists the urge to which Benjamin sometimes succumbs, to write in the style of a mosaic, to take montage as a formal principle and present with style what could not be said as content. In this way Kafka also takes Wittgenstein's prohibition in the *Tractatus* one step further. Whereas Wittgenstein denies the possibility of speaking about that which one cannot speak, Kafka denies even the possibility of making such a prohibition. How then does he plot a course between Jean Paul and Benjamin, between representing distraction, albeit negatively, and raising distraction to a principle of representation?

Kafka traces the problem back to Genesis. Every human act, artistic or linguistic activities of representation included, denies the fall by attempting to build paradise over again. The word gives us a clue to the situation it inaugurates: in its Persian etymology the word means

something like “wall” (from “Old Iranian pari “around” + daiz- “to heap up, build” (OED)).

Paradise lies neither inside the garden nor outside it, but beside it, at its limit. Thus building paradise walls the builder out of it again and again. What needs to be learned is how to live in a heap without making improvements. Such is the lesson of the late story, “Der Bau,” which I treat in this regard. Efforts to rebuild the garden reproduce the pain of the fall by reproducing the original error, which was not eating the apple, but rather the belief that we belong to one family around which a wall should be built again. Toil, suffering, death, and the hope for continuation either by personal survival after death or as generations of a family or nation follow from this mistake. Art and literature too are “Hilfskonstruktionen” that add to the unending construction of the garden wall. For Kafka “Zerstreuung” names a character’s response to an inexorable situation that both awareness and evasion merely perpetuate. When, in the story “Das Urteil,” his father’s robe falls open, for instance, Georg Bendemann stumbles backward into a corner. He has inadvertently broken the biblical ban on seeing a father’s genitals. Horrified at the sight of the instrument of his own genesis, he could be reflecting on the Freudian explanation of the scene. “Gedanken an Freud natürlich” Kafka records in his journal after writing this story, the one in which he began his career as “Kafka” (Tagebücher 461). Georg is not thinking of Freud however: he is not thinking at all. At the confluence of the streams of paternal power, religious tradition, and self-determination, Georg becomes “zerstreut” (Drücke 57). Likewise, during the explanation of the penal machine in “In der Strafkolonie,” the traveling researcher has trouble “collecting his thoughts” (Drücke 206).

These scenes hint at the larger context of Kafkan Zerstreuung. The whole of his late writing seems to pose the questions: is my writing not also building walls? Is there a way of writing that would resist adding yet another “Hilfskonstruktion” to the chain of constructions by

which human beings obscure their origins in suffering with the image of salvation? Fiction could perhaps be written from within the predicament without trying to find “a way out,” but its writer and reader would have to give in or give way to distraction. One would have to resist also the many versions of a thought voiced best by Montaigne. “Our thoughts are always elsewhere; the hope of a better life stays and supports us” (633). One would have to discover or invent a thought of distraction that was not exactly proportional to the thought of life elsewhere. In response to a similar problem we have this reflection from Kafka, written in 1920: “Life is a continual diversion that doesn’t even allow you to reflect on what it diverts from [Das Leben ist eine fortwährende Ablenkung, die nicht einmal zur Besinnung darüber kommen lässt, wovon sie ablenkt]” (NS II 340). In dispensing with *Besinnung* about the origin of the diversion, Kafka does the last thing in his power to forestall the effort to move away from distraction and toward a better life. The impulse toward resignation shines out in Kafka’s mode of writing as well as in his occasional propositions about distraction. We mustn’t forget, too, the faces of the characters across which the dull light of failed reflection flickers. The murky glow in the eyes of the prisoner in the penal machine marks death’s progress in eradicating reflection. Similarly, what Benjamin called Kafka’s “parables without doctrines” annul, as far as possible, *Besinnung* in the quasi-religious community that comes into existence when they read them.



### **A Non-Teleological Suspension of Thought**

Distraction suspends epochal processes such as consciousness, experience, history, and time, by releasing ontological horizons and with them being as the *sine qua non* of existence. The distracted one exists but does not lend being to what he encounters. What happens to his social relations? What is his attitude toward beings that are like him? Of course he does not recognize their likeness, and perhaps this is what La Bruyère means with this obscure remark about le distrait: “he is never with those with whom he appears to be” (Characters 1929 282). The kind of ethics, then, that le distrait enacts and enables would be one that no one could carry out, at least insofar as it cannot be willed. Yes, distracted ethics would be accomplishable by no one. A multitude of distraits would form an ethos without ethics, since, as a community that at any one time or place would be only virtual, it would not respond to an “ought.” Because it does not exist here and now, would it not be comparable to a Kantian regulative idea? One could try to imagine this, but for the fact that a distracted ethos lacks the quality of an ideal toward which one could strive. True, it will not arrive altogether during our lifetimes, yet we also cannot clock our progress against its future arrival. A distracted community never asserts itself as a task, even an infinite one.<sup>12</sup> It cannot be reached through hard work or deeper faith or better knowledge—

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<sup>12</sup> As is not uncommon in contemporary American writing, a novel classified as science fiction faces the question of political distraction most directly. In a fractious nation whose government contributes as much to civic chaos as the roving gangs of “prolos” and “nomads” that now make up the people, long after China has ruined the American information economy by making its secrets available for free on the internet, under pressure from without—there is a cold war on with Holland—and pressure from within—the governor of Louisiana rebels against the weak

willing a not-yet here and now. One could call it a negative ideal that penetrates every grouping, rendering group decisions provisional in light of a non-existent, temporally and spatially strewn, absolutely inclusive collective. Everyone belongs to distraction *at some time*. At some time everyone will be *nowhere*. In addition, it goes so far as to receive into the fold things that do not think. This grouping principle accepts even things! Stones are its founding members, one could say. Furthermore, insofar as it embraces what may be and what will never be at every time out of

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federal government, in a nation that is as close as it can be to a state of constant civil war, two figures rise above the strife—a public relations man who never sleeps and a scientist who has won the Nobel prize for discovering the physical basis of attention. In Bruce Sterling’s novel *Distraction*, what divides these two figures is much weaker than what unifies them: the tireless search for a way to command attention again in a distracted nation. To reverse the trend toward political entropy two acts are necessary, one conventional, the other, at least in appearance, radical and new. A state of emergency is brought about through a general strike (371) in order that scientists in the “Collaboratory,” the model community of the future, can continue to work on their radical solution for the plague of distraction, despite constant threats from the governor of Louisiana. What grand solution does science find just in time? It discovers the ability to pay attention to two things at once. Is there anything in experience that compares to this? Yes, according to the novel—it is like the dual concentration of existing in this world while praying: “you tell God what you’re thinking every minute—and that’s how you know it yourself” (438). Thus this most intricate picture of political distraction dissolves its true possibility when the problem of distraction is resolved through new capabilities, which are in effect only new controls—and theocratic ones at that—over attention.

time, all other grouping principles face in it their inability to include the infinity that virtually traverses them. With the thought of distraction in mind, moreover, no group should be able to make its prejudices, dispositions, genealogy, its thought of what it holds in common, its essence, or its science into a ground for legitimizing its activities, that is, not without also admitting its inability to include the uncollectible set of unthinking things.

Distraction as a communitarian principle should be contrasted not so much with communism, as Nancy and Blanchot have done for the community out of work and the unavowable community.<sup>13</sup> A distracted community should be compared with cosmopolitanism, which advocates transcendence of local norms for the sake of higher inclusivity. According to Diderot's *Encyclopédie*, a cosmopolitan is a person of no fixed abode who is nonetheless nowhere a stranger. Through his or her extra-territorial travels, he or she reconciles those at home with those of other comparably constituted homelands. Le distrait, in contrast, is one who has a fixed abode but is everywhere a stranger, even in his or her ownmost dwelling place, house, language, soul. As such, he or she ("it" would be a more proper marker; but the neutrality of this pronoun will be called into serious question in the treatment of Derrida in Chapter 3)—the distracted one brings not higher inclusivity but higher exclusivity into the nation. Because distraction excludes everyone and everything equally, no community is more inclusive. A realist would ask: what good is it if the inanimate takes power over living creatures, creatures with movement, soul, thought, design? If the contemplative life yields its privileged place to inertia, intractability, who would care for the ethical life of humans? To respond to this crucial objection we will turn to Kafka, who drew thinking into question precisely because of its unshakeable

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<sup>13</sup> Blanchot's *The Unavowable Community*; Nancy's *The Inoperative Community*.

insistence on commonality and necessity in the form of law, family, and politics. In a journal entry from January 1920, Kafka asks into the ethics of a communitarian principle of distraction. “He lives in dispersal/ diaspora / distraction [Zerstreuung]. His elements, a freely living horde, ramble around the world. And only insofar as his room belongs to the world does he see them occasionally in the distance. How can he carry the responsibility for them? Is that still called responsibility?” (Tagebücher 850).

**1. Prehistory of the Problem:  
Fifth Century Greece**

This chapter points out where a concept of distraction might have been articulated in fifth-century Greek philosophy but wasn't. The method employed in the first part is almost wholly negative. It examines the facets of his philosophical system that made it unlikely for distraction to be conceived, beginning with a seemingly offhand statement in Aristotle's treatise on the soul. Two factors made distraction inconceivable in first philosophy. Firstly, since throughout his ontological writings Aristotle interprets not-being as potentiality, a not-being that would be impotent—a not-being that does not harbor being latent within it and tend toward its revelation—becomes a pariah in the system. Secondly, in his later writings Aristotle ascribes a divine center to mind or nous that makes the occasional, temporary withdrawal of this aspect a sacrilege of a high order. It is his theory of nous—thought, mind, the separable and eternal part of the soul: however this word should be translated into English—that makes metaphysics an especially inhospitable environment for something like distraction to be theorized. It is also, however, the same metaphysics that makes the withdrawal of the godlike aspect of human being a potent hazard for the system founded on its permanent presence.

The second part of this chapter traces Aristotle's repression of distraction to a scene in Parmenides' poem. The conditions under which the main tradition of Western philosophy will continue to define thought are given in this poem. In it, thinking and being become associated through "the same," "τὸ αὐτόν." One may read this sameness of being and thinking in one of

two ways. Thinking always and only thinks what-is; it takes already constituted beings as its objects, and thus is subservient to being. Or else, one can imagine a greater power for thinking, such that whatever it thinks is; that is, thought administers being to beings. In either case, however, “the same thing” exercises its force over the relationship. Thought and being name what is held in common for anthropoi, what they can call the same, their possession. The center of their commonality lies in what-is and what-is-thought. In order to make the benefits of this arrangement unambiguous, Parmenides presents an image of a community in distraction. The chapter ends with an interpretation of this image.

### **Aristotle: A Moving Unmover**

Already as a student Aristotle had begun rejecting the strong emphasis on mathematics in Plato’s school. His interest in nous no less than his passion for direct observation may have contributed to his differences with his teacher. To teach and learn for him meant to make nous intelligible, to oneself and to others. Perhaps this emphasis on intellect was the source of his undergraduate nickname: they reportedly called him “the nous of the Academy.”

An anecdote recounted by one of his students reminds us of the importance of nous for Aristotle. Klearchos reports that Aristotle performed a public experiment: with expert scientific observers gathered around, Aristotle struck a reclining boy with a rod made for attracting souls (“τῆ ψυχουλκῶ ῥάβδῳ”). Upon being hit, the boy’s soul slipped out of his body and came to hover in a corner of the observation room. To the amazement of the onlookers, when the soul

was slipped back into him, the boy was able to report all that happened as though he had experienced it without interruption.<sup>14</sup>

Although it is apocryphal and surely originates in confusion about Aristotle's intentions in his study of the psuche and its separable part, nous, on the part of a well-meaning but empirically-minded student, or on the part of Proclus, who records Klearchos' anecdote, the story is nevertheless striking. It communicates the philosopher's desire for a direct experience of the highest aspect of thought. It is interesting to note that although he cannot experiment on

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<sup>14</sup> The full citation reads, in my translation: "that the going out and coming in of the soul into the body would seem possible, Aristotle used the soul-attracting rod near Klearchos on the lad lying down and persuaded the daemon, just as Klearchos said in his 'on sleep,' in regard to the soul, so that it go out of the body and so that it should go into the body and in order that it need for itself a resting place. For, striking the child with the rod he slipped out the soul, and leading forwards from the body, he showed the motionless body to those bending over it, having been saved unharmed, to be anesthetic [unperceiving], like one without a soul. Meanwhile having been sundered from the body, after the soul was lead back in by means of the rod along the entranceway, he reported everything. Accordingly out of these things the other inquiring spectators and Aristotle were convinced that the soul is apart from the body. This is therefore just as I say, the ability (dunasthai) for the soul to go out and to come back in again and make it alive (ἐμπνουν, literally en-nous-ed), just as it had left it, these old writings are clear to the leaders of the peripatetics..." (Klearchos 11). Part of the fragment is quoted in Jan Bremmer's valuable survey of the motif of "the living soul" in Ancient Greece and other cultures in *The Early Greek Concept of the Soul* (49f).



himself, he can on a passive, prostrate boy.<sup>15</sup> It is also interesting that the instrument with which he accomplishes this feat, the soul-attracting rod, attracts psuchai not through eros, as the figure of the prostrate boy might suggest, but by a blow to the body, πλήξας. The attractive quality of the soul-attracting rod seems to reside in its capacity for violence, through which it jars loose what only appears to be a fixed part of the being lying there. The philosopher's skill at moving psuchai around is remarkable. It is Aristotle's teaching, after all, that the active part of the psuche is coaxed into activity by nothing other than itself, on the model of the highest being, god (Metaphysics 1072b24f). In the anecdote, Klearchos obviously confuses the intelligible with the empirical, the intuitive or deductive methods of first philosophy with the empirical or inductive methods of second philosophy. It is not in the realm of experience, however scientific, that the separability of nous can be demonstrated. As soon as it became a phenomenon it would no longer be separate from the body, or different from any other appearance. In this respect Klearchos confuses the spatial and logical senses of χώρις, separation, a distinction fundamental to the Platonic metaphysics within which Aristotle works. Nevertheless, the anecdote makes plain the lesson the student has learned: the teacher desired to gain mastery over the special case of nous, and he did so by force.

Although a misunderstanding, Klearchos's anecdote identifies the quality that would be necessary if nous were in fact to be separable from the senses, the rest of the soul (fantasy, locomotion), and the body. If the psuche is not mixed with physical life in any way, it must have a motility of its own beyond the locomotion it produces. Soul must be able to slip away. To

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<sup>15</sup> For a description of the motif of the boy-medium and the hieroscopic sacrifice of boys, see Daniel Ogden, *Greek and Roman Necromancy* (196-200).

become a master of psychic slippage is what it means, according to Klearchos' anecdote, to be a philosopher. In addition, Aristotle striking the boy recalls the process by which one comes to philosophy. The verb πλήσσω in the middle and passive often means to be struck by something intellectually, to be struck dumb, or struck with awe or amazement. Just as the philosopher is attracted to an aporia, psuche in the anecdote is attracted to what strikes it dumb, what amazes it—θαυμάζειν—and renders it powerless, at the mercy of that which struck it. The event of being struck dumb inheres in Aristotelian philosophy, even in its apocrypha.

In Klearchos' anecdote, however, the boy's psuche continues to process perceptions even though it is out of his senses. Slipping makes no difference to its operation. In his epilogue to Klearchos' anecdote, Proclus adds that the experiment convinced onlookers about the psuche's independence from the body. The philosopher demonstrated that, although it is separable from experience, nous never stops noetizing. It always operates, independent of circumstances. Whatever shock it falls into belongs to the body or the rest of the soul, and not to nous. Being a philosopher means demonstrating this fact. This gesture notwithstanding, however, in the desire for an absolutely separate nous and the need to prove its separability, a certain looseness of the soul has to be stipulated.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> A discussion of the necessity that nous be separable can be found in Kahn (375-9). After summarizing Aristotle's reasoning, the author shows the irreducibility of nous to body in contemporary terms (377) The difference between Platonic separability of the ideas and Aristotelian separability of nous is discussed by Wedin. Plato's mistake, according to Aristotle, was to conflate noematic separateness with ontological separateness ("Tracking Aristotle's Nous" 153).

### **Not-Always-Thinking**

A looseness in the soul comes up again in Aristotle's *De anima*. In elevating noesis to the highest human capacity, Aristotle is left with a question in his treatise on the soul that is so troublesome—or so trivial—that it is abandoned without a clear answer. “τοῦ δὲ μὴ ἀεὶ νοεῖν τὸ αἴτιον ἐπισκεπτεόν.” “Of not-always-thinking the cause is to be investigated” (De Anima 430a5-6).

This demand appears in *De anima* 3.4 in the midst of an argument that leads to a final understanding of nous and noesis. What is noesis? First the section distinguishes it from aesthesis. In some respects the two capacities are similar. Both perception and thinking “are” only when they receive objects (De Anima 429a13f.). If noesis is an analogue of aisthesis, Aristotle argues, nous is nothing until it thinks. Only because of this inherent capacity to be nothing is the thinking part of the soul called “τόπον εἰδῶν” (De Anima 429a27-28). It is nothing and becomes it objects by receiving its form and not its matter. What, then, is the difference between thinking and perception? The basic trait that aisthetike and noetike share, according to this section of *De anima*, is a particular apathy, and this ἀπάθεια occurs most strongly in both when an object surpasses the capacity to receive (De Anima 429a29-31). Here the difference between perception and thinking is stated for the first time with precision. Sense perception shuts down when confronted with a highly perceptible thing. Directly after a very loud noise for instance, hearing is temporarily suspended (De Anima 429a31f). Conversely, thought is made stronger, not weaker, by highly thinkable things. The difference between thought and perception is the difference between these two apathies. When confronted with an

object stronger than it is, whereas sensation becomes weaker, thought becomes stronger, and in the impassivity that the “exceedingly thinkable” (σφόδρα νοητόν) gives to thought, thought is strengthened. Thought reacts by moving towards what exceeds its receptive potential (*De Anima* 429b3f.). To be attracted to an overpowering object that it cannot receive is the characteristic that distinguishes thinking from perceiving, according to Aristotle in *De anima*. Mind strives toward that which it cannot fully comprehend, and this striving constitutes its “life.”

Yet the problem of nous’s passivity still remains. If it is “nothing until it thinks,” the question “how does nous think itself?” becomes very difficult to answer. As utterly passive, it would rely on objects outside itself to activate it, and thus the activity of noesis would always be directed by foreign elements. For nous to become its own object, that is, when it wants to activate itself, it would in effect have to wait forever, since it would remain nothing until it itself—a nothing—activated it. This premise about thought derives from Aristotle’s famous argument for the primacy of actuality in the cosmos. For there to be a cosmos, actuality must come first. It must even come before time; for if it didn’t, time would never have begun. “ἡ δὲ κατὰ δύναμιν χρόνῳ προτέρα ἐν τῷ ἐνί, ὅλως δὲ οὐδὲ χρόνῳ” (*De Anima* 430a20-21). Likewise, there must be an active aspect of nous that precedes the passive aspect. Nous must, in short, contain an eternal, unchanging, and active principle.

Thus far, we are simply reiterating Aristotle’s theory of actual mind. In light of it, it is easier to see that when Aristotle exhorts us to investigate the cause of “not-always-thinking” in *De anima* 3.4, the stakes are high. It is also clear that with this demand he is not talking about the passive aspect of nous. For “not-always” is its main trait. Passive nous is nothing until it is activated by an object; it is intermittent by nature. “Not-always-thinking” cannot refer to this intermittency. It is, rather, an effect that takes place within actual and activating mind. “Not-

always-thinking”— wherever it comes from—is a direct challenge to active thought, and so a challenge to the intelligibility of thought in general. For this reason Aristotle feels it necessary to state, as soon as he describes active or productive mind: “οὐχ ὅτε μὲν νοεῖ ὅτε δ’ οὐ νοεῖ.”<sup>17</sup> “It does not think at one time and not think at another” (De Anima 430a22). Although it seems to deny it, this declaration intensifies the worry about “not-always-thinking,” insofar as it does not give any grounds for denying it. Making such a statement does not provide the “aition” of not-always-thinking, but simply defers the question.

What would occur, if anything, while nous poietikos (a phrase that Aristotle does not actually use) is not-always-noetizing?<sup>18</sup> What sort of movement might this be? Would the good life stop, giving way to wickedness, the polis open its walls to barbarians, philosophers teach

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<sup>17</sup> Some scholars suspect this line is an interpolation.

<sup>18</sup> The long story of nous poietikos, productive intellect, better known by its Latin name, intellectus agens, begins in *De Anima* 3.5, just after the appearance of not-always-thinking. Sorabji collects the ancient commentators views on this thorny subject in (Commentators 102-118). Wedin makes a strong argument for understanding Aristotle’s sketchily introduced concept as “mind producing itself,” which also explains what he means by nous noetizing itself (Mind 168). This, in turn, should be understood, with reference to the definition of the producer [τὸ ποιοῦν] in *De generatione et corruptione*, as a producer who, like the artist, remains unaffected by what it produces and the act of production (Mind 173-4). Wedin goes on to explain this as well with another analogy, that of “having” (Mind 179, n.34). As a hexis, nous produces itself and has itself; when its activity is suspended or interrupted—which should not be possible—it loses itself by failing to produce itself, with no higher actuality to locate it.

rhetoric to the highest bidder, beings forget being *qua* being? What does it mean for anthropos to not-always-think if thinking must have an active aspect that always thinks—or else it never could get started thinking? If anyone actually thinks, it seems, thinking must mean that at least some part of thought thinks always.

### **What it Means to Not-Think**

Nous's looseness, although it is mastered by Aristotle in Klearchos's anecdote, returns as a worry in *De anima*, in the demand to locate the cause of "not-always-thinking." This exigency breaks into the discourse in *De anima* 3.4 just as Aristotle is describing nous's structure.

Aristotle never claimed that nous was easy to understand of course. In the *Metaphysics* he remarks prominently on the difficulty of the topic. "The things of nous hold certain aporias." "Τὰ δὲ περὶ τὸν νοῦν ἔχει τινὰς ἀπορίας" (*Metaphysics* 1074b15). So we should not be surprised that in *De anima* 3.4 he proposes to investigate a disturbance within noesis that causes nous to slip away unaccountably. And, too, we mustn't forget how high the stakes are in the gamble on a theory of nous. A theory of nous whose aporias have been solved would prove the perfection and immortality of *theoria per se*. Hence Aristotle's interest in developing one.

Yet, what could an investigator hope to gain from an investigation—an ἐπισκέψις—of not-always-thinking? If one observed nous and found it intermittent, occasionally out of operation, fickle, or untrustworthy, where would this leave theory and the sciences that depend on its unobstructed and continual view of οὐσία?

"Not-always-thinking" has its own aporias, it seems, which—at first glance at least—appear irresolvable. First of all, we would not be able to trust the observation of not-always-

thinking—insofar as it was performed noetically, that is. Taken as the object of our investigation, “not-always-thinking,” if it appeared, would interrupt the observation. Not always thinking cannot be thought. Or, better said, not-always-thinking cannot always be thought. The paradox of distraction seems intransigent here. If it is true that nous does not always noetize, it is also false that it does not always noetize. Yes, the statement of not always thinking is ambiguous to the extent that it can never be stated unequivocally one way or the other. This is why, perhaps, the question itself is more threatening than the answer, and thus Aristotle does not pursue it further. Of course, if it is not true, and some aspect of thought is in fact always thinking, there is no need to worry about it. Thus, Aristotle’s desire to examine the cause of not-always-thinking is in fact a desire to see that it has no cause and does not exist. If he could establish this, it would be of great benefit to his scientific system based on nous and its eternal operation.

Yet the question remains paradoxical. Proving the inexistence of not-always-thinking would mean showing that not-always-thinking had no ousia, no aitia or cause that could be located and coaxed into yielding its meaning. How then can one prove the inexistence of something without assuming a cause or a being to which it corresponds? Another way to state this is the following. If distraction has being, it cannot be—because being is always, despite the birth and decay of any being. Then again, if it does not have being, how can Aristotle even raise the question of its cause?

If it is not a being and has no ousia, another possible name for it within Aristotle’s system would be *tuche*, a blow or strike of chance. Since they have no being, these do not have or need explanations; they happen, *τυγχόνται*, but without necessity or unity and thus do not correspond to a *logos*. If a phenomenon has any permanence at all, however, and if it acts in accord with any of the definitions of change—if it comes to be or passes away, increases or decreases in size,

moves from one identifiable place to another, in short, if it is affected by anything—if it can be called a phenomenon, in other words, it is not tuchic. If Aristotle had considered not-always-thinking the one time result of chance, he would not have needed to raise the question at all. Not only must it be more than a chance occurrence that afflicts some particular nous once and never again without the possibility for perception or cognition of it, but moreover, according to the demand made in *De anima* to investigate it, it must be a recognizable, recurring phenomenon that therefore has a cause.

What is it, then, to be not-always-thinking? What is its being, its form, what governs its appearance and disappearance, and how does this affect noesis, the study of being qua being, philosophy? How does it affect the attempt to define anthropos's difference from other animals as well as its ethical life in the polis?

Modern commentaries almost uniformly suggest that Aristotle abandons the demand without fulfilling it, while ancient commentaries tend to discover indirect responses to it in other Aristotelian doctrines. Among modern commentators, Ross believes not-always-thinking is for Aristotle an actual problem, but he neglects to address it. "A. does not appear to discuss this question anywhere" (*De Anima* 295). Hicks interpolates his own answer, calling the demand simply "a parenthetical remark." As an aside, the demand actually poses no problem for the theory of nous. "Why then," Hicks continues, "if τὸ νοοῦν and τὸ νοούμενον be always present, should there be any intermission in the process of thinking?" Hamlyn offers a combination of acceptance of the problem and denial of its importance. "The remark about why the intellect does not always think is parenthetical, suggested presumably by the previous remark about the identity of that which thinks and its object. It is not obvious that Aristotle does consider



the question later, except perhaps at the end of Chapter 5" (Aristotle's De Anima, Books II and III 129).

Among ancient commentators, the intention to answer the question is strong, although the answers are unsatisfying. Themistius writes in his commentary on *De anima* 429a13-15: "For it is said in a stricter sense that [the intellect] would be 'perfected' rather [than affected] by being advanced from potentiality to actuality. And it is obvious that [it is advanced] from potentiality. That is why we do not always think, nor even always think the same objects rather than different ones at different time. This is, in fact, a sign that this intellect exists in potentiality, as there can be no transition from one activity to another unless a potentiality remains to display the different activities" (118-9). But Themistius here misses the point and with it the urgency of Aristotle's demand. If not-always-thinking were simply equivalent to potential thought, he would have treated it as part of the passive nous, which he discusses immediately prior to this. It arises, however, as a problem within the activity of thought, what comes to be called intellectus agens. The demand would not have had to be raised if not-always-thinking were simply another way to say potentiality. Indeed, Aristotle deals with mind's latency as not-thinking at great length and in many places (Aristotle Metaphysics Met Λ, 1074b15f) (Aristotle De Anima De anima 3.4, 429a10-b9, b29-30a9).

Philoponus states the problem precisely, but then misreads it in a similar way: "But we should consider the cause of its not understanding always. Aristotle here interposes another problem. If the intellect is both intellect and intelligible thing, why does it not understand all the time? Since the intelligibles are always in actuality, how is it that it does not understand them all the time? And if it is both intellect and intelligible thing, why does it not understand itself all the time? Such is the problem or difficulty. Aristotle did not, as some have thought, omit to provide

a solution; he will give it later, as we shall make clear when we get there" (Philoponus 60-1).

Philoponus sees 430a33 as the answer to this question, where Aristotle states that "without this [always-thinking] it thinks nothing." But this is simply to say again that all not-always-thinking must be potential thinking, and active, actual thinking must continue always.

In the commentary on *De anima*, written before getting involved in the Averroist controversy over the materiality of soul, Aquinas accepts no natural change in the intellect; its only motion is that from potential to actual (*non est mutatio secundum esse naturale*) (Aquinas §160). And since thought has its unity in succession, as an operation unified in time, not in magnitude, any interruption would be less like a disintegration of a faculty than like a suspension of the number series, that is, of time (Aquinas §111). As for our sentence, the demand that not-always-thinking be thought all the way back to its origin, Aquinas's comment is complicated. He takes it as an element of the question "how can mind think itself?" The difficulty for him lies in the nature of potentiality. For intellectus, as the pure potential to become any object, in order to cognize itself it must translate or transform its potential into an actual. For the form of the potential intellect, that which the active intellect desires to know, is also potential. *Intellectus possibilis* is a variety of *materia prima*, base matter (Aquinas §725). Among intelligences only God is perfect actuality and so he is as intelligible as he is intelligent (Aquinas §726). Thus, given that the unity of thought is time and the only non-time is eternity, why a particular thinker might not always think remains obscure (Aquinas §727).

### Is “τὸ μὴ ἀεὶ νοεῖν” δυνάμις, ἀπορεῖν, or ὑπνεῖν?

Perhaps somewhere in Aristotle’s writings we can find another explanation for this peculiar on-again off-again quality of thought. Perhaps the negation of thought in not-always-thinking corresponds to one of the negations that Aristotle explains elsewhere, such as potentiality, aporia, or even a thing as common as sleeping.

Every potential for thinking is a species of not-thinking: not yet thinking. Is the not-always-thinking of *De anima* 3.4 a potentiality of thought, akin to a stage in anthropos’s development, from child to adult, for example, or from student to philosopher? Is its aitia as natural and ineradicable as growth or as quotidian and practical as education?

If the one who does not-always-think were comparable to the child, there would be little need to inquire into its aition. A child’s potential has its final cause in the mature actuality of adulthood. A child’s incapacity to think, likewise, is a capacity for future thinking. With the help of learning [“διὰ μαθήσεως”] and time, the child’s not-thinking can be made actually thinking (*De Anima* 417a31). It is true then that a human being can be said to “not-always-think.” Yet in the framework of a lifetime, not-always-thinking simply means preparing to think. Childish thought’s aition is adult thinking. And so the not-always-thinking whose cause Aristotle inquires into in *De anima* 3.4 cannot be the potential thinking of the child; it is not a *dunamis* of future thought, a potential that derives its meaning and direction from the day in which it becomes perfected and permanent. As an interruption in adult thought that remains undetermined in Aristotle’s system, it may in some way be *adunaton*, impossible, since there seems to be nothing at all latent or potential in it. It is a not-always that will not develop into always.

Every problem that brings thought to a halt is a species of not-always-thinking. Is not-always-thinking perhaps a description of thought encountering an aporia? Does it describe

thinking confronted with a temporary impasse? “τὰ δὲ περὶ τὸν νοῦν ἔχει τινὰς ἀπορίας.”

“The things about the nous hold certain aporias” (Metaphysics 1074b15). With this sentence the *Metaphysics* introduces a type of not-always directly into nous. An aporia—an undecidable choice between two alternatives, “ποτερον...ἢ” “whether this or that—is the primary philosophical type of non-thinking for Aristotle. The word is used often by Plato, but Aristotle raises it to the *sine qua non* of philosophical inquiry, whether one is investigating the movements of animals or the thinking of nous. Early in Book 3 of the *Metaphysics* he presents his methodological hopes for aporia. This hints at the problem involved in conceiving not-always-thinking as aporia.

Still for the ones wishing to pass through well [“εὐπορήσαι”] it is useful to pass into [“διαπορήσαι”] it completely. For the ultimate good passage [“εὐπορία”] is a release [“λύσις”] from prior instances of not-having-passed [“ἀπορουμένων”], and release [“λυεῖν”] is not possible if we fail to know the shackle [“τὸν δεσμόν”], but the impasse of thought [“ἡ τῆς διανοίας ἀπορία”] shows this about the matter [i.e. that there is a shackle on nous]; for that which is in an impasse [“ἀπορία”] is with respect to these things just about equal to men who are shackled [“τοῖς δεδεμένοις”]. In both situations it is impossible to proceed forward.

(Metaphysics 995a27-33).

Aporia is here compared to a restraint, a set of fetters. This comparison explains the non-thinking of aporia. This not-thinking is a hindrance to thought, conceived of as that which moves forward without restriction. It demonstrates dialectically that at a certain point dianoia was free

to move, and that it can be free again. Interruption of movement means that thought is fundamentally forward movement. And so investigators of *protai ousiai* begin in bondage in order for philosophy to become free and forward-moving in its operation. Those who don't recognize and make use of this structure are like "people who go without knowing where" (Aristotle Metaphysics 995a35-36). "For the end is not clear to him, but to the one who has faced the *aporia* it is clear" (Metaphysics 995b1-2). *Aporia*, then, is the dialectical demonstration of the goal-directedness of thinking, and it has this goal-directedness as its cause.

The cause of not-always-thinking can therefore not be found in two of the classic negativities of Greek philosophy: potentiality or *aporia*. Potential thought is not-yet-thinking, and *aporia* is the trivial hindrance to forward-moving thought. As a negation *aporia* is temporary, and its transitoriness dialectically confirms thought's underlying continual movement toward the intelligible. Just as adult thinking is the final cause of potential thought, the intelligible and ultimately god is the origin of the *aporetic* impasse.

Since we find our path blocked, it may be more fruitful to approach the problem by another way. Let us look at a removal of thinking that is not at first glance reducible to potential. There is a not-thinking that constantly afflicts the contemplative life.

According to Aristotle's little treatise what sleeps in sleep is *aisthesis*. And thus, among beings, sleep affects only those that are constitutionally able to perceive. A sense might be out of operation ["ἀργεῖν"], out of use ["μὴ χρῆσθαι"], or be incapable of sensation ["μὴ δύνασθαι αἰσθάνεσθαι"]—the soul may swoon; it may become "fatty," be in "λιποψυχία," when the veins in the neck are compressed so that the blood cannot flow downward; but sleep is no swoon, no illness, no breakdown in the machinery of perception. Instead, sleep results from the healthy workings of digestion. Food, when it enters the body, changes into blood; your dinner rises

upward until the added weight in the upper parts of your body causes drowsiness; so your head nods and your eyelids droop ("On Sleep and Waking" 456a17f). When digestion is complete, the weight settles lower again and one wakes "up."<sup>19</sup>

Like digestion, there are things in nature that in certain respects do not move always and continuously, Aristotle admits ("On Sleep and Waking" 454a24f). Sleep is a discontinuity in the motion of waking. For this reason Aristotle can say that sleep is a "having halted" [“ἀναπαύσει”], and yet he insists that this is so only “as a metaphor” ("On Sleep and Waking" 455b21). The metaphoric character of sleep’s halt is transplanted from another context. In the archaic Greek imagination, sleep is a death, but only as a metaphor; it is only like death. It belongs of course to life. Sensation does not die in sleep, on the contrary—it prepares itself. Not-always-perceiving belongs to the natural push-pull of anthropic movement, a natural cycle that depends on nature’s continual movement. Its intermittency does not divert its ultimate purposiveness. Impotency—like the inability to sense in sleep—is here as elsewhere always already a potential—a non-thinking movement toward thought. When Nux comes, dropping Hypnos from his lap, he does so at the bidding of Hyperion, who appears promptly the next morning to expel him. “Always” remains the standard by which sleep’s “not-always” is measured.

It is then a myth that nous occasionally dies a death in life? Can its rest never suspend itself, can it never have a share of death’s finality? No—everything in thinking is of life (and life is movement, and movement being, so thinking moves, lives, is, always). Given that not-always-

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<sup>19</sup> For an account of the problems understanding Aristotle’s physical account of sleep, its genesis and responses in the commentaries, see Wiesner.

thinking does not coincide with potential, aporia, or sleep, it seems not to belong to Aristotle's understanding of human being at all.

With this reason it becomes easier to understand why it might not be susceptible to first philosophy's method. More like an irritant than an impasse, it makes the metaphor of a path impractical. It does not seduce thought into untying it like a knot. It does not, at least on the surface, offer an actuality that would make its negativity seem like a potentiality. What is a nothing that does not prepare for being? A sleep from which one cannot awake? In the *Metaphysics* Aristotle formulates this as a worry about the dignity of thinking. "If it [nous] noetizes nothing, what would be worthy of reverence?" ("εἴτε γὰρ μηδὲν νοεῖ, τί ἂν εἴη τὸ σεμνόν;"), he writes (*Metaphysics* 1074b17-18). What would be worthy of reverence if thinking were from time to time as empty as the void that Aristotle goes to great lengths in *Physics* X to prove cannot exist... or even emptier? What can be made salvageable for his system in an unattractive, nameless non-being that cannot be allowed appearance, activity, passivity, potential, practice, or poiesis, but instead withdraws from each of these terms in turn. What, in a cosmos where everything is in motion—even rest is defined as the from-which of motion, whose stop is but a pause—what is a stop that disconnects the clockwork of the cosmic machine? What can be made of this restless intractability?

A restless pause, a pause that will not stop, more than an interruption since its "halt!" does not belong to the continuity with which it collides, an arrest that occurs frequently though without attaining the necessity or continuity of "always," a halting in the present that releases the infinite lapses between infinitesimal limit points until "now" no longer pertains, an unattractive pull that draws thought again and again out of its perpetual motion or away from motion per se, a move that is not a movement, a move perhaps against the immobile mover—god—that, by

canceling thought's motion for an unspecifiable time—barely resting—simultaneously turns away from and advances on the divine, distraction would be—if it were given being by Aristotle—a moving unmover that unmakes the hierarchy of his system. Aristotle comments in *Metaphysics* λ that god has to think continually or else he will look like a man asleep. And yet, ironically, although anthropos has to think continually in order to look like theos—the desire for a likeness between anthropos and theos is what motivates the demand we are studying, the demand to find not-always-thinking a cause that leads back ultimately to god's “always”—and yet ironically, when we follow the demand to its logical, though unreasonable, end, something *more than theos*, a hypergod, distraction splits the heavens open. If we accept this, hypothesis it will be possible as well to say that anthropos must think continually or else he will look like a hypergod, or a paratheos—a mortal sprung out beyond or to the side of the chiasm that binds mortals and immortals in a fateful likeness.

### **What is Not-Always?**

In the Aristotelian cosmos there doesn't seem to be a place for a not-thinking that is permanently without thought (like death, say) but which is not analogous to potential thought. We may therefore have to pursue our question in another way, asking not about thought but about time. What does “not-always” mean? What is the cosmic equivalent of this temporality of thought? In order to approach this question, we should also ask another. How does “not-always” relate to the Aristotelian “always”?

Always—ἀεί—is familiar from Aristotle's definitions of theos, ouranos, and phusis—god, the heavens, and nature. God, for example, is continual, unchanging, ungenerated,



indestructible, alive, alive always, and always good, according to the *Metaphysics* (Metaphysics 1072b14-b31). Despite the impressive list of adjectives, however, what precisely “always” means here and throughout the Aristotelian corpus is debated by ancient and modern commentators.<sup>20</sup> Given Aristotle’s definitions of time and infinity, “ἀεὶ” can be understood in two or three ways, depending on what being you look at. Take phusis, for example. Phusis is that which has its cause of motion within it, thus containing all motions beneath the heavens. Its “always” is aggregative. Phusis is the sum total of the relative motions of becoming, being, decay, locomotion, alteration, and so on—of potential as well as actual movements. The “always” of circular motion, in contrast, is continual. Circular motion is primary in the heavens because, although spatially finite, it is temporally infinite, even if its temporal infinity is not expressed in any single turn of the heavenly orbit (On the Heavens *Peri ouranos* 270a18). Circling ouranos marks out a finite time in one orbit, and the infinity of time in the continuity of rounds. The “always” of its continual movement stems also from its external resistance; the

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<sup>20</sup> Richard Sorabji offers a division among ancient theorists of time into those who believe eternity, *aei* and *aion*, means infinite duration and those who believe it means timelessness. For Aristotle, according to Sorabji, nothing in time can last until the end of time or outlast it; this is why time is called the destroyer. A second class of beings, which Sorabji mentions but does not spend time on, are those too quick or too divided to count as taking time, such as “coincidences, relations, processes, points” and so forth. Thirdly, there are beings that relate to time differently than any other being; they are not in time although they are not technically timeless. Stars, for example, are not in time and yet they are for all time. Finally, there is that which lies beyond the farthest sphere of heaven, God’s eternity, *to aion* (Time 126-7).

circle cannot itself be moved from its type of motion. It never deviates nor is it subject to generation and destruction (On the Heavens 270a10-13). Aither, the fifth ousia, also moves in a circle, and Aristotle identifies the etymology of the word with its essence: “ἀεὶ θεῖν,” “to run always” (On the Heavens 270b21). Always running, the second sense of “always” in the physical writings, is the standard by which the totality of finite physical movements is measured. Cosmos consists of these two “always.” Nature is a totality that moves through the intermittent generation and degeneration, alteration, growth, and locomotion of its elements. It is continually discontinuous, mortal in any instance, as a whole immortal.

Within nature’s continuity, elements move in different ways. They have direction and misdirection, corruption and interruption. Their impulse to move comes from within by nature (an animal moves toward food by appetite) or from without by nature (wind moves trees), or from without but artificially or by force (bronze is hammered by a shield-maker). The circling aither, conversely, has no contrary—this Aristotle derives from a formal aspect of circularity, that it moves constantly toward its beginning and thus always reaches its proper end, without interruption (On the Heavens 270a18). It is not a repetition, since nothing changes between revolutions.

The relationship between ouranos (aither), circular and unassailable, and phusis, the sum total of discontinuous motions, is expressed “according to the same logos” in the word αἰών. A being’s lifetime and the infinite circling of the heavens are both evoked by this word, which Aristotle breaks down into “ἀεὶ εἶναι,” to be always. “Always” in both cases names the completion of a totality that includes within it all of time as a sum. It names a totality of time on analogy with the contents of an “outermost circumference,” ouranos, of which by nature nothing is outside (On the Heavens 278b8f.). Within the arc of this great loop, beings are imperfect

dependencies that desire perfection. Nature's contents are telic, we might say, but only the cosmos as a whole is teleion, perfected. A sum total of shortcomings, natural beings desire perfection. Each being comes to its end with this desire, but being as a whole lives beyond each singular ending. Deathless, the circling either encompasses dying and misdirection but does not partake in it, just as the sky looms high above the earth (On the Heavens 279a23f.). Cosmos, the union of these two movements, is, despite the tension between the two, one,<sup>21</sup> in that it comprises all past and future change.

God, is also in some way "always"; not, however, because it moves in one way or the other. According to Aristotle's late accounts, cosmic movement originates in god, who moves (transitively); god does not, however, move (intransitively) and yet its activity never stops. This is the famous definition of the unmoved mover. How does Aristotle understand this unceasing moving in a being that is not, never was, and never will be in motion? More specifically, we would need to know what the nature of its "unceasing" quality might be, if what does not cease in god cannot be confused with its own motion. What is an immobile thing that is also unstoppable? Is an immobile thing not already stopped? These and other unanswered questions surround the unmoved mover's "always." Its meaning can be deduced from the transcendental necessities of the system, but only negatively. First of all, there cannot be an infinite regress of causes or else the universe becomes unintelligible. Secondly, there cannot be a highest being that is sheer potential—that is, purely future motion—for then nothing would be guaranteed to ever become actual. This is more or less the transcendental deduction of the first mover to which

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<sup>21</sup> For Aristotle's argument against a plurality of kosmoi, see *Peri ouranos*, Bk. I. viii, 276a18-b21.

Aristotle commits when he introduces the figure in *Physics* 8.4 and 8.5. There he also compares it explicitly to Anaxagoras's cosmic nous (Physics 256b24). An intransitively transitive cosmic noesis, which will become in *Metaphysics* Λ “nous noetizing nous,” the first mover's “always” is, although deducible, by and large inexplicable.<sup>22</sup> Aristotle says only that it persists as the ultimate toward-which of all movement, the love-object of the world.

### **A Moving Unmover**

“Not-always” poses a great challenge for the understanding of “always” because it does not contradict it. This may seem counterintuitive, wrong even, since the one at least grammatically negates the other. ἀεί... μὴ ἀεί. always... not always. It is because not-always and always do not contradict one another, moreover, that the demand raised in *De anima* is so threatening to thinking. The difference is not the same as, for instance, the difference between “always” and “always-not,” which indeed is a contradiction. Nothing can be always and always not at the same

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<sup>22</sup> Here is Ross on the question: “He is an ever-living being whose influence radiates through the universe in such wise that everything that happens—at any rate if we leave out of account the obscure realms of chance and free-will—depends on Him. He moves directly the ‘first heaven’; i.e., he causes the daily rotation of the stars round the earth. Since He moves by inspiring love and desire, it seems to be implied that the ‘first heaven’ has soul” (181). And yet, nothing could be more obscure than this account. Besides the interpretation's obviously anachronistic Christian language, it patently begs the question. Soul moves by soul, it seems to say, and yet the highest soul is neither moved by another nor moves itself.

time in the same way. What is threatening about not-always-thinking is that “not-always” seems to be an inalienable aspect of “always-thinking.”

Insofar as one of the ways in which Aristotle brings not-being into being is as contradiction (τάναντίον) (in a manner similar to Plato who wove it in as “otherness” (τὸ ἕτερον), contradiction entails a necessity that something either be or not be, but never both at once (and, incidentally, never neither at once—this is a very important aspect of the law of contradiction that is rarely mentioned). Contradiction has an “always” internal to it. It means always one way or the other. In other words, quite formally, contradiction allows for no intermediary position between being and not being. Its always keeps vigil over the line between the two. Thus contradiction always points to a being or to its negation. This is the meaning of negation when it comes into being as contradiction, ἀντίφασις (contrary, ἐναντία, is of course another case). The principle of the excluded middle applies always and its always applying is the reason for its privileged place as a negation within being. As a principle that regulates negativity, contradiction holds the limit between beings and their negation, but more importantly, it never allows the limit to blur or vanish. The limit coincides with the always of principle. In principle, always “one or the other” cannot give way to “one and the other, or one or the other now but later one and the other, and occasionally one without an other.” In short, nothing opposes contradiction, because contradiction gives the incontrovertible law of opposition. This is a tautology, meaning simply that the law of contradiction is a law, paradigmatically so, and thus from the perspective of time it carries the designation “always.” If, however, this always encounters an “at times and not at others,” if the principle is challenged by a fluctuation within it, a higher principle would have to be found that would manage the alternation between always and not-always, between “at all times” and “at times,” between a principle of contradiction and a

principle of difference. Thus the directness of this challenge to “always” lies in the tendency of “not-always” to open out toward a principle higher than the principle of contradiction. Or rather, to be more precise, not-always gestures toward a paradox in logic. A principle that would be called upon to regulate the alternation between the principled and the unprincipled could obviously not itself be a principle. This unprincipled principle, which corresponds here, hypothetically, to a “moving unmover,” a freely moving stop to being and thinking, is gestured toward in Aristotle’s not-always-thinking. It points to a place beyond or beside the fates, beyond where moirai of individuals are spun, where fate and indeterminacy are doled out in unequal portions, in a fluid staccato, without what could be called either chance or necessity.

### **Not-Always-Thinking and Time**

Not-always-thinking implies the possibility of a moving unmover, a principle that would account for the intermittency of principles, and this, I want to suggest, is why Aristotle does not proceed with the investigation into its cause. Such an investigation would unseat cause from its high position in first philosophy, and change the nature of first philosophy significantly. It hints at an alteration that is not change, and therefore not a part of a universe made intelligible by motion and perfectibility. With the suggestion of an alteration that is not change, in addition, arises the specter of a temporality that does not comport with Aristotle’s definition of time. Thus not-always-thinking also implies a time outside time that is not eternity, which appears as a non-temporal aspect within time.

In Book IV Section XI of the *Physics*, Aristotle specifies the nature of the relationship between time and change with a negative example. He will soon define χρόνος as “the number

of change with respect to before and after” (Physics 219b1-2). Once he defines time in this way a difficulty arises. Number, in the sense in which Aristotle means it here, is not the entity that is counted, and certainly not the arbitrary mark that commemorates it, but rather the noetic procedure of counting, which implies a counting agent and an intellectual potential to count (Physics 219b2f.). Noesis, it is made clear here, is responsible for time. In other words, although change is imaginable without cognition, time is not. While tracing out the consequences of the conception of time as numbering, Aristotle comes to express a negative proof of time’s existence. The way he formulates this proof, however, seems akin to the worry about not-always-thinking in *De anima* 3.4. When there is temporarily no thinking, what happens to time?

Although time is unthinkable without change, Aristotle certainly does not believe that time stops when physical beings don’t change or don’t appear to be changing. This is because in the absence of motion outside of it nous counts time by means of the constant motion within. For the sake of time, then, a part of nous always thinks. If or when there is no thinking in this part, and thus no internal movement at all, when “the soul appears to remain in a unified and undifferentiated [state]” there seems to be no time (Physics 218b32).

In these passages time is revealed to be not simply an epiphenomenon of change, but something that also depends on cognition (*dianoia*). In the same gesture something other than time is addressed as well. “When we do not change with respect to cognition [*τὴν διάνοιαν*], or if although we are changing we fail to notice [*λάθωμεν*], there doesn’t seem to us to have been [*γεγονέναι*] time” (Physics 218b21). The last clause of this passage, “οὐ δοκεῖ ἡμῖν γεγονέναι χρόνος,” might better be translated in this way: “time does not seem to us to have been.”

Intervals of not-thinking, in other words, instead of producing time, produce untime. If thinking fails to move ahead, fails to count the now points as they break off and in breaking off always

lead into the next and start again, time vanishes. In Aristotle's theory of time, where time and eternity are the two poles of understanding, such an untime does not seem to make sense.

Toward an understanding of untime, Aristotle retells a myth. The non-experience of not-thinking that corresponds to non-time is comparable to "those men in Sardinia who, in the mythological account [μυθολογουμένοις] slept beside the heroes, when they awoke" (Physics 218b24). Upon waking from their mysterious "sleep with the heroes" these anthropoi fit "the former now onto the latter," effectively "taking out the middle through anesthesia" (218b26). In his commentary on this passage Simplicius affirms Aristotle's account of non-time. Time, Simplicius writes, can escape our notice (115). His apparatus of stoic terms allows him perhaps to better pinpoint a certain susceptibility of the thinking activity to worldly corruption. He describes a dianoetic "following alongside" [parakolouthesis] that makes time a double of thought; the two proceed like traveling companions who combine their journey into one path.

Simplicius goes on to relate the tale that Aristotle apparently had in mind, the myth of Herakles' nine sons who died in Sardinia and whose bodies remained whole and undecayed after death. What kind of effect is this? A preservation in and by means of death? This is a strange mixture, known perhaps only in myth, of perpetuity and mortality. It is clear that in this fable it is time, as Aristotle defines it, that sleeps, waiting to be awakened. Numbering, thought as a constant, a standard for measurement, as a noetic continuum by which the rhythm of existence can be regularized falls prey here to a come and go of thought without a standard. To sleep with the heroes is to cull time from awareness, leading Aristotelian standards, potential-actual, contradiction, and the unchanging thought by which alteration becomes change, into an impotent dormancy.



If “the unchanging thought of change carries with it the thought of time,” as Simplicius writes, explaining Aristotle’s intention in a flash of insight, then a faltering, failure, or disappearance—however it may be described—of the thought of μεταβολή, change, would entail the loss of time, or at the very least a changed time. Time, the number of movement with respect to before and after, vanishes in a thoughtlessness that is *ageneton*—it does not “become”—and *aphtharton*—it does not “decay.” In the temporal void corresponding to distraction the cosmos, that vast mechanical linkage between the classes of change, uncouples. From time to time—the cause has yet to be sorted out, and it will, perhaps forever—thinking stops in Sardinia, to sleep “long sleeps beside [the heroes] for the sake of dreams or through some other need” (Simplicius 116). “Fitting together the earlier now with the later now and making them one, they remove—through anesthesia—the in-between.” Then one can say “there has not been time” (*Physics* 218b28). Yet can anyone say this who has not experienced it? Can anyone who has experienced this attest to its having occurred? Can one testify to it without a standard by which the experience can be measured? There is no such experience in the modern sense of the word. No *Erlebnis*, no ‘lived time,’ since the gash that unchains the continuum for the course of its lack of duration is stitched directly back onto waking life. This gash is the depthless depth out of which philosophy seeks to pull itself, an anaporetic, aneuporetic pathlessness. Neither memory nor prophecy penetrates untime.<sup>23</sup> Unlike anything else in the cosmos, the heroic sleep is consummately unmemorable, slipping by without a place-holder, without a time or function in being to which it could be assigned. Without revenant or specter

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<sup>23</sup> On the notion of a counter-time or “untime” in Kant and Hegel, see Werner Hamacher, “Des contrées des tempes.”

not-always-thinking rumbles around Aristotle's treatise on time like a mouse in the walls of a great edifice. About this mouse one can say, but only in a very particular sense, "one can't build without it!" It comes with the building, and its presence is not exactly an accident, and yet it is also not a part of the plan. It is simply not explainable from the perspective of the builder.

"τὸ μὴ ἄεὶ νοεῖν," the uninvited guest in the house of being, is ungeneratable and indestructible from the perspective of χρόνος. It will never decay, perhaps because it is dead already, or because within the Aristotelian system it is an actuality that does not correspond to a potential. It enters and exits without so much as a nod to the now traditional, then revolutionary, circuit between being and not-being.

### **Parmenides: The Mortal Way**

Aristotle's response to distraction in *De anima* belongs to the Eleatic intellectual milieu in which fourth century Athenian philosophy still moved. "Not-always-thinking" is colored by Aristotle's interpretation of not-being. Having interpreted not-being as potentiality, there was no place in Aristotle's cosmos, and certainly not in the highest aspect of thought, for a not-being that was utterly impotent. The ontological interpretation of not-being as potential was a reaction to a set of problems in which Aristotle, schooled in Platonic thinking, had been immersed throughout his education in the Academy, problems that originated in the teachings of Parmenides. Not-being in no way is: this is one formulation of the Parmenidean doctrine. Early on Plato had recognized that such a dogma not only gave a much-needed positive criterion for philosophizing, but it had also had a severe disadvantage: it led to the free-for-all—as he saw it—of sophistry. Sophists also made the Parmenidean doctrine into a rule for thought. From it they drew the conclusion

that if nothing is not, everything must be. If what-is-not cannot be said, whatever is said must be. And so instead of limiting the hold of doxa on mortal minds, Parmenides' doctrine had in fact extended and legitimized its dominion.

Thus when Aristotle cannot conceive of a not-thinking without a cause, or, in other words, when he fails to see how this negation of thinking could fit into the potential-actual schema by which he had tamed not-being, he still operates under the ontological parameters set by Parmenides in his poem "On nature." It should not be surprising then to find that the poem itself makes reference to distraction. When in the poem's first part the goddess urges the traveler to avoid the way of not-being, she presents him with an image of mortals who do not think. More than just a reference to distraction, in fact, the portrait that the poem paints of a group of distracted ones is an ur-scene in the history of the thought of thought. In order to arrive at justice, necessity, and being, thought must separate itself from not-thinking. Let us try to understand the Parmenidean scene of distraction.

### **Fragment 6**

The goddess who addresses the central figure in the poem, the "εἰδότης φῶτα," the "man who has seen," emphasizes the rhetorical aspect of truth when she proclaims in Fragment 8:

"μάνθανε κόσμον ἐμῶν ἐπέων ἀπατηλὸν ἀκούων," "learn while listening to the disingenuous order of my words" (Fragments Line 53).<sup>24</sup> It is not the goddess's words that are false, but their order. This important observation proves true in the structure of the poem itself.

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<sup>24</sup> Throughout this section I cite Gallop's 1984 edition of the poem. The translations are Gallop's, occasionally modified to bring out an important element in the Greek.

The line between truth and opinion cuts famously through the poem at the end of Fragment 8, just after this command appears: listen to the inauthentic order of my words. The end of Fragment 8 gestures past the “πιστόν λόγον,” “trustworthy speech,” that has reigned up to this point in the poem, with its corresponding “νόημα ἀμφις ἀληθείης,” “thought about truth” (Fragments 74/5). It gestures into the second part; the untrustworthy but also by all accounts much longer portion of the poem. Opposed like roads traveling through different terrains, the thought about truth that corresponds to a trustworthy order and the deceitful ordering of words that offers only “δόξα βροτεία,” brotic or mortal opinion, diverge at this point. The goddess stops between the two modes, or at least says she does (“παύω,” I stop), putting to rest a certain kind of discourse that corresponds to one relationship between thought, language, and being, while at the same time announcing the beginning of another, to which the human traveler, the experienced one, εἰδότα φῶτα, must also listen and learn. The traveler in search of truth must have the capacity to understand both orders, and, more importantly, to distinguish between them.

The fragment we are interested in, Fragment 6, falls in the first part, and so needs to be considered within the order of true thought and trustworthy words. Thus, at least insofar as the goddess can be trusted—and indeed she must be reliable, since necessity and justice attend her—we can take the words of this fragment and their order as “γνήσιος,” genuine, and not at all “ἀπατηλός,” that which does not authentically belong to truth. This is particularly surprising, however, given the image and doctrine that the fragment contains. I quote it in its entirety here:

χρῆ τὸ λέγειν τε νοεῖν τ' ἐὼν ἔμμεναι· ἔστι γὰρ εἶναι,  
 μηδὲν δ' οὐκ ἔστιν· τά σ' ἐγὼ φράζεσθαι ἄνωγα.  
 πρώτης γὰρ σ' ἀφ' ὁδοῦ ταύτης διζήσιος <εἶρω>.

αὐτὰρ ἔπειτ' ἀπὸ τῆς, ἣν δὴ βροτοὶ εἰδότες οὐδὲν  
 πλάττονται, δίκραννοι· ἀμηχανίη γὰρ ἐν αὐτῶν  
 στήθεσιν ἰθύνει πλακτὸν νόον· οἱ δὲ φοροῦνται  
 κωφοὶ ὁμῶς τυφλοὶ τε, τεθηπότες, ἄκριτα φύλα,  
 οἷς τὸ πέλειν τε καὶ οὐκ εἶναι ταῦτόν νενόμισται  
 κοῦ ταῦτόν· πάντων δὲ παλίντροπὸς ἐστὶ κέλευθος.  
 (Fragments 60)

It must be that what is there for speaking and thinking of *is*; for it is there to be,  
 whereas nothing is not;<sup>25</sup> that is what I bid you consider,  
 for <I restrain> you from that first route of inquiry,  
 and then also from this one, on which mortals knowing nothing  
 wander, two-headed; for helplessness in their  
 breasts guides their distracted mind; and they are carried  
 deaf and blind alike, dazed, tribes without judgment,  
 by whom being and not-being have been thought both the same  
 and not the same; and the path of all is backward-turning.

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<sup>25</sup> The desire to derive a philosophical axiom from these first lines has driven editors and commentators into heated debate over their meaning. The debate turns, of course, around the understanding of the verb εἶναι and its various forms and substitutes. Gallop prints several variants. The best summary of the salient issues surrounding the interpretation of these lines can be found in Tarán, p. 54f.

(Fragments)

Although these beings know nothing and so their thought, speech, and actions correspond to untruth, their existence in untruth is nonetheless true. In its broadest sense, truth contains them. And so we find, ordered into the goddess's reliable account, words that describe a band of beings who appear in a precisely defined, though for that no less difficult to comprehend, crisis at the very beginning of the gigantomachy over being. The move toward being and thought originates in a band of distracted ones, the words say. This fact belongs to truth, and what's more a primordial one. Aristotle does not cite this scene, however, despite the fact that it may be considered a progenitor of his question "what is the cause of not-always thinking?" It is surprising to find Parmenides less dogmatic than Aristotle on any topic. His reputation as the exponent of changeless totality seems to forbid it. In this case, however, a more broadminded view of existence allows him to paint a portrait of a sphere in which cause, αἰτίον, is not a factor. Parmenides does not ask for the cause of not-thinking, as though it were just one phenomenon among many in a rational order; instead he depicts not-thinking as a pre-rational given. For "brotoi" not thinking is the inexplicable but for that no less real condition of existence. Everything other than this originary brotic condition requires a cause and an explanation, but it does not.

The poem, and Fragment 6 in particular, are the site of an event in which the straight path of thought emerges out of the "backward-turning" path of not-thinking. Far to the side of being's way, as well as the restricted one-way street of non-being, curves a barely recognizable, prehistoric path. It is hard to recognize because it cannot in fact be compared to a path; neither path-like thoughts nor the thought of a path apply to it. The brotoi have not yet met critique and

not yet suffered a separation into is and is-not, good and bad, day and night. This is a community that understands “no” as little as it understands “yes,” an ἄκριτα φύλα, a phyle that has not yet heard the rumor of diacritics and the forced separation of what is into gené. Who are these indecisive Greeks? They are as far from an ideal for a future Europe as they are from the ideal of a thought bound to being. Why haven’t we heard from them before?

Perhaps because they have no music. That is to say, the distracted ones do not make up a Dionysian chorus that dissolves into “Rausch”; they don’t reveal an underlying “Ur-eine,” or belong to a higher commonality. “Singend und tanzend äussert sich der Mensch als Mitglied einer höheren Gemeinsamkeit: er hat das Gehen und das Sprechen verlernt und ist auf dem Wege, tanzend in die Lüfte emporzufliegen” (Nietzsche 1.30). None of these lofty Nietzschean terms applies to the earthbound, disunified, sober collective that the goddess shows the traveler in Fragment 6.

### **Who are the Brotoi?**

Parmenides’ poem could be considered a revision of the Prometheus myth, told not in the dark setting of Hesiod’s *Theogony* or *Works and Days*, which are heavy with the weight of human suffering and the burden of explaining it, but now in a redemptive framework, where the duty to sacrifice becomes the possibility of apotheosis, the bitter fruit of Prometheus’ cunning insurrection becomes the freely given gift of truth, and reverence for mortals becomes scorn for their intellectual weaknesses.

A Homeric motif present in the *Works and Days* that already disappears in the *Theogony* helps explain the change in perspective in Parmenides’ poem. In the *Works and Days* the poet reminds

us: “Κρύψαντες γὰρ ἔχουσι θεοὶ βίον ἀνθρώποισιν.” “For the gods keep life cryptic [veiled] for men” (5). As in the *Iliad*, men’s fate is held secret by the gods. This is part of the explanatory tendency of *Works and Days*. It explains human suffering by reference to the secret of their fate. Were the boundaries of life made clear to men, there would be no need to toil. Likewise, if day were extendable into night by means of fire, human suffering would be lifted. Instead, Zeus hides fire from men (“κρύψε δὲ πῦρ”). Prometheus learns this very trick from him: how to hide the light in order to preserve its divine element. Thus he conceals fire, now hidden from the god, and carries it away in a fennel-stalk (7).

In Parmenides’ version, the goddess hides nothing from mortals. She commands justice, Δίκη, to open the gates of the paths of day and night for the benefit of human nous. And yet this turnaround does not obscure the basic similarity of the two muthoi. Hesiod’s Prometheus is to his brother, Epimetheus, as Parmenides’ traveler is to the Brotoi. Epimethean through and through, the Brotoi’s lack of forethought causes their suffering; they are characterized by blindness to the future and an inability to plan. Epimetheus, who in the *Theogony* is called “ἀμαρτίνοον,” “missing-minded,” misses the benefits of fire that blazes through the secrets of nature in a forward-directed, planning thought. The community that comes into being once the furies are released from Pandora’s box is beset with suffering, lack of judgment, and an obscure future. They are, like Prometheus’ thoughtless brother, forbidden one gift, hope—ἐλπίς (9).

In the fragment with which we are concerned, the lack of future that characterizes the brotoi is named, “ἀμηχανία,” being without plans. Brotoi are beings without a device or mechanism that would produce time for them as a path toward future fulfillment of thought. They lack as well a corresponding sense of their own capacity to travel toward anything. In a real sense brotoi do not travel. In the Homeric poems “brotoi” is often used to designate soldiers



mired in battle and destined to die there. It continues to connote one half of the dialectical pair dead and living, immortal and mortal, but one cannot simply accept this relation in the abstract. The more abstract position is taken by the word θνήπτος, which signifies one who is not immortal, one beset by death, θάνατος. Another word, μέροψ, connotes the being that is defined only by its tendency toward death. Literally “death-faced,” it is etymologically related to μοῖρα, fate or lot. Between μέροψ, the death-faced one awaiting fate, and ἀνθρώπος, for which there are two plausible etymologies—“man-faced” and “upward-faced,” both of which imply a turn away from death toward a positive definition of man, perhaps as male, ἀνήρ, or as directed toward divinity—lie the βροτοί. The appellation is more often found in the plural without an article, an indefinite plurality. Morphologically similar to Βρότος, it may also carry semantic traces of this word, the differently accented word that indicates the blood and gore that runs out from a wound. Brotoi are, thus, those who go back and forth on a battlefield, who are deviceless, hopeless, insofar as they cannot stop the flow of blood.

### **A Shared Nous**

To see what is at stake in the image of the brotoi in Fragment 6, we also need an understanding of the word “nous” in the poem. The brotic “πλακτὸν νόον,” wandering mind,” requires elaboration. Heraclitus, even though he is identified by tradition as Parmenides’ opponent in these matters, is surprisingly helpful here. Only following Plato can the relationship between the two writers be taken as an opposition. A look at two fragments from Heraclitus shows important

correspondences between their concepts of nous.<sup>26</sup> Parmenides, great patron of permanence, and Heraclitus, great proponent of change, share a common understanding of nous.

A famous Heraclitian fragment recorded by Stobaeus comes closest to expressing the Parmenidean idea of nous. Similar in intention to the speech made by Parmenides' goddess, this fragment presents an injunction to a human community and a reminder of the divine source of its truth. "Speaking with nous (ξὺν νόῳ) it is necessary that they take their strength from what is common (τῷ ξυνοῷ) for all" (Fgt. XXX, p.43). As Kurt von Fritz points out, the play on words in this line is anything but unimportant. "The choice of the parallel forms ξὺν νόῳ and ξυνοῷ is hardly fortuitous and obviously stresses the connection between the νόος and the ξύνον or κοινόν" ("Noos2" 232). The fragment continues: "Speaking with nous (ξὺν νόῳ) it is necessary

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<sup>26</sup> The series of three articles by Kurt von Fritz still gives the clearest and most helpful exposition of the development of the concept of *nous* from Homer through the *physiologoi*. In brief, nous means neither mind nor thought in Homer, at least not in a sense that would be recognizable to us. Its two basic senses in Homer are 1) realization of a situation, usually in a flash of insight, and 2) planning or having an intention, usually in order to escape the situation that has been immediately comprehended as a whole ("Noos1" 85). Naturally only a version of this double-sense carries through to Aristotle, that which is concerned with unmasking the truth behind a situation, thus its essence. This transpires, according to von Fritz, with the advent of the notion that nous can be stunned or dulled, and thus that something can indeed escape its attention. He traces the shift to Hesiod. Only after this change in nature can nous come to have an ethical component, be good or bad, well-directed or misdirected, educated or potentially educated ("Noos2" 226).

that they take their strength from what is common (τῷ ξυνῷ) for all, as a city takes its strength from law and very much more strongly. For all human laws (ἀνθρώπειοι νόμοι) are nourished by the divine one. It rules (κροατεῖ) in the way that it wishes and suffices for all and is more than enough” (Fgt. XXX, p.43).<sup>27</sup> Far from the fork-tongued forerunner of sophistry, the Heraclitus of this fragment, through an operation that could be called poetic insofar as it relies on the sensual form of words, a creative homonymy or homotypy, to convey an intellectual connection—through a hidden commonality with human language the Heraclitus of this fragment posits a single source in divine justice by which human speech becomes law, and binds thought into a common community.

To speak with intellect, mortals must hold fast to its collective nature, because intellect, shared out through speech, finds its strength in what is common; nous is that which keeps what is common to all, beyond the idiomatic and the disparate, and as such nous itself is what is held in common by an all whose totality depends on it. He does not say, if I am reading this line correctly, that intellect is that which collects, as though there were first a scattering of opinion far and wide and then a god, or a philosopher, come to gather it up and sift wisdom from the ignorance. Rather, intellect is what is already collected, although distributed, among the all. It stands with it and in it, although it is readily distinguishable from it. Community appears in and as nous, a fact made obvious in the next Heraclitian fragment, also preserved by Stobaeus. “ξυνόν ἐστι πάσι τὸ φρονέειν.” “Thinking is common to all” (Fgt. 31, p.43).<sup>28</sup> The idea that a community, in order to be a community, has nous in its words, where this also means that there

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<sup>27</sup> Translation modified.

<sup>28</sup> For another version, see Fragment 3, p 29 in the Kahn edition.

is a necessity, *χρή*, that those with nous bring forward what is common among the multiple and fix it indelibly meets an analogue in Parmenides' *ταυτόν*, the same thing. "...τὸ γὰρ αὐτὸ νοεῖν ἔστιν τε καὶ εἶναι." The famous doctrine of Parmenides' poem is presented in what is considered Fragment 3: "...for the same thing is with respect to thinking and being" (Fragments Fgt. 3, p.56). Being is the name here for what is common and nous is what holds onto it, maintaining in perpetuity the unalienable goods of the group.

### **The Way of the Brotoi**

According to Heraclitus anthropoi should acknowledge what is common to them. In missing it, they have no access to the way in which "all things come to pass," and there is no difference between their waking and sleeping. Because they err, he enjoins them to speak with the nous that corresponds to the divine "one" behind their laws. The common thing to which nous corresponds is not the common of, say, the *hoi polloi*. Heraclitus does not mean that thought holds onto the lowest common denominator among an empirical group. More precisely, the common is highly uncommon, to the point of touching the divine. A community, then, is that which is in possession of the law of its multiplicity without knowing it, and orients itself around what it fails to notice. Then philosophy can go to work, reminding it of its hidden law, reducing the multitude of opinions to a manageable set of positive truths held in nous.

The brotoi seem to stand against this selective collectivity. The image in Fragment 6 shows a group that is not unlike the first biblical community after the fall of the tower of Babel. Their "*πλακτὸς νόος*," wandering cognition, shares only one thing. It shares a movement away

from things held in common, whose repository would be nous. In the wandering mind, thought is liberated from the hegemony of “the same thing,” ταὐτόν.

What path do the “uncritical tribes” walk, guided by planlessness, “ἀμηχανίη” in their breasts? “οἱ δὲ φοροῦνται/ κωφοὶ ὁμῶς τυφλοὶ τε, τεθηπότες, ἄκριτα φύλα,/ οἷς τὸ πέλειν τε καὶ οὐκ εἶναι ταὐτόν νενόμισται/ κοῦ ταὐτόν· πάντων δὲ παλίντροπὸς ἐστὶ κέλευθος.” “And they are carried/ Deaf and blind alike, dazed, uncritical tribes,/ By whom being and not-being have been thought both the same/ And not the same; and the path of all is backward turning” (Fragments Line 6-9, p.60-1).<sup>29</sup>

Aristotle arranges a cosmos as a hierarchy of motions, where beings are continually in places or moving between them without voids, and nous, top of the chain, moves and is moved ceaselessly by and toward perfected motion. Not-always-thinking may be an empirical fact and even a logical necessity produced by this arrangement, and yet it is given little room to develop

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<sup>29</sup> I do not take up the question here whether this last phrase, which echoes Heraclitus’ Fragment 78, is a deliberate reference to Heraclitus, in the assumption that his backward-turning bow makes not-being and being the same. It is not clear that Parmenides’ phrase implies the identity of contraries. In fact, it is doubtful that it does imply this, given that the phrase reads not simply that being and not-being are the same from the perspective of the Brotoi, but that they are also not the same from the very same position. The contradiction implied in thinking they are the same is thus doubled. Whatever this may mean, I suggest that it indicates that the perspective is contradictory, not its content, and that it therefore points toward a change in perspective that can only be associated with history. For an elaborate presentation of a contrary view, see Tarán, p.61-72. For a note of caution about leaping to conclusions, see Chalmers (8).

in the tight relations between potential and actual. Parmenides, in order to inaugurate the rule of the same—the common, τὸ κοινόν—offers an image of an order that disperses the order of the common-same. This other order in effect is an experimental illustration of Aristotle’s “not always thinking.” It shows a group that moves by a sort of auto-repulsion. A community of the distracted, brotoi have a distracted relation to each other, to the same, and to time. With each other insofar as each allocates to each a share of dispossession, “they” recognize no common good for always.

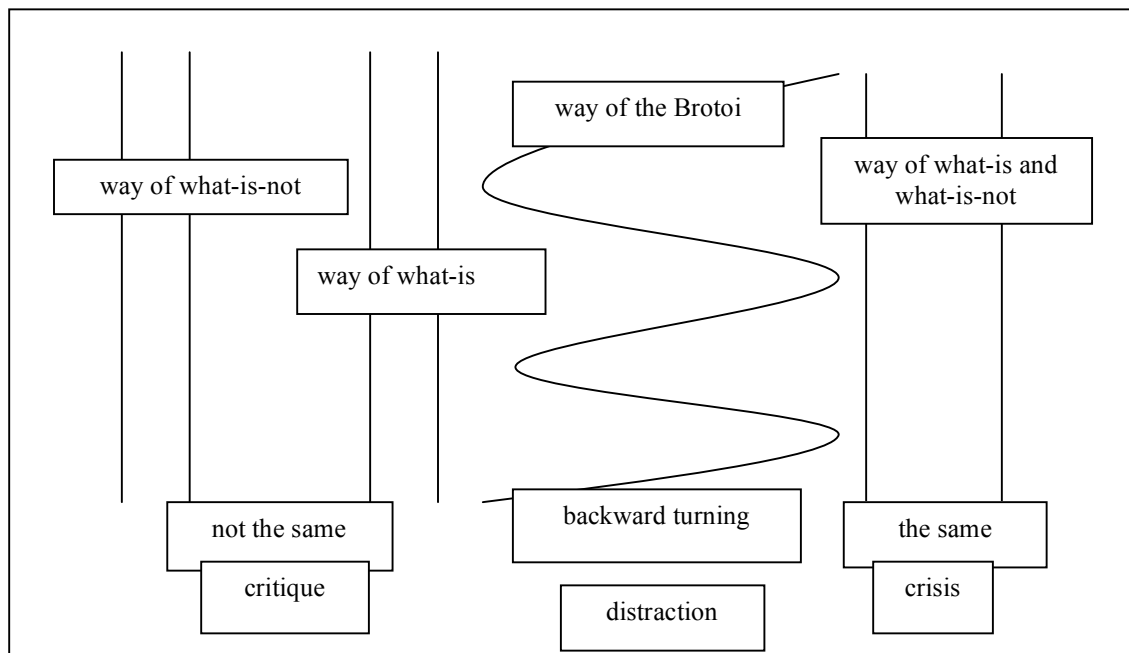
In the poem, the goddess initially describes three paths to the traveler:<sup>30</sup> the way of truth, the way of opinion, and the way of not-being. Only from the third way does she prohibit him absolutely. The other two she commands him to learn, the first because it is the way of justice, thought, and being, the second because it is the veil draped over the first. The veil of opinion indicates the unity and purity of what it covers. The mode of brotic existence is more complicated, however. For these beings there are four paths, at least as Fragment 6 lists them: the way of being, the way of not-being, the way on which the first two are indistinguishable, and the movement between these positions, between diakrisis and adiakrisis.<sup>31</sup> This fourth way is the way

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<sup>30</sup> There is great controversy over the number of ways. Tarán insists that the gate in the so-called proem separates the ways of night and day, not the ways of truth and doxa as some have insisted, and certainly not the ways of being and not-being, since the second should not be travelable at all (Parmenides Tarán 13-4). I follow Cornford’s earlier count of three ways (98-100).

<sup>31</sup> Thus Tarán miscalculates when he asserts that the Brotoi “are unable to distinguish, to judge, even what they see, so much so that they are blind and deaf” (Parmenides 63). Their

of the Brotoi. It is no way at all, if a “way” is an end-directed path. As a backward-turning way it is neither a way-to nor a way-back. Wracked by distraction, their waywardness marks out a distribution that we would explain today as temporal or historical. They move back and forth between setting iron-clad boundaries between truth and opinion and letting them flow together. A diagram of the mortal way, *neither aporetic nor euporetic*, would look something like this:



In essence, as those who are fundamentally directed toward finitude, the brotoi cannot decide between crisis and critique, at least not with any finality. Lacking a divine part, they are not merely lost, but lost and found, repeatedly, in a cycle of changes without origin or end. At

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senselessness is not simply confusion produced by an inability to distinguish, but distraction, produced by a vacillation between distinguishing and the inability to do so.

times they are directed, decided, and travel on the road of what-is. Here they distinguish easily and effectively between what-is and what-is-not. They build a community based on common goods and exclude the uncommon and the bad. At other times they let go of this distinction and annul their former decision. At these times what-is and what-is-not become indistinguishable again and the demand for a new decisiveness arises. One way to think of this would be to take it as an image of history. Parmenides of course does not do this. But one can make out here the marks of a historical community, one that moves between tradition-making and tradition-breaking. It is true, in any case, that distraction moves in effect between path and pathlessness. At the very least it should not then be mistaken for confusion. Already for Parmenides, it is not a state that could be easily cleared up. Those who live in distraction have a different ontological ground than those who live by thought.



