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INTRODUCTION

The term "historicism" appears a natural foil to that of the avant-garde. Indeed it appears with surprising regularity in avant-garde theoretical writings, generally accompanied by a fair share of contempt. Despite the obvious connection – or tension – between the two terms, historicism has never achieved anything near the suggestiveness or authority enjoyed by the avant-garde as a category through which to reflect on contemporary culture. One of the reasons it has remained largely maligned or ignored as a critical category is the common presumption that the term is basically unambiguous. Whereas "avant-garde" is a term loaded with contradictions and implications that remain urgent and thought-provoking today (even though the era of the avant-garde is no longer our era), there is a strong tendency to assume that we know unproblematically what is involved or at stake with the term "historicism," and that it has little to reveal to the present except insofar as it served as an object of critique for the avant-garde. This situation is primarily due to the decisiveness of the avant-garde's victory in the narrative of twentieth-century culture and the firmness with which the avant-garde was able to establish its contentious position towards historicism as the whole truth of the matter. With a presumptiveness akin to Gertrude Stein's, the avant-garde undertook to write the autobiography of historicism, and we have too often read this account without critical reflection on the biases it incorporates.

In that account, historicism typically appears as a fearful resistance to contemporary trends, as a futile attempt to ignore the passage of time, or as a senile incapacity to create new forms of expression. Avant-garde theoreticians rarely felt the need to define the historicism they attacked in terms more precise than this. Historicism generally remained on the level of a codeword or negative slogan, the implications of which were clear to all and required no explication. It is important to bear in mind that the avant-garde discourse on historicism rarely associated the term specifically with the Rankean Historical School and its successors (although they would obviously also have been encompassed by the term). Rather, historicism

designated for the avant-garde a general mindset typical for the liberal bourgeois culture of Europe up until at least the end of World War I. Historicism was thus perceived as one of the crucial cultural pillars of the ruling society against which the avant-garde revolted with such vehemence.

Yet precisely the vagueness and ubiquity of this avant-garde critique of historicism ought to provide grounds for pause.[1] The intensity of the avant-garde hostility to historicism (whatever that was understood to designate) could be a symptom that more was at stake than just cultural-political competitiveness. Closer examination of the assumptions and implications of the avant-garde critique of historicism indeed reveals that the apparently inevitable conflict of positions between courageously forward-looking vision and hesitant backward glance disguises a more complex situation. If historicism was the alter-ego of the avant-garde, it was one that could not be easily avoided: rather than the remnant of an obsolete understanding of culture, historicism was more the inescapable shadow cast by the sharp light of the future.

For avant-garde thinkers, historicism typically represented a sort of corrupt or degraded consciousness of history, which paralyzed the production of cultural forms appropriate to the present age. The response was to seek to recover effective forms of expression by vilifying the past as such. But precisely this moment − this translation of a critique of *historicism* into a rejection of *history* − is what requires closer examination. This translation was an essential feature of the avant-garde's self-

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[1] Historicism is in any event a difficult term to pin down, having meant many different things to different people at different times. See the discussions in Georg G. Iggers, *The German Conception of History: The National Tradition of Historical Thought from Herder to the Present*, rev. ed. (S.l.: Wesleyan Univ. Press, 1983): 295-98; Charles R. Bambach, *Heidegger, Dilthey, and the Crisis of Historicism* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1995): 4-5; Herbert Schnädelbach, *Philosophie in Deutschland 1831-1933* (Frankfurt a/M.: Suhrkamp, 1983): chapter 2; and Karl Heussi, *Die Krisis des Historismus* (Tübingen: Mohr: 1932). For useful general accounts of historicism, see, in addition to the above, Paul Hamilton, *Historicism* (London: Routledge, 1996); Friedrich Jaeger and Jörn Rüsen, *Geschichte des Historismus* (München: Beck, 1992); Leonard Krieger, *Ranke: The Meaning of History* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1977); Peter Reill, *The German Enlightenment and the Rise of Historicism* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1975); Maurice Mandelbaum, *History, Man, and Reason: A Study in Nineteenth-Century Thought* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1973); Friedrich Meinecke, *Die Entstehung des Historismus* (München and Berlin: R. Oldenbourg, 1936); and Ernst Troeltsch, *Der Historismus und seine Probleme* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1922). The point I am making here, however, is not that the term is difficult to define with any precision but rather that the avant-garde generally did not even find the attempt necessary.

understanding and also remains explicit or implicit in most present-day discussion on the topic of the avant-garde. Yet such a translation conceals the central paradox in the role that historicism assumed for the avant-garde: historicism represented not a surfeit but rather an *absence* of history. The avant-garde rejected the historicism of bourgeois liberal culture not because of the strength and vitality of the historicist understanding of tradition, but rather because of a perceived superficiality in that understanding, with its characteristic gestures of imitation and eclecticism. Historicism represented a culture grounded in the dusty encyclopaedia rather than in real life, a costume melodrama rather than true-to-life tragedy. Ultimately historicism appeared as an *interruption* rather than extension of historical continuity – a fact that considerably complicates the avant-garde ideology of radical historical instauration.   The consequence of this paradox is that the avant-garde was able to attack historicism in terms that clearly reveal a certain historical nostalgia.

The following chapters will explore these issues by tracing the background of this critique of historicism in the nineteenth-century and then examining the sorts of complications to which it led for theoreticians of the avant-garde between the two World Wars. Chapter One provides a first look at those complications as they surfaced in the so-called Realism Debate that took place between avant-gardists and proponents of Realism (Socialist or otherwise) over the most appropriate artistic vehicle for representing the complexities of the modern era. While this debate has commonly been interpreted through various pairs of opposed terms such as form versus content, neurosis versus reason, or fragment versus rounded whole, this chapter emphasizes rather the similarities between the two sides of the debate. Those similarities lie primarily in the threat perceived on both sides: the threat of an artistic technique or strategy that misrecognizes the essential features of the present, a threat that this chapter argues can best be understood as a type of historicism or loss of vital contact with the present.

The second chapter goes back to the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century roots of the discourse on historicism. Beginning with an examination of Herder, the thinker generally regarded as the founding father of modern historicism, and continuing with a

consideration of Nietzsche's extremely influential critique of historicism almost a century later, this chapter again seeks parallels between positions that are usually perceived to be radically at odds. Herder and Nietzsche, surprisingly, have much in common in their attacks on a "formalizing" reason and their attempts to counter this through a vitalist discourse. While Herder associated such vitalism with the historical consciousness, Nietzsche's vitalism was primarily figured as a release from, or forgetting of, the past. The chapter argues that this change in the status of the historical consciousness represents the crucial moment in the formation of the critique of historicism pervasive for the avant-garde.

Chapter Three examines Marx's theory of consciousness in order to suggest that the aporiai encountered there are of particular relevance to the historical consciousness. Marx provides one of the clearest demonstrations of a basic difficulty with articulating historical consciousness: the moment one articulates one's own historical position, one has been thrust out of the narrative of history, becoming an object of examination rather than a subject of historical experience. This adds a further layer of paradox to Nietzsche's difficulty that the only way that historical consciousness could be creatively vital was if it forgot the past.

Chapter Four returns to the twentieth-century and to the avant-garde proper by examining theoretical texts by Karel Teige, the leading theoretician of the Czech avant-garde. The paradoxes discussed in the chapters on Nietzsche and Marx returned for Teige in his attempt to formulate Constructivism as the "style of the present." For Teige, the prerequisite for Constructivism's claim to represent the essential identity of the modern age was its strict functionalism and freedom from all ornamentation. Yet the radicality of Constructivism's emergence as a scientific method of artistic production method truly expressive of the present, after the long interregnum of imitative historicism, led Teige to posit a programmatic counterpart to Constructivism: Poetism, the joyful celebration of the beauty revealed by the Constructivist vision. Yet the dual program that resulted – straddling the rhetorical and logical poles of strict rationalism and lyrical irrationalism, purposefulness and undirected eudaemonism – reproduced precisely the configuration that Teige posited as definitive of historicism:

the dualism of an ornamental system standing in uncertain relation to the functionalist structure to which it has been applied.

The final chapter examines Walter Benjamin's theory of historical experience. Benjamin is a thinker who is in many ways difficult to categorize: although clearly sympathizing with the avant-garde and making use of many central avant-garde categories such as montage and shock, he is simultaneously obsessed with the question of the deterioration of historical experience in modernity. Benjamin's thought thus incorporates elements that are both parallel to and critical of the avant-garde temporal paradigm. This chapter argues that these tensions in Benjamin's thought are in fact fruitful in that they help to reveal some of the paradoxes and reversals that were constitutive for the emergence of the critique of historicism beginning with Nietzsche and attaining its most radical formulations with the interwar avant-garde.