**2. Zerstreuung as Thoughtlessness:  
Kafka's Critique of Consciousness**

### **The Thought to End All Thinking**

Everything remained unchanged.

To begin with this line is perhaps an indiscretion. Criticism as we understand it tells us precisely what change we can expect once critique has proofed the fundament of a faculty or a system or a work of art. Yet here I write along with the creature of Kafka's "Bau," "everything remained unchanged," as if to discourage such an idea of criticism from the outset, for Kafka criticism or for critique in general.

An investigation, an "Untersuchung," that begins with these words appears at first glance as little critical as a story that ends with them. No new thought, it seems to say, will be possible on the basis of it. Of course neither this chapter nor Kafka's fragment actually include these words; the words hang on it like an appendage, beyond the true thought-context of the work—a citation without quotation marks for me, for Kafka's Bau-creature an unfinished thought, a reflex, or perhaps for Kafka a beginning to yet another section of the long narrative—and so in any case tangential to the text's central thrust. It is a fruit that is as tempting as it is risky to pluck. To complicate matters, the phrase is not unique to the last page and line; virtually the same words appear six or seven times over the course of the text. Everything remained unchanged. Thus it is even more curious that it is with this proposition that Kafka's story becomes a fragment, as if upon writing the line once more, Kafka became unsure or afraid,

suddenly (after 56 pages, the length of the story as it appears in the Fischer critical edition), where the path he had been following might lead, at what point it would end, or whether an end was even conceivable. A story becomes a fragment for at least two reasons. It shrinks back from its tendency out of fear of going on or it falters at the inability to imagine a fitting ending. The words with which the story stops point to the former. Nothing has changed—here the text would begin to say over again what it had already said, perhaps never to conclude, and so it leaves off with an ellipsis, “...”, in this case one that is only implied. This means that it is more likely something in the story itself that leads to the break and not, as is usually assumed, something in the writer. It is well known that Kafka drops projects often, for various reasons; it would not be an injustice to call leaving off the rule of his oeuvre rather than the exception. Often however when a story on which he had worked for some time, despite having what he occasionally called “internal errors,” still bothered him or held enough of his interest or hope to continue, if the story had “innere Wahrheit,” as he once called it, he would write another ending later on in his notebooks, returning to the unfinished text on a new page. At times he wrote “Fortsetzung” across the top; yet this would be absurd for the fragment in question. “Alles blieb unverändert, das” ...and then pages later... “Fortsetzung” ... followed by a continuation—of what?—of more of the same?<sup>32</sup> If we accept this as an infinite story that has simply run out of space or, that has

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<sup>32</sup> As if it were the story’s—or even Kafka’s—greatest mystery or secret, the problem of the fragment’s ending has bothered interpreters. And not only interpreters. Ending in general bothered Kafka, for obvious and less obvious reasons, and also, we should admit, it bothers every reader and every writer... and all living beings. Why should this particular ending be exempted from the doubt and anxiety that finitude in general arouses? Or should we believe that

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the end of a novel or an essay is of less importance? No easy understanding can be reached of finitude in general, something after which comfort and ease would return. And yet, what if even the appearance of a proper ending is taken away, even from such an inconsequential artifact as a fictional story? If death is worrisome it is at least a familiar worry. In the context of this story, anxiety about the lack of a proper ending penetrates as far as textual matters. The editor of the *Apparatband*, Jost Schillemeit, indicates that, of the 16 sides, recto and verso, that the manuscript comprises, “eine ursprünglich vorhandene Fortsetzung vermutet werden kann.” The ending, says the editor, was originally present; the ending was contained in the origin and accident intervened to separate them. How does he come to this conclusion? From the observation that the text extends down beyond the comfortable writing area of the last page, “bis zum Ende der untersten Zeile.” The manuscript is poised at the tipping point between certainty and doubt over the ending. One thing can be surmised. Choosing a missing ending over one that was never written removes the burden of thinking what a story could be that does not naturally, constitutively, following its own internal path, or even by chance, find a proper end (*NS II* 142). Only a force working against ending, a demonic force, the assumption goes, only something like misfortune or death could have denied a story so ripe for a finish its ending. The assumption Brod makes in his afterword to the first edition of the fragment has had a long life. Basing his opinion on the authority of Dora Dymant, he states with certainty: “Die Arbeit war vollendet; es fehlt in den erhalten gebliebenen Blättern nicht mehr viel bis zum Schluß gespannter Kampfstellung in unmittelbarer Erwartung des Tieres und des entscheidenen Kampes, in dem der Held unterliegen wird” (*Beschreibung* 314). There are more recent, and more nuanced, versions of this conclusion for conclusion. Having decided that the creature’s enemy is “Death,” that the creature is “the

along the way exhausted its author or its readers, we may have to admit at the same time that it is, for this very reason, the most perfected of all of Kafka's longer works. And yet this evaluative gesture is not satisfying either. The gesture toward an infinite repetition of the lack of change is

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Thinker" ("Kafka's End" 176) and the Bau is "his tomb" (179), Mark Boulby goes on to surmise that the non-ending is intentional, because Kafka could not write convincingly "about his own death (who can?)" (181). The story's end and the author's death are completely conflated here. For this reason the Bau is in fact finished, even though and because it is incomplete. It ended when Kafka did. But did Kafka end? What do we mean by ending? What does death mean? Does life finish in death or merely end? The word is a ruse, another image, as Kafka has written. Furthermore, between those who take great pains to distinguish narrators and authors and those who identify them absolutely, as Boulby does despite qualifications and protests, there is a secret understanding. The existing, beginning and eventually dying author has a natural life, beyond the life of the text, and the text gains its authority through a reference, positive or negative, to this naturally existing figure. Does this not also do an injustice to the sort of ending that happens in writing, as well as in reading writing that just ends, cuts off, falters, or runs off the bottom of the page? What happens when a reader or writer decides to begin again from the beginning, or from some other point? On the model of a text, then, is there any reason to think that life has a single direction or movement? Likewise there is no reason to think that anyone survives any particular text as they were before reading it, especially Kafka's, in a way that one could say: there he is, alive again still. Isn't Kafka's death and inability or unwillingness to finish this fragment, not to mention the absolute farce of the creature's attempts to sum up his life's work, aren't these things all reminders of what readers do not survive, from minute to minute or line to line?

not merely formal, as if it were the perfect form for an imperfect story. No such romanticism seems possible here. Everything remains unchanged despite or even because of the matter of the story, that is, the narrative driven by the protagonist's expert and trenchant self-critique. In point of fact we don't know whether with this story the lack of an ending would have stimulated Kafka to return to it to explore other possible continuations, to try, yet again, to recuperate the creature's self-esteem or sanity, since Kafka's death interrupted the *Fortsetzung* of this and any other writing. And yet to readers for whom Kafka's oeuvre seems to have produced quite a lot of changes—in the trajectory of literary history, in thought and about thought, as well as in theories of the political and the social—ending this way, whether by chance or by plan, may cause consternation. After all, how far should we believe this statement goes in its denial of change? The creature denies the effect of his own story, not just once but repeatedly, and the denial of the effects of the creature's self-critique on himself and his world calls the efficacy of the story with respect to its readers into question—how could there be hope for us to change if despite his voracious, auto-critical thinking the creature in the end does not? Everything, including the creature, remained unchanged. And so we cannot adopt his self-critique as a method for our self-transformation—, readers' failure to draw inspiration for change or development from the story casts doubt on Kafka's "development" as a writer, doubts about Kafka's development this late in his career call the whole of his work and its supposed "transformation," "*Verwandlung*," of the field of fiction and the understanding of law, power, history, family, and so forth into question. In short, the line is an opportunity for pessimism. You might object that endings are never dramatic or conclusive in Kafka's fiction. Some would have expected a diminished ending, a doglike death, a fall under infinite traffic, disappearance into the straw. None of these anti-

climaxes, in which something seems to come to nothing, or almost nothing, seem forthcoming in the fragment.

No other work except maybe *Das Schloß* appears so intimately tied to the question of Kafka's own writing; indeed the parallels between the creature who builds the "Bau" and the author who writes the text are too obvious to go into detail about. Beyond this one interpretation, however, the story is heaped over with significations that compete for attention. Which thematic trail, which train of thought, which subterranean subtext would come to an end in the wished-for ending? How could all the passageways opened here be closed up or find that they all lead to the same point, be it an exit or an entrance to some other part of the Bau? A list can easily be made of the motifs such an ending would have to resolve, and yet it would be a *listige* list, a *List*—in German a trick or ruse—placed here in order to avoid confronting the complicated question of why so many interpretations are made possible by the fragment, while none seems to exclude any of the others. Still, although it is a false entryway to the text—and indeed by comparing the text to a building with entryways, we will have already settled on one of the many possible ways to interpret it, a popular one and a false one—as they all are—I will enumerate potential interpretations in a telegraphic and necessarily incomplete list. The story can be read as an allegory of Kafka's experience of his worsening illness in the winter of 1923, as he scans the tubers of his tuberculosis, anxious at the intermittent whistle in his constricting lungs, succumbing to terrors over death's final attack—death, which in his private writings he sometimes called "das Tier"; as a return to the book of Genesis to clip in an apocryphal legend of a lone Hebrew who builds a "shaft of Babel" in order to avoid striving upward and inciting God's scattering wrath; as an exposé of the philosophical concept of "ground"; as a send-up of the "Blut und Boden" rhetoric of political Zionism and other nationalisms; as a final elaborate

working out of his conceptual struggles over the practice of “Selbst-Beobachtung” and his tendency toward autobiography, partially at least an outgrowth of his training in Brentanist empirical psychology; as an allegorical representation of the writing of *Das Schloß* and the failure to perfect its structure; as a political fable told from the point of view of a radically individual consciousness, the tale of a thoroughly isolated, community-less individual set between two other tales in a trilogy of animal political theory, the first tale an investigation into the communal life of dogs, the third tale an operatic staging of an aesthetic state for mice. A dialectic animates the trilogy’s beasts: dogs (community); mole (isolated individuality); mice (inoperative community). And the list of possible interpretations goes on.<sup>33</sup> As the opening line

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<sup>33</sup> In the early collection of essays introducing the reading of Kafka to an English-speaking audience, Malcolm Pasley takes note of some possible readings. “The burrow as Kafka’s work” and “The burrow as Kafka’s inner self” are two rubrics under which he sketches out possible approaches to the fragment (“The Burrow”). Heinz Politzer emphasizes these two interpretations as well, calling the fragment “the tale of Kafka’s work at the moment of his dying” (321) and “a place of some timid inner security, a frail Castle Within” (333). More importantly, or at least, in an interpretive gesture that is less biographical—or ergographical—and more allegorical, Politzer, subtly insightful as is his whole reading, despite certain blind spots, argues that Kafka finally enters the Castle in this story. Whether we agree or not that it is “Kafka” or even “K.” who is at issue here, the suggestion that the creature builds and dwells in its Castle as a combination of K., the Schoolmaster, and the secretary Bürgel, who gives away its secrets while K. sleeps, is incontrovertible. The creature is Herr and Knecht at once, worker and planner, memory and speaker, destroyer and questioner, and its Castle is likewise everywhere and



to a contemporaneous story fragments puts it: “Alles fñgt sich zum Bau” (NS II 107). For this reason, the multiplicity of readings, the way the shafts of the Bau fan out toward Kafka’s other writings—the temptation to allegorize “The Bau” as a Bau is almost irresistible, and the lure of this reading, to which some have succumbed, is a clue to another reading to which the some remain resistant<sup>34</sup>—the story seems to play a programmatic role in Kafka’s late writings,

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nowhere, coincides with community and with the impossibility of coinciding with community, supported and promoted as a foundational myth by its inhabitants, yet never taken as verifiably true or even as useful information. Politzer describes the attitude in the creature that corresponds to this predicament as “extreme doubt” (322). This does not quite capture the situation of the animal who “cannot live within the cave and likewise is not able to bear the thought of leaving it” (324). To bear a thought, this is what the creature must do and cannot, and so he arrives at an unbearable thought—that he must let thought go. That this is not nihilism Politzer also understands. He denies that the “forces at work” in the story are purely “self defeating,” although the conclusion he draws from this insight, that Kafka finds security at last, however precariously, in this Bau, seems untenable (331).

<sup>34</sup> A paradox punctuates Deleuze and Guattari’s complicated and ambitious 1975 book on Kafka, one that calls at least part of their project into question. The very model or paradigm that they adduce over and over again to describe their method compromises their ability to exercise it. They do not intend to represent Kafka’s “imaginary” with a set of “archetypes,” and yet the archetype that comes back again and again to describe the whole complex of his works as well as particular aspects of it is the Bau (7). In addition, “The Bau” is never looked into as such (to use their metaphoric of doors and corridors), but instead it is used as a rhetorical device, chiefly as a

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metaphor. Slippage between the functional, political, “experimenting” reading that they announce and a more traditional, symbolic, hermeneusis begins with the very first lines. “How can we enter into Kafka’s work? This work is a rhizome, a burrow” (3). I will set aside the troublesome apposition between rhizome and burrow, whose differences do not stop with the line between vegetable and animal. To mention the obvious in what remains, they equivocate on the word l’oeuvre, which refers both to an object and to an activity in French, as “work” can in English. This by itself would not be a problem, except that they make use of the ambiguity without discussing its significance. Entering into Kafka’s “oeuvre” (activity) would mean, since the verb oeuvrer refers to a specific kind of creative work, such as forging national consciousness or a body of “works,” writing like Kafka does, following the ductus of his pen, no easy task and one already attempted by others, Borges and Blanchot among the most remarkable. Entering into Kafka’s “oeuvre” (object), the text of the Bau in and among his life’s work, would be to come to the limit of the metaphor and leap across, to imagine a text or lifetime worth of texts as a building, and consequently to imagine reading as moving through the space and finding your way blocked by doors that must be opened with keys. In other words, “as” is everywhere in their text, the unmistakable sign of interpretation at work. They go on to clarify, still in the first paragraph, that Kafka’s “work” is not at all like the Bau, or what the Bau at first seems to be in the story. The burrow, they claim, and here they mean the burrow-as-Kafka’s-oeuvre, has many “entrances.” Because of this it is not open to interpretation but only to experimentation. And yet, as I have begun to point out, the logic of their rhetoric argues against the limitation to an experimenting technique. Entrances and impasses, maps and modifications—the vocabulary belies a mixture of Aristotelian and cartographical desires—to place obstacles and remove them

projecting a project and reflecting retrospectively on past failures. Why, if we grant the existence of a plurality of readings—an infinity—why should the creature in this pivotal story terminate his reflections with the disjunction “but”: “but everything remained unchanged, the ” without further enumeration of the object of this unexpected changelessness? Do all its rich motifs come to nothing? Is the ending a symptom of a creeping nihilism, in which creature or author acquiesces to the thought that only death can terminate the failed attempts to bring constantly turning thoughts and rabid self-critiques to their end? Is it then analogous to Kafka’s repeated failure at ending things: the interminable, if intermittent, liaison with Felice Bauer, strife with his father, his burdensome job, trouble with his stories, illness, Prague, and so on? In this way the fragment could be seen as a successful attempt at autobiography—at last!—, the autobiography of a failure to finish. These potential readings—and others I have not yet mentioned, and won’t—make the lack of an ending plausible, necessary even. It does not explain, however, why the spinning out of these important motifs, even if none of them is brought to a final conclusion, leave everything in the end unchanged.

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as well as to chart position and measure progress. Here and elsewhere a traditional metaphorical toolbox is put to work, such that, through a set of substitutions very appropriate to what Deleuze and Guattari call “the Signifier,” although they denigrate it, also in the first paragraph, the burrow can come to represent, speak for, and thus interpret a plethora of archetypes, maneuvers, and desires. The only thing it does not come to represent is itself. See pages 3, 7, 8, 10, 13, 17, 18, 33, 37, 41, 46, 59, 75 in the English edition for further use of the Bau as a metaphor. We might ask, what in “The Bau” allows for this effect of easy transfer?

Readers who don't suffocate in the labyrinth of the creature's self-reflections or exhaust themselves mentally trying to follow its movements or who find they can stomach the lack of a clear moral or a single intention behind the creature's back and forth in the tunnels it has built for itself that will also, we suspect—as does the creature—, become its tomb, they—us, all of us, we tunnel dwellers—will be surprised at the end of the story, where it simply halts with an affirmation that it would have continued, had it continued, in much the same way.

The statement itself makes some difference. Everything remained unchanged. At this point in the story, neither proper end nor new beginning, though perhaps the climax of the action—if it can be called action—a thought surges up in the creature's mind that it has been unable to repress several times earlier as well but whose force as a thought works through repetition. Everything remained unchanged. In the same last paragraph (the paragraphs are quite long, like the Bau's tunnels. But let us abjure the temptation to analogize in this way.), the creature uses an expression with strong Nietzschean overtones: “auch dieser Gedanke schleicht mir ein.” The idea that a thought creeps in after one like an underground creature is Nietzsche's. The thought that creeps after Nietzsche is this: “wie, wenn dir eines Tages oder Nachts, ein Dämon in deine einsamste Einsamkeit nachschliche und dir sagte: „Dieses Leben, wie du es jetzt lebst und gelebt hast, wirst du noch einmal und noch unzählige Male leben müssen...”—the thought of the eternal return of the same (Die fröhliche Wissenschaft 3.570). For Nietzsche what returns is not, despite the common understanding of his thought, a world of things—the eternal return is not a cosmological principle, but rather thought hitting its limit, yet again, and the one more time is this limit, revelation of the fantastic wish for progress. It is the thought, alien to Aristotle and the tradition he inaugurates, of a thought without change. Not existential but intellectual, it is the thought that keeps coming back to the philosopher in his most isolated

moments, to give a glimpse of freedom from teleology of the will without nihilism, and this happens by stealing away his will, emptying his mind of what thought has built there, expunging in particular a specific way of counting time. This is the great change to the European tradition that Nietzsche the Lehrer expects from his great Lehre. He writes in a contemporary note: “wenn du dir den Gedanken der Gedanken einverleibst, so wird er dich verwandeln“ (v. 9 p.496). You will be transformed by the thought that it is the thought of the return of “the same.” Once you have assimilated it everything changes. Burdens of causality, a transcendental a priori, progress, reason, history will no longer weigh on you—why?—because this is the heaviest thought; all other thoughts are light and move upward. The problem is of course how to bear the weight. Kafka’s story, if we can add one more interpretation to our deceptive list, dramatizes the encounter of a creature, as voracious in its thinking as it is in killing and hoarding its prey, with the thought that his thinking changes nothing but only builds additions onto his Bau. The thought that, for Nietzsche, releases human action from bondage to law, leaving only lightness and “freie Geister,” in Kafka’s dramatization, sinks the creature further into the earth. Already underground, the creature breathes gravity; for this reason it builds sideways, pulled down evenly at all times by a force it cannot or will not evade. Its medium of existence is density and darkness. In a terribly material sense it is the being that moves the earth, though this, as the repeated phrase suggests, does not mean that it changes the world.

Not unlike the Bau creature, Nietzsche made a habit of returning to earlier work in order to expose the faults in its Grund-Gedanken, which only the perspective of time and further thought could expose. In one of the critical prefaces that do just this, Nietzsche presents—not without an eye to future readers who would be able to “hear” him, even ones so unorthodox as Kafka—he unwittingly presents the conceptual outlines of the Bau fragment. It is not clear

whether Kafka read the preface to *Morgenröthe*; nevertheless I quote from it extensively here as a prelude to my reading of “The Bau.” It offers such a close analogue that it will allow me, I hope, to point out where Kafka’s critical project follows Nietzsche’s and where it may deviate.<sup>35</sup> At times it seems as though Kafka signs on to perhaps the strongest revolutionary project for thought since Kant, yet at other times it seems as though he is deeply critical of Nietzsche’s

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<sup>35</sup> Being struck by the thought of the same again, the same thought that one’s thought has not changed, is to lose the thread of thinking. So Nietzsche hopes. The thought of the return of the same notices one difference from its usual thinking: there is no difference, and thus everything in the history of thought changes. In Nietzsche’s framework, the only true change is that there be none, to let change derail and with it thought and progress. Kafka’s creature’s mantra, in the face of the Lehre of the eternal return, is either more ambiguous or else it draws out the ambiguity of Nietzsche’s thought. How? For one thing, because we are driven to ask whether this thought belongs or does not belong to the text it articulates and cancels out at the end. Is it part of the creature’s self-critique, or not? If it is, and it certainly sounds like it is, writing it makes no difference at all. With its utterance, nothing is renewed: even this repetition is more of the same, part of the elaborate chess-game the creature plays with himself in which even when he wins he also loses. Whereas Nietzsche’s thought is supposed to end “thought” by giving a final turn to thinking, Kafka’s creature’s repeated phrase is no prick of conscience, just an empty refrain, like the chorus in an overplayed rock song. The creature’s ending, like Nietzsche’s ultimate thought, does not end the activities of mind, but continues it, to infinity. For Kafka it would have to be the thought after the last thought—to cite a well-known Kafkan aphorism out of context. The very last thought is already not a thought.

critical project—critique of critique, an ambiguous movement that Nietzsche inaugurated it and gave it an image—a snake biting its own tail. In the preface to *Morgenröthe* Nietzsche writes:

In diesem Buch findet man einen “Unterirdischen” an der Arbeit, einen Bohrenden, Grabenden, Untergrabenden. Man sieht ihn, vorausgesetzt, dass man Augen für solche Arbeit der Tiefe hat...fragt ihn nicht, was er da unten will, er wird es euch selbst schon sagen, dieser scheinbare Trophonios und Unterirdische, wenn er es erst wieder “Mensch geworden” ist. Man verlernt gründlich das Schweigen, wenn man so lange, wie er, Maulwurf war, allein war—

(v. 3 p.11)

— Damals unternahm ich Etwas, das nicht jedermanns Sache sein dürfte: ich stieg in die Tiefe, ich bohrte in den Grund, ich began ein altes *Vertrauen* zu untersuchen und anzugraben, auf dem wir Philosophen seit ein paar Jahrtausenden wie auf dem sichersten Grunde zu bauen pflegten, — immer wieder, obwohl jedes Gebäude bisher einstürzte...

(v. 3 p.12)

Woran liegt es doch, dass von Plato ab alle philosophischen Baumeister in Europa umsonst gebaut haben? Das Alles einzufallen droht oder schon in Schutt liegt, was sie selber ehrlich und ernsthaft für aere perennius hielten? Oh wie falsch ist die Antwort, welche man jetzt noch auf diese Frage bereit hält, “weil von ihnen Allen die Voraussetzung versäumt war, die Prüfung des Fundamentes, eine Kritik der gesamten Vernunft” — jene verhängnisvolle Antwort Kants, der damit uns moderne Philosophen

wahrhaftig nicht auf einen festeren und weniger trüglichen Boden gelockt hat! (— und nachträglich gefragt, war es nicht etwas sonderbar, zu verlangen, dass ein Werkzeug seine eigne Trefflichkeit und Tauglichkeit kritisieren solle? Dass der Intellekt selbst seinen Werth, seine Kraft, seine Grenzen “erkennen” solle? War es nicht sogar ein wenig widersinnig? —)

(v. 3 p.13)

In the preface to his story, Kafka’s creature responds ironically to Nietzsche’s vitriolic preface: “Ich habe den Bau eingerichtet und er scheint wohl gelungen” (NS II 576). Kafka’s creature is at once the “modern philosopher” whom Nietzsche lambastes and Nietzsche himself, who claims the mole’s work for his own.<sup>36</sup> Facing the dilemmas he outlines in the preface to

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<sup>36</sup> The lineage of the mole demonstrating a certain scope and movement of thought extends to Kant, who in the first book of the “Transzendente Dialektik” admonishes: “Statt aller dieser Betrachtungen, deren gehörige Ausführung in der Tat die eigentümliche Würde der Philosophie ausmacht, beschäftigen wir uns jetzt mit einer nicht so glänzenden, aber doch auch nicht verdienstlosen Arbeit, nämlich: den Boden zu jenen majestätischen sittlichen Gebäuden eben und baufest zu machen, un welchem sich allerlei Maulwurfsgänge einer vergeblich, aber mit guter zuversicht, auf Schätze grabenden Vernunft vorfinden, und die jenes Bauwerk unsicher machen” (Kritik der reinen Vernunft A319, B76). Already in Kant the “transzendente Gebrauch der reinen Vernunft” is contrasted to the mole’s work, which not only makes the majestic edifice teeter on its foundation, but to do so must use reason in an anti-transcendental fashion that can only be, from a Kantian perspective, a Mißbrauch.



*Morgenröthe*, how reason can be critiqued by reason, the deceptive metaphors of building permeating Western philosophical language since Aristotle, and with the characterization of his own self-critical work as “molework,” Nietzsche pulls back the curtain on a scene that had been playing in the German imagination for some time. For one thing, a minor genre of earth-boring stories trickles through the German canon. Two of its high points are J.P. Hebel’s “Unverhofftes Wiedersehen”—a favorite small work of Kafka’s—and, more notably, Novalis’s *Heinrich von Ofterdingen*. Novalis’s formulation, “Wir suchen überall das Unbedingte, und finden immer nur Dinge” (Blüthenstaub 426) lies in this vein, as does Ofterdingen’s name and the poetic avocation he develops in order to try to reach the unconditioned *through* things. More generally, the groundwork for the trend towards both mines and moles is laid in Aristotle. On one hand it precipitates out of his hylomorphism; on the other it follows from the exemplarity of the mole. To demonstrate the ontological status of “*dunamis*,” Aristotle calls on the mole as one who is blind although it has vestigial eyes. The structure of potentiality and actuality can be seen most clearly in the mole, for whom blindness derives from the potential to see. Aristotle does not draw the conclusion, as Nietzsche does, that the mole’s factual blindness gives him a wholly other potential, to be scientist of the invisible. The mole is the *Untersucher* of the invisible, formless underneath of the all—the thing-in-itself—on which thought is supposed to rest. Nietzsche’s mole perceives in the realm of substance, and, sightless, *builds in the ground of the visible*. For Nietzsche this is probably a metaphor, and not unironic. And yet the instinct to go through the ground instead of beyond the skies, to dig down through matter to arrive at substance instead of ascending to the heights of immateriality—this impulse drives both Nietzsche in his critical preface and Kafka’s creature in the fragment. Let us name the Bau creature provisionally “N.” Set loose in the hallways of his construction, N. writes a critical preface to his oeuvre and an

anteroom to his Bau in which he exposes the faults in its fundament. In this respect it has less to do with construction and constructivism and more to do with the critique that belongs to it, follow it, and shores up its efforts. The ironic, worried, retrospective attack on a past self and its ideals, for the sake of changing the future.

At a point in the work's afterlife the builder returns to mourn the original plans. A futile gesture for his own work; only of benefit to the future that will construct itself around this limited dismantling. Critic and artist share a narrow space in this endeavor. As a response to the failed critique of reason by itself Nietzsche will later propose the artist—the artist will be the one who deploys the power of interpretation, who sets horizons and does not feign to provide a natural, unshakeable *fundamentum inconcussum* for her work, who provides structures for the future and not for the present or for herself insofar as she replaces making with making-up, building with faking, *factum* with *fictum*. With this thought Nietzsche raised the circus tent in which Kafka would become a celebrated trapeze artist. As an artist whose Graben was from the beginning Untergraben, Kafka writes this fragment, as one who made his life art, not as an aesthete—a common wish in his time. The Bau contains the confessions of an artist who began from the position sketched in Nietzsche's preface, and who has returned to redress the assumptions of his "unterirdische," critical, undermining work by means of literature. Literature, then, is not coincident with critique. In it the one who desires to reap the rewards of undermining comes up with less instead of more ore. Hilarious and terrifying in equal measure, the ruminations of the mole ruin the idea of critique as that which produces change in thought's fundament; this structure—for it is also a structure—is brought to an abrupt end in Kafka's story. "Alles blieb unverändert"; the glorious reign of groundlessness—for what ground can a mole's construction have, since it lives and works in the ground?—the recognition of the abyss hidden

in the ground that Nietzsche saw and gave as a gift to the artist of the future does not change anything, at least according to the image projected in this text. Something other than change is in the offing. We do not stand over an abyss, we stand, as Kafka writes elsewhere, on two foot-shaped parcels of dirt. This brings us to the main critique—but we cannot call it that—that Kafka the creature enacts through its frantic movements in its tunnels and its attempt to train his thought on perfection their flaws. Even digging up from under, even undercutting the triumph with which philosophers have cut the ribbons on their edifices—even critique to the point of destruction—is no more and no less than building, again. Everything...<sup>37</sup> The critical philosopher's sojourn in the "Finsterniss" proceeds, as Nietzsche writes, from a desire for "seine eigne *Morgenröthe*." By the winter of 1923 to 1924 when he writes the *Bau* fragment, Kafka has a different understanding of literature's desire; leaving the dark dark, art leaves change behind.

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<sup>37</sup> To avoid the appearance of nihilism, Winfried Kudzus cleverly places the change that he apparently believes *must* occur as a result of or over the course of this story before the story begins. "Die Veränderung im *Bau* ist schon am Anfang geschehen" (316). He reasons that as soon as one enters the *Bau*, one has missed the point, reading is in vain, and all there is to gain from the words of the text is a fall into a bad infinity. "Der Eingang in den *Bau* ist gleich zu Beginn verstellt." This may very well be, and the creature admits as much—although in his description there is an authentic entrance, beyond the deceptive one. Yet it only applies to the text if you fall into the other trap and take the irresistible analogy between *Bau* and text as true. A text is not a *Bau*, reading is not "going," unless, that is, you prefer to ignore the words that would otherwise slow up your progress.

## The Artist's Clear Eye

Sometime after February 1906 while he was in the last stages of completing his law degree, Kafka made a list of five points toward an understanding of the relationship between art and consciousness. According to Max Brod, who preserved them, they were written in response to two articles he had published under the joint title “Zur Ästhetik.”<sup>38</sup> Aside from his rejection of Brod's ideas—Brod's equation of aesthetic beauty with “newness” he turns down unreservedly—over the course of the five points Kafka develops an intriguing line of thought. Let me briefly summarize his main points.

- a. Aesthetic pleasure is awakened by a *Vorstellung*—an idea, image, representation, literally a “proposition”—that does not come into contact with the sphere of the will.
- b. The pleasure of aesthetic apperception differs essentially from the pleasure brought on by other new things that strike consciousness, such as scientific discoveries or news from a foreign land.
- c. Art exhausts itself, but not like other things that become exhausted in modernity. Art exhausts itself or, rather, exhausts consciousness for the reason that, in aesthetic apperception, the object loses its balance—and, Kafka adds: in the bad sense.

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<sup>38</sup> Brod chronicles the rediscovery of the manuscript containing the points, along with a sketchy remembrance of the occasion for writing them in *der Prager Kreis* (Der Prager Kreis 93-5). Here he censures the “jugendliche[n] Leichtsinn” with which he had equated beauty and newness, taking the notion innocently from Herbart and Wundt. These remarks are followed by a transcription of the original letter to Brod.

d. Perhaps aesthetic human beings differ from scientific human beings? He later confirms that there is a difference.

e. Finally and most surprisingly, apperception is not a concept in aesthetics.

The central terms of the theses (here abbreviated and reformulated by me) like the terms of Brod's corresponding articles—*Vorstellung*, *Apperception*, *das Ästhetische*, among other words—most likely have been taken from Brentano's descriptive psychology as it was practiced and taught by his followers in Prague. Kafka and Brod had the opportunity to learn the precise meanings and uses of these terms in the new science when they attended Anton Marty and Christian von Ehrenfels' university lectures as well as in discussions with the Brentanist group at the *Café Louvre*, which at the time they both frequented.<sup>39</sup> That Brod is thinking of this set of terms and the force with which his teachers—the more orthodox of Brentano's followers had settled in Prague—had pronounced them, is likely; whether Kafka was or not, his conclusion differs from Brentanist doctrine. The new science of the psyche will do nothing for art, since unlike perhaps every other sphere of knowledge or life, art does not “touch” consciousness, at least insofar as consciousness remains tinged with will, or so these theses seem to indicate. As

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<sup>39</sup> For a summary of Louvre-Circle activities and the cultish relations among Brentanists in Prague at this time, see Barry Smith, “Brentano and Kafka”. Smith argues here that Kafka adopts his portrayal of consciousness from his lessons at the university and in the Louvre Circle; he goes on to interpret several of Kafka's fictions using Brentano's psychological and ethical theories as interpretive keys. For an introduction to Marty's activities in Prague and excerpts from one of his lectures on descriptive psychology, see Marek (“Einleitung zu Anton Martys *Elemente der Deskriptiven Psychologie*”).

Kafka somewhat irreverently puts it in one of them: apperception “as we know it, is not a concept of aesthetics.” What might this rather radical proposition mean? First let us specify that he is discussing consciousness as he and Brod and others in their milieu knew it, which, we should say, is not altogether different from the way in which we know it still today. Good students of Brentano knew consciousness, and its synonym, the word that had become popular in empirical psychology, “apperception,” as the bare minimum of awareness necessary to notice what one is thinking and that one is thinking that accompanies every thought-act. This minimum mental activity founds the new science of descriptive psychology. If, according to Kafka, then, noticing plays not the slightest role in “aesthetics,” two questions immediately arise: what concepts, if any, do belong to aesthetics as Kafka sees it? It seems almost impossible to imagine a concept, useful for a science, that makes no contact with consciousness. And thus the second question: is there a thinking or apperception that Brentanists were perhaps unaware of, another way to construe human capacities that might be made use of in art or art theory? If not, we may begin to wonder whether, in Kafka’s mind, there existed a science of art at all.<sup>40</sup>

Descriptive psychology’s own view of art is not fully spelled out. Neither Brentano’s early *Psychologie vom empirischen Standpunkt* nor the transcripts of Marty’s lectures on the topic go into much detail about aesthetic matters. Both however include aesthetics among the disciplines that will be revolutionized once the science of consciousness is fully worked out. In

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<sup>40</sup> A rare mention of this early fragment can be found in *Kafka’s Clothes* (99-100), although Anderson reads it as an aspect of Kafka’s concern with being in motion, while I see him critiquing Brod for this common view of “modernity.” It is the modern and the “new” that Kafka sees as the most traditional and immediately passé.

an introductory session from the year after Kafka took his lecture course—the version for which a full transcript is extant—Marty insists that descriptive psychology will serve as a “Grundlage” for many disciplines, among them: “die Ästhetik, Pädagogik, Ethik, Logik, philosophische Staatslehre” (“Elemente” 54).<sup>41</sup> Brentano had gone further, though in scarcely more detail. “Nur ganz flüchtig weise ich darauf hin, wie, in der Psychologie die Wurzeln der Ästhetik liegen, die unfehlbar bei vollerer Entwicklung das Auge des Künstlers klären und seinen Fortschritt sichern wird” (30). How both the study and production of art would be more securely grounded in the science of consciousness is not explained in these texts. We can infer the nature of the ground however from the goals of the science and the foundation it is supposed to offer other spheres of knowledge and intellectual activity. It clears, as Brentano puts it, the artist’s eye. The clear eye corresponds to an insight into the structure of consciousness and a new kind of truth that descriptive psychology claims to provide.

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<sup>41</sup> Barry Smith and Johann Christian Marek have transcribed and edited several sections from the 1903 transcript of Marty’s lectures on descriptive psychology, whereas Kafka attended them in 1902 (“Elemente”). Nevertheless, given the orthodoxy with which Marty followed his teacher’s doctrines, the fact that he taught the same course on descriptive psychology in Prague for more than three decades, taking into account as well that he himself did not work in the field, but instead in the philosophy of language, it is likely that the lectures for which we have the manuscripts are very similar, if not identical, in content to those that Kafka would have heard. It is also true that Kafka did not like these classes and, according to Hugo Bergmann’s memoirs, did not pass the exam at the end of it.

The truth of descriptive psychology's "clear eye" is immediate, self-evident, and certain. Its insight is not prone to error insofar as a perception does not differ from its object. At a distance a camel might appear to be a horse, the sea on the horizon might be a mirage; the clear eye sees through these illusions, not because it sees the truth behind appearance, but rather because it dispenses with objective truth and replaces it with the truth of appearance. It accepts the sight of a horse and the mirage as an image. Perceptual illusions, like the fata morgana, are as real to it as any other objects. "Wahrnehmung" lives up to its name. "Innere Wahrnehmung" the doctrine goes, is always "wahr," while "äußere Wahrnehmung" is that which is subject to error, illusion, distortion, and so forth, insofar as it denies the primary involvement of psychic acts, states, limitations, and motivations in perception. Inner perception is true because it does not bleach out the coloring of experience. Marty calls it "Innere Erfahrung" ("Elemente" Elemente passim) and it becomes the science's highest law. One can only imagine Kafka's reaction to hearing a statement like the following during Marty's lecture: "Die Gesetze der deskriptiven Psychologie können vollkommen exakte Fassung erfahren, sie gelten ausnahmslos" ("Elemente" Elemente 53). Here is a much more far-reaching law than the Bohemian legal code that Kafka would later study and practice in. If he had wanted to become a philosopher he would have had to serve this other, less fallible law. He didn't. Nonetheless "psychology without soul," as Brentano puts it, quoting Albert Lange (Franz Brentano 16), must have interested him, since, if there were a psychological aspect to Kafka's fiction, it also would make no reference to a soul. Brentano and his students taught the soulless science as a series of axioms. The first states that inner perception is always true, since what it perceives it perceives as a perception, that is, in the way that such and such appears to consciousness. What appears is true in the way it appears. Clarity and certainty are grounded in internal experience. Extrapolating on Aristotle, another



axiom states that thought is a set of thought-acts directed toward objects, thinking is thinking something, and intentional objects, as is widely known, are true and exist because nothing more is required of them than that they be those things which thought intends. There is still of course a discrepancy between external and internal perception, but the difference only serves to confirm the mastery of the inner sense and the primacy of experience over objective truth.

“Inner perception” or “inner experience” raised to universality is “apperception.” As Marty defines it in the lectures, apperception is “ein explizites Erfassen oder anerkennendes Beurteilen von solchem, was schon implizit in der Perzeption, in der bloßen Wahrnehmung beschlossen war” (“Elemente” Elemente 58). This description is copied verbatim from a series of Brentano’s notes or lectures published posthumously under the title *Deskriptive Psychologie* (33). The notes contain a long section on apperception, now under its other name: “Bemerken,” in which Brentano resolves a contradiction that beset his book on empirical psychology. In the earlier book he had to deny positivistic science a foothold in consciousness, while at the same time allowing the new science to develop a dependable method for investigating psychic structures. Thus he admonishes: “Es ist ein allgemeingültiges psychologisches Gesetz, daß wir niemals dem Gegenstande der inneren Wahrnehmung unsere Aufmerksamkeit schenken zuzuwenden vermögen” (41). What, if not “Aufmerksamkeit,” will provide access to inner perception, such that its truth can be made available to the psyche’s science? He is unable to provide a satisfactory answer. The difficulty in coming up with an answer is signaled in this statement, which seems to call into use the very “Aufmerksamkeit” that was earlier banned: “Die Hinwendung der Aufmerksamkeit auf die physischen Phänomene in der Phantasie” is the “Erkenntnisquelle” for psychic laws (41-2). In *Psychologie vom empirischen Standpunkt*, “Aufmerksamkeit” falls under the ban, since it is the single mode of perception recognized in

positive science and thus represses all the others, and it returns from exile to become the one and only source of psychic laws. Brentano wants to banish it because of its relation to the “genetic” sciences in their monoptical view of sensing in science, and yet he cannot disentangle himself from the methodological exigencies of science per se—to put it rather coarsely, to be able to look at what it wants to see. The desire to guarantee access to psychic events moves toward attention as a paradigm even though attention reduces all psychic events to one kind of event. Attention emits an attractive force that is difficult to resist. This crossed wire—you cannot pay attention you must pay attention—is exactly the short-circuit for which the idea of distraction appears as a salvation in those thinkers who are influenced by yet who depart from the fundamental problems of phenomenology: Heidegger and Benjamin, but also perhaps Kafka. Husserl of course will develop the eidetic and phenomenological epochés in response to the dilemma, and yet this will be another tool for developing attention in an arena in which attention should be prohibited. Heidegger will criticize Husserl for remaining trapped in the “theoretical” mode (and Levinas will support this in his thesis on Husserl’s notion of evidence) but Heidegger will then also call for a turn away from *Zerstreuung* toward the ontological difference, that comes dangerously close to attention once again. Brentano, when he returns to the problem of method in *Deskriptive Psychologie*, goes to the heart of the matter. He identifies *Aufmerken*, like other basic terms in contemporary perceptual psychology as well as in the ongoing tradition of German idealist philosophy, as overburdened with the will. And so, for *Aufmerken* he substitutes “*Bemerken*.” Apperception could never will a view of the object of inner perception; this would turn apperception into perception, the same perception of outer objects but turned on inner objects, which would disintegrate under its fixed gaze, as Wundt’s empirical psychology did, in Brentano’s estimation. No, apperception had to be qualitatively unlike outer perception, since

what was to be received, perceived, or apperceived was the how of perception. So it had to have no relationship to willing, and thus hold itself back from being described as an internal, purposeful turning-towards of the gaze. This is the source of Brentano's ultimate rejection of Husserl's epoché: it was too willful. As a tool of science therefore Brentano's *Bemerken* is quite subtle: noticing in apperception means barely noticing, unwillingly—almost—registering the way something appears in experience. If it were attention, Brentano remarks, it would turn all experiences into objects of attention, which is exactly the mistake the science of experience is designed to avoid (41). All shades are wanted (though not willed!), delicate impressions, blurry visions, the half-seen and the barely imaginable, error, illusion, art, and so on. What's more, an inner attention would pervert its truth insofar as *Aufmerken* directs itself only toward present objects, and the targets of this science will include memories, dreams, wishes, fantasies, and perhaps as yet unheard-of modalities of human sensibility.

Although the basic activity of the new science could not be willed, it could be practiced, "geübt." A psychologist can and indeed needs to undergo "eine Ausbildung in *Bemerken*" and perhaps this is the training on which Kafka drew when he wrote these points in response to Brod's articles. It was surely what the others in the circle were practicing and discussing, no doubt in a more orthodox manner than Kafka, and yet Kafka notices something in Brod's assertions about aesthetics that escaped the psychologists' attention (38). At the core of the new method directed toward rebuilding the traditional sciences lay a mode of attending to experiences without direct attention that was supposed to preserve their truth, the truth of the way in which they were experienced. The "clear sight" that Brentano wishes for the artist trained in "*Bemerken*" is oblique. Brentano compares it to trying to see the edges of eyesight (38). As indirect as it is unwilled, carried out only after extensive practice, once it has become, I assume,

a habit or even a virtually automatic repetition of movements—how else could it be executed but not willed?—the method is not to be confused with no method at all. As much as it cannot be willed, it also cannot be accidental or contingent on anything external to consciousness, even if it does dispense with a soul-substance and replace it with an interrelationship of intentional acts, sending a shudder through the afterlife. This is to say that although it reduces will to an absolute minimum, will cannot be done away with altogether. As in Kant’s definition of the aesthetic, it probably retains a will-like character. Without the ability to initiate a scientific act, it could simply disappear. This leads Brentano to make note of an important worry. “Wichtiger fast noch als die Übung im Bemerken ist die Sorge dafür, daß keine Übung im Nichtbemerken bestehe.” Not-noticing, if it is practiced, builds into an unassailable wall that the scientist can only break through with difficulty and with continual effort; it becomes a kind of “second nature” (39). In this way the psychologist balances on a tightrope between willing to the smallest degree and drowning in *Vorstellungen* over which he has no control; Brentano and his students stand at an abyss into which the scientist’s self-experience threatens to escape completely.

### **“Ästhetische Apperception”**

Kafka begins his repudiation of Brod’s arguments about art and consciousness with a warning. “Man darf nicht sagen: Nur die neue Vorstellung erweckt ästhetische Freude, sondern jede Vorstellung, die nicht in die Sphäre des Willens fällt, erweckt ästhetische Freude” (NS I 9). The sentence—point “a”—proposes that aesthetic delight appears only as a response to an unwilled idea, image, proposition. *Vorstellung* means: that which thought places before itself. Only, in this case thought cannot place it there by its own will or any of will’s variants, desire, love, hatred,

appetite, wish-fulfillment, and so forth. It is neither new, in Brod's sense, nor old; it is simply unwilled, and for this reason not simply unexpected, but more precisely unlike anything the will could expect, like nothing that could be made into an object of willing. It comes before thought as something totally unremarkable, *nicht bemerkenswert*. And so, whereas a never before thought *Vorstellung* could easily be recognized as an object, a slightly different object than expected—new, that is—Kafka's aesthetic *Vorstellung* is unrecognizable, and so either not a *Vorstellung* at all, or exactly the same as an old familiar one—or so it seems. In addition, we cannot say that it arrives with violence, as if to destroy the will, since it falls completely outside the will's sphere, without touching it, in a willless zone, an area of pure receptivity perhaps, or as a spontaneity without desire, where there is nothing that would register this *Vorstellung* as a violation of the will's willing. It does not, for example, force consciousness against its will—as perhaps only another will can do. Nothing in this arrangement either strengthens or affirms the power of willing in general. In bypassing the will Kafka strays into Brentano's territory (not to mention coming very near to the argument of Kant's third critique). For this is exactly Brentano's requirement for the psychologist: they are to have *Vorstellungen* without will, or with just enough smuggled in to be able to initiate psychological activities. If the modicum of volition preserved in the concepts of apperception and *Bemerken* were erased there would be no psychology, but rather art, if we follow Kafka's thinking: that which comes from elsewhere, is not a will-correlate, and leaves consciousness undisturbed. Art will not be apperceived; it will not let it be noticed that it is in fact art, an art-experience. Or, in other words, art is not an experience. It is the one item on the list of inner perceptions, apperceptions, and the sciences that will be founded upon their truth, ethics, logic, politics, and so on, that, we might say, has no inner truth—for consciousness. If art is true it is not true for thought. This is why Brod's

technical term “aesthetic apperception” can hardly satisfy Kafka. He mentions in the second point that the phrase needs explanation, hinting that it may not actually have existed before Brod invented it. Indeed it is hard to imagine what the phrase might mean, since aesthetics originally names the science of perception, while apperception, since at least Leibniz, begins to describe the unity of the thinking subject over and against perception and through time, as the secondary awareness of perception, coming after it, gaining control, moving toward concepts. Is aesthetic apperception an apperception that merely perceives? Perceives again? A duplicate perception?

And although Kafka’s target is clear when he writes in his last point, “das Unsichere bleibt der Begriff ‘Apperception’,” it is also true that in a psychology that intended to lay the cornerstone for all other sciences on the basis of its technique, apperception would have to be the most secure concept. Apperception makes the science teachable and learnable. This turns out to be true: Brentano’s infallible internal vision made the twentieth century a testing ground for techniques of inner experience. If art theory cannot be included in the project, so much the worse for art. Kafka is not aiming here to defeat psychology’s claims; rather, he aims to make a place for art outside of its purview. Later, his attitude will change. “Zum letztenmal Psychologie!” With these words he emphatically rejects the science once and for all in 1918 (NS II 81). For now his notes to Brod raise the question of its scope.

And yet, how would the sphere of aesthetics be defined if no one was entitled or equipped to notice its objects, if no one could, by extension, communicate anything about them, or if in their presence no one could initiate an act of thought? In this way aesthetic experience seems, to Kafka’s mind in this very early polemical set of points, the purest art purifies thought of experience.

Beginning from the conclusion to his rebuttal to Brod, Kafka cannot go ahead and establish the new aesthetics to which his reflections seem to lead him. His conclusion is wholly negative. Far from being a reiteration of the credo “art for art sake,” the conclusion implies that since art cannot be apperceived, there are no grounds on which to claim that a mental object is art, or for that matter, that it is not art. The significance of this argument is still to be fathomed. Thought “as we know it” does not notice art; a science of art, aesthetics, cannot be built on such a discouraging fact. Given this impasse, Kafka sets up a small experiment. Maybe aesthetics will let itself be presented in another way. Let me paraphrase the most stunning passage of the Brod refutation:

A man without a good sense of direction—Kafka—comes to Prague, never having been to the city before. If he wants to write Brod a letter he asks him for his address, Brod tells him, and Kafka apperceives it. He never needs to ask Brod again. If, in contrast, he wants to visit Brod, he must stop at every corner and crossing to ask the way. “Immer immer fragen,” Kafka writes with pathos. Experience and apperception are incompatible according to this parable. Only in converting experience to “inner experience” or truth can apperception act. Experience is irreducible, and particularly not liable to a “reduction” to a structure of thought, to an interiority like mind or consciousness, even to a transcendental consciousness. Like a computer hard-drive, apperception consists in calling and recalling addresses. Consciousness, we might say—for Kafka—doesn’t travel. Experience, in contrast, has an indispensable empirical moment that cannot be apperceived because it arrives from outside, is limited in duration and value, moving past its sphere of effectiveness each time anew, and thus needing a primary contact with others, though these, too, and the relation to them, are not conceivable as a transcendental condition of the possibility of experience. Along the course of the absentminded visit, the being called

“Kafka,” whom we could as easily call “K,” might grow tired and sit down in a café (the Café Louvre, to find himself listening to a talk on apperception?) or even abandon the search, but still he will never have apperceived, never have reached a goal, except maybe by stumbling upon it. Art departs from Wissenschaft and the desires that Wissenschaft arouses. It removes one’s “Ortsgefühl” or demands that one abandon it; it sets one loose in one’s city of birth as though in a labyrinth, with the result that, unremittingly out of place, unable to conceive in advance what lies beyond the next turn, one makes do with the short life-span of a local answer. What seems like bad empiricism, however, is in fact the condition of the possibility of the empirical per se, severed from a higher unification. Far from alleviating this repetition as apperception does, art institutes it, travels along with it, abandoning consciousness to a mission for which it no longer carries the resources internal to itself.<sup>42</sup> Art posts street signs in the labyrinth of experience.

Another way to say this is that art has an internal relation to exhaustion. In the second point in the rebuttal, Kafka takes up Brod’s term “Ermüdung.” Brod seems to mean the situation of “modern man,” who, from the perspective of a subject that is constantly in motion, perceives objects that are themselves in motion; modern man soon tires of the vertiginous back and forth. Kafka scolds Brod for the vagueness of this account. What does he mean, precisely, by exhaustion? (Marty taught students nothing if not to be precise with their words.) Exhaustion also arises from studying or mountain climbing, Kafka remarks, even from the quotidian act of

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<sup>42</sup> In this way Kafka’s art-theory, in whatever sketchy and undeveloped form we have it in these early points, differs radically from Kant’s. The aesthetic object itself loses its balance, toward not being an object at all. Reflective judgment, in contrast, stimulated by an aesthetic object, calls the faculties into play in order to submit the object to the rule of apperception.



eating lunch. And yet, although lunch may exhaust me, I cannot say that beef is no longer a food because today I tired of it. No, of beef I cannot say this, but of art I can. For art does not exhaust the man; it exhausts itself in him. This comports with our at times bewildering everyday understanding of it. Only of art am I allowed to say that such and such an art-object is no longer art; it does not stay in apperception as a permanent possession. In order to be slippery in this way, to come and go as it pleases according to another law or lack thereof, it cannot come into the grips of the will whose ground-tone is possession. It is in this “bad” sense that Kafka claims the art-object loses its balance, ready to tip over out of possession into nothingness. Here now gone tomorrow, Art must have another faculty that finds the jarring alternation between being and not-being acceptable.<sup>43</sup> It may very well be that art, for the young Kafka, already acts in

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<sup>43</sup> In his study of Kafka’s relation to Prague intellectual milieus, Arnold Heidsieck acknowledges the larger relationship between apperception and fatigue—“Many of Kafka’s works of fiction offer some observation concerning the dynamics of apperception and fatigue,” he writes. Yet he considers exhaustion a mere interruption of the “mysterious power” of apperception that he claims Kafka explores (33). For as much as Kafka does place characters in situations that test their ability to notice, and Heidsieck adduces some of the most important of these (34), he more and more—according to the program outlined in the notes on Brod’s article—tests the ability to set noticing out of operation altogether by various means, sometimes, as in the Bau story, through a mode of art for which consciousness is itself the great obstacle. The range of intellectual influences available in Kafka’s Prague are admirably summarized in the introduction to Heidsieck’s book.

concert with an eternal return, which Nietzsche associates in a note with a “Wendepunkt der Geschichte” (v. 105 p.15).

### **Keine Literatur**

These very early notes on the incompatibility of art and consciousness seem, in the motivation behind them and even in their object, far from the famous reflections on literature that Kafka enters in his diary at the end of 1911. There, in three obviously interrelated fragments he explores the relationship between literature and national politics, in a tone that at first hearing seems quite positive. In the first fragment he says outright that literary work has the great advantage of setting minds in motion, drawing the often divisive strands of national consciousness together into a unity such that it binds together unsatisfied elements, and restricting national attention to its own circle, so that anything foreign appears not as itself but reflected through the domestic bastion (Tagebücher 312-3). It is, however, somewhat surprisingly, “bad literature” that best accomplishes these things. Bad literature reflects national consciousness back to itself, Kafka remarks, leaving no “holes” [Lücken] for foreign things to penetrate; for foreign things would be “indifferent” [gleichgültig] to the project of unification, fracturing national self-consciousness’s uniform surface (Tagebücher 314). Bad literature, in this fragment, may be equivalent to “beauty” that Brod equated with the “new,” an aesthetic Vorstellung that is as easily accepted into consciousness as the latest thing is accepted into the market, challenging neither its authority nor its underlying rhythm of change, absorption, rejection, change... The automatic reflex of a nation toward itself, channeled through bad literature, is not weaker but stronger in small nations, Kafka continues, where the national self-

image depends all the more on the few works and even fewer literary figures it produces. Here the pressure for literature to aid and abet the small national consciousness in its David-like effort to resist foreign goliaths is almost too great to withstand. This is the “schöpferische und beglückende Kraft einer im einzelnen schlechten Litteratur” (Tagebücher 314). As often happens, a power that makes many happy makes Kafka anxious. The Kraft or power to create literature that binds nations through self-consciousness is handled here with hesitation, in ambiguous phrases like the one above, such that one cannot say with certainty whether Kafka holds that the effects of “bad literature” are bad or good. The entry is exploratory, experimenting, not a representation of a conviction or a set argument. Like many of his diary entries and notebook fragments, he explores a set of ideas here in their first outpouring, without editing himself; then he moves on, often never to return. For this reason I should proceed with caution, to avoid drawing grand conclusions or taking these reflections as programmatic for literature in general of Kafka’s writing in particular. There is no doubt that the reflections are critical in nature, aimed at the institutions and process of institutionalization of one time and place. The examples he gives, Czech literature with which he is somewhat familiar and Yiddish literature that his friend Jizchak Löwy knows, seem to benefit their respective small nations for the sake of politics, not literature. And yet this is not quite right.

What becomes apparent in the second entry, written a few pages later, is the deleterious effect of bad literature on national consciousness over time. Even more powerful when it seems to issue from dead authors, old bad literature produces a “Befangenheit,” a bias, toward the straightforward [ehrlich] that quickly turns to reverence [Ehrfurcht] (Tagebücher 321). Being thus captive to one attitude, veneration, a narrowing and stultification of literary processes results, which turns all literature—in the vain attempt to flee these restrictions—immediately into

politics, the primary example of this being the similarity between literary works and political slogans. Whereas polemical, direct, even aggressive speech, which Kafka compares to Schimpfwörter, plays a small role in great literature, in bad literature it comes to dominate the entire field insofar as every line of every novel seems to demand a decision between life and death. Left out completely in the exaggerated power of literature to command the attention of the nation's Geister through an emphatic tone and propagandistic style is the exhaustion proper to art. Bad literature lets "keine Ermüdung aufkommen" (Tagebücher 320). The notes to Brod's article, then nearly a decade old, prompt us to wonder whether Kafka has rejected his sketchily articulated views of art and consciousness, or whether this oblique reference indicates a continuity with those reflections. Be that as it may, no one will ever tire of this art-form, the slogan, hot-headed headlines, bad words calculated to whip readers into a frenzy—to preserve the unity of consciousnesses that insures the nation's unity. Such literature provides this kind of service inexhaustibly.

Only in the context of these two entries does the third exploratory entry allow its tentative conclusions to appear in the proper light. This is the infamous "Schema zur Charakteristik kleiner Litteraturen" (Tagebücher 326). Despite the fact that what he calls "kleine Litteraturen" here may seem to have much in common with Kafka's own forms of writing, they in fact share very little. What he calls here "kleine Litteraturen" are "keine Litteratur," or at least "keine Kunst," according to his earlier definition in his rebuttal to Brod. "Small literatures" is another name for what he formerly called "schlechte Litteratur." The "creative and happy-making force" of bad literature that binds the national consciousness together becomes, over time and after its success, a universal pleasure at the literary handling of "small themes" that require no more than "a little enthusiasm" on the part of readers for upkeep of the political structure that depends on

them. Small literatures comport perfectly with political slogans in a decadent age. From within the very narrow functioning of literature in a nation whose consciousness has long been reified through bad literature's tireless reflection, Kafka does not recommend a literary rebellion led by the sharp swords of an advanced guard, and certainly not a return to earlier ideas. On the contrary—taking the current situation for granted as the starting point for any possible “art” that would not be new, but creep in unnoticed to shift the basis of thought, he proposes a schema of bad literature's “better” characteristics. That he intends to list effects [Wirkungen] here that are not simply “good,” like the effects he catalogued in the other two fragments, but even “better,” has to be understood—to risk repeating—as the betterment of a very bad situation from within its horizons. Out of an art which has become consciousness, an art that is no longer art—and so is perfectly compatible with the national good; it has become one of the nation's preeminent goods—Kafka begins a tentative list of existing “good” effects (worse effects) that point toward better ones. In doing so he assembles the skeleton of an art that can be screwed together from the bones of the nation's cultural corpse, comparable—perhaps—to a ready-made or a found object, a list of positive dialectical moments in the current aesthetic stillstand. To a literature with no place for Ermüdung—no one will ever tire of bad literature: today this would have to be said about television...—corresponds something like a thousand-year Reich. In contrast, many of the elements that Kafka praises in small literatures—Streit, Zeitschriften, Principienlosigkeit, leichte Symbolbildung—flaunt their exhaustibility. These aspects might allow the half-dead art underwriting national consciousness to actually die, and to keep on dying: this after all is the major symptom of healthy art: it dies, gets you lost. Literature, the one that may arise from the salvageable elements of ossified “small literatures,” will carry its own exhaustion with it. Or else, like many of Kafka's later works, it will exhaust those who seek to exhaust it. A final

positive moment in the schema of small literatures that Kafka outlines here under the rubric of “Popularität” is: “Glaube an die Litteratur, ihre Gesetzgebung wird ihr überlassen” (Tagebücher 326). Here the schema breaks off with a comma. Just before it does, however, it is apparent that the infallible law that Anton Marty, following Brentano, lays down for the apperception of thought-acts is not the only law. After the law of psychological consciousness, which is “always” true and “ausnahmslos,” and after the law of national-consciousness in which no one ever tires of the reflection on the same that bad literature endlessly serves up to it—where the new is always already old—another law follows, the law that literature, under the strictest limitation of its sphere of effectiveness, gives to itself. In its self-satisfied dormancy consciousness bears a strange fruit. Defenses worn down by tradition, it cannot help but believe that what has provided its unity and stability—culture, literature—will continue to do so. By means of such a belief, which consists in trust in literature’s affirming stance toward politics, by means, also, of the “unburdening” [Entlastung] of the demands made on it by a national politics that it has made successful (much like Hollywood, which supports the supposed left-leaning politics of its elite by reiterating and reifying national consciousness through the jingoism, violence, bigotry, and heroic exceptionalism of the family and nation-centered characters and narratives of its films)—since it has become stable it places its full, complacent trust in its art—in a state where literature has become part of the regulatory mechanism of political-ideological processes, whereby it comes to spurn principles and forgo strong symbols, in short, in the very weakness and corruption of small literatures Kafka sees the potential for a literary effect that is not simply good—does not simply continue to work for the national good—but has, instead, something better in mind, better than nation, better than mind, better than good literature that in effect and over time is in fact the worst.

### **Thought, Politics, Art**

If bad literature is good, better literature is bad, for consciousness and nation. This motto may help us understand the relationship between Kafka's early notes on aesthetic apperception and the sketches in which he tries to think his way out of a decadent literary situation. The connection between the two moments crosses from what is less noticeable than the slightest notice to what is good in the bad, or better in the good, in a national literature. In the first case Kafka suggests that Brod think of art as that which cannot be captured, reified, or, better: preserved forever as the answer to one question. Those interested in art's effects will not be able to dispense with the advice of the next work, and the next, and so on, with each one its effect becomes interrupted and redirected, dropping its tie to the previous instance while projecting yet another future. This is a halting and somewhat hilarious version of the artistic path, a keystone kops clip of thinking, complete with half-gestures, misunderstandings, wrong turns, discoveries, and the possibility to sit out the overall mission in a café, given that all missions are impossible in a labyrinth; how lucky then that this one—Prague—has a café. This is the image that Kafka leaves us with at the end of the theory of aesthetic apperception, a discontinuous path whose only end is collapse.

A close relationship to its own disappearance makes art hard for consciousness to assimilate. In both fragmentary textual moments something essentially empirical about art escapes awareness's digestive mechanism. Art is not, like inner perception, to be "taken as true"; far from it, what truth would need continual input from strangers producing an infinite deviation

of its non-path? Who would give up the permanent truths in the mouths of dead authors for a cast of living figures gesticulating comically?

“Never will I be able to dispense with the passers-by” (NS I 11). The only a priori is the never that leads the traveler to dawdle. Never is not a logical restriction. In logic I will have already arrived at my destination once I have apperceived the address, whereas in art or experience I will have never quite arrived, even after I am there; even at the end I will have to stop and ask again. This is to say: aesthetic apperception waits for experience. Kafka qualifies the first logical, universal statement, “eine Apperception ist hier überhaupt unmöglich” with the factual statement “deshalb aber habe ich immer noch nicht appercipiert” (NS I 11). “Always” like the previous “never” must be taken as operating with a very peculiar sort of necessity, a compulsion not to rely on what is logically or a priori necessary. Consciousness, that which holds onto a relation for always—Brod and his street address, for example, the “new” once it is apperceived and becomes instantly “old,” a psychological description of a thought-act—because it has come late, is always behind in seeing that relation carried out. Its belatedness to experience determines its necessity, in contrast, as a foregone conclusion.

In the fragments on “bad literature” Kafka has little to say about the classical determination of literature as form. In point of fact, these reflection have much more to do with tone, content, and effects than with genre or form. And they have little to do with literary criticism that seeks to separate bad from good for the sake of Bildung. Instead the fragments view literature from a position external to poetics and Literaturwissenschaft—the entries do not mention a single author, style, or even a particular genre. Instead, they turn around the binding force between literature—although we don’t yet know what this word means—consciousness, and nation. In the end these three categories are revised by means of the schema for the



characteristics of small literature. The three main headings of the schema are: “Lebhaftigkeit,” “Entlastung,” and “Popularität.” “Liveliness” recalls the turn to passers-by, the repeated irruption of the empirical that characterizes art in the arguments against Brod. The characteristics that fall into this category show a tendency toward just such contact and the ensuing contingency. “a. Streit b. Schulen c. Zeitschriften.” Small literatures are responsive and polemical; they enter into a struggle. They are also worked out among small, loose-knit groups. Finally, they are written in and for their mode of distribution. In all these ways they are in fact *Zeit Schriften*, and tell against consciousness’s eternal possessions. The second category, “Unburdening,” celebrates characteristics that run counter to the principles of descriptive psychology. The first is “Principienlosigkeit,” hardly a viable characteristic for a philosophical science of thought. Not only does Kafka praise this literature because it frees itself from fixed principles—presumably because the nation that relies on it to reflect or project its image has become so transfixed by its own face that literature is able to abandon the principles that the nation once desperately needed it to produce and follow, and so it discovers a freedom within restrictions—the freedom to become unscrupulous. Literature, we may suggest, is the petty but indispensable official who finds that a job that once took him the whole day, with time and age now takes him hardly five minutes and allows him plenty of time, between filling out forms, to make artworks... that look for all the world like government forms. Once great themes give way to “kleine Themen,” finding themselves unburdened of greater responsibilities, they no longer need to emblazon national consciousness with unequivocal symbols. What’s more, literature no longer subordinates itself to rules. As we learn from the next category, “Popularity,” due to the general, unreflective belief in literature, the rule-giving function is abandoned to literature. It makes its own principles, which do not have the character of principles, but instead are scrupulously

unprincipled, without instituting a counter-principle of the unscrupulous. When nation-building reduces it to a terrible smallness, whence it becomes free for its own laws, Literature does not choose law again. Unburdened of the binding character of law, as well as consciousness, small literatures become liable once again to the law of exhaustibility of laws, and the empirical moment necessary for traveling a labyrinth.

From the context in which these entries were written, it is apparent that they are not only a set of reflections on the public usefulness of literature; they are also an attempt to articulate the value of a life spent on literature, and thus an exercise in self-justification. In other entries written within a few days of the entries on “bad literature,” Kafka evaluates the literary life from the perspective of his father’s generation, admitting how much they suffered to allow his generation to live a comfortable, assimilated life (Tagebücher 293, 304). While contemplating his situation as a Jewish son, he witnesses the initiation of another into the same predicament. He attends his nephew’s circumcision and afterwards records the deceptive character of the “Symbolbildung” it involved (Tagebücher 310-2). The symbolic character of the ritual has turned into thoughtless repetition, the union of God and people a musty convention. Although the baby has entered the “Bund,” as the Mohel’s prayer pronounces, the western European Jews standing around daydreaming or bored Kafka describes as “in einem deutlichen unabsehbaren Übergang begriffen[.]” What was formerly a living symbol is in the process of taking on a purely “historical character” (Tagebücher 311-2). Alongside the emptying and becoming parodic of the tradition, he also commits to paper an invective against Goethe, whose “greatness” has damaged the German language, holding prose back (Tagebücher 318). Finally, and most importantly perhaps, he records an “accidental” conversation with his mother at breakfast. “Nur ein paar Worte” about marriage and children belie the two great motifs over which Kafka would suffer

for years. With cold precision he presents his mother's image of him: a "healthy young man, who suffers a little from imagination" with an "interest in literature," but no more than is proper to any educated person. One can see how integral the reflections on literature's greater and smaller effectiveness are to his personal situation. Looking into the political and historical network in which literature is caught he discovers a moral justification for living that rivals marriage and children. One also finds several entries in December 1911 in which he reminds himself of his long-standing intention to write a "Selbstbiographie" (Tagebücher 298). In one, he examines the practice of writing entries in a diary (Tagebücher 307-8).

One of the advantages of "Tagebuchführens," he decides, is the "reassuring clarity" with which one becomes conscious of "the transformations...that unceasingly underlie one." In modern times, he acknowledges, one generally believes that around experience the frame is constantly shifting, but as soon as one admits this, one "then always unconsciously denies [it]," in order to secretly depend on "hope" or "rest." The recognition of instability is a claim to stability. To counter the force of the secret denial of change in every admission of it, there is diary writing. Writing in a diary has an inverse relationship to the general acceptance of change that conceals its secret denial. Diary writing itself, almost regardless of its content, proves that one has managed to write down "Beobachtungen" even in the most unendurable circumstances. Consciousness makes its own stopping point in the midst of fluctuating experience. And, at the same time, by means of this "halt!", this Halt, or foothold for Geist, one is forced also recognize how deeply rooted is the striving for an overview of changing circumstances and for this reason how strongly one is driven to write in the diary (Tagebücher 307-8). Diarism admits the secret denial and is nothing other than this admission. It is tied to a deceptive strand in experience from which it will never free itself. A note found among the more elaborate conceptual constructions

of 1917-18 indicates the trajectory of this entry. “Der Geist wird erst frei, wenn es aufhört Halt zu sein” (NS II 68). Negatively speaking, having achieved reflection on experience in a diary does not give the mind a stopping point as much as it demonstrates its continued lack. Freedom, as Kafka later will describe it, comes neither from striving nor possessing.

From very early, then, Kafka tried to articulate the difference that art and writing make. He was interested in the difference from consciousness and all consciousness implied: universality, permanence, binding of individuals into a group, will, the old will to renew. Although he cannot prove it, he can demonstrate it. In his rebuttal to Brod’s naïve association of art with newness Kafka shows art sidestepping consciousness. To explain this demonstration, we might add that Kafka allows for an effect that permits consciousness to escape from itself, to become distracted from its certainty, and thereby become susceptible to what is uncertain or dependent on others in experience. Brentano, insofar as he determined one particular experience as the scientific mode of access to consciousness, breaks through the history of soul-substance and reason, while instituting another regime of the will, another catalogue of faculties or thought-acts resolving into another image of the shared, the universal, that which binds a subject and a nation according to a prefabricated image. Noticing, the kind that establishes new categories—“new” as a substitution for the old—cannot be, for Kafka, the basis of art. Although he does not or cannot yet enumerate the consequences of such an assertion, he does try to place art in a position where it cannot be subsumed by science. In point of fact by its very existence outside science it must call into question not only psychological science’s claim to universal scope, but also the effectiveness of its basic methodological gesture. For Brentano and Brentanists there are perceptions and apperception; these make up the closed system of human cognition. Art not only does not register in this system—it is perhaps a perception to which no apperception

corresponds—its resistance to systematicity is a threat that consciousness cannot even address.

That there is a sphere to which not even noticing has access means that through this sphere another mind might enter consciousness, beyond or beneath its capability to cognize, categorize, intend, or will it, where objects “lose their balance.” This is also to say that art does take objects, and science—the science of psychology for which a thought is a thought only and always if it intends an object—cannot comprehend this. Literary artists take advantage of consciousness’s complacency—consciousness being the aim to fix the world to such a degree that it can become complacent again—to turn literature into art.

The sketchy attempts to separate art from consciousness could easily be extended and expanded by reference to the stories; think of the hunger artist, to name only one. For the creature of the Bau to aver that “everything remained unchanged” despite the consummate artistry with which he constructed his masterpiece brings this story into this grouping as well. At the beginning of the story he holds the opposite opinion. “Ich habe den Bau eingerichtet und er scheint wohl gelungen” (NS II 576), and he proceeds to describe the momentous change that the Bau wrought in his life. In the early aesthetic reflections Kafka attempts to undermine first Brod’s then the nation’s cherished beliefs. In the Bau creature, Kafka found a figure whose profession, like Nietzsche’s, was to undermine these assumptions from the perspective of the lone mole. First it undermines the world’s designs on it by building his subversive, subterranean Bau and isolating itself in it against the herd, and then he undermines yet further his own constructed counter-world, and yet everything he says becomes another construction. The Maulwurf is intimately bound to the project of the Entwurf, the blueprint or plan; he plans with his mouth, casting his thought-plans immediately into material.

## Signs of the Mole

One of the first decisions—perhaps the very first—to share his writing with a reader refers to this figure. When Kafka announces to Oskar Pollak in a letter of 1903 that he is sending him a bundle of papers to read, the struggle over whether to open his most intimate activity to a reader is described in an image: “Jetzt aber reißt mir etwas die Lippen auseinander oder ist es sanft, nein, es reißt, und jemand, der hinter dem Baum steht, sagt mir leise: ‘Du wirst nichts tun ohne andere.’” It is less the solitary author’s need for an audience that should be emphasized in this line and more the curious way in which the need attacks Kafka. An invisible voice speaks and the resulting action is violent. The voice behind the tree that rips open his lips is probably Pollak’s. Throughout his life friends continue to voice similar demands, though to what extent Kafka himself asks for violence to be done to him in order to be able to defend his solitude as the very foundation of friendship is another question: he demands a struggle so that remaining alone with his constructions it has a certain heightened meaning. This tension is already evident in his letter to Pollak. “Ich aber schreibe jetzt mit Bedeutung und zierlichem Satzbau: “Einsiedler ist widerlich, man lege seine Eier ehrlich vor alle Welt, die Sonne wird sie ausbrüten; man beiße lieber ins Leben statt in seine Zunge; man ehre den Maulwurf und seine Art, aber man mache ihn nicht zu seinem Heiligen” (Briefe, 1900-1912 1900-12, 25). It is surprising that such an early statement would contain so many of the motifs that later fill letters, stories, and diary entries: an almost unbearable tension binding the hermit to “life”, a preoccupation with the mouth, a moral imperative to direct one’s biting outward onto the world and a caution not to destroy oneself in the process by incapacitating the organ of speech. These tensions are folded into the word “Maulwurf,” which casts a long shadow from this letter down to the very last stories. As a young man Kafka argues for moderation, light, and honesty on the part of the writer, all of which is

opposed, as he sees it, to the Maulwurf's darker tendencies. And yet, it is as if, because of the powers associated with it, the creature already threatened to become his personal god.

Almost exactly a year later another Maulwurf turns up, this time in a letter to Max Brod, who had already overtaken Pollak in Kafka's imagination as friend and reader, threatening to tear the words out of his mouth. Shocking how literally this image would much later turn into fact. At this time Brod and he study together at the university and attend discussions of the latest psychological theories at the Café Louvre. Toward the end of his 1904 summer vacation with his parents in a country spot outside Prague he send the following report to Brod. "Bei einem Spaziergang ertappte mein Hund einen Maulwurf, der über die Straße laufen wollte. Er sprang immer wieder auf ihn und ließ ihn dann wieder los, denn er ist noch jung und furchtsam. Zuerst belustigte es mich und die Aufregung des Maulwurfs besonders war mir angenehm, der geradezu verzweifelt und umsonst im harten Boden der Straße ein Loch suchte." Here we have a view of the struggle: quintessential communal creature and instinctive hermit clash in a shameful battle. The dog socializes, the mole digs, until the difference in intentions expresses itself in violence. "Plötzlich aber als der Hund ihn wieder mit seiner gestreckten Pfote schlug, schrie er auf. Ks, kss so schrie er." The whispering of the voice from behind the tree here finds an answer in the urgent, inarticulate defense of the burrower, who's vocabulary consists in little more than the letter "K". In addition to the reference to Kafka's favorite letter, the scene depicts a conflict of relationships to the ground. Medium of his work and life, the Maulwurf hisses its surprise at finding the ground closed to him, a thought that had never crossed its mind. Hound and Mole draw the sense-making structures of their life-worlds from irreconcilable sources. The irreconcilability of worlds has a strong effect on Kafka, one that he cannot immediately explain. "Es täuschte mich bloß so, weil mir an jenem Tag der Kopf so schwer herunterhieng daß ich am

Abend mit Verwunderung bemerkte, daß mir das Kinn in meine Brust hineingewachsen war.

Aber am nächsten Tag hielt ich meinen Kopf wieder hübsch aufrecht” (Briefe, 1900-1912 40).

The scene produces a heavy thought, one that makes his head sink. It goes away as soon as the scene passes. A word he later uses to describe the reaction of an observer to the clash of irreconcilable worlds is “Zerstreuung,” distraction.

The mole does not go away. In 1914 it resurfaces in a diary entry in which Kafka records, hurriedly and in a tone of shock, the war-time experience of his brother-in-law, Josef Pollak, who had returned injured from the front. “Geschichte vom Maulwurf,” he writes, although it is not clear whether this is a story told him by Pollak—nicknamed Pepa—or an Entwurf of a story to be invented by him out of what Pepa has experienced. Still it is significant that ten years after his letter to his childhood friend Pollak, in a story of the other Pollak, his brother-in-law, the divinity of the creature is still at issue. “Geschichte vom Maulwurf, der im Schützengraben unter ihm bohrte und den er für ein göttliches Zeichen ansah, von dort wegzurücken” (Tagebücher 697). In this case the Maulwurf is noted for its signlike character that points his soldier brother-in-law toward salvation. Pepa reads it as a divine signal to retreat. What in this particular figure allows it to become a sign of impending danger? What tells Pepa that he should ignore the chain of command for a higher instance, although it is literally lower? The soldier in the trench senses another refugee in the earth, digging in below him. Does he fear that the Maulwurf is the better soldier, that he is in fact the enemy, his personal demon, as Kafka worries for himself? Does the one who has been created to bore expose Pepa’s digging in as a farce and his Schützengraben as a grave? This may be what goes through the soldier’s mind as he flees his post. It is also possible, however, that the divinity who sends signs in this region is not the divinity of heaven. In war in the trenches the universe stands on its head; heaven rains fire and the earth saves souls.