Chapter One

THE PHYSIOGNOMY OF THE PRESENT

Lukács, Teige, and the Realism Debate

> The fascination of portraits comes partly from the way they entrap the past. They catch in the mirror of art the reflections of a vanished past. […T]hese reproductions show the face of the sixteenth century […].[1]

> […] to imitate or perpetuate this return [to classical antiquity] in the present day is to compel a young and robust body to live among corpses – to inflict on it a premature death. We admire tombs, but we do not live in them.[2]

Few aesthetic conflicts of the past century appear as stubbornly irresolvable as the "Realism Debate" that raged among Marxist critics and philosophers in the nineteen-thirties.[3] The vast differences in the aesthetic assumptions and artistic products defended on each side of the debate seemed to admit no theoretical reconciliation. Worse yet, it is not always clear whether the attempts to hash out these differences

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[1] John Walker, *National Gallery of Art Washington*, revised ed. (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1995): 159.

[2] Eugène-Emmanuel Viollet-le-Duc, *Lectures on Architecture*, [1872] trans. Benjamin Bucknall (New York: Dover, 1987): 315.

[3] This Realism Debate can be identified with various degrees of particularity. On the most specific level, it refers to a series of articles by a range of authors appearing in the German-language exile journal *Das Wort* in 1937-38. (These materials are collected in Hans-Jürgen Schmitt, ed., *Die Expressionismusdebatte. Materialien zu einer marxistischen Realismuskonzeption* [Frankfurt a/M.: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1973], and a selection of these documents in English appears in New Left Review, ed., *Aesthetics and Politics* [London: Verso, 1977].) On a broader level, the exchanges in *Das Wort* are simply a conveniently compact formulation of issues confronting Marxist proponents of the avant-garde or realism almost everywhere in the mid- to late thirties. For example, the maneuvering of Breton's Surrealists vis-à-vis the cultural authorities in Moscow invoked similar issues and exchanges, as did the never-ending tensions between the Czech Poetists and Surrealists on the one hand and their interlocutors defending Proletkult and Socialist Realism on the other (see, e.g., Helena Lewis, *The Politics of Surrealism* [New York: Paragon House, 1988]; and Květoslav Chvatík, *Bedřich Václavek a vývoj české marxistické estetiky* [Praha: Československý spisovatel, 1961]). In what follows, I shall refer to the particular debate that unfolded in and around *Das Wort* as the "Expressionism Debate," while the term "Realism Debate" shall refer to this more general context.

were even enlightening. At times the debate appeared as a grand drama touching on the most crucial issues of modern aesthetics; at other times it appeared mired in an abstraction of argument just as scholastic as that earlier Realism debate of the thirteenth-century.[4] The ambiguity about what precisely was at stake has often lent the Debate the appearance of a literary-theoretical feud between modernist Montagues and card-carrying Capulets.

This impression is heightened by the sense of urgency saturating these exchanges: a sense that it was not only possible but even crucial to resolve these issues and demonstrate the error of the opposing camp. More was at stake than aesthetic method. The antagonists of the debate did not accuse each other merely of producing "bad art" (bad art rarely causes people to feel so threatened) but of producing fundamentally *false* images. Fredric Jameson has described Lukács' concept of decadence as:

> the equivalent in the aesthetic realm of that of "false consciousness" in the domain of traditional ideological analysis. Both suffer from the same defect: the common presupposition that in the world of culture and society such a thing as pure error is possible. They imply, in other words, that works of art or systems of philosophy are conceivable which have no content, and are therefore to be denounced for failing to grapple with the "serious" issues of the day […].[5]

Although the point is made less often, the spokespeople for the avant-garde were rarely less presumptuous of the error and emptiness of literary and artistic Realism. Thus ostensibly aesthetic issues merged seamlessly with broader campaigns against false consciousness. The arguments left no room for peaceful co-habitation, for

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[4] Thus Fredric Jameson has described the Realism Debate as an aesthetic event "whose navigation and renegotiation is still unavoidable for us today" ("Reflections on the Brecht-Lukács Debate," in *The Ideologies of Theory: Essays 1971-1986* [Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1988]: 133), while Peter Bürger argues in effect that the version of this debate between Lukács and Adorno only arose out of a failure to realize that the categories used in that debate had already been made obsolete and irrelevant by the phenomenon of the historical avant-garde (*Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. Michael Shaw [Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1984]: 86-87).

[5] "Reflections on the Brecht-Lukács Debate," 138.

differences of taste or temperament.   One position was right and the other, consequently, could not simply be ignored but had to have its error demonstrated.

This absolutism is clearly connected with the term "realism" itself. Again, in Jameson's words:

> the originality of the concept of realism […] lies in its claim to cognitive as well as aesthetic status. […T]he ideal of realism presupposes a form of aesthetic experience that yet lays claim to a binding relationship to the real itself, that is to say, to those realms of knowledge and praxis that had traditionally been differentiated from the realm of the aesthetic, with its disinterested judgments and its constitution as sheer appearance.[6]

Such an expansion of aesthetic into cognitive concerns clearly foreclosed on tolerance of alternatives.

In the case of Realism, and especially of twentieth-century Realism as a consciously theoreticized method, such cognitive claims appear to hearken back to a Hegelian subordination of the aesthetic to the conceptual. Indeed one of the standard accounts of modern Realism perceives it as the belated offspring of Hegelian aesthetics. By such accounts, this ancestry can be recognized in particular in the emphases on totality (expressing art's necessary function as a vehicle for truth content rather than as an autonomous phenomenon), on artistic over natural beauty (expressing beauty's grounding in the conceptual), and on reflection (expressing the subordination of the aesthetic to the conceptual).[7] Further, however, such accounts generally recognize that the Hegelian roots of the Realist tradition are countered by a parallel tradition stemming from Kantian aesthetics, usually seen as leading to Modernism proper and taking its most extreme form in the twentieth-century avant-garde. The

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[6] *Ibid.*, 135.

[7] A recent such account is Petr V. Zima, *Literarische Ästhetik. Methoden und Modelle der Literaturwissenschaft* (Tübingen: Francke Verlag, 1991). The notion of Hegelian/Realist aesthetics involving a necessary subordination of art to truth clearly lays the ground for the recurring emphasis on didactic art in the Realist tradition. For many authors writing under the onus of Zhdanovite Socialist Realism, the step from didacticism to political prescription and censorship appeared swift and inevitable. See, e.g., Robert Kalivoda, *Moderní duchovní skutečnost a marxismus*, 2nd ed. (Praha: Československý spisovatel, 1970): 19-20 and 39-40.

main characteristics of this competing tradition are the emphases on art's independence from conceptual truth claims (associated also with the notion of the autonomy of art), on the priority of nature and the material over spirit (associated with critiques of "idealisms" of various kinds), and on beauty's immanence to form (and thus its independence from particular content). From such a perspective, the Realism Debate in twentieth-century Marxist aesthetics would appear to have its roots in a fundamental division located more or less at the origin of modern aesthetics: a Manichean conflict between Hegelian "conceptual" aesthetics and Kantian "formalist" aesthetics.[8]

As tidy as this scheme is, and as much as it seems to explain the hegemony of terms such as "formalism" and "reflection" in the Realism Debate, it is misleading even on the broad level on which it is obviously meant to apply. The line separating these aesthetic traditions was crossed as often as it was upheld,[9] and Marxist aesthetics in particular demonstrates how either a Hegelian or a Kantian interpretation could convincingly be postulated as the most appropriate context for a particular aesthetic tradition.[10] In the case of the Realism Debate, however, the characterization as Hegelian v. Kantian, or content-based v. form-based, is particularly onerous because it disguises much of what the two camps shared: the common vocabulary that allowed them to enter into debate in the first place.[11] The insistence on presenting the Realism

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[8] Zima goes so far as to describe modern aesthetics as a "pendulum" swinging between the poles of expressive (Kantian) and content (Hegelian) aesthetics (*Literarische Ästhetik*, 30).

[9] For instance, the anti-conceptual strain in Dada could perhaps be fit into this scheme as "Kantian" (assuming one did not hesitate at the posthumous laughter of the Dadaists at such a label), but the Dadaist attack on aesthetic autonomy would have to be classified as "anti-Kantian."

[10] Debate on this issue has often commenced by trying to determine Marx's own aesthetic taste, about which he left few unambiguous clues. The argument that Marx's aesthetic preferences lay with the realist works of his age is generally based on interpretation of the Sickingen debate between Marx and Lasalle (see Walter Hinderer, ed., *Sickingen-Debatte. Ein Beitrag zur materialistischen Literaturtheorie* [Darmstadt: Luchterhand, 1974]). For an argument that Marx in fact sympathized with the proto-modernist art of his time, see Margaret A. Rose, *Marx's Lost Aesthetic: Karl Marx and the Visual Arts* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1984).