It is not the abyss above him that frightens Pepa; it is rather the intimation that the earth is populated. In this Gnostic paradise the Maulwurf becomes a sign of a different theological order in which a god presides over, under, the realm of dirt. When the earth that protects me becomes the earth that buries me, when the ground becomes a burial ground, these are the prognostications that the sign gives rise to. As if to confirm that the mole is a god of the underworld, as soon as Pepa leaves the protection of the trench, a bullet finds his troop-captain who had crawled in behind him. The captain dies directly over the mole.

For those who can read it as a sign the Maulwurf points in two directions. Its effect is double, to protect and expose. Saving while damning, it effects a substitution. For one schooled in the mole's duplicity it seduces one into cover and reveals when not to trust the desire, when exposure is in actuality safer. Those not familiar with the mole's sign pay a high price. Kafka sees this quite early when he tells Oskar Pollak "one should honor the Maulwurf and its kind but one should not make it into a saint." To be of the mole's mind one becomes a mole, living in ever narrowing circles away from heaven and its community of the chosen, though at the same time one penetrates that much closer into the antinomy of freedom. The more enclosed my cover, the freer I am; the freer I am the more exposed to total destruction. Outside of my trench I restrict my movements to avoid dangers; outside I have a thousand small fears. In the trench that represents the reification of my restricted movement—by excluding the enemy my walls imprison me—I have but one enormous fear. My lair will be found and I will have no way out; I and it will be destroyed in one blow. Sign of this antinomy, the mole seems to chase Kafka throughout his writing.

This divinity does not inspire reverence. On the contrary, Widerwillen, dislike and reluctance to confront it are the reactions of most. There are many reasons for repulsion at the

thought of the animal. By nature anti-social, it is so ravenous that some species must eat their bodyweight in meat many times a day. It relates to other beasts almost exclusively by devouring them, its hunger surpassing the hunger, will, will to self-preservation, and defenses of other creatures. Widerwillen is the form of worship of the god of hunger, a constant appetite—the lowest manifestation of will—that expresses itself in carnage. Either it consumes its object continually or it dies.<sup>44</sup> With this in mind it is easy to see why the sight of it would be impossible to bear, why it would stimulate a counter-will, why, upon the failure to resist, the sight of the mole would be pushed back into oblivion, its truth shrugged off, and in its place a rumor would arise. It is also understandable that social and moral forces array themselves against the defenseless “Dorfschullehrer” who champions the existence of such a giant mole in the story fragment that Kafka writes, also in 1914.

“Diejenigen, ich gehöre zu ihnen, die schon einen kleinen gewöhnlichen Maulwurf widerlich finden, wären wahrscheinlich vom Widerwillen getötet worden, wenn sie den Riesenmaulwurf gesehen hätten” (NS I 194). These are the narrator’s first lines. There is little doubt that the giant mole would eat its way through the observers gathered to witness its monstrous activity in a very short time. More to the point, the repulsion brought on by the sight of it is enough to do anyone in. With its giant hunger and the single-minded determination it wields to satisfy it, the Maulwurf does away with the subtle resistance and frictions that hinder willing in the everyday. Not wholly unlike the God of the Hebrews, a direct encounter with it destroys the believer. Here the giant Maulwurf is less a creature that plans, a creature that “entwürft” with its “Maul” and more one who hurls its mouth, the abyss that actualizes its will,

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<sup>44</sup> In this it is not unlike the hunger artist who devours himself.

over everything in its path. In two ways it is also a Vorwurf, by throwing its mouth before it and by turning the world into an object, a “Vorwurf”—occupations for which it can only be reproached by the community at large, “vorgeworfen.”<sup>45</sup> A subject who saw such a monster would have to disbelieve it in order to survive. What the Maulwurf wills comes to be; to achieve this it only wills one thing: destruction. In this story the human will that there exist such a creature, can never—no matter what the narrator does to bolster the Dorfschullehrer’s case—it can never rise beyond the status of a rumor; for accepting the truth of the story would mean accepting something greater than the human will, not a perfect, idealized will but a raw, material will that objectifies everything by consuming it. By becoming a rumor, however, it simultaneously insures the mole’s repetition and distribution as a tale, a version of the mole that has no teeth. Had it been believed as a mere fact the story would have died out in the small outlying town—“weit von der Eisenbahn”—in which the creature was discovered, having been absorbed as news or as a new scientific discovery (NS I 195). And yet the creature’s existence cannot be accepted, whereas the rumor of its existence, the weak, spreading ghost of its non-reception, allows a shadowy version of itself to haunt the human community. Should it exist, the creature would slice its rows of needle-like teeth through the resistance that its being there brings about. Should it not exist, science would find no resistance to its knowledge-building machinery, nothing that it could deny in order to offer reason, calculation, and evidence in its place. Resistance to the idea of the enormous counter-human will preserves the monster, while the

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<sup>45</sup> Another set of linguistic associations can be made that move toward idiomatic associations. In common figures of speech, the Maulwurf is used to describe one who works without stopping, as well as the work of investigating one’s own mind. See Winkler (145-6).

monster's virtual existence insures the continuity of the science that denies it. In a similar way the project of the Chinese wall is preserved across generations by the rumor of northern enemies.

Resistance to the report of the giant mole swirls around the "kleine Schrift" written by the Dorfschullehrer. After the sensation of the first report has faded, the Dorfschullehrer writes a Nachtrag to his kleine Schrift, and on the much weaker strength of this small note, his discovery at last enters the echoing hallways of academia. The Lehrer's small scripture, the testament of the mole, can then be repudiated by a Gelehrter who denies the possibility that an impossibly large creature exists, ever existed, or could ever exist. It was but a large mole, nourished by favorable soil conditions in the land around the town, he replies. The scholar does not deny the size of the mole—the Schoolteacher measures out a height of two meters on the wall and the scholar agrees: "Why not?" he retorts—science knows "large," and other relative determinations. Relatives were its beginning, the first clearly definable "senses" of not-being as contraries within being: hot-cold, small-large. What scientific discourse denies with this relative is anything extraordinary about the discovery—contrary to what rumor is made to promote: a being that exceeds any possible causes. Such hyperbolic being is carried by rumor, which is less heard than it is overheard. At this point the narrator steps in to defend the indefensible and sell the public on the schoolteacher's discovery of that whose actuality is disproportionate to its possibility. Neither scholar nor schoolteacher, the narrator is rather a Kaufmann who has found a new product; yet to sell it will be the challenge of his career. The problem that immediately arises is this: the narrator wishes to support the schoolteacher's case for the existence of the giant Maulwurf, and so he writes his own treatise in support of the idea. Despite his good intentions, however, his treatise contains many small details that contradict the teacher's account. Much worse than the scholar's reasoned dismissal or the world's having nearly forgotten it, the

salesman's support of the schoolteacher's case undermines the credibility of the original "kleine Schrift." Their two scriptures arrive at the same conclusion—that the giant Maulwurf exists—by different means. That is to say, the same Lehre or doctrine, the same truth, is supported by contradictory arguments. How can divergent justifications support the same principle? Can a conclusion be accepted if contradictory proofs support it? Or will the principle have to be tossed out on account of a conflict in the facts? On this dilemma the religion of the mole falters. The mole is, in this story, a god of the earth who has revealed itself to a few men. Like the Christian God, its will coincides completely with its existence. And yet, when it appears on earth (in its case emerging out of the earth) it steps from the realm of immediacy into the realm of mediacy and so it appears as the reverse of what it is: a giant mole represented by a "kleine Schrift," a will that procures its immediate satisfaction transplanted into the most delayed form, after its failure giving rise to the most mediated of all communicative modes, rumor, which passes through everyone, leaves them unchanged, and seems to have no source. Then the salesman enters the scene, the good capitalist, to apply the rules of marketing: the more exposure the better. The conflict of the two Schriften seems made for the application of a famous rabbinical rule for bible interpretation (which is not wholly dissimilar to the rule of scientific truth). The 13<sup>th</sup> *middah* of Israel ben Elisha stipulates: "Two verses of scripture contradict each other until the third verse comes and decides between them" (Strack and Stemberger 21). In the debates over the mole-god, however, the opposite happens. The third verse fails to decide between the two contradicting verses exactly to the extent that it decides for one of them. That is to say, by supporting the schoolteacher's small scripture the salesman's treatise ruins the decision by making the matter in question more, not less, ambiguous. The coming of the mole-god inaugurates an age of interpretation in which writing sheds its judging function. In this way the "kleine Schrift" has an

effect on observers similar to the mole itself who exceeds the causes that could have created it. The mole is immortalized in scripture that exceeds analysis and resists interpretation. Of course none of that “kleine Schrift” is reproduced in the report; of it we only have a rumor, passed on by the ham-handed narrator.

A divinity like the Maulwurf cannot be written about, not in the present age. This is the “Vorwurf,” the reproach with which the Salesman responds to the Schoolteacher’s “small scripture,” in response to the Vorwurf with which the Schoolteacher attacks the Kaufmann—that he has made the situation worse. Why should the Maulwurf produce Vorwürfe? Because, it seems, it throws itself forward out of another time. It comes to the present age like a nightmare whose threat is proportionate to its fantastic size. It threatens the workings of science. A small writing that constitutes a holy scripture about a giant creature to which only this script attests is a writing inversely proportional to the magnitude of the anomaly that it records and conveys. As such it no longer finds a place in the apparatus of scientific reasoning, whose magnitude has increased so much that little writings become absorbed immediately into its machinery. Science has in effect become a giant Maulwurf, absorbing all other forms, devouring the past, the legendary, assimilating particularly things beyond proof, those things that threaten human security—things that might themselves be caricatures or projections of the grossness of the human will to knowledge. In response to this, the rumor of the giant Maulwurf reproduced and promoted through its small scripture antagonizes science. It reminds it whence it comes, and science represses it by normalizing it and absorbing it. According to the salesman-narrator, the teacher now has to be taught this lesson. “Jede Entdeckung wird gleich in die Gesamtheit der Wissenschaften geleitet und hört damit gewissermassen auf Entdeckung zu sein, sie geht im Ganzen auf und verschwindet, man muss schon einen wissenschaftlich geschulten Blick haben,

um sie dann noch zu erkennen. Sie wird gleich an Leitsätze geknüpft von deren Dasein wir gar nicht gehört haben, und im wissenschaftlichen Streit wird sie an diesen Leitsätzen bis in die Wolken hinaufgerissen” (NS I 214-5). Science feeds on discoveries, digesting them and divesting them of revelatory potential. In science nothing remains uncovered for long. The mole that is uncovered must be recovered. New discoveries merge ceaselessly into the whole to bare themselves only to the expert eye as part of the whole. In other words, insofar as it makes Entdeckung into its method, science recovers revelations, removing them from their sphere of influence on the Dorf people, who, through their Lehrer, stand to be reinitiated into a certain cultic practice—reverence for the wild and a healthy fear of the will—and the teacher wishes to export this to the city as well, where rumor flies faster and people gather in an instant (NS I 210).

This script, Kafka’s story-fragment, the narrator’s metacritical report on the fate of two scriptures, is neither the Schoolteacher’s “kleine Schrift” nor the narrator’s second scripture, but rather a retelling of the struggle between three wills: that of “the professors”—science’s will to cover over what has been uncovered by absorbing into an epistemic whole, by putting it into its place, a new giant that—looking nothing like what it is—consumes all competitors; that of the schoolteacher who tries to preserve, in the ways of the small town and the cultic past, a relationship to the beast without dissolving its incomparable size, a creature that, although within the town, could not have come from the town; and that of the salesman-narrator who, coming from the city, tries to repackage the legend as something it is not. The giant mole rampages around a battle over the value of writing—this time not the personal battle between isolation and sociality that plagues Kafka in his letter to Oskar Pollak. No—here the mole threatens to undermine the edifice of science through hole-drilling rumor and a kind of scripture that is small not in size but in its effects, not unlike what Kafka wanted to salvage from “kleinen Literaturen.”

Little is said about the mole over the course of the fragment. Instead the narrator focuses his reportage on the scriptural conflict. The giant mole has been completely absorbed into writing; in turn, writing manifests varying degrees of ability to assimilate it without trampling it. Kafka set himself this task with this new piece of writing—the story: a report on the failure of the scriptural justification of scripture, on an inability to come to grips with the whole problem. Over the course of the investigation the irreparable tension between the will to conceal every discovery in the bright daylight of science’s knowledge and the giant mole’s will to cover itself over and produce a spreading, darkening “Gerücht” that demands of its hearers a decision between belief and disbelief, without proof and without reservations. So irreconcilable are the two instincts and the two types of writing, small scripture or big science, that in order to truly support the wisdom of the Dorfschullehrer, which is not yet estranged from superstition and non-technocratic ties to the earth, out of reverence for the schoolteacher, the salesman recalls every copy of his damaging treatise, and he hands them over to the schoolteacher to be destroyed (NS I 211). Small scripture bears no justification. It speaks only to the “lumpige[m] Bauer,” as the schoolteacher himself laments, the farmer whose activity “ist immer unanständig” (NS I 209).

Rumor, Gerücht, calls to the indecent, the dirty, the group whose multiplication only increases its indecency—not unlike the mole: the more repulsive, the more repelled, the more repelled, the bigger it grows. “Ob er nun sagt: Der alte Dorfschullehrer hat recht,” the Dorfschullehrer complains about the indecent townie, the dirty farmer to whom his scripture is dedicated, “oder ob er etwa unpassender Weise ausspuckt, beides ist in der Wirkung einander gleich” (NS I 209). City-dwellers are different. A Kaufmann has “Verbindungen.” Just as money is shared around easily in the city, so city-dwellers, who “zwitschern” like birds, gather instantly at a call, an Anruf. This is because what one cares about the other cares about, and their common



concerns binds them. “Sie nehmen einander mit ihrem Atem die Meinungen weg und eignen sich sie an” (NS I 210). Not so the farmers and simple workers who have followed the rumor of the mole. They gather around the immense beast’s incommensurable rumor—for what is a rumor except that type of speech which cannot be measured against its source. And what is that which cannot be measured but that which will not fit? It will not fit with the wishes of the will, never to be absorbed or assimilated, but instead it will travel. As soon as it stops, as soon as it is proved, proofed, compared, or confirmed it is no longer. Kafka confronts, in this story, the truth-structure of science with that of rumor. The objective correlate of rumor is an unconfirmed collective, as large as it is dissipated. As its medium of transmission, rumor demands a cohort of “*einzelne ganz einfache Leute*,” single workers who unselfishly take up the cause. Workers whose “*Tagesarbeit ihnen kaum ein ruhiges Aufatmen gestattete*” were the first to congregate around the spot where the mole appeared. The word appearance is very important in the first few pages of the fragment. What the Kaufmann wanted to explain, “*erklären*,” was the mole’s “*Erscheinung*,” and furthermore, the corresponding appearance of the rumor and the “official” resistance that lent it a medium in which to move. As an appearance the mole surpasses the narrator’s impulse to explain; it remains rumor in frictionless flight. What about the mole is mere appearance or, to say it more positively, fully appearance? The simple workers, the only group who make the difficult pilgrimage to the town disconnected from usual modes of transportation are made in the mole’s image, or rather, it is made in theirs. Those who are attracted to the rumor are workers whose work occupies them at every moment, and the ones who accept the rumor as rumor are farmers who dig in the earth. Breathless work, earth-diggers—these are surface qualities, though quite right. Giant in its capacity for unmitigated toil, penned in its workplace without a breath of fresh air, connected directly to the earth without explanation, the mole is a

mirror image of the collective of unanständige, einfache workers—who only collect in appearance. That is, they are not a real community—like city dwellers who gather instantly at a call—but an apparent collective, or perhaps a possible one, although they are not, say, a city mass.

A divine sign in one instance and the appearance of a merely apparent collectivity of workers in another, the mole is however not only a sign for Kafka and not at all a symbol of a divinity that is other than it is. It is a divine sign only because its own manner of existence, its praxis, exposes the soldier's own helpless exposure within his constructed security. The soldier is that instant a mole, not the other way around. As a reflection of the workers and an antipode to all-devouring scientific knowledge it is not a mole of course but the rumor of a mole—one at whose appearance armies shudder. And for this reason rumor is a sign of the mole, who in actuality produces effects—the Bau—that are much greater than his presence—every mole is giant despite its size—and who has the capacity in a terribly literal sense to undercut convictions. Rumor is molelike, not the other way around. Thus the mole is not an anthropomorphism, not an analogue of human qualities or, as is usually the case, a projection of human qualities onto an animal (the lion, poor beast, who is not Achilles); it is first of all a relationship that humans, whether they accept it or not, have to moles; a rare instance of theromorphism. The invisible, industrious, and violent mole Kafka will continue to exploit, and this is what the workers in this story are not yet too sullied by reason and science to overhear.

## Distractions

The Dorfschullehrer and his little scripture become a rumor among the scientific community, just as the mole keeps its ghostlike status among the workers and farmers. It cannot be heard by science, except as noise, and science's rationalizations are unheeded by the faithful. Digging in at the inner limits of episteme, at the constitutive underpass between hermit and cohort, self-preservation and exposure to destruction, the mole works the internal boundary between dialectically constituting elements within a self-contained ontic sphere: life/death, individual/community, producers/owners of production, human speech (sourceless)/ scientific or theological speech (with a view of the source). These schematics serve to quickly—much too quickly—indicate the stakes of molework for Kafka. As the worker of and at the limit, the mole corresponds to a disposition or attitude within the human and the human community that we have not yet mentioned. *Zerstreuung is the disposition that corresponds to the eternal return of the missing clash of worlds* along with which the mole works. This is true to a degree. *Zerstreuung*, however, unlike the mole in these early appearances, does not occur in internal structural conflicts within a single sphere of being and thought. Throughout Kafka's thinking these spheres emerge out of a dialectic internal to each of them. Some examples of dialectical spheres in Kafka are the mutually constituting, as well as at times mutually exclusive or contradictory, relationships between *Recht* and *Gesetz*, family and family members, corporation and worker, *Judentum* and *Deutschtum*, Literature and Politics. The list is of course inadequate. Yet in each of these can be seen a structural conflict or incongruence that gives rise, dialectically, to a sphere in which thinking can operate. Thinking is nothing other than the attempt to reconcile the two elements, and the tension between the two clashing elements define the limits of the sphere of thought, action, and being. A certain balance or struggle—Kafka's word, *Kampf*,

gestures toward it—perpetuates the sphere’s coherence within and through the conflict. In each dialectic, then, thought is of and in the dialectic—that, although dialectical, never allows one term or element to become permanently subordinated to the other, as would happen in the Hegelian system; the dialectic is interminable. In the undialectical, frictionless space between the pairs that through surface tension contract into relatively closed spheres, thought is no longer possible, nor, I should say—and more critically for our investigation—is it actual. Impossible and unactualized, thought sets itself out of operation when it comes to the relationship of one sphere to another or the constellation of all possible spheres that make up existence, whose disunity is—to put down a highly ambivalent and risky phrase—not dialectical. The “not” in the phrase will have to be much more closely studied.

Imagine a topography of thought that no surveyor could map; the lines of the landscape lose themselves everywhere in snow. Here we can measure, think, rationalize our actions, project a future, remember a past. There we can do something different, but within itself also coherent, sensible. Yet we cannot get from here to there no matter how hard we try: trying, like planning, is bound into the thinking that counts here according to the coordinates of this struggle. Those thinkers—they misunderstand whatever we say!

One gets a sense of this procedure best in *The Castle*. The Innfolk share an imagination in which the men of the Herrenhoff and the phantasm of the Castle have their proper place; the denizens of the Herrenhoff share another. Neither thinking is reducible to a “perspective” insofar as there is no shared sphere on which their many viewpoints shine. The two groups barely manage to navigate their misapprehension of each other’s world, and then only by long familiarity with the problem (toward which there is no end to K.’s astonishment), and yet mishaps still occur. The curse on Barnabas’s family is a casualty of the collision between the

sense-making mechanisms of two spheres. And yet it is not exactly a collision. More precisely, it is the lack of contact that leaves the spheres spinning frictionlessly on their own, stripped of the former agreement to misunderstand and yet cohabitate in abstention from one another. The non-collision occurred for two reasons, first, superficially because Amalia, who belonged to the sphere of Innfolk, dared to say no to a Herr and second, more deeply, because a vain attempt was made to jump spheres. K., perhaps out of stubbornness but certainly not from a lack of intelligence—on the contrary, were he dumber he would surely suffer less—K. cannot fathom the disjuncture between these spheres and others (mainly the castle), for the reason that it is unfathomable, the only difference between him and the other inmates being that they have learned to give up. With respect to the castle this is particularly perturbing because Schloss names not a separate entity or system, but the unhappy amalgam of spheres and the inaccessible distances that divide them. A reading of “Schloß” that K will not accept. He persists in trying to map the pathways back to the lock or key that shuts the way to the unbroken lines of sight that his surveyor’s instruments need in order to measure. Lines of sight are not blocked, they are simply not lines. Likewise “lines of flight”—to cite Deleuze and Guattari—lead the eye back to the same. What road in the world leads to “world”? Everything remains unchanged. The mantra can apply to this novel as well. Looking for what is not there, being where there is no “there,” thinking nothing, not thinking—such is the chain of activities carried out by K. that demonstrates Kafka’s barely articulated but frequently staged thought of *Zerstreuung*.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Although he takes *Verwirrung* as a synonym of *Zerstreuung*, a stance with which I do not agree, Christof Hamann demonstrates the amphiboly of distraction and diaspora that animates the earlier novel, *Der Verschollene*. In his dispersal into America and his mental distraction,

Let me cite a few more examples. In one tiny tale in the collection, “Betrachtung,” a figure contemplates a scene through a window at the end of a winter day. What about this *Betrachtung* is different from the others in the collection? Everything in the scene is in motion. Spring is coming, the speaker notes, swiftly—we note that Spring is coming as swiftly as the shadow of the man who overtakes the girl walking past the window into the setting sun that lights her face. The undertone of violence swells as the man approaches, but he passes the girl, and she hasn’t even seen him; her face remains bright. Between the girl’s childish ambling and the man’s sure gait there is no comparison, just as the one is in light and the other in shadow, and neither notice. The narrator with his cheek leaning against the window clasp notices, however, and asks “what will we do in the Spring?” What shared goal directs the disarticulated race between subjects of different kingdoms, the kingdoms of childhood and adulthood in this case? They are all but ignorant of each other’s existence. The speaker can only describe the misencounter, but the writer calls this particular type of *Betrachtung*, the contemplation of encounter’s failure, “Zerstreutes Hinausschauen” (*Drücke* 24).

At the moment of the most extreme tension between father and son, when distinct regions of the son’s existence reveal secret connections, Georg Bendemann becomes “fast zerstreut” (*Drücke* 57). “‘Aber schau mich an!’ rief der Vater.” The command is not only to look at his father lying on the bed—now standing on the bed—in the half-light of his bedroom, and not in

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Roßman participates in a “Fremdwerdungsprozess,” according to Hamann, that leads him to become a “befreiten Subjekt” (141). More apt, I think, would have been to take as distraction’s synonym the title, even though it was attached to the text posthumously: *Der Verschollene*. In being “not heard from,” Roßman is freed from subjectivity in *Zerstreuung*.

the way that his son and caretaker had been used to looking at him. Here the son, a modern day Atlas charged with holding multiple worlds apart, feels them crashing together. Along four axes—from Prague to Russia, from father to friend, from father to lover, and from ancient Israel to today’s Diaspora—an unhealthy interpenetration has occurred. A whirlpool swirls and lashes where these rivers flow together! When his father reveals his secret communications with the friend, while standing on the bed, he begins to imitate the lover, pulling up his robe just as she must have pulled up her skirt, until he stood “vollkommen frei und warf die Beine. Er strahlte vor Einsicht.” What beams in such bright resplendence is not the size or sight of his father’s penis, but the presence of God as the blinding non-correspondence between all these realms—the friend who promises a break with patrilineal power, the lover who promises a repetition of it but this time as Georg’s “own” family, the eastern Judaism that promised to enliven the tradition, and the generation of Noah in which the prohibition against the “Einsicht” into the source of generation is first presented. Georg sees sin, or the original clothing of sin where the genitals should be.<sup>47</sup> According to one midrash God made Adam clothes not out of skin but out of light.<sup>48</sup> From the corner to where he has retreated Georg reflects on the situation. The tale goes on: “vor einer langen Weile hatte er sich fest entschlossen, alles vollkommen genau zu beobachten, damit er nicht irgendwie auf Umwegen, von hinten her, von oben herab überrascht werden könne. Jetzt erinnerte er sich wieder an den längst vergessenen Entschluss und vergass ihn, wie man einen kurzen Faden durch ein Nadelöhr zieht” (Drücke 57). In spite of his decision to observe,

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<sup>47</sup> A discussion of this passage and its relationship to “the traffic of clothes” can be found in Anderson’s *Kafka’s Clothes* (88-9).

<sup>48</sup> Gen. R. xx.

Beobachten, what threatens him, he cannot, although—in contrast to Freud—not as a forgetting that would correspond to a future remembering, but rather as a *Zerstreuung* that is like multiple “Umwegen.” The detours draw him away and around—and not merely beyond the sight of the encounter, as if he could spare himself the prohibited sight by covering it with another thought. More precisely they draw one away from the decision to be attentive to it. In contrast to Freud’s view, the primal material is not repressed, and repeated later in altered form—this is exactly what cannot happen. The return of the repressed is an imitation of generation, each return a repetition and transformation of the former generation, yet only so insofar as it continues to embrace the law of genesis. Made Greek, this law lives on in his reading of Oedipus. Both the Hebrew myth and the Sophoclean tragedy preserve the taboo against looking into the origin—one at the father, one at the mother—or, better, at the blindspot where the origin should have been, in order that genesis can continue to occur—or that one believe it does. Here Georg, caught between a homosexual possibility that the father has perhaps intuited, a love for the friend, or perhaps in an incestuous possibility that psychoanalytic theory avoids, perhaps because the system genesis-origin-taboo is based on the repression of a homosexual bond between father and son—or at the very least a substitution of friendship for marriage that would cancel out procreation—caught between the potential derailment of genesis and a heterosexual continuation of the same formula Georg “stockte aber in der Mitte des Weges.”<sup>49</sup> From this position he does not have a better view of the situation—far from it, since this is no situation, no site; it falls

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<sup>49</sup> For a reading of homosexual fantasy in Kafka, one that places it within the homosexual and homosocial milieu of fin-de-siècle German culture, see Mark Anderson’s “Kafka, Homosexuality and the Aesthetics of 'Male Culture'.”



outside the limits of several sites. And yet here he can take some advantage of his distraction, which is like the infinitesimal passage from one side of the needle to the other. Georg has passed through, even if the thread has not been and perhaps cannot be broken.

Examples multiply. While he has the workings of the punishment machine explained to him, the observer who travels to the penal colony can “schwer seine Gedanken sammeln” (Drücke 206). Many examples of a withdrawal of the ability to cognize what one has been sent to cognize occur in *The Castle*. K is always “zerstreut” when listening to the Schoolteacher, the Wirtin, and the Wirtin when listening to him. K. is convinced that he has been called by the Castle and that when he or his representative at the inn called the castle on the telephone that he received an answer. Complaining to the superintendent, he recalls the incident: “Er erkundigte sich dann telefonisch bei einem unterkastellan namens Fritz und bekam die Auskunft, daß ich als Landvermesser aufgenommen sei. Wie erklären Sie sich das, Herr Vorsteher?” “Sehr einfach,” sagte der Vorsteher, “Sie sind eben noch niemals wirklich mit unsern Behörden in Berührung gekommen. Alle diese Berührungen sind nur scheinbar, Sie aber halten sie infolge Ihrer Unkenntnis der Verhältnisse für wirklich” (Das Schloß 155). And why did the Unterkastellan answer the phone? “Hie und da aber hat ein übermüdeter Beamter das Bedürfnis sich ein wenig zu zerstreuen—besonders am Abend oder bei Nacht—und schaltet das Läutwerk ein” (Das Schloß 116). Real or feigned, the connection is an extension of the official’s desire for self-distraction, and communication never crosses out of this realm. One could say that the telephone line itself offers an image of distraction—a sound image. It is only a rumor—“wie man mir erzählt hat,” says the superintendent—there, where there is no there, in the castle, to totality of misrelations that is more than the town itself but nowhere other than the town, the disconnected sphere of its self-constitution as a town, is continual telephony: “dort [wird] ununterbrochen

telephoniert.” This means simply that from the position of the town—which is not a different position, and nonetheless they cannot break the lock on the castle—they hear telephony itself, the voice of distance, which sounds from the town like “Rauschen und Gesang.” These are the only “right and trustworthy” things about the connection to the castle, all the rest is illusory. A rustle and whoosh that has its own melody—albeit an unmelodious one—we will see in the Bau is the only sensory correlative of the détente in cognition, the sound of Zerstreung. When K. finally arrives in what must be the outbuilding nearest the heart of the castle-town, the maze of corridors under the Herrenhoff, K. succumbs to it himself. “...er ziellose umherblickte...” Speaking to the servant—the psychopomp who leads him into the underworld—he receives an unnerving response. “—je mehr man zu dem Diener sprach, desto geistesabwesender schien er zu werden” (Das Schloß 385).

Absence of thought could be said to intervene in many places in Kleist’s texts as well—the long dash in *Marquise von O*, at crucial junctures in *Prinz Friedrich von Homburg*—but the most schematic passage, which Kafka undoubtedly knew well, would be the last lines of “Über das Marionettentheater.” Here too it is a reaction to what is said, the final reaction of the narrator to the friend who has been speaking to him in parables. “Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent” has a corollary: whereof one cannot think, thereof one must be thoughtless. Except in this case “must” is inappropriate. This motto fits nothing more perfectly than the lesson that the acquaintance, “Herr C.,” attempts to teach his friend. He himself does not realize, however, the contradiction of his argument. Grace increases as reflection becomes weaker; this is the proportion he proposes. And yet given his presentation we should take his words as products of reflection and not grace. Graceless words, they carry nothing of either the puppet, who has grace for having no consciousness, or of god who has (and perhaps better said, is) grace because

his consciousness is infinite. Herr C. who, as a dancer, knows this and never do this, reflects and perpetuates reflection by presenting his argument to his friend. Perhaps he is after all a bad dancer. At this paradox, then, the narrator, when he tries to respond in a logical and, given that it is Kleist, ironic manner, he confesses that he is “ein wenig zerstreut” (345). Just as he goes on to suggest committing the grossest act of heresy imaginable—returning to the garden and eating *again* from the tree of knowledge—in order to reverse original sin—, Kafka will describe the distracted dimension as an innocence that accompanies us, just to the side of consciousness.

The most complex treatment of *Zerstreuung* occurs in “The Bau.” I will leave the working through of its complexity for later, but I will at least say now that the conflict—in actuality the lack of conflict, which causes untold suffering—between closed spheres of sense-making and the distraction that corresponds to their non-coincidence arises in the Bau fragment as the result of a peculiar activity. Whereas the protagonists of distraction in other stories become distracted when confronted with the incomprehensible interplay of dissymmetrical forces that determine their existence but that are outside of them, this creature—mole or whatever it is: the creature is not named, or rather, it does not name itself, which is only logical since it speaks of itself to itself, no one shares its world (or perhaps, as is customary in confessions it speaks before its god)—this creature becomes distracted whilst attempting to observe itself and its own work.

### **Writing on Kafka**

In those critics who became obsessed with Kafka early in their careers there is a tendency to identify with him. Blanchot and Borges are two who struggled most openly with “being Kafka.”

In a late newspaper article Borges admits that the two early story collections that brought him

international fame were produced during a period of enthrallment. Despite his insight that Kafka “invented his precursors”, Borges did not invent his, or not at first; instead, he imagined himself Kafka in order to write in the iconoclastic manner he imagined was his destiny. It is true that neither Borges nor Blanchot was merely a literary critic; both were fiction writers of deep inventiveness. No wonder Kafka became the object of their lusty imitations. And yet neither could have strayed farther from Kafka’s fundamental refusal to write about others’ writing. Although we know Kafka read widely, aside from a small note on Kleist’s anecdotes and scattered remarks in letters and diary entries about books he is currently reading—usually no more than a mention of a surname, a title, an approving aside to his addressee—literary criticism, of central importance to both Borges and Blanchot’s procedures, is largely left aside. In these two figures it is the writer of fiction who is fascinated with Kafka and the literary critic who tries desperately to come to terms with this almost stultifying fascination. Being Kafka means writing, studying him means pursuing the most intimate facts of the writer’s activity, taking the chance of becoming fixated with his figure and never writing again.

By writing as him Borges found at least one way to remove Kafka’s silhouette from his field of vision. A great pressure to know him definitively, to pin down the philosophical meaning of his writerly eccentricities and rescue him from those who do not take the extremity of his thought seriously shines through Blanchot’s repeated return to him in essays, reviews, and occasional pieces. What must have been clear to Blanchot was this: to have Kafka as an object of attention and to be Kafka are not the same thing, and this dichotomy informs all attempts to write on him. After this insight, the question poses itself: would Kafka have wanted to read “Kafka”? Would he have read his work? Would he have revered himself in the way that he revered Flaubert, carrying “The Castle” around with him like he carried *L’education sentimentale* on his

trip through Italy with Max Brod? It is true that he sometimes read his own stories aloud, and yet this almost always occurred very soon after writing them, each time to a controlled set of listeners, his sisters, Brod, later Dora Diamant, as though the act of writing a story, which was ideally accomplished “in one breath,” in one night or two or three, had to have this one complimentary noise and then silence, disgust, thoughts of destruction. It is true that his relationship to his writing as well as to himself was overwhelmingly negative. Kafka repulsed him. Can one write on Kafka without somehow ignoring his strange, or rather, strained, mole-like self-relation, refusing even the community of one, even if the critic purports to expose it, comment on it, analyze it? It would not be too much to say that after Kafka no one has dared to loathe him. Who could possibly surpass the writer, young or old, healthy or ill, at this game? What’s more, who could make his inscrutable figure or his enigmatic writing, his life or his milieu the subject of investigation, “Untersuchung,” with more deadly precision than he himself did? He worried out his investigation through a dozen methods, analyzed his family relationships, reflected on his historical and political milieu, his childhood, friendships, and love affairs. Kafka-studies were a lifetime occupation. Yet, instead of yielding understanding, clarity, or relief, the investigation resulted in an accumulation of what Kafka called “Schmutz,” dirt.

### **Smut and Self-Observation**

The problem of dirt is old and messy; in it the ground breaks up, the theory of ideas grows murky, and the future of generations is predetermined. As the groundless within ground that holds the ground together, it is—to take advantage of an ambiguity in the English word—ground up or ground to pieces, and for this reason (Grund) a complicated dialectic between a force that

holds together and a force or release that allows falling apart belongs to and within dirt. Structure is essentially strewable. Between ground, earth, dirt, and dust there exists a secret ratio: if not as a permanent bondage, then as intermittently or transitorily bound. And, too, the inconsequence of what holds ground together—for ground is dirt and liable to dirt’s loosening—its tendency to strew again, when the essentially inessential looseness in or under ground comes to be thought, it makes for sin; thought gets soiled. Thought thinks dirt where it should think ground; this is after all an all out metaphoric attack on the metaphor that supports the idea of reason or *causa* or αἰτίον as Grund or grounds. To see earth as dirt is to see disunity in the unit that has provided coherence and dependability for thought in space and time. To say this in extreme terms, terms that will also seem familiar, where God is considered the absolute ground, dirt can only be considered His greatest adversary. Two historical layers are buried in the motif of dirt, one Greek and one Hebrew.

The locus classicus of dirt in Greek philosophy are lines 130C-D of Plato’s *Parmenides*. In this passage the stakes of the lowest and dirtiest turn out to be very high. The structure and intelligibility of the world depend on the meaning of dirt. Outside of this dialogue a more voracious dialectic can only be found in Hegel’s *Logic* and a few works of Kierkegaard, *The Sickness unto Death* among them. Here philosophy’s bid to gain control of the cosmos and to find it intelligible for philosophers turns to dirt. In one respect the question is simple: how to think of a conglomerate of dissimilar, deformed or decayed things? When the dialogue sets about to prove that the unity of many appearances in one idea is not a contradiction in terms, dirt interposes a many/one that will not fit this schema. For one thing, its unity or self-identity derives from the decay of the unity and self-identity of other beings. This raises the question of its number. In English the matter is clearer than in Greek. Is there “a” dirt or dirt? My hasty

remarks, and the questionable example of the mass noun in English, tentatively suggest that dirt may have no unit, and for this reason may not lend itself to proving or proofing the ideas. Then we must wonder what value or function the word “dirt” might have, with no idea that it could “mean” or “be” or “participate in” and no unitary appearance to which it could “refer.” If it is anything, dirt is possibly a one-many that has no intrinsic value, or has a negative one; it deducts being from beings and must be removed from them and cast away. To remove dirt one performs katharsis, cleaning.<sup>50</sup>

In another respect, however, the problem is less tractable. This has to do with the nature of matter in classical Greek philosophy. It is interesting to note that when Aristotle comes to name what English calls “matter” he uses the word “wood,” “ύλη.” This is of course perfectly consistent with the eternally repeated “house” of philosophy or being or language for which he lays the foundation (Athenian houses of the time were mostly made of stone or clay). In keeping with his intuition that absolutely unformed matter cannot exist (pure matter is a construct for thinking; all actual matter is already formed, actualized into this or that material by nature or by man) wood is a natural choice. The acorn contains the tree that actualizes it as its final cause, while the house contains the wood actualized in the tree by the builder, its efficient cause (if Athenian houses had been made of wood). All aspects of the cosmos, except perhaps accidents, fall onto the continuum of causes. Fourth century Athenian dirt, however, does not belong on it. It is called “the most dishonored and the most worthless thing,” “άτιμότατόν τε καί

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<sup>50</sup> Perhaps the oldest attested instance of this opposition is *Odyssey* 6.93, where Nausikaa and her maids wash and cleanse (kathan) the dirt (rupta) off their garments in the river, just before the encounter with Odysseus.

φαιλότατον.” So says Parmenides in Plato’s dialogue when he inquires into Socrates’ beliefs about dirt (Platonis Opera 130c6-7). Does the most unappreciated, unesteemed, filthy, foul, undignified thing that is not a thing or the material to make a thing participate in an idea, one that would be its idea and its alone? Would this not degrade the dignity of every idea to a level lower even than the level of appearances? An idea of dirt defiles the world of ideas insofar as it legitimizes a deformity or imperfection. To put this in Aristotelian terms makes the problem clearer. A being must be either potential or actual, just as a form belongs to the formed and formable. In the Aristotelian vocabulary, dirt might be an emblem for the potential of beings to deform, a depotentializing in the form marking an inability to become what it is or “what-it-was-to-be,” an essential fall away from the essence. This is the unbecoming question with which Plato’s dialogue begins. But, whereas the *Sophist* closes unable to make the impossible distinction between sophist and philosopher, having followed the sophist into a darkness indistinguishable from light, this dialogue begins from the inability to distinguish, and names it dirt. As Reginald Allen points out in the rigorous commentary to his translation of the *Parmenides*, whatever its intrinsic intellectual value, the question of dirt serves a dialectical function within the dialogue (Plato's Parmenides 123f). It catalyzes Parmenides’ movement of thought and his critique of the theory of ideas.

In Allen’s translation the catalytic lines spoken by Parmenides read: “And what about these, Socrates—they really seem ridiculous (γελοῖα): hair and mud and dirt (θριξ καὶ πηλὸς καὶ ῥύπος), for example, or anything else which is utterly worthless and trivial (ἀτιμώτατόν τε καὶ φαιλότατον). Are you perplexed (ἀπορεῖς) whether or not one should say that there is a separate character (εἶδος εἶναι χωρὶς) for each of these too, a character that is again other than the sorts of things we handle?” (Plato's Parmenides 130c5f). Although the end of the line is



probably corrupt, the general question posed here is unmistakable: what is the extent of the ideas? Do ideas extend to the lowest things? And the specific, pointed question posed here is: if the theory of ideas cannot withstand this one test, the test of dirt, can it be valid as a theory? Socrates' response to Parmenides contains all the elements by which we can understand dirt's decisive challenge to the appearance-idea configuration.

Not at all, said Socrates. Surely these things are just what we see them to be (ἄπερ ὁρώμεν, ταῦτα καὶ εἶναι): it would be absurd (ἀτοπός) to suppose that something is a character (εἶδος) of them. Still, I sometimes worry lest what holds in one case may not hold in all; but then, when I take that stand, I retreat, for fear of tumbling undone (ἐμπροσθὸν διαφθαροῦ) into the depths of nonsense (εἷς τινα βυθὸν φλυαρίας) (Plato's Parmenides 130d).

As we know and Socrates does not yet, seeing is exactly what is at stake in the world-structure that originates in the division into idea and appearance. Parmenides sees the irony of young Socrates' blindness but only addresses it ironically. The answer cannot be said outright because it belongs to the dialectic. Later, the course of the dialectic will counterpose direct speech to this ironic beginning. Here is what Parmenides might have said, had he chosen to divulge the secret: if dirt is what you see it to be, Socrates, it already has an *eidos* that shines through your very ability to raise the question. To distinguish dirt is to have already attributed to it a distinct idea. Still, despite his apparent naiveté, Socrates' daimon is at work, even at this age. His gnawing worry points to the double nature of the problem. If dirt does have an *eidos*, however, as Parmenides insinuates (what "having" an idea or character means will be interrogated in Parmenides' next line of questioning and will become the dialogue's main critique of facile understandings of the theory of ideas) the dignity of the world of ideas is threatened; it comes crashing down to earth. However, if dirt has no *eidos* the world of

appearance becomes invisible and incoherent. Under this condition there will be an appearance for which there is no idea. Shall they destroy the heavens or the earth? This is the dilemma from which they start out and which, in my opinion, is never quite resolved. What would this idealess appearance then be (no being)? How could it be talked about (silence)? This second case operates in an ethical register in Socrates' remark. He fears that without an idea he will tumble into the depths of nonsense or childish foolery (φλυαρία). When this happens he worries not so much that he himself will be "undone," as Allen translates, but that he will "destroy," διαφθερεῖ, or better, "corrupt" something. The verb can be construed in the active voice future tense instead of the passive or middle. Echoes of the much later charge against Socrates are heard here. In the *Apology* he defends himself against the accusation that his dialectic corrupts the youth.<sup>51</sup> Here he admits that he may corrupt the intelligibility of the cosmos unless this predicament can be resolved. Along with the cosmos, of course, philosophy will be corrupted, since ideas will cease to "hold in all cases," and discourse will slip now and again into nonsense. The trouble would not be merely intermittent, however. Nonsense would interpenetrate sense in a way that would disturb every sense-making operation, insofar as the crucial distinction between thing and non-thing would be drawn into doubt. At times, Parmenides explains, one would not be able to think...

...if in light of all the present difficulties and others like them, Socrates, one will not allow that there are characters of things that are (εἶδη τῶν ὄντων), and refuses to

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<sup>51</sup> "εἰ μὲν οὖν ταῦτα λέγων διαφθείρω τοὺς νέους..." "If therefore by saying these things I corrupt the youth..." (*Apology* 30b).

distinguish as something a character of each single thing, he will not even have anything to which to turn his mind (ὄυδὲ ὅποι τρέψει τὴν διάνοιαν ἔξει), since he will not allow that there is a characteristic, ever the same, of each of the things that are; and so he will utterly destroy (or corrupt, διαφθερεῖ) the power (δύναμιν) of thought and discourse (διαλέγεσθαι--dialectic).

(Plato's Parmenides 135b-c)

Here Socrates's corruption becomes visible. Dirt without *eidos* threatens to become unthinkable and unsayable and to draw thought and language with it behind the curtain of not-being. A non-thing that breaks the line between appearance and idea—however this line may be conceived—withdraws the grounds by which thought distinguishes one from the other. Without something toward which to turn, turning-toward ceases to define thought. Thus dirt calls into question not only the extent of the ideas (Allen's analysis) but also their ability to account for appearances at all (my addition) insofar as the intelligibility of the world and the efficacy of thought as dependant on an entity are based on an exclusive opposition between appearance and idea. A world that had dirt as an element, even if it were not elemental to it, would find itself intermittently unintelligible, and the intermittency would be inexplicable and unforeseeable.

Parmenides calls it “ἀτιμώτατόν τε καὶ φαυλότατον,” the most dishonorable and the most worthless thing. Going along with the dialectic, the most worthless and squalid should produce the most valuable and pure, up to and including the good itself. And yet the very possibility that a dialectic can proceed here requires a pre-dialectical decision on the status of dirt. You will see when you're older, Parmenides retorts, how naïve you are being. At the moment in which the status of dirt has not yet been decided, or so Socrates' in his innocence

believes, when it is not known whether it has an idea, whether it is or it is not, “the power (δύναμιν) of dialecticizing (διαλέγεσθαι)” is threatened. If that by which the dialectic is supposed to inaugurate its movement is that towards which it moves—the one condition of dialectical movement—then it must presuppose ideas in order to move from appearances. Under these conditions a dialectical movement begins easily by denying ideas. That means starting from mere appearances, asking “What *are* appearances—what do they look like?” and moving on from there to a more or less predetermined destination. Appearances are appearances of, and onward. Dirt, however, is not the determinate negation of an idea as its appearance, to use a Hegelian formulation. Dirt leads nowhere, except to the question of the legitimacy of the whole schema. It is within the realm of appearances but cannot properly appear. What is this non-thing without an idea? There is one possibility conscionable within the system. Perhaps it is an idea itself, even the idea of the good, made manifest directly without an intermediary. Since an idea itself cannot look like anything, it may very well look like nothing much. This is one conclusion that could be logically drawn. Dirt may in fact be the Good or else a god who has drawn aside her disguise and appears without appearance to mask her. But this is unlikely. A not-appearance among appearances, dirt likely draws the structure toward dissolution by pulling appearances away from human eyes: it muddies the clarity of their idea, implies a “bad” mixture of what is not into what is—introduces a permanent stranger into the polis. For a philosophy that defines its value-order as moving toward the good as the idea of ideas, this kind of not-being can only be thought of as very bad. Dirt’s mode of not-being: it is not a determinate negation but an indeterminate one, a negative that makes determinate things less determinate. Thus dirt is to be

associated not with ground but with Ungrund,<sup>52</sup> in German, which makes up the substance of the underground, just as the dingy wet snow in Dostoevsky's novella makes St. Petersburg.<sup>53</sup> It

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<sup>52</sup> This differs from Schelling's "Ungrund" in that indifference, which is Schelling's definition of it, remains coherent as an idea. "Es muß *vor* allem Grund und *vor* allem Existierenden, also überhaupt *vor* aller Dualität, ein Wesen sein; wie können wir es anders nennen als den Urgrund oder vielmehr *Ungrund*" (Freiheit 78). We cannot name it anything other than unground, and yet unground is, or as Schelling puts it, it must be "ein Wesen." The condition of the possibility of the distribution of everything into essence and existence is a necessity, an essence. Dirt, on the other hand, leads essence toward disintegration and necessity toward an unforeseeable event. Schelling draws on the German Christian mystical tradition for the notions of Grund and Ungrund, while Kafka, in turning to dirt, recognizes that if Grund is the mystical, deepest bottom of the soul, its condition of possibility cannot be yet another mystery, internal, and tied directly to God. A comparable insight was reached by the young Hölderlin. As Anthony Adler has shown in his recent dissertation on Hölderlin's *Hyperion*, the young writer, although strongly influenced by his friend Schelling, anticipates and departs in advance from Schelling's later conception of Ungrund as "Indifferenz." The non-humanist "Quelle" or "Ursprung" of human politics and history is found instead in the garden. Not as the site, however, of life-giving soil in the ground—it is that too, but with an important qualification. "Garten" is the favored locus for the origin of the ontological difference because its humus muddles up death and life in a process of "gären," decomposition and fermentation .

<sup>53</sup> In his study of the influence of Dostoevsky on Kafka's writing, W.J. Dodd disagrees with Malcolm Pasley, who in his "Introduction" to the 1966 edition of three Kafka Stories finds a

points up a relation not between the world and a world beyond, but between world and its grimy underworld, the invisible and wretched warping of appearances away from “their” ideas that intercedes into the dialectical structure of appearance to spoil it. A fragment of Pindar might be quoted here. “ὄλβιος ὅστις ἰδὼν κεῖν’ εἶσ’ ὑπὸ χθόν’· / οἶδεν μὲν βίου τελευτάν, / οἶδεν δὲ διόσδοτον ἀρχάν.” “Blessed is he who has seen this and goes beneath the earth; he knows the end of life, he knows the beginning given by Zeus” (Pindar 370).

In ancient Hebrew tradition dirt is no blessing. “τίς γὰρ καθαρὸς ἔσται ἀπὸ ῥύπου; ἀλλ οὐθεὶς.” “Who can make the clean out of the dirty? No one,” Job laments in the Septuagint’s Greek (Septuaginta Job 14:4 p.294). But dirt is much older than Job in biblical time, although the Job story is probably older than Genesis in historical time. In biblical time dirt is primordial. The Jawist version of creation introduces it, although the Priestly version does not. The latter, which in the Genesis of the standard edited version comes first, the stately and removed, so-called Priestly account, imagines creation (בָּרָא, bar’a) to be the result of a linguistic act. Language in its nature separates (בָּדַל, badal) one linguistically created thing from another. Creation is separation, yet it is not merely a neutral division (Genesis 1:1).

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strong similarity between Dostoevsky’s novella *Notes from Underground* and Kafka’s Bau fragment. Dodd sees little to comment on in the “matter” of the two texts, except for Kafka’s beginning from the idea of the ‘underground’ in a literal way (188). Although Dodd sees many more affinities between “Die Verwandlung” and the story of the “underground-man,” nonetheless, there are affinities in narrative structure, intensity of reflection, and the impetus for the narrative—a desire to confess—and, as I’ve indicated, the material correlative of shame at reflection and the failure of action: wet snow and dirt.

Creation places one dividend above another according to the pattern of Elohim's first judgment. In the Priestly version judging language does not originate with the fall; it is there from the first jussive: "Let there be." Speech is judgment insofar as it is jussive—that is, insofar as it separates and separating means preferring one dividend over another. Light is one name of this preference. As light is to darkness and dry land is to water, good cuts into an undifferentiated expanse to divide and demarcate it, while what is bad remains undifferentiated even though it preceded the separation, as darkness preceded light and breath preceded dividing speech. Speech divides silence but first it prefers dividing over divisionlessness. Unlike light, which is made in speech's image, speech is not created in this account but, as the writer of John observes when he returns to the motifs of Genesis 1:1 in the prologue to his Gospel, the word was already "with God." The word "was God." God and language are equiprimordial. Thus everything made by God is made from speech in the Priestly version's elegant theological formula, which accounts for creation at the same time as it accounts for its own authority as a linguistic representation of creation. In contrast, YWH, the potter-god, does not have the potential to divide within him as speech but between him and creation, and this separation enters creation as a dualism. Dirt and earth are two sides of a theoretical construction out of which the whole story of the formation, seduction, fall, and expulsion of adam are sculpted. Genesis 2:17 records this in a delicate play on words. "The Lord God formed man from the dust of the earth." First, the imposing new God with the new double name, YWH Elohim forms man (yatsar) in place of creating him (bar'a), and extracts man (ha'adam) from the earth (ha'adamah) through dirt or dust ('afar), the mediate stage the stuff passes through before it is formed. The dirt of the ground is the means to formation; dirt is creative and creaturely in the Jawist's adam. In the Priestly version, "image" (tsedem) is creation's medium. To be created means for adam to come to be "in his image," which favors no

specific element over the primary relation of similarity by vision (Genesis 1:27). And thus in this version there is equality between male and female and no tree is forbidden him to eat. He can eat “any tree that bears fruit with seeds” (Genesis 1:29). His life is the life of an image, which knows no difference between life and death and need not know one. There is nothing before the image but God, and nothing to return to or be banished from—specifically, no history. To form, in distinction, is to incorporate by transforming the reddish ground (ha’adamah), which is not yet “earth” or “land” (ha’arets) by God’s will into dirt—malleable, formable, but lifeless, then made living by spirit, will, or breath. Dirt surrenders to the mightier—this is one of its qualities. To become a living being (hay’ah) means to stand up out of surrender and strike a counterpose. From the tension that ensues when creation is conceived as shaping dirt, all the curses follow. And the curses that do follow it, the legal writs of the fall, involve the return of dirt. Adam, now a proper name—cut off from the etymological play that links his name with the red ground—will be cursed to struggle over it as soil (ha’adamah) and surrender to it as dirt (‘afar), Eve is cursed by the serpent whom she battles in the dirt (‘afar) that it eats, and Cain is cursed away from the soil (ha’adamah). Discharged from the circuit between ground and life, dirt and death, Cain is banished to “earth” (erets) as that which no longer is an element of creation, but a plane of no attachment, released to promote ceaseless movement. To be true to the text, it is not the first adams that are cursed, but ha’adamah itself. “Cursed be the ground because of you” (Genesis 3:17). Even worse for Cain: “you shall be more cursed than the ground” (4:11). The curse of the ground, and by extension Cain’s descendants, may be its triple appearance: as earth, ground, and dirt. Constructions of thought, be they philosophical, theological, or some other kind—poetic perhaps—, are cursed to choose one of these three elementary interpretations of being and human being, and subsequently to shroud the others in mistrust. Trust, however, along with



every other term of morality, derives from the choice between dirt, ground, and earth; once the choice is made a moral law can be articulated. This is not then a moral decision, but a hermeneutic one. The fall narrative chooses to prefer ground when it curses Adam to dirt and Cain to wander the earth like dust. As is well-known, the covenant with Abraham includes this clause: his offspring will be “as the dust of the earth (ca’afar ha’arets). Kierkegaard makes much of the ambivalence in this promise. Kafka, we should say, dedicates himself to a critique of one, ground, and an understanding of the other two, earth—the plane of diaspora, as well as of nations (nations, you could say, mistake earth for ground)—and dirt—the disintegration against which every building is built after the fall. The narrator of “Beim Bau der Chinesischen Mauer” puts the Kafkan solution least indirectly. “Das menschliche Wesen, leichtfertig in seinem Grunde (insofar as in its ground it is dirt, unground), von der Natur der auffliegenden Staubes, verträgt keine Fesselung, fesselt es sich selbst, wird es bald wahnsinnig an den Fesseln zu rütteln anfangen und Mauer Kette und sich selbst in alle Himmelsrichtungen zerreißen” (NS I 344).

Walter Benjamin was possibly the first to note the importance of dirt for Kafka. “Schmutz ist das Lebenselement der Beamten.” This goes as much for the father (Benjamin refers with this line to “The Metamorphosis”) as it does for the son. Nothing to do with business, everything to do with the “Kräfte der Vernunft und der Menschlichkeit, von denen diese Sippe ihr Leben fristet” (GS II.2 411). Dirt is the Lebenselement of parasites who, as in the parasitic relationship of father on son, eat away at the other’s reason and humanity until they too become dirty. Thus the son can be said to inherit his father’s dirt like an “Ersünde” (GS II.2 412). Generation degenerates. Dirt, genesis, original sin—this is the connection that Kafka makes and Benjamin intuits. And, keeping in mind Benjamin’s central insight in his greater Kafka essay, we must not make the mistake to think that Kafka wanted to reverse this degenerating code, to make

original sin “rückgängig,” as he will put it, and return to a sinless state, clean—not at all; this too is a fantasy brought on by the desire for ground. It is rather the case that, following Benjamin, dirt remains, it revisits the present like Benjamin’s “forgotten,” and yet it won’t be seen—the giant Maulwurf—except perhaps by “luck.” “To grasp the luck that the ground [Boden] on which you stand cannot be bigger than the two feet [that] cover it” (NS II 118). Luck relates in another way that ground (Boden) is a fantasy laid over dirt: its stability-giving powers come from standing on it rather than from its intrinsic nature; stability is loaned it by the feet, and enlarged from there to extend to the earth. But this fact—our bad luck—is not easily graspable. It demands that we release our grip on the ground. Flying and leaping things—dust, fleas, the little creatures that bore straight through the earth and through the Bau without resistance, because they eat it—do this routinely in Kafka. Human figures, however, move downward.<sup>54</sup>

"Wir versinken ja im Schmutz" cries Josef K. (Der Prozeß 117). Too “zerstreut” to work, he will leave the office “gedankenlos.” At the office he is penned in by the watchers who wait for him, as fresh and greedy as they had been in the morning, and the workers, who are blithely indifferent to his suffering and at whom he shouts: “we are sinking in the dirt!” Schmutz here does not correspond to guilt for the unknown crime of which he is accused. Schmutz names the fine fallout from his inability either to assume the guilt and possibly be pardoned or to shrug it off and possibly be punished. This dirt is, as it is in Genesis, the condition of *possibility* of guilt; that is, the opening towards guilt produced by the creation out of dirt by a fatherly, autocratic, molding, shaping God—a construction worker—whose raw materials return and are deposited

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<sup>54</sup> On the ontological status of a related motif in Kafka, or rather two, excrement and trivialities, see Corngold .

constantly over everything.<sup>55</sup> Uncreated and impossible to get rid of, Schmutz is abhorrent.

Again, this is not because it reminds K. of the fall; dirt is not the sign of sin, but the proof that there is none. Therefore sin is impossible to cleanse and leaves the children of Adam to an unbearably, imperceptibly slow sinking, not a fall. From sinking there is no salvation yet imagined. And no one seems to see this but Josef K, albeit in distraction. And he does not grasp the “luck” he has, to have seen it.

In Plato’s dialogue, Parmenides soon demonstrates that even a part of something has to have a separate idea for it to be thinkable and sayable apart from its whole. No idea, no part, and thus nothing apart in appearances, instead one uniform Parmenidean totality. Dirt is therefore perhaps a part with no whole, a left-over, a bit or a leaving, although the speakers in the dialogue, tellingly, never define dirt as such—in this it resembles biblical dirt or dust; or else it is, conversely, what an idea looks like without its comforting appearance, a kind of disheveled

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<sup>55</sup> In Philip Pullman’s trilogy, *His Dark Materials*, dust is the invisible sign of the material essence of the all. Kept either on the science fiction or fantasy shelf of the bookstore or in the children’s section, the series tries to avoid two motifs from Genesis that persist in Christian sin. Dust, which in the story gathers around children as they approach sexual maturity, is not sinful but natural. What is sinful is the unequal division of the sexes in the Jewish’s creation story and in C. S. Lewis’s *Chronicles of Narnia*. A war of the worlds is fought over the meaning and control of dust. In the end, however, although dust is proved to be the floating, clinging, all pervasive medium that links the otherwise divided multiverse, and, through a chain of complex relations sustains life in each universe separately, it remains a metaphysical force, substance, not the shatterer of substances, dirt .

nudity, unornamented and uniformly unremarkable, an appearanceless appearance without internal or external distinction that gnaws away at appearance per se, like a shadow let's say, but severed from its dependence on light, like a mole. Dirt clings, goes where you go. Then, dirt in Genesis 2:7 is that in ground which is not ground, yet nonetheless forms Adam's fateful tie to the earth and soil, not to mention the attribute that allows for his ultimate unmaking. It is not quite an abyss in adam, no—we cannot say that adams, their existence, their actions, their history are in essence groundless. For this would be the sin they flee when they seek ground, and the reason they always prefers it. What they carry is less than an Abgrund and more than Grund. It approaches Ungrund, a determinate invalidity of ground, an inefficacy in the moment—or over the long duration—of grounding, or an indeterminacy of ground itself, far beyond what the builder wants from it when he packs it with his own “two feet.” It masquerades as a sign of sin: sweat and smut, crime, poverty, and the types associated with them: workers, prostitutes, criminals, servants, and the poor. And yet it precedes sin and makes sin possible, and thus it shows at one and the same time the contingency of sin on this god who hand-crafts his creatures. Sin is also contingent on the Jawist editor having decided for dualism, breath and matter, that is really a trinity: unform (dirt), form, life. The last two lead to the expulsion. Form or shape—one interpretation of the being of beings, that which distinguishes adam from shapeless earth (shape is that given to earth by relieving it of “its” dirt, cleaning it up)—and life—in contradistinction not to death but to soil, that which gives life but is not itself alive—the last two will enable the expulsion. The advent of death will force Eve to become like soil: to reproduce, a weakened repetition of the original forming in which dirt remains as smut, sex for sex' sake without reproduction, which may be all that remains of the other origin of man, before the fall, although

thirty years (and more) of sexual liberation have not taken the West any closer to paradise, or any farther from spirit and soil.

To put it more succinctly:

1. Plato's ὀύπος: detritus that disrupts the dialectic of appearance and idea (which is the dialectic of dialectic, is it not?—in dialectic, ancient or modern, does the dialectician not always start from the appearance of truth and remove its apparent nature to reveal its ideal nature, the truth of appearance. Plato banks on the fact that the two systems, ontological and logical, are unhealthily intertwined.)
2. The Jew's a'far: remnant from before formation and fall, proof that there is no original sin—at least not if it is conceived as original guilt—and no fall, only sinking.

Kafka's dirt has a Platonic and a biblical side. It is, as Benjamin noted, the life-element of petty officials, but insofar as everyone is now a petty official—as *The Castle* will show—it is the life-element of humanity, as well as the death-element. This may become clear to those who attempt to observe themselves. Contrary to the Brentanist position, self-observation is possible; and yet it is an insignificant problem to Kafka, except for the negative result it brings to light. Although it is possible, one does not see oneself by means of it. The reason for the failure of self-observation is the distance that the repulsive spectacle internal to it introduces into the act. What one finds upon observing oneself is so "schmützig" that one will not want to "think it through" (durchdenken wollen), "but will be satisfied with looking from afar." The will does not want to approach this spectacle interior to the self; as when confronted with the giant Mole, the human will is *widerwillig* with regard to this scenario. Dirt in the self distances through observation. The closer you look at it, turning "observation" into "thinking through," the less closely you perceive

it. This is because “[d]er Schmutz, den man finden wird, wird um seiner selbst willen da sein, man wird erkennen, daß man tiefend von dieser Belastung auf der Welt gekommen ist und durch sie unkenntlich oder allzu gut erkennbar wieder abgehen wird.” Widerwillig is the repulsion at the non-self that one encounters within one. It finds it was born with an alien that does not grow up when it does, and even accompanies it out of life. Resistant to the will to knowledge, dirt is there for its own sake, and not for the sake of the self or the observer, and certainly not for the sake of science. Observation and knowledge are not its concern; they do not originate with it (they originate with sin and the idea, as does self, family, nation) and, faced with the sight of that which they can never subdue as an object, knowledge and observation are repulsed by their inability to penetrate the continuum between life and death carried within them. The shock at the sight of this connection that sends the observer to seek safety in distance is deepened in the following reflection. “Dieser Schmutz wird der unterste Boden sein, den man finden wird, der unterste Boden wird nicht etwa Lava enthalten, sondern Schmutz. Er wird das unterste und das oberste sein und selbst die Zweifel der Selbstbeobachtung werden bald so schwach und selbstgefällig werden, wie das Schaukeln eines Schweines in der Jauche” (Tagebücher 726).<sup>56</sup> Over or underground makes no difference. Heaven and earth crumble

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<sup>56</sup> “Disgust with oneself can be perversely pleasurable, a wallowing in one’s own filth,” Ritchie Robertson comments laconically (Robertson 186). Is it not also too however a joy at getting to the very bottom of things, in spite of not having found a heavenly structure there? On the relation of Kafka’s auto-repulsion both to anti-Semitism and to the topos of Jewish self-hatred, see especially Chapter 8, “Jewish Music?” in *Kafka’s Clothes*. Anderson cites in detail here from

together in this, the lowest of all floors, the dirt in Genesis. As ground of ground, it reveals the fantasy of that other ground that the forming God instilled in his creation. By making knowledge off-limits to Adam, God implied that knowledge meant divinity. It doesn't, as Kafka notes elsewhere; for that they would have had to eat from the other tree. The dirt of self-observation reveals the basic incapacity of knowledge to make the self divine and, once again, reveals sin to be fiction. An unwanted consequence of this revelation, of course, is that redemption no longer applies.

These thoughts point toward a turning point in Kafka's thinking. He himself becomes acutely conscious of it after suddenly coughing up blood in August 1917 and being diagnosed with tuberculosis.<sup>57</sup> It is doubtless valid to see parallels between theological dirt (the constant, repugnant presence of death in life—the not-being carried in a being) and the filthy reality of his illness. Kafka himself makes this connection. And yet the counsel he offers himself in his diary a month after his diagnosis should also be heeded. "Du has soweit diese Möglichkeit überhaupt besteht, die Möglichkeit einen Anfang zu machen. Verschwende sie nicht."

It should not surprise us that Kafka would see this illness as an opportunity. He has written of dirt as the inner potential for mortality that immortality-loving self-knowledge and the science of psychology based on it routinely ignore. Do not waste the possibility that the wasting

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Otto Weininger's *Geschlecht und Charakter*, particularly telling for its descriptions of Jewish behavior as animal-like.

<sup>57</sup> A fuller treatment of the work of this period in its political, religious, and historical context, as well as in relation to Kafka's health, contemporaneous reading, and the intense theological experimentation in which he was engaged can be found in Robertson (185-217).

disease has opened for you! he admonishes himself. With this warning he makes an opening toward waste. In this diary entry he intervenes in his own thinking about his disease with a demand that has a Platonic hue.

The first part of the diary entry involves dirt's impenetrability. "Du wirst den Schmutz, der aus dir aufschwemmt, nicht vermeiden können, wenn du eindringen willst." Digging into the thought of the disease will not mean removing its filth. Then he revises this insight. He makes it stronger. Do not go in! he admonishes himself, because the disease is only an image. "Ist die Lungenwunde nur ein Sinnbild, wie du behauptest, Sinnbild der Wunde, deren Entzündung Felice und deren Tiefe Rechtfertigung heißt, ist dies so, dann sind auch die ärztlichen Ratschläge (Licht Luft Sonne Ruhe) Sinnbild. Fasse dieses Sinnbild an" (Tagebücher 831). Is he trying to convince himself to ignore his illness by moving into a realm of fantasy, where everything, including his mortality, would be just an image? Not likely. As a prolegomenon to an interpretation, it might be suggested that this statement cuts a path toward much of what comes directly after this diary entry, in life as well as in the writing: the stay in Zürau with Ottla, the furious epistolary exchanges with Brod about Kierkegaard, and most importantly, the theses he writes down in a set of smaller notebooks later that same year. It might also be suggested that he returns to the thought of dirt and the exhortation to grasp it as a Sinnbild, an image for and maybe also of the senses, in "The Bau." This story may after all fulfill the "possibility" whose "inception" he grasped in this diary entry.

Don't waste the beginning offered by the wasting disease. The possibility to experience and experiment with a Sinnbild of death irrupting into life, an image that brings the two so close together as to make them inseparable (the very fact that self-observation repels and is repelled by) was an opportunity Kafka did not want to forgo. This corresponds, though perhaps Kafka



would not have been aware of it, to the opportunity and danger that Parmenides recognized, though Socrates at first did not, in the seemingly offhand examples of hair, mud, and dirt. Kafka commands himself to take hold of the Sinnbild, to take advantage of the “luck” to grasp the ground of ground, the undermost floor, that we now learn is “Sinnbild.” How would we live in a world without ideas, a dirty world? Whereas Socrates has a presentiment that dirt will make the universe unintelligible (since it is an appearance with no idea, it would progressively infect other appearances and the efficacy of ideas themselves—dirtying them), Kafka, although he believes much the same thing, wishes for another “inception” in which the unintelligibility can be maintained.

### **The Antinomy of the Garden**

Very soon after writing this diary entry, his thoughts veer away from himself and self-observation and back toward the formation of Adam, the walling in of the garden, and the supposed fall. The aphorisms that he writes in the winter of 1917-1918 confirm that this too is a Sinnbild, and an especially virulent one. Whereas dirt is the mode or medium of divine formation whose consequences accompany everyone out of birth into death, the illusion that conceals this fact is the garden. The garden wall marks another difference between the P and J versions of the Pentateuch. With the wall, a conception of creation is erected from which it is difficult if not impossible to escape. Many of the theses that Kafka jots down in a fury over the winter of 1917-18 take this problem as their theme. Why a garden? Why not leave Adam in the open where he was formed? In the Priestly version there is no demarcation of territories, everything created is open to Adam and Adam is open to all creation, but in the Jewish version he is immediately

walled in. Kafka recognizes that it is the garden—not the base material of Adam’s creation—that is the condition for the possibility of sin, expulsion, and suffering. The endless interchange of territorialization and deterritorialization, mentioned countless times in Deleuze’s writings, presumes an original garden. Kafka addresses the consequences of this origin in the incisive reading of Genesis scattered across these aphoristic theses.<sup>58</sup> That the reading is scattered among the theses corresponds to the theological and historical situation out of which they were written. Benjamin writes that Kafka’s fictions are “parables without doctrines.” These aphorisms, in contrast, are like doctrines without parables, theses severed from their arguments and sent out into history in search of a context, as though it too were a diasporic plane.<sup>59</sup> It is in this sense that

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<sup>58</sup> For an account of Kafka’s engagement with the Book of Genesis that focuses on his fascination with the Tower of Babel, see Alter (67-77).

<sup>59</sup> “Die Aphorismen sind—so stelle ich es mir vor—wie Blitze, die für einen Augenblick eine von Dunkelheit umhüllte Landschaft erleuchten...” (Arbib 122). This is a slightly different understanding of the form and function of the aphorisms, that seeks to explain their aphoristic shape by their effect—perhaps even by the effect of a certain kind of reading: reading for sense, desire for a context that would give rise to a synthetic understanding. It applies the Benjaminian motif of the “Blitz” or “éclair” that he adopts from, among other places, Baudelaire’s poem “A un passante,” and that gestures toward a mode of sense-making proper to an age in which poetic sensibility has been lost. When the poet loses his halo, the only light he can throw on his objects is Blitz-like. Kafka’s aphorisms, however, are not conceived along the lines of this phenomenological image. Whereas, with this figure, Benjamin seeks to critique phenomenology and the seeming transparency of appearances in that they endure in consciousness, with many of

they are aphorisms—cut off from the landscape of their original meaningfulness by historical horizons. And yet they have not been emitted, destiny-less, in order to vanish in the present, into a scholarly text, say. Quite the contrary. The destiny of these principles without a system is to gather up the present and direct it toward its contradiction. The antinomy of the garden poses an irresolvable conflict of interpretations that the walling up of Adam bequeathed to modernity and from which it suffers unremittingly.<sup>60</sup> This is not the suffering of toil or pain or death given to

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these aphorisms, Kafka seeks to critique a certain configuration of knowledge, history, and image-building, not following a metaphor of light and darkness, but a scriptural metaphor, that is, in effect, not a metaphor. Although in this chapter, Arbib speaks of Kafka's relationship to the Jewish tradition as gesturing towards "ein Judentum *sui generis*," Kafka, even if and to the very extent that his critique is destructive, is much closer to Jewish tradition (which is a very wide and varied category, including such disparate extremes as Talmud and Kabala) than this analysis would indicate (124). Biblical scholar Robert Alter notes: "There is something almost uncanny about Kafka as a reader of the Bible. Midrash, Talmud, and Kabbalah were certainly not part of his formative cultural experience, and even his late acquaintance with them was rather marginal. Yet the way he read the Bible reflected a spiritual kinship with these classical vehicles of Jewish exegesis" (64-5) although his readings are often what Alter calls "heretical" (66).

<sup>60</sup> The antinomy of the garden has a corresponding hermeneutic antinomy, expressed in these lines by Alter: "Even as Kafka's lavishing of exegetical speculation confirms the authority of the biblical text—the measure of the canonical is that the interpreter assumes truth must be derived from the text through the labor of interpretation—biblical canonicity is also quietly compromised because its claim to be the exclusive source of truth is tacitly set aside" (75-6). This eloquent

man within the garden, but rather the suffering brought on by the desire to wall ourselves off from suffering as a “self” or as a “people” or “nation” (ha’am), that is, the desire to derive our self-understanding from the story of the garden. Yet once mythically formed, planted there, primed to be driven out, what choice do we have but to interpret suffering as the other kind of suffering that fulfills the curse? We have been cursed to trace our suffering to this curse, Kafka insists. Thus it is also a curse to pay restitution.

To this fateful reading of history—Deuteronomic history—Kafka counterposes a peculiar freedom. Here is the first stage of his response to the curse that the garden placed on history. As if he were engaged in a rabbinical dispute, he pits two possible readings against one another.

Wenn das was im Paradies zerstört worden sein soll, zerstörbar war, dann war es nicht entscheidend, war es aber unzerstörbar, dann leben wir in einem falschen Glauben.

(NS II 67)

After the expulsion of Adam, Eve, and the snake, the garden (a) was destroyed, (b) could not be destroyed.

(a) The garden was destroyed. In this case it had always been destructible, never the secure, perfect, or eternal bastion it had represented itself to be. It was no paradise. Our

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account of Kafka’s hermeneutic impulse implies that Kafka finds in scripture a scriptural clue or hint, that for him has the force of commandment, to move beyond scripture. This was, in some sense, the allure of the idea of the Jewish tradition for Kafka, if his knowledge of its actual historical modalities was limited.

understanding of human nature and purpose, it follows, is mistaken to the extent that it derives from a belief in an indestructible thing that still belongs to us because it is that to which we originally belonged, our Herrkunft. Therefore, since without the memory of an indestructible origin, life is no longer what we thought it was; we can no longer live—if living means striving for paradise, by return or reconstruction or salvation. In being destroyed it was not destroyed. For, destructible, it never could have existed in the first place. Having been destroyed it was never destroyed. That is, being destructible and having been destroyed, only the fiction of its existence was removed and so “destruction” applies to it only as a metaphor or a “belief”, and a “false” one, a credence or a creed, a gullibleness or naiveté or innocence, if you will, that that clings to the believer. What is indestructible, then, is not paradise but the false belief that it existed and was destroyed, its falsity as integral to its endurance as its belief-character. The falsity planted in the garden myth pertains perhaps less to its logical aspects than to its theatrical ones—the dramatis personae, the plot, and the anti-climax of the expulsion. (Why expel if you are going to destroy? Conversely, why let fall if you can explode and reduce once and for all to dust that which came from it?) In any case its ruin could have been due to Adam. What we suffer he did not cause and if there is sin it is not his and so not ours, or if ours, ours for different reasons. “Sündig ist der Stand in dem wir uns befinden, unabhängig von Schuld” (NS II 72). Because we are not guilty of our sin—this false belief in a lost golden past with which we burden ourselves and our children—we can neither be punished for it nor make restitution. Paradise was never for us, nor we for it. Much comes down with the downfall of the myth. There is no family tragedy, no mark of Cain, no subjugation of woman, and so forth, at least not for the reasons that the Jewish story was supposed to provide. What’s more, the life is made up of “Sinnbilder,” whose sensual quality is precisely what is sinful—Sinnen is sin. “Die Sünde kommt immer offen

und ist mit den Sinnen gleich zu fassen. Durchsichtig als Selbstgeschaffenes. Sie kommt von außen und nennt, wenn man sie fragt, ihre Herrkunft” (NS II 93). From the garden this self-evident, self-created fantasy comes; sin comes with the senses, that which presents itself and its origin as though it were innocent and transparent. Life in its very self-evidence is the sin; life is in every instance stained by the seeming transparency of its Herrkunft.

(b) After Adam, Eve, and the snake’s expulsion, *the garden could not be destroyed*. This is the antinomial whose consequences Kafka wants to explore. Under the condition that the garden was indestructible, we live in a false belief, he writes, or perhaps two. We first believe falsely that the garden exists but is closed to us. Kleist suggested traveling around the world to slip in the back door before God locked it as well. Kafka illuminates, in place of Kleist’s ironic suggestion, the origin of the desire to get back into paradise: the belief that since a paradisaal state was once possible, it can be or will be again—or rather, it must still be. From this, shall we say, uncomplicated messianism, human activity derives its impetus. This is not an overstatement. Kafka will try to argue that all human activity *without exception* is driven by this type of messianism. And this law that is “ausnahmslos” is the point at which his considerations on law, work, property, theology, community, and writing come together. Activity, including *intellectus activus*, and so every conceivable thinking, believes that another, better garden can be built, however costly or infinite the task. Similarly, in a slightly different image, we believe that the fall can be reversed and that we can make our way back to it through the right kind of labor—the idea of progress (the idea by means of which humanity has made little progress since the expulsion from the garden). Both of these responses—building and work—are founded on false beliefs. Life, in short, is nothing other than the exercise of these beliefs. “Kämpfen,” that all-important Kafkan word, comes to mean something similar: “Alle kämpfen,” he writes in 1917,

“nur einen Kampf” (NS II 29). The Kampf for these false beliefs is usually triumphant. With building or work, life becomes a struggle between two forces: a push toward paradise and a the drive away from what lies barely hidden behind its image—its status as an image and hegemony over all images. In one of his few propositions about distraction, Kafka describes the counter-motions that determine life. “Das Leben ist eine fortwährende Ablenkung, die nicht einmal zur Besinnung darüber kommen läßt, wovon sie ablenkt” (NS II 340). Life has nothing to do with the vitalist conceptions popular during Kafka’s youth and afterwards. Life twists in a double bend that is difficult to picture, a turn away from something and a turn away from the original turn that never allows that something, or the original evasion of it, to come to thought.<sup>61</sup> In this reflection from a 1920 notebook, life has much in common with the suggestions he had made about art much earlier: both deny consciousness access. Are these then the same structures? Is life art? If so, it certainly would not be in the same sense in which many of his contemporaries obeyed Nietzsche, not George’s cultic aestheticism and not Expressionism’s “Schrei.” Or has he by 1920 abandoned the positive outlook on the challenge to consciousness that he once argued art is, to replace it with a critique of life? With this statement does he, in short, admonish the living in order to bring the source of life’s eccentric turning away to consciousness?

According to the Zürau theses the antinomy of the garden is unavoidable. Nevertheless, the theses try to find a way around it, working through paradisaal motifs over and over again, not by editing them, but by starting over each time as he was wont to do. Since from the perspective of the present we cannot decide for either principle—that no paradise existed or that it exists

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<sup>61</sup> Compare Heidegger’s notion of *Zerstreuung* as the everyday turning away that can be made “mächtig” and turned toward its source in the ontological difference (*Infra* Ch. 3).

still—the only adequate response is to rethink the motives to which the antinomy responds. He does this (how else?) in a Sinnbild. “Wir sind, mit dem irdisch befleckten Auge gesehn, in der Situation von Eisenbahnreisenden, die in einem langen Tunnel verunglückt sind und zwar an einer Stelle wo man das Licht des Anfangs nicht mehr sieht, das Licht des Endes aber nur so winzig, daß der Blick es immerfort suchen muß und immerfort verliert wobei Anfang und Ende nicht einmal sicher sind.” The very faint light—hope for an Ausgang from the present situation—creates the tunnel effect, the feeling of motion, and the fantasy of an irretrievable beginning. Kafka would like to put that one little light out. The subjective correlative of this situation is the disintegration of sense-data. The tunnel allegory continues: “Rings um uns aber haben wir in der Verwirrung der Sinne oder in der Höchstepfindlichkeit der Sinne lauter Ungeheuer und ein je nach der Laune und Verwundung des Einzelnen entzückendes oder ermüdendes kaleidoskopisches Spiel.” The fragment that immediately follows this thesis in the notebook clarifies the distinction between the kaleidoscope of the senses and the condition of being lost or disoriented. “Was soll ich tun? Oder Wozu soll ich es tun? sind keine Fragen dieser Gegenden” (NS II 33). “What should I do” and “what for” are not questions that belong to these zones insofar as they are not zones, but the crumbling of the two-way structure of track and tunnel into a Spiel without space. Flashing into being around the traveler at the center point of the tunnel, the play of the kaleidoscope corresponds to what can be described either as a confusion of the senses or as a perceptive hypersensitivity. In both cases the senses short-circuit the faculty that makes sense of the material, that is, that directional and directing engine that interprets the inability to think as “being in a tunnel,” and confirms it by the light at the far end. What is a tunnel without a light at the end of it? Not the condition for the possibility of being lost, broken down, or having gone astray; without one point of orientation there is no measure of



one's drift. Rather, the tunnel, the means, is constituted by its ends, and a means without an end is no longer construable as a means. Or more to the point, a set of points between which one cannot draw a line—this is the end toward which these theses tend. They ask the impossible: to banish questions of purpose and moral action, and do so not in the knowledge or hope that their suspension of the telos will itself be teleological. Teleological suspensions simply push the goal farther off, make the light more minute and charming. That's just it. Here is a scattering—not a diaspora that brings itself together in the mind. A kaleidoscope keeps the collection scattering, according to the rule of play.

With this in mind, the goal Kafka had announced for himself just a few months earlier, to take advantage of the inception of something in him, cannot be confused with a new orientation or goal. On the contrary—will: means to ends, building and buildings, work and works fall squarely within the garden antinomy. Instead, Kafka decides for the kaleidoscopic point at which the tunnel suspends. “Von einem gewissen Punkt gibt es keine Ruckkehr mehr. Dieser Punkt ist zu erreichen” (NS II 34). Upon saying this—that the point of no return is “to be reached” or realized—the track becomes untraversable. This is what Kafka means to make graspable in the Sinnbild, the word by which he intends not to waste the opening toward an “inception,” “Anfang.” He urges that these allegories be pushed to their limits, to a certain point—ein gewisser Punkt that is no Punkt der Gewissheit—from which there is no returning because the point ceases to delimit a line or track. An allegory pushed beyond its allegorand, a signifier pushed beyond its signified, a way to the null-point of Sinnbilder where either they reveal their nature as Sinnbilder, and so reveal that they are not “ways,” or a way to fill the senses to a point where they can no longer be made sense of. The point of no return is the point at which the image becomes a sheer image, whence the irony in his words. As soon as we intend, hope, plan,

or move toward this point so as to “reach” it, we have laid another track, made it an end, and rebuilt our paradise again. The point is not an endpoint, but a beginning, an Anfang.

In a labyrinth there is only beginning. Kafka’s desire to put out the end’s seductive little light takes many forms in his stories, from the country-man’s wait until the protector cuts off the light as his light goes out, to an emphasis on “process” and on locks—Schlosser—, to the architectural tendency towards the labyrinthine. Time also comes under scrutiny for its habit of building methodically towards an end of building. “Der entscheidende Augenblick der menschlichen Entwicklung ist, wenn wir unsern Zeitbegriff fallen lassen immerwährend. Darum sind die revolutionären geistigen Bewegungen, welche alles frühere für nichtig erklären im Recht, denn ist noch nichts geschehen” (NS II 34). And: “Dem Diesseits kann nicht ein Jenseits folgen, den das Jenseits ist ewig, kann also mit dem Diesseits nicht in Zeitlicher Beziehung stehen” (NS II 62). An instant<sup>62</sup> tells the difference between chronological time and eternity. The decisive instant drops chronological time; just as infinity cannot be counted up to, eternity cannot be reached through time. They are, in Kafka’s reading, a false dichotomy, no contact between them, and so neither one a coherent concept in itself. The alternative he proposes favors neither the one nor the other but instead a perpetual letting fall of our concept of time. He gives a clue as to how to understand this. In this instant there is no leap out of time by means of faith—the act is far more absurd! First, it is a perpetuity that occurs—if we can even use that word—on *this* side of eternity, where all we have is our usual concept of time in which things, we, they, you are not eternal; that is, we pass on. Spatializing time, we conceive of it as a track. Temporalizing space,

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<sup>62</sup> Kafka wrote the aphorisms that winter while intellectually trapped between alarm at Kierkegaard’s aesthetic theology and alarm at the mouse that invaded his room at night.

we conceive of the track as a train traveling, and there is no getting off until it disembarks at the station. The instant however is decisive. Like the point of no return, it must be reached but cannot be *reached*. So the analogy of thinking with stretching and intending is brought to a point of decision. The grip of these movements on thought, for a flash, lets fall. “Letting fall” demonstrates, like the play of the kaleidoscope, Kafka’s repeated attempts to produce thinking without will that corresponds to a life not buttressed by the thought of paradise. Here he compares it to a decision that corresponds to the declaration of something—the entire past, striving, falls, rails, perhaps even motion—as nothing. Upon saying this revolutionary “nix,” the ties with time are cut. As we are well aware, cutting off from the past can have horrific consequences. Kafka’s “geistige” revolutionaries, however, who may not correspond to any that ever lived, not only must recognize that, until the instant of their decision, nothing has yet happened, but also and more importantly they must maintain their mental “Nichtigkeit” in perpetuity, continually distancing themselves from their intentions to think of thought as construction.

The antinomy cannot be solved, but it can be depicted—in a labyrinth. All of these Sinnbilder have in common a paradox equally valid for both time and space: the need to think something other than a continuum, whereas thinking itself builds and rebuilds one. Space and time are inconceivable without the complicity of thought, and thought is inconceivable without the continuity of each of its pure intuitions. This is both a Kantian formulation, perhaps not known as such to Kafka, and a commonplace. The fateful association of thought and being means that thinking beings are intersections of space and time in which beings appear. Building, for Kafka, is an extension of this fate, our predetermination as extended things, and thus our luck to be exposed, and the desire to wall oneself in, make the world measurable—mapped by a land

surveyor, whom Kafka then frustrates *in perpetuum* with snow. Illustrative of this fate is the Tower of Babel, which is but an aftershock of the impossible destruction of the garden. “Das Wesentlich des ganzen Unternehmens ist der Gedanke, einen bis in den Himmel reichenden Turm zu bauen,” says the narrator of a fragment from around 1920. “Neben diesem Gedanken ist alles andere nebensächlich. Der Gedanke, einmal in seiner Größe gefaßt, kann nicht mehr verschwinden; solange es Menschen gibt, wird auch der starke Wunsch da sein, den Turm zu Ende zu bauen” (NS II 318). As long as there are human beings there will be this wish, which is to building as a plan is to its fulfillment. The wish before the wish: there is no wish, irrespective of its object, that does not first wish for fulfillment. Two responses suggest themselves. If it is true and unavoidable that the thought of reaching heaven is the quintessence of human beings, either the end of humanity must be brought about or else the end of being. Or—a second option: build differently. In the image-world this must be grasped as a difference in images. In 1917 Kafka notes: “Wenn es möglich wäre, den Turm von Babel zu bauen, ohne ihn zu erklettern – der Bau wäre erlaubt worden” (NS II 45). A portion of a line from 1922 confirms its continued life in Kafka’s imagination: “Wir graben den Schacht von Babel” (NS II 484). A shaft of Babel presents in an image a toppled tower that at every instant lets its claim on heaven fall away. It is not a downward movement, as it would be were it evil, Gnostic, or technocratic and secular. This building is not the building of a world, at least insofar as it would be against God. It is also not a mine. Image – counter-image: the shaft is neither. It drills the horizon of its own worldlessness; it digs in the horizon itself. As an image, then, it also lets something fall. Still an exercise of the human will, it lets fall the pretense that it is an image able to seduce humanity into climbing, or, what is the mirror image of this, warning them not to climb. Its image is not a mirror image: this much is confirmed in the thesis. To build upward without climbing—to build without striving—

describes the counterintuitive structure that occurs to a builder without the will to inhabit or own what is built.

One Sinnbild in which Kafka places some faith to accomplish this is the labyrinth itself. The problem is that no labyrinth exists. To the extent that it can be experienced, it is no labyrinth; what looks like a labyrinth is not one. No image allows one to calculate its effects and assert with any assurance their labyrinthine quality. A labyrinth seen from above—the way in which we almost always see it—is not a labyrinth but a maze. It is an instrument of torture or a clever teaser for the intelligence. A true labyrinth, if we can use a word that gestures deceptively at what it cannot hope to convey, teases away intelligence; it closes out apperception altogether and with it any hope of salvation—except by chance—through building or its subjective correlate, thinking.

In examining Kafka's thought of the labyrinth, let us accept the following postulate as true. Thought and space are reciprocally determined. One's configuration determines the other, and visa versa, without hope of saying which is the Anfang, arche, inception. Kafka thinks something like this, as his architectural and spatial projections demonstrate. Building draws with it thinking that is like building, that walls itself in and secures itself against happenstance, pens up its inhabitants, and depends on the groundedness of its foundation. Building determines space as a series of containers, and thought as the containers' container (not unlike the hand as the tool of tools to cite Aristotle). Likewise, thought as will to act projects a space that funnels or obstructs the will, a tunnel and a train, and so forth. Thought and space determine one another, every thinking projecting a corresponding space in which its plans are carried out, or in which its objects exist or its gurus withdraw from space toward the intelligible, every space in turn conditioning a thought that inhabits it, like an animal in its corridors. This implies, however, that

a difference in one would bring a difference in the other, another thought another space, and so forth, and the conversion point between spaces and thoughts would be the point at which you cannot make up your mind. What space corresponds to thought's detention? What thought corresponds to the withholding of space? Is there an unspace that corresponds to unthinking? The closest earthly paradigm of this is, once again, the labyrinth, concrete projection of a mind unable to make itself up. Almost any of the historical images of thinking—forethought and afterthought, the Greek brothers, planning, memory, reflection (*cogitare*), intention (thought-act toward an object, *νοεῖν*), calculation (*λογιζέσθαι*) a silent conversation with the self, though perhaps not Mallarmé's "writing without implements"—is senseless inside one. Kafka wishes, although he dare's not wish again, to demolish the house that is the image of the history of images of thought; each differently decorated room goes down equally into the rubble. In a true labyrinth there are only walls (and this is its only truth). There are horizons and more horizons and no path is the right one to prove to thought that the will to transcend them has been fulfilled.<sup>63</sup>

A question that urges itself on Kafka, and soon after on Borges who picks up on it in Kafka is—if this is so, if the labyrinth is the space of unthought or distraction, as the continual disarming of the will and the will to build (they are the same), what status does the thought of the labyrinth have? This inkling comes very close to describing both writers' conceptions of literature. It is at odds, however, with Heidegger's desires for interpretation. Whereas for Heidegger, in the Leibniz lectures, *Zerstreuung* is interpretation, for Kafka it is a respite from

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<sup>63</sup> A note on the famous labyrinth at Crete: there was no monster at its center, just a man who, after an interminably long frustration of his will, had grown bullish and huge.

interpreting, a break in the continuity of the endlessly revolving projecting-understanding, although of course not by having arrived at what transcends it. Entwerfendes Verstehen names the Maulwurf's building, and Kafka's story fragment searches for its fissures.

To build what cannot be thought, to think what cannot become a construction—these are the two anti-teleological objectives that Kafka begins to articulate in a programmatic manner in the Zürau theses. In line with this program, he develops a technical term for the continued influence of the garden on human history—“Hilfskonstruktion.” “(Die Schlange hat mit dem Rat ihre Arbeit nur halb getan, sie muß jetzt das, was sie bewirkt hat, auch noch zu fälschen suchen, sich also im eigentlichen Sinne in den Schwanz beißen.) Aber was geschehen ist kann nicht rückgängig gemacht sondern nur getrübt werden. Zu diesem Zwecke entstehen die Hilfskonstruktionen. Die ganze Welt ist ihrer voll, ja die ganze sichtbare Welt ist vielleicht nichts anderes als eine Hilfskonstruktion des einen Augenblick lang ruhen wollenden Menschen. Ein Mittel um die Tatsache der Erkenntnis in Verdacht zu bringen, die Erkenntnis erst zum Ziel zu machen" (NS II 74-5).<sup>64</sup> To make knowledge the goal entails letting knowledge fall away as a

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<sup>64</sup> Kafka attributes this term, which he replaces with “Motivationen” in the fair copy of the aphorisms, to Max Brod. In a letter to Brod he calls “Hilfskonstruktion” “Fachwort aus deinem Roman” (Briefe, 1902-1924 224). And indeed, although perhaps not an important term for Brod, it does appear in his novel “Das große Wagnis,” which Kafka read and critiqued for his friend. In one appearance the word describes a the compensation for a failed romance. The “Dichter” confesses to the narrator: “Ich habe allerdings nicht die ‘passende Frau’ geheiratet, sondern eine ganz komplizierte Hilfskonstruktion an ihrer Stelle [gebaut]” (194). It should be apparent why Kafka was attracted to this word for a structure or institution of compensation.

means. This insight is very close to the central insight of Plato's *Sophist*. It is readily understandable that one can never know knowledge as one knows an object of knowledge, just as one cannot think one's way out of thinking that builds ever more auxiliary constructions. What should be let fall, or helped along toward collapse, is the image of thought as construction. And although Kafka begins to explore the possibility of another mode, "destruction," in these aphorisms, he does not decide for that either.

The Book of Genesis not only reserves a myth by which constructions become Hilfskonstruktionen, it moreover responds to a human need to produce or find a "Halt" in existence, a ground that is more than the two feet that cover it, a building that, like the Castle, finally bares the lines and lineages of its power, if only by constructing them again in a different place. The theses express this in the following manner. "Der Mensch kann nicht leben ohne ein dauerndes vertrauen zu etwas Unzerstörbarem" (NS II 58). Kafka experiments with the idea that belief in something indestructible is not only the key to human being, but is being itself.

"Glauben heißt: das Unzerstörbar in sich befreien oder richtiger: sich befreien oder richtiger: unzerstörbar sein oder richtiger: sein" (NS II 55). This astounding chain of associations, or rather, this set of more and more precise truths peels away the layers of sedimented interpretation to expose the fundament of belief. Faith is faith only insofar as it is faith in something indestructible. Being... indestructible; insofar as I am or anything is I am offered that much more of a handhold for trust or belief. In terms more pertinent to our line of questioning, the reverse of this is the lesson Kafka's *Lehren ohne Parabeln* teach. For however long nothing indestructible is found, faith will keep filling the world with Hilfskonstruktionen. In point of fact, world for Kafka is made of supporting constructions that reinforce the faith in something beyond them. And so the messiah, in order to live up to the task, "wird erst kommen, wenn er nicht mehr nötig



sein wird, er wird erst nach seiner Ankunft kommen, er wird nicht am letzten tag kommen, sondern am allerletzten” (NS II 56-7). A messiah could not come in response to human desire, since he stands outside the scope of human concerns. Paradise will either have to be established or abandoned before that day, and thus salvation can only occur as an afterthought, a fluke that adds nothing essential to what already exists, which remains unchanged.

### **Der Bau**

The creature of “The Bau” built a labyrinth and knows exactly how far it has gotten him. In the early days of the Bau, at the inception of the building and the building—in the English gerund the striving work of building is indistinguishable from the final possession of a building—the creature plans and builds a labyrinth... ”dort fing mein Bau an...und so tobte sich dort die erste Arbeitsfreude in einem Labyrinth aus, der mir damals die Krone aller Bauten schien, den ich aber heute wahrscheinlich richtiger al allzu kleinliche, des Gesamtbaues nicht recht würdige Bastelei beurteile, die zwar theoretisch vielleicht köstlich ist—...in wirklichkeit aber eine viel zu dünnwandige spielerei darstellt, die einem ersten Angriff oder einem verzweifelt um sein Leben kämpfenden Feind kaum widerstehen wird” (NS II 586-7).

Its labyrinth is the paradigm of a Hilfskonstruktion, a temporary respite from building, hasty joy in outwitting the enemy. As such it is a theological construction. The labyrinth sets forth in concentrated form the creature’s extra-terrestrial hopes for the Bau, since it is designed to secure the passage of one from mortality to immortality. Imitating the Garden, at the exact dividing point between the Bau and “das Fremde,” “das Freie,” the surface world, the labyrinth stands exposed and protected at the same time. Protected by its inner impassability, it mediates

and controls the passage between mortality and immortality by the sheer intelligence of its design. And yet the creature, now grown older and wiser, knows that any construction that allows one mortal through can allow others; a true impasse would, in order to be foolproof, have to trap it as well. Its apotheosis by its own hand and intelligence is a cheap sham. “Freilich manche List ist so fein, daß sie sich selbst umbringt,” the creature remarks (NS II 576). The sentiment that these lines express carries through the entire fragment. The creature’s various vigils and experiments to proof the fundament of its Bau fall under the scorn of this reproof. Its “attempt at a self-critique” is indeed a “ruthless critique of everything standing,” insofar as it presents in scrupulous detail the fine tricks of construction and constructionism that eventually self-destruct. It amounts to a critique of ontology—a refutation of any possible understanding of being—by a creature once obsessed with securing its own being by means of perfect forethought, the plan for its Bau, which, starting in its youth and extending until at least the delivery of this report, has taken up its entire adult life. The fragment, however, does not join it in the first joyous victory of its great accomplishment, but instead presents, as if in a final accounting of its life and opinions before a court or a god, reminiscences told in a kind of general past of repeated action. It recalls the ins and outs of Bau life, the experience marking out and patrolling the boundaries of existence. This experience is truly labyrinthine; over the course of the first half of the fragment, the proofing of the fundament of the creature’s dream-home, the tour of the Bau, leads it to describe a situation from which there is no escape. The labyrinth it has built is not a labyrinth—this much is clear—no one can build a true labyrinth, but the one who tries lives within the labyrinthine thinking to which the desire to construct the perfect building exposes him. At every turn the creature must think, and think again, returning ever again to each of its tunnels’ turns; of an actual labyrinth there is no overview. Between the Bau, his scurrying

thoughts, the “free and foreign” above him, the dark unknown beneath, the creature has made itself a nest in a warren of relations it cannot fathom.

Martin Heidegger once commented that this story represents “the last gasp of Western subjectivity.”<sup>65</sup> Perhaps. But when was the subject not gasping for breath, either to go on living under the crush of philosophical or physical arguments for and against it, or to finally give up the ghost during the destruction of Western metaphysics? Will there ever be a *last* gasp, and if so, does this not come under the heading of “Bauen” that Heidegger, like Kafka, associated with “being.” Heidegger links them etymologically, and, I should add, very positively. Furthermore, Heidegger’s “house of being,” die Sprache, language or speech, has no *fundamentum inconcussum*, and yet we should ask whether the “unheimlich” that liberates “heimat” from dogmatism and essentialism—neither of which would correctly characterize the thinking of the creature in the Bau; no it is a thinker of the highest order, one who asks, when he inquires into the meaning of his Bau “Was heißt denken?”—is not still too dialectical, and the ontological difference not constructed and named in order to locate, once and for all, the boundary with heaven. Is the Kierkegaardian and ultimately Augustinian and Platonic description of everyday experience, so essential to Heidegger’s understanding of being, separable from its role in

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<sup>65</sup> Reported by Giorgio Agamben in a conversation in May 2004. As a student in the Le Thor seminar he asked Heidegger if he had read this story. A similar sentiment can be found in (Richter), though with a more elaborated argument for the placement of this text in debates over subjectivity. It is interesting to note that a carnivore who makes his home so secure and so alluring to his prey that he becomes ensnared in it himself is described by Hannah Arendt in a diary entry entitled “Heidegger the Fox.”

Christian doctrine? What if, as Kafka admonishes himself in September 1917, the allegorical and imagistic nature of this construction should be grasped and brought to light? What if, instead of conscience calling to tell the self of the nothing that grounds it, something else was heard, less a call than a noise, or less even than a noise, and much less than another Sinnbild to construct a façade for the senses once again.

The subject that is willing to give up subjectivity after hearing the call of nothing is not able to give up anything if it cannot receive the call. Everything remains the same. In essence the call must come from itself. It must be its conscience calling to say “nothing,” or “no”; nobody else’s will do. For this reason, the radical break with the phenomenology of consciousness that runs through *Sein und Zeit*—and this is not to be denied—preserves the unity of the self that receives the call. Nothing calls—myself. It is me and I am the one who receives the call of nothing, who can and does operate in the anxiety-provoking, consciousness-splitting, insecure rift between being and beings. If however the Ruf is itself nothing—not identifiable as a Ruf, it calls for another ontology and another hermeneutics.

The first half of the Bau fragment describes in detail, as I hope I have indicated, the labyrinthine thoughts that the desire to reach immortality through building provokes. As an aside, it is important to note that Walter Benjamin’s famous warning that the greatest misinterpretations of Kafka’s works arise from interpreting them theologically or psychologically is itself often misunderstood. Without psychology—the descriptive psychology of Brentano—and theology—the theological myths of Genesis—it is impossible to understand

Kafka's use or misuse of both.<sup>66</sup> In fact, the two can be reduced to one, and Kafka does so:

"Psychologie ist die Beschreibung der Spiegelung der irdischen Welt in der himmlischen Fläche oder richtiger die Beschreibung einer Spiegelung, wie wir, Vollgesogene der Erde, sie uns denken, denn eine Spiegelung erfolgt gar nicht, nur wir sehen Erde, wohin wir uns auch wenden" (NS II 32). Heaven is a mirror reflecting those "soaked with earth" back to themselves and psychology is nothing more than a description of this projective reflection. Both come to naught in the reflection, because, although "we" look upward, in that direction we see as well an image of us, looking for our image.

"Alles fügt sich zum Bau," but not quite everything. A mole knows, since it lives by in the main by its sense of hearing and not by sight, that there are some Sinnbilder, in particular aural ones, that expose the non-space between buildings, and that contribute neither to structure nor to ground. If ground is, in Kant's definition, that which determines the indeterminate, building a bounded thing for the senses, then this Sinnbild undetermines, not because it is indeterminate, but because it cannot be either. In one of the professional articles written at the behest of the director of the insurance bureau where he worked as legal counsel, Kafka made a

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<sup>66</sup> Robertson argues that "to discuss Kafka's thought in theological terms" is misleading because he did not believe in any God. First this argument must be made more precise. Judaism has a very different understanding of faith or belief than Christianity, relying less on personal belief and more on ritual and keeping of the law. This said, theology, at least Christian theology, it can be argued, although it seeks to promote and secure faith through reason, also has to suspend faith in order to investigate arguments for and against God. It certainly can be said that Kafka engages in this kind of reflection, although his conclusions are quite heretical.

similar point. To every “Baugewerbe” there is a “Nebengewerbe” such that the relationship between the two calls into question the “Umfang der Versicherungspflicht” (Amtliche Schriften 107-38). In every project there is a line or zone at which point the worker becomes uninsured. For the younger Kafka the aporias of insurance were became apparent to him in his investigation of construction sites and their neighboring workshops. In his report, he states unequivocally the effect this has on the worker. “Das hiebei in betracht kommende Hauptmoment ist jedoch, daß der Arbeiter des gleichen Betriebs in Diensten des gleichen Unternehmers einmal versichert ist, das andere mal nicht” (Amtliche Schriften 118-9). According to the laws covering occupational safety were workers to become injured or die between Bau and Bau, it did not constitute an accident, since their being as workers was not assured and their bodies not insured in those places. Where there was no insurance the worker ceased to be a worker—and if the worker ceased to be, there would be no repercussions. At last partly as a result of Kafka’s report the law was changed in 1906 to offer expanded coverage for workers in all spaces connected with the Bau and its construction. Alles fügt sich zum Bau, and yet, in Kafka’s imagination this only displaced the limits to being as security, forced them to go underground, as it were. There he notes also, a marked pathos invading his otherwise surgical tone, the effect of these limits on the worker: “Und die Arbeiter müssen, wenn sie als Laien, aber als die Interessiertesten, die Sache betrachten, zu dem Glauben kommen, das nicht Prinzipien, sondern Zufälligkeiten das Versicherungswesen beherrschen” (Amtliche Schriften 119). Later when he stages a scene in which the mole-creature is Baumeister and Arbeiter, worker and owner, architect and inhabitant, Prometheus and Epimetheus; the unsecured zone is shown up for a trick—eine List—the entrance to the Bau, the precarious passage out into the danger of unending traffic and the equally dangerous return into the Bau that now has become a lure to enemies and a trap for the

creature. The accidental quality in Kafka's report belonged not to the actual physical dangers of working in a construction site but the arbitrariness of the principles that could never provide total security for people as people, and not workers, when they consider the whole business (das Gewerbe). Accidental principles, the sudden unreality of the real in Kafka's Bau fragment is given a peculiar Sinnbild. Or, rather, it has a Sinnen that never becomes a Bild, and so can contribute to no Bildung, not the creature's and not ours.

### **The Sound of Zerstreung**

In most allusions to it, distraction is said to do nothing more than steal away attention, and thus has no positive presence of its own. This is at least in part due to the way in which attention has been imagined. Thought of as the focusing of the mind's eye on a present object, attention has lately become the site of a power struggle over the will of every class and within every class, both for liberators of the subject from oppression as well as for oppressors, to the point where, whichever side wins, the subject is left a subject oppressed in its very definition by the restriction to attention, by, in other words, restricting sensing and thinking to willed sensing and thinking. Thrown under its object, the subject is not free for anything but the adjustment of its attentive powers. Under the tyranny of attention, distraction appears either as diversion, and thus points the way toward entertainment and down the path toward vice, or else as dispersal, a divided attention that indicates an inability to unify what falls into the attentive field. Both these understandings derive distraction from attention, attention from subjectivity, and fault "power" for directing it away or for shaping it to its own purposes. For Hobbes "distraction" named the cause and effect of civil war; the people, when they looked away from the sovereign, tumbled

back into a mental *bellum omnium contra omnes* from which physical weapons were sure to follow. And yet, the striking fact about theories of distraction as a diverted or degraded attention is that they all, almost without exception, visualize both members of the opposition on the model of one sense. “Vision” can be substituted freely for “perception” and “apperception” in these theories. It is on the model of vision with a field, a periphery, a point of focus, and the ability, or desire, to erase extraneous material, to concentrate within the already constituted visual field, to draw an object as an entity with an outline—a double-concentration, then: producing objects and isolating fields—to the detriment of the majority of beings, half-beings, and non-being that populate it. You cannot see what is not there. Because of this description of visual experience—and the consequent determination of presence and absence as the poles between which the discussion sways—mental experience can be viewed in the same manner, or imagined to be. Yet, prior to the advent of attention a narrowing and gathering already has taken place, so to speak, of the field of attention studies, from five senses to one. The one which seems to have most control over what it perceives, the sovereign sense, holds the others back from rebellion. For Walter Benjamin, touch suggests a different arrangement of faculties in which attention does not even figure and distraction is the rule. A distraction without relation to attention could derive from a phenomenology of hearing as well, whereas with regard to taste or smell—I don’t know of any European language that maintains the possibility of claiming olfactory concentration. If anything, Proust has shown the tendency of smell toward diversion—not to another attention, but toward an evocation of a manifold of impressions that would be hard to label “attention to the past,” if anything it is an indeterminate “search.”

You can, however, hear what is not strictly there. The “there” of auditory experience differs from the there of vision. Vision’s demonstrative has imprinted philosophical attempts to



name, and critique, sense certainty from Hegel to Heidegger. Hearing's there cannot necessarily be pointed to, even in the first instance. In an important sense the there of hearing does not correspond to a where.

The second half of the Bau fragment is devoted to a disturbance in the Bau and the description of the frantic measures the creature takes to discover where it originates. In this disturbance, indicated by a barely audible rustling noise—a *Zischen* that breaks the customary stillness—fundamental critique, critique of critique, meets an obstacle it cannot overcome.

Whatever else can be said about it, and the possible interpretations are numerous if not innumerable, as I hope I've indicated, the Bau acts as an amplifier. It sharpens the creature's hearing as though it were in reality a telephone or a prosthetic ear. If one had to assign it a shape and an emblem, it would probably be the ear itself, whose canals, to the very extent that they turn around themselves into the ear's depths, inwardly expose themselves to what is without. In the end it is not its shape that determines the Bau. Like a true labyrinth, it has no shape, only an experience, and not a synthetic one or an "innere Erfahrung" but one that turns thought out of its house. When Deleuze and Guattari in the very first lines of their 1975 book on Kafka associate the Bau with the Rhizome, a word that is impressive for the revolution it works on the concept of the concept, they do the Bau fragment and the thinking that is going on in it an injustice, as I have indicated.<sup>67</sup> Even the creature who has been building, dwelling, and thinking in the Bau cannot see it; from outside it disappears, from inside he is forced to revisit all the passageways, little chambers, and the "castle keep" continually in order to approximate an overview of his

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<sup>67</sup> See *Infra*: Note 34 on Deleuze and Guattari's uses of the Bau as a pattern for revolutionary intellectual forms in their book on Kafka.

territory. But it remains an approximation. Moreover the Burgplatz itself has no “shape” or “outline,” and this is why he dreams of digging a ditch like a moat around it so he can get outside it and observe it. The Bau is not a territory, not exactly—how could it be? It exists within the terra itself. If anything, it is subterritorial or quasi-territorial. And if the story makes anything available for philosophy to more precisely understand or even to invent anew the thought of thought or the concept of concept, it should be drawn from the difficulties that the creature experiences in having a total view—Gesamtaussicht—of his total edifice—Gesamtbau. One might contrast this with the panopticon, whose inmate cannot see out but is aware that the watcher, who may or may not be actually there, sees all the inhabitants. Sight is not the privileged faculty without or within the Bau—moles are virtually blind, and in the subterritory there is no light source.<sup>68</sup> If we allow our senses to be sharpened by the story we notice that the talk of Selbst-Beobachtung has to be taken, from the perspective of the nearly-blind mole in a sunless cave, as at best a metaphor, at worst an error. The Bau, despite its best laid plans—or rather, because of them—has become a giant ear, the deeper and more convoluted its canals, the

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<sup>68</sup> In his excellent study of Kafka’s relationship to and critique of Wissenschaft, Paul Heller cites the crucial passage from *Brehms Tierleben* on the perceptual capacity of the Maulwurf that he calls the “Keimzelle für Kafkas Erzählung “Der Bau” (120). I quote it here in its entirety:

Das Gehör ist vortrefflich. Wahrscheinlich wird es besonders benutzt, um Gefahren zu bemerken; den der Maulwurf [...] hört auch jedes ihm bedenklich erscheinende Geräusch mit aller Sicherheit und sucht sich dann so schnell wie möglich auf und davon zu machen [...] in der Erde wirkt ja der ganze Körper gleichsam als äußeres Ohr [...].

(*Brehms Tierleben*, 1912, Bd. 10, s.313. qtd. in Heller, p.120.)

more exposed and receptive to the outside; the larger and more powerful it grows, the less certain its ability to pinpoint noises. At times the creature half intuits this fact. “Das schönste an meinem Bau,” the creature rhapsodizes, “ist aber seine Stille, freilich sie ist trügerisch, plötzlich einmal kann sie unterbrochen werden und alles ist zu Ende, vorläufig aber ist sie noch da” (NS II 579). The “da” of the Bau, unlike the da of Dasein in its thrownness into being-in, is not always there. In its greed for booty and its will to total security, the mole, fat capitalist, suffers from what it calls the “ungeheuren Ausdehnung” of his Bau that turns it into a panacousticon (NS II 577). Every tiny noise becomes equal in its vast chambers. When it comes, the shattering of the cherished stillness that goes on during the second half of the creature’s narration, it is not, however, the end of stillness in one frontal attack, after which the Bau is changed forever. The creature anticipates this eventuality but is wrong. To be as precise as possible, the ruination of his great construction occurs as an on-again off-again noise—a hiss—whose source is undiscoverable. Between its broadcasts “everything remains unchanged.” The territorialist, if that is what the creature is, is terrorized by an unexpected, previously unheard and unheard of possibility of his own territory.<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> Noise murders, music saves. This insight forms the basis of Jacques Attali’s analysis of the role of music in political economy. Music sacrifices noise, the destroyer of order, and thereby reestablishes the orderly trade routes of capitalism, communication, the stratification of classes, the normative force of moral codes and law. Kafka, who often confessed to having a tin ear, would have been well situated to “hear” noise, although, as Attali rightly points out, noise is not a positive perception that can be simply received. If it were, it would be communicable, and not noise. Because it is, rather, an interference in communication, and thus not a sound at all, but

It would not be incorrect to say that thinking, insofar as it results in building or is an act of construction, produces this possibility, but it would also not convey the subtlety of the situation. It may very well be that the noise the creature suddenly hears was there from the start—from before the start—and something in its “Recherche a la Temp Perdu” brings it to life in his ear as if it came out of nowhere and became suddenly audible, if not exactly thinkable. This is to say that hearing is not noticing, not as Brentano intended with his term of art “Bemerken.” Perhaps the impetus for the creature’s confession has to do with the sudden appearance of the noise. At one point the creature addresses the Bau in an unexpected apostrophe: “Was kümmert mir die Gefahr jetzt, da ich bei Euch bin. Ihr gehört zu mir, ich zu Euch, verbunden sind wir, was kann uns geschehen” (NS II 605). The words reveal the intimacy

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rather a violence to the systematization of sound and silence in music, speech, and communication, a violence done to their constitutive opposition of sound and silence—being neither the one nor the other—it cannot properly be heard. Kafka, then, who has no ear for music even if he listened to it, would not have “heard” noise, and yet he was deeply receptive to its plaint. What calls for more thinking in the relationship between Attali’s historical analysis and Kafka’s fiction are the differences in their receptions of Nietzsche and Schopenhauer. Despite his disagreement with Nietzsche, who wrote that music was the “expression of truth” (6), Attali’s understanding of the tension between music and noise as a tension between order and disorder echoes the Schopenhaurian strains in *The Birth of Tragedy*. Kafka seems to take issue with this. To the Bau creature, silence is order, music absent, and noise is less disorder than the mark of something that will not abide either, and so pierces the creature’s lifework and lifeworld in its fundamental assumption.

that binds building, being, and thinking together. Building and thinking are bound in a reciprocal relationship of possession—love, you might call it—such that the freeing of one from its bonds implies the redefinition of the other, and being names the relation. Over against this bond or Bund are two things that, to the creature, belong together, but which will soon prove to be distinct events: danger, Gefahr, and happening, Geschehen. Danger, on the one hand, is the threat against which the bond between thought and building makes sense; being is nothing other than the building in thought of an edifice that repels destruction, while danger is nothing less than the denial of this bond and the subsequent release of thinking and building into indeterminacy. On this basis the Bau was built, and on this basis the creature’s thoughts run rings around it, calculating its soundness from every possible angle. Life or being means constant vigilance over life and being, while thought keeps the vigil. At the middle point of “The Bau,” when the creature has returned from the free, foreign surface world to find that, once more, in its Bau—“alles ist unverändert” (NS II 604)—a Geschehen wakes it from its sleep. The “still und leer” Bau is penetrated by a being he can neither find nor identify.<sup>70</sup> The Zischen stays on the thin edge

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<sup>70</sup> Hansjörg Bay traces the figure of the “penetrator,” the “Eindringling” in several of Kafka’s works. In general the figure represents for him a “Zersetzung” of the reigning order (50). If this is so, it is even more significant that in this late story the Eindringling never in fact appears, and thus the reigning order, in a coup de grace, is not in the least disturbed—and in this way is disturbed irreparably. Bay resolves the absence of the invader by understanding the hissing noise itself as the most extreme version of the Eindringling. This certainly changes the terms of the argument. This invader, according to him, “deterritorialisiert in seiner Ortlosigkeit den gesamten Bau” as “reines...Geräusch” (63-4). Although he is right to say that the noise is “sinn- und

of audible—and yet it is, as the creature remarks more than once, “nur mit dem Ohr des wirklichen sein Amt ausübenden Hausbesitzers hörbar” (NS II 606). What is the noise that can only be heard by the builder and dweller, the true homeowner exercising his duty—the being who has taken on the burden of Being as its whole life’s work, to build and build toward eternal life? The noise possesses to the Bau, and as a Geschehen, a happening, it dispossesses thought from the building that constitutes it.

Geräusche und Gerüche are the creature’s livelihood. Smells and sounds travel to it wherever it lays down and it follows them back to their sources to sink its fangs into them. Yet to listen to this noise is impossible. Despite the furious “Untersuchungen” at which it is an expert—penetrating critic that it is—it comes “gar nicht dem Ort des Geräusches näher, immer klingt es unverändert dünn in regelmäßigen Pausen” (NS II 607). “Ich horche, hoch und tief, an den Wänden oder am Boden, an den Eingängen oder im Innern, überall, überall das gleiche Geräusch” (NS II 612). The noise returns each time, whereupon the creature reports that “alles blieb unverändert.” Although it makes obvious reference to it, the creature rejects Nietzsche’s thought to end all thoughts. For this is not the return of the thought of an eternal return come to stimulate thinking against European nihilism and a particular interpretation of thinking and progress, but rather the return of the end of thought, that steals away the eternal. Nietzsche’s anti-metaphysical principal calls institutions into question insofar as they grow out of a desire for infinite progress into the future, a desire that is utilitarian to the core. Yet in the formulation itself a ground is given back to the one whose ground has been stolen away. We can depend on an

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subjektlos[.]” (66), he does not identify it as the Sinnbild der Sinnlosigkeit, that changes nothing but leaves nothing the same.

“eternal” return, build on it, in whatever provisional way. “Alles blieb unverändert” does not imitate the eternal return of the same but rather, in remaining unchanged, it does not allow the recognition of “sameness.”

Attempts to discover the source of the noise as a builder, by dismantling parts of the Bau, and as a thinker, by deducing the source from his experience of the noise, come to naught. In the end it is not the feared attack of an enemy from below or above, and not the “Kleinzeuge,” who penetrate his isolation, and who, in another analysis of the story, could be shown to be the only creatures with actual freedom of movement in this claustrophobic world, but something that does not attack that disturbs the peace of the Bau. It does not attack because it does not let itself be presented as a Sinnbild. Its only claim on the senses is “ein leichtes Zischen, in langen Pausen nur hörbar, ein Nichts, an das man sich, ich will nicht sagen, gewöhnen könnte, nein, gewöhnen könnte man sich daran nicht...denn die Unruhe zittert in mir noch genau wie seit Stunden und wenn mich der Verstand nicht zurückhielte würde ich wahrscheinlich am liebsten an irgendeiner Stelle, gleichgültig ob etwas dort zu hören ist oder nicht, stumpfsinnig, trotzig nur des Grabens wegen zu graben anfangen, schon fast ähnlich dem Kleinzeug, welches entweder ganz ohne Sinn gräbt oder nur weil es die Erde frißt” (NS II 615-6). The Sinnbild robs him of Sinnen. To rebuild the parts of the Bau destroyed in the search for the hiss’ source it no longer has sufficient powers. “Ich bin zu zerstreut,” the creature confesses, and “störende Risse bleiben” (NS II 617).

Irregularly sounding in an arrhythmic syncope, the hiss sends rifts through the tunnel walls. This is not destruction, nor is it construction. It is instead “destroying,” the only event—Geschehen—that Kafka would allow, in his Zürau theses, might offer an indestructible object for adams’ lasting faith. “Die Zerstörung[] zu bauen” (NS II 78), the “aufbauende Zerstörung der Welt” (NS II 105), Kafka writes. With respect to intellect, the indestructible is distraction. Das

Unzerstörbare ist die Zerstreung. And this, a reformulation, perhaps, of Nietzsche's thought of the eternal return, steals away thought in an unpredictable way. Not an ontological principle, it can borrow none of the stability or predictability of being. Not a call of conscience to the groundless ground of thinking, it cannot offer a new image of thought a new principle. That which answers to no principle, it is essentially anarchic. I have said that distraction as *Zerstreung* has no image, no *Sinnbild*, but this is not exactly true. It has an *Ohrbild*, albeit a dislocated one. A hiss that without warning breaks the silence of being, a noise that only you, with ears trained for your house, can hear, and then only barely, an experience that chases you out of house and mind, and turns off as unexpectedly as it turned on. It is, we might say, the end beyond which the building is uninsured and where thinking cannot go, yet it is not simply the limit of thought that a critique could expose. The proofing of the fundament exposes the critic to a limit within thought, the sourcelessness of his own critique, which seemed a minute before to have been grounded in the rational and empirical structures whose securing was its task. Kafka's *Zerstreung* can be contrasted with consciousness, rather than as an unconscious, as a counter-conscious. Freud's unconscious carries the indigestible parts of the past forward into the future, albeit transformed, producing a shock of the uncanny in the "same" subject that encounters itself as "other," such that the same is never the same. And yet it is the same as well, for how else could it encounter itself as "other"? Uncanniness carries forward a substrate of a self to encounter its other, and the future remains a future of this self. *Zerstreung* indicates the absence of this effect. Everything remains unchanged and yet *der Zerstreute* is not carried forward in the promise of change and further life, or another one. Always unwelcome, always leaving behind disturbing rifts in institutions and selves and other structures, it names the attitude toward a future where nothing returns to expose the fact that the fundament of a building is another



building, and so on ad infinitum. Everywhere we turn are Hilfskonstruktionen—the world is full of them, except where we do not or cannot turn, but something turns toward us without letting us think it or build it a home.

Kafka conceived of this possibility in several ways. “Manchmal scheint es mir,” he writes to Brod in September 1917, “Gehirn und Lunge hätten sich ohne mein Wissen verständigt” (Briefe, April 1914-1917 319). To Ottilia he had written just before this “Das ist also der Stand der geistige Krankheit, Tuberkulose” (Briefe, April 1914-1917 309). He will carry on this association until the end, calling the outbreak in his lungs “nur ein aus-den-Ufern-treten der geistigen Krankheit” (29). So it is in fact a Sinnbild not of his physical illness that he sets himself the challenge of grasping but a Sinnbild of a mental illness that presents to the senses as this sensible form, dirt overflowing, but really it has none. It is, to risk a convoluted expression, a Sinnbild of the necessary production of Sinnbilder that the final outbreak of the mental illness into the realm of the sensible, as tumors, calls him to investigate. And the Bau story is a response to this call. It is, without a doubt, a call from within “Kafka,” and yet it doesn’t appear as a call or a voice. For it cannot be merely sensible, and yet it cannot be some supersensible thing that draws him away from a naturalistic attitude toward his illness. Like his fantasy of natural healing, the vegetarianism, the working outdoors in the fresh air, what interested him were the principles at issue, not the empirical state of affairs that was his health. Doctors, medicine, sanatoria—being diagnosed allowed him to give these up—although he would be dealing with them almost constantly from then on—as elements of Sinnbilder, the paradisaical elements of knowledge whose source he intended to destroy.

### Note on Allegory

It<sup>71</sup> is easy to read the Bau as an allegory of the futility of desiring security and the drive to build that arises from it. To some extent this is the lesson of the earlier story about the building of the

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<sup>71</sup> This note follows the pattern of the note-like series of propositions in Günther Anders' 1951 book, *Kafka: Pro und Contra*. His notes are warnings to the reader. The first in the chapter entitled "The Literal Metaphor" counsels that *Kafka's stories are neither allegorical nor symbolic*. Neither of these two terms is adequate to describe Kafka's rhetorical technique, that is, although he doesn't make this distinction, not as they are traditionally understood. Walter Benjamin's theory of allegory, which might have been available to him in the early edition that had been helped toward publication by his former wife, Hannah Arendt (who was still in touch with Anders, and specifically about Benjamin's Nachlass), does not however find a place in the discussion. Instead, allegory as a representation that follows conventionalized rules and symbol as a representation that follows natural rules are the modes found inadequate to understand Kafka's fiction. The second term, symbol, is the model of both. It is inadequate because Kafka writes in "the absence of that community of belief which gives birth to and sustains symbols" (43). Perhaps. There were certainly communities, political and literary, for whom symbols had and would soon have an even stronger meaning. In any case, Anders historical-political assessment reintroduces the symbolic into the heart of Kafka's fiction, because it lies deep in Kafka's own heart. The unnatural, non-symbolic means in his fictions are the natural representation, the symbol that is, of his historical condition, his lack of a natural community. Kafka's writings are not symbolic but "Kafka" is. Allegory faces the same problem, except, instead of a shared nature, "Kafka" and his community lack the shared conventions in which

Chinese wall. The difference in the Bau fragment is indicated by the Zischen that ruins his thinking and building. It foreshadows the “Pfeifen” of the next, and last, story, titled by Brod “Josefine die Sangerin oder das Volk der Mause.” There a community, not a lone individual encounters a sound that robs its image-making capacity. Here too sound divides and fractures, driving the creature worse than mad—it makes his thought at times coherent and a times not. The allegorical character of “The Bau” comes into question in the creature’s attempt to interpret the noise. Knowing what it says means finding its source, and he can do neither. Yet he insists on

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allegory could function (this lack is the very substance of modern allegory, in Benjamin’s understanding of it, developed out of his readings of Baudelaire and German Trauerspiele). Moreover, in Anders’ estimation, Kafka avoids the paths taken by Wagner and Nietzsche, so that he does not re-mythologize the world by inventing new symbols (whether Nietzsche does this or his readers is the crucial question). Instead, taking existing images into his laboratory, he illuminates the literal substrate of metaphors to “yield a new insight into the reality of our world” (Anders 45). Literalization of metaphor is certainly one facet of Kafka’s writing, and a comic one at that (Sussman 105-9). But what does it mean? What does this procedure imply about his writing, his situation, the difference they and he make, and the possibility of reading both? Not unlike Benjamin’s allegory which shows the present returning from its experience with “empty hands,” whereupon the lack becomes a symbol of the failure of allegory to “speak the other,” Kafka offers a parable of allegory’s failure, without the moral that would reinitiate it into the sphere of meaning. Ritchie Robertson makes the case for allegory as a useful exegetic term with regard to Kafka, and comes to the conclusion by means of it that the late animal stories are not animal stories, but references to humans (268-72).

precision in defining it. “Abgesehen davon ist es eben ein Zischen und in ein Rauschen nicht umzudeuten” (NS II 622). Do not mistake it for the heady sound of ecstasy, the dionysiac flooding together of distinctions in “Rausch... Aber was helfen alle Mahnungen zur Ruhe,” it complains, “die Einbildungskraft will nicht stillstehen und ich halte tatsächlich dabei zu glauben—es ist zwecklos, sich das selbst abzuläugnen—, das Zischen stamme von einem Tier” (NS II 622-3). When it finally settles on an interpretation, the truth of what he had been trying not to admit grips him. Another animal is the source of the noise. With all other avenues exhausted, “bleibt nur die Annahme der Existenz des großen Tiers” (NS II 623). Yet the assumption does not harmonize with the noise’s ubiquity. It is everywhere and everywhere the same. Nor does it explain its intermittent transmission. In order to weave these facts into its interpretation, the creature imagines yet worse contingencies. A beast is digging towards it; or else the creature has inadvertently built its Bau within the limits of another creature’s much bigger Bau—a giant mole perhaps; or else, it is a beast on holiday making a tour of the earth, insensible to its proximity to the creature’s own Bau; these and other possible interpretations occur to it, but no one of them corresponds well enough to the noise. At loose ends, it searches for “die rettende Entschlüsse,” but shakes its head—none comes (NS II 629). Then a question appears: what is the other creature’s plan? What is it thinking? Perhaps it is digging in its own Bau. Perhaps it is as insensible of its own noise as our creature is of its source. Perhaps the other has heard the one scurrying along the passageways of our Bau, tearing out pieces of wall. Of course the other has started investigating the source of the noise that it must also hear, stopping its work now and again to listen, investigating, deconstructing, reconstructing...”aber alles blieb unverändert, das” (The fragment ends here, without the mark of an ellipsis, because presumably the writer could not or would not go on. His creature, of course, has unwittingly come into

contact with the one, or the other, that its whole existence was designed to exclude. Here is the uncanny return of the same, another creature, just like it, doing what it is doing, each frightened out of its wits and witlessly constructing scenarios to give sense back to the scene. Here the fragment stops. All along we have heard a barely audible whisper telling us that we are the ones to which this story refers. It is a Sinnbild of our predicament. The story reflects us in slightly—but only slightly—altered form. For what is a reflecting, planning, building, talking, even writing animal but a *zoon logon exon*?<sup>72</sup> In the end however the fragment is neither a confirmation of

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<sup>72</sup> Of Kafka's thinking beasts, Benjamin writes: "Man kann die Tiergeschichten Kafkas auf eine gute Strecke lesen, ohne überhaupt wahrzunehmen, daß es sich gar nicht um Menschen handelt" (GS II.2 419). Roy Pascal, in his study of Kafka's narrators, devotes only a few lines to the protagonist and narrator of "The Bau." In them he calls the creature incapable of reflection and compares him unfavorably to the other thinkers among Kafka's beasts: dog, ape, and mouse (192). Whereas identifying an incapacity is not far from the mark, the creature's specific incapacity occurs, rather, within reflection—perhaps the most rabid and unstoppable thinking of any of Kafka's characters, human or animal. It is certainly not the case, as Pascal says, that the creature is stuck in the present. His thoughts run back and forth along the Bau, which is as temporal—the work of a lifetime—as it is spatial. Some of the story is retold as memory, some cast in the future as anxiety. In an early book, Hartmut Binder anticipates this reading. Extrapolating from the present tense verbs in the creature's narration, Binder contrasts the style of narration of the Bau fragment with other stories. Whereas elsewhere first person narrators speak in internal monologues, "Der Landarzt" is the example he gives for this, the creature offers "*geäußerte Gedanken*" (340-1). The narrator of "The Bau," he adds, is positioned within the

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events that are spoken about, and furthermore the position “sich während der Erzählung dauernd verändert und diese Veränderung sich in der Erzählergegenwart spiegelt” (341). While there is a curious relationship between past and present in the text, and it is true that the narrative and the narration are intertwined in a manner that does not approximate speaking aloud—it is perhaps more like a transcription of his thinking, as Binder says—it is also true however that the question of the passage of time is not only to be answered in the tense of the verb. Time is not to be measured here by the time-aspect of the verb, nor can it be traced in the change the reader notes in the creature. Instead, it is the time of a repeated return without change. On the relation of change and thinking in the story, Henry Sussman has written: “the ability of such suggestive moments of insight,” on the part of the Bau creature, “to subside into oblivion before reaching a logical conclusion is fundamental to the story’s temporality of obsessive repetition” (117). The most intricate presentation of time in “The Bau” is that of J.M. Coetzee. “[T]he relations between the *time of narration* (the moving *now* of the narrator’s utterance) and the *time of the narrative* (referential time)” are “baffling,” he admits. “Representations of an idiosyncratic feel for time,” are his words for it (557), idiosyncratic first because neither German nor English has an iterative aspect for the verb, and so Kafka has to contort the language to express this, and secondly because the story tries to move not simply in repeated or habitual occurrences, but rather in repeated occurrences of urgent, unrepeatable interruptions of habits (559-60). “The extraordinary time structure of “The Burrow”” is far from being an “eternal present” (564). Time is nothing less than the iteration of the non-iterative, in short, the return of the singular, or an event. I quote Coetzee again: “The key notion here is *without warning*. A warning is a sign of a transition from peace to its opposite...In “The Burrow” however, time does not move through transitional

human powers nor a radical suggestion about the human-worthy intelligence of animals. There is no “becoming animal” in Kafka; this assertion would be held up by an empirical study of his texts. All animals, without exception I believe, are already animals when a story opens. More than this however, there is no becoming in Kafka; his writing is shows that the trajectory from plan to building, from potentiality to actuality, is a false image—the false image of genesis, and he strives to give an image for this image. Just when we think this fragment, which is no fragment but breaks off when it does to leave us with the Zischen of a distraction, exactly when we think this is an allegory pointing at us we are furthest from the truth. Here it leaves us with a allegory’s parable, abandoned to the repetition of an unchanging image of the referentiality of images. They all point toward salvation. This projection, this misunderstanding sets the stage for the vicious circle of destruction and construction, deterritorialization and territorialization, the simultaneous need for and impossibility of obtaining complete security. Our tendency here as with every other story is to make our home in it or at most to recognize it as a mirrorlike reflection of our concerns. Even the irregular, unsystematic, disturbing, rift-producing sound of distraction falls prey to domestication in the end. Our task then, which I have not carried out very well here at all, is to read allegory’s parable, “Der Bau,” without turning it into a Sinnbild, that is without appropriating it for our own needs or concerns, without building it into our Bau or

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phases” (574). Without transitions, time skips. On the whole it moves “away from universe-time [by which he means countable time that beings can be “in”] toward event time” (576). And yet things are not this simple. There is no smooth movement from one time to the other; instead there is a tense struggle between them, such that on the whole time is experienced as if it were in “continual crisis...signaled by the whistling that comes from its point(s) of rupture” (579).

likening the creature's experience to our own. To read as if it had not been written for us. Only then will we crack the mirror of heaven.) Training in distraction—read in this way “Der Bau” may offer such a thing.



**3. Zerstreuung as Dispersal:  
Heidegger and Derrida**

This chapter will bring to light a few noteworthy decisions on the use of the word or concept “Zerstreuung,” made in Martin Heidegger’s texts and lectures at the end of the 1920s. Because more than fifty years later in the early 1980s these decisions were taken up again by Jacques Derrida as a means toward a certain interpretive end, this chapter will move between these two “moments”—keeping in mind that *Moment* will be a word to be defined in at least one of these texts. Moving between these two moments, these two writer-thinkers, and these two—if they are distinctly two—pointed uses or understandings of the word “Zerstreuung,” I will try to expose a strand of thinking common to both. In this sense they are in fact *Momente*, a term taken from the science of mechanics and used to great effect by Hegel to say without proving it that a multiplicity is already a unity. I will attempt to demonstrate a continuity between them and to suggest, furthermore, that it derives from an underlying assumption of phenomenology that belongs to attempts to go beyond its axioms by means of them.

To bring these similar though distinct decisions about “Zerstreuung” to light does not mean to refute them. The texts in which the word is used are, after all, themselves refutations of traditional philosophical arguments, and they oppose even the way of arguing in which something like refutation would make sense. The analytic of Dasein does not admit of refutation, only reinterpretation. Derrida’s reading of Heidegger cannot be refuted as though it were a proposition or a proof, only reread to expose other possible tendencies. And the meaning of

reading and interpretation will depend, at least in part, on their understanding of “Zerstreuung.” Thus I hope, through careful readings of these texts, to illuminate certain decisions made there, not to find them lacking, but rather to demonstrate their richness, in order to contrast it with the almost absolute poverty of “distraction” against which they position themselves. It is the lack that this word or concept seeks to remedy that I hope to point out in both writers’ texts. What does Zerstreuung supply to arguments that without this term or concept would be lacking? At first glance the idea that such a term and the disposition that it often designates should fill an otherwise empty place in understanding seems peculiar. One can say without too much equivocation that, at least insofar as it corresponds to the English word “distraction,” Zerstreuung designates a lack in thinking—a lack *of* thinking—without offering an understanding of the lack that would step in to take its place. Treatments of it should, then, at least for a short time, leave the lack lacking. As a word it should designate, namely, a temporary lack of cognition that no insight can penetrate. There is nothing to see into. Instead of calling upon, evoking, or referring to its object, the word “Zerstreuung” should actively ward off what it purportedly designates. In doing so it should also disrupt the regular course of words, since it says from the outset that it cannot say, decrees, in being pronounced or written, its inability to make even itself present, laments the loss of certainty about whether what it lacks was ever present to begin with. Lacking what it never had, Zerstreuung—in its most extreme sense—should remain inaccessible to the understanding to the point that it confounds reasonable discourse. It functions as the blankest of blank slates, a Rorschach test without ink blots. It presents, if we can imagine this, a text that says: this blank page reveals everything about you.

To be sure, the German word has several meanings, and its ability to mean more than absolute distraction, more than a loophole in consciousness, will be at issue, especially in

Derrida's reading of Heidegger. Nonetheless—and this is a very unscientific observation, since it can neither be verified nor denied—nonetheless, the most extreme sense of *Zerstreuung* cannot be eliminated, I will argue, from the word's polysemy. It seems to be a necessity that this possibility—the disappearance of possibility—should make its impotence known. Absolute, unfathomable distraction hovers anxiously around the use of the word. This, at least, I hope to demonstrate over the course of the chapter: absolute distraction, thoughtlessness, the disintegration of thinking, a blank space that *cannot be interpreted or read*, haunts the use of the word in these texts. It haunts them insofar as it is what is denied in order to speak about *Zerstreuung*. It is as though, for these two philosophers, to understand this term in its most extreme possibility would mean the collapse of hermeneutic phenomenology, understanding, and the positive practices of destruction and deconstruction. This is the strong claim I try to make in this chapter. The ability to read blank spaces, to move from already understood existence back to a transcendent, or historical or linguistic condition of possibility of that existence, and in so doing to give back or open up a multiplicity in a previously impoverished being—this seems to be what is threatened by absolute distraction. Above all then it is a methodological concern. This one word—if that is what it is—needs to be interpreted in a narrow way in order for all other possibilities to be opened by means of hermeneutic or deconstructive “thinking” or “writing.” It seems in Heidegger's case and perhaps in Derrida's too, although this is much harder to demonstrate, that the fundamental act of phenomenological interpretation or destruction demands that *Zerstreuung* not be understood as “distraction,” and even less as the distraction of the philosopher. In Heidegger in particular this prohibition is evident.

Only after Derrida's analysis of Heidegger's use of the word, however, can we begin to articulate this problem. He pinpoints one critical facet of Heidegger's maneuvers around the

word. In the essay “Geschlecht: Sexual Difference, Ontological Difference,” Derrida shows how Heidegger’s desire to step beyond a binary understanding of difference reproduces it, insofar as “Zerstreuung” and related words determine the ontological difference on analogy with sexual difference. Binary sexual difference and the generative potential traditionally associated with it are reinscribed in Heidegger’s use of the word “Zerstreuung,” reintroduced into the very movement of ontological difference. Ontological difference is not, in this one respect, very different than traditional philosophical conceptions of difference. In fact, Derrida suggests that the entire project of fundamental ontology is limited by a covert reliance on sexual difference or dual difference as the model for all difference. The very movement of giving possibility—Zerstreuung—the fundamental ontological movement that constitutes the radical departure from substance-based metaphysical notions of foundation, is limited and biased in a most traditional way by Heidegger’s understanding of Zerstreuung. In the chapter’s first section, I present the logical and stylistic steps that Derrida takes to demonstrate radical ontology’s complicity with this traditional metaphysical structure.

Gambling on the word “Zerstreuung” has high stakes, however. Insofar as he demonstrates this in his reading of Heidegger, Derrida’s text is a model for thinking and reading. To the extent, however, that he interprets Zerstreuung as a different type of movement, “dissemination”—however temporary and contextually constrained the interpretation is in this particular reading—he places a bet similar to Heidegger’s, though he plays a different hand. In order to make the type of critique he does, one that brings Heidegger’s interpretation back to its conditions of possibility in order to gesture toward another path, he relies on this word. Zerstreuung is the condition of possibility of his reading. The critique or deconstruction requires that the word mean “dissemination,” and thus, as the word through which the critique or

deconstruction operates, this one word cannot be deconstructed or critiqued. It gives possibility but cannot be given any other possibility—especially not the lack of possibility that it sometimes brings to language.

Both texts seem to follow this pattern. For Heidegger, *Zerstreuung* names the movement by which being distributes itself to beings. And, although he reveals that Heidegger's *Zerstreuung* holds onto traces of a less original movement, namely a biblical one, generative sex between two—Derrida substitutes another movement, “dissemination,” for sexual genesis as the understanding of *Zerstreuung*, claiming—however indirectly, subtly, disseminatedly—if one can say that—through innuendo, tone, grammatical mood, and performance of that which he proposes—Derrida claims that *Zerstreuung* may be yet *more* originary, stepping beyond binary difference or belonging to a stage ontologically prior to the reduction to two. The transcendental movement of possibility, the giving of the gift of being is “dissemination,” not sex between two. In making this claim, in determining the distribution of possibility as this or that—even to the degree of multiplicity and self-dispersal implied in “dissemination”—Derrida reinscribes “*Zerstreuung*” as an understanding of difference, which at that moment he was still calling, no doubt for strategic reasons, “dissemination.” Like *différance*, dissemination is meant to raise more questions than it answers. It should be seen as a problematic name for a differing difference, a difference that gives itself possibility, if not continually then at least without end. And yet, there is a sense *as well* in which, unlike *différance* and dissemination, *Zerstreuung* can also be understood as *not making any difference*, as the evacuation of possibility and as a stumbling block to differentiation, variation, mutation, infection, contamination, dissemination, and so forth. It can, in short, withhold possibility, and it can do so without any strategy. This highly paradoxical sense of the word is not a central or seminal sense, and so to that extent it is

in the far wings of its historical and linguistic “dissemination.” It may in fact name the interruption and displacement of the movement of transcendence. La Bruyère intuitively senses as much when, although he senses and moves, world and beings vanish before the *distract*. As just one of *Zerstreuung*’s semiological rays, it seems rather to withdraw potential to differ or defer, to freeze movement, to make being impossible, to remove the hope of future understanding, and thus to reveal any attempt to make sense of it as arbitrary and violent. It names, in short, the possibility that there be no future, at least none from which talk of the “to come,” *l’avenir*, *Zukunft* would derive authority. Whatever may come, we will not be there to receive it. This is the impotency that *Zerstreuung* can say, although in these texts this interpretation is omitted.

### **Derrida’s Desire**

Not only in the tone of the book, but in the arguments as well, in the vocabulary and even in the process of laying out existence’s structure, a certain headiness or intellectuality makes itself known...a clue, perhaps, to the debt *Being and Time* still owes to transcendental phenomenology, although consciousness is given hardly any airtime under its own name.

Derrida, who picks up a related clue—the most unvoiced one, he argues, and because of this to him the most telling: “sexuality” or “sexual difference,” exposes, or rather, gestures toward the possibility that this radicalized ontology continues to be haunted by ghosts of the tradition, the roots of which Heidegger wants to reinterpret. There is, according to Derrida’s reading in “Geschlecht: Sexual Difference, Ontological Difference,” an unshakeable metaphysical assumption underlying Heidegger’s procedure, in his use of certain words and his handling of the

notion of difference, an element or assumption that repeats and in repeating asserts and obscures again some part of the tradition's intransigence.

The essay as it was first published and later collected unchanged<sup>73</sup> is a prolegomenon to a series of essays, two published during Derrida's lifetime, one not yet published, though circulated. All of the texts derive from a seminar he gave in 1983-84 on "'Nation, Nationality, Nationalism'" (Krell 342). The relationship between the "Geschlecht" series is presented by David Farrell Krell in his article on the topic, which includes a description of the missing "Geschlecht III." Although "Geschlecht I" shares the aim of tracing the contours of "Geschlecht" in Heidegger's writings, unlike the other essays it does not concentrate on Heidegger's writings on Georg Trakl, in which the treatment of sex is particularly rich. It does not even mention Trakl, except in an intriguing footnote on the first page that, if truth be told, reads more like an excuse for the lack of direct discussion of Geschlecht in this article than a preparatory gesture toward future essays. In fact, although it would be easy to guess how the theme of sex, generations, genesis and all the other words that Derrida associates with "Geschlecht" in the other articles would have a central place in a seminar on "nation," through the notion of *natio* and its corollaries, it is less apparent how this preliminary foray would support a political reading. Nonetheless, Krell spends the most time summarizing it, and the footnote that announces its status as ancillary to the main trajectory of his reading cannot help but catch our attention. The

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<sup>73</sup> Originally published in French in *Cahier de l'Herne* in 1983, "Geschlecht I" appeared quickly in English translation in John Sallis, *Research in Phenomenology* 13 (1983). Later it was collected in *Psyche: Invention de l'autre II* (Galilée, 2003), as yet untranslated.



need to excuse the first “Geschlecht” for falling outside the main path of thought, announces, almost simultaneously, the contradictory need to nonetheless start with this detour.

Its status as a deviation is especially intriguing insofar as the short but penetrating article that precedes those in which Derrida carries out his actual reading of Heidegger’s *Geschlecht* lies, in retrospect now more than twenty years later, like a second skin over the question of *Zerstreung* in *Being and Time* and contemporary lecture courses, such that the way back to that question can only be embarked upon through this article. At the very least I hope to show how difficult it is to loosen its subtle grasp on the Heideggerian texts it analyzes.

Once again in *Being and Time*, though perhaps less in the last Marburg lecture course, both of which Derrida undertakes—in 1983, the year of Paul de Man’s death, among other things—to reread, something of transcendental phenomenology’s insistence on a certain mode of transcendence persists, such that *Zerstreung*’s semantic range is narrowed to a particular possibility or potential, although—as Derrida points out repeatedly—the string of varying senses or derivatives or disseminations that attach to this word is indeed more extensive than Heidegger lets on. Yet the string does not only contain the semiotic relatives that trail off like a comet’s tail after this word. Both an inter- and an intra-linguistic proliferation accrue to “*Zerstreung*” in Derrida’s estimation; words both within and cutting across the language, German, angling toward language itself or at least toward “languages,” attach to or associate with the word *Zerstreung*: “*Zerstreung, Zerstretheit, Zerstörung, Zersplitterung, Zerspaltung.*” Derrida punctuates his text with lists such as these, in italics, in German, to remind readers of the other axis of distribution that attaches to the word, that is, in his treatment its having already been disseminated into French. In the French text a parallel or at least related “*série*” is given as “dissociation,” “distraction,” “dissémination,” “division,” “dispersion” (“Geschl. I Fr.” 425),

which appears subsequently in the English translation as “dissociation,” “distraction,” “dissemination,” “division,” “dispersion” (“Geschlecht I” 75). None of these lists is merely equivalent to another, or to itself, nor are the individual members of a list capable of being ordered into a lexicon according to their history or normal usage. Derrida’s study of *Zerstreuung* is neither an etymological nor a semantic survey, but a grammatological exploration, a gesture toward further derivations, what he calls—or he with the translator, a former student of his, Ruben Berezdivin, calls—a “lexical hive.” Most likely to avoid turning Derrida’s claim into a chaos too scattered for readers in any language, the translator has already reduced the proliferation of senses by a lexical choice, “hived it,” one might say—a choice made for reasons of style, economy, or, perhaps, out of anxiety at what was being said. This is not a reproach; translation is not possible without such lexical choices, without one diminishment or another, or perhaps with an enrichment of semantic relations in the “target language,” which thereby becomes less like a target than a display of dispersion. And yet, in a text whose very subject will be this proliferation, whose procedure will be to reintroduce a swarm of family relations, it should not be left without remark that the translator decides to translate “l’essaim” as “hive.”

Yes, the word for the arrangement or disposition of words that Derrida wants to specify in this essay, and by specifying purposefully render irreducible by expanding and exceeding even perhaps the capacity for containment of that particular word (*Zerstreuung*) is “l’essaim” (425), which, not to rest easy with a noun—Derrida will later remark on the disseminating *Macht* of nouns in Heidegger’s discourse around “*Zerstreuung*,” hinting at the hidden reasons for Heidegger’s choice of words, but never excusing himself for remaining with this choice for the purposes of his critique—which (l’essaim) reaches out toward a verb that interprets “rassemble” as “essaime”—or “it swarms, throngs.” “Ici l’essaim lexical rassemble (ou essaime) la série

“dissociation,” “distraction,” ... ” and so forth. In short, the decision of the translator to reduce the lexical swarm, throng, horde, cloud, a family with fluid relations and the ensuing potential for savagery in this uncertain movement, not to mention the disorienting effect it might have on the observer, spectator, or reader who may at any time be engulfed in the “swarm”—

notwithstanding these considerations, the translator’s decision to reduce an active subtraction of shape, order, number, intention, and direction to a geometrically ordered, enclosed, productive “hive”—which is, doubtless, one of the several meanings of “essaim” listed in French-English dictionaries—exemplifies Derrida’s argument about Heidegger’s use of the term *Zerstreuung*, and points toward the problem of “*Zerstreuung*” in general. When the word is used, it designates, if it can be said to designate at all, the outward and eccentric movement that Derrida wants to—here and elsewhere—attribute to writing. This is a basic criticism that one could level against Heidegger: he ignores the grammatological dimensions of his writing and writing in general. Of course, it is much easier to demonstrate a deafness to writing’s scattering movement in the earlier work around *Being and Time*, before language, speech, and poetry become central concerns.

Nonetheless, the involvement of *Zerstreuung* both in the movement of being and the movement of signification catches Derrida’s ear—and ours—when he returns to and we turn to these texts. Because of this, it will be, for Derrida, much more in need of comment the way Heidegger gathers up the swarm in order to present his analysis than the specific outcome of that analysis. He is not so much interested in *Dasein*’s being in the world as Heidegger’s use of language. And yet there is a tension as well in Derrida’s use of language, his tone and style, his grammatical and syntactic *Zerstreuungen* (to make perhaps precipitous use of his understanding of the term), and the arguments he makes about difference. Why, we might ask, does he grab out of the “swarm” the theme of sexual difference, and collect his essay around this one sense of *Zerstreuung*? Why

sexuality and not, for instance, “entertainment,” “sich zerstreuen,” another associate or sibling of *Zerstreuung* about which Heidegger has little to say, although an aversion to it appears often in his texts, and many critics and philosophers have had much to say about it then and since? Why not focus on the phantasmagoria, the entertainment industry, the “Oberflächlich,” as Siegfried Kracauer puts it in contemporaneous writings, the return with a vehemence of the Platonic cave? Derrida hints at least once toward such a thematic in his strings of inter- and intra-linguistic *Zerstreuungen*, but he does not treat it in any depth or with any interest. Instead he fastens on a silence in Heidegger’s discourse around which a certain pattern of traces seems to have arranged itself. One silence is chosen over other perhaps less legible ones. Yet who can tell one silence from another?

In both writer-thinkers’ discussions of the word or theme or problem, *Zerstreuung*, the choice to privilege one item in the set or swarm of words excludes not just other swarming senses, but one sense in particular that shades quickly off into nonsense and thus makes each member of the swarm the more indeterminate. The shape of this thought is itself swarm-like or labyrinthine. It involves Derrida’s very keen insight about the involvement of this peculiar word in the very movement or quality of word-ness and writing. *Zerstreuung* would, if it were a word, be charged with signifying signification, or perhaps the very viability or motion or ground of signification. This could be said to be Derrida’s gain over Heidegger, if it can be called a “gain” to implicate all readings in a contamination between meaning and articulation, word and spread.<sup>74</sup> *Zerstreuung* is certainly one of the more contaminated words. It is particularly tainted

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<sup>74</sup> This continues to be Derrida’s plan of attack, at least he indicates as much when he distributes his schema for future readings of Heidegger at a conference in 1986. He lists this general critique

insofar as it also seeks to name the contamination that it perpetrates and distributes. And yet, for Derrida, in order to make this claim—and it is a claim, a privileging of one word or image, dissemination, over other words or phrases—a minimal decontamination has to take place. Ontological difference and sexual difference become the battleground of his *Auseinandersetzung* with Heidegger, a four over a two, as he describes the procedure elsewhere.<sup>75</sup> In order to separate

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of Heidegger among his “to do’s”: “Being’s difference *from* beings is itself dissimulated *in* beings, and thus appears to be a kind of contamination. Yet Heidegger would insist that contamination is merely an “ontic” scheme, a “mere” metaphor” (“On Reading Heidegger” 173). Paola Marrati sets out in her book *Genesis and Trace: Derrida Reading Husserl and Heidegger*, “to follow the trajectory of a *thought of contamination* of the finite and the infinite that no longer has any place either in a phenomenology... or in a thought of ontological difference” (xiv). She examines in particular Derrida’s discovery of contamination in the Heideggerian themes history, logos, and death (87f.).

<sup>75</sup> “Dissemination *displaces* the three of ontotheology along the angle of a certain re-folding [*reploiement*]. A Crisis of *versus*: these marks can no longer be summed up or “decided” according to the two of binary oppositions nor sublated into the three of speculative dialectics (for example “difference,” “gramme,” “trace,” “broach/breach” [*entamer*], “de-limitation,” “pharmakon,” “supplement,” “hymen,” “mark-march-margin,” and others; the movement of these marks pervades the whole space of writing in which they occur... They “add” a fourth term the more or the less” (*Dissemination* 25). The multiplication of these incalculable effects leads Derrida to remark: “To lose one’s head, no longer know where one’s head is, such is perhaps the effect of dissemination” (*Dissemination* 20).

himself from Heidegger, Derrida will have to have already decided on a single dissemination of *Zerstreuung*, which by its history and lexicography, as well as by means of the every time finite distribution of disseminations in its mother-tongue, participates in a chosen, already arrayed set of senses or understandings.

No speaker, writer, thinker, or even *Dasein* itself can make a choice for infinite dispersion, and no word, *even the word that seems to designate the infinite distributability, dispersability, or disseminability of finite lexical possibilities*, can present infinite displacements or differences of sense. That is to say, absolute possibility and infinity are also interpretations, and finite ones. No finite being or linguistic enunciation (*parole*) can evoke infinity. Illicit, motivated, and deceptive, this interpretation—for infinitude—hides as much as it shows. In providing for infinity, or at least indeterminacy in a swarm or a throng, it obscures a less universal movement that doesn't open to possibility in quite the same way. In both treatments, Heidegger's in 1927 and Derrida's in 1983, a certain distance is taken from the potential to close down possibility, to not distribute, to stagnate or go stale. In one of the disseminations of *Zerstreuung*, the one they both avoid, you could say that nothing is any longer "possible," even though things may still "happen." In *Zerstreuung* as distraction the bond between potential and actual is severed.

One of the potentially infinite derivatives, senses, or disseminations of the word "Zerstreuung" in German halts dissemination. Insofar as in it dissemination ceases, *Zerstreuung* preserves the possibility of impotence, a nothing that does not also mean power, even the power of redistribution or multiplicity, and certainly not, as Derrida rightly argues, sexual difference. Both Derrida and Heidegger, the one in his lexical swarm, the other in existence, seem assiduously to avoid one version—a late version, undoubtedly, also a derivative one, and most importantly one not directly traceable to the word's etymology, but rather one superadded by

translation and association. Distraction to the point of absentmindedness is no longer distribution or dispersion. This is the *Zerstreuung* in which sense is withdrawn, distribution ceases, thinking and language abruptly arrest, or if they do not, they are no longer recognizable, and yet the stoppage cannot be traced to a cause within either thinking or language. In *Being and Time* Heidegger predetermines distraction as curiosity, “Neugier,” following an unambiguously Christian line of thinking.<sup>76</sup> In his essay on sexual difference Derrida predetermines *Zerstreuung* as unstoppable linguistic displacement, in accord with a set of prior readings and his development of analyses of writing and history. In short, *Zerstreuung* here takes on the mantle once worn by the trace. Linguistic dissemination is then supposed to suggest, from inside language, an alternative to sexual difference as a generative encounter between “two.” Heidegger does not mention absentmindedness; Derrida mentions distraction as one dissemination among many, dominated by the primordial movement of dissemination. Interestingly enough, of all the *zerstreute* relatives he mentions in his swarm, “dissemination” is the one that is *not* found in the lexicon under *Zerstreuung*. “Ausstreung” names this movement, or with a particularly spatial sense, “ausbreiten,” or, following the organic or sexual metaphoric toward which Derrida’s ironic use of the term often points, “aussäen,” but not normally *Zerstreuen*.

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<sup>76</sup> As John van Buren notes, *Neugier* translates “curiositas,” whose connection to “cura” is much clearer in Augustine’s Latin (179). This same pattern arises in Kierkegaard, to whom Heidegger was attracted through Karl Jaspers’ treatment of his thought in *Psychologie der Weltanschauungen*. There the association of *Neugier* with *Zerstreuung* is already established (182).

Why does Derrida in 1983 draw—somewhat brusquely—a reading of Heidegger’s quite scattered use of the word “Zerstreuung” in 1927-28 into the problematic of “dissemination” that he had been working out in detail since at least 1972? Does he not think about, or not think important, Heidegger’s call, later in *Being and Time*, for a philosophical concentration capable of gathering up *Zerstreuung* as mental dissipation in order to exist authentically? In his zeal to collect repetitions of the word (or words), Derrida passes over a part of the book’s argument that speaks directly about its own method or trajectory, and in which *Zerstreuung*’s terminological counterpart, *Augenblick*, is introduced. *Augenblick* is the *Überblick* of *Zerstreuung*, for Heidegger, the moment in which it is grasped. Looking back on the analytic from the perspective of the Second Division, Heidegger writes, in a didactic tone: "Die vorbereitende Analyse hat eine Mannigfaltigkeit von Phänomenen zugänglich gemacht, die bei aller Konzentration auf die fundierende Strukturganzheit der Sorge dem phänomenologischen Blick nicht entschwinden darf" (*SuZ* 334). Concentration, to be sure, partakes of the movement into the hive that is often performed when *Zerstreuung* is at issue. Here, concentration is directed toward the “structural wholeness of care,” a figure that, we will see, determines the meaning of *Zerstreuung* in *Being and Time*. At stake in the admonishment to move toward the “phenomenological gaze,” which here is a stand-in for the “*Augenblick*” and shows again the affinities that persist between Husserl’s transcendental project and Heidegger’s in *Being and Time*—at stake in this line is not so much the spatial opposition of collection and dispersion—this opposition is often the result of a bad empiricism—but much more the possibility that the structural totality of care might *disappear* (rather than appear, as it does in *Angst*) in the uncaring, all-destroying insensate and intractable non-gaze of distraction. Where Derrida insists on pluralizing difference against the fixity and reduced possibility of Heidegger’s “ontological difference” as a difference between



two or a dialectical source for all other differences, he also persists in this very insistence on a certain power of insight and argument for philosophy that is not unanticipated in Heidegger. Both move toward a presentation of the hive or swarm and take for granted not only the ability to say the word “Zerstreuung” but also its place in a description of method.

By the very logic of Derrida’s linguistic argument one would have to make room for a dispersion or *Zerstreuung* that spreads out to such an extreme that *no* one sense, translation, or association could come to dominate the rest—even “dissemination.” What is lacking is an absolute dispersion, for which the basic qualities or modes that both Derrida and Heidegger depend on would not apply. This *Zerstreuung* would steal away the capacity for thought, writing, or reading before a decision on it could be made. A *zerstreute Zerstreuung* would imply an already dispersed dispersability that can as little be asserted under one term as several, and can be as little seen as deduced, and yet it also would not emerge from suggestion, play, or repetition in form of the conceptual problem, or, conversely, in enactment of the movement in writing that as a concept can only be pointed at and, hence, ruined. Distraction cannot be mere digression or diversion. Derrida knows this, to be sure. To a great extent, as well, Derrida’s text draws our attention out toward the ragged edges of concentrability, and in this it approaches an actual engagement with “distraction.” Derrida’s text is diverting—at times diverting its readers to the very edges of philosophy and its concentrations. And yet, if we can assert anything about *le distrait*, the figure who had a marked influence on the word *Zerstreuung* in German and whose presence is felt in French letters, although Derrida does not mention him here, it would be this: his absence of cognition, meaningful language, memory even—which a close analysis of the text by La Bruyère shows—does not come about for him when reading, even if he were to read a text like Sollers’ *Nombres*. That is to say, distraction comes about as a reaction to a coherent world-

structure or textual concentration, in the midst of it but not at all because of it, and not as a critique of it, as if it had belonged to it originally and had been forgotten or neglected.

## **Geschlecht**

Three elements are necessary to read Derrida's essay: an ear for the tone or mood, an eye for the dispersion pattern of *Zerstreuungen*—Derrida does his best to refuse us a view or overview—and a hand for grasping the difference between the ontological difference and sexual difference. Ear, eye, and hand are of course *topoi* that one finds scattered throughout Derrida's writings, often as part of an exposé of a Heideggerian metaphoric. Hands seem most important to Derrida in the *Geschlecht* essays. Because of it we will want to inquire: why sex? why sex at that moment? Why choose this particular silence through which to read a fault-line in Heidegger's method? There are plenty of other silences, after all, even ones that seem just as essential. Childhood comes to mind. Heidegger rarely if ever mentions the stages of life as though they were co-constitutive in *Dasein*'s structure. Thus, in response to Derrida's emphasis on sex, we will also ask why *dissemination* again, more than ten years after the book that appeared under that name?

“Geschlecht I” belongs to what might be called Derrida's turn or return to Heidegger. Starting with *The Truth in Painting* in 1978, Derrida begins to face—another important Derridean body part—or face up to Heidegger in a different way. To be sure, from the earliest readings of Husserl, Heidegger's conclusions stood in the background. Now the two go head to head, in a confrontation of methods, if you will, where one is clearly indebted to the other, derivative even, knowingly taking up the former and re-disseminating him. It is a Bacchic rather

than an Oedipal confrontation, then, that leads not to the destruction of eyes, feet, genitals, but rather to the violent dismemberment of the corpus, in its satirical tone more like a comedy than a tragedy.

Listen: it is as if he were writing about a fiction or a dream, or at the very least giving an unauthorized and very risky interpretation: “A few indications, concluding with “everything happens as if...,” and it would be satisfied. The dossier could then be shut, avoiding trouble if not risk: it is as if, in reading Heidegger, there were no sexual difference, nothing of that in man, or put otherwise in woman, to interrogate or suspect, nothing worthy of questioning, *fragwürdig*” (“Geschlecht I” 65-6) [“Elle se contenterait de quelques indices et conclurait par un “tout se passe comme si...” Sans pene mais non sans risque, on fermerait ainsi le dossier: tout se passe comme si, à lire Heidegger, il n’y avait pas de différence sexuelle, et rien de ce côté de l’homme, autrement dit de la femme, à interroger ou à soupçonner, rien qui soi digne de question, *fragwürdig*” (“Geschl. I Fr.” 419)]. The “it” in the first sentence, “elle,” refers to sexual difference and at the same time to the curiosity provoked by Heidegger’s silence on the subject. The charged, tentative mood of Derrida’s first lines diminishes within a few pages. Before it does, the suspicion grows that there is no small entertainment value to Derrida’s curiosity, even to the point of prurience. One would not be completely wrong to ask, on the basis of the mood of the first paragraphs, whether serious knowledge was the object here, or simply diversion or even sport. It is not merely a matter of the choice of vocabulary or the delicacy with which the critic treats his subject. Instead the sporting mood reinforces itself in the grammatical mood, the subjunctive, and the operative comparison “as if,” scattered here not to invoke a universal power of the imagination, but rather to impute opinions to others — *as if* to invoke them — about

Heidegger, baselessly, by way of rumor. The essay opens in the voice of “Das Man.” Nothing actually is, it is only “as if it were.” The essay, like the inquiry into sexual difference, arises “in a century when sexuality, commonplace of all babbling, has also become the currency of philosophic and scientific “knowledge,” the inevitable *Kampfplatz* of ethics and politics.” And despite the buzz, Derrida remarks, “[n]ot a word from Heidegger!”

But we have to discount this exclamation, don't we? It is not Derrida's, but theirs, the babblers who have taken hold of the argument already. Even in the philosophical tradition there is “Gerede.” “Who, indeed, around or even long before him has not chatted about sexuality as such, as it were, and by that name? All the philosophers in the tradition have done so, from Plato to Nietzsche, who for their part were irrepressible on the subject.” In these and others—Kant, Hegel, Husserl—talk of “sexuality” is “really everywhere” (“Geschlecht I” 66).

The stage is set for a drama in which Heidegger stands alone and silent against the irrepressible chatter of the tradition and the present “under its panoply of “everything-is-sexual-and-everything-is-political-and-reciprocally” (“Geschlecht I” 67). “Is it imprudent,” Derrida asks, “to trust Heidegger's manifest silence?” (“Geschlecht I” 66). Imprudent it is perhaps not, but here are the obstacles that Derrida must navigate, placed around us like so many theatrical scrim, but with doors that really open, to confuse the matter. A scene out of the analytic of Dasein is played here between Heidegger and “them.” It is as if this scenario had been planned by one of the greatest critical dramaturges of the twentieth century, this scene in which life is a dream in which one dreams of life. On the stage meticulously set by Derrida, Heidegger is made to suffer the humiliation of standing in for Dasein as truth bearer for philosophy, only to be booed and jeered for turning a deaf ear to the very Gerede that he claims elsewhere so adamantly should not be tossed out or ignored, but rather taken, on its form, as an indicator of ontological

truth. In this one place Heidegger fails to interpret a formal indication of Dasein—sex—that is as ubiquitous as any of the other indications—or more so. This opening scene is an important signpost for the course that Derrida’s argument will take. In fact, it is so patently true that Heidegger is biased here that one need only look at the source for a large part of *Being and Time*’s “Existentialia” to see that worldliness, fallenness, and curiosity have everything to do with sex. Augustine’s *Confessions* devotes no small attention to concupiscentia and tentatio, and Heidegger developed much of his picture of worldliness in a reading of this text in Freiburg lectures of 1921. Although the lectures turn around a reading of Book X, at the center of which is a categorization of temptation, Heidegger lectures in 1921 without devoting so much as a session to sex. Derrida does not return to Heidegger’s sources, however. Rather than identify the origins of Heidegger’s silence on sex in his reading preferences, Derrida attempts instead to localize Heidegger’s resistance within the question of being itself, within the question that Dasein asks itself about itself. Something in the way in which Heidegger conceives of the ontic-ontological difference at this point in his writings forces him—if forces is not too strong a word—to keep silent on the matter of sex. The difference runs through Dasein but not through its sexuality. So Derrida will not perform an intellectual-historical reading, in which the influences of Paul, Augustine, Luther, and Kierkegaard—not to mention Aristotle and Plato—on Heidegger’s construction, for want of a better word, of worldliness are rooted. Whereas one could contend that Heidegger’s placement both of sexuality and *Zerstreuung* depends heavily on a certain image of world and position of worldliness, Derrida will insist on a philosophical or linguistic dependence, what I would call an immanent explanation. Where one could acknowledge that the very use of the word “*Zerstreuung*” derives from Christian doctrine that at least partially explains its effects in philosophies that consider themselves secular, from Kant’s understanding of

experience to Nietzsche's critique of nihilism, Derrida localizes and ontologizes the problem in Heidegger's discourse. Furthermore, in keeping with the immanent or deconstructive procedure, he does not want to come to Heidegger's text "armed with psychoanalysis," in "an enquiry authorized by complete anthropological culture" ("Geschlecht I" 67). Let us pause on this phrase: "complete anthropological culture."

This critique—for that is what it is—of the state of the sciences, the "so-called 'modern'", conviction that desire and sexuality form the basis of all human action, is an instant replay of the scene. Is it not? Do we not see Derrida here, ironically, playfully, and yet doggedly avoiding the crowd of empirical sexologists, in order to carry out his "remarking" of Heidegger's text *on its own terms*. There is a parasitism here that Derrida could only appreciate, yes, and probably also endorse, however ruefully. In avoiding the crowd, a certain independence from the current state of the sciences is borrowed from Heidegger's position. He rejects Heidegger's silence but accepts his exceptionalism, which is perhaps not all that different from the exceptionalism of Dasein. Dasein is an exemplary being, Heidegger is the exemplary philosopher, about whom Derrida had been silent, or almost, until this spate of texts in the late 70s and early 80s: *The Truth in Painting*, "Geschlecht I," "Geschlecht II," "Geschlecht III (unpublished)," "Geschlecht IV," *Of Spirit*. Now he will approach Heidegger, and yet not dispense totally with certain exigencies of Heideggerian method.

For Heidegger according to Derrida "sexuality would never be the guiding thread for a privileged access to" the general structures of Dasein ("Geschlecht I" 68). Does Derrida therefore want to restore one ignored Existential to the set of Existentialia, as though it were essential to the functioning of the whole, *das Ganze*? Or does he instead want to undermine the essential-existential order, to do away with the priority of the ontic-ontological difference over other forms

of difference, over more defective, contaminated, disseminating differences that are unsayable or only partially sayable and that therefore correspond to other, less “transitive and significant” silences? In so doing, however, would he not also undo the entire edifice of formal indication and the priority of worldliness that accompanies it, not to mention the concomitant understanding of being’s movement? Such things are not easy to prove. I would want to argue, however, despite the difficulty of doing so, that Derrida vacillates in this article between doing to Heidegger what Heidegger has done to the tradition—that is, deconstructing him from a point of advantage—and removing the possibility of a steady ground from which to deconstruct anything. In other words, removing Dasein’s ontological privilege. Thus, in mood and argumentative attack, he vacillates between mastering the master by certain modifications of his method and submitting to a *zerstreute Zerstreung* by which even sexual difference could not be considered privileged access to the problem. From such an extreme, beyond Heidegger’s limited understanding of *Zerstreung* and beyond Derrida’s desire that sexual difference reveal this limitation, one may find an undifferentiated turning that allows a student to deviate from a teacher without the effort of imitating, altering, and returning to destroy him.

Let us return to the first element of our reading: mood or tone. With the right ears, one can hear in the “as if” with which Derrida introduces the “scene,” the ubiquitous chatter about sexuality and Heidegger’s resistance to it. One can hear it also in the many verbs, which, alternating between subjunctive and conditional moods, call the status of these preliminary observations into question. “[I]l n’y avait pas,” “ne serait pas” (“Geschl. I Fr.” 419), “Heidegger n’aurait rien dit” (“Geschl. I Fr.” 420). These and others like them are mood markers that diminish or put into doubt the things said but do not subtract their being completely. And yet Derrida is not simply introducing ambiguity into the discourse around and about Heidegger. He

does not merely take on a way of speaking that would refuse to make the ontological-difference so uncontaminated as to be able to speak being unequivocally about it to. He does this too of course. We can certainly read here an attempt to speak being in a mood of possibility. To run the risk of taking grammatical categories as ontological ones—something that Derrida avoids with respect to sex, but not, if we accept this moody mode of attack, with respect to possibility—we might say that given certain conditions this declaration about Heidegger and sexual difference could be made, although not as a general claim that would be valid always unconditionally. Given the chance to talk with him, perhaps, or an infinite time to reread his texts, or with the help of “some reading machine,” one might come to a different conclusion (“Geschlecht I” 66). Yet even this would require interpreters, those responsible for “programming the machine,” as Derrida puts it. First and foremost here the mood stands as a counter-mode to Heidegger’s, who “seems to proceed by decree,” at least where he asserts the centrality of Dasein for the question of being (“Geschlecht I” 68). One could add that Heidegger does this nearly everywhere. Even questions are tantamount to decrees, to wit, the question of being, whose status as *the* question is not so much proven or suggested as decreed. Insofar as Heidegger “seems” to decree, Derrida manifestly avoids decreeing that Heidegger does so. And yet at the same time, insofar as his manner of proceeding—and it is a procedure, not a random or haphazard dispersal of comments, not merely a changeable mood or temporary “Befindlichkeit”—derives from and opposes Heidegger’s, the mood is more tense, less what it seems to be at first. It seems at first glance, by way of what have been considered marginal characteristics of language, grammatical mood and stylistic tone, to remain open to the possible non-being of the situation, of Heidegger’s insistence, of the “they” of sexual politics and the almost metaphysical resistance of Heidegger himself to shared, plural, and diffuse language. In the polemical spirit with which Derrida wields



this mood, one would have to impute to him more than just a concern for modality as such. There is nothing about this attack that is neutral—even and especially the discussion of neutrality.

What Derrida implies in the subjunctive, the may of grammar and the faltering or noncommittal mode of gossip, is his desire to put back into Heidegger's *Sprache* a possibility foreclosed by declarative diction. Declaration remains, after all—doesn't it?—intricately intertwined with the philosophical topoi that Heidegger had wanted to unseat, among them apodictic utterances.

This is the mood or mode that, on opening this reading or set of "remarks," makes Heidegger appear in no less than an autocratic light, throwing long shadows on the they or the crowd or mass to which apodictic, decreeing language opposes itself. The modality of "as if" or "under not-fully-determinable conditions," unreal that is, in a suspension between what-is and what-is-not, exercises a critique on Heidegger's mode of writing and speaking around *Being and Time*. It is a critique less in substance than in and by means of mode or mood, and so it is not a critique per se. We might rather call it a virtual critique, whose premises and conclusions remain suspended between fact and fiction.

A second element of a reading is an eye to visualize the point of origin from which "Zerstreuung" has dispersed itself throughout it. To do this, however, we will have to follow the course of the writing quite carefully.

A careful reading: no one could say that Derrida's way of moving through Heidegger's texts is not full of care. And yet, care is not always caution or hesitation, not a reluctance to advance without having considered all options or potential dangers. For instance, in turning to the main body of his argument—and by and large turning away from the opening mood, from virtual to actual critique or deconstruction; there come many declarations and a few decrees—he characterizes the last lecture course that Heidegger gave at Marburg before returning to Freiburg

as having been written “in the margins of *Sein und Zeit*” (“Geschlecht I” 68). This assertion is not wrong, but it is something of a “decree” insofar as it elides the complex objective of the lectures and directs Derrida’s reading toward sex and sexual difference. The course, whose title is never once mentioned here, only its location—Marburg—and its proximity in time and theme to *Being and Time*—is, rather than marginalia on that book, instead an extension, elaboration, and completion of it, while moving off in a different direction—toward logic. These lectures mark the beginning of *Being and Time*’s completion by fulfilling two promises made there. Firstly, they initiate the “Destruktion der Geschichte der Ontologie” (*Sein und Zeit* §8). Secondly, they deepen the question of being from the perspective of time. Together with a course on Kant’s first critique from the year before, it constitutes the beginning of Heidegger’s destructive or deconstructive project. Moreover, the course, entitled “Anfangsgründe der Logik im Ausgang von Leibniz,” has a certain primacy in the works around the publication of *Being and Time*. In August 1928, Heidegger writes to Elisabeth Blochmann from, as he tells her, “vor der Hütte”: “nun stelle ich mich langsam auf Freiburg um.” Before this self-transposition, however slow, would have begun, the summer semester that he has just finished, in which he has taken lovely leave of his “Hörer und Schüler,” can be seen as “ein neuer Weg oder vielmehr ein Beschreiten der Pfade, die ich glaubte noch langehin nur ahnen zu dürfen” (24). The body of the letter is devoted to addressing Blochmann’s queries about theology that come in response to a lecture she had heard, published as “Phänomenologie und Theologie,” which Heidegger had given the year before to the Evangelical Theologians’ Society in Tübingen. But this remark, amidst the salutations at the beginning of the letter, indicates an “Umstellung” that had just

begun to take place, before his return to Freiburg, at the end of his stay in Marburg years, with a new intensity.<sup>77</sup> That Derrida neither brings up the special place that Heidegger saw for these lectures at the time—though perhaps he later would change his mind—nor discusses the general course of the course, that starts from a destruction of the origins of logic in Leibniz is not surprising. He is not writing here in this all-too hasty essay, after all, a chronicle of Heidegger's "Denkweg": many have and are still doing that work. He is also not interested in the early mode of Heideggerian destruction, which we might presume to be the "new way" that Heidegger announces in the letter to Blochmann.

Derrida takes up one segment of the lectures that doesn't seem to fit into the overall course, the part in which Heidegger "seems to proceed by decree" and in so proceeding to qualify, explain, and evaluate the name and function of Dasein, and in particular to insist on its neutrality. "Insistence" is a key word for Derrida in his analysis; it is the sign of an indulgence in one kind of difference under the guise of a claimed or feigned indifference or neutrality.

To begin with, Derrida insists on Dasein's neutrality, although his insistence never claims to be neutral. "Now, the first trait that Heidegger underlines is its *neutrality* [his italics]" ("Geschlecht I" 69). At least, Derrida does not *here* claim to be neutral, although the thematic of neutrality could—and would have to be, according to a Derridean way of proceeding—traced out through the whole of his writings, whether with a "reading machine" or by "hand". At any rate, before turning to the discussion of the neutrality of Dasein and its role in the masking of sex, I

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<sup>77</sup> The significant place these lectures hold in the rethinking of *Sein und Zeit* that culminates in the thought of Ereignis in *Vom Ereignis* (written 1936-1938) is affirmed by John van Buren (367-8).

would like to adduce at least one appearance of the word “neutral” in Derrida. It will be seen to be not totally unrelated to his emphasis on Heidegger’s neutrality here. In one of the more programmatic passages of *Of Grammatology*, Derrida has recourse to this word or operator, perhaps not in a sexual way, but in a way that is as fundamental to his project of the time as sexual difference and its alternative, dissemination, seem to be at the time of “Geschlecht I.”

In Chapter 3 of *Of Grammatology*, Derrida poses the question whether the condition of the possibility of grammatology is positive, and whether it can then be considered a positive science. This formulation makes visible, we might add, a phrase that might easily stand before the book’s title: the conditions of possibility [of grammatology]. This section of the book is, although it comes in the middle, the necessary prolegomenon to such a book. “On what conditions is grammatology possible?”, Derrida asks. He answers immediately: “Its fundamental condition is certainly the undoing [*sollicitation*] of logocentrism. But,” he goes on, “this condition of possibility turns into a condition of impossibility” (*Of Grammatology* 74). In the end—right from the beginning—the notion, method, and presupposition of science as that which produces *epistemai* is the positivity of the science, as announced in the chapter heading. In other words, an empirical, positivistic science of writing, a history of writing, a “[g]raphematics or grammatography” (*Of Grammatology* 74) or “typology” (*Of Grammatology* 81) or “cultural graphology” (*Of Grammatology* 87), not to mention the traditional graphematizing structures such as dictionary, thesaurus, capitalization, or any other element or version that makes writing into a “regional science” of writing (*Of Grammatology* 87)—each one of these examples and all of them together, insofar as they present the gamma as graphé, avoids or suppresses their condition of possibility, which, although not present, is unified as well as unique and nameable: trace. As a positive science, however, the condition of the possibility of writing dissimulates

itself as an essence of writing upon whose basis a history of writing can be written. After all, one cannot write a history of something whose essence is unknown. Unless, of course, one can conceive of an interminable and never-commencing history. As it turns out and as is well known, the self-dissimulation of *gramma* as *graphé* is called *trace* by Derrida. Appearing in difference from itself, it displaces its essence and, as it were, is essentially displacement or *différance*. To begin to demonstrate this peculiar movement, the chapter on method immediately detours through some exemplary passages from histories and taxonomies of script. It turns into a catalogue of what Derrida calls somewhat disparagingly “grammatological knowledge” less for illustration of a point than to follow a certain path of destruction through this possible misunderstanding (Of Grammatology 75). As Derrida admits in the chapter’s first paragraph—truly a para-graph, a shot alongside the mark: a comment on writing itself—the condition of possibility of writing, insofar as it is inquired into, “risks destroying the concept of science” (Of Grammatology 74). With this in mind, the chapter carries out the destruction of the sciences of writing from the perspective of the trace, that which is already at work in all the “facts” in which such a science would deal, both in its object (writing) and in its method (writing).

I will not go into detail about the procedures in use here or the various concepts of writing science that his reading destroys; I will, however, attempt to analyze the chapter’s conclusion, which, after unveiling the impossibility of a grammatological episteme, offers an alternative to it. The “*closure of epistémé*” is contrasted to the “unmonotonous insistence of difference,” “the *incompetence* of science” and “philosophy” recedes over and against the “unnamable movement of *difference-itself*,” and the science or philosophy of writing—not at all the same, already, as philosophy or science in general, not a set of regional philosophies or scientific disciplines sharing the rudiments of method—this is here rigorously distinguished from

“a *thought* of the trace, of difference,” which, “having arrived at these limits and repeating them ceaselessly, must also point beyond the field of the *epistémè*” (*Of Grammatology* 93). It is here that the name of Heidegger is invoked and the theme that will become a weapon sixteen years later is praised. To the extent that “a thought” is not already a logos, not even in the form of a “grammatology,” and only to this very extent, it comes closest to expressing the impossible condition for a grammatology—insofar as thinking is something like “transgression of all philosophemes” that ceaselessly reinscribes, rethinks, and each time it refers to itself leaps beyond. It might seem odd that at the end of this quite negative chapter, one that shows the fault or lack of every positive science of writing, a new negativity or lack should find itself enshrined. Instead of a reiteration of the negativity or indeterminacy of the trace, Derrida writes, instead, of the neutrality of thought. Let me cite the passage in its entirety.

The constitution of a science or a philosophy of writing is a necessary and difficult task [tâche]. But, a *thought* of the trace [une *pensée* de la trace], of difference or of reserve, having arrived at these limits and repeating them ceaselessly, must also point beyond the field of the *epistémè*. Outside of the economic and strategic reference to the name that Heidegger justifies himself in giving to an analogous but not identical transgression of all philosophemes, *thought* is here for me a perfectly neutral name [un nom parfaitement neuter], the blank part of the text [un blanc textual], the necessarily indeterminate index of a future epoch of difference. *In a certain sense, “thought” means nothing* [ne veut rien dire]. Like all openings, this index belongs within a past epoch by the face that is open to view. This thought has no weight [Cette pensée ne pèse rien]. Thinking is what we

already know we have not yet begun; measured against the shape of writing, it is  
*broached* [*s'entame*] only in the *epistémè*.

(De la Grammatologie 142; Of Grammatology 93)

Unraveling all the threads of this already raveling weave of thoughts would take us far  
 afield. Nonetheless, a few strands already stray in our direction. To begin with, we must accept  
 the first statement as sincere and not ironic. Grammatology is a necessary and difficult task—or  
 rather, its constitution is necessary, that is, the constitution of the science as a task. As a task and  
 not an accomplished fact or an unvarying method that produces an each-time identical result,  
 grammatology approaches the movement of what Heidegger called thinking, Denken—what in  
 Derrida's French and Spivak's English is translated with the somewhat ambiguous nouns  
 “pensée” and “thought.”<sup>78</sup> More than ambiguous, polyvalent to be sure, the word “thought” can  
 mean in English just as easily that which Aristotle designated νόημα as that which he called  
 νοήσις; it can say both process and product, or in Husserlian terms intentional act and object;  
 moreover, beyond these two related effects it can, in English at least, refer to the entire sphere in

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<sup>78</sup> While it is possible in German for “Gedanke” to mean a faculty or act, even then it is usually  
 an act with respect to its product. For grammatical as well as historical reasons, German has  
 recourse to two words to designate the process and the product of thinking: das Denken und der  
 Gedanke. In English and French, “thought” and “pensée” occupy an indistinct position between  
 the noetic and noematic. The ambiguity directs one to the presumption of the double nature of  
 each—each thinking directed toward a thought, a thought the aim of thinking. The productive  
 ambiguity is particularly present in the French tradition, beginning in Pascal.

which the two elements might interact, what is more comfortably written in Latin *intellegentia* or all that pertains to cognition in general, although cognition—it must be admitted—is merely a less colloquial way of saying the same thing. Thought, thinking, a thought—these here, and Derrida specifically addresses the Heideggerian sense of the word or words, come closest to capturing—though not as knowledge—the movement of the trace. Why? For the simple reason that thought is neutral. And *not* as Heidegger uses this word with respect to Dasein, that is, strategically and economically. These two words circulate widely in Derrida’s writings of the late sixties. In “Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences,” another text concerned with an obscurity within the supposedly transparent grounds of science, these words appear in roughly the same formation. The critical rigor of a text, in this case several of Levi-Strauss’s texts will be at issue, depends on the ability of the discourse to put its own status into question. Derrida calls this “a problem of *economy and strategy*” (Writing and Difference 182). These two topoi will turn out, however, to be standard ruses of the tradition: it strategically inserts moments of critical reflection on its own language, thereby insuring the continuation of its particular economy. Economy is nothing more than a discourse’s strategic suspension or critique for the purposes of longevity. This crisis or “scandal,” as Levi-Strauss calls the incest taboo, precedes and makes possible the critical discourse, and its strategic absorption into the economy of the text occludes that fact. In *Of Grammatology*, then, Heidegger is not neutral and does not claim neutrality for himself, but instead installs “thought” in his economy strategically, enabling himself to continue philosophizing by means of it. “Outside of the economic and strategic reference to the name that Heidegger justifies himself in giving to an analogous but not identical transgression of all philosophemes, *thought* is here for me a perfectly neutral name.”



Heidegger's "*thought*"—the word gets printed often in italics—is not Derrida's thought. For Derrida thinking is not merely neutral but perfectly neutral, a neutrality more perfect even than the non-neutral, the biased, the committed, the—shall we say—ontic. One could begin to dissect the body of Derrida's thought here; it is "not Heidegger," except by analogy, like it, but not it, meaning, we surmise, neither strategic or economic, and not imperfectly, partially, or impurely neutral, but neutral without the taint of positive or negative aims or effects. One would have to, as Derrida himself might have said, follow up this thematic of perfection, as well as that of "economy and strategy," and the italics that emphasize them, in the writer's texts of this period and later, in order to bring these methodological prescriptions toward clarity.

Without attempting to do that, a rudimentary explanation already lets itself be articulated. *This* neutrality, Derrida's—if neutrality can be taken possession of by anyone—is not the same neutrality with which Derrida will begin his reading of *Geschlecht* in Heidegger's writings. This neutral is not the neutral that first of all seems to promise a sexual difference prior to and generative of sexual duality, a sexual differentiation that would not in the first instance limit itself to man and woman, or, for that matter, genital duality and all the interpretations that swirl around it. It is also not the neutral that may, conversely, draw its power directly from the concept of sexual duality, of *Geschlecht* as *zwei Geschlechter*. These are the *Neutral* of Heidegger's last Marburg lectures. While it suggests a sexual difference before duality—a sexual plurality perhaps—it does so only insofar as it derives, in what Derrida calls the "order of implications," directly from such a duality. In effect the neutral comes about by means of neutering man and woman. David Farrell Krell reminds us of this possible reading in his article on the development of the "Geschlecht" series of articles(344). We might also mention that to de-sex said "neuter" occurs in English but not in French (in French the word for the physical removal of sexual

organs in animals is “châtrer”). It is not so much the sexual connotation of the word “neutral” that Derrida banks on in “Geschlecht I,” but rather its position in a web of references to sex in Heidegger’s text. In light of this, it is important for us to distinguish Derrida’s earlier neutrality from the instrumental—both for his reading and for Heidegger’s argument—neutral he finds in Heidegger. “Neutral,” it will turn out, is a highly charged word. The earlier neutral—we must try to situate it in... what can I call it? I cannot call it the “strategy” of Derrida’s earlier writing or an “economy” that orders those texts; for these are the operative words on which the neutral operates or which it neutralizes in *Of Grammatology*. He insists in the passage we are considering that his very difference from Heidegger lies in the neutrality, in his analogous but different use of it, of the word “*thought*,” as opposed to—to risk repeating—Heidegger’s economic and strategic use of it. Derrida’s *thought* is non-strategic and uneconomical. It is not a critical tool used to demonstrate the rigor of argument through self-reflection. It is not the reflex of a textual system reaffirming itself.

At a minimum, it is not easy to miss the policy under which the word neutral is deployed here; it makes up an article of that policy, sometimes called deconstruction, that is meant to counter strategic and economic critical ventures, and particularly those critical ventures that attempt most rigorously to cleanse themselves of instrumentality. In effect, it is the last strategy of a discourse, wielded or exercised here by Derrida on the Heideggerian topos that comes closest to anticipating Derrida’s strategy, deconstructive neutrality, marking the indication of the weightless nothing that haunts the text without meaning anything and without in due course becoming a lack of meaning—. This much we have begun to learn from Derrida, and continue to begin. And the quality that distinguishes this “indeterminate index of a future epoch of difference,” the “blank part of the text,” that which remains unreadable in any text and by

remaining points first to the dissolution of *this* reading. In this way it is the only *epistémé* appropriate to writing, the knowledge of a future that has no beginning in the present, a cracked *epistémé* and a thought that is analogon to nothing.

Unlike Heidegger's *Denken*, Derrida's *thought* is like nothing. Not the movement of transcendence without a transcendental subject or a realm beyond, as it seems to be in Heidegger, but the index of a leap to come—certainly not a leap into the future—that stalls the economy and deactivates the strategy of the here and now, without offering a next step or an alternative, Derrida's thought, when compared with Heidegger's as well as with a metaphysical understanding of thinking, is not a thought at all. It signals, if we can venture to elaborate on this elliptical passage, an unthinking that neutralizes whatever textual system or authorial strategy is at play—including *this one, the naming of thought and the attribution of neutrality to it*. What is neutral about this thought is its absolute lack of effects. As Derrida writes, though in a suggestive and not declarative manner: it lacks continuity with the future. The future breaks into the present and interrupts it, to be sure—but as nothing. Just so, an absolute lack of weight resists gravity—not by friction, but rather by being of a different order. No incrementally augmenting force, no path to what is to come appears in the moment of *thought* that unthinks, and precisely this unthought irrupts here around the adjective “neutral.”

Why then does Derrida choose one unthought over the other when he returns to Heidegger in “Geschlecht I”? Why does he insist on one neutral, Heidegger's *neutral* (and no longer Heidegger's *thought*)—if we can put it this way—as one unthought among potentially many, leaving the thematic of unthought in general, and the task of unthinking, the other, earlier neutral that he claimed for his *thought*, to care for itself? Of course, one cannot expect a philosopher to reiterate the same thing in every seminar or paper (although, by limiting his

reading to the section of the Marburg lectures that deal with *Being and Time*, Derrida may imply something like this about Heidegger's seminars of this period; that is, that they are repetitions of *Being and Time*). Here—it would seem—Derrida has the perfect opportunity to carry on the comparison of his own thought with Heidegger's in the same rigorous fashion. Not merely as an empirical comparison, of course, although this happens here doubtlessly too. Derrida pits his thought against Heidegger's; he thinks against him in public and without reservations. It should be remarked sooner or later that it is never an unimportant event in a thinker's contemplative life when she turns to listen to the hearing that has been sharpened by listening to her teacher. Not the empirical encounter between two thinkers that takes place in the first "Geschlecht" essay: rather a more fundamental, methodological struggle over "thought" begins in this programmatic passage *Of Grammatology*. In "Geschlecht I" he has the perfect opportunity to test his perfectly neutral, that is perfectly *unthinking thought*, against a word that Heidegger makes use of for methodological reasons: neutral. Instead Derrida decides to focus on sexual difference and the word "dissemination," which, as I've indicated is not only not a neutral translation of "Zerstreuung," it is not even a biased one: it is not a translation of the word at all. Let this mistranslation, whether it be strategic or merely part of an unreflective economy, stand as an index of Derrida's desire as it moves through this reading. It points toward a desire insofar as the decision does violence—admittedly small—to the practical lexicography of the German word. (Is only a "graphematic" assertion?) More than that, however, it forgets Derrida's frequent recourse to the philosophical topos or instrumental turn of phrase "unthinking," around which many of his essays from this period turn,<sup>79</sup> which lead back, we may assume, to the

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<sup>79</sup> See for example the use of "unthinkable" in "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the

programmatic positioning of thinking as the most perfectly “neutral” operation, and not, we assume, in relation to sexual difference, but rather to difference per se—to *différance*. To make the argument more precise, we could propose that Derrida’s desire fixates on a certain unthought in Heidegger’s text in order to fix its object, sexual difference, instead of trying to account for the power of *Zerstreuung* in the general economy of his texts of the late twenties. What power does Derrida expect to gain by reducing *Zerstreuung*’s scope and potential, that is, by reducing it to sexual potency, albeit a more pluralistic and scattering one than Heidegger’s?

### “Contours of the Unsaid”

Neutral is sexual, even to the extent that its predicates, positive and powerful (*mächtig*) are steeped in sexuality and suggest, as Derrida goes on to argue in “Geschlecht I,” a sexuality prior to or equiprimordial with *Dasein*’s neutrality. Neutral is sexual since what proceeds from it, sexual duality, and what precedes it, “what Heidegger doesn’t hesitate to call a “positivity” (*Positivität*), a richness, and, in a heavily charged code, even a power (*Mächtigkeit*)” are also sexual (“Geschlecht I” 71). Sexual means, we presume, productive, generative, and moving, able to reproduce, displace, and foment difference. What Derrida will want to demonstrate is that although Heidegger tries to step beyond sexual difference as dual, duality continues to operate in the beyond as the source, power, and positivity of ontological difference. Before introducing the analysis of “*Zerstreuung*,” Derrida lays out the steps Heidegger takes toward this primordial sexuality. The analysis of *Zerstreuung* is the final step in this procedure.

Neutrality is not neutral with respect to its objects. This is the key insight that leads Derrida to ascribe it a paradoxical sexuality. Of the myriad possible determinants of “Mensch” that could possibly be cancelled out or neutralized, sexual difference is cancelled out first. This “order of implication,” as Derrida calls it, implies a complicity with sexual difference and particularly with sexual duality that the word neutral cannot seem to shake. In order to demonstrate the complicity, the argument advances in two stages. At first “neutral” will be shown to favor sexual binarity, to derive from it and to mask it. Following this, it will be shown to already be, despite its desire to stand prior to binarity and sexual potency in the chain of being, “on the same side, on the side of that sexual difference” (“Geschlecht I” 72). The first stage of the argument depends on a reading of section 10 and a part of section 11 of the Marburg lectures. What interests us here are not so much the fine points of Derrida’s analysis. They will comport, in total, with a plan of reading that gathers them into evidence for a certain conclusion. More important to us is to ask, then, about the procedure of a reading that advances and gathers, moving along a rather oblique trajectory with seemingly single-minded determination. What, in the case of this one article, does “reading” mean? In his summary of it, David Farrell Krell dwells briefly on one word that reveals much about the manner or method in the reading. “Derrida confesses himself riveted by Heidegger’s use of the word *Geschlecht*” (343). Riveted or “magnetized” is the word that Derrida himself uses, “aimantée,” and Krell playfully picks up on it. The confession he is referring to occurs in the first authorial footnote in the text, in which the author admits something about the reading’s trajectory. The reading is not for itself or even on its own terms. It is not oriented toward discovering these texts’ particular “neutral,” their “blank space on the page,” as Derrida put it earlier. The footnote announces, rather, that the reading is “part of an interpretation” whose sole aim is to “situate *Geschlecht* within Heidegger’s path of

thought” (“Geschlecht I” note 1 p.65). Since the thematic of *Geschlecht* does not become evident or rich here—or in the terms of this essay: since it does not become positive and powerful yet—“this reading,” the one in which *Zerstreuung* figures so prominently, is not exactly a reading. Insofar as it is oriented toward another text, it does not take this text or these texts as its destination, but rather as a necessary detour. Thus we might begin to see why the reading of it remains preliminary, introductory, cursory—we can tell this right off from the hasty style and the leaps that Derrida allows himself—because it is aimed, directed, biased, and desirous of something other than its object. The reading is dependent “d’une interprétation” whose terms are, like compass needles, attracted to a Heideggerian text on Georg Trakl published twenty-five years later. Krell again: “Much could be made of this being magnetized, *aimantée*, a word so close to the *aimant(e)*, the *lover*, a figure that occupies Derrida as much as it did Trakl” (345). Much could be made of it, as much could also be made of the other significant marks of desire for Heidegger and resistance to it that surface in the text. The confession of love for another text raises some doubts about the neutrality with which the word “neutral” is said. The “as if” of the opening paragraphs would be another such mark. Lines like the following, which take the tone of ironic asides, but function like steam brakes that bring the movement of the discourse to a sudden halt, contribute to the sense of an internal resistance to the reading’s movement, motivated by love, to be sure, but a love that is somehow hateful to the lover. “Does this interpretation sound too violent?” he writes (“Geschlecht I” 72). If the relationship between Derrida and Heidegger’s *Geschlecht* is one of a lover, it is of a lover who, in Proustian fashion, makes his way to the beloved through another, seeing his best qualities in the surrogate. The reading that results displays the exaggerated feelings that arise in a lover’s triangle.

This is not to say that the reading is fabricated or forced—far from it—only selective and embellished. In reading a “silence” within a text, we must always be careful—mustn’t we?—not to confuse our carefulness for care; for silence, blankness, the future, the unthought cannot be objects of care, but are, rather, something like the origin of care itself, its origin in utter impudence. In moving toward his reading, Derrida alludes to the problem: “And what are the forms and determinable contours of that non-said?” he asks, referring to Heidegger’s failure to address sex, as well as to his own mode of approaching it. And although this question is placed in the service of the motion towards sexual difference, it raises, surreptitiously, silently even, the question of all silences and proposes that a magnetism or desire—one that Derrida elsewhere spares no effort to expose and neutralize; one that may figure in the movement of philosophy from its beginnings—governs them. Does silence have contours? Does nothing give itself to be determined? If so, when and to whom? Can we accept the assertion of such contours and the presentation of such forms as a truth carried by the text, beyond a reader’s desire projected into that blank space? Who could possibly say? Thus, at least, the claims Derrida makes for the reading call the outcome of the reading into question. That this question might be ironic, that is, that it might be designed to undercut the truth content of the reading is also a definite possibility. Later, the irony or negativity with which the “unthought” is presented is made clearer: “...there’s nothing immobile in the places where the arrows of the aforesaid panoply would assign the point named: omission, repression, denial, foreclosure, even the unthought” (Derrida “Geschlecht I” 67). “Even the unthought” “impensée même” is not immobile, “ne s’immobilise,” that is, it is not only internally unverifiable, such that its form or contours, imposed from without, could easily misrepresent it, but it is not each time in the same place or the same. “Impensée même” is not “le même impensée.” In this way Derrida recognizes *Zerstreuung* as “profoundly symptomatic” of



Heidegger's way of reading, to cite a text that on the surface has little to do with Derrida's reading. Nevertheless these lines from Breton's 1924 *Manifesto of Surrealism* display an affinity with Derrida's attempt to differentiate his *Zerstreuung* from Heidegger's. "[Surrealism] could, on the contrary, only serve to justify the complete state of distraction which we hope to achieve here below. Kant's absentmindedness regarding women, Pasteur's absentmindedness about "grapes," Curie's absentmindedness with respect to vehicles, are in this regard profoundly symptomatic. This world is only very relatively in tune with thought, and incidents of this kind are only the most obvious episodes of a war in which I am proud to be participating. Surrealism is the "invisible ray" which will one day enable us to win out over our opponents" (47). Like Breton, Derrida insists on a symptomatic reading of distraction in the great thinker, in the hopes that, after it has been made to mean this particular thing, a specific unthought, that it will lead to an achievement of another, more general distraction.

Does this mean that we can say nothing about nothing? With respect to this reading, we can say that a nothing, a blank in the text or a silence whose indefiniteness is indeterminable in two dimensions, semantically and temporally, by the transitive force of this reading comes to be seen as a symptom and thus to fix itself for the duration of these pages. This tendency is evident in a more general way in some of the silences of Derrida's text. First, it should be admitted that the authority of the text of the Marburg lectures to claim its silences as its own is highly questionable. Derrida reports on silences from a text that has already been subject to practical dissemination, if you will. Like a student's notebook the text has been written on, filled out, doodled in, and dispersed through several students' hands, not to mention editors'. Thus the reading, which privileges the name Heidegger as the force behind the claims—as Derrida's earlier identification of the unthought in *Of Grammatology* does not; there the force is attributed

to the “name” Heidegger—avoids confronting these practical *Ausstreunungen*. In doing so it also evades the very real, practical *Zerstreuungen*, distractions, on the part of students—whose prerogative distraction is—and also on the part of editors, and Heidegger himself, which will necessarily have affected the texts transmission to Derrida in the form of Band 26 of the *Gesamtausgabe*. Insofar as it is already a dissemination, it comes attended by distractions that arrive at the destination as unreadable or as impossible to gather into a desired reading. One of these, I continue to argue, is the sense of *Zerstreuung* as distraction, unthinking-ness, that Derrida avoids, although Heidegger avoids it perhaps less. “As “anyone,” *Dasein* is dispersed or distracted (*zerstreut*). The whole of that analysis [Heidegger’s analysis of being-in-the-world and specifically the inauthentic being of *Dasein im Man*] is well known, we’re only detaching that which concerns dispersion,” Derrida announces near the end of the article (“Geschlecht I” 81). Thus he privileges “*Zerstreuung*,” abandoning “*zertreut sein*” or “*Zerstreutheit*,” and even “*sich zerstreuen*,” to the whims of “*das Man*.”

Let me briefly paraphrase Derrida’s argument, so that we can move on to the second element of our reading, his deliberate dissemination of *Zerstreuungen*. “Neutral” reinscribes a duality that can be compared to the sexual duality that it claims to transcend, insofar as when it repeats duality the duality that it repeats becomes powerful, generative, and positive. Neutral, “ne-uter” as Krell points out—neither of two—“leads automatically to the example of the duality of the sexes” (345). Moreover, the difference between “Neutral” and “Geschlecht” as binary sexual difference is ne-uter as well—or vel... vel. (One might remember that “ne uter” would also carry echoes of “hysterectomy,” a negation or cancellation of the sexual or reproductive potential of the uterus.) If the difference between ontic and ontological, between existing and existence (for this is the last productive difference for Heidegger) is the difference between

sexual difference and “asexuality,” it is also a difference conceived on the order of the two (“Geschlecht I” 69). This is the point to which Derrida will lead us. Derrida doesn’t go on to say that ontological difference is sexual difference because neutrality or the ontological shows traits of the phallus and existence or the ontic is what is inseminated, but one could draw this conclusion. Then the ontological would be “ne uter,” the uterus-less. However you read the specifics, it is as if the powerful, generative binarity of sexual difference had penetrated the ontic-ontological difference from the start. And to this Derrida would like to oppose his understanding of dissemination, and particularly the dissemination of senses of the word “Zerstreuung.” The most powerful question in the article is raised at the very end: “how is difference deposited among two?” (“Geschlecht I” 83), “comment la différence s’est-elle déposée dans le deux?” (“Geschl. I Fr.” 430). The choice of preposition is telling. In place of “between two” “entre deux,” “dans le deux” “among or in two” calls upon a two that is already more than itself, without simply deriving from it a third and hypostasizing it as a source.

Derrida aims his first blow at the “zer-“ of “Zerstreuung.” The tendency toward division into two, it seems, is made possible or stands in for a tendency of negation to present itself as privation. Although Heidegger brings fallenness, displacement, and concealment, among many other negatives, into being, his methodological negatives, Derrida argues, are bent on depriving existence of those negativities, on neutralizing them (“Geschlecht I” 80-1). Toward supporting this conclusion his analysis of Zerstreuung moves. How is the “zer-” or “dis-“ to be understood, insofar as it stands on the frontier not only of sexual difference and ontological difference, but also at the limit of language’s ability to spread out, to distribute itself such that words, in repetition and reconfiguration, gesture toward a transcendental realm of meaning, a fantasy that their very distributing movement produces and then immediately masks? How does the original,

unstable, unpredictable, quasi-material movement of signification that Derrida has elsewhere analyzed reduce itself to the origin of a duality that at the same time inaugurates a duality between origin and offspring—generations—that ontologically appears as a duel between ontological Ursprung or Urquelle and ontical sexual dualism? By a prejudice in Heidegger's method. Where the matter of the argument seems to move toward or imply a pre-dual sexuality, the mode of the argument moves between poles in a pre-established duality that takes privation as its model for negation: a with and without, either/or, where difference means simply neither/nor. Derrida does not say this outright here, but it can be suggested that this model, the image of negation as privation, is a residue of the phenomenological epoché, the transcendental movement that Heidegger has not been able to reduce away, despite the fact that the next section of the Marburg lectures, section 11, is devoted at least in part to removing the transcendental stains from the idea of transcendence. Derrida does not delve into Heidegger's arguments about transcendence.

Rather, he takes Heidegger to task for his theory of dissemination, which is of course not unrelated to the problem of transcendence. Heidegger, on the positive side, does not conceive of *Zerstreuung* transcendently, at least not in the traditional sense of that which is beyond experience or existence. *Zerstreuung* is not a “grand original being whose simplicity was suddenly dispersed (*zerspaltet*) into various singularities”; his understanding of the ontological difference would forbid this understanding. Nonetheless the strained attempt to derive *Zerstreuung* from an originary “*Streuung*” preserves the operative force of this model. To Derrida, *Zerstreuung* is positioned as a “corruption of pure originary possibility (*Streuung*)” (“*Geschlecht I*” 76), and the distinction between the two is thus an avoidance or possibly even a purification of corruption or contamination, a privation that preserves a bias which, we might

add, can be traced back to the discussion of diacritics in Plato's *Sophist*. Insofar as *Dasein* is always already thrown, dispersed, disseminated, mixed in with the world and others in all the ways the analytic has already demonstrated, it is subject to multiplicity and diversity. And yet, insofar as it is *identifiable* as such—and it is the task of the fundamental ontology outlined in these lectures to identify this original multiplicity, a gesture which constitutes, in these lectures, a repetition and intensification of the demand of *Being and Time* to once again ask the question of being—insofar as one identifies it, one reinscribes the transcendental opposition between transcendence and the transcendent. The difference here is between a transcendental difference and transcendence as difference or *différance*. The distinction is also between the matter and the mode of Heidegger's discourse, such that the ability of fundamental ontology to account for the non-fundamental—its ability even to say that the unfounded, the dispersed, or the distracted is or is not fundamental (in Heidegger's analysis they are of course fundamental categories of existence)—is called into question. Ontology is unfindable—even as or on an abyss—once its privilege is removed, once it—and the activity of philosophy with it—is made subject to ontic disturbances, corruptions, and impure differences, whose difference may or may not be divisible and liable to subtraction or privation. This is why Derrida hastens to remind us of a contamination in Heidegger's discourse. As dispersion, dissemination, distribution, *Zerstreuung* “is marked *twice*, as general structure of *Dasein* and as mode of inauthenticity. One might say the same for the neutral,” Derrida adds, “in the *Course*, while it is the question of *Dasein's* neutrality, no negative or pejorative index [according to Heidegger]; yet “neutral,” in *Sein und Zeit* may also be used to characterize the “one,” to wit what becomes the “who” within everyday ipseity: then the “who” is the neutral (*Neutrum*), “the one” (§27)” (“Geschlecht I” 82).

### Toward a Carefree Reading

We should proceed from this insight, take it as axiomatic that an untoward contamination of the ontological difference marks these texts around *Being and Time*. We could complain about Derrida's reducing, selecting, or desiring dissemination when what is at issue is *Zerstreuung*. We could also hint, although to demonstrate this would require a rather tortuous argument, that Derrida too must claim, albeit through play and the ellipses and corruptions of his way of writing, that dissemination is not sexual difference, and thus he implicates himself once again in a dialectic or quasi-dialectic (is there such a thing?), putting to use a methodological privative, an apparent neutering that uses but displaces, "verstellt," and covers over, "verdeckt," the generative power of negation as privation, the basis of opposition, thesis – antithesis, penis – vagina, Heidegger - Derrida. These negativities, dissemination included, could then be shown, by the same logic of course, to be not distraction or not yet distraction. Some of the motivations behind Derrida's move away from distraction I have indicated at several points in my reading. The *Zerstreuung* of the philosopher or the mindlessness of *Dasein* itself as questioner—these are not on display in Derrida's powerful reading, but much more his powers of attention, desirous of the sweet fruits of careful reading, in short: the fruits of care, *Sorge*. His *sorgfältige* attention to the traces that surround Heidegger's silence emerge, we might argue, from just as careful an avoidance of silence itself, of unthought. But we should not dwell on Derrida's lack of thoughtlessness; the insight at which he arrives is more fruitful, more instructive. Because of it we no longer have to search for words to ask for a sexual difference that is not dual, whether it is called "dissemination" or goes by some other name. And certainly not by opposing another ordinal number to it, conceived of as second, derivative, or alternative to it, that reinscribes the dual of which we had lately unburdened our thinking. Derrida's most cutting insight here is that

Zerstreung is written *twice* in both *Being and Time* and the Marburg lectures, such that the dual it is supposed to create afflicts it as well. What can one expect from a division divided against itself? Once on each side of the ontological difference it is written, once in each order—in the understanding and the understood—leading to a confusion or contamination within “Zerstreung” that points toward an original pleonexia, a surfeit of Zerstreung and, what is perhaps more important, toward an inability to say or think the difference that it institutes.

Through this insight we open to the richness of Zerstreung, although its richness may differ significantly from “power” or “Macht.” Even the double writing of Zerstreung is on display in more than one way in *Being and Time*. There are three—or more—doubled or doubling Zerstreungen there. Let us start with the deployments of this movement in *Being and Time*, since what happens afterward in the Leibniz lectures is part of a different project, or forms the beginning of one, as Heidegger wrote to Elisabeth Blochmann. Let us start with the analytic of Dasein.

Zerstreung is part of the structure of Dasein’s being-in-the-world. Nonetheless it is not appointed to one of the high ranks in the analytic. It does not name a mode or “Weise” of Dasein, as for instance “Befindlichkeit,” “Verstehen,” and “Rede” do. This is one of the reasons for which, before Derrida’s reading, Zerstreung was largely overlooked as a Heideggerian technical term. It was not taken as a word that could speak being, as one of the ek-stases of existence, or anything of the sort. Heidegger’s texts of the late 20s give ample grounds for ignoring it. The first time it is written it does not even attain the rank of a noun with such disseminative potential as “Zerstreung.” As a mere verb that is used, and not mentioned or otherwise emphasized, it does not signal the induction of a new category of existence. And yet, taking both Heidegger and Derrida as the teachers of method that they are, this lack of stature puts us on alert. Zerstreung

is a structural element in *Being and Time*, as paradoxical as such a fact may seem. This *struo* or *Streuen* is *structus*, has already been strewn, its destructuring or prestructuring movement belongs to or builds up the structure of being-there. Strewing structures... how can this be?

### **Structural Wholeness, Ontic Dispersion**

That Dasein “zerstreut sich” is first announced at the beginning of the analytic, in the “First Part,” “First Section,” once the analysis gets underway in Chapter Two after the “Exposition of the Task” in Chapter One. “Das In-der-Welt-sein des Daseins hat sich mit dessen Faktizität schon in bestimmte Weisen des In-Seins zerstreut oder gar zersplittert” (SuZ 56). At this point begins, you will remember, the process of analyzing Dasein’s fundamental constitution, although these words, “fundamental,” “constitution [Verfassung],” “Dasein,” still require further interpretation. “Being-in-the-world” is introduced as a specification of this constitution. In Chapter 2, “Being-in-the-world in General as the Basic Constitution of Dasein,” Heidegger announces that worldliness is the “rechte Ansatz,” the right approach to Dasein’s constitution, and shows in particular the unity of Dasein as a phenomenon. At first these two—worldliness and unity—seem to have little in common. It is at the very least counterintuitive that Dasein should be unified insofar as it is constituted through being-in-the-world. He goes on to say that being in the world, Dasein “zerstreut sich,” to the point that one might assume from the formulation that the being of being-in-the-world is equivalent, one way or the other, to being anything but a whole. Before we are shown precisely how or why this is the case, however, this being’s phenomenal wholeness is attested to. Sich zerstreuen and Dasein’s unity are



codependent, co-constitutive even. Spreading out to the point of dismemberment is unthinkable outside of Dasein's integrity as a phenomenon and visa versa. Its wholeness is the precondition for its being-in-the-world and thus its determination as that being which "zerstreut sich." Its tendency to distribute and dissipate itself is the sign of a wholeness against which dissipation can be distinguished. Thus, although worldliness names Dasein's primary phenomenality, it also points toward a feature that would be difficult to consider merely phenomenal: unity. Still we should remember—and Heidegger reminds us forcefully at the beginning of the chapter—that for all its rigor, the analytic is only a primary finding (*Befund*), and, more importantly, for all its unity Dasein is ontologically a plurality of "structural moments." Its plural yet unified structure must not, however, be thought of as a merely "pieced together inventory" (*zusammenstückbare Bestände*) (*SuZ* 53). No ontic grouping can explain its ontological plurality. Its plurality is distinguished by the fact that it never disintegrates, never aggregates more items, and never runs out of stock for its worldly business. This is why, from the beginning of the analytic, structural moments, when introduced, immediately announce their inner connections with each other and declare their roots in a primordial unity. Structural moments are "gleichursprünglich," usually somewhat inelegantly translated as "equiprimordial." Structural moments, in fact, insofar as they originate similarly and are likewise origins for the ontic, and not items stuck together *ex post facto*, joined by external forces, empirically, or by accident, point back to their unity. Whatever the affinities between *Being and Time* and certain romantic topoi, Dasein is no Frankenstein's monster. As will be shown, whatever alienation from itself it displays has its origin in its "ownmost" self-identity or unity. Dasein is a monster whose every part is parcel of its whole, whose self-difference brings it into closer contact with its being. Its self-difference is generative of questions and questions follow guiding lines toward the ontological difference. Frankenstein's

monster, in contrast, has only empirical unity. For this reason, he cannot reproduce, but must be every time again gathered, powered up from the outside; he even has to go through the same rebellion, be left unloved, abandoned, unsexed, and assert his belonging or “Mitsein” through words or when that doesn’t work, through violence, with no hope of differentiating himself from the inauthentic or improper, even to say that this is what they are, no hope of identifying with his parts, which are still dead or mortifying, parts that make him up without belonging to him, such that what they make up can perhaps never be thought of as structured by them.

Dasein’s structural unity is also not empirically apparent. It occurs, rather, through the mediation of philosophy’s gaze. And yet, its philosophically mediated unity is not the unity of the subject as articulated by German idealism. It goes without saying that *Zerstreuung* is not *Zerrissenheit*, Heidegger is not Hegel, and the unity of Dasein and the propriety and continuity of its structural moments are not to be confused with the going out from and returning to itself of absolute spirit. Being-there is already in association with other beings, it is in the world, distributed—*zerstreut*—among beings, working on tasks, lost in the crowd, gossipy; and yet insofar as its in-ness is apparent to it, to the extent that its constitution appears to it, Dasein first and foremost projects itself as the sole projector of its being and the sole overseer of its *Zerstreuungen*. This, and not its multiplicity, is its ownmost possibility, the possibility of achieving an “*unzerstreuten Blick*.” “Jede Hebung des einen dieser Verfassungsmomente bedeutet die Mithebung der anderen, das sagt: jeweilig ein Sehen des ganzen Phänomens” (*SuZ* 53). (This is the rather severe methodological condition that Heidegger establishes at the beginning of the analysis. I mention it not because I want to dwell on it here—although it does merit scrutiny, mainly because the claim for unity of the phenomena does not seem to emerge from the phenomena themselves but instead is the presupposed, methodological *sine qua non* of

the project as a whole: “ein Sehen des ganzen Phänomens.” The second division will go into more detail about the need for and nature of the totality or being-whole of Dasein, its essence wholly in its existence, which is its essential standing out of itself.) I mention the methodological presupposition for the unity of Dasein’s structural moments as a background against which the marginal and somewhat weak use of the verb “sich zerstreuen” here can be understood. When it is first revealed that Dasein is not ontically whole, the thematic of distraction surfaces, weakly, only to further specify or determine—Bestimmen—the already disclosed movement of facticity, the mode of existence by which Dasein is in the world. Despite its weakness here and the lack of emphasis in the text, the verb, however, is the datum from which the analytic of Dasein will begin—with the suggestion that Dasein is not ontically whole. Ontic disintegration formally indicates ontological integrity—existing is dismembered but existence is not. These are the preliminary conclusions expressed here, already. This difference is the basis on which *Zerstreuung* will later receive its determination, and which it also, to my mind, comes to threaten, and by threatening the difference—already the ontological difference here—it offers Heidegger an unforeseen possibility in his Marburg lectures, which, after his return to Freiburg, he then seems to abandon.

In an unceremonious manner and without any emphasis on the word itself, the first *zerstreu*-word in *Being and Time* christens the ontic tendency that formally indicates the a priori wholeness, *Ganzheit*, of Dasein, the unity of the Existentialia, which will ultimately be determined as “care,” “Sorge.” “Sich zerstreuen” indicates unity at the very least by the fact that it can be articulated in a word. Dasein is completely existent, entirely and essentially *in* the possibilities provided by its Existentialia, fated to be always already detained among beings, without exceptions: no grace, no miracles, no paradise. This is so because existence means to be

spread out, broken up, dissipated, and so on. This is its celebrated facticity or factuality, which, as an aside, also corresponds to what Heidegger calls elsewhere the appearance of a radical atheism (Anfangsgründe 177). Dasein's being condemns it to an irremediably "verwickelte Struktur" (SuZ 56), and the precondition for Verwicklung of its structure, another description of its having its essence in its existence or the ontological difference, is "sich zerstreuen." The claim that the structure is irremediable, however, the fact that Dasein's essence is wholly in its existence, is never itself zerstreut, dissipated or deviated from. This minimum of positive "being" and positive knowledge of it distinguish hermeneutic phenomenology from some other contemporaneous attempts at codifying dissipation and the internal differences and breakdowns of existence. Dadaism and Surrealism, not to mention certain strands in Kafka's writing, dispense with this minimum positivity, or try to. Philosophy thus resists becoming experimental poetry, dream, or gibberish by maintaining its ability to say what existence is, even if existence is experimental, dream-like, or nonsensical. If philosophy is an Existential, and Heidegger indeed insists that it grows out of Dasein's essential existence, it appears to operate unlike all the other Existentialia. Heidegger says: Dasein zerstreut sich. Having said this, he might have added that it is not a statement of which Dasein, insofar as the statement is true, would be capable.

With this self-referential paradox, the identification of Zerstreung as a structural element becomes questionable. If Dasein cannot say "Dasein zerstreut sich" it is also blocked from ever claiming unity for itself. This puzzle has determinate consequences in the beginning of the analytic. For instance, the attempt to enumerate Dasein's specific Zerstreungen involves certain related paradoxes. It is not saying much if we propose that each of the entanglements, distributions, or dissipations cited by Heidegger is a choice made out of a potentially limitless and actually transforming set of ways of dispersing into world. He himself treats them as though

specifics were unimportant. After all, this is not a philosophical anthropology. And so he is content to list some of the factual ways in which Dasein zerstreut sich in the world and he feels no pressure to describe any one of them further: “zutunhaben mit etwas, herstellen von etwas, bestellen und pflegen von etwas, verwenden von etwas, aufgeben und in Verlust geraten von etwas, unternehmen, durchsetzen, erkunden, befragen, betrachten, besprechen, bestimmen...” (SuZ 56-7). The authorial ellipsis that ends the enumeration suggests an ongoing list, an infinite one perhaps, but the final element before the virtual continuation makes the next item hard to imagine. Is “bestimmen,” one of the factual Zerstreungen of being-in-the-world, not in effect a “higher” activity? Is it not, for instance, what Heidegger is already doing in making this list? Is it not the philosophical distribution par excellence, the one—even more—that begins to gather up the dispersion or at least what allows Zerstreungen to be listed?

Despite this somewhat more unhealthy entanglement—Bestimmen appears on both sides of the difference as well—the structure of Dasein is going to be more or less clear. Dasein’s Verwicklung in the everyday disunifies it, but its partiality toward objects, others, tools, and tasks expresses the wholeness of its constitution. It is always and wholly in its existence, in one way or another zerstreut into determinate Zerstreungen, and Zerstreung stands in a puzzling relationship to this infinite finitude. First, as an ontological rather than an ontic characteristic, the wholeness of Dasein’s constitution *zerstreut sich nicht*. This results in a thorny problem, expressed by Derrida in perhaps the most penetrating sentence of “Geschlecht I”: “It is the whole problematic that is here in question, the one that subjects positive knowings to regional ontologies, and these to a fundamental ontology, which itself at that time was preliminarily opened up by the existential analytic of *Dasein*” (“Geschlecht I” 80). The existential analytic of Dasein does not only break being-in-the-world down into its constitutive moments, nor does it

merely, as later will be the case, reinterpret these moments as temporal (a possibility already prepared for in the word “Moment.”) It also asserts the methodological necessity and ontological priority of a hierarchy building toward fundamental unity. A different kind of multiplicity, in other words, one that would not be as conducive to Dasein’s wholeness, and thus to its intelligibility, will be kept rigorously separate from the ontological structure. Bad Zerstreung, as we might call this ghoul, is consistently remanded to the ghetto of the ontic. It is, in effect, the ghost that haunts the ontological difference, representing another movement between determination and determinant that might not live up to the name “being,” which might correspond to another discourse—one that corrupts or even excludes the *quaestio* hidden in the question—that would not be able to rest its identification of “entanglement” on an a priori disentangled “structure.” What if the strewing or struo, the στρόνυμμα assumed in “structure” were to bleed over into the ontological? What if zerstreu- or streu- sometime somehow deprioritized the a priori? What if it complicated the smooth passage between a being and the conditions of its possibility? What if world became temporarily impossible or intractable? What if world held off from worlding?

“Das In-der-Welt-sein des Daseins hat sich mit dessen Faktizität schon in bestimmte Weisen des In-Seins zerstreut oder gar zersplittert” (SuZ 56). The statement is unambiguous. Heidegger implies here and will say outright elsewhere in *Being and Time* that there is no other being for Dasein than its existence, no other state or way that is not already distributed, dispersed, and even dismembered. This is its facticity, non-negotiable and unavoidable. Part of its facticity, then, must be the “no other way” that forbids escape. No exit belongs to existence. And so the facticity must contain the certainty that existent humanity is condemned to existence. Here we find a negativity, gesturing toward permanence, that might not fit within existence, but

belongs instead to a transcendental, we might even say epistemological hold out in the act of analysis itself. Even if this problem were not as grievous as it seems, it is still the case that in Chapter 2 and elsewhere in *Being and Time*, “zerstreu-” words make a claim on disunity, but do so from elsewhere. A figure who “zerstreut sich,” who is carried away in entertainment, who fills up with lightness and emptiness, moving toward the nothing of a *Zerstretheit* that is much harder to marshal for hermeneutic purposes—*le distrait* cannot say distraction. There is a conceptual integrity underlying all these statements about existence that already stands away from distraction – “already” – already belongs to the temporality that Heidegger will also analyze, and which proposes its own unified and unchanging structure, even if it grounds being in something other than eternal substance.

### **Double Distraction**

*Zerstreuung* is double in *Being and Time*, and yet this doubleness does not mean that it simply occurs twice or that its meaning is ambiguous. Two distinct versions discourage one from distributing *Zerstreuung* to a category, or making it into one itself. One reason for its being double, or at least more than one, is that, since there is no category to which it belongs, it cannot be counted as one of anything. this is the same as saying that *Zerstreuung* is not a being. Thus this “more than one” does not only lead to a doubling of its power. It also leads to a duplicity that clouds one’s view of it insofar as, if *Zerstreuung* is not one, existence becomes more, and not less, indeterminate. Let us try to find a vantage point from which we can envision the distribution of *Zerstreuung* in *Being and Time*. The double-writing or double-distribution of *zerstreu-* words

occurs in three important involvements of Dasein: involvement with beings, abandonment of its “self” in das Man, and being continually away from itself in curiosity.

Firstly, in Chapter Two of the First Division, “sich zerstreuen” is associated closely with Dasein’s celebrated facticity, as we have seen. The facticity or factuality there is not, as we have tried to show, a fact that, as the Nietzschean dictum would have it, is indistinguishable from interpretation; it is in fact a truth. Dasein’s fact is true in form even if the content of the fact is interpretation itself. This amounts, from the perspective of method at least, to a reversal of Nietzsche’s dictum. Instead of saying that all facts are interpretations, Heidegger wants to claim it as a fact that there are nothing but interpretations, that Dasein is the interpreting animal, and that its access to its own possibilities depends on this very fact. Nietzsche preserves the methodological paradox that leaves this fact too an interpretation, whereas Heidegger, at least on the surface, does not. “With its facticity” Dasein has already distributed, dispersed, distracted itself in the world; this is not an interpretation but a state of affairs. The “into-what” of the distribution or dissipation is never fixed, but the movement is fixed forever. Despite its universality and permanence, “sich zerstreuen” describes an ontic way of being and as such, although the activity belongs to the ontic, the word and concept belongs to the ontological, and what’s more are indispensable to Dasein’s constitutional integrity. The cohesiveness and integrity of the word and concept “sich zerstreuen” is this integrity, and cannot be at issue.

Thus the word or words first describe Dasein’s detour or association with any and all beings. How does it describe this? It names Dasein’s mode of involvement with beings in the most general terms. It is the “Weise” of “Weisen” of being-in-the-world. “Der phänomenologische Aufweis des Seins des nächstgebenden Seienden bewerkstelligt sich am Leitfaden des alltäglichen In-der-Welt-seins, das wir auch den *Umgang in der Welt und mit dem*



innerweltlichen Seienden nennen. Der Umgang hat sich schon zerstreut in eine mannigfaltigkeit von Weisen des Besorgens” (SuZ 67). Here, the word “Umgang” is determined by the reflexive verb “sich zerstreuen.” As a result the importance of zerstreu- in the understanding of Dasein’s constitution comes more into focus. Dasein is its “going-around.” The “going-around,” however, insofar as it is here identified as Dasein’s being, is plural, it flings itself out into “Weisen,” into diverse “go-rounds.” Dasein’s being flings itself out or around into ways. The self that is flung with this reflexive verb is Dasein’s, not the ontic movement of a being in space or even intellectual and still ontic disposition of a subject over against that which it perceives or thinks. Dasein is self-scattering. Being-scattered, then, cannot be opposed to a collection or concentration. In order to concentrate on something, in order to collect things, words, ideas, in order, even, to be a scatterbrain, Dasein has to be a priori scattered in its being. What would the scatterbrain be then in this scenario? Furthest away from Dasein’s being or closest? Does the scatterbrain, le distrait, have no hope of becoming Entschlossen toward his particular involvement in the world, or does he have a privileged intuition of the being of all human beings? In lacking all intuition, all Umgang with beings, is he face to face with being? These questions aside, we sense the trouble that Heidegger goes to in order to keep the ontological separate from the ontic, even this early in the book. And yet the question must arise—mustn’t it?—under which rubric these zerstreu- words belong. Derrida became concerned enough about this question to propose a surprising answer: they belong under both. And yet is it so easy to say? There is little doubt, however, about the stakes of the question. If zerstreu- is ontic, if it characterizes one of the determinate ways of being-in-the-world, a particular *Erschlossenheit*, for instance one of the species of Besorgen, as it often seems, how is the multiplicity of these Besorgen and the necessity of returning to them to be explained? One runs

the risk, when imagining a merely ontic strewing out to pieces, of glorifying violent destruction.

One also runs the risk of falling back on a bad empiricism, and envisioning, for example, a history in which periods of destruction are routinely followed by periods of “Zerstreuung.” If it is purely ontological, a technical term in fundamental ontology and one of the few words in the analytic that don’t emerge from experience—if as the movement of experience it remains unexperientiable—not only is there no grounds for asserting its “existence,” but it would lead hermeneutic ontology back to a mystically grounded metaphysics. Who can say *Zerstreuung*? Is it even a word? These questions return with some insistence here.

Secondly, the word or words describes Dasein’s *Umgang* with others, the deviation that ultimately dissipates to the point of abandonment in *das Man*. “Das Selbst des alltäglichen Daseins ist das *Man-selbst*, *das wir von dem eigentlichen, das heißt eigens ergriffenen Selbst unterscheiden*. Als *Man-selbst* ist das jeweilige Dasein in das *Man zerstreut* und muß sich erst finden. Diese Zerstreuung charakterisiert das “Subjekt” der Seinsart, die wir als besorgende Aufgehen in der nächst begehrenden Welt kennen” (*SuZ* 129). Again, this word or words, now appearing as an adjective and a noun, appear to determine the manner of being-with-others in the every day; without it, *das Man*’s way of being would remain indeterminate. Although *das Man* is a fundamental existential category, we must not forget that its particular dissipation and changeability cannot be confused with the “various possibilities” in which its “daseinsmäßigen Konkretion” might appear and change historically, Heidegger reminds us. It matters little whether we are talking about an Athenian jury of the fifth century, the court of a baroque monarch, or students in a Hessische university in 1928: the group does not determine the *Zerstreuung* of Dasein im *Man*; determination flows in the other direction. Being-with others is grounded in a preparatory strewing out and away toward them, of course not spatially but in

“care” or “solicitude” that should never be confused with the action of an existent group or the disposition of a group’s internal constitutive relations. Dasein is universally zerstreut into relations with others. Conversely, its sociality is asocial only ontologically; ontically it is in and among others.

Here we are given a slightly larger view of the parameters of Zerstreung. A chain of claims helps present this view. In reverse order to that in which Heidegger presents it: ontological interpretation emerges out of das Man’s pre-ontological interpretation of human being (SuZ 130). This re-ontological interpretation is characterized by Zerstreung, which comes to mean here the way in which Dasein accepts a certain interpretation. Earlier it was characterized as Dasein’s movement among various “Weisen” of involvement, where it was connected with Dasein’s factuality, the essential tendency toward multiplicity. In section §27, “Das alltägliche Selbstsein und das Man,” it is explicitly aligned with interpretation and the possibility of ontological interpretation. Dasein opts for a certain way of interpreting its existence; this is what it means to be “in das Man zerstreut.” Zerstreung here is a mode of interpretation that occurs as an ontic determination, and coming to see this mode is the content of ontological interpretation. This is why a theoretical perspective on a being released from the impersonal crowd, but rather on an existential modification of the one (SuZ 130).

Der Zerstreute interprets by taking the nearest as the most real. This Heidegger calls the “Subjektcharakter” of authentic Dasein in its relationship to others. Dasein takes others as like itself and takes itself as like the other. Instead of being what it does, as Dasein was described in connection with the significant and service structure of Zuhandenheit, here it is who it sees. This is its first self-interpretation and the easiest interpretation for it to grasp. Why is this the first and easiest? Because it is the nearest. The nearest interpretation is someone else’s interpretation.

When everyone adopts someone else's interpretation, all adopt each others', and thus the interpretation is the most indifferent to others, and thus to the self. Everyone thus becomes "the one." Das Man exercises its power over self-interpretation through this indifference: we are we because I am you and you are me. The "Unauffälligkeit und Nichtfeststellbarkeit" of this relation expresses itself as a disappearance of the other's "Unterschiedlichkeit and Ausdrücklichkeit" (SuZ 126). Difference and explicitness disappear in *Zerstreuung* as an "*Einebnung* aller Seinsmöglichkeiten" (SuZ 127). This flattening of possibilities into one level is significant for two reasons. First, the presentation of the flattening and making indifferent of this way of interpreting is one of the few places where some of the central concerns of conservative cultural critics of the epoch make their way into the book. Here we find references to the masses, obviously transformed into an ontological category, but we also find ontic phenomena that are supposed to be explained by this category. Public transportation is one, enjoyment, reading, popular or bourgeois criticism of the arts are others. *Zerstreuung* as entertainment is *almost* mentioned. "Wir genießen und vergnügen uns, wie *man* genießt; wir lesen, sehen, und urteilen über Literatur und Kunst, wie *man* sieht und urteilt." And we shouldn't forget this addition that seems so timely, not to mention critical on Heidegger's part—critical in the way that "das Man" is critical: "wir ziehen uns aber auch vom "großen Haufen" zurück, wie *man* sich zurückzieht" (SuZ 127). It should not seem puzzling that one of the few times pleasure is mentioned it is mentioned in relation to *Zerstreuung*, as a resistance to authentic, ontological interpretation—toward which, lest we forget, the entire book is an exhortation. Here is the pleasure and satisfaction against which philosophy turns when it turns against *Zerstreuung*. It is also relatively clear in the portrait of "one" here that *Zerstreuung* names mode of Dasein that leads it to interpret itself as the "one" of "one says"—or better, the indifferent one of "one another," one

like another, any one less than extraordinary. And yet it does not name the interpretation itself, but rather the movement of the interpretation, the condition of its possibility. One is “one another” because one is *zerstreut*, subjected to *Zerstreuung*. It is not that which entertains one, the being entertained, but one’s tendency toward entertainment, and in particular toward satisfaction soon—the kind of pleasure or fulfillment that subtracts the motivation for questioning or reinterpreting. It names, in short, the constitutive resistance to interpretation, the dislike for interpretation as that which puts something between one and “one another.” The pleasure is found in not interpreting, where to interpret means to find existent things other than a mirror image of oneself and *visa versa*. *Zerstreuung* is thus an avoidance of the *Auffälligkeit* of what is not like one, an other with whom one would have a different rapport. One would not be able to say, for instance, “we understand one another.” *Dasein*, which we now learn is conceived as that whose internal differentiation that makes it “*auffallen*,” catch the eye or demand attention, is washed out in *Zerstreuung*. Ontological interpretation would remove this process of making indistinct that results in self-satisfaction. To be a self is to be unsatisfied, to find oneself distinct from others and thus for selfhood to remain a question. Insofar as this question is the *Seinsfrage*, we can make an assertion about *Zerstreuung* for Heidegger that we could not before. *Zerstreuung* is the non-asking that resists the *Seinsfrage*, and thus becomes the positive sign of the priority of the question. It comes to function as, if not to mean, distraction from the question of being. The importance of *Zerstreuung* as a proof that interpretation belongs fundamentally to *Dasein*’s way of being is made even more clear in its next appearance.

The “*da*” of *Dasein*, thirdly, is characterized by *Zerstreuung* insofar as it is “*erschlossen*” in everydayness. Gossip (*Gerede*), ambiguity (*Zweideutigkeit*), fallenness (*Verfallenheit*), thrownness (*Geworfenheit*), and curiosity (*Neugier*) name the categories by which everydayness

can be understood.<sup>80</sup> Only one of these, however, Neugier, also names the mode of understanding, here described by Heidegger as a kind of “Sehen” (SuZ 170), proper to everydayness itself. As such it will also become the one and only path out of everydayness toward phenomenology. As the defective mode of seeing native to everydayness, curiosity

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<sup>80</sup> Stanley Rosen’s recent study of the ambiguity of notions such as life-world, everyday life, ordinary experience, and ordinary language—an ambiguity that persists despite and perhaps also because of their central place in the activity of philosophizing—presents a detailed genealogy of the extraordinary attention paid to these notions by thinkers from Montesquieu to Austin. Heidegger’s “average everydayness” is, in Rosen’s estimation, a mixture of Aristotle’s phronesis, Husserl’s natural attitude, and Christian theology’s world, to which he might have added Nietzsche’s “herd” (Rosen 117). He gleans this interpretation from a reading, not of *Sein und Zeit*, but of the lectures on Plato’s *Sophist* of 1924-5, because, as he says, the first and largest section of this text is devoted to Aristotle and to laying out his concept of phronesis. Phronesis is of course both the antidote to average everydayness and at the same time a wisdom, sophia, that emerges directly from practical concerns. What preoccupies Rosen is not the contingent, and not in any way necessary, presumption of this structure—the conflation of the everyday with the average. No, instead he critiques what he sees as the historical determinism of the account. Circumstances either give or withhold the right to derive sophia from phronesis, or phronesis from average everydayness (Rosen 127). He laments that there is no concept of virtue—an idea not wholly absent from Aristotle’s notion of phronesis—that would counteract both the historical ground for an opening towards practical wisdom and the priority of mood over reason.

presents the analytic with a special sign of its potential to dispense with the defect. “In ihrem Unverweilen besorgt die Neugier die ständige Möglichkeit der Zerstreuung...Dieser Modus des In-der-Welt-seins enthüllt eine neue Seinsart des alltäglichen Daseins, in der es sich ständig entwurzelt” (SuZ 172-3). Worthy of note in this passage is the position of Zerstreuung in the ontological difference. It belongs to the ontic, to that which has been made possible. It is now that which Dasein “besorgt” insofar as it is curious. Out of curiosity it procures itself distraction, diversion—but not only this. Curiosity is of particular importance to the possibility of ontological interpretation because it does this continually. To repeat, as the fruit of curiosity, distraction no longer names the movement among “Weisen” of “Besorgen,” but rather that which is besorgt.

In three key analyses of existence, then, “sich zerstreuen,” “zerstreut sein,” and “Zerstreuung” intercede to determine the movement by which existence makes itself more indeterminate. Through the many modes of “Besorgen,” one of which is determination, “Bestimmen,” itself, the philosophical act of “Bestimmen” is dwarfed by a multitude of other modes of being-in-the-world. If Bestimmen is one mode of being among many, a general tendency away from determination and toward greater indeterminacy is evident. Likewise, the movement away from the authentically grasped “self” of Dasein into and among being one with one another brings indifference. Zerstreuung is here associated directly with enjoyment. “Wir genießen und vergnügen uns, wie man genießt; wir lesen, sehen und urteilen über Literatur und Kunst, wie man sieht und urteilt...” (SuZ 126-7). Participation in bourgeois culture of *belles lettres*, satisfaction in art as well as bourgeois art criticism, these distractions draw us into the indeterminate crowd of shared opinion. Zerstreuung names a resistance to hermeneutics. In *Neugier*, however, Zerstreuung displays a different face. There it is characterized by “Unruhe

und Aufregung durch das immer Neue und den Wechsel des Begegnenden" (SuZ 172). Here the determinacy of Dasein is undermined by the multiplication of its objects and a corresponding unrest and agitation caused by their ceaseless exchange for new ones. This is rightly described by Heidegger as an epistemic indeterminacy, and moreover, a the indeterminacy of the epistemic itself—making Dasein into a “subject,” subjected to a series of changing objects.

This frenetic lust for objects, however, is also a sign.

Keeping in mind how fundamental the word or words are for defining Dasein’s deficiency with respect to beings, other Daseins, and itself—how fundamental, that is, *Zerstreuung* is for determining its deficiencies—we can now turn to Division Two, where Heidegger allows himself more strident methodological statements. Here a willful canceling out of *Zerstreuung* is a prerequisite for philosophy. For the first time *Zerstreuung* has a “positive” character. Let us set the scene. By late in Division Two, *Entschlossenheit* has become the philosophical antidote to the everyday attitude, the dissipation in *das Mann*, the seduction of curiosity. In the analysis of being-to-death, *Entschlossenheit* is a kind of determination—as we would translate it in English—that allows Dasein’s relation to its death, and thus to itself, to change, to become more determined (*bestimmt*) and less dissipated, even if its condemnation to dissipation does not change. In response to real or imagined rebuttals to the idea of *Entschlossenheit*, Heidegger qualifies his definition of the term: “Die vorläufige *Entschlossenheit* ist kein Ausweg, erfunden, um den Tod zu “überwinden”, sondern das dem gewissensruf folgende Verstehen, das dem Tod die Möglichkeit freigibt, der Existenz des Daseins mächtig zu werden und jede flüchtige Selbstverdeckung im Grunde zu zerstreuen" (SuZ 310). Most surprising of all in this passage is the description of the movement of



Entschlossenheit. It too depends on a zerstreu- movement, a strewing, though not at this point a reflexive one. Zerstreung that names the tendency to dissipate and by dissipating to cover-over and conceal the ontological difference returns here as the manner in which philosophy should or can erase that concealment *im Grunde*, in the fundament. The “possibility (*Möglichkeit*)” for Dasein’s existence “to become powerful (*mächtig zu werden*),” become Entschlossen, and do philosophy, lies fundamentally with Zerstreung. The covering tendency must be dissipated, the tendency to flee being-toward death as well. To say zerstreuen, to be a victim or object of Zerstreung—to be zerstreut—is more importantly *also to be unzerstreut*. The path that *Being and Time* takes from the beginning of the analytic and the exposition of the fundamental constitution of Dasein as being-in-the-world to the reinterpretation of Dasein’s being as constituted in a temporal horizon traverses the doubleness and duplicity of this word and this action. The constitution of Dasein is zerstreut. The constitution of Dasein as one who can come to understand its Zerstretheit is as “Zerstreuer der Zerstretheit.” It is not for no reason that the very possibility of hermeneutic phenomenology lies is derived from this word or words. When Dasein reaches an intuition of its integrity in “Sorge,” it does so by recognizing and thus negating its dispersion, dissipation and distraction. “Dieser Modus der Eigentlichkeit der Sorge enthält die ursprüngliche Selbst-ständigkeit und Ganzheit des Daseins. Im unzerstreuten, existenzial verstehenden Blick auf sie muß sich die Freilegung des ontologischen Sinnes des Seins des Daseins vollziehen" (SuZ 323).

### **Zerstreuung and Sorge**

To will and to wish, to be inclined towards and to be driven to, all manners of “Besorgen,” not to mention the more general modalities of *Zuhandenheit* and *Vorhandenheit*—in short, every one of *Dasein*’s constitutive moments outlined in the analytic is a function or derivative of *Sorge*, care, which is in this respect none other than *Dasein*’s being. *Dasein* *sorgt*. That is to say, its most extreme possibility, the farthest it can go with respect to itself and the world it inhabits, is to care. Nothing it does, insofar as it remains *Dasein*, could negate care completely. *Dasein* *sorgt* and that which “*sorgt nicht*” is simply not *Dasein*. It would be some other being, an animal, plant, or stone. *Sorge* is the way of the world and anything that does not care, that is, anything that does not have the minimum penchant for the things of the world is to that degree without world. Behind the understanding of itself as either “*zuhanden*” or “*vorhanden*,” lies *Dasein*’s fundamental ability to associate with anything or anyone—including itself—and that makes its self-understanding possible. It cares about its being, as we know. Thus understanding streams from care, as do the other *Existentialia*. And so, the “*Weisen des Besorgens*” that we have seen distributed to the point of dismemberment, “*zerstreut oder gar zersplittert*,” are expressions of a *Sorge* or care that transcends them.

Why care? As a surrogate for Husserl’s intentional structure of consciousness, *Sorge* makes many more facets of existent human beings available for philosophy, non-intellectual modes of being, quasi-intellectual modes, like striving, love, and so on. As the basic structure of *Dasein*, *Sorge*—which we must still define more precisely—opens the existent human being to non-intellectual objects, to its own death, for example, or to being with others. Everything that is posited the analytic will be modalities of *Sorge*, including time. It is in fact *Sorge* that is gestured

toward, when Heidegger presents Dasein's facticity for the first time. The relationship between the ontological wholeness of Dasein and the ontic scatteredness of Dasein is due to Sorge. Each of the ways of "Besorgen," which might be translated as "to take care of something," is a determinate modality of Sorge—but not just determinate. According to Heidegger at this time, there is also a distinct loss of value—although Heidegger would despise this word—when care expresses itself in determinate ways of taking care. For one thing, taking care takes care for granted. Besorgen of something in some way, attending to it or protecting it, caressing it—these are "defiziente[] Modi," and in particular, they are deficient insofar as they omit, fail, abjure, and rest from Dasein's true possibility, care. These negations that define the always partial and privative nature of Besorgen are summed up in Chapter Two of Division One. The expression "Besorgen" is "als ontologischer Terminus (Existenzial) gebraucht als Bezeichnung des Seins eines möglichen In-der-Welt-seins" (SuZ 57). Of "one possible being-in-the-world," that is, of only one possible way of being, Besorgen is the title. By naming the tendency to care in only one way it indicates the deficiency of being in the world: its decision for one way omits all others. Conversely, all possible ways of caring make up Dasein's structure whose name is care. Second point: what we may think of as care or concern is really a manner of Besorgen. Suffering, worry, care taking, gloom, melancholia, love, effort, wishing, wanting—even noesis—are ways of Besorgen and thus deficient or less than care. Care is, Heidegger repeats several times, "als ontologischer Strukturbegriff zu fassen" (SuZ 57). It has no meaning in itself other than the multiplicity of ways of taking care and their internal relation. Care never appears as such, but allows one to conceptualize the structure of all that appears under the name Dasein. Care is the

unity of its phenomena.<sup>81</sup> Furthermore, the ontological difference, the relationship between being and beings as articulated in Dasein, extends from “care” to these narrow, deficient modes of taking care. Being with a particular being—a dog, a brother, a saw—is made possible by this most general inclination, the *clinamen*, of Dasein toward beings.

This poses a special problem for the understanding of *Zerstreuung*. Insofar as it is understood as entertainment or amusement, it is easy to assimilate to the care-structure of Dasein. To amuse oneself, *sich zerstreuen*, would be yet another deficient mode of care that expressed the central position of care even while and especially because it denied it. The same would go for entertainment as would go for “*zutunhaben mit etwas, herstellen von etwas, bestellen und pflegen von etwas, verwenden von etwas,*” and so forth. Entertainment or amusement are not special targets of attack for Heidegger, as they might be for others who desire to save the Western tradition at this time... Kracauer’s writings come to mind in particular. The two other senses of the word or words, however, do draw this structure into question. What is it about “*Sorge*” that demands that it be “*zerstreut*” in manifold ways of “*Besorgen*”? Clearly the train of thought moves in the other direction. Everything human, except perhaps its death, can be made understandable by means of this word. There is no activity, state, or way of being,

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<sup>81</sup> Toward an understanding of this unity, Françoise Dastur writes: “This unitary phenomenon, however, is not an *arkhé*, or an origin, that would enjoy the simplicity and uniqueness of an ultimate structural element, a foundation in which the manifold would come to disappear. Far from being excluded, the multiplicity of items is, on the contrary, required by the structural unity of the being of Dasein and by the whole it represents, one which, as an articulated structural whole, cannot be “rent asunder” (20).

according to this argument, that would be essentially without concern. Even negations of ways of caring for beings belong to care. Positive Besorgen “ist nur möglich ebenso wie “Sorglosigkeit: und “Heiterkeit”, weil Dasein *ontologisch* verstanden Sorge ist” (SuZ 57). Put otherwise, there is no ontological place for being carefree: this would be a contradiction in terms. Ontology takes its license from the essential and general relationality of care. Joy in letting go of cares is but a secondary feature, only possible through a relationship to care. Heidegger insists on this point more than once, in surprisingly hyperbolic language. “Die transzendente “Allgemeinheit” des Phänomens der Sorge und aller fundamentalen Existenzialien hat andererseits jene Weite, durch die der Boden vorgegeben wird, auf dem sich *jede* ontisch-weltanschauliche Daseinsauslegung bewegt” (SuZ 200). Every ontical interpretation of Dasein is possible because of the transcendental universality of care. Care is not, in that case, an ontical interpretation. It is not subject anywhere we look, in the writing of *Being and Time* or elsewhere, to its own diminishment. Heidegger’s writing about “Sorge” therefore does not fall under one of the “Weisen des Besorgens” that he has begun to list. In this one instance and in this one mode, hermeneutic fundamental phenomenology, the preeminence of Besorgen is suspended, and care can be presented as the being of Dasein without the intervention of Dasein’s limitations. And yet, we might ask here about access to care, since care is evidently that which provides Dasein with access to itself. Who has access to care? Who could claim it as fundamental without tainting it with one of its derivatives, even if it is simply a tangential concern for an academic career, for attracting the attention of students, made much easier by appearing “Entschlossen”? Would it not be more appropriate to the task to admit that care would only be expressible or accessible for one who had become absolutely uncaring in every way, and thus that access to care itself would no longer be one of care’s minions, but an absolute lack of concern for basic structures, intentional

structures, even extremely weak versions of willing? These are not rhetorical questions, but provocations toward answers that I am not able to give.

For Heidegger's understanding of Dasein and the philosophical method that he develops in his lectures of the twenties and in *Being and Time*, any other relationship between unconcern and care as the being of Dasein would be disastrous. One cannot imagine a *Being and Time*, let alone any other philosophy, that held up, say, disinclination as a category of existence or even as the most fundamental way of an existent being. And yet, what shall we say is the source of the ontic omission, avoidance, loss or diminishment of "care" that Heidegger attributes to Dasein as it becomes *zerstreut* in deficient modes? What brings about this deficiency? That which gives Dasein structural integrity as a being is care, but why should its structure disintegrate in ontic involvement? To repeat something I said earlier, how can disintegration be structural? How should we understand the mysterious relationship between care and dissipation? Why should the one transcend and the other descend? Why should existent human beings be condemned to one deficient mode at a time? Or better put, why should we understand existence in this way, as the movement of a full, rich, and powerful abundance of possibility toward a reduced, weakened, and multiple diffusion into individual mesmerization?

It is somewhat premature to suggest this, nonetheless a glimpse of a transcendently universal uncaring may be revealing. It is not hard to imagine what a transcendental carelessness would do to the analytic of Dasein. If disinclination or disinterest were to govern its being, it would not be "in the world," in the way that Heidegger has indicated. It would not dwell in, make familiar, or seek to make permanent its bonds and doings with things, others, and systems of significance. The positive nature of its relations would not be at all assured. It would take the finitude its categories for granted—even the concept of category would not be an object of

concern. Concern itself would be an afterthought, the product of effort, a striving against the basic human dissipation. Instead of widening Husserl's intentional structure to include more facets of experience, say Heidegger had exchanged it. Say he had rejected the synthetic nature of "structure" instead of the intellectual nature of "intention." Could he have imagined a lack of concern as the source of the existent human's potential to close out concerns or to let go of concerns it had mysteriously held onto? If care were ad hoc, if it were ontic rather than ontological, it would be subject to its own history of coming and going. The structure of care could come and go if freedom from care were the being of Dasein. Dasein could let itself go, and when it did it would be most "itself." An essentially careless Dasein would first of all not be guaranteed to be concerned for itself, but might find its self-affection replaced by self-indifference or repulsion. If it sprang from an essential indifference to itself and selfhood in general, its Existentialia might be distraction, irony, a tendency toward disinterest, drifting, a preference for means over ends—the doing coming to appearance while the "wozu" faded, an aversion to theoretical intuition, and an apathy towards beings. It would not desire to construe its perception as the perception of beings that themselves are one and objects of desire. It would prefer what was never quite itself. In this regard Dasein would not be sure of ever "being there," where it is, insofar as the "there" would not be defined by the beings that it, in its care, made its own. With respect to its death, there would be no concealment. Death would be the ultimate expression of a carefree existence, so much that it would cease to define existence's extreme limit and appear as the foundation of everyday. Existing carefree translates to a familiarity with finitude—not just the finitude of a human lifetime, but of episodes within it. Instead of its "being" becoming a question for it, its potential to become not-itself, that is, its self-rejecting potential would become a question and its innermost and highest possibility, which would most

likely not be expressed in the structure of a question. The possibility to become another, based in an indifference or uncaring attitude to what one essentially “is,” would guide its involvements. Stages on life’s way would take on an importance that they do not have in Heidegger’s philosophy. “Friend” might become a formal indicator of its being in the carefree, to the extent that friend meant a non-deficient relationship mediated through dissimilarity. Plurality would thus enter ontology such that no fundament in a self could be claimed for it. It is true that for Heidegger existence is what the word says—it stands out of itself—and yet this standing out of itself is, as the being of existence, unchanging and unavoidable. Existence would also be able to stand out of *itself*, if the being of Dasein were free of care. That is to say, existence would not coincide with itself even so far as to be “ahead of itself,” for example. Possibility would be in existence. There would be “moments” in which Dasein was fully uncommitted, stone like, absolutely reserved. Where Angst is the mood that Heidegger claims corresponds to Dasein’s ultimate “care” for the world as a structural whole, since its object is everywhere and nowhere, the mood or disposition that would correspond to a Dasein who from time to time is free from itself—something that in Heidegger’s system is impossible—would be distraction, *Zerstreuung*. The “from time to time” that distraction would punctuate would not be “in time” but between “times,” and as such, with non-being permeating its core, this “being” would become difficult, if not impossible, for philosophy to encompass.

Such a being or not-quite being would present significant problems for thought, obviously a kind of monstrous figure that has no place in a discussion of Dasein. Nevertheless, this fantastic portrait opens a perspective on the choices Heidegger has made.

Why does Heidegger choose care as the being of Dasein?



## The Way to Care

“Schon vor sieben Jahren,” Heidegger says, lecturing in Marburg in 1925, “als ich diese Strukturen im Zusammenhang der Versuche untersuchte, auf die ontologischen Grundlagen der Augustinischen Anthropologie zu kommen, bin ich auf das Phänomen der Sorge gestoßen”

(Prolegomena zur Geschichte des Zeitbegriffs 418). It is not so much, however, Augustine’s understanding of this phenomenon, Heidegger goes on to explain, that led him to Sorge’s preeminence as the category of categories for Dasein, nor was it the well-known classical and biblical uses of the word “cura.” “Nachträglich,” later, after the fact, too late perhaps even, he stumbled onto one of Dasein’s auto-interpretations in which it understood itself as care.

“Nachträglich aber stieß ich auf eine Selbstausslegung des Daseins, in der es sich selbst als Sorge sieht” (418). He means of course the Hyginus fable that he later includes in §42 of *Being and Time*, in which a peculiar divinity named “cura” is responsible for the creation and continuing care of human being, named “homo” but in its being “care.” These two, Augustine’s anthropology and the cura fable, are the textual evidence Heidegger adduces for his belief that Sorge can replace and expand Husserl’s concept of intentionality until it covers all of human experience. The turn to Sorge was an important step in his critique of Husserl. Intentionality was “too fragmentary,” and moreover “a phenomenon only seen from the outside.” More important than its limited scope however was its misunderstanding of existence’s basic structure. With “intentionality” “das bloße Sichrichten-auf” is meant. The more originary, ontological formulation of this tendency that needs explaining and that Sorge explains is rather “die einheitliche Grundstruktur des Sich-vorweg-seins-im-sein-bei” (Prolegomena zur Geschichte des Zeitbegriffs 420). From the perspective of phenomenology, then, Sorge explains several features of human experience that intentionality does not. First, it presents the set of disparate experiences

as ultimately unified, though not in a transcendental consciousness or in an exclusively intellectual mode. Second, it presents this unity as articulated in a structure, and what's more, a fundamental one, one beyond which the philosopher cannot or need not go. It sets up an end toward which philosophizing can aim. Third, it corresponds to the most elemental figure of Dasein's being, the smallest set of relations by which Dasein can be identified, and that which, more importantly perhaps, looks forward to the identity between being and time. "Sich-vorweg-sein-im-sein-bei" presents the ontological condition of all Dasein's experience, which will later be interpreted as a temporal condition. Being ahead of itself in an ontic involvement, Dasein comes to itself belatedly, *nachträglich*—just as Heidegger shows us that he came to the understanding of *Sorge*. *Sorge* had him—*Sorge* made him!—and he was drawn along by its movement toward himself, the philosopher.

Given Heidegger's refusal of the term's history, it is perhaps not wise to implicate him in a longer tradition—one going back past the New Testament<sup>82</sup> and Seneca even, reaching at least to Plato's Socrates. If he bumped into care along his own trajectory, it is perhaps not important that Augustine's Neo-Platonism—which Heidegger elsewhere denigrates, while praising his Christian anthropology—has, perhaps, an antecedent in Plato. In the *Apology* Socrates describes his philosophical activities as attempts to persuade Athenians "ἐπιμελεῖσθαι τῆς ψυχῆς" to care for the soul, and not for their bodies (σωμάτων) or their possessions (χρημάτων) (*Apologia* 30a-b p.47). While elsewhere Heidegger is only too happy to return to Greek sources, the well-known association of care, ἐπιμέλεια or μέριμνα, with the one of the historically most originary acts of philosophizing is too obviously ontical for his purposes, and at the same time too

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<sup>82</sup> On the trajectory of care in Heidegger's Christian readings, see van Buren (van Buren 179).

metaphysical. Sorge is not the highest anthropic activity producing the highest value in a scheme of values moving toward virtue. Sorge cannot be found in the classroom, the agora, or the courts. It is certainly not the movement away from the physical toward a transcendent core, but names the structure of the transcendental *per se*. For this reason, it is not restricted to the philosophically minded. “Minding,” a possible way of saying Sorge in English, is not above all philosophical, but belongs to Dasein in general. This is just to say, for Heidegger, that Dasein in general is philosophical. Care is the principle of intelligibility not only for its involvements in the world but also for its primary involvement with itself, from which the question of being derives—as the question of its own being, care for its being, its being being care. Here a similarity between the structures of Socrates and Heidegger’s concerns catches our attention. As for Socrates, Sorge is for Heidegger that which allows philosophy to be the most natural or essential activity for *anthropos*. Philosophy participates in Dasein’s basic care-structure, as one of its modes of concern, and specifically as the concern for the self as that which cares. Caring cares for itself above all. The center point of the transcendental structure of Dasein’s existence is this auto-affection. It is not another who is “*vorweg-im-sein-bei*,” but “*sich selbst*.” The reflexive movement of Plato’s care for the soul, which is, no doubt, one’s soul caring for itself, carries over here. Heidegger’s philosophy might be called “care without soul” just as Brentano called his science “psychology without soul,” yet soul, for Plato—at least as he defined it later—was the reflexive movement of soul conversing with itself. No doubt, the difference between the two gestures is great. Heidegger the intentional structure of consciousness with the anxiety of coming late to a set of prior involvements and the *unheimliche* self-relation that results. And yet, philosophy still names the return to an already established structure and stands as the movement that connects (however “uncannily”) the self to its lost or dissipated self, the latter being

unoriginal and the former its origin, while philosophy is the backward movement from the latter to the former. One is urged not to merely exist in these involvements, but to understand them, radicalize them, draw them toward an “Umschlag” (*Anfangsgründe* 200) σῶμα and χρῆμα cannot be avoided, for Heidegger, as they can or should be for Socrates, Plato, and later the Stoics and Christians, but they can and should be “modified” (*SuZ* 62, 130) This is the difference philosophy makes. It springs from an innate power of human being, rooted in care, one that can be practiced not by a god but by an existent human being—by any and all who can speak. In this way, coming to know the basic nature of human being means not only doing philosophy but doing it “by nature,” and by doing it also discovering that philosophy awaits one at one’s core. This assessment is perhaps not fair to Socrates, even if it is an accurate description of Plato. As care is for Heidegger, memory is for Plato in the *Meno* and elsewhere. But there too, philosophy’s access to knowledge is not fully natural or innate. A certain violence against forgetting is needed for the soul to remember its innate knowledge. One reacts to this violence in the *Meno*. There are strains in the Socratic dialogues, too, in which the teacher does not simply believe philosophizing is available to everyone—not even to him. He does not bump into the dialectic or the question of epistemology—how we know what we know—by following his prescribed path. The task had been given him by the god, or so he claims in Plato’s *Apology*. Moreover, as Plato intuits, the problems of fifth century philosophizing were bequeathed to them by the previous generation, to which Plato makes a specific link in later dialogues such as the *Parmenides*. We philosophize, this seems to say, not because there is an innate capacity in anthropos for philosophizing, but rather because this *aner* Parmenides constructed this argument in this way. Even the persuasive speech with which Socrates claims to urge the youth around him “to care for the soul” is a kind of force enacted against them. It is not simply the release of

anthropic nature, not a transcendental but an empirical activity. This element of Socratic practice did not escape Kierkegaard, who praised Socrates continually in his dissertation for his irony. Irony named the non-philosophical modality of language that announced the absolute distance from the source of human angst. For all of the Idealism that shines through Kierkegaard's vocabulary, this unmediated negative that cannot be transcended continues to block the way. In addition to the irony with which he addressed ideas, for Socrates the force of philosophy belonged to pedagogy and the artificial involvements of the agora where he taught, not to mention the struggle over the future of a city whose political fortune hung very much in the balance at the turn of the fourth century. Much depended on the next generation of educated aristocrats.

With this in mind it is interesting that Heidegger should admit that he “bumped into” the phenomenon of care, as if it was before anything else an existential phenomenon and not a loaded technical term in metaphysics, one that, above all, drew into question the ontic-ontological relationship, the relationship between a philosopher and the capacity for philosophizing. Heidegger's admission is a highly rhetorical moment in the 1925 lectures, *Prolegomena zur Geschichte des Zeitbegriffs*. He has introduced the care-structure as the final foundation of Dasein, associated it with the retrospectively proleptic temporality, and extolled its virtue for being able to explain every “vor” – “Vorhabe,” “Vorsicht,” “Vorgriff” – in Dasein's make-up, all the ways in which Dasein is already in the world as active interpreter and

participant in its structures.<sup>83</sup> Care names something outside the history of philosophy, at the innermost point of existence. Just as “das Dasein im Sichaussprechen immer schon aus einer vorgegebenen Ausgelegtheit spricht und notwendig aus ihr heraus spricht” so cura must lie in Dasein’s unmediated relationship to itself, unmediated by anything other than its own movement of self-interpretation. Care names Dasein’s final self-interpretation as a being that gets involved. It identifies the being that projects its world, at the same time making it intelligible as a projection. At once, this puts care above and beyond the merely interpreted. It is not part of an interpretation, a projection, or a historically delimited understanding, but the ahistorical, non-hermeneutic basis for interpretation. This is why Heidegger, although he mentions philosophical sources, prefers the image of care standing before him as he unwittingly collides with it. Rather than admit that it is, like phenomenology, the product of intellectual-historical work, thinking, or even imaginative creation, without caring, the philosopher encounters the source of human being in care. The encounter is accidental and necessary. It is ontically accidental, insofar as, since in care the self is displaced from itself, it moves in ignorance of care. It is ontologically necessary insofar as, since care is its self-interpretation, the philosopher who traces Dasein’s self-interpreting movement will undoubtedly come across this word or concept, movement or structure that transcends each and every concrete interpretation but makes them all possible. It came before him—it is the self-identical ground of being-ahead-of-himself in which the philosopher is caught.

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<sup>83</sup> A thorough explication of the temporality of care, as well as the central role care has in determining Heidegger’s notion of temporality in Division Two of *Sein und Zeit*, see Dastur (28-38).

### **Cura and Saturnus**

Let us look into the scene of this chance collision between the philosopher and Sorge. There were in fact two Stoßungen or bumps. One happens in lectures on Augustine from 1921-22, one while reading a genealogical creation myth from imperial Rome, made popular much later in a poem by Herder and by Goethe in Part Two of Faust.

What came to be known as *Fabularum Liber* contains a compendium of highly abbreviated myths drawn from a multitude of sources from the classical past and was widely consulted by authors in imperial Rome. Unfortunately, the text is also regarded as faulty in numerous respects. Between the text's first formulation, its *primum fictum*, and the current version too much has been corrupted. According to a review of the latest published edition of the text, it derives from an original work entitled *Geneologiae*, which by ancient and modern reports was in fact written by a freedman of Augustus named Gaius Julius Hyginus and was used by authors as illustrious as Ovid. The extant text frustrates scholars because of its obvious crudeness, lack of style, abundant errors, and simplifying of more complex stories. For these reasons, it is assumed that the manuscript that forms the basis for the one modern edition is not the book Hyginus wrote. In addition, the manuscript of these problematic fables was itself notoriously difficult to read and was promptly dismantled after the *editio princeps* was made from it in 1535. This edition and two small fragments of the manuscript form the basis of the modern version (Major).

None of this is particularly damning for Heidegger's inclusion of fable number 220 in §42 of *Being and Time*. But the status of the text might begin to put his contentions about its power to illuminate Dasein in a different light. "Das im Dasein selbst liegende

Seinsverständnis,” in this very fable, “spricht sich vorontologisch aus” (SuZ 197). The interpretation of being that lies already in existent human being enunciates itself pre-ontologically in this exemplary fable. But when does this *already* take place? With Hyginus, to whom the fable is attributed? With Herder or Goethe, who also find their names printed there? Or with the mysterious, possibly Christianizing forces of preservation that protected and surely affected the text over fifteen hundred years. That scribes and clerics preserved the fable in whatever form, despite the vicissitudes of transmission, shows, Heidegger might say, its ontological preeminence.<sup>84</sup> And yet this fable is one of two hundred seventy-seven fables preserved in the *editio princeps*, each of which participates in the attempt to write a universal genealogy of all that existed. Along the way, more than one provide a genesis *hominorum*. Deucalion and Pyrrha, famous from Ovid’s retelling, appear in Hyginus’s version. After the destruction of the age of man by flood, they find themselves bereft of companions; they are the last humans, charged by the gods with living on. This proves too difficult to do alone, and they

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<sup>84</sup> Drew Hyland registers some doubt about this reasoning when he examines Heidegger’s “ambivalence” toward the myth in §42 (93). What Hyland argues on the basis of this, however, is hard to support. He suggests that Heidegger finds the myth of cura pre-ontological “precisely **because** it is a myth [his emphasis]” (94); however, it is not only “myths” that Heidegger adduces as pre-ontological testimony to ontological truths. Poems are another example. In *Being and Time* C. F. Meyer’s “der römische Brunnen” operates in this way. Gerede does also. The ontic is in fact full of half-understandings of the being of beings, and this makes sense, since existence is interpretation through and through. There is no reason for Heidegger to be skeptical of myth in particular; moreover, to be “pre-ontological” is no slur.



beg Jove either to give them companions or to destroy them as well. Humanity comes into being in this fable not as an individual human, not even as the result of an activity of formation, let alone one that unites mud (*lutum*) with spirit (*spiritum*), but rather out of a need for companionship, and mysteriously, through the medium of stone. Nothing is said in the corrupted Hyginus version about the meaning of the derivation of humanity from stones, nor the impatience of the first humans, for whom sexual reproduction was somehow too slow or troublesome. In Ovid, however, because of this humans are *gens dura*, a hard family, made to endure *experientia laboris* a trial of toil. One could see in this a genealogy conducive to Roman stoicism; one might even relate this origin negatively to the phenomenon of care, worry, or anxiety. And yet the basic attitude of these stony humans is not to care, to resist attachment, to be with as an exteriority. The trial of labor is not co-constitutive of their being. On the contrary, *homo* is made to resist all toil and suffering, to ignore business with things, products, profits, and property, and, as with everything in Ovid, to love one another.

In the Hyginus genealogy, the plasticity of the stuff of creation is emphasized. Cura picks up the clay-filled mud, already made pliable by the river she is crossing. In the fable, humanity's formability is the telluric quality that allows Cura to make it her own. While crossing the river she stops to lift up (*tollo*) the formable earth, she cogitates (*cogitabunda*). "And she lifted it up while thinking (*sustullitque cogitabunda*) and began to form it" (SuZ 197). A strange stupidity hangs about Cura in Hyginus' fable. Heidegger leaves this out of his reading. Once she has formed the clay that will become human, she is incapable of determining what exactly she has formed. Jove "intervenes," Cura begs him to give the clay form spirit, and he does this easily. But he forbids Cura to give it her name. The two argue. Tellus, the earth god, rises up and claims the body, Jove claims the spirit, and Saturn judges (*iudicat*). Jove will receive the spirit and

Tellus the body after death, while during life the being will belong to Cura. Since the name is controversial, he decides to name the being *homo*, after the matter out of which it is made.

Heidegger's interpretation of the fable is very brief. The special meaning ["besondere Bedeutung"] that the fable has as a pre-ontological testimonial ["vorontologische[s] Zeugnis"] about care lies in a double revelation. Not does human existence belong to Sorge during its lifetime, Sorge is the special deity of the unhappy and temporary union between spirit and mud. For this reason, the name *homo* is misleading: it names the substrate of human being, that out of which it is made, but not its being or essence that is much more than this. Finally, Heidegger identifies Saturn with "Zeit," and indicates the close bond between care and the "zeitliche[] Wandel in der Welt" (SuZ 198-9). In short, to belong to care means to be detained in an uneasy union of mud and breath, death and life, pulled in two directions by the god of the sky and the god of the earth for a limited span of time before ultimate dissolution, and, to have the whole, tense internal relationship covered over by a name that misrepresents and neutralizes it.

The fable brings to the fore, for Heidegger, the ontological or original meaning of care, as opposed to the ontic meanings that merely derive from it. In the next paragraph he goes on to name a few of these—"ängstliche Bemühung," "Sorgfalt," "Hingabe"—and he attributes them to historical sources, Seneca above all. And yet, Heidegger's ontological reading omits at least two details, which, although they do not decisively refute his interpretation, they at least suggest certain ontic commitments that lie behind his lack of "Sorgfalt."

To repeat: there is something remarkably offhand or even slightly stupid about Cura's behavior. Her picking up the malleable mud is contingent on her crossing the river and it coming into her line of sight. What's more, it is no natural outpouring of her essence that leads to its creation. It is *fictum*—made, fashioned. Yet it is more than simply artificial or an intellectual

product; it is an intellectual product of a certain kind. “sustulitque cogitabunda atque coepit fingere.” Only when she had raised it up and became absorbed in thought, wrapped up in thinking, did she begin to fashion it. Out of this absorption in thought, and which was not a mindful attention to what she would create, not an intention to create this or that being, does the form arise. This is evident in the results of her cogitation. Her thinking fashioning, the absorption in thought out of which her absentminded fashioning activity springs, brings her little understanding after the fact about what she has made. Now, *iam*, she tries to engage in careful thought, *deliberat*, considering and trying to resolve the question of what, *quid*, in fact she has made, *fecisset*. It is not as though she has made the thing in her own image—far from it. Jove intervenes, *intervenit*, between her and her inscrutable product.

From this it becomes apparent that whatever *Cura* in fact means here in this adulterated entry in a suspicious compendium, and Heidegger does not inquire, assuming that the Roman imperial sense would match Augustine’s—beyond the ceremonial deposit of *homo* into the care of care for the duration of its lifetime, *Cura* behaves in the most carefree manner. If anything, what is soon named *homo* is born haphazardly, out of an almost thoughtless encounter, the thoughtlessness of which is indicated in the progress from absorption in thought to the deliberative question “what.” In the reconstruction of the lectures of 1928, Heidegger declares: “Nur ein freies Wesen kann unfrei sein” (Anfangsgründe 247). this is perhaps how we should understand carefree care as *Dasein*’s ultimate ground. Nothing determines this *fictum* or *fiction* at its outset, except perhaps the carelessness with which *Cura* strolls around the countryside. She has no cares, of course; she gives them all away to others. And so, even the name *Cura* does not suit this being, and this is what Jove may in fact recognize when he refuses *Cura* the right to name it. *Homo* may as well be named after its “out of which,” its material cause, because the

name is, as Saturn correctly notes, *controversia*, disputed, or as the adjective says in its components, turned against one another. There are multiple claims to name this creature: Saturn might have even claimed it for his own, insofar as its internal controversy, its multiplicity and indeterminacy had to be judged by one who was not one of the creators. In this way the name *cura* is just as deceptive as the name *homo*. Where Heidegger wants to privilege the movement of concealment and revelation, the fable seems to offer a controversy between three—or four—forces, that any name would misrepresent. Why does Saturn then decide to name the being *homo*? He does give a reason: “quia videtur esse factus ex homo.” It is evident, *videtur*, that it has been produced, *factus*. Saturn judges that the being should be named for the stuff out of which it came together, artificially. Only the careless musings of care (who has no concern to spare for her own projects!), could endure the endless tension between earth and heaven, mud and spirit. It is also true, however, that the naming process also produces a displacement of the named; this is why the name appears in the dative, *homo*. The being is not earth, but *out of or derived from* earth, put together in a process of *figere*, fashioning, that indicates the more universal nature of the being as that which has been brought forth, operated on, having its essence in an irresolvable controversy springing perhaps from the lack of determinacy with which Cura made it.

This brings us to the other element that might raise doubts about the legitimacy of Heidegger’s interpretation: Saturn. This god might have held special significance for Hyginus, insofar as he had been a slave. At the Roman Saturnalia, which was celebrated continuously for as long as 900 years, from the early Republic down through the early Christian age, the social order—the order of *cura*, if you will, allied in the Roman social code with *pietas*, care for family, fatherland, the gods—was set on its head. A satirical king presided over the festival, slaves were

temporarily liberated, gifts were exchanged. During Augustus's reign the festival was cut from seven days to three, undoubtedly a part of his generally conservative plans to stabilize Roman society.<sup>85</sup> In any case, the choice of Saturn is not insignificant. One of the oldest Roman gods, he was assimilated to the Greek god Kronos only toward the end of the republic, when elaborate myths were invented to explain his migration from Greece to Rome. At no point, however, was he associated with *chronos*, time. This is Heidegger's interpolation. The mistaken association of the father of Zeus, Kronos, with the allegorical figure of time, Chronos, it must be said, was also made at times in Ancient Greece, though the myths about Kronos do not support the interpretation. Yet this misinterpretation does not seem to have been directed toward Saturn. Why does Heidegger, like Cura, want to impose his own name on this figure? His concern that Cura be the pre-ontological proof of Sorge's "transzendente "Allgemeinheit"," which the quotation marks here do little to camouflage, sets a name in place of the name with which existent homines of the epoch understood the figure. Saturn was not the god of time, but the god who inverted the regime of care, whose statue, bound during the year, was ritually set free at the inauguration of his annual festival. The unbinding of Saturn coincided with the release of the bonds of slavery, the dissolution of the *classes*, and the letting out of school classes.

A later concern seems to motivate fundamental ontology here, when it takes up the task of defining its own movement. In breaking free of determinate concerns, worries, attachments and moving toward the care-structure of Dasein, it projects a concern for care that blinds it to care's lack of itself. Cura is free of itself, and out of this freedom of care, this thoughtful inattention, she fashions *homo*; yes humans are made care's wards during their lifetimes, but its

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<sup>85</sup> See Scheid (1361).

origin does not coincide with that. Care is imposed by a different god; Cura takes its own creation under its foster care, to protect it from its fundamental insouciance.

### **Augustinian Zerstreung**

Even earlier, Heidegger bumped into “cura” in Augustine. “Seven years before” most likely refers to a 1918 reading of Augustine’s *Confessions*, in particular Book Ten, on which a set of notes survive that, in turn, were used by Heidegger to develop the lecture course on Augustine that he gave in Marburg in the summer of 1921. One of the notes reads: “Aus der *Zerstreung*. Und diese gründet gleicherweise in der Grundtendenz von timere und desiderare. Beides in der *Bekümmerung* um das *Weltliche*; und das ist das eigene irruere – defluere: herabgleiten, herabsinken, und zwar mit dem Sinn des Schlaffwerdens.” Thus in 1921 he makes the connection between *Zerstreung* and *Sorge*, here written as “*Bekümmerung*.” The modes of involvement here are just two, dread and desire, but the configuration of elements is the same as in *Being and Time*. *Zerstreung* is the basic tendency that unifies these two determinate involvements and proceeds from an ultimate ground in care for the worldly. Here he also gives what will become his standard interpretation of the general phenomenon of self-distributing care: “Im defluxus gebe ich mir und schaffe mir eine im bestimmten Sinne geschlossene Situation, die in sich selbst Möglichkeit trägt...” (*Phänomenologie* 250-1). A few points are worth emphasizing in these lines. First, Heidegger asserts that, according to his reading of Augustine, the proper incursion into worldliness is “to flow down, away,” “defluere.” What does flowing down mean? Being in a determinate situation as though asleep. The images here are hard to reconcile. Can one sleep in a determinate way? Why should flowing away from a point or down

from a height lead to determination? Second, the determinateness of the situation carries possibility. How does closed determination open to possibility? According to the formula of formal indication, closure here indicates openness elsewhere, insofar as “defluere” gestures back to an original possibility from which it draws its power. The flood narrows into finite distribution; and formal indication allows the closure to be read as the product of a reversible process or path. “Aus der *Zerstreuung*,” the phrase that begins this note, reinforces this interpretation. The phrase is either an exhortation or at the very least a signpost pointing toward a way out. “Out of *Zerstreuung*,” elliptical as the phrase may be, is a conclusion that Heidegger draws from his previous note. “Certamen,” the note before begins. It is written in an intriguing mixture of Augustine’s Latin and Heidegger’s German—“Certamen: in multa defluximus. Hoffnungslos. – Also iubes continentiam” (*Phänomenologie* 250). What do Augustine and Heidegger say here? This much can be told with certainty: we spill down into a many. We, who are previously one, flow away from ourselves and into a bad multiplicity. What is the character of this one and this many? Of the one, little is said. Of the many, the only feature given is the certainty with which the philosopher knows that in it there is no other possibility. There is no question but that many is never more than one many. This is the key to formal indication and the signal of the immediate return of interpretive plentitude through what might be called the hermeneutic epoché. If there were already a plentitude of interpretations in existence, there would be no way to reduce it to a yet wider set. In other words, it is because existence is narrow that interpretation can be an act of widening. And because this existential certainty, the certainty of narrowness, is so great as to leave us no hope, here in Heidegger’s abbreviated summary of Augustine, God orders us to hold ourselves back from it. Holding back from narrowness, one negation following another, modifying the relation to the world such that it is *even more closed*,

closed, even, to the narrowness of the world, indicates a return to the apriori of closure. So much in Heidegger's "path" depends on this interpretation of this very move. Only so long as the no that the philosopher says to the no of the world means more instead of less, does the system function. If this way of proceeding derives, at least in part, from Augustine, it does not come out of his Platonism, but instead from his earlier Ciceronian stoicism. Augustine's *continentia* brings to mind less Pyrrhonian skepticism's *epoché* than stoicism's *ataraxia*, a contained waiting that is not a waiting for anything in particular, but rather a waiting through everything. For Heidegger's Augustine, the response to "defluere" is containment of the disintegrating self, at God's command. "Iubes certe, ut continenteam a concupiscentia carnis et concupiscentia oculorum et ambitione saeculi" (Bk X, Chap. XXX, p. 150). Where Augustine tells God that he has received the command to hold himself into himself, against concupiscence—which is just one result of defluere's motion—Heidegger, in contrast, hears in Augustine an imperative: "Aus der Zerstreung." Augustine performs his confession before a God who, he has already admitted to his readers, knows what he is going to say in advance. Heidegger, conversely, takes Augustine's statement as a clue to the phenomenological structure of worldliness. His speech is no perlocutionary act. He does not bring about in saying what beforehand was not the case. One cannot forget the status of this book's structure of address when trying to understand Augustine's statements. It has the structure of a plea or a prayer that asks, before anything else, for the effectiveness of its own language. The long discursus on memory in Book Ten is nothing if not an attempt to ground the speaker's very ability to confess. If memory were not true, he would be confessing a lie, that is, not confessing at all. For this reason his inability to determine the status of "oblivio" is of the greatest importance.



Moreover, the Augustinian version is vertical and not easily flattened out. The “de-” of *defluxus* is not the “zer-” of *Zerstreuung*. Although in other places, such as for instance in the Leibniz lectures where Heidegger celebrates the horizontal and not vertical movement implied in the prefix “trans-,” such that transcendental can come to mean simply moving past a being, here Heidegger elides the difference between spilling down and spreading out. And he clips the citation. He writes of the capacity for *continentia*, which comes of course from God alone. “*nemo potest esse continens,*” no one is able to hold himself, “*nisi deus det,*” unless God gives it, “*et hoc ipsum erat sapientiae, scire cuius esset hoc donum,*” and this very thing was wisdom, to know whose gift it was. Wisdom, that which Augustine wants to substitute for natural philosophy or instrumental rhetoric, means not just continence but also knowing the source of the gift of continence. The all important first step to this, however, is to know as a fact that “*a quo in multa defluximus,*” (Bk. X, Chap. XXIX, p. 150). Why in his citation does he leave out “*a quo*”? Why should it become necessary to avoid this qualification of Augustine’s, that is at the same time a logical part of “*defluxere.*” In no way does Heidegger attempt in his later lectures and writings to disguise the provenance of these thoughts in Christian theology. On the contrary, he takes up the theological quite directly. Here he carefully weeds theology out from what he then in retrospect calls “Augustinian anthropology,” the only dimension he considers insightful about the nature of existence. And yet, the question to ask would be: is anyone deft enough in their handling of these thoughts to disconnect them thoroughly from the armature of theology? Is *defluxere* without “*a quo*” conceivable? At the very least the conception is not spelled out here. Not only does the verb “*defluximus*” in Augustine only make sense if it is contrasted to a flow-less point, but it assumes that this point lends *defluxere* its meaning. The tension between concupiscence and *continentia* that follows the dispersion into multiplicity makes constant

reference to a position beyond them both. How could the command “aus der Zerstreuung” issue from within that tension? How can one choose between them if there is no position from which to decide? The direction of flow, down, the command to attain one worldly possibility, continence, the image of an origin in the one, God, as a consequence of which (and only as a consequence of which) “not-one” can properly be understood as many, that is to say, as a plurality of ones or units—these features of the image of *defluere* seem difficult to avoid. One might not be able to crop God out of the image so simply. Heidegger, who had rejected Catholicism and then the Christianity altogether by the early 20s wants nevertheless to salvage theological insights about existence while leaving their place in a theological or theocratic structure behind.<sup>86</sup> In Augustine, to repeat, these insights only make sense with reference to two things: theocracy—the origin of all capacities in God’s infinite capacity—and Augustine’s own experience of his existence. *Aus der Zerstreuung* Heidegger draws a conclusion that Augustine could only draw once he himself had converted, once he had rejected Manichaeism, refused rhetoric in a certain way, and redefined his involvement in the world through God and the Church. These seem like obvious observations, and yet the fact that Augustine’s anthropology is the product of a singular *anthropos*, in a text that demonstrates just as intensely the struggle over generalizing this experience as it does the triumph of its universality, makes the acceptance of these features as universal facets of experience questionable. It is not only God that Heidegger

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<sup>86</sup> To follow the changing role of Christianity in Heidegger’s early thinking, see Capelle . Capelle argues that although the final break with Christianity was a result of the discovery of “formal indication,” after which “faith” became unnecessary (364). Nonetheless, he maintains, Heidegger’s occupation with Christian themes continues beyond this point.

has to erase, in other words, it is Augustine himself, who made turned to confess his trials and who attempts to organize existence in order to present it as universal. The *Confessions* are the attempt to universalize and not the universalization itself. The statement “you commanded me” is generalizable, it’s true—this is critical for the Catholic enterprise. Any single conversion or intercourse with God can come to represent an equivalent relationship for others, just as any sin can be exemplary for others. Yet this fundamentally personal structure is central to Augustine’s image of worldliness and his attitude toward it. His history as a fallen or falling man determines his reflections here, a fact about which he is always candid. Continentia, concupiscentia—these are not universal structural elements, but conclusions drawn from memories of his lifetime. In other words, what Heidegger takes as an opportunity to adopt elements to a philosophical system, what he sees as part of a transcendental existential structure, are in fact elements of a confession. Augustine puts on display a conversation with God in which the universality of his experiences is not taken for granted, but is, rather, to be decided. “numquid non temptatio est vita humana super terram sine ullo interstitio?” (Bk X, Chap. XXVIII, p. 148). “Is not human life upon the earth trial without respite?” What is said is indeed similar to Heidegger’s existential structure, but how it is said is vastly different. One hears a plaintive, at times demanding, at times wheedling, and at other times desperate voice trying again and again to ascertain the meaning of his experience and his powers to recapitulate it. Instead of asking a question of God and receiving in return silence, Heidegger presents the question as the rhetorical kernel of method, the route from concupiscentia to continentia, bypassing God, but also bypassing the ordeal of asking, again, about this method. For Augustine, confession does not produce wisdom about a structure that can be passed without further trial. The *Confessions* testify to the ongoing nature of the trial. They themselves are afflicted with worldliness, and make up something like a

set of *Zerstreungen*. “In multa defluximus” the *Confessions* seem to say, and confessions partake of this movement as well.

In the 1921 lectures on Confessions X, Heidegger acknowledges that the form of the book, “die Darstellung,” relates directly to its argument. Augustine proceeds “im fort- und überschreitenden Aufstieg.” With the transgressive movement of the text in mind, Heidegger prefaces his analysis of the central theme of Book X, *memoria*, with this warning to students: “Bei Augustine selbst hat gerade die “Unordnung” einen bestimmten Ausdruckssinn, das immer neu Aufschließen von “Gehalten” und Vollzugsrätseln. (Was Augustin an konkreten Phänomenen beibringt, rein inhaltlich, und vor allem *wie* er die Phänomene expliziert, in welchen Grundzusammenhängen und –bestimmungen... sprengt den Rahmen und die Struktur des üblichen Begriffes.)” (Phänomenologie 182). What customary concept has its frame and structure exploded in the *wie* of Augustine’s teaching? The frame and structure of a “concrete phenomenon.” No concrete phenomenon is itself or stays itself for long in the disorder of Augustine’s presentation. They lose themselves in the repeated opening up of contents and paradoxes of incompleteness. Again Heidegger insists, however—out of a pedagogical assumption that differs deeply from Augustine’s—that the textual disorder expresses itself in one determinate way. Its “Ausdruckssinn,” a seeming neologism, is bestimmt. Not only does it express something—which is not at all necessary—but it expresses a “meaning” or “sense.” The sense conveyed by taking the disorder as an expression is the following: there will always be new contents to experience and new puzzles about its incompleteness. If the first changes, the “Gehalt” of existence, there will be no change to the structure of existence. This would correspond to the unbounded set of involvements in the world, the *Besorgen* in which *Sorge* each time anew dissimulates itself. And the puzzles that surround fulfillment of these involvements

would most likely belong to the realm of *Zuhandenheit*. When these effects are applied, however, to Augustine's text itself, it explodes the structure of the common concept of phenomenon. It is no longer just a phenomenon, contained within itself, made sensible by its structure and frame, but rather, in becoming susceptible to the phenomenality of what it confesses, the confession, as a worldly phenomenon, makes its phenomena *less* intelligible. The intelligibility of phenomena depends on the concept of phenomenon, and particularly on the "Üblichkeit" with which that concept is accepted. Insofar as the frame of understanding is shattered by the disorder of the text, the routine of accepting these as phenomena is interrupted. The text, in other words, in presenting the "defluxere" in disorder, makes it unintelligible as a claim about existence. Making claims about existence from within existence seems, in this light, to increase the vertigo of human life, not decrease it. For this reason continence is necessarily something imposed from without and inaccessible to the fluctuating confessor of the flow. Even confession does not coincide with continence, but doubles the flux.

To say this in another way, to run against the grain of Augustine's book and at the same time to disrespect its central assumption, the problem could be stated this way. Augustine imagines a conversation with God, and having projected a position outside of the world, can let himself go along with the world with a calm heart. To define the *vita humana* as defluxus allows for an even less orderly flow.

Memory names the less orderly flow, that is at the same time the repository of one's experience and thus proof of its possession, as well as the connection with God, and the source of these confessions. Memory is the conflictual locale of these relations. Moreover, the discussion of *memoria* in Book X and Heidegger's reading of it have a special relationship to the understanding of distraction. On one hand, Heidegger translates Augustine's "defluxere" as

“Zerstreuung.” Both thinkers are clearly concerned with what are considered lower or deficient attachments in the world and their source(s). For Heidegger, we know as well that the motion of *Zerstreuung* as a moving down into the world is also always an attachment to one thing, and in addition the attachment occurs as if one were asleep. All other possible attachments and the fact of attachment itself, just like the original movement toward world, *defluxere*, and the point from which *defluxus* departs, God—in Augustine—and being—in Heidegger—are forsaken in oblivion by this sleep. It is the power of memory, for Augustine, that overcomes the tendency to move down into and forget, and forgetting is the most dangerous aspect of concupiscence. Thus, the style or mode of the *Confessions* is important to recognize not only because it repeats the movement of *defluxus*, but also because it is an attempt, through memory, to seek an end to it, by going through these *defluxions* one more time.

There is a problem, however, that arises in Augustine’s treatment of memory. If memory is the antidote to *defluxion*, what is the status of forgetting, which Augustine cannot help but admit is also a human capacity. Human beings *can* forget. Where does this capacity reside? What is its relationship to memory? If God resides in memory or gives us the gift of memory as a permanent capacity, shall he have given us the gift of oblivion as well? Augustine may be on the verge of another Manichaeism here. The impasse that he comes to and the reading Heidegger gives of it tell us much about the correlation between a sourceless, negative faculty afflicting mind and a *defluxus* that any attempt to confess, let alone escape, repeats with even greater intensity.<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>87</sup> There isn’t space to go into this here, but I will outline a few of the aspects of Augustine’s theory of memory, with the corresponding inquiry into forgetting, that turn his text into a

## Refusing Care

Sorge is the foundation of all Dasein's involvements as well as the source of its ability to recognize that it is *merely* involved in one or another mode of Besorgen. How can it be both the source of worried attachments and the release from them? Could there not be another ground-figure of Dasein that accounts for this tendency toward release? Before and even in *Being and Time* the answer is decidedly no. In a series of lectures from the previous year, *Einführung in die phänomenologische Forschung*, Heidegger enumerates "was in der Sorge steht":

1. Eine bestimmte Sorge hat die Eigentümlichkeit, das, um welches sie geht, zu *erschließen* und in das Dasein zu bringen; 2. das Erschlossene dergestalt, wie es da ist, konkret zu *explizieren*; 3. das explizit Ausgebildete in einer bestimmten Weise zu *behalten*; 4. dem Behaltene*n sich zu verschreiben*, d.h. bestimmte Grundsätze daraus für das Besorgte anderer Sorgen normative zu machen; 5. das *Sichverlieren*: das, was in der Sorge steht, so unbedingt anzusetzen, daß von ihm aus jegliche Sorge grundsätzlich motiviert ist.

(Einführung 61)

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confession of memory's receding ground. Although he goes to great lengths to prove, by deduction, that forgetting must also be a memorable activity, he throws up his hands in the end. "cum autem adesset, quomodo imaginem suam in memoriam conscribebat, quando id etiam, quod iam notatum invenit, praesentia sua delet oblivio?" (Bk. X, Chap. XVI, p. 120). Forgetting, the place or state out of which memories arise, cannot be brought to mind, and in being consigned to oblivion itself, draws certainty and stability away from the powers of memory.

Care is in effect when Dasein closes itself within one mode of caring. It reinforces this closure by explaining itself concretely to itself (being explained makes it “explicit”). Following this, it preserves this determinate Besorgen, and, equipped with its rationalizing explanation, limits itself to what it has preserved. Finally, it makes the entire configuration as the norm for all other cares, and in doing so, loses itself. When it places this concern at the source of all its motivations it fails to see the general “cura” to which it has been entrusted. Loss of self does not mean that the self loses its way in the world, but rather that the self finds itself by identifying itself with this closure. This articulation of care has the power to do two things. First, it naturalizes the lack of unity between fields of Besorgen. It has the potential to explain class struggle, and perhaps even the failure of certain Marxist ideas, generation gaps, the failure of group psychology to explain mass culture, the limits of cultural anthropology, history, and so forth. Why can it claim such powers? Insofar as care tends toward determination, explanation, and normativity, it provides a recipe for understanding misunderstanding as that which occurs between determinate modes of Besorgen. By positing as essential and irresistible the impulse to determine an involvement and to build a world around it, it offers a transcending view of the incompatibility of involvements between themselves. Husserl’s natural attitude becomes here a nearly automatic process of reduction, closure, and resistance to disturbances that reifies ideologies in defense of its exclusivity. Where, we ask timidly, might the philosopher’s commitment lie when he enunciates this list? In which Erschließung, toward what explanandum, held by and proscribed in what possibility? This is the question to be put to Heidegger. It is the question Derrida puts to him with respect to *Geschlecht*. One cannot ignore the this-ness or the there-ness of this Dasein, made concrete in writing. What is this writing’s commitment to



exposing the nature of commitment? It is also the question that moves the structure toward its dissolution. As I hope I've indicated, following Derrida, exposing the philosopher's commitment to care as his very singular worry, hinting that his involvement with Sorge is itself a result of Besorgen arising from his commitment to Augustine and a certain reading of Hyginus's fable, but doubtless also exposing the "da" of this thought that consists in his move away from Christian doctrine and theology, as well as—perhaps—unthinking absorption in popular themes of the day, does not seek to invalidate the interpretation of Dasein as care, but rather to defundamentalize it, if I can use this ungainly term. The hint that Sorge is here by Heidegger besorgt, an existent, lecturing, teaching, wishing, reading, and committed philosopher, buffeted by the Hang und Drang of his Da, draws care into the Wirbel of Dasein's world. How could it "be" otherwise? How could it otherwise be "said"? And this involvement in the cataract of existence fundamentally alters its explanatory or interpretive power. If care is tainted in the least bit by concern, Zerstreung can no longer be confined to one side of the ontological difference (the "difference" of course cannot be imagined like this, as a spatial divide; and yet, we must have the ability to say definitively what is ontic and what is not, even if the difference be merely one of interpretation. This ability to say, and by saying to determine the difference, has determined, in turn, the understanding of Zerstreung and its placement "on the side" of the ontic).

For how could the philosopher give up his ontic commitments and "bump into" the root of all commitments? Would the collision be ontic or ontological? It cannot be ontic, if care is the interpretation of all interpretations. Among the modes of Besorgen, Sorge is nothing and nowhere. It cannot be ontological, at least not purely or precisely, because it is nothing more than the structure or unity of ontic involvements. To encounter care is to come into contact with the

entire configuration of Dasein's concerns. In this respect *Being and Time* can be thought of as a fuller description of Heidegger's encounter with care. And yet, according to the book's own reasoning, what existent being would have access to the condition of possibility of any and all involvements? Would we not have to look for the most uninvolved, uncommitted being, the one that is not with beings but closest to care (the most insouciant, lighthearted divinity), and thus not ahead of itself enclosed in an interpretation but rather one who sheds all projection until it bumps into the source of projecting, the one that, abandoned by world and beings, is nowhere and not even alone—since there are no others from which it could distinguish itself. His description is apt: one can only “bump into” care, since concern for it would push it further away. And yet, this manner of speaking is not in accord with the “thing itself.” Only by speaking in an unconcerned manner—by speaking of “whatever”—can one possibly address care, since it can neither be “erschlossen” in a concern, nor belong to a concrete explanation that preserves it and generalizes it. Would this mean, then, that the “analytic” could not be written? Could one not reproach Heidegger with a modified version of Kierkegaard's gibe at Hegel? If Heidegger exists, the analytic cannot be trusted...

If the one who seeks *Sorge*, and not a determinate ontic commitment, has to be wholly uncommitted and unclosed, *Sorge* itself should appear, from the perspective of the thinker, as a contentless, free-moving, motivation-less, uncommitted, abnormal non-thing that permits no one to become committed to it or to make it a norm for thought or behavior. *Sorge* refuses interest. As the universal of all commitments it can only be that which allows them to depart from themselves, to become unconcerned. To the extent that Dasein is completely within its cares, to the extent that human life is trial without respite, care would be absolutely uncaring. And yet, the costs of the care's utter withdrawal from the reach of concern would be great for philosophy. As

care removes itself from any possible ontic involvement it removes itself from thinking and writing. This leads to a potentially devastating situation. The question, as that which, rooted in Dasein's being, brings it face to face with its own structure, both must and cannot achieve a view of care, and thus care both must and cannot be the structural essence of Dasein. Insofar as it itself is a function of care, Dasein cannot ever bring care into its concerned attention, even for the purposes of saying that its involvement in world is always concerned involvement. To make this claim it must take care into account, and yet it is only able to do this by *scrupulously dropping all concern*. As Heidegger lays it out in *Being and Time*, human beings in the world cannot even begin to make a claim on care. It cannot become an object of theoretical scrutiny, nor can it become part of a service relay, a system of use or a complex of significance, that is, an element or end of *Zuhandenheit*. In each of these modes care is already reduced, determined, and reduces and determines Dasein's self-understanding in turn. The most extreme conclusion that can be drawn from this situation is the following. If care means what Heidegger claims it means, if it is the ontologically earliest element of Dasein's structure, unity of the ontic disunity that existent human beings endure without reprieve, if it is the temporal and intentional being-ahead-of-itself in or with others, beings, contexts, world, it cannot be ontologically committed to these things. Dasein's most extreme possibility, then, might be better described not as care but as carelessness, which not only makes its ironclad tendency toward factual involvement intelligible, but also makes each individual involvement inessential and disconnected from others, each one a misinterpretation with a source—if one can call it that—in a disaffected, intractable, and disaffected condition. This is a step that Heidegger does not take in *Being and Time* or in lecture courses of the twenties, and yet it is a conclusion that seems warranted. Care is unconcerned with itself, that is, it has its condition of possibility in a non-intentional, unattached, willless lack of

direction, which, because of this, eludes the “phänomenologischen Blick.” Being-ahead-of-itself-in-being-with, the figure at the font of Dasein’s being as intentional (or “caring” and temporal), would have its origin, in turn, in being-away, not-dwelling or inhabiting, wandering without respite, a “transcendental homelessness,” as Heidegger puts it elsewhere, though ruefully. Yet this could also not be an “origin” in any recognizable sense, but rather a breakdown of the transcendental structure. The greatest human potential would then not be becoming attached, closing off, inventing ideologies, and so forth. Instead, it would be the potential to become impotent and disaffected from any concern, that arose from the intervention of something like “distraction,” the meaning of *Zerstreuung* to which Heidegger’s concerned interpretation of Dasein has closed itself off. Far from being the problem that hermeneutic phenomenology might solve through a fundamental interpretation of *Denken*, it is, viewed in this way, rather an origin that is impossible to come to terms with, because it is something like a repetitive, empirical dispersal of Dasein’s transcendental unity.

To sum up, the concern for care determines the meaning and operation of *Zerstreuung* in these texts. It determines it, moreover, through the total determination that it exercises over existence. Human existence is so totally given over to care such that it is in life distributed into particular concerns without respite. The totality of care’s reign, in turn, makes for the power of fundamental ontology. We saw, however, that insofar as care determines Dasein fully, care itself must be utterly carefree, capricious even, or whimsical. As Hyginus’s fable demonstrates, another divinity, a thundering, father-god commands it to take human being under its auspices for the duration of its lifetime, banning other types of dissolution to its death time, when it is given over to tellurian decomposition. We saw, furthermore, that gaining access to this ontical nothing would require an equally detached, careless disposition, and this disaffected affect is

concealed behind the very word that Heidegger uses to describe the ontological condition for human involvement.

### **Zerstreuung “and” Transcendence**

The Marburg lectures on Leibniz makes this concealment even more apparent. Here Dasein’s condition of possibility is no longer care that only subsequently “zerstreut sich” into a multitude of concerns. Instead, the condition of all conditions like care is now *Zerstreuung*. This makes sense. For, if *Zerstreuung* is the movement by which the condition of all ontic possibilities—care—is translated or carried over into those possibilities, *Zerstreuung*, in fact, names the movement of that possibility. As the movement of possibility that allows conditions to condition, it must come before care in the transcendental sequence of conditions. Because of this line of thought, *Zerstreuung* will be directly associated in the lectures with the ontological difference. It becomes the necessary condition of transcendence itself, a freedom that underlies the necessity with which Dasein moves between possibilities and commitments. As the inner possibility of translation from one way or interpretation of its being to another, *Zerstreuung* names Dasein’s ground as well as its access to ground. As a word, it takes on an uncomfortably large burden.

*Zerstreuung* supplants care as Dasein’s ultimate origin, an original “*Streuung*,” as Heidegger calls it, in which the ontological difference repeatedly renews itself. How far we have come from absentmindedness with this interpretation! Instead of naming an empirical nothing that intervenes in noesis and all purposive activity, it now evokes an ontological fundament unshakeable in its ability to produce monolithic, self-differing existence. For a short time in 1928, *Zerstreuung* becomes the ontological term in which all other terms are rooted. What can

we make of the oxymoronic phrase “rooted in dispersal”? Such Heideggerian phrases have often been taken to mean that no matter what the powers of human intelligence, existence’s vicissitudes will always exceed it. From another perspective, however, as I try to suggest, one notes an insistence on dispersion that does not comport with the diminishment and disassociation that the word tries to communicate. Dispersion never becomes diffuse, Dasein never finds itself less “in-the-world.” Such a doctrine had distinct advantages and continues to have them. It demands a return to existence and insists that human existence means nothing more than this excursion and return. Existence’s transcendental structure, however, remains resistant to diminishment—to wearing away—and for this reason *Zerstreuung*, its movement, never contaminates itself. As the source of Dasein’s *Auseinandersetzung mit sich selbst*, its uncanniness and angst, it never tips over into its contrary. And, although it escapes the notice of the committed, existent human being (and is therefore the ontological corollary to ontic “*Absehen*” or diversion: I look away from possibility toward my actuality), it is never ontologically absent, never absentmindedly strays from its dispersing course.

Heidegger substantiates his claim for the transcendence of *Zerstreuung* with a transcendental argument. Where *Being and Time* had closed itself off from the question of the relationship between *Besorgen* and *Sorge*, in the middle of the Leibniz lectures Heidegger turns directly to this question. If care is the structural unity of existence, and as such the condition of possibility of any single worldly concern, what is the condition of possibility of them both, of their very relationship? Why and how does “care” operate beyond every concern and yet constitute the condition of possibility of any commitment as well as the phenomenological gaze

that by means of it reorients itself toward the whole? Heidegger asks, in short, into the nature of transcendence and into the grounds of transcendental philosophy.<sup>88</sup>

For “fundamental ontology” to function, transcendence both must and cannot be transcendental; *Zerstreuung* enters into this dilemma in order to try to resolve it. It is much easier to explain why transcendence must be transcendental than it is to explain why it cannot be. If transcendence itself is a transcendental—concept, movement, actuality—it remains coherent and dependable, despite the instability and blindness of the existence it produces. Existence’s instability, in point of fact, is made intelligible and sayable by *Zerstreuung*’s transcendence. It confirms Augustine’s question by lending the trial of life the ceaselessness and fullness that makes it “trial without respite.” If, as Heidegger argues, what transcends is world, and world is transcendence such that whatever the configuration of world and its meanings and whatever their duration, transcendence—as the transcendence of existence—remains unchanged, existence will always... exist. This is the central cogitandum of existential philosophy: how this always could be justified from within existence. Two terms, *Geworfenheit* and *Transzendenz*, must be kept rigorously apart and yet their connection must be articulable for fundamental ontology to function. *Geworfenheit* and *Transzendenz*, bound and opposed, also go by the names *Sein und Zeit*, about which Heidegger makes the comment: “*Sein* wird verstanden aus einem *Zeit*bezug,

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<sup>88</sup> A valuable exploration of the role of medieval “transcendence” and the Kantian and Husserlian “Transcendental” in early texts and lectures is included in Daniel Dahlstrom’s analysis of Heidegger’s repudiation of them in his later work . For a discussion of the difference in Husserlian transcendence (in opposition to immanence), see Jacques Taminiaux, *Heidegger and the Project of Fundamental Ontology* (9-10).

aber das Problem dieses Bezuges von Sein und Zeit ist das “und”” (Anfangsgründe 182). In light of this attempt to clarify the relationship between being and time, thrownness and transcendence, and ultimately also existence and philosophy, I will try to present Heidegger’s play with “Zerstreuung” in the Leibniz lectures. At certain points it stands in for the “und” in *Sein und Zeit*, as their link and their condition—the transfer or translation that binds them, as the “a” of the a priori. Derrida attempts to perform a similar illumination in “Geschlecht I” by means of sex. Sex is the ontic power that contaminates Heidegger’s attempt to articulate the power of ontology as transcendental Zerstreuung. But it is also the deconstructive means toward an ontologically “prior” sexuality. Krell recognizes this motivation in the essay’s final lines: “He concludes... by reinvoking the hope that the “retreat of the dyad” in Heidegger’s strange treatment of sexuality will open the possibility of a more original, more positive, and more powerful sexuality” (348).

Despite Heidegger’s insistence on “transcendence,” anxiety about the grounds for the transcendental method fill the Leibniz lectures, as far as we can hear it in the somewhat questionable textual form in which we have them. It also spills over into the tone with which Heidegger addresses students; the text is full of exhortations and decrees that underline the urgency of these questions and also reveal the difficulty in answering them. In the second half of the lectures, in a complex set of arguments that only in part repeat arguments from *Being and Time*, the “Problem von *Sein und Zeit*” is brought to our attention. First I will give a brief summary of the trajectory of the lectures up to this point, and then I will turn to the problem of transcendence and the “and.”

A look at the afterlife of the thoughts first presented in this course shows how important they must have been for Heidegger at the time. The thought of “ground” developed will reappear in the important later essays “Der Satz vom Grund” and “Vom Wesen des Grundes.” Similar



reflections on freedom are taken up and developed in subsequent courses. What is not taken up again, however, at least to my knowledge, is Leibniz.<sup>89</sup> Why Leibniz here, just after the publication of *Being and Time*? Why turn to him to articulate ideas that he will later articulate, perhaps better, with reference to Kant, Hegel, Schelling, and Nietzsche, and then in the context of German poetry, but never again in Leibniz? Could this be because Leibniz's philosophy seems, on the surface at least, quite removed from the problems of *Sein und Zeit*?

In the brief prologue to the excerpt that Heidegger allows to be published in a Festschrift for Bultmann (1964) and later again in *Wegmarken* (1967), the turn to Leibniz is justified by his interpretation of being as substance ("Aus der Letzten Marburger Vorlesung" 79). With this in mind, the lectures could very well be understood as a branch of the *Suche nach dem Seinssinn* that, by exposing an influential misinterpretation of being, pointed beyond it to its hermeneutic structure. Leibniz's is the strongest modern interpretation of being as substance, and thus the site

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<sup>89</sup> In the first chapter of his book on the subject, Renato Cristin sketches out a genealogy of Heidegger's liberation of ground as a motif from and with Leibniz. He then goes on, in subsequent chapters, to follow Heidegger's reading of Leibniz up to and including "Der Satz vom Grund." His insight, that "the whole operation whereby Heidegger deconstructs the traditional meaning of the principle of sufficient reason is very similar to the phenomenological destruction of obviousness" (Cristin 10), steps beyond Heidegger's handling of Leibniz to locate a similarity in their operations. The strength of the book is the even-handedness with which Cristin presents Heidegger's reading of Leibniz and appraises Heidegger from the position of Leibniz's thought. His call for further study of the important interactions between the two bodies of thought has not, however, as far as I can tell, been heeded.

for a necessary destruction. For this reason the excerpt from the course that Heidegger first publishes in 1964 deals almost solely with the meaning of the monad and excises *Zerstreuung* and the problem of transcendence altogether. Much time could be spent explaining the grounds on which this very selective choice was made. Other parts of the course may have been omitted out of indebtedness to Bultmann, for whose phenomenological Christology a transcendental *Zerstreuung* would have, perhaps, been too threatening, or in order to weed out traces of obsolete thoughts, such as the name *Dasein* and the transcendence problem, aspects that the course of his thinking had wiped away. And yet it is not only *Zerstreuung* that fails to appear in the 1964 excerpt, but the thesis of the course itself: that logic is grounded in metaphysics, and both are grounded in “Grund” (whose relationship to itself is one of “dispersal”).

“The Metaphysical Foundations of Logic Beginning from Leibniz,” the course’s full title, makes no reference to the monad and the substance-ontology that it anchors; instead of his metaphysics, Leibniz’s logical thought appears, as that which is here to be sent back to its origins. And this is in fact what happens: along with the discussion of *Zerstreuung*, missing from the 1964 excerpt are the much more extensive treatment of philosophical logic and its position in philosophy. *Topoi* such as the structure of universal judgments, and, most importantly, the principle of sufficient reason, are addressed. It is the latter element of logic that leads directly from the treatment of Leibniz into the transcendence problem of *Being and Time*, carrying the course toward *Zerstreuung*. How are these seeming unrelated topics, the logical principle of all principles and the problem of transcendence, related?

“Why is there something rather than nothing?” is the question that unites Leibniz’s logic and Heidegger’s *Seinsfrage*. Through this question Heidegger demonstrates that the principle of sufficient reason, which constitutes Leibniz’s response—nothing is without reason—is not

simply a logical proposition and the form of predication, but is metaphysical, is, in fact, a formula for apriorism itself, which Leibniz's presentation of the principle both obfuscates and makes accessible for the first time. The metaphysical grounds of logic become accessible through Leibniz's formulation of the principle of sufficient reason.

To repeat, the course is less a destruction of the Leibnizean interpretation of being as substance, as the later-published excerpt would suggest, although it is this as well, than a presentation of the metaphysical, which here means "transcending," ground of logic in the decision between nothing and something that precedes all predication. For something to be predicated it first has to be something, and this insight leads Heidegger to conclude that ontology therefore precedes the reduced philosophical notion of logic as the study of predicative judgment or as a repository of rules for thinking (Anfangsgründe 24, 128f.). After passing through historical interpretations of philosophical logic, Leibniz's metaphysics and the theory of the monad, and a general overview of the way the relationship between logic and ontology had been understood, Heidegger comes, in the second main division ("Zweites Hauptstück"), to the "Problemdimension" of logic. Leibniz in fact offers two fundamental logical principles, the principle of contradiction (or non-contradiction) and the principle of sufficient reason. To this double beginning of logic, Heidegger asks three questions. What is the relationship between the two principles? What is the true foundation of the principle of sufficient reason? And, what is the relationship between Leibniz's logical doctrines and his metaphysical doctrines? Two further questions are then appended: what is a principle? And is a "principle" fundamentally logical or metaphysical? In short, Heidegger asks into the principle of "firstness" by which a sentence becomes a principle, and through which either logic or metaphysics would show itself to be a primary mode of philosophy (Anfangsgründe 135). That Leibniz addresses the fundamentality of

any principle in one principle, the principle of sufficient reason, makes it more than one principle among several; it becomes, in Heidegger's estimation, the one that specifies the principality of *Sätzen* by stating that firstness means distinguishing something from nothing. Although he answers it from within logic, the question is not in essence logical, since it gestures toward the condition of possibility of logic as predication or judgment.

The situation is made worse, not better, with time. Schopenhauer's doctoral dissertation covers up the intuition into the primacy of this principle in Leibniz. Schopenhauer's translates "nihil est sine ratione cur potius sit quam non sit" as "nichts ist ohne Grund warum es sei" (Anfangsgründe 141) and Heidegger takes him to task for erasing the "potius quam," that according to him is the axiom's key phrase. Why is the "potius quam" so important? Heidegger writes: "Das principium rationis ist das Prinzip des "eher als," des Vorrangs des Etwas vor dem Nichts, des Dieses vor dem Jenen, des So vor dem Anders" (Anfangsgründe 141-2). In Leibniz's original formulation, then, one can see the entire problematic of the analytic of Dasein intuited—the truthing, concealing-unconcealing being through whose understanding being is given to beings. Defining the origin of the principle of sufficient reason as the problem of the "potius," which Heidegger translates as "Vorzug," "advantage," "precedence," and much more appropriately, "priority," the question of being as transcendence is already glimpsed. Leibniz's "potius quam" reveals an image of transcendence that precedes and determines the most basic principle of logic. For, how is any being uncovered such that it could possibly become the object of a judgment? Dasein's transcending movement accomplishes this uncovering. Whence the priority of the decision for something and against nothing? Arising from his reading of Leibniz's logic, the questions allow Heidegger to cut a path through logic back to issues left unresolved in *Being and Time*.

These issues are more complex than my cursory treatment lets on; nevertheless the sequence of claims leading to the problem of transcendence as the unresolved problem in *Being and Time* stands as we've seen it: logic and metaphysics are grounded, one could say, in a more original problem, the problem of ground, foundation, origin or "Grund." How does something precede and determine another? How does temporizing displacement make out world? Who can explain the "condition of possibility" that determines transcendence, since the question is already conditioned by it? How do we understand "it is"—*sit*—as "rather than" or "the priority of this over"—*potius quam*?

It is at this point that Derrida's analysis intervenes. He steps in at this point, however, without mentioning the line of thinking that leads to the assertion of Dasein's metaphysical neutrality. Either he did not see it as an attempt to come to terms with transcendence in general or as a destruction of Leibnizean logic; in any case he is concerned with the particular derivation of the "power" of dispersal out of a traditional ascription of that power to sexual reproduction. As an aside, but an important one, neither Derrida nor Heidegger discusses, in his presentation of this figure, the Biblical origins of the figure, preferring, for whatever reasons perhaps, to leave the Jewish problematic of *Zerstreuung* out of consideration—a problematic Heidegger would have known well from Luther's translation. Both prefer an "ontological," rather than a theological or even historical interpretation of the word, Heidegger out of the desire for an "Aufhellung der inneren Möglichkeit der Vermannigfaltigung," Derrida out of the desire to demonstrate the equivalence of "Zerstreuung" with "dissemination." You could say that the two uses of *Zerstreuung* are similar to the degree to which Derrida remains caught within the problem of transcendence—problematizing it while at the same time operating a critique by means of it, a deconstruction that claims to go one more step beyond dispersal to the

dissemination of the word, the linguistic dispersion that allows something like *Zerstreuung* to come to thought. It is perhaps for this reason Derrida does not set Heidegger's discussion of *Dasein*'s neutrality into the wider context of the course.

What shapes the problem of transcendence to which Heidegger now returns?

At this moment, though not a year later, its importance is beyond question: he calls it ontology's "leitende Problem" (*Anfangsgründe* 187) and as such its "Grundproblem" (186). He explains the "problem of *Being and Time*" as the missing question of "Grund," a word brought into the analytic here in a decisive way. What does it mean to be a fundament or causa, reason or origin, aitia or arche, condition of possibility? An explanation of these phenomena is missing in *Being and Time*, although it is there, hidden in the link between the title's two words. "Aber dies ist das Problem...wie Sein früher ist...Sein und Zeit, das ist das Grundproblem!" (186). The mysterious link eludes even philosophical attempts to access it; ontology and its tool, the question, are fated to encounter it, yet each time to obscure it anew. "Alles ontologische Fragen ist ein Fragen nach dem und ein Bestimmen des "Apriori" (184). How to access this problem without assuming the answer in advance is the ineluctable problem to which he refers. But it is only apparently ineluctable. Or rather, it is ineluctable, but its contours can be readily discerned. The adjective "ontological" communicates no more or less than this problem: a desire to access and guarantee the apriori and in accessing it (or pretending to) to interpret it and thus to determine it once again as something. Each time it is made accessible, each time an ontological structure or origin is desired for a certain region or reign of beings, the movement of aprioricity recedes, leaving an image in its place, a determinate "before" whose before-ness has vanished.

What is the affiliation between *Zerstreuung* and the a priori?

Transcendence means of course nothing more than “going beyond,” for Heidegger, a mode of distancing that constitutes the nearness with which human beings take the already interpreted world in which they dwell. Suddenly, several “Existentialia” collapse into one another. *Verstehen*, *Zeit*, *Sorge*, *Ekstasis*, *Wahrheit*—all seem to originate in the “vorgängige” movement by which transcendence operates. Phenomenological intentionality is still too ontic, too wedged between subject and object to describe the movement. Intentionality has its possibility elsewhere, in transcendence. “Wenn demnach die ursprüngliche Transzendenz (das In-der-Welt-sein) die intentionale Beziehung ermöglicht, diese aber ontisch ist, und das Verhältnis zu Ontischem im Seinsverständnis gründet, dann muß zwischen ursprünglicher Transzendenz und Seinsverständnis überhaupt eine innere Verwandtschaft bestehen; ja am Ende sind sie ein und dasselbe” (*Anfangsgründe* 170). The understanding of being and transcendence are one and the same! Not just today’s understanding by this or that interpreter and not just the fulfillment of this or that intention for consciousness, but something that moves beyond these limited goings beyond. “Diese Urtranszendenz ermöglicht jedes intentionale Verhältnis zu Seiendem” (170). What then accounts for passing by “going beyond,” what he calls here “Urtanszendenz”?

In a passage that Derrida makes much of for his critique, Heidegger tries to give the distinction between transcendence and original transcendence or “Urtranszendenz” a linguistic form. Facticity, the tendency toward beings is “Zerstreuung,” but the transcendence of facticity, its “every time again,” Augustine’s “trial without respite,” in short, the unity and perpetuity of the phenomenal, the inescapable phenomenality of the world of appearances that phenomenology since Plato has assumed, is “Streuung.” It is this second version which philosophy makes the claim to understand. “Sichverstehen aus dem Umwillen heißt Sichverstehen aus dem Grunde.

Dieses muß sich gemäß dem, was ich die innere Streuung des Daseins nenne (sec. 10), in die Grundmöglichkeiten seiner selbst schon vermannigfaltigt haben" (Anfangsgründe 277). Given that the lecture course is meant to be both a primer in and a persuasion to phenomenology, the turn from care to understanding heralded in this citation is critical. "Umwillen," "for the sake of" names the structure of care that makes up being-in-the-world (276). This is no longer the most extreme "beyond" of Dasein, however. Urtranszendenz is equivalent, instead, to "*Freiheit zum Grunde*" (Heidegger 276), Dasein's capacity to act for its own sake. "Grund" extends beyond care to freedom, "*der Grund des Grundes*" (277). Grund's own freedom, in turn, consists in a "Streuung von Grund" (278). What seems, however, like a recipe for apotheosis, is in fact no such thing. Here is the potential confusion as I see it. Heidegger exhorts students to understand with an existent understanding that which can only be understood when the understanding "streut sich" among its own possibilities. And yet the freedom toward foundation depends on what Heidegger means here by "gemäß." "Sichverstehen aus dem Grunde... muß sich gemäß dem, was ich die innere Streuung des Daseins nenne... schon vermannigfaltigt haben" (277). Self-understanding would mean—would it not?—letting the ontic understanding proliferate, pluralize, become manifold, "sich zerstreuen lassen" to the point at which it equals Dasein's internal scatteredness. In order to give Dasein's fundament its due, a phenomenological "Blick" that would be in accord with ("gemäß") its internal dispersal, therefore, philosophical understanding would need to become as dissolute in its possibilities as the "trial without respite" and the "je schon" of existence are parsimonious with possibility. Metaphysical understanding becomes, in a word, distracted. A pertinent (though impertinent) question could be raised in response to the gesture toward the "higher" distraction upon which the whole project of an analytic of existence is premised. Is there a difference between being ontologically zerstreut and the ontically



zerstreut? Can the words, “Streuung” and “Zerstreuung,” between which there is hardly a semantic difference in German, carry such a distinction? They certainly don’t suffice to make the difference clear. How, then, can a standard be found by which the philosophical understanding that has diffused itself completely into the manifold possibilities of the as yet uncommitted understanding can be separated from the “merely” ontically distracted everyday understanding?

No mention is made of a “zerstreute Philosoph,” one whose understanding is, in any conventional sense, lacking during these activities. You could easily imagine one appearing here, like the poet in Valéry’s *L’idée fixe* who tries to run away from his thoughts. Would this be an image of a successful philosopher of being?

In these reflections, however, Heidegger’s *Zerstreuung* does not belong under the sign of the ontic. This or that man, woman, or child—or whatever other ontic designations *Dasein* may carry—cannot be “zerstreut.” Ontic distraction occurs only between consciousness and objects, when consciousness cannot identify them, say, or when it detaches from them, turns away from one or divides itself among many. That this is a different matter altogether than ontological “*Zerstreuung*” is confirmed in these remarks: “Hierzu ein roher Hinweis: Das *Dasein* verhält sich als existierendes nie je nur zu einem Objekt, und wenn, dann nur in der Weise des Absehens von zuvor und zugleich immer miterscheinenden anderen Seienden. Diese Mannigfaltigung geschieht nicht dadurch, daß es mehrere Objekte gibt, sondern umgekehrt.” (*Anfangsgründe* 173). In the world there is diversion, which takes place in the familiar milieu of subjects and objects, and which furthermore is inseparable from their relation. *Absehen* belongs to a subject as a crucial component of consciousness’s directing itself toward a being; it names the exclusion of the chaotic complex of the “*da*” that allows something like *noesis* to occur. One can see from this that *Zerstreuung* is the condition of possibility for both attention and diversion, insofar as they

are two sides of the same phenomenon, and so share a common source. Absehen produces Aufmerksamkeit and Aufmerksamkeit is nothing more than a sustained look away from multiplicity. Without having turned away from my desk, the room, and the noises of the street outside the window I would not have paid attention to this screen; without paying attention to the screen I would never have avoided losing myself in a multitude of perceptions and apperceptions. It is from this reduced dialectical and epistemological understanding that distraction acquires its negative connotation, as that which hinders productive attention. Heidegger goes to great lengths to disconnect Zerstreung from this dialectic. The fact of a philosophical “freedom toward ground” should not be confused, he reminds us, with “fragen nach dem Warum des Warum des Warum u.s.f. Solches Weiterfragen hat den Schein von Radikalismus, der nirgendwo halt macht, bei sich; aber es ist doch nur Schein, und eigentlich eine Gedankenlosigkeit” (Anfangsgründe 278). Although he leaves the pair attention-distraction behind among subjects and objects, “thoughtlessness” is still an value-laden term used to ridicule and direct students’ thinking. And yet, as I hope I have shown, transcending Zerstreung is not completely without relationship to ontic thoughtlessness.

**4. Zerstreuung as Distribution:  
Benjamin's Doctrine**

### **“Reception in Distraction”**

The phrase from Benjamin’s essay on technical reproducibility that has provoked both interest and skepticism since it was written declares the central concern for art-theory around 1935 to be the “reception in distraction [die Rezeption in der Zerstreuung]” triggered by film. Interesting is the potential that the phrase seems to have—still today—to illuminate the structure and effects of the then new medium. It has also been praised for the light it throws on the history of art forms and their audiences. More than both of these however, the phrase alludes to a solution to a trenchant problem in the study of art. Under the influence of Nietzsche, art-theory was dominated by theories of the artist as the privileged source for artworks. Under the influence of formalism, in contrast, art-theory had succumbed to technical considerations that seemed to exclude the larger context of a work’s meaning. Between sterile formalism and theological creationism—the one evoking on the part of critics exceptional powers of perception, the other adulation of genius (as could be seen in the circle around Stefan George, which Benjamin disdained)—the status of the artwork was left undecided. Both critical modes celebrated the triumph of consciousness: the perspicacious consciousness of the critic or the artist’s productive mind. In reifying intelligence on the front and back end of artistic production, the product or object of these intellectual feats fell into neglect. The assertion of a reception in distraction takes

a stand against this neglect. According to the phrase, due to certain of its technological and social aspects, the cinematic artwork impinges on the structure of thought.

It is also true that at least part of the interest in the phrase lies in the structure of the phrase itself: its form poses an obstacle to thinking about it. This chapter presents some of the strands of thought woven together in Benjamin's perplexing phrase, drawing material from some of his earlier writings in order to do so.

The phrase "reception in distraction" itself cannot be easily "received"; at best it is a paradox, at worst nonsense. If a paradox, it is perhaps not one in the etymological sense, a thought that lands to the side of general opinion. As Karl Kraus put it: "Ein Paradoxon entsteht, wenn eine frühreife Erkenntnis mit dem Unsinn ihrer Zeit zusammenprallt" (164). In the best of all worlds, "reception in distraction" will have ripened over the years between 1935 and today, surviving the "Unsinn" of its time, and coming out like a debutant at the moment of its historical maturity. And yet, although the argument can be made that today we are more welcoming of distraction and theories about it, the phrase still seems to hold our interest because it is difficult to understand. It seems, in fact, to be more closely related to "Unsinn" than Sinn, and not just to the senselessness of the Nazi era or the prejudices of the immediate post-war years, the sixties in France and the seventies in America, and so forth—the various epochs of Benjamin reception. Even in the furious devouring of Benjamin that has taken place over the past twenty years, this phrase has continued to appear odd and somewhat unacceptable. The collision of an idea with the stupidity of its time—Kraus's definition of "paradox"—would seem to contain an appeal to distraction within it. A time's distraction and the idea that collides with it is an image of this very phenomenon. Paradox, in Kraus's understanding of it, is another name for "reception in distraction."

Insofar as it describes the structure of paradox per se, the phrase cannot hope to find resolution or understanding in another time, as though it were simply waiting for the right intelligence to resolve it. In fact—this is the more revolutionary implication of the phrase—distraction is that which accounts for intellectual transformations that accompany changes in “times.” “Die Art und Weise, in der die menschliche Sinneswahrnehmung sich organisiert—das Medium, in dem sie erfolgt—ist nicht nur natürlich sondern auch geschichtlich bedingt” (GS I.2 478). From this statement we can surmise that the self-organization of sensual perception is liable to change such that its historical condition grounds its natural one. From this perspective, distraction appears to be the stage in which the “Sinneswahrnehmung” is no-longer organized and yet not-yet reorganized, the medium that stands between nature and history, and between perceptual orders, a medium in which the reorganization of their elements can take place. This unprecedented mode is not an outgrowth of the natural intellectual faculties, but rather the intervention of “history” into their natural shape. Distraction names the interval of their historical transition.

For this reason distraction cannot be seen as a new part that fits into an old apparatus. It is not a new perceptual order but the condition of its possibility. For this reason, according to the third draft of the artwork essay, reception in distraction allows “new tasks of apperception” [neue Aufgaben der Apperzeption] to become “solvable” or “soluble” [lösbar] (GS I.2 505). And yet the sense or senses of “reception in distraction” and the “new apperceptive tasks” it makes possible remain problematic, insofar as they name what intervenes in configurations of “Sinneswahrnehmung” to dissolve their structure.

If history is thought of as the layered deposit of meaning onto a single, authentic cult object—this is one of the ways in which Benjamin defines history in these writings, as the

objective correlative of aura—if history is auratic, “Reception in der Zerstreung” points to the moment in which that cultural deposit is blown away. “Die Aura war ursprünglich (solange sie den Kultwert begründete) mit Geschichte geladen” (GS VII.2 677). This leads, however, to several difficulties.

With the dispersal of aura, the continuity of history that aura and cult guaranteed is broken. Thus, what had previously been understood as an artwork because it was laden with the history that justified the cult and surrounded by the cult that justified its permanence, such a work would no longer be taken as art. The cultic-auratic criteria for recognizing art became invalid and a new way of receiving was required. This is the first problem with the new type of reception: it would have to follow the structure and effects of its new object... in order to receive it. Since art no longer acted like art, this reception would also not be taken as reception of art, but as something else—play, maybe, or some sort of vice. Insofar as one “reception” belonged to auratic art—an arrangement of spectators in the mystery cult, immersion in darkness followed by a sudden flare of light, reverence and sacrifice instead of critique—the new artistic effects would remain mysterious, incapable of being received.

“Zerstreung” is not simply the contrary of aura; it is not just the next kind of perceptual or intellectual relationship to art in a series of relationships that makes up another history, a history of art forms and forms of reception. We cannot expect an “age of distraction” to follow the “age of aura,” since with the end of auratic history the cultic idea of an “age” would have to end as well. Inasmuch as reception meant the goings on in the cult, what happened in the wake of the disintegration of cultic history was no longer reception. We cannot expect, for example, a cult of distraction to spring up in place of it. This art and this reception are not cultish; distraction is not simply another cult-value appropriate to the film object. Not at all—it has a different value

altogether, and vastly different social, historical, and ontological effects and consequences.

Incidentally, this is where Benjamin differs sharply from Siegfried Kracauer's "Cult of Distraction," first published in the *Frankfurter Zeitung* in March 1926. Where Kracauer saw an audience grow up for the cinema and form itself into a cult for whom "Zerstreuung" was a manner of self-expression, Benjamin saw in *Zerstreuung* the dispersal of the cult habitus itself, through a revolution in the very objectness or way of being of artworks, and only secondarily in their effects. This is what needed to be received in the new reception. And so, the artistic revolution would have to take place as much in the receiving-entity as in the artwork or artist, and equally deeply in the concept of history to which artwork and receiver belonged.

"Die ursprüngliche Art der Einbettung des Kunstwerks in den Traditionszusammenhang fand ihren Ausdruck im Kult" (GS I.2 480). Art corresponding to distraction was certainly not "embedded" in a tradition like the cultic object was embedded in its aura, therewith collecting the ritual community around it. Cult as the social expression of this particular theory of history and artworks could not survive the advent of distraction; no, a community whose internal configuration derived from a dispersed "here and now"—a there and again there and a then and again then—would differ correspondingly. The essence of this Benjaminian tableau—the reference to Greek mystery cult above all—is theological: the auratic artwork corresponds at least in part to the Hegelian category of symbolic art, in which the idea shines through the sensual form. Aura is for Benjamin, in the third version of the reproducibility essay—his explorations of the concept differ in different texts—the "einmalige Erscheinung einer Ferne, so nah sie sein mag" (GS I.2 479, 80 n.7). Benjamin clearly wants to contrast the "Einmaligkeit" of the cultic artwork to the multiplicity of "times" available in reproducible art. In addition, whereas one resists the wearing forces of history, the other seems to compliment or even accelerate them.



The relationship between reproducible artworks and an ability to wear away, “Verschleißbarkeit,” will be important in Benjamin’s notes on the topic. *Zerstreuung* and its reception are conditions of possibility for the break with cultic-auratic history, though not necessarily in the name of a stable state that might follow it. Since a stable historical state, at least the continuum formed in relationship of aura to cult, no longer attains, reception in distraction cannot be counted on to continue. Whatever other intellectual or aesthetic configuration would hold sway after it is not predicted.

It seems then that this eccentric kind of reception would interrupt the continuity of the tradition in two ways. It would pull out by the roots the sense of being embedded that characterizes the cultic order of tradition. And, since aura is by Benjamin’s definition the once and in one place appearing of a distance—a theological, symbolic structure—distraction would, furthermore, allow the “far” to return to its place, releasing it into the distance and reclaiming the near for cult followers when they disband. Once the far—the idea, good, or god—releases its hold on what were in fact highly quotidian and kitsch cult objects (the secret of Demeter’s mystery cult, for example, was as banal, it is believed, as a large phony ear of wheat) into meaninglessness or meaning-poverty, the cult *scatters into the distance*. No longer held together by a fantastical kernel of distance contained and protected at the cult’s center, this nostalgic theological structure disintegrates. This is the other way in which “Rezeption in der Zerstreuung” made sense to Benjamin in the thirties. Although it named a peculiar condition in which the “Sinneswahrnehmung” were freed up from their organization, at the same time it carried strong allusions to political diaspora. “Rezeption in diaspora,” another possible translation of the

phrase, hints at a positive diasporic theory in which no future coming together would be dreamed of in order to define the present disparateness—a diaspora without hope or promise.

Skepticism of the phrase, then, may in fact be a response to the almost impossible conditions that would be necessary to understand it. Such reception is highly unstable. It is meant to receive an art object whose meaning is no longer guaranteed by history or by a god. It would not be too much to say, I think, that by most standards “reception in distraction” receives nothing. It may in fact only receive the destructive tendencies that lead to the tradition’s demise...and reception, thought of as passivity, with it. In this way it is controversial and resistance to it is understandable. Perhaps the earliest critique of the idea, although also one of the crudest, arrives in a letter from Adorno in 1936.

A lot is conveyed in the tone of the letters between Adorno and Benjamin in the thirties. One hears first of all, beneath the politeness on both men’s part, a sincere attentiveness to the words of the other; in the background, however, whisper widely differing motives. Adorno’s letters often take the form of verbose commentaries on Benjamin’s writings. Since Benjamin was at that time coming more and more under the auspices of Adorno and Horkheimer’s institute and would have felt the need to offer the two sociologists early opportunities to read the works they would later publish, it is not surprising that Adorno would find himself responding to a draft of the reproducibility essay as one charged with accepting it for publication. Yet one also catches in Adorno a familiarity with Benjamin’s work that only a student could have of a teacher’s—awestruck, a little afraid to speak up, and a compensatory unyielding quality. For this reason his letters seem torn. On one hand they read like the effusions of an acolyte who has been asked by the master to put in his two cents (instead he puts in fifty), and on the other hand, one hears an

apprentice bent on making a place for himself within his teacher's ideas. Benjamin, on the other hand, is reserved, courteous, and thankful, offering little more than thanks for his commentary, praise for those of Adorno's works that he has read, repeatedly encouraging Adorno in his projects. One can read as much in the lack of detail in Benjamin's letters as one can in the overabundance in Adorno's. This may be due in part to the very different circumstances in which they were writing. By 1936 Adorno had been for some years in England, whereas Benjamin remained on the continent, exiled from Germany, staying mainly in Paris, with short periods of travel, living in financial hardship and largely off the meager profits from his publications. That the difference is not only economical, however, is readily seen. Adorno's letters often include an advertisement of his own earlier interest in the topic of Benjamin's latest work. "Sie wissen, daß der Gegenstand...seit vielen Jahren hinter meinen ästhetischen Versuchen steht," "Ich muß Sie nicht dessen versichern...daß ich...durchaus bewußt bin," "als ich immer ja immer wieder versuche," and so forth (3/18/36 p.168-9). Here I make what might seem like a critique *ad hominem*. But I do so only in order to point out how the affective context of the letters is as important as the intellectual or historical context for analyzing their arguments. Because of the circumstances, Adorno holds a certain administrative power over the elder thinker for whose work he obviously also has tremendous respect, and, too, he must sense both that Benjamin's situation vis-à-vis his own position is tenuous, and, what's more and to his dismay that his power over Benjamin is in fact bureaucratic and not intellectual. Correspondingly, Benjamin seems to tread lightly, claiming repeatedly that he has taken Adorno's commentaries seriously, but not addressing them in specifics, although rarely if ever contradicting them.

The letter in which Adorno announces his skepticism toward what he calls Benjamin's "Theorie der Zerstreuung" is full of such tensions. Beginning a treatment of what must be the

second version of Benjamin's essay, "On the Work of Art in the Age of its Technical Reproducibility" with the appeal "Lassen Sie darum auf eine Hauptlinie mich beschränken" can only seem insincere in a letter that goes on, in the critical edition, for eight crammed pages. Be that as it may, Adorno's commentary—whose approach he calls in the letter itself "unsere alte Methode der Immanenten Kritik" (169)—is in some ways quite astute. He sees immediately the roots of the idea of "aura" in the "baroque book" and its distinction between allegory and symbol (168-9). He sees, furthermore, that the essay is less a theory of film than a "Durchsetzung" of Benjamin's "Ursprungintentionen – der dialektischen Konstruktion des Verhältnisses von Mythos und Geschichte" (168).

A few remarks on this analysis. If Adorno means, though an adroit play on words, not only that the essay is a realization of much older motifs in Benjamin's writing, but more importantly that it returns to and completes—in a different direction—his thoughts on "Ursprung," this is truly an insightful comment. Allegory in the baroque book presents a different order of "origin" than symbol does, far more the origin of present meaning in the loss of a divine connection or a break with the past. In a similar way the artwork essay presents an origin for modern theory and art in the demise of the auratic. The preface to the *Habilitationsschrift* offers an intricate image for this concept of origin. That Adorno attributes the "original" in both Benjamin's earlier writing and in the present essay to his "intentions," however, implies that Adorno does not understand quite it this way. The misunderstanding is confirmed in his comment on the relationship of myth to history. In Adorno's reading, myth and history are parallel to symbol and allegory, as are aura and the historical makeup of film. This is what he sees as Benjamin's "original intention": the "dialektische[] selbstauflösung des Mythos, die hier als Entzauberung der Kunst visiert wird" (168). He then compares this movement, the

dialectical self-dissolution of myth, to his own interest—to his interest in the primacy of technology in music—in the “Liquidation der Kunst” (168). A lot could be said about this, starting with his choice of words, contrasting them carefully with Benjamin’s elsewhere—Adorno’s “Liquidation,” Benjamin’s “Liquidierung”; Benjamin’s discussion of myth in the *Wahlverwandtschaften* essay to which Adorno refers here and in other contemporaneous letters; the two thinkers’ understandings of the adjective “dialectical.” Suffice it to say here that where Adorno would like to see a dialectical configuration of history in which one stage is “aufgehoben” in the next by means of “selbst-auflösung,” Benjamin implies a history that is non-dialectical, in which “dissolution” is never the automatic result of the death of the past, but depends on the shock of singular artworks in transforming and transformational media as well as, too, the work of art theorists in disseminating the effects of the one-time, unforeseeable change. That is to say, the passage from aura and cult to reproducibility and distraction is neither automatic—it does not proceed by necessity, nor does it happen without effects and consequences that are unintended and unabsorbable—nor dialectical. On the question of the structure of history, then, Adorno—here at least—diverges from Benjamin. In this sense, then, it is true what Adorno writes in this and in many other letters. Benjamin is not dialectical enough. In this one he advises: “Was ich postulieren würde, wäre demnach ein *Mehr* an Dialektik” (Adorno and Benjamin 173).

With this divergence of understandings in mind, we can now turn to *Zerstreuung*, about which Adorno writes rather glibly, although perhaps also not without a touch of sarcasm: “und vollends die Theorie der Zerstreuung will mich, trotz ihrer chokhaften Verführung, nicht überzeugen. Wäre es auch nur aus dem simplen Grunde, daß in der kommunistischen

Gesellschaft die Arbeit so organisiert sein wird, daß die Menschen nicht mehr so müde und nicht mehr so verdummt sein werden, um der Zerstreung zu bedürfen” (172).

Again, Adorno’s insight is keen, and his wordplay suggestive. At the same time—in the same word—he expresses his thoughts about the effects of *Zerstreung* on society and the effects of the “theory” in Benjamin’s text. Distraction is “seductive” because it shocks its readers, shocks them into—not thinking, just as it may be seductive to film audiences. Adorno, however, who has thought it out and completely—“vollends”—avoided becoming diverted by it, is not seduced. Several elements of Adorno’s brief commentary are worth remarking on. First, he sees Benjamin operating with respect to *Zerstreung* in a common scientific mode. Benjamin presents a “theory,” whose aim is “to convince” [“überreden”]. This itself is slightly shocking, since in this case Adorno seems to have left his dialectical demands aside for a much more traditional requirement of argument. Dialectic does not “convince,” it mediates, raises, cancels, and preserves. Be that as it may, the “*Theorie der Zerstreung*” is to be assessed here according to its effectiveness as syllogism. Is the major premise true and valid? Valid but untrue, he argues, because it does not hold for always. In the political society to come there will be no need for it. He doesn’t at all mention the more puzzling aspects of the “theory,” for instance, the suggestion that anything could be “received” in distraction. He also does not ask into the definition of the term—in Benjamin’s terms or anyone else’s. Adorno assumes it is a mode produced by the capitalist superstructure, which after the revolution will no longer serve a purpose. Of course, there is something sarcastic about this comment, is there not? Does Adorno actually believe at this point in time, 1936, that the revolution is coming? In any case, he still understands the phenomenon within a revolutionary Marxist framework, and links it to the consequences of the capitalist system: exhaustion and stupefaction. How could dialectical liberation come out of the

very same seductive, false image—the worker at rest, entertained—so obviously in service of the ruling ideology that insures the proletariat’s continued oppression? For these reasons then, Adorno rejects Benjamin’s thought of *Zerstreuung* in the artwork essay: first because he expects to be convinced by it as though it were an argument, second because he interprets the word as amusement in a Marxist framework.<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>90</sup> In a much more recent treatment of the topic, Howard Eiland notes the “peculiarly slippery manner” with which the “notion of distraction...operates” in Benjamin’s writings. I would suggest that this slipperiness, which Eiland rightly identifies, has a source in the slipping operation of distraction itself, in which noesis, the process in which any “notion” comes to be, ceases to operate. Insofar as he takes *Zerstreuung* as a “concept” toward which Benjamin has an “attitude” his analysis of Benjamin’s uses of the word is quite instructive. To the extent, however, that *Zerstreuung* calls conceptuality into question for Benjamin, posing deep paradoxes for the understanding of thought, gesturing toward a breakdown in the normal relations between perception and apperception, it would seem to elude the kind of attention that a history of concepts would pay it. In addition, because he confines his analysis to the writings of the 30s, Eiland misses the crucial significance of the term in the work on color and in the baroque book. In the baroque book it is the a priori of concepts “überhaupt,” when it comes to designating the relationship between art, theory, and the idea, whose proper name is “history.” Furthermore, when he divides Benjamin’s “attitude” toward distraction into “negative” and “positive”, *Zerstreuung* is abandoned to a moralism that Benjamin assiduously avoids (51-2). Benjamin admits its “verrufene Gestalt” but indicates that it is precisely not for yet another judgment between good and bad that he will judge its effects—indeed, they cannot be subject to judgment

Two of Benjamin's responses to Adorno's commentary are noteworthy. Soon after receiving it, Benjamin writes Adorno that his letter "eröffnet eine Fülle von Perspektiven," but he puts off further discussion until they meet face-to-face (177). Then three months later he laments not having been able to send Adorno "eine kleine Beilage in Gestalt mehrerer Paralipomena zu der Filmarbeit" because he has no extra copy (184). These notes were apparently never sent to Adorno, and clearly they could not be sent in June 1936 because Benjamin needed the one copy to continue to revise the artwork essay. Most significantly, we find among the "Paralipomena" an orderly page of notes entitled "Theorie der Zerstreuung," which one cannot help but surmise constitute a response to Adorno's criticism.

In this chapter I will try to show why the "theory" may not have seemed completely convincing when Adorno wrote to Benjamin in 1936. For one thing, for Benjamin the stakes of the text were not only intellectual. It was not only convincing that he was striving to be, but active and activating as an art theorist and a laborer. This circumstance has a very personal side. In a 1935 letter to Max Horkheimer, Benjamin complains about his own financial situation: "The paradox in this situation is that my work has probably never been closer to a public usefulness as it is now [Es ist an dieser Lage das Paradoxe, daß meine Arbeit wahrscheinlich nie einer

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at all—but for something else: "Lehrewerden", to become a doctrine. Until *Zerstreuung's* antagonism to judgment, and, conversely, its openness to doctrine is understood, such moralism will continue to hover around it. Another recent example can be found in Bernard Waldenfels' *Phänomenologie der Aufmerksamkeit*, where Benjamin's "inversion" of distraction is registered and then dismissed in one breath as "questionable" (105). For an analysis of the fear of distraction among media critics, see Schneider.



öffentlichen Nützlichkeit näher gewesen ist als eben jetzt]” (GB V 178). The “work” in question is the artwork essay, and the usefulness, as he writes in another letter to Horkheimer from around the same time, lies in the “informational value” [informativische[m] Wert] that “this work” [diese Arbeit] will have “for the avant-garde of the French intelligentsia” (GB V 252). What is paradoxical about the situation is that for his work on technical reproducibility to be publicly useful, for it to be given worth as information by the most advanced of German intellectuals and to achieve, as Benjamin puts it in a note to the second version of the essay, “the liquidation of the difference between intellectual and manual labor [geistiger und manueller Arbeit],” Benjamin has to produce something recognizable as work to his employers. For the newly resettled Institute for Social Research he has to produce something that can be categorized as intellectual labor (GS I.3 1051). How then, the question poses itself, could a work that would redefine intellectual labor per se be received in advance of the revolution it intended to produce as the labor of an intellectual whose work was worth fair recompense?

There is no question that Benjamin would have taken Adorno’s objection seriously, as seriously as any worker must take the censure of his supervisor, even if he is also his friend. With not only his theory of intellectual work, but his survival as an intellectual worker at stake, Benjamin produces and writes three versions of the essay, which he had called, in an outline for the first version: “an attempt to give the questions of art theory a true contemporary shape” and “a programmatic work [“Arbeit”] toward art theory.” Among his writings, this essay seems to be among the most reworked [umgearbeitet]: in the process of rewriting Benjamin produces a plethora of notes, among which we find the numbered set of theses with the title “Theory of Distraction [Theorie der Zerstreuung]” that, he writes Adorno, add up to “paralipomena,” things

that are “left-aside.” And indeed, they are left aside: nothing of the “Theory of Distraction” migrates into the third and last version of the artwork essay.

With this in mind, I will also try to suggest in the following reflections why such a “Theory of Distraction” might conflict with “the questions of art theory” that Benjamin wanted to give a new shape in the artwork essay, and why to address these questions he may not have left distraction aside, but rather theory. In these writings he dismisses “theory” for a mode more suited to the phenomenon, or non-phenomenon—*Zerstreuung*—that such a theory would have failed to address.

### **Reproducibility – Distracting/Diasporizing – Politicization**

When Benjamin sets out to elaborate and clarify the “theory of distraction-diaspora” that Adorno, among so much praise for the essay in his letter, dismisses so abruptly, he writes a spare series of premises that outlines a train of thought. The twenty sentence-like notes collected in the *Nachträge zu den Anmerkungen* in Volume VII of the *Gesammelte Schriften* establish the conceptual parameters for his so-called “theory.” One line captures the theory’s general parameters in an captivating formula: “Reproduzierbarkeit – *Zerstreuung* – Politisierung” (GS VII.2 679). These are the poles of Benjamin’s thought of distraction. “*Zerstreuung*” stands here between two terms with which we are perhaps more familiar from Benjamin’s oeuvre, terms that fall—or seem to—into common disciplines: art theory and political theory. To what discipline does the middle term belong? What role does it play in this trinity? Asking this question points to the significance of the dashes—*Gedankenstriche*—that connect the three. Do these dashes signify a thoughtful movement between concepts? Is there a dialectic at work here such that

politicization represents a synthesis of the two former terms? Perhaps, and yet the specific values—Werte—of the concepts in question would have to be ascertained in order to be sure. Two of them, as I’ve said, fall into well-known categories: they are the elements Benjamin presents us with at the end of the published version of the essay on reproducibility. There he asks: what is the relationship between aesthetics and politics that would not be cooptable for the purposes of fascism? This telegraphic line, a triode of terms, offers a response. The flow of force between the cathode, reproducibility, and the anode, politicization, is regulated by the grid through which the force flows—Zerstreuung. By means of Zerstreuung, reproducibility draws aesthetics away from fascism toward a different order—an order in which all relationships are “politicized.”

The triode, then, is a translation of the questionable or “unconvincing” “reception in distraction” of section 15 of the reproducibility essay. Here it becomes an unequivocal statement of the relationship that Benjamin hopes to establish between artworks, mental and historical life, and politics. It is not simply a new mode of perception or experience that is envisaged here, but a catalytic event whose technical base determines and is determined by—reciprocally—a political grouping principle in the medium of distraction-distribution-diasporization. Zerstreuung is the mental, historical, and geographical medium that responds to reproducibility, whose actuality is not a fixed political structure, but an event or movement, a “becoming political.” One of the “paralipomena” to the first version of the essay sheds light on the concept of political event at work here. “Die technische Reproduzierbarkeit des Kunstwerks führt zu seiner Literarisierung,” but the last word is struck through, “~~Literarisierung~~,” and replaced by “Politisierung.” Many “-ierung” words come into play in Benjamin’s writings around this time. The “Liquidierung der Differenz zwischen geistiger und manueller Arbeit” marks film’s mode of artistic production

(GS I.3 1050). There is also the “Umfunktionierung des menschlichen Apperzeptionsapparats” (GS I.3 1049). Beyond the comment that these suffixes emphasize process rather than product and imply a change of state whose ends are not as important as their means, these terms are not all of the same value. “Liquidierung” is in fact the model for them all. In each “-ierung” a liquidation comes into effect by which solid becomes fluid. Interest in this suffix probably derives from Benjamin’s reading of the Jena romantics for his dissertation. Schlegel and Novalis’s *Athenaeum* fragments among all their diversity bring to the fore a term that towers above the rest: the aim of literary criticism and theory, the *raison d’etre* of the fragment form as well as the novel, the “Poetisierung” of all relations. This signals a movement that provides for the unity of all poetry—and all art—in a progressing, infinite flow of genres.<sup>91</sup> The later verbal nouns echo this early emphasis on infinitization. With this in mind, the political movement that corresponds to a fascist-proof aesthetics is not a politics per se, not, at least, if it is a constructive, prescriptive, or proscriptive program for group formation or institution building; instead it calls for a “liquidation” of political bonds toward their infinitization, the making, we might say, of politics into a medium for politicization. This does not mean of course a liquidation of members of already constituted groups: there is no confusing this with a genocidal principle—impossible, since it names a principle for the dissolution of genre. Whereas in the first type of liquidation an ethnos or genos is reified in order to erase its contents, Benjamin’s “Politisierung” liquefies grouping principles, putting the elements into circulation again and raising them to a higher

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<sup>91</sup> See especially the section entitled “Die Idee der Kunst” in *Der Begriff der Kunstkritik in der deutschen Romantik*. (GS I.1 87f.)

status, toward purity, in Benjamin's language. Once liquefied, the elements of politics are no longer second to a completed politics, but released from their structure, they swirl freely.

What is the source of this liquidification, the making-fluid of solids, the release from transcendental constraints, the making multiple of units, in Benjamin's estimation? What does reception in distraction do to the human mental-perceptual mechanism and the groups formed on its basis? To answer these questions, we will turn to a set of very early sketches for essays and notes on color, "Farbe," and experience, "Erfahrung."

### **"A Distracted, Spaceless Infinity of Pure Reception"**

What gets marked as problematic or questionable in the phrase "reception in distraction"—it is a paradox *an sich*, as we've noted, and not merely a historical blind spot—is the word "distraction." Not only is it difficult to imagine any reception taking place in distraction, but it is also not clear why we should not do everything in our power to avoid it. In all the worry about distraction, however, the concept of "reception" slips by without comment, as though its meaning in Benjamin were self-evident. It is in fact a precisely understood concept that appears in his earliest writings as the highest aesthetic desideratum. To encounter a "pure reception" that would dethrone knowledge from its hegemony over experience is Benjamin's early desire. A different kind of reception seemed as though it would offer Benjamin a solution to his Auseinandersetzung with Kant over the concept of experience, "Erfahrung."

In a sketch not written later than fall 1917, "Über die Wahrnehmung," Benjamin specifies which elements of Kant's doctrine of experience should be kept and which should be discarded. He sets himself the task, which he will soon work out in more detail in "Über das Programm der

kommenden Philosophie,” to retain “die höchsten Bestimmungen” that Kant gave to knowledge [Erkenntnis], while challenging “seine[] erkenntnistheoretische[] Auffassung von der Struktur... der Erfahrung” (GS VI 33). The highest determination that Kant gave to knowledge as its Reinheit or purity. When he conceptualized experience, however, he did not allow it the same purity. Or, better said, in the *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, “rein” means that experience is derived purely from knowledge, and not the other way around (GS VI 34). Knowledge is pure to the extent that experience is not. Completely dependent on knowledge that transcends and determines it, experience cannot be deduced from its own a priori principles, but only from those of knowledge. Worse—an a priori principle is by definition a principle of knowledge for Kant, and so in challenging this arrangement Benjamin challenges one of the foundations of critical philosophy. Experience [Erfahrung] is always “Erkenntnis von Erfahrung.” In this light experience is so empty that it comes to be no more than the “Symbol dieses Erkenntniszusammenhangs” (GS VI 36). The whole of first philosophy insofar as it does not go beyond this knowledge-critical structure depends on experience’s total emptiness.

This argument has two corollaries. First, from the assumption of an empty experience, worthless in itself, the richness of the transcendental world can be deduced. Experience is, secondly, the shell into which transcendental knowledge—the categories, pure intuitions, and ideas of reason—are poured. Following up on this intuition, in “Über das Programm der kommenden Philosophie,” written slightly later than its prototype, “Über die Wahrnehmung,” Benjamin rebukes Kant for having established his philosophy “auf den Nullpunkt, auf das Minimum reduzierte Erfahrung” (GS II.1 159). “Flache[] Erfahrung” is the unwarranted presupposition of Kant’s knowledge-critical philosophy, and constitutes a metaphysical remnant, a mythological element that needs to be purged (GS II.1 161). If flat experience were got rid of,

two cornerstones of pure reason's edifice would have to go as well: the difference between empirical consciousness and transcendental consciousness and, in turn, the "Vorstellung eines individuellen leibgeistigen Ich welches mittelst der Sinne die Empfindungen empfängt und auf deren Grundlage sich seine Vorstellung bildet die größte Rolle spielt. Diese Vorstellung ist jedoch Mythologie..." (GS II.1 161). In the destruction of Kant's theory of experience, then, lies a possibility for an experience beyond subject and object, beyond the unity of consciousness as the unexperiencable transcendental ground, beyond—perhaps—transcendence per se. It is surprising to note how many of the motifs that ten years later Heidegger would explore in *Being and Time* are already sketched out here by the 25-year-old Benjamin.<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>92</sup> The theory of coloring-experience does not only anticipate Heideggerian motifs; it also provides an anti-Hegelian solution to the Kantian distinction between experience and the absolute, according to Howard Caygill. "The proposal to break down the distinctions between intuition, understanding and reason has led historically either to a revival of pre-Kantian dogmatic metaphysics or to a form of Hegelianism. Benjamin, aware of both possibilities and of the traditional Kantian objections to them, nevertheless insists on a transformation of the transcendental philosophy of experience into a transcendental but speculative philosophy. For this transformation not to lapse into a gesture of empty philosophical radicalism it was necessary to address the architectonic of Kant's concept of experience. An essential preliminary to any speculative recasting of the distinctions between intuition, concept and idea is to show that the totality expressed by the ideas of reason appears in intuitions and concepts, and, by implication, that spatio-temporal experience contains elements of both categorical universality and rational totality" (3). When elements of reason disperse into experience, the corresponding mental

What would this “beyond” the transcendental look like? What would an experience freed from the oppression of knowledge be? In these early writings he gives two answers: doctrine and fantasy.

The essay on the coming philosophy repeats the emphasis on the liberation of experience from knowledge. In fact, the “coming philosophy” itself coincides with freed experience. “Und damit läßt sich die Forderung an die kommenden Philosophie endlich in die Worte fassen,” he writes at the end of the essay, “Auf Grund des Kantischen Systems einen Erkenntnisbegriff zu schaffen dem der Begriff einer Erfahrung korrespondiert von der die Erkenntnis Lehre ist” (GS II.1 168). To free experience from knowledge requires transforming knowledge into “Lehre,” “teaching” or “doctrine.” Benjamin goes on to elaborate on this statement in the Nachtrag to the essay. Lehre is normally thought of as that form in which critical philosophy is made into dogmatic philosophy, the point at which critique becomes universalized by becoming fixed in fundamental concepts. Benjamin calls on a different notion of “Lehre” however. In the program sketch, the change in the hierarchy of experience and knowledge occurs in a peculiar reconciliation between philosophy and religion. Religion, and Christianity in particular, offers a

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attitude is distraction. Mind, as one of reason’s foremost elements, disperses into experience as well. It is hard to see however—much in Benjamin’s writing speaks against this idea—how this experience remains “spatio-temporal” if its transcendental conditions now have to be found within experience. For Benjamin, pure intuitions are experiential. Space originates in painting and the plastic arts, time (as a continuum) in the cultic artwork. Other modes of experience that are, traditionally speaking, timeless and spaceless, are found in coloring and the cinema, to give two examples.



counterexample to dogmatic Lehre. In Christian doctrine knowledge is subjected to the conditions of experience—historical experience—within which knowledge appears as teachings or doctrine that seek as much to respond to the as of yet unknown, to ignorant or distracted experience, as to the already known. Lehre responds to experience rather than seeking to determine it. Christian doctrine, to which Benjamin must be alluding here, is historical, beginning with revelation and destined for salvation. Between these two limits, experience and knowledge communicate with each other as equals. Benjamin’s engagement with Adolf von Harnack’s “Dogmengeschichte” (he writes about the long work that he “read it through”) stems from his interest in these things.<sup>93</sup> When it becomes a doctrine—a better English word is “teaching”—knowledge forfeits its transcendental claim; it cedes its status as ground of experience to experience, “Erfahrung,” a horizontal “traveling beyond,” whose historical

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<sup>93</sup> Harnack: “Dogmas arise, develop themselves and are made serviceable to new aims.” Now, although it is true that theology controls dogma, according to Harnack, it is also true that “the moment in which the product of theology became dogma, the way which led to it must be obscured; for, according to the conception of the Church, dogma can be nothing else than the revealed faith itself. Dogma is regarded not as the exponent, but as the basis for theology, and therefore the product of theology having passed into dogma limits, and criticizes the work of theology both past and future” (9). This thought continues in a note: “Here then begins the ecclesiastical theology which takes as its starting-point the finished dogma it strives to prove or harmonise, but very soon, as experience has shewn, loses its firm footing and so occasions new crises” (p.9 note 2).

movement is accompanied rather than led by teachings—which are something like detranscendentalized, unstable, and transmutable categories.<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>94</sup> In his entry on “Über das Programm der kommenden Philosophie” in the *Benjamin-Handbuch*, Peter Fenves identifies Benjamin’s understanding of experience released from transcendental knowledge as a “Lehre, die sich von der Sphäre der Subjektivität *gänzlich* löst und nicht nur empirisches Bewußtsein, sondern Bewußtsein überhaupt hinter sich zurückläßt” (135). This means that Lehre’s objects are not those which “über ein passives Subjekt Macht ausüben, das ihnen umgekehrt Herr zu werden sucht.” Rather, following Leibniz, Benjamin brings them into a “virtual” relationship that nothing affects, “nichts affiziert” (148). Experience is not a perception that receives what is outside it, but is itself an absolute. In Lehre knowledge is “monadic,” and thus it does not repeat an “Erkenntnismythologie.” Benjamin’s utter abandonment of subjectivity is further elucidated in the association that Fenves stresses between “Lehre” and “Dasein” in the “Nachtrag” to the “Programmschrift.” “Dasein,” existence, brings thought to a stop (148). This is a crucial point. Existence is the interruption of thinking’s continual progress. Thus, insofar as Lehre is an existential form of knowledge, it has a different relationship to thinking. Lehre is distractive. What does distractive mean here? Since existence is not equivalent to knowledge but draws its meaning from a “Totalität der Erfahrung,” any experience is an infinitesimal piece of the total sum of possible experiences. Lehre, doctrine, then, as existent knowledge, gestures toward a totality that it can never represent. In this way Lehre also constitutes an “Übergang” between philosophy and religion. It is religion, and not philosophy, that serves as a model for a doctrinal mode that defines its doctrines with this totality in mind (149). Religious knowledge is provisional and dependant on experience that continually exceeds it.

In the program essay, Lehre offers the paradigm for knowledge that travels in and with experience. Even earlier, however, fantasy offers a slightly different one.

Where religion seeks to respond to experience with doctrine, a child experiences free of the tyranny of transcendental knowledge in color. As such the child's experience is infinitely rich—incomparable to the “flat experience” of the adult (unless of course he or she is a “kindliche[r] Mensch” (GS VI 110)). Two relatively completed though short compositions and several more fragmentary notes explore the child's experience along two axes: looking (Sehen/Aussehen, Schau) and color (Farbe).

Soap bubbles are emblematic focal points of childish experience; the “bewegliche Übergang von Nuancen” on their convex, watery surface are fascinating (GS VI 110). This observation, drawn from Benjamin's composition “Die Farbe vom Kind aus Betrachtet,” is evidence of a highly discerning capacity in children and childlike adults. Children are, however paradoxical it may sound, discerning in an order in which no objects come forward. Instead of beings with outlines they see infinite nuances, and yet these correspond much more to a “vermischung” than to a “Verschwommenheit” (GS VI 110). Children are best at being distracted: thinking nothing means that they need think no thing. And yet the mental correlate of the infinite nuances of color's phantasmagoria is not a cloud; a child's thinking is not nebulous or vague—far from it. It is as precise as a range of perfectly distinct hues can be. In the realm of color mixture is never contamination. Where there are no substances there can be no pollution of a “pure” substance by another. Conversely, mixture without muddiness constitutes the “purity” of color. Why is mixture not a degradation in the sphere of color? Mingling one color with another simply makes another color, and so the result is no less colorful or distinct than any other. As a sphere of pure distinction, then, the order of color for children is “etwas Geistiges,”

Benjamin notes.<sup>95</sup> At first look, it is not easy to understand how a perceptual event as lowly as seeing color could be mental, and secondly, why an ever-changing “bad infinity,” as Hegel would call it, should be brought into Geist and be of Geist. Benjamin declares this to be a fact in the first words of the sketch. “Die Farbe ist etwas Geistiges, etwas dessen Klarheit geistig ist...” (GS VI 110). It is obvious that the spiritual clarity of Geist does not correspond to perceptual clarity. Color, after all, is opaque or translucent. Moreover, reception of color is not perception, for Benjamin, but experience. It does not correspond to a perception that could possibly be considered separately from the perceived, that would divide a subject from its objects, and so forth. Furthermore, it is only “seeing,” visual experience, to which these reflections apply. Let me cite a line from the essay in full, since it contains much of the argument about “seeing” *in nuce*. “Die kindliche Auffassung der Farbe bringt den Gesichtssinn zur höchsten künstlerischen Ausbildung, zur Reinheit, indem sie ihn isoliert, sie erhebt diese Bildung zu einer geistigen, da sie die Gegenstände nach ihrem farbigen Gehalt anschaut und folglich nicht isoliert, sondern sich die zusammenhängende Anschauung der Phantasiewelt in ihnen sichert” (GS VI 110). In short,

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<sup>95</sup> Howard Caygill presents the intellectual parameters of Benjamin’s early theory of experience in *Walter Benjamin: The Colour of Experience*. In the introduction Caygill writes that “the inspiration of Benjamin’s speculative concept of experience is less linguistic than chromatic, that the paradigm of experience for him is not linguistic signification but chromatic differentiation. In Kantian terms his concept of experience emphasizes the complexities of intuition—the ‘axioms’ or ‘things seen’—over those of the understanding—the ‘acroams’ or things spoken. The result is a concept of experience far more recalcitrant to philosophical reflection than the linguistic metacritiques of the concepts of the understanding” (xiii).

the mentality of the colored world consists in the fact that it brings the sense of sight [den Gesichtssinn] into the realm of the mental. More than this, however, it brings the experience of seeing, and not just the seen thing, into the mental sphere as that which can teach it to be otherwise. This is because color, as pure seeing, is not susceptible to other mental processes. One cannot of course think color. For this reason, too, it is only a highly trained “seeing” that can learn to distinguish many colors. This cannot be done analytically. Another fragment puts it this way: “Farbe muß gesehen werden” (GS VI 109). And what’s more, “*die Farben sehen sich*” (GS VI 118). Children achieve “Bildung” or training of their thinking insofar as they model mental activity on seeing. As I’ve indicated, this sight does not see entities. With this assertion Benjamin rejects an important aspect of Aristotle’s aesthetic doctrine, while retaining another. In Book III section 3 of *De anima*, Aristotle construes mental activity on analogy with perception, and in particular with sight. Thought, like sight, is the reception of the form of objects without their matter. The hegemony of form in Aristotle’s theory of the soul is the forerunner of the hegemony of transcendental knowledge in Kant’s critical philosophy, and so for Benjamin, if he mentioned Aristotle in these writings—which he doesn’t—such a definition of thought would have to be avoided. Shortly before making this analogy, however, Aristotle raises a question about perception very similar to Benjamin’s reflections on children’s looking. In Book III section 2 he asks: how can we know that we are seeing? This is a question that, like Benjamin’s, asks into the order of the relationship between knowledge and vision. It asks in effect whether there is a knowledge that is purely visual. Does the soul have a special sight for sensation? Does the soul see (know) that it sees? This assumption, the sense of sensation, is the basis for the construction of the fantastical apparatus, apperception. According to Aristotle—who has problems accepting the idea of a common sense, although his formulation of it has long lasting effects—if nous is

built on analogy with sight, this would mean that, since seeing becomes its object, when it sees “red” it becomes red. Only when seeing becomes red, its object, can the sense of sense perceive it. Aisthesis, in this case, is as colored as its aistheta. Although this threatens to devolve into an infinite regress and Aristotle rejects it, the basic pattern anticipates Benjamin’s insight: color is a medium in which looking takes place, such that, in its infinite distinguishability, the looker and the looked-at become indistinguishable, though equally full of distinctions—colored looking. There is no higher instance, no uncolored receptive capacity that could receive it and know it but avoid being tinted by it. The child is colored into the world such that Erfahrung is “Färbung,” a modality Benjamin calls “reine Empfänglichkeit,” “pure receptivity,” that is reception purified of categories—whose categories are in the reception (GS VI 111). Subjectless and objectless “being-colored-in-the-world” does not give up the world when it gives up a mentalistic relationship to it and the transcendental assumptions that the relationship entails. The pure constitution of the world without the interruption of transcendental determination of entities in it enters into the mental and rearranges it; it deranges it.<sup>96</sup> This is surely what Baudelaire means, and what Benjamin reads later there, when in “Les paradis artificiels” he describes his version of “objectivity.” In hashish intoxication objects in the world enter the subject and kick out the consciousness that would isolate them as objects. “High” experience is truly objective.

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<sup>96</sup> A citation from Kierkegaard’s journals makes the stakes of Benjamin’s “experience” clear. “They say that experience makes a man wise. This is very unreasonable talk. If there were nothing higher than experience, experience would drive a man crazy” (469). It is this crazy experience that Benjamin wants to think through.

Benjamin calls on two words in order to evoke “Er-fahr-bung,” coloring-experience, in this essay: art and fantasy. Their relationship is worked out in more nuance in “Der Regenbogen: Gespräch über die Phantasie,” written around same time or slightly later.<sup>97</sup> The complex network of thoughts that give rise to these early, esoteric reflections on color is laid out with special distinctness by Peter Fenves in “The Paradisal *Epoché*: On Benjamin’s First Philosophy” (Arresting Language 174f.). According to Fenves, Benjamin’s early work on color forms not only a critique of Kant’s theory of experience, but also a departure from Hermann Cohen’s reading of that theory, as well as an overcoming of the latent subjectivity in Husserl’s *Ideen*, a putting into practice of his study of Cantor’s transfinite numbers, and, last but by no means least, the color work stands as a compliment to the language theory that Benjamin develops in the early reading of two poems by Hölderlin and in his essay on language. Reading this essay is indispensable for an understanding of the philosophical sources of Benjamin’s thoughts and the transformation he effects on them.

It is interesting that the phenomenological mode in which coloring-experience may appear to adults is the dream. This multiplies rather than diminishes the difficulties. At the beginning of the dialogue on the rainbow when the two speakers come together, although Georg would like to hear Margarethe’s dream and she would like nothing more than to share her “Bilder” with him, such communication seems at first impossible. “Georg – ich sehe, daß ich es nicht kann. Ein Traum läßt sich nicht sagen” (GS VII.1 19). The rhetoric of seeing begins to

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<sup>97</sup> According to the editors of the critical edition, Scholem reported that the essay on perception was written in 1914 or 1915 (GS VI 695). The editors reason that the rainbow dialogue would most likely have been written in the winter of 1915 (GS VII.2 561).

display its complexity in this line. By “ich sehe,” Margarethe means that she has an insight or a thought, and yet insight or thought, as analogues of vision but made into discreet units that can be transferred from one thinker to another, is what a dream forbids. It has to be dreamed. The dream form of coloring-experience is not communicable as knowledge, at least not insofar as the receiver would not also be dreaming or inside the other’s dream. Howard Caygill expresses one of the reasons behind this incommunicability. What he says about painting applies equally to writing. To write about color “entails that a particular modality of colour—the polar contrast of black and white—becomes the canon for the spectrum of tonal values which serves as the medium for colour. For this reason, the colours of which Margarete dreamt cannot be translated from the speculative infinity of configuration into the inscription of coloured marks on a surface...” (Caygill 10-1). Color is degraded when it becomes writing: a myriad of hues becomes a binary contrast. And this difference is in fact what Margarethe’s dream was a dream *of*. “So war es im Traum, ich war nichts als Sehen. Alle anderen Sinne waren vergessen, verschwunden. Auch ich selbst war nicht, nicht mein Verstand, der die Dinge aus den Bildern der Sinne erschließt. Ich war keine Sehende, ich war nur Sehen. Und was ich sah, waren nicht Dinge, Georg, nur Farben. Und ich selbst war gefärbt in dieser Landschaft” (GS VII. 1 19-20). The understanding that separates things from the images of sight is forgotten in dreaming, and so the contents of the dream cannot be communicated in the language of things. Margarethe has had a dream about the dissolution of the opposition between form and contents. Her being, in the dream, was seeing. Quite unlike psychoanalytic instruments for understanding the dissolute way of dreams—as a gap-filled series of images that can be smoothed into a narrative, or a set of signs that stand, in their fragmentary quality, as symbols for a hidden continuity—this dream-communication dispenses with the requirement of sense. Margarethe’s understanding disappears



and with it “things,” insofar as things are what images offer and images are gifts of the senses to the understanding to be plundered of their things. This is the ineluctable constitution of the empirical “I” whose remnant Benjamin had wanted to eradicate from the “Kantian Typic”: empty senses that serve only to fill preexisting structure with predictable contents. This perceptual-mental schema dissolves when in the dream Margarethe “is” seeing. Seeing, she “is not” “ich selbst.”

Margarethe’s dream, in which experience is freed from knowledge and presented in all its richness, stimulates Georg, her interlocutor, to extrapolate this model to fantasy and to art. Of the two, she is the experiencer and he the explainer. Although Benjamin is obviously trying to develop a positive doctrine of distraction in these writings, he nonetheless leaves experience in the hands and dreams of women and children (animals are not mentioned), where it has traditionally been relegated, and gives the task of deriving a principle from it to the man—that is, insofar as we can assume that Georg corresponds to a man or male principle and Margarethe to a female principle or woman.

Although this gender structure is doubtless in operation here, Georg’s derivation of the principles of distraction also move toward destroying the categories that support such a division of labor. The associations—principle-cognition/male-adult, experience-distraction/ female-child—should break down in experience that is no longer determined by transcendental forms. By rights they should dissolve into the sea of fantasy. In Georg’s formulation, fantasy has much less to learn about experience from art than art does from fantasy. Painting is the exemplary art form that Georg adduces to demonstrate the difference. Painting cannot make a claim to “pure experience” because it does not have color as its essence, but rather “surface,” “Fläche.” Essentially surface, its principle is space and not color, and its mode is thus formation and not

coloring; painting forms space for the sake of things, with the result that for painting color is secondary (GS VII.1 20-1). Philosophy that has seen color as a “secondary property” falls prey to critique here, when Benjamin—like Plato before him—recognizes a complicity between the Western philosophical outlook and painting.<sup>98</sup> Outline and perspective, light and shadow, form and content, things—painting’s ontological toolkit—impoverish color, whose strength lies in an uninterrupted infinite variability of hues. As the critique of painting demonstrates, not just any art can take this eccentric “Farbenlehre” as its principle. Said another way, an art that would take color as its principle and not merely as a weak reflection or secondary property would have to accept the laws of fantasy. Fantastic law carries the special proviso, however, that it cannot be followed as though it were a paradigm, a “Vorbild.” It must instead be taken as an Urbild, a “prototype,” a prefiguration of a similar but not identical variation that streams from fantasy into art. Georg expresses this strict requirement in a paradoxical formula: ““Und nur, wo er [the artist] das Urbild zum Vorbild zu machen strebt, wo er des Geistigen sich gestaltlos bemächtigen will, formlos anschaut, wird das Werk phantastisch” (GS VII.1 22). Unlike the formalist or artist-centered theories of art, Benjamin makes a *plaidoyer* here for an artistic principle of unformation that would benefit neither theory. From this will follow, both sooner and later in his writings, a theory of history and art history seen not so much as the succession of forms or a set of intellectual reforms, but rather as the repeated advent of the principle of unforming, of which

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<sup>98</sup> For an account of the discussion between Benjamin and Scholem on cubism during which this attitude toward painting was first adumbrated, see Brüggemann (125). Benjamin works out the details of his distinction between the beauty of art, which is spatial, and the beauty of nature, which isn’t, in the fragment “Der Regenbogen oder die Kunst des Paradieses” (GS VII.1 562-3).

color is an essential prototype—prototype not because it is an archetype against which each instance is measured, but because it is the origin of a configuration. Autumn is a sign of the advent of this principle in nature: “werden spricht sich aus in Gestaltung (junge Knospen), Vergehen in Färbung” (GS VI 122). A reference to Hölderlin’s dense text, “Das Werden im Vergehen,” this line clarifies Benjamin’s emphasis on the “Buntheit,” the infinite variegation of the colored world. A color manifold represents an absolute dissolution of form, a uniformly unformed array—a rainbow. Along with it, the intellectual order that corresponds to the reception of forms, objects, things, space, and time also disintegrates. Not surprisingly, it is Margarethe who offers a subtle, nuanced word that sums up in an experiential manner Georg’s speculative remarks. She calls the pure reception of color “woolly.” She makes this word even more distinct with the following lines: “Eine zerstreute, raumlose Unendlichkeit der reinen Aufnahme, so war die Kunstwelt des Kindes gebildet... Das Wahrnehmen der Kinder ist selbst in die Farbe zerstreut. Sie leiten nicht ab” (GS VII.1 25). Her last remark opens up the difference between two concepts of distraction that are easily and often confused (needless to say, this conceptual “confusion” is not distraction, not in Benjamin’s sense at any rate!). It is not the case that children are always ready to be distracted. Children are in point of fact undistractable. They are undistractable *from* a total distraction *in* the dispersed, spaceless infinity of pure reception. In other words, in a world without things, distraction cannot be confused with diversion. One can be diverted from one thing or state of affairs to another. Children are then never easy to divert from the vision in which they alone see and are seen, in which they experience-color. As we’ve seen, Adorno takes it for granted in his commentary on the artwork essay that Benjamin means *Zerstreuung* in the first sense, as diversion, amusement, a sense about which one might rightly be suspicious. All its relatives and connotations—division, diversion, amusement, entertainment,

dissolution, depravity—speak of a deficiency, whereas Benjamin’s “Zerstreuung” gestures toward an untold abundance and fertility in which nature and human nature merge in a Technicolor kaleidoscope that no Hollywood studio or laser-show could replicate. This, the second sense, names a complete un-forming of the perceptual-mental order. In pure reception there are neither beings nor primary properties, only free and freely combining secondary properties for which painters—even though Benjamin insists that they occupy themselves primarily with the forms of things in space—have a term: “values,” “Werte.”

### **Redemption in Perdition**

“Reception in Distraction,” as the phrase is used in the reproducibility essay, reverberates with strong echoes of the early work on color. In “Er-fahr-bung” the hold of beings—at least insofar as they are conceived as the union of form and matter, the latter placed into and contained by the former without leaks—the hold of beings and thus of being on thought dissolves. When seeing and being seen are equalized—in “looking” this way or that—experience is purified of knowledge. Experience is made “higher” than knowledge, higher, that is, than transcendence, and so perhaps not “high” in a relative sense. Coloring-experience, it should be noted, is not comparable to a “transcendental experience” (which in any case would be, once again, indistinguishable from transcendental knowledge), but blurs the difference between the two realms—or better, re-envisions the two as something other than “realms”—an infinite variegation of hues, in this case. And so, with the dissolution of the form principle—and of principles as formative or forming—the intellectual and empirical worlds cease to conform to a topographical model. Fantasy is the palette on which the empirical and the ideal mingle.

We have seen that experience can be liberated from transcendence in fantasy—for adults in dreams and for children in the reception of color. But, at least in these early essays, little else qualifies as pure experience, pure reception, besides dreaming and coloring. Calling the reception of film reception in distraction, then, constitutes, at least in part, an attempt to generalize the experience of child and dreamer beyond childhood and dreaming—and beyond fantasy, to art and technology, and ultimately into the political realm. The artwork essay seems to call for experience in general to be purified of transcendental knowledge; it demands that all of what knowledge has emptied out be filled up again. Thus in film and its intentional structure Benjamin sees the possibility to extend his critique of Kant's theory of experience toward political experience. The political theory involved would in all probability be unlike any enlightenment or idealist theory. Wanted would be a "pure" politics, not burdened by immovable transcendental or normative structures. It would be something like a politics of pure experience, a pure politics, and therefore in a real sense unknowable. How could a politics be conceived that would be beyond knowledge? A dumb, unscientific, irregular politics? A timeless politics, that is, a politics without clock or calendar? How could a marginal intellectual state or an utterly untrained perception—dreaming or childhood—be carried into the center of a political theory? Although surrealist artists were experimenting with wider applications of dream sense, and Benjamin studied these trials carefully, it was not enough to demand the dissolution of the individual imagination in dream-images or of the subjective nature of grammar in automatic writing, not enough to envision another reality above or below the rational order as a secret source to which an individual intellect could gain access. Surrealist doctrine, in addition, did not venture to explain political community. Neither in surrealism nor *l'art pour l'art* did art theory achieve, from Benjamin's perspective, a force strong enough to melt the bonds of traditional

politics. Half a century later Jean Luc-Nancy would develop such a notion through the works of a colleague and acquaintance of Benjamin's in Paris, Georges Bataille, in a theory of a community with nothing in common (that is, with no shared fund of knowledge) that derived partly from Bataille's historical association with the surrealists.

To understand the connection that Benjamin makes between *Zerstreuung* and politics we also have to traverse his *Habilitationsschrift* on the German mourning play. In this work, whose composition Benjamin finished in 1925 although he started sketching out the central themes almost ten years earlier, one could say that he repeats and deepens his critique of Kant's theory of experience. This time however he does so in two dimensions that with this work become ineluctably interrelated in his thinking: art and history. Now it is historical experience that has to be liberated from its transcendental schemata, and it finds this liberation in and through the visual art, poetry, literary criticism, of the period. The *Trauerspiel* offers a pre-Kantian alternative to the transcendental structure of knowledge in its language, imagery, and dramaturgy.

The "Erkenntniskritische Vorrede" to this book is the stage on which the next battle against transcendental knowledge's hegemony over "pure experience" is fought. This time the main actor is not child or dreamer but *Wissenschaftler*. Benjamin introduces this figure in the preface, as part of the attempt to ground his own activity as a scholar in the object of his writing. Benjamin finds his own scholarly ideal—to rescue the *Trauerspiel* from disappearance—already at work in the German baroque. The *Trauerspiel*, in this sense, is an idea. It accomplishes the ideal of rescuing historical phenomena, as do the poetry, poetic treatises, and emblem books of the period. This is the hallmark of the baroque: its artworks have a prosaic, scientific, scholarly intention. In addition, like the child in his earlier writings, the *Wissenschaftler*—whether

Benjamin himself or the baroque dramatist—constitutes and is constituted by his activity. The baroque—named, one etymology suggests, after the unusual beauty of an irregularly shaped pearl—works its grotesquerie on him while he writes on it. Once they join in deformation, there is no telling the dreamer from the dream: the figure of the researcher, born in the period, sinks into the rubble in which he works; he collects its dispersed elements and distracts himself again among his collection. In fact, the more compact the dispersal the more distracted he becomes. Thus, just as much as the *Trauerspiel*—unlike tragedy—communicates in the mode of allegory, the genre becomes, for the researcher, an allegory of the advent of a new intellectual form, the idea.

Benjamin's doctrine of pure experience, which he describes in the early work in terms of color, passes through the *Trauerspiel* book, where the close connection between the artwork and history is made. The "Erkenntniskritische Vorrede" lays out the parameters of this connection. *Trauerspiele* are the union of history and art in an idea, although Benjamin uses the term "idea" here in a peculiar sense. Whereas before encountering Socrates, Plato had been a tragedian, the theorists of the German baroque were writers of *Trauerspiele*. Thus the *Trauerspiel* offers the philosophical critic the materials for a newly conceived doctrine of ideas. It is the particularly philosophical configuration of *Trauerspiele* that appeals to Benjamin, and not their greatness as artworks. In point of fact it is the plays' poverty as artworks that reveals their richness as ideas.

How can one have an idea without knowledge? Is there an idea that does away with the Platonic separation between idea and appearance that makes knowledge—the mediator between the two—necessary and possible? Is there, in short, an idea of experience within experience, such that what is accounted for by ideas and what accounts for in them become accessible to critical theory? If so, if the world of ideas came down to earth, as it were, how would an idea

retain the authority it needs to offer truth about the phenomena in question? Where would truth be in an experiencable idea?

Benjamin asks these and related questions in the preface, and answers at least some of them at one blow in an aphoristic sentence, which he then goes on to interpret. “So definiert die Sonderung der Wahrheit von dem Zusammenhang des Erkennens die Idee als Sein” (Benjamin GS I.1 210). The idea belongs to the sphere of being rather than the sphere of knowledge. This is its truth. About the idea there are no facts, no information is forthcoming—and for this reason it has been subject to an historical “Unkunde” (GS I.1 218) that, according to Benjamin, kept this *other* doctrine of ideas secret until the silence was broken by the early romantics. As an aside, we can note that here again that Benjamin anticipates the separation of knowledge and being in Heidegger. In the seventeenth century there was already a movement toward an ontological Ideenlehre. “Das Trauerspiel im Sinn der kunstphilosophischen Abhandlung ist eine Idee” (GS I.1 218). The Trauerspiel *is* an idea. This assertion is of no little importance. On the contrary—insofar as an idea gives truth in the sphere of being and not in the sphere of knowledge, given that the Trauerspiel *is* an idea, it has its being as its idea. The Trauerspiel is an idea of being. And it is so in an exemplary manner. That is to say, for Benjamin this genre has a privileged place as exemplar of the new doctrine of ideas. It sets the Ideenlehre forth, it presents itself as the idea of ideas. Why? Because it is a drama of configuration, and configuration is the idea’s being. As configuration, ideas function historically and artistically, not transcendently, at least not in the Platonic or the Kantian senses of the term. We might understand the situation something like this: the idea survives from its Platonic formulation, but the world in which it was supposed to exist as separate, autonomous, from whose distant landscape it gave the look to appearances... this world no longer exists, even as a wish. In baroque art the two worlds collapse into one



another. Then, in retrospect, it can be seen that of course Plato's two worlds were also an idea—a configuration of elements that opened a stretch with a pre- and post-history. With the Trauerspiel, then, the idea of idea changes, and with it, philosophical language and the form of its writing can be re-envisioned from the beginning.

“Idee als Konfiguration” Benjamin entitles the fifth section of the preface. An idea is neither a concept, under which phenomena can be ordered hierarchically, nor the law by which those concepts would order phenomena, as it seemed to be in Plato's theory and was in Kant's (GS I.1 214). An idea depends on the removal—the being separately, χωρῖς—of ideas from things. And yet, unlike Plato's theory in which the notion of distance could never be reconciled with the need for “participation” (μετέχως) of phenomena in ideas,<sup>99</sup> the removal is here brought into the realm of phenomena as difference. An idea is the sum of differences between phenomena by which they hang together, their Zusammenhang, as it were. This sense of idea as relation or configuration of phenomenal elements through separation has peculiar consequences, and one of them is important for the study of distraction. It is the disunity of phenomena and not their unity (under one or another category) that constitutes their being. Their spread, and the nothing between, the true removal of one from another without being able to categorize either, gives them their being as phenomena. As a “diskontinuierliche[] Endlichkeit” or an infinite finitude phenomena hang together in an idea (GS I.1 218). And thus, only insofar as they are distant, broken up and held apart by the discontinuity that allows them to shine—like stars, as Benjamin's famous analogy goes—are they at all. This allows phenomena to become “elements” of an idea without sacrificing their singularity to its unity; an idea is no more than the

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<sup>99</sup> Aristotle's critique of the Platonic notion of participation is found at (Metaphysics 990b31f.).

discontinuity that defines them. In this way “sind die Phänomene aufgeteilt und gerettet zugleich” (GS I.1 215). Saved they are, but only insofar as they remain strewn apart, “aufgeteilt,” distributed about in a divergent array. “Die Einsammlung der Phänomene,” writes Benjamin, “ist die Sache der Begriffe und die Zerteilung, die sich kraft des unterscheidenden Verstandes in ihnen vollzieht, ist um so bedeutungsvoller, als in einem und demselben Vollzuge sie ein Doppeltes vollendet: die Rettung der Phänomene und die Darstellung der Ideen” (GS I.1 215). The reception of ideas, then, occurs in a double movement in which idea, concept, and understanding play very specific roles. “Begriff” names the grasping, collecting quality that follows after the idea to categorize it; “Zerteilen” names the scattering movement that precedes the idea, of which the understanding is the principle organ. “Darstellung” is perhaps the word that comes closest to standing for the whole complex of movements. It stands here in place of the coloring-experience of the early work on children and fantasy. Nothing to do with forming material, “placing there”—Darstellen—is the movement of the idea whose two faces are dividing out and maintaining distances. Philosophy is fated—as the first lines of the preface declare—to always again face the question of Darstellung for the very reason that it *makes* ideas when it configures phenomena, and also because although it “places there”—“darstellt”—it routinely ignores its direct involvement in ideas’ look. Ideas are presented in and through philosophical writing and exist in the presentation and nowhere else. So distant stands Benjamin’s idea from idealism. What’s more, so distant stands his truth from the positivism that would accumulate disparate bits of knowledge, weaving them more and more tightly together in order eventually to catch truth “als käme sie von draußen herzuflogen” (GS I.1 207) that Benjamin has to turn to the scholastic treatise for a philosophical form capable of demonstrating this point. It is not just this or that idea that the medieval treatise presents. It presents, rather, in its broken, halting

development the discontinuous distancing configuring movement of ideas themselves. In setting up relationships between phenomena and their concepts, the treatise does not try to smooth out the disparities. By means of the authoritative citation, among other rhetorical figures, the treatise performs the task of *Darstellen*, placing in a differential array that, like the rainbow, harbors no truths beyond the absolute truth of its differentiation. Nothing can be known about it except that it is this way or that, that this is placed here (“da”) and that is placed there (“da”), and it is the task of philosophy to articulate this fact and thus to describe ideas.

The “*Darstellung*” that takes the idea as its model—and doesn’t flee from its truth—is, for Benjamin, prose. Philosophical style is prosaic and its social function that of pedagogy—it is made for teaching and learning, not for the progressive establishment of positive truth—and its correlative mental attitude is “*Zerstreuung*.”

There is no question that collecting takes a back seat to dispersal in the preface. *Aufteilen*—dividing up and sharing out—is collection, and collection occurs only to the extent that it includes unfathomable breaks in its grouping. The unfathomable gap belongs to the idea before phenomena do, and thus, as its primordial element—no element—it allows it to remain mutable and open to deformation. Every idea is a deformation of the original break. To the primordial “*Aufteilung*” corresponds a *Zerstreuung* of the faculties. Benjamin indicates as much when he defines understanding as the capacity for differentiating. It is also apparent from the preface that if truth is the unity of all singularities (GS I.1 210), that is, if it is the idea of ideas, the description of all possible configurations, and, moreover, if “*Ideen bilden eine unreduzierbare Vielheit*” (GS I.1 223), then whatever capacity a human being has for receiving ideas or their overall truth is itself irreducibly multitudinous and disparate. If ideas are the “objective virtuelle Anordnung” of phenomena, their “objektive interpretation,”

interpretation—thinking—is the faculty of scattering that corresponds to them (GS I.1 214).

Truly scientific thinking, in that case, is distractive.

Two baroque figures offer a lesson in the reception of ideas: the artist and the researcher. Only through the coordinated effort of these two can ideas be configured and subsequently made decipherable, that is, describable. Each of their tasks is transformed by the baroque revolution in understanding, albeit from contrary perspectives. One condenses understanding into a little image, the other spreads it out to the point of distraction. According to the preface, the artist “entwirft ein Bildchen der Ideenwelt und eben darum, weil er es als Gleichnis entwirft, in jeder Gegenwart ein endgültiges” (GS I.1 212). The artist is given his new task in the change that takes place in art’s mode and aims during the baroque, according to Benjamin’s understanding of it. Having thrown off the yoke of classical rules and abandoned itself to finite history in the wake of the reformation and the gruesome thirty years’ war, the baroque artist crystallizes his estrangement from eternal artistic and religious truths in an outline, that is, in an index of the now missing completed work, and a little image, a parabolic reflection of the inaccessible Platonic idea. Both the diminutive size and distorted character of the artist’s work testify to his alienation from the fixed, transcendent idea-world. Ideas now take place in time, or rather, they define and determine a time, and so each time an artist makes an artwork, each time he makes an earthly, material work that condenses his alienation from eternity, that work has value only for a finite duration. With the Trauerspiel, the idea of the eternal artwork is overcome.

As compliment and contrast to the artist’s exile from the transcendental idea stands the researcher’s powers over the scientific idea. “Der Forscher disponiert die Welt zu der Zerstreuung im Bereiche der Idee, indem er sie vom innen im Begriffe aufteilt” (GS I.1 212). It is the work of the researcher to divide up the world and strew it out into an idea according to

concepts. The give and take between these two ways of working determines the shape of intellectual tasks for subsequent generations. Kantian critique, nineteenth-century systematic philosophy, scientific positivism, as well as Benjamin's own recondite treatise fall within the scope of intellectual possibilities opened up by this pair, who in turn have their synthesis in the philosopher. While the artist condenses into a parable that must be read, and the researcher distributes phenomena according to concepts, the philosopher is the one who truly works within the new *Ideenlehre*. "Ist Übung im beschreibenden entwerfe der Ideenwelt, dergestalt, daß die empirische von selber in sie eingeht und in ihr sich löst, die Aufgabe des Philosophen, so gewinnt er die erhobene Mitte zwischen dem Forscher und dem Künstler" (GS I.1 212). The philosopher operates in the space cleared by the work of these two, interested in both the raising of phenomena out of the merely empirical and the presentation of ideas, their configuration. Philosophers should be the presenting-gathering, scattering-placing, here-and-there-moving synthesis of artist and researcher. A philosopher's task is "Übung," improvisatory, practical learning while making descriptive sketches of ideas. For this reason the philosopher is raised above the artist and researcher: the philosopher acknowledges what the other two do not. In the artist's condensation of the world of ideas an image is made, but the connections within the idea-world are left inaccessible. This is the artwork's parable like quality, which leaves the artwork to be read by another. In the researcher's distribution by means of concepts, in contrast, it is never recognized that the categories in which concepts make sense are part of an idea. Concepts and categories themselves are not fixed and apriori but movable aftereffects. What the artist knows—that ideas are sketched, *entworfen*—and what the researcher knows—that ideas are scatterings, *Zerstreuungen*, of concepts—come together in the Benjaminian philosopher. Without taking the highest categories as fixed, and yet without condensing the idea into a relatively impermeable

image, a parable, the philosopher makes use of the new, variable relationship between empirical and ideal. Used to the movement of phenomena into and out of an idea, the dissolution of empirical material as well as the improvisatory nature of the sketch, the philosopher is the paramount absentminded scientist.

In a Platonic landscape the pursuer of knowledge must leave behind the world of images and art's dissembling along with it, to move, by means of the dialectic, towards the idea-realm. Yet Benjamin's researcher-artist, the philosopher, moves in reverse, performing an "Aufteilung," a dividing up and sharing out of the world of images *within* the realm of ideas. At a moment when the past no longer functioned as the rule of the present, in which art transformed its relation to history, research becomes a plodding, hoarding, materially ordering apperception of the world, and art becomes a condensing, image-making empirical activity. This transformation has several important consequences. For one thing, understanding can no more expect to escape the finality of the present than art can. The realm of ideas enters history under the glance of the researcher-philosopher, which is directed toward a multiplicity of finite images; indeed, research historicizes in a scattered glance. Only through the dividing activity, "Aufteilung," and the distributing activity of "Zerstreuung," are phenomena drawn into an idea.<sup>100</sup> Art condenses, each

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<sup>100</sup> In his recent book, whose subtitle indicates the stakes of the opposition between concentration and distraction, "Targets of Opportunity: On the Militarization of Thinking," Samuel Weber recalls the baroque court of the Trauerspiel book, which, in adhering to the laws of *Zerstreuung und Sammlung*, after every collection and concentration of political powers repeats "the "fall" rather than the coming of the resurrection" (*Targets* 104). To this eternal return of distraction,

time for a singular present, but philosophical research removes whatever density art has.

Whatever occlusion remains in the artwork philosophical research makes accessible to the understanding in an idea, by setting it in distance from other artworks and other phenomena.

From this we can begin to see how the medium of the philosophical researcher, who is also a philosopher-artist, is neither ideas nor phenomena, but the span or reach that keeps them from collapsing into one another, keeping ideas from becoming internally indistinguishable unities. Where philosophical research-art represents the new shape of understanding, however, it also presents a problem for philosophy as traditionally understood. Philosophical research completes ideas by scattering, by grasping at distances. The traditional or systematic philosopher, however, who conceives of truth as a unity in “gaplessness” [“Lückenlosigkeit”], pales before understanding’s new task: the distractive work of keeping the gaps open (GS I.1 213).<sup>101</sup> Philosophical research, one of Benjamin’s earliest attempts to come to terms with

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Weber contrasts the notion of network at work in “net war” that removes “everything that might distract its aim from the place it seeks to secure” (105).

<sup>101</sup> In this sense philosophical research is “barbaric,” as Kevin McLaughlin interprets this term in “Benjamin’s Barbarism.” The “interference and distortion” that accompanies any transmission of culture, like a “caesura in the movement of thought” is what Benjamin means by barbaric (15).

One who values and includes what comes between the message and the receiver is thus a barbarian. This is what McLaughlin has to say about what to Benjamin was a barbaric genre, the novel: it is “the literary mode of a collective that outlives culture understood along the traditional lines of a community based on the reciprocal exchange of experience and of the wisdom gained

distraction in and as intellectual work, saves phenomena and avoids utter darkness for the idea-realm in a relay of multiple receptions. Reception is dispersal and dispersal again. For this reason, from the perspective of knowledge “salvation of the phenomena” takes place in and as perdition, when the artistic philosophical researcher, shuttling from extreme to extreme, draws the empty spans between disparate points that comprise the only content of the idea.

Making distance into salvation is also the activity of the allegorist. Following in the allegorist’s footsteps, the philosophical critic—Benjamin—wanders away from his object and by deserting it freezes it into an image. Images are thus products of a passage beyond their elements, and the allegorist is by nature, through this active leaving behind, bereft. For this reason, allegory is “das gewaltige Divertissement” (GS I.1 361), by which the baroque researching artist comes to terms with the disintegration of the transcendental realm. In Pascal’s image, the diverted one absorbs himself in the most trivially small amusement, the to and fro of a billiard ball, or fox hunting; in Benjamin’s version, the allegorist disperses himself in the unproductive activity of arranging and rearranging the disconnected, ruined crumbings of history. In an important sense, then, history produces ideas. Or, at least, history as ruination presents the artist and researcher with the material for idea-building. In his discussion of the allegorical modus of Trauerspiele, Benjamin presents the idea-doctrine as a philosophical process carried out on and in history. “Es ist der Gegenstand der philosophischen Kritik zu erweisen, daß die Funktion der Kunstform eben dies ist: historische Sachgehalte, wie sie jedem bedeutende Werk zugrunde liegen, zu philosophische Wahrheitsgehalt zu machen” (GS I.1 358). Philosophical critique, which in the

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from it. Thus, the novel starts, and indeed repeatedly anew, where experience means nothing”

(13).



preface is said to stand between research and art, is defined more precisely here (although of course Benjamin wrote this section before he wrote the preface). What does the artwork do? It turns the materials washed up by history into truth—truth being no more than the reiterated necessity to build ideas, history being nothing more than a producer of waste, ideas being no more than an intensification of wasting—at least, this is how the artwork looks from the perspective of one who longs for transcendence. For the baroque artist art is the temporary, finite rescue of waste—ontological recycling, Benjamin might have said had he been familiar with the term. Philosophical critique then presents the “new birth” of the recycled phenomena in their idea, the artwork, which lifted them out of the decaying stream of “ephemeral beauty.” That the baroque artwork thereby itself becomes a “ruin” makes it no less beautiful, no less the beautiful showplace of ideas. “Im allegorischen Aufbau des barocken Trauerspiels zeichnen solch trümmerhafte Formen des geretteten Kunstwerks von jeher deutlich sich ab” (GS I.1 358). The Trauerspiel is an exemplary structure in which rubble-like forms show up as rubble-like. Born again as rubble, historical structures lose the unifying force of, say, lived experience, directed as it is from above by categories that transcend it. As a consequence, no longer can a desirous gaze, an art criticism, or “thought” look to history to reflect back to it its unity. And the reverse is also true. No longer can the common store of concepts or knowledge handed over by history be unified by the consciousness that attends it. Instead of the triumphant, unifying attention of, say, the Greek sculptor who moves ever closer to his subject by means of his artistry, “zumal in der Barock sieht man die allegorische Person gegen die Embleme zurücktreten, die meist in wüster, trauriger Zerstreung sich den Blicken darbieten” (GS I.1 361-2). In the allegorical person, the one who has his “life” in allegory, at the same time the maker and receiver of allegories and himself no more than allegory, a corresponding disposition takes hold. The disposing, displacing,

distancing “Darstellung” of historical materials in the idea finds its counterpart in the “Darbieten,” the offering up of a zerstreute gaze. The philosophical researcher, it turns out, is the heir of the allegorist. “Als Stückwerk aber starren aus dem allegorischen Gebild die Dinge,” and the distracted one throws back a patchwork stare. Like the baroque literary and artistic forms whose stare he returns, the allegorist’s distracted gaze should not be confused with intellectual modes that correspond to poetry, say, or music. Zerstreung is prosaic; whereas the poet receives a gift of heavenly powers, the distracted one experiences no ecstasy. Inspiration is as foreign to him as distraction would have been to Hesiod. In that case, it is not the Dionysus of “Rausch,” intoxication, from whom distraction borrows its mood, but rather the Dionysus in whose company reasonable anthropoi are torn to pieces—Euripides would perhaps then be this god’s finest playwright. The allegorist’s shattered stare corresponds to the “Denkbruchstücken” (GS I.1 208) that make up the mosaic quality of the treatise; it is the mode of contemplation proper to discontinuity, produced by it and returned to it.

For this reason, when, in the baroque, nature is allegorized as a person, it is not in order to ascribe to nature unity or a greater capacity for reason. No—nature becomes human in order to become “entseelt,” un-souled, according to Cysarz as Benjamin cites him (GS I.1 263). Nature’s soullessness concretizes in the other structure emphasized in Trauerspielen, the royal court. “Allegorie...führt in ihren ausgebildeten Form, der barocken, einen Hof mit sich; ums figuralen Zentrum, das den eigentlichen Allegorien im Gegensatz zu Begriffsumschreibungen nicht fehlt, gruppiert die Fülle der Embleme sich” (GS I.1 364). Not conceptually, but allegorically, the sum of emblems—script-like, lexical elements—gather around a figurative center—empty, soulless—whose presence guarantees order to the elements. “Sie scheinen willkürlich angeordnet,” writes Benjamin. The only law of this collection is the disposition of items around the allegorist—the

emblematic sovereign of historical ruination—who steps back sadly from the collection upon realizing that the act of collecting makes the arrangement no less arbitrary. Knowledge, Benjamin reminds us in the preface, “ist ein haben” (GS I.1 209). One insight at which Benjamin seems to have arrived in his work on the German baroque is that if experience, historical or individual, is to overcome knowledge, and, moreover if the understanding is to move in among the phenomena as its “objective interpretation,” the discontinuity of the arrangement—of arrangement (dispersal, distancing) as the fundamental intellectual principle—calls for an intellectual mode that lives up to the strict demand not to turn the arrangement back into knowledge. Such a strict demand for thought Benjamin learned from the *Trauerspiel*. God may propose and man dispose, but the baroque court—an arbitrary arrangement of elements—becomes the emblem of allegory—a “disposing” of elements to which no “proposing” corresponds. Instead of a “having,” the order of allegory disposes and in disposing dispossesses the center of its periphery. The allegorist goes away empty handed because the court’s “Zerstreuung” won’t be contained by collecting; instead collecting intensifies distraction. Although named here, collection, “Sammlung,” hardly exists at all as an independent attitude. “Der verwirrte ‘Hof’”—der spanische Trauerspieltitle—ließ als Schema der Allegorie sich ansprechen. “Zerstreuung” und “Sammlung” heißt das Gesetz dieses Hofes. Die Dinge sind zusammengetragen nach ihrer Bedeutung; die Anteillosigkeit an ihrem Dasein zerstreut sie wieder” (GS I.1 364). The meaning ascribed to the elements by the sovereign allegorist, in other words, whatever temporary principle he proposes in order to collect them, never naturalizes itself; the principle never becomes the law of the court. The elements remain, although collected, ontologically dispersed. A hint toward this second level of dispersal, according to Benjamin, lies in the disorderliness of the *Trauerspiel*’s allegorical scenery.

Allegory is the historical compliment to a child's coloring-experience. In its work and the work, idea and phenomena, actuality and potentiality coincide in a virtual, working, concrete understanding that is again conceived by Benjamin as difference without substance—experience without knowledge. In addition, once again, the purely differential experience of the idea evacuates the distinction between subject and object. Distinctions are *made*, objectively, in configurations in which phenomena—or colors—need not conform to a concept in order to be clear and distinct, and, too, the one who configures is a phenomenon in the configuration. In allegory the “nuance” or hue that in coloring-experience constitutes difference is replaced by the mark or “script.” Allegory offers a rainbow of writing capable of producing endless finite configurations by “saving” characters from lost contexts, not to erase the loss but to affirm and reinscribe it. Whereas the doctrine of color emphasizes hue or nuance in contrast to form and space, allegory emphasizes disposition or arrangement in contrast to meaning and concept. In both coloring-experience and allegory, the relation of matter to form is “aufgehoben,” consumed and cancelled in a much more vulgar movement than that of the Hegelian dialectic. Phenomena and ideas exist together in suspension here; ideas are the suspension of phenomena, unchanged, in a finite array, always capable of being dissolved again. Thus allegory operates, like coloring-experience, through a principle of un-forming. It names the removal of form for the purposes of pure history, the experience of ruination, the repeatable dissolution of elements. A child's “looking” in coloring is, for Benjamin, *zerstreut*; likewise, the allegorist, whose characteristic affect is “Trauer,” insofar as he is already one of the elements in the allegory, is distracted from it, within it.

The two “Zerstreuungen” are not the same however. The first, the “distracted, spaceless infinity of pure reception,” is a specifically individual liberation of the human faculties from the

pressure of transcendence, even though it does away with the individual in the process.

Furthermore, reception is pure in coloring-experience, unlike in Kant's epistemology, because it dispenses with one of the pure intuitions that precede and determine all experience: space. The infinitude of the rainbow is not "bad," as Hegel might call it, in comparison to the "good" infinity of totality—it does not stand in relation to totality at all. Instead, color relates to an absolute. Each hue is absolutely different from every other and is relative only to the infinity of actual hues of the rainbow. Color difference is not a question of relativity, as it would be for difference in magnitude—the infinitely big or the infinitely small—there is simply no question of measurement in a chromatic array because any point is a beginning or an end. Distraction in the rainbow destroys the preeminence of space in philosophical explanation. Without formed spaces, without space thought of as the outermost outline, the intelligence, which knows when it knows because it comes to the end of an epistemic object, would become infinite as well. Infinitized intelligence offers an image of distraction—*Zerstreuung*—as an endlessly rich commotion among nuances, a shifting from hue to hue. Unlike the popular view of distraction, for Benjamin it is unlike normal intelligence not because it is muddy or confused, and certainly not because it take as its object some unsanctioned thing, but because it is absolutely distinct. Distraction receives pure phenomenality—in it everything is phenomenal; even the distinctions between colors are themselves colored.

But such a concept of distraction is also limited. Confined to two realms, dream-fantasy and coloring-experience, the concept does not so much pull knowledge off its transcendental throne as evade its reach. Who ever claimed that color or dreams should be subject to transcendental knowledge? Certainly not Kant; he simply did not value them. What about the

regions in which transcendental knowledge would continue to reign undisturbed? Science and history, politics and non-fantastic art, the technological sphere, and so forth?

Allegory opens the way for a more general doctrine of distraction. It entails not just a critique of perception and a presentation of what is truly “wahrgenommen” in “Wahrnehmung,” but also a theory of history and an image of the role of artists and researchers in it. In allegory, distraction is the intellectual dispersal that responds to history’s production of ruins and their “Umdeutung,” their allegorical reinterpretation into an objective configuration. Configuring draws its strength from distraction at the same time as a configuration domesticates distraction for the allegorist. Knowledge, then, ceases to transcend the singular crystallization that history, art, and research conjointly arrange. In this sense, *Zerstreuung* also names a relationship with history in which disintegration is the rule, and so it is an anti-eschatological attitude, awaiting no final judgment in which things will take their ultimate position, but instead stepping in to dispose—not to judge—in an each-time finite, though never final way.

We have seen that distraction-distribution is for Benjamin a disposition toward and within “pure experience” and “ruination history.” Moreover, from the beginning of his writing on the subject, Benjamin’s distraction occurs in the dissolution of subject and object into a medium. Distraction names the intellectual mode in which intellect and world become inseparable. No longer do Aristotle’s passive and active intellects vie for primacy. Coloring, an active-passive, makes them indistinguishable, as does the baroque disposition of elements—among which the allegorist is but one—in an idea. In the former, however, experience is irreducibly individual, and its doctrine derives from the stages of life and the modalities of the individual mind. The beneficiaries of distraction in coloring-experience are the child, who will most certainly grow out of this peculiar intractability and freedom, and the dreamer, whose

distraction is confined to dream-time. The name for both of these, “fantasy,” alludes both to its private nature and the difficulties in generalizing it to other areas. Nonetheless, the dialogue on the rainbow represents an attempt on Benjamin’s part to generalize fantasy by making it communicable, and with that in mind the dialogue’s structure of address is worthy of comment. As always with the strange figure of *le distrait* the question arises: who can possibly speak for him? Who can speak to him? Communicative language, either because—in European languages at least—its grammar insists on subject that do things to objects, or because, in effect, when faced with distraction language faces its own disseminating and diasporizing impulses—whatever the problem, it falters and fails.

The young Benjamin imagines a communication about distraction occurring as a dialogue between a dreamer and an artist who is also a thinker about art. She speaks of her dream-experience and he translates that experience into a technical, abstract language. At once we see however that the power of presentation lies not just with his theorizing exercises, but rather in the interchange between the two, and the loss of wonderment that accompanies it. Margarethe, still half in her dream-vision, accepts with gratitude what her theorist friend tells her about what she has passed through. The difference between their positions offers an image of the problem. Despite the personal, individual nature of coloring-experience or dream-fantasy, the importance of distraction is already communal for Benjamin, and ultimately related to the nature of communication. Theory may speak for experience, but only the combination of the two, and the loss that marks their interchange—here symbolized by their presentation in a dialogue—manages to carry across the experience *in its distance from theory*. This joint venture, this double-communication is close to what Benjamin later thinks of as “Lehre”—a communicative mode that does not do away with the losses inherent in linguistic communication. The tension between

experience and the theory of it persists through Benjamin's works, and the impossibility of resolving the tension persists as well. How can you exchange the dream for the theory of the dream when what you are after is the dream-experience freed from knowledge that would determine it? How could the theory, moreover, escape being tainted by the very thing it wishes to present, explain, contain, depict, or describe in words? And yet, instead of creating a dreamy, fantastically formed theory—a colorful theory, for example—Benjamin prefers to leave the two unsynthesized.

A similar tension appears in the *Trauerspiel* book. Here the elements condensed by the playwright into an image are loosened up and reconfigured by the researcher, and, insofar as Benjamin then presents the interchange between the two modes, something like distraction is preserved—even as it is lost for theory. And just as in the rainbow dialogue, the format of the text—as described in the preface: the mosaic treatise—resolves the tension between experience and communication much less than it exacerbates and intensifies it. It would not be unfair to call the text, at least in part, kaleidoscopic.

In both texts, then, the doctrine of distraction is communicated through a disjunction between “pure experience” and knowledge. Again, between the two scenes there are significant differences. In the rainbow dialogue, the scenery is painted by the psyche, while in the baroque book it is painted by history. The difference should not be underestimated. In the earlier work, two metaphysical concepts—or as Benjamin might have called them, “mythological”—are liberated from dogma. First, dreaming is brought out of its position secondary to waking, rational thought and extolled as the locus of “pure experience.” Second, color is freed from depreciation as a secondary property and given a higher value precisely because of its secondariness. The philosophical tradition has left color in a secondary position for the very reason that it does not



fit into substance metaphysics. Benjamin concludes that the problem of color is reason to demote metaphysics, and not the other way around. The two marginal effects allow Benjamin then to show a range of experience that philosophy has oppressed or ignored through its concept of experience, and, at the same time, to open a way toward an ignored intellectual effect—a corresponding pure thought: distraction. It is also important to note that in these early destructions, beyond the individual subject, Benjamin aims his destruction at spatiality. In the baroque book, in contrast, the target is time. Of course, the notion of the “idea” also sidesteps the highly metaphysical notion of space. It is not space as a container for objects or the substrate of motion in which ideas flourish—far from it. An idea—a disposition of elements in a systematic philosophy, Kant’s let us say—gives rise to space as an original intuition. Space is an idea, but ideas are not spatial, they are interpretive. The distance between elements in an idea is differential, not spatial; space, if it is adduced, is one possible element among many others in an idea. It is an element, as Georg says in the rainbow dialogue, proper to painting. More than space, in any case, time is the target of Benjamin’s critique in the *Trauerspiel* book—particularly historical time, conceived as a fall.

Fall-time is the historical schema—the form or idea of time—that is born in the baroque, and the *Trauerspiel* and the literary theory of the time respond to and participate in its birth. There are other factors as well, the thirty-years war, reformation and counter-reformation and the loss of eschatological security that attended these momentous changes. Insofar as historical unpredictability becomes the matter for the *Trauerspiel*’s treatment, literary form ceases to contain matter. The *Trauerspiel* becomes the showplace for the idea. Just as in the emblem books of the period, the *Trauerspiel* is a drama of arrangement, whose exemplary stage is the court in which the sovereign mourns history’s fate. And yet there is a problem in the court as well that

keeps the sovereign from ever recuperating the medieval faith in salvation. The intriguer, endemic to the court, disperses the power of the sovereign among the elements. Distraction is something like an intriguer in history. Without a divine substrate on which to depend, the motion of history becomes intrinsically diffractable, its props capable of being redistributed, its actors open to being sent out into new diasporai. A force that disrupts the longevity of this or that configuration, distraction becomes, in the baroque, the underlying disorder of human history and Benjamin takes it as his task to present this change.

### **Mass and Massiveness**

In section fifteen of the essay on technical reproducibility Benjamin returns to the topic; however, here distraction emerges in yet another set of relationships. Now it is the grounds for the occurrence of any historical turning point. Out of this, in addition, there results a specifically political effect. Benjamin would now like to contrast mass experience with knowledge. Mass can play this role because, although it is a form of community that extends to ever larger numbers of members, its communality does not depend on the self-knowledge or identity of its members.

A mass ensues when “quantity is turned around [umgeschlagen] into quality,” as section 15 in the third version begins, and thus it is not a group or collective. “Masse” is the only political unit Benjamin discusses in the essay. Other words that might indicate similar formations—Menge, Haufen, Ansammlung—are absent. There is something in the quality of the word and concept “Masse” that Benjamin wants to exploit. One obvious difference from other grouping principles is the non-spatial definition that mass borrows from physics, from whose lexicon the term originally comes. There are many hints toward the physical provenance of the

political term in Benjamin's text. Reproduction and mass share certain characteristics. They both "vervielfältigen" without becoming quantifiably more, for instance. A set of reproductions—a mass of reproductions—is not more than the original in the same way that more originals would be. Reproductions are many, though each is not one, and thus a group of them does not make up a numerable series or set. The same is true for mass. "*Indem sie [die Tradition] die Reproduktion vervielfältigt,*" writes Benjamin in section two, "*setzt sie an de stelle seines einmaligen Vorkommens sein massenweises*" (GS I.2 477). Both the political unit, mass, and the art form that it receives depart from the "once-ness" of tradition and also the "one-ness" of a denumerable series, leaving the sphere of counting for a massive way of being. The way of being massive crosses a turning point, as section 15 announces, from quantity into quality.

"Massenbewegungen unserer tage" (GS I.2 478) are to be explained, at least in part, according to this qualitative "Massenweise." Mass is the contemporary "way" of the "menschliche[] Kollektiva" that explains the change in "die Art und Weise ihrer Sinneswahrnehmung" (GS I.2 478). Furthermore, the changed kind and manner of sensual perception is "nicht nur natürlich sondern auch geschichtlich bedingt." Thus the appearance of the mass is historical, not natural. Or, better said, in mass nature changes its course—history intervenes in the seemingly natural makeup of sensual perception and transforms its basic nature. The "Zertrümmerung der Aura" and the concomitant change in political form from cult to mass coincide with this basic change in the perceiver-receiver. When human beings mass up, their sensual perception becomes massive, and their apperception is able to transform as well. We should not underestimate the momentousness of such a transformation, Benjamin insists. "Die Ausrichtung der Realität auf die Massen und der Massen auf sie ist ein Vorgang unbegrenzter Tragweite sowohl für das Denken wie für die Anschauung" (GS I.2 480).

“Die Quantität ist in Qualität umgeschlagen” (GS I.2 503). This means, among other things, that the group that could be counted up as an aggregate of individuals, equally capable of grouping together as of separating into their constituent units, becomes an indivisible bulk. As a bulk or a hulk, it has a different relationship to art (GS I.2 496). Its reaction to artworks is “massive,” which means that the reactions of individuals are “von vornherein durch ihre unmittelbar bevorstehende Massierung bedingt.” Instead of an aggregate of individuals the audience becomes susceptible to a simultaneous “Kollektivrezeption,” that begins to point once again toward Benjamin’s prior theory of pure experience (GS I.2 497). Experience is loosed from the transcendental in coloring; collective reception of artworks receives without a unified substrate. For, how can a mass—if it is not divisible into individual members whose cognitions could add up to one—how can a mass give itself transcendental unity as the law of its experience? How can the apperception of an uncountable one-many count on a transcendental unity to ensure the coherence and continuity of its thinking? A non-denumerable collective operates, according to Benjamin’s line of thinking here, through a truly plural thinking.

Coloring-experience and the allegorical idea also occur in the sphere of quality rather than quantity. In the Trauerspiel book, “Aufteilung,” the divvying up of the empirical world that the researcher accomplishes designates not an amount of phenomena but the quality of their distribution. In the reproducibility essay, similarly, Benjamin turns away from quantity toward quality, although now not in the idea but in what he calls “an altered mode of allotment” [*eine veränderte Art des Anteils*] that appears in a “disreputable shape” [*in verrufener Gestalt*] (GS I.2 503). Mass, to which the new kind of allotment belongs, seems to have to do more with

physics than with the political use of the term that was reaching one peak of its popularity at that moment.<sup>102</sup>

Let us take a brief detour through the physical concept of mass in the hopes that it illuminates Benjamin's use of the term. Like the concept of drama in the *Trauerspiel*, a shift in the concept of mass in physics came about during the German baroque. At a moment in which, as Benjamin describes it in his *Habilitationsschrift*, heaven's palace began to show its cracks, where the *Trauerspiel* was one attempt to cope with its breakdown, physics also took up the challenge to put the skies on a firm footing once again, although by thoroughly earthly means. One scientific intervention in heavenly uncertainty after the reformation was a new understanding of mass. In ancient and medieval accounts, mass had been explained by reference to substance. As *quantitas materiae* mass was a measure of the eternal substrate of perceivable qualities, a number calculating the amount of inert matter, the unchanging stuff of the mutable world. In a Copernican universe that had lost its substrate, so to speak, with no single body at its

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<sup>102</sup> On the significance of this term in Benjamin: Samuel Weber interprets "the law of dispersion and collection that governs the ambivalent movement of the allegorical mass...." Mass is allegorical because of its opaqueness to sight and the resulting resistance to manipulation as an entity. A mass comes together only in movement (and not merely in the reduced sense this term has in empirical politics), and more importantly out of a peculiar temporal pressure that Weber calls "coming-to-pass." Mass corresponds, for Weber, to a figure that fascinated Benjamin in Baudelaire, the *passante*, yet it also echoes one of the most esoteric writings of Friedrich Hölderlin, insofar as, in Weber's update of a Hölderlinian title, a mass, like the *passante*, "comes to be in passing by" (*Mass Mediauras* 84f.).

center and nothing permanently at rest, mass came to describe instead a feature of universal dynamism. In an attempt to explain the non-uniform motions of heavenly bodies, the devoutly Lutheran Kepler argued that without some innate resistance, heavenly bodies would be sent off at an infinite velocity when the tiniest force was applied. What prevented the disappearance of the heavens in a single instant was mass. Mass explained the staying power of the heavens. Whatever order there was in the universe derived from the inertia, of which mass was the measurement, that held the heavenly bodies to their paths. In short, Kepler recognized that for there to be motion at all, indeed for there to be matter and not nothing, that is, for the created universe to remain in the balance in which it was observed to be—however precarious—motion had to be directly proportional to something that opposed it. Motion, in order to be intelligible, depended on a counteracting potential to be motionless. Mass was the *sine qua non* of the given—without it, there would be nothing. In a centerless, changing universe, mass was the index of the resistance that lead to orderly change and avoided chaos.

Some consequences of Kepler's thoughts were developed in post-classical physics. The modern concept of mass is first of all not empirical. Unlike other physical qualities, it cannot be perceived by the senses or tested directly by experiment. In Euler's mechanics, for instance, mass is defined neither as the property of a body nor as a measurable quantity of material, but instead as that which arises in an interaction—an interaction that is not identifiable with any one of the participants. A ghostly construct that arises at the instant of a violent encounter, mass in modern physics names a momentary synthesis of force and matter. For Euler the mass concept named a relation, the ratio of force to acceleration, and so belonged technically to the science of motion, kinematics. It should not be surprising then that it resurfaces in a theory of cinema. In kinematics, only when two objects collide can mass be measured, and then not in itself, but in the

effects of the collision. “Massenweise” may mean for Benjamin something like this collision effect. Mass’s existence is purely virtual, and it can only be measured as a phenomenon produced by a crash—the temporary synthesis of force and matter, a kineme. Later in relativity theory, the idea of a matter-force synthesis developed to the point at which mass was thought to be identical with energy, with the striking consequence that mass would be active and passive at the same time, depending on the way it was viewed (Jammer).<sup>103</sup> Thus, from the point of view of physics after Kepler it is at the very least impossible to equate mass with material.

With mass the more actively and directly it is subject to collision, the more massive it becomes—the more massive, the more resistant, the more resistant, the more catastrophic the effects of encountering one. Thus it falls out of the classical ontological and aesthetic omniprinciples of form and content. As unformed, masses cannot be gathered into sets or ordered serially one after the other. Technically, there is no plural. Each “mass” and all “masses” are one mass, a multiplicitous bulk that unites participants under no norm and so has nothing in common with the much weaker notion of “multitude.” Furthermore, a mass has no members and so cannot be defined by internal relations. Without denumerable members, mass, it follows, can just as little be defined by criteria of entrance or by what it refuses to accept into it. It does not constitute itself by means of exclusion but in the instant of a collision, and it can be measured only by its effects. As such masses are characterized by violence, although violence is perhaps not the right English word. It cannot violate or be violated, given that it does not belong in the

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<sup>103</sup> My remarks on the physics of mass are drawn from Max Jammer’s excellent historical study of the concept of mass. P. 53f discusses Kepler’s breakthrough, p.87f Euler’s formulation of mass’s kinematic constitution, p. 172f relativity’s “massenergy”.

realm of the will; it protects no interior space of autonomy that could be invaded or forced, and thus it is impenetrable insofar as it holds no boundaries that could be penetrated.

### **Kracauer's Cult**

Given mass's impenetrability, when Benjamin writes that the social classes that enter the cinema are "umgeschlagen," turned around and thrust out of the realm of quantity into quality, they are also thrust out of "society" per se and thus made inaccessible to sociology. Exactly how one imagines the "veränderte Art des Anteils," the modified way that participants have of having a share in mass becomes the critical question. Roman *socii* established a reciprocal relationship between members, a partnership implying mutual obligation that made an alliance toward a particular purpose and only for the duration necessary for its accomplishment. A mass, however, does not seem to come into being for any purpose. We then should ask: what relationship determines a mass? Do massables amass on the basis of something held in common, a world view, an origin, a goal? Is a mass a community? The observer who wants to see mass should not be put off, Benjamin warns in section 15, just because the changed "Anteil" in the mass appears in a "verrufene Gestalt."

What is unambiguous in Benjamin's presentation is that mass does not become visible to those who pursue it by optical means—indeed, a mass has as little to do with the temporal-visual complex of present—presentation—representation as it does with the other complex of absent—invisible—unrepresentable. It is neither present nor absent, but—virtual, dispersed, massive. Those who have a passion for its "oberflächliche Seite," however, Benjamin remarks—a pointed jab at Siegfried Kracauer's passion for "Oberflächlichkeit," and, too, a recollection of Georg's



critique of painters in the rainbow dialogue, painters who occupy themselves with the Fläche— become preoccupied by mass’s “Gestalt.” And yet it is “Gestalt” itself that comes under suspicion around a mass. Like coloring-experience and the baroque “idea,” mass falls out of the sphere of form. In the *Nachwort* to the artwork essay, Benjamin ascribes a horrific outcome to the desire to give mass form. In only two ways can a mass be given shape. Mass becomes “a” mass, a unit with a visible external form, in the bird’s-eye photograph that falsifies the mass into an aggregate with an outline. A second shape is given to mass by war, which turns it into a group with countable members; it does so by dissolving the mass into corpses (GS I.2 506). Both reduce mass to formed material.<sup>104</sup> Attempts to give mass shape run counter to the tendency of reproducibility, however. Reproducibility caters to qualitative massiveness, a relationship that cannot be represented without ruining it. “*Der massenweisen Reproduktion kommt die Reproduktion von Massen besonders entgegen*” (GS I.2 506 n.32).

The stealthy but pointed critique of Kracauer here in the first passages of section 15 stem from their contrasting views of *Zerstreuung*. Kracauer welcomed *Zerstreuung* as the term for the proper representation of the new unit of social organization. Mass joins the “Cult of Distraction” in order to catch sight of itself, in order to encounter itself in an “Abbild” (Kracauer “Kult der *Zerstreuung*” 316). With mass, there is no change in the public desire for self-representation. What is represented changes—but the need for representation remains constant. In this Hegelian view, art binds the community by offering it a representation of itself; it offers itself its own norm in an image, and sociology, informed by Hegelian history, presents the new norm as science. The norm of mass, for Kracauer, is more. It is a quantitative measurement that registers

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<sup>104</sup> See again Weber, *Mass Mediauras*, p. 102-104.

a bigger, faster, more delirious collective whose experience in the world-city demands adequate representation, which it then finds in splinters, on surfaces, in flashing lights and endless illusion. As a theoretical term—as the theoretical moment of mass experience, mass finds itself on an adequate view of its essence. That essence can then be presented in sociology, where “Zerstreuung” provides theoretical truth about a cult whose image is given to it by film. More “aktuell” than the newspaper, the truth of film is the distracted totality that goes to see itself reflected there, and sociology presents this relationship.

In presenting this new form of “Kultur” as a “Kult,” however, Kracauer provides a warning for Benjamin. In his theory of art, cinema is precisely what leaves cultic spectatorship behind, not to mention normative politics. “Die technische Reproduzierbarkeit des Kunstwerks,” Benjamin reminds us, “emanzipiert dieses zum ersten Mal in der Weltgeschichte von seinem parasitären Dasein am Ritual” (GS I.2 481). With the disappearance of the “here and now” of the artwork, and the patina that gathers this here and now onto the work—its aura—the cultic idea of culture vanishes as well. In order to do justice to these new modes—mass, film, distraction—another interpretation will be required. Without a doubt, Kracauer’s reading is an empirical gain. He perceives that in cinema “die Erregungen der Sinne folgen sich in ihnen so dicht, daß nicht das schmalste Nachdenken sich zwischen sie einzwängen kann” (“Kult der Zerstreuung” 314). And yet the massification of thinking reinforces perhaps the oldest tool of theory: the division of its object into form and matter. Instead of dissipating when it dissipates—and theory with it—mass fulfills itself mentally in cinema; it becomes “geistig” again in its new form. And this is just what the critic counts on. Mass is the form in which the unchanging social substance presents itself today, and sociology receives this form without itself having to change its own method or intellectual status. As a good empiricist, Kracauer attributes the emphasis on form to his object,

not to his own theory. “Je mehr sich aber die Menschen als Masse spüren, um so eher erlangt die Masse auch auf geistige Gebiet formende Kräfte.” But this is a displacement, is it not? The attribution of a desire for form to the mass is a projection of the theoretical underpinnings of Kracauer’s sociological theory. What would a sociology do that could not claim to represent the newest social forms?

Another gain in Kracauer’s presentation is the positive attitude he takes toward distraction. In this article, first published in 1926 in the *Frankfurter Zeitung* where he was culture editor, Kracauer recommends that mass culture as he describes it be accepted and encouraged, even that its *Zerstreuungssucht* be given the financial means it needs to develop. This is the moral duty of the sociology of modernity: to make “die *Unordnung der Gesellschaft*” visible (“Kult der *Zerstreuung*” 315). Such making-visible, he claims, is the preparation for the “notwendigen Umschlag,” which, however, Kracauer does not specify further in this brief editorial. He does, however, in his earlier book on the foundations of sociology. In *Sociology als Wissenschaft*, Kracauer turns a traditionally minded sociology toward *Zerstreuung* as the hallmark of modernity. Sociology should take distraction as its subject matter in what Kracauer calls “einer sinnerfüllten Epoché”; and yet he makes this claim in order to reconfirm science’s traditional method: “verhüllung der Wahrheit als Abbild der Realität.”<sup>105</sup> Although the epoch

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<sup>105</sup> It is worth noting that in the first line of his investigation into the foundations of sociology, Kracauer acknowledges *Die Theorie des Romans* as a formative influence on the notion of history that underlies his methodology. Lukács’s concept “einer ‘sinnerfüllten Epoché’” that springs from “einer bestimmten metaphysischen Grundeinstellung” holds the position “*eines erkenntniskritischen Grenzbegriffs*” in his investigation, Kracauer advises readers. The

overfilled with sensual stimulation produces a “schlechte Undenlichkeit” of world-views, nothing of its Schlechtigkeit infects sociology’s ability to represent it (“Soziologie Als Wissenschaft: Eine Erkenntnistheoretische Untersuchung” 29); sociology manages, in spite of the degradation of modern experience, to encompass a totality of world views and become the unity of the bad infinity in a good principle—the principle of representation—that regulates it.

### **Benjamin’s Haptology**

In Benjamin’s eyes, however, mass representation can mean mass destruction. And so, in order to begin to conceive the changes to “apperception” required to receive mass in a massive way, Benjamin turns to architecture for an analogy—not because it condenses a crowd of visitors within its walls, but rather because in architecture, optical reception cedes control to another mode. In architecture optical perception is retrained by tactile perception. “There is no concept of such reception,” Benjamin declares, and yet nevertheless it can be expressed as laws that are, for an understanding of mass and film, “die lehrreichsten,” the richest in teaching (GS I.2 504).

In the sphere of touch concentration has zero value, since in tactile perception fixity translates into the most immediate loss. Touching must keep moving in order to sense: “sie findet...als in einem beiläufiges Bemerken statt” (GS I.2 505). Although the metaphors involved in the words “concept” and “attention” arise from touch—a stretching to make contact and a

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difference, he later explains, lies in the protagonist. The “freischwebende[s] Subjekt” that, according to Kracauer, the novel presents and perpetuates (“Soziologie Als Wissenschaft” 14) is replaced by a “gestaltlose Mannigfaltigkeit” in sociology, a figure that he will soon align with the medium of film (19).

grasping—grasping is death to tactile reception. It senses in running by. The instant it grasps it begins to lose its object. “Es gibt von solcher Rezeption keinen Begriff,” and for this reason no theory is produced in the mode of touch, only habit, “Gewohnheit” (GS I.2 504-5).<sup>106</sup> In addition,

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<sup>106</sup> My understanding of *Gewohnheit* in Benjamin’s writings differs from Carolin Duttlinger’s in her recent article “Between Contemplation and Distraction: Configurations of Attention in Walter Benjamin.” In an experience without transcendental guarantees, practices such as exercise (*Übung*) and concrete accumulations of experience such as collections, texts, and *Gewohnheiten*—not to mention memory—are the sources for whatever duration experience may have. For Duttlinger, however, *Gewohnheit* is a deteriorated form of attention—it is what happens to attention after its moment of presence, clarity, and force (37). Benjamin sees *Gewohnheit*, as he does practice, lessons, and training, along with other repetitions, as positive modes of human action in a detranscendentalized, historical arena.

Duttlinger’s understanding of *Gewohnheit* as deficient stems from her reading of “attention”—“*Aufmerksamkeit*” and “*Geistesgegenwart*”—in early fragments and later essays, as well as in the *Passagen-Werk*. In each case she argues that Benjamin champions neither distraction nor contemplation, but rather a different mode of attention that falls between the two. First of all, the frame of comparison is questionable. What she means by attention applies in a sphere in which the difference between subjects and objects has already been made. Thus distraction, contemplation, and the “heightened mode of attention” that she ascribes to Benjamin as a desideratum differ only in quality and degree (37). Distraction is “disengaged,” contemplation is absorbed (38). All three—*Gewohnheit*, *Zerstreuung*, *Contemplation*—are faulty modes of the attention that constitutes a “perception of significant details” (43) in a “state of

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perpetual alertness” (46) that turns out to be “a form of attentiveness whose openness towards the marginal, the overlooked, the forgotten collapses neither into solipsistic absorption nor into endless dispersal” (51). The word that sums up these desiderata for Duttlinger—a word that Benjamin does use repeatedly—is “Geistesgegenwart,” which she translates quite literally as presence of mind, and which, for her, is nearly synonymous with perception. Presence of mind is the modern equivalent of a contemplation of objects that relies on perception. Both relate a perceiving subject to a perceptible, but because in modernity the object has changed its quality, attention changes with it. The goal is still the same, however: to make an object durably present to a subject. This stance is quite alien to Benjamin’s thinking. In addition, there is an epistemological problem that Duttlinger’s phrase “significant details” captures well. As soon as a detail is made significant, it ceases to be a detail. Thus we can see that it is truly only in *Gewohnheit*, habit, or distraction that details *are* details. These are the modes that do them the honor they deserve without reinscribing the system by which they were excluded or diminished in the first place. This problem is one of the reasons for Benjamin’s interest in marginal intellectual modes like *Zerstreuung*.

To understand what Benjamin means by “Geistesgegenwart,” one should probably refer to his sketch on children’s perception of color. Here one is forced to ask what exactly Benjamin means by “Geist” when he claims that children’s distraction into coloring-experience is “geistig” and, for that matter, with a mentality that is absolutely clear. Here there is no attention, or, rather, attention *is* distraction, since there is no object toward which a subject could “stretch” its perception. Instead both poles dissolve into a medium. Another hint toward deciphering his peculiar idea of “presentness” of “Geist” can also be found in one of the citations that Duttlinger

touch never produces an adequate perception of its object; because it cannot grasp or measure, it either loses by becoming accustomed to its object, or else it continues to perceive its object by passing by and failing to keep track. Thus there are two losses that surround tactile reception. The first, when it stops and rests, is a complete loss in amnesia; the second, however, is a positive loss, an active, moving letting go in which sensation flees in front of the sensor. The laws of touch are “rich in teaching,” for Benjamin, because they teach in a future tense in which reception runs ahead of itself out of fear that if it stops for an instant it will lose itself and its object, transfixed in a senseless present.<sup>107</sup> In the sphere of touch, to be oriented is utterly

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includes in her article. When Benjamin remarks in the notes toward the *Passagen-Werk* that a relationship between “Geistesgegenwart” and “‘Methode’” needs to be established, he goes on to say that the historical materialist who thinks by following history’s development can observe an historical “Gefahrenkonstellation” only when she “is “abzuwenden jederzeit auf dem Sprunge ist” (Benjamin GS V.1 586-7; Duttlinger 47). Presence of mind means, in this instance, being on the point of turning away from thinking, preparing for and getting used to (sich daran gewöhnen) turning away from continuous history and the unbroken thought that reflects on it.

<sup>107</sup> Touch for Benjamin here seems to have little to do with touch in the history of philosophy. There the sense of touch stands for immediacy, intimacy, possession, and presence. Derrida gives the most thorough reading of the philosophical tradition for which touch has been the untouchable cornerstone, in a book whose title is translated *On Touching—Jean Luc Nancy*. Although Benjamin does not come up in it, as far as I can see, one part of the analysis comes close to Benjamin’s basic phenomenological insight that touch is in practice virtually senseless, especially with respect to its temporal character. Touch-time is almost completely distracted.

disorienting. Reception in distraction, the new way of having a share in mass, insofar as it can be conceived of on analogy with touch, occurs in and prepares the way for historical turning-points by letting go of concepts; it does so when it releases its grip on a present that it cannot sense and passes on into a richer, though undetermined future.

### **Suspension of the Mental**

Although it does not grasp what it receives, mass thinks. When the French cultural critic Georges Duhamel writes of film that it is a “pastime” that “demands no concentration, presupposes no faculty of thought [kein Denkvermögen voraussetzt],” it is not as the “old complaint” about the diversion-seeking masses that Benjamin wants to base his investigation into mass reception on it (GS I.2 504). This is not merely anti-elitism or love of pop-culture on Benjamin’s part. What Duhamel intends as a reprimand, Benjamin raises out of the realm of intellectualism, reading there an inadvertent discovery of the structure of mass thinking. It amounts to a shocking proposition: in order to receive in distraction, apperception must temporarily set itself out of power, its Voraussetzung must become its Aussetzung. In this way, mass Zerstreuung can be seen as another working through of Benjamin’s thoughts on the revolutionary general strike and other non-mental suspensions, in which structural transformations become possible. Zerstreuung

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Nancy’s equation of touch with weight and weighing with thinking Derrida rightly connects to the primacy of touch as metaphor for intellection in Aristotle’s *Peri psuches* (72f). It is also true, according to Derrida, that Nancy shows touching-weighing-thinking to be an “appropriation of the inappropriable” a relation to the untouchable, and thus to the absolute lightness of not thinking.



abandons—if only for an instant—an apperception that would have to presuppose its own structure in order for there to be thought.<sup>108</sup> Groping absentmindedly ahead, thought abandons itself. One thing must be very clear: distraction does not remove thought forever, as madness or death are supposed to do. Then again, it does remove *this* thought forever for the sake of a thinking to come. For this reason apperception's new task is not revolutionary; that is, it is not asked to reorganize the world and retain an identical power for another regime in the future. Benjamin proposes here a revolution in the conception of radical change in which apperception, instead of being given an upgrade to its operating system or a set of categories more in step with the times, has its structure, aims, processes, and product made responsive to otherness per se, in a *Streik der Facultät* that brackets the very routine by which apperception already, in advance, and without publicizing its decisions, understands itself as a faculty and again domesticates the wild future.

Benjamin's insight is highly instructive and at the same time difficult to receive. Apperception, which in philosophy's view has always, one way or another, been in charge of reception, must abruptly become receptive. In order for apperception to renounce its teaching habit and learn to learn, it will have to become susceptible to teaching. Like the Zen master who strikes the student in order to enlighten him, film momentarily shocks apperception into massiveness. Apperception and reception reverse roles in the cinema and mass thinking strikes against a future in which a present *Bildung* will be brought to fruition. The strike, however, is not carried out in the desire to end all work, in keeping with a utopian Marxist vision that today rings

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<sup>108</sup> For the most exacting reading of Benjamin's essay "Zur Kritik der Gewalt" in terms of his understanding of the revolutionary general strike, see Werner Hamacher, "Affirmative, Strike."

horribly false. Mind on strike does not imagine a “free spirit” that would do away with thought once and for all and replace it with dreams, fantasy, or insanity. Rather, the intellect withdraws from work in a gesture that, although it can neither be willed nor willed away, is reproducible: it can be trained for or gotten used to. “Gewöhnen kann sich auch der Zerstreute,” Benjamin announces. As habit, distraction becomes a tool for dissolving regimes of thought, modes of understanding, by admitting an empirical moment into the structure of apperception.

### **The Distraction-Value of Art**

It is also not the case, however, that, after apperception has been put out of work by distraction, thought simply resumes its attentive activities, as if obeying an eternal law of alternation between attention and distraction. It is also not the case that attention, now under the influence of distraction, is broken up and shared out such that afterward it pays an attention of a different quality, a fragmented attention, for instance, or a collecting one that would be the synthesis of the two terms. Distraction is not the opposite of attention for Benjamin; it is a transitional phase toward another sort of relationship.

As a word or concept—whatever it may be—*Zerstreuung* carries a heavy weight in the reproducibility essay. It accounts not only for the change in the mode of reception that comes into being with the mass, but also for mass’s internal structure. The mass is, though dense, internally “zerstreut,” that is, no matter how much pressure is put on it, it will not fuse. Participants give up their individual identities in it, but not for the sake of forming a group identity. In Benjamin’s view, mass is not one. Moreover, *Zerstreuung* denotes not only the internal structure of the mass, as well as the relationship between a particular artwork and a

particular public at a particular time—film, mass, the early twentieth century—but also, and perhaps more importantly, it names the historical force that transforms that relationship. Cult-value cedes its hegemony over artworks to distraction-value because distraction-distribution, brought on by and in the artwork’s technical reproducibility, scatters the cult across the earth. Distraction is the condition of possibility for a political event: diaspora.

The audience for film is “zerstreut” because it no longer has to be tied to one place and time; it becomes plastic and mobile. And yet it is also true that the shock-effect of film disperses a mass internally even when it is in “one place,” i.e. the movie theater. The unity of any place flies apart in distraction. Because of the historical change that it brings about, and its potential to bring about a change again at any time, it is as much a term that belongs in a historiographical lexicon as it does in a lexicon of the philosophy of mind. Because of its position between nature and history, since it intervenes as a historical event in the natural structure of mind, furthermore, it also calls for or designates a different relationship to science. The science that attempts to come to terms with distraction has to transform along with the artwork, mass, history, and apperception that it seeks to explicate. “Reception in distraction” affects the reception *of* distraction in the theory that would account for it.

Several important historical differences accompany the advent of *Zerstreuung*. Art differs in its mode of production and its technical capacities, reception differs in its mode, apperception differs in the tasks it can accomplish, history differs—it dispenses with tradition—and, finally, art theory differs when it has to account for these changes. What’s more, because of the nature of these differences, it is not easy to tell which change has priority over the others. They do not fall into a chain of causes and effects but seem to happen all at once, and to determine and reinforce one another. As it is described in section 15, film and its shock-effect comes “*entgegen*,” against,

“reception in distraction”; mass and cinema encounter one another on equal terms. This face-to-face encounter is not a purely empirical event, however, that evaporates as soon as it comes to pass, and yet it is also not transcendently determined. It is, instead, an opportunity for training. “Rezeption in Zerstreuung...hat am Film ihr eigentliches Übungsinstrument” (Benjamin GS I.2 505). Thus the changed relationship between artwork and public does not automatically become a different historical-perceptual-apperceptual moment. It is neither given nor fated, even though it may already have happened or be in the process of happening. Yes, the auratic, cultic artwork gathers its public around it and draws attention into it to the point of absorption. Yes, in contrast, “die zerstreute Masse” sinks the artwork into itself—given that “itself” is an internal diaspora. In the first relationship, observers come into a unity mediated by their absorption in the artwork, which lends them its “here and now,” a point that constitutes both the cultic spatial order and the traditional historical order. In the second, the technical aspects of film contribute to the Zerstretheit of the mass—ensuring its inability to fuse into a unit, distracting and distributing it further, not specifying what will come next in the historical continuum—ensuring, in fact, that there will no longer be a “next.” The transformation should not be understood as a tipping point prepared by the past. It turns by means of a didactic element. There may not be any concept of the new mode of reception as Benjamin argues, but there is a path toward carrying it out. It can be taught—on the example of architecture and touch—and it can be learned—by practicing it, by going to the movies and training the apperception to disperse.

This is the situation in which the reproducibility essay leaves Zerstreuung. There is no concept of it insofar as it designates a new mode of reception that tears apperception away from its traditional task of subsuming beings under concepts. Mass, neither one being nor many individual beings, receives, and what it receives sets the “Denkvermögen” out of work in order

to train it in a different, non-conceptual way of cognizing, which has more to do with habit formation than it does with the application of transcendental categories or intuitions. The model for this reception and this training is not optical but first of all tactile, given that touch has as its basic gesture letting go in passing by—a “beiläufiges Bemerken.” This intellectual change, from thinking on the model of vision to thinking on the model of touch, is the “mass-movement” that Benjamin is after. Mass moves not geographically but intellectually, spreading into a diaspora wherever it may be, a *Zerstreuung* that resists being co-opted for the kinds of group action that fascism demands. As distracted-distributed, mass becomes immovable by ordinary means.

The lack of fate in this story, that is, the lack of a transcendental determination for distraction drives Benjamin in a direction in which he had been moving for some time. What steps in to offer stability to experience without knowledge? That which children experience in the pure perception of color, and that which adults, if they are sensitive to it, experience in dreams Benjamin would like to make available in other spheres. But how can it be made available for politics if there is no cognitive access to it and if it depends on these marginal areas of sensibility? Practice, habit formation, and learning in the most rudimentary sense offer pure experience manners of enduring and becoming rooted in human being that are, however fixed or repeatable they make the experience, experiential, without transcendental guarantees. With this in mind, it is easier to see why it seemed important for Benjamin to communicate his analysis of distraction. If it is right, if new tasks for apperception could become solvable by the mass-intellect trained in distraction, art theorists would need to be on the front lines of this training. As was the case in the German baroque, the entire constellation of science, art, spectatorship, and history was shifting, and no “theory,” no privileged vision of the transcendental truth of the situation, would do this change justice. Moreover, the impossible “theory of distraction” would

have to be made presentable to the changed intellect about which it theorized. In the cinema everyone—in whatever class or occupation, theorists included—was subject to pure experience. Theory, in the epoch opened by distraction, would therefore have to be made distributable and distraction-worthy.

The notes entitled “Theorie der Zerstreuung” that Benjamin wrote in or around 1936 in response to Adorno’s criticism are an attempt to rethink these complex changes and how they interrelate. The notes take steps toward more clearly answering the questions: what is the value of distraction? How does it come to hold a prominent place in the mode of production and reception of artworks? What kind of art theory might be invented to disseminate its teaching?

What follows is a commentary on select premises out of the twenty or so that Benjamin wrote. It is important to remember that they are, in effect, a cluster of arrows pointing toward a future theory, and for that reason they hit as many targets as they miss. Also, for that reason, I treat them according to theme, not strictly according to the order in which they were noted down. At best we can try to understand from reading them the direction in which an understanding of distraction ought to move and the form it should take.

### **Premises on Sociality**

*Versuch die Wirkung des Kunstwerks unter Eliminierung der Weihe in ihr zu fixieren*

(GS VII 678)

This premise, the first in the notes, says what is wanted from the concept of distraction-distribution. It is important to notice that the artwork is not to be explained in terms of its mode

of production, its source in an artist or in divine inspiration, its structure or its formal elements, its place in a historical series, its genre, or even on the basis of its ontological activity—by the kind of “world” it opens. The explicandum of the artwork for Benjamin in these notes and in the writings of the mid to late thirties in general is its social “effect,” its “Wirkung.” These notes focus, as Benjamin says elsewhere of his writings after 1933, on the sociology of art (GS VI 227).

A theory of distraction is an attempt to locate a change in the artwork’s social effect. The change in effect is not as easy to place as it at first seems, however. Given Benjamin’s understanding of aura, which this line implies is the aspect of traditional artworks that produces their social effect, what changes is not only the effect, but the historical basis of the social per se. Aura is an accumulation of history, and with its dispersal the shape of history changes such that sociality can no longer constitute itself in the same way. Nevertheless, we shouldn’t forget that Benjamin conserves the central role of artworks in the constitution of the social sphere. This much does not change. A separate note among the paralipomena reads: “Die Aura war ursprünglich (solange sie den Kultwert begründete) mit Geschichte geladen” (GS VII.2 677). Loaded up with history, the artwork was the focal point of tradition. It carried the substance of history, and although it was marked by passing changes in context, it remained a fixed reference point for continuity. Tradition meant the passing on of this reference point from generation to generation. History as tradition has a social face. As the repository of historical sentiment—as the objective correlative of historical continuity: so long as one could go back to the immovable, datable artwork at the center of the cult, the history of the cult remained continuous no matter how distant its center in space and time—as the substrate of historical continuity it belonged to a community made up of those with exclusive cult rights. The consecration of the artwork by the

priest and the consecration of cult members through the artwork established the community's social parameters. Mystery, silence, ritual, sacrifice—the dimensions of cultic group formation are eliminated in the new art form, film. How? Benjamin asks. In what aspect of film's effect is the drive toward consecration exposed and sacrificed? As this premise makes clear, a theory of distraction would have to account for the elimination of the force of consecration in the artwork's effect.

Two other premises elaborate on this one. First: *Paritätäre Existenz der Kunst auf der Grundlage des Heiligen*. This premise follows the previous one and makes it more precise. It is the divine presence in the artwork—its symbolic nature, if you will—that grounds its ability to consecrate members. In order to locate the elimination of consecration, the divine origin of the artwork will have to be rethought. In the case of film, Benjamin has already begun to replace a divine origin with a technological one. In retrospect, technology intercedes even in the origin of the theological artwork, Athens. The Greeks *könnten ihre Kunstwerke nicht reproduzieren. Diese mußten also dauerhaft sein. Daher: ewige Kunst* (GS VII.2 679). It was not the gods that lent artworks permanence but the technical inability to reproduce them that lent permanence to the gods! Art, for Benjamin, is parasitic on technology, and the gods can only submit to its historical power. All that is parasitic on the divine—eschatological fantasies, communities based on unchanging foundations, artistic inspiration, even the fundament of thought—loses its footing in this change of perspective. It is no wonder that the theoretical attitude loses its preeminence as well.

The second premise that corresponds to the elimination of consecration in the artwork's effect is critical to understanding the social change that Benjamin envisions. As in the *Trauerspiel* book, Benjamin's touchstone for demonstrating the change is Greece. *Die Werte der*



*Zerstreuung sind am Film zu entwickeln wie die Werte der Katharsis an der Tragödie* (GS VII.2 678). The art theorist should still take Aristotle as a model and seek to develop what Benjamin calls “the values” of distraction. Although they are not specified by Benjamin in these telegraphic premises, we can imagine which values of catharsis he may have meant. His only comment is: *Zerstreuung wie Katharsis sind als physiologische Phänomene zu umschreiben* (GS VII.2 678). We need not go too deeply into the many problems in understanding Aristotle on the topic of catharsis. Benjamin is interested in the physiological effects. What are these effects? Although purgation of passions through pity and fear seems to us more psychological than physiological, in fact for Aristotle the seat of emotions was physiological, not a part of the psyche, which comprised soul and nous, but a reaction in the organs and blood. As is widely known, the physiological purgation of strife-producing pathoi is supposed to contribute to the harmonious life of the polis. Benjamin will look for a configuration corresponding to Aristotle’s analysis of tragedy’s elements: a physiological response with political effects.

### **Premises on Temporality**

*In Film erreicht das Kunstwerk den Höhepunkt der Verschleißbarkeit*

(GS VII.2 678)

In this premise the “Grundlage” for the artwork’s new social effect is named: Verschleiß. Inasmuch as catharsis was produced not as a one-time effect, but in a repeated return to the Dionysia, the cult festival by which artworks—in this case tragedies—distributed their physiological effects to the political body, it worked according to the Greek temporal signature—

“Dauer.” Catharsis translated the Greek tragedy at the center of the yearly ritual into an enduring physiological and thus political effect. *So wie die Griechen auf Dauer ist die gegenwärtige auf Verschleiß angewiesen* (GS VII.2 679). But whereas Greek art because of the lack of technical reproducibility produced a time filled with duration, film wears time away. In order to help understand the new temporal mode, Benjamin offers an analogy, the same that he will offer in the notes that make up the *Passagenwerk*. Fashion is one feature of the epoch that could explain film’s tendency to wear away time, and in particular the haste with which it does this. The speed of its deterioration arises from its being parasitic on fashion, a paradigmatic mode of capitalist consumption. It is possible to account for film’s wearing away in the terms that fashion offers: rapid, unexpected coming into and going out of, constant changes in value of the object. In film, images arise and decay in the rapidity with which hem-lines rise and fall. Still another analogy is offered by politics. The temporality of film—its dependence on Verschleiß—is to be explained *durch ihre Auslieferung an die Mode oder durch ihre Umfunktionierung in der Politik* (GS VII.2 679). With film the artwork has either been delivered over to fashion or it has had its function transformed in or into politics. The second change is harder to understand. What politics could absorb the rapid wearing away of images in film? What is a politics of “Verschleiß”... a verschleißbare Politik? Benjamin does not say. One can surmise, however, that the political form that could absorb and make use of Verschleiß would be in some way similar to his conception of mass. That is, this politics would be anti-polis, its fundamental unit would be a group not consecrated to the god and made exclusive through controlled access to an artwork, not purged of strife-inducing passions, whose history was not tradition, and the temporality of whose relations was not parasitic on divine permanence, in short, a highly apolitical grouping. The end of the polis and the end of politics, at least in the Greek sense to which Benjamin appeals for a

counter-example, is foreseen here. Greek art is art because it endures and promotes duration, tendering its physiological value over and over again in catharsis, which translates into the duration of politics. The time of “Verschleiß,” in contrast, is no longer the medium in which coming and going can be measured or understood. In film time itself “wears out.” With the dispersal of aura, the sedimentation of history onto the artwork, time can no longer be thought of as a continuum by which events are measured. Rather, when the auratic artwork no longer endures neither does time. With the erosion of time through film, we enter an epoch of “times,” a plural temporality, and politics would have to adapt to this.

### **Communication of Effect**

*Das Kriterium für die Fruchtbarkeit ihres Wirkens ist die Kommunizierbarkeit dieser Wirkung*

(GS VII.2 679)

Zerstreuung—if it truly disperses the *durée* of history previously maintained by aura—will have to imagine for itself a theory, a mode of seeing, an understanding, something—something other than a theoretical intuition of its eternal essence—in short, some mode of communication that is as *verschleißbar* as time is. If the change in art and history is as radical as Benjamin paints it in these notes and in the artwork essay, when film diverts history from duration, how can theory endure just as it was in the golden age? What is a theory without persistence in time—indeed, what is it without an original claim to permanence, even if sometime somewhere it will be proven wrong? That a theory of Zerstreuung is to be developed

like the doctrine of catharsis does not mean that its mode of presentation will be the same as Aristotle's. The knowledge contained in a theory of distraction will most likely not persist as a standard for 2000 years.

Although Benjamin doesn't mention its Greek provenance here, *theoria* was an integral element in the sacred political and historical structures that included cathartic art. In the 5<sup>th</sup> century, the "Grundlage des Heiligen" lay not only in art, but also in the communications of the *theoros*, the half-religious, half-political figure who translated the god's words given at the oracle in the priest's poetic verses, delivering them to polis as the predictions that allowed it to continue as it was, self-same and divinely sanctioned. In the fifth century, a "theorist" mediated between polis and the divine guarantee of its continuity, the oracle. Thus catharsis and theory are Greek twins. When Aristotle defines the effects of good tragedy—it keeps the polis from succumbing to the deleterious forces of its own populus, at least until next year's Great Dionysia—he also rings in the epoch of theory as an enduring attention to immutable being. Theoretical attention to *οὐσία* resulted in one political order, one art, one thought, based on time as a stable substance for the continuation of things. Film-time is, for Benjamin, the mode in which substance tends toward disintegration and decay rather than toward production and permanence.

We should remember that according to Benjamin's analysis history is the product of auratic art and not the other way around. Correspondingly, as we've noted, film produces a temporal shape that can hardly be called history. If history in Greece is the potential to continue, history in the age of film is the potential to leave off. And so, just as Aristotle's literary theory was a product of the historical time inaugurated by auratic art, so the art theory of the film age would have to develop within disintegrating history. This is to say nothing of the other parameters in which it would have to operate: the massiveness of the mass, the technical nature

of film production, and the wide distribution made possible by reproducibility. Theory would no longer be possible since in *Zerstreuung* it would disintegrate along with the apperception whose activity it formerly guaranteed. The scientific mode that would go along with the *Verschleiß* of film, mass, technical reproduction and distributability is not stated directly in these notes, but it is implied in the vocabulary.

Beyond its appearance in the title, the word “theory” does not show up among the twenty or so premises in the “Theory of Distraction.” Instead the notes turn around a term that hints at the mode in which a science of distraction would have to operate. The “Werte” of distraction-distribution that need to be developed on the model of catharsis for tragedy are “Konsumwert” and “Lehrwert.” These correspond roughly to Marx’s “exchange-value” and “use-value,” at least in one way, if not in others as well. The first “value” is quantitative, the second qualitative. Consumption-value, like exchange-value, is countable; the higher the consumption-value the higher the number of consumers, and the more area the commodity covers. The second, teaching-value, is qualitative. It describes the potential that the knowledge has as a doctrine to be distributed, practiced, and assimilated. The communicability of film’s effects in these two dimensions—qualitative and quantitative—that is, the *Zerstreubarkeit* of art, history, and politics by means of film is the criterion of its effectiveness. Since film, through *Zerstreuung*, has such a high consumption- and teaching-value, it is highly effective, that is—very communicable. Its effects spread and spread, and their distribution is not checked by absorption and assimilation—on the contrary. Its unlimited effects derive from the fact that in *Zerstreuung* the two modes converge. Although they rarely come together in other arts, in film *Lehrwert und Konsumwert konvergieren. Damit ist eine neue Art des Lernens gegeben* (GS VII.2 679). Through distraction, more than through any other artistically or technologically produced effect, the potential for

learning comes together with the capacity to be consumed. Whereas a doctoral dissertation may have a high teaching-value, its consumption-value is quite low. The intellectual and social requirements of receiving it remind us of the cult. The same thing could be said of auratic art, museum exhibitions, and so forth—the so-called “long tail” of the market. Conversely, whereas the communicability or distributability of fashion is extremely high—before you know it everybody’s wearing that hat—its teaching value is quite low. Film, in contrast, is easily consumed, widely distributable, and carries with it the potential to teach apperception and train the mass in massive thinking—distraction, which is, at least in theory, useless for fascism.<sup>109</sup> This resistance constitutes its high doctrinal value—which for Benjamin, of course, has little to do with the content of any particular film.

What about distraction is so consumable? Benjamin offers several clues, and these are also the physiological effects he meant to ascribe to it. *Das Verhältnis der Zerstreuung zur Einverleibung muß untersucht werden*, he remarks (GS VII.2 678). Part of the program, then, for understanding *Zerstreuung* includes an investigation into its capacity to be incorporated. This is

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<sup>109</sup> A response notable for its departure from the usual terms of the debate surrounding Benjamin’s call for an aesthetics that does not, when it becomes politicized, aestheticize politics is given by Peter Fenves. The answer to the question posed in the title of his article “Is There an Answer to the Aestheticizing of the Political?” is no. Fenves’s “no” corresponds to the different notion of the artwork in which the ground of any politics shifts in an “epoch-making moment.” “Artwork as a whole rests on the movement-in-place of its foundation.” In other words, its political effect is directly proportional to the artwork’s “Zerstreuungswert,” its capacity to divert the world from a course in which “politics” would mean the same thing (72).

because [*i]hre wirkliche Humanität besteht in ihrer unbegrenzten Anpassungsfähigkeit (GS VII.2 678)*). Like yawning, distraction-distribution affects those around it like a contagion. Finally now, after long detours through Benjamin's earlier writing, the connection between the three elements, *Reproduzierbarkeit – Zerstreung – Politisierung*, shimmers into view. This premise, one of the last in the so-called "Theory of Distraction," constitutes an esoteric doctrine of political diaspora. Mental and geographical *Zerstreung* made possible by film allow for a political arrangement that is not so different from the scattering after Babel, before the advent of Mosaic law. The politicization that Benjamin seems to intend in these notes is a translation of his idea of mass onto a planetary scale. Distraction-distribution disperses the polis to the four corners of the earth, because with distraction it distributes an unlimited capacity to adapt. This for Benjamin is the essence of the human, the ability to become other<sup>110</sup>—and thus *Zerstreung*'s real, "effective" "wirkliche" humanity consists in its ability to aid human beings in dispersing and adapting to whatever context. The release of tradition and the dispersal of the cult is but a preparation for adaptation to other contexts, and tools for future liberation from those as well. Through its dispersal-value, film brings on this "wirkliche," effective, real humanity, by allowing it to train in massiveness—to learn to resist politics per se, to retain contrary emotions and not purge them, to allow time to divagate, to prevent history from accumulating, and so forth.

"Lehre," then, allows knowledge of distraction to accompany and not annul the dispersive movement of mind and mass. In this it is not unlike the dialogue or the treatise form

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<sup>110</sup> Testimony to this conviction can be found much earlier. The ability to *see* similarities is the weak remainder of an ability to *become* similar, that is, to become other. See the "Zusatz" to "Lehre vom Ähnlichen" (GS II.1 210).

with which Benjamin experimented earlier. It offers transcendental knowledge no foothold, since it is just a spur towards and training in the pure experience of distraction, this time in a political sense.

An important question poses itself once we begin to understand Benjamin's doctrine of distraction. In what position do we find ourselves now when we receive his transmission? The advent of film falls almost one hundred years in the past. Has it trained us in distraction enough to have absorbed and assimilated it? Do we find ourselves in diaspora, in *Zerstreuung*? Have we then assimilated its lesson to the point at which we need to depart from it again? In other words, has the revolutionary promise of film as Benjamin tried to interpret it been fulfilled? An empirical survey of film audiences certainly would not show it. And art critics certainly have not dispensed with theory—quite the contrary. If we had dispensed with theory, it would mean, however—would it not?—that at a certain point we would find ourselves needing to dispense with distraction too, at least insofar as our perception had been trained for it by film. A related question: do we live happily in a plurality of “times,” changing out our cognitive structures as we change computer operating systems? And then, contradictory questions must also be asked. If we have indeed accustomed ourselves to distraction, distribution, and dispersal, how would we perceive, receive, or otherwise evaluate it, to know if it had been productive for art theory and, more importantly, for politics? Until these questions are given at least tentative answers, it remains a question whether “distraction” should become a permanent addition to our theoretical vocabulary. The fact is that it has not. And yet this is not necessarily a problem. As children of the age of distraction we would have to be ready to dispense with this term and this theory as



though it were what Benjamin tried to make it, a doctrine useful for training in dispersal. A doctrine that is as *verschleißbar* as the history it inaugurates would quickly become a liability.

In the revolution in apperception wrought by film, theory cannot hold itself above cognition's disintegration, clinging to a universal image—even if it is an image of distraction. Film teaches us to let go of images. With this in mind, it does seem that although Adorno's criticism about Benjamin's "theory" is overstated, his aversion to it has perhaps a deeper ground. After apperception's hold over reception is broken by film, once experience is "freed" from knowledge, theory—even critical theory—cannot continue to function in the same way. *Zerstreuung* enters experience as a doctrine subject to the *Zerstreuungen* of experience. In this way it is an open question whether it ever was or will be convincing, with what intention we should receive it, or whether we are still living under its historical sign. If we receive it theoretically, we nullify its effects. If we receive it as doctrine, we miss its essence, since it will have already become outdated.

A trace of this problem can be read in the irony—now difficult to bear—with which Benjamin wrote to Siegfried Kracauer in 1934 from Skovsbostrand where he was spending the summer with Brecht. "Im übrigen trägt ja die Weltgeschichte zur *Zerstreuung* nicht wenig bei. Man verfolgt sie hier leicht im Radio" (GB IV. 473).<sup>111</sup>

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<sup>111</sup> Letter from the end of July or the beginning of August 1934 from Benjamin in Denmark to Siegfried Kracauer in Paris.

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