[11] That some kind of common vocabulary must have existed for the debate even to commence becomes apparent enough if one tries to imagine what "debate" could possibly have arisen, for example, between Realist and Fascist aesthetics, despite the many similarities between Fascist and Socialist Realist aesthetic norms (noted already by Ernst Bloch during the Expressionism Debate and by Karel Teige a year or two earlier).

Debate through opposed terms ultimately hypostacizes it in terms that boil down to "realism v. anti-realism."

What was really at issue, however, were fundamentally opposed understandings of what constituted "realistic" artistic representation. Those arguing avant-garde positions lay no less emphasis on the ultimate "realism" of their art than did the defenders of Realism. They argued in essence that artistic representations corresponding to the complexities of modern reality were only to be achieved through intricate processes and ended up taking startling, counter-intuitive forms. Precisely this belief is expressed in a statement such as: "Surrealism is *realism in the dialectical sense*."[12] If the degree to which many avant-gardists insisted on the realism of their artistic methods is surprising, equally surprising is the insistence of the Lukácsian Realists that the failure of avant-garde art consisted in the adherence to the mere appearance of things, the copying of outer forms without the work of mediation that would reveal the true, organic appearance underneath. Thus, paradoxically, precisely the distance that separated avant-garde formal vocabularies from standard notions of realistic representation became, in Lukács' account, not so much the sign of excessive technical reworking, as one might have expected, but rather the symptom of unmediated imitation.

Here, rather than with any rigid dichotomies such as form versus content or realism versus anti-realism, is where the debate ultimately proved a dead-end. The feud appeared interminable precisely because each side raised such similar claims. Each claimed to portray the deeper, essential reality, arrived at through a laborious process of mediation. Correspondingly, each claimed that the other remained entangled in and misled by a superficial, merely apparent reality. This rhetoric of surface and essence pervaded both sides of the debate and, in the absence of agreed criteria for determining when the essential mother lode of truth had been uncovered, remained patently irresolvable. Ironically, the debate hit a blank wall not because of the strict differences and dichotomies that ceaselessly arose – form v. content, reason

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[12] Karel Teige, "Deset let surrealismu," in *Surrealismus v diskusi,* eds. K. Teige and Ladislav Štoll (Praha: Knihovna levé fronty, 1934): 55. Emphasis in original.

v. irrationality, fragment v. rounded whole, etc. – but rather because of the similar use of the distinction between unmediated surface appearance and deeper, essential reality.

Both sides of the Realism Debate thus justified their artistic technique as uniquely equipped to reveal the true "physiognomy" of the modern era. The shared assumption was that the nature and identity of the present was not immediately apparent: the physiognomy of the modern was hidden behind masks. In contrast to previous periods, where the unique features of a unifying style were recognizable across an entire range of cultural products, the modern era presented an enigma: an eclectic mix of disputed traditions, of contradictions and crises, and of lost certainties. The immediate and secure cultural identity that past epochs seemed to have enjoyed was no longer possible. The complexity of the modern era prevented it from openly revealing its true face; its features could therefore only be recovered by technical effort.

These common concerns of the two sides of the Debate are easily obscured by the radically different physiognomies each identified as true. But the parallels become more visible when one examines the flip side of the arguments: how the "false" forms of modern culture were portrayed. The masks or false identities assumed by the present might display various features, but for both Realist and avant-gardist such masks constituted a form of *historicism*. Historicism here did not necessarily indicate obsession with historical forms and techniques. Nor did it necessarily denote any direct association with the particular historiographical tradition of which Ranke was the most illustrious member. Rather it connoted an artistic style having no legitimate grounding in the historical period it claimed to represent, one that therefore "was to be denounced for having failed to grapple with the 'serious' issues of the day."[13] Historicism constituted a false consciousness because it represented a fundamental misrecognition of the present: the failure to perceive the present as it really was.

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[13] Jameson*, loc. cit.*

I. *The Historicist Novel*

The general features of Lukács' critique of modernist art, centered on the concepts of decadence and formalism, are all too familiar. That Lukács also associated these concepts with a notion of historicism, however, is rarely commented upon. This is due in part to his persistent emphasis on the need to cultivate a deeper historical sense: precisely the loss of such a historical sense and the consequent pettiness of a present conceived as unconditioned and self-postulating were central aspects of the decadence Lukács perceived in modernist literature. His own elevation of the status of the historical novel genre, and the broad claims he made for it as a cognitive instrument, appear to reinforce the interpretation of Lukács as a defender of the specifically historical dimension of culture against the attempts of the avant-garde to create a *tabula rasa*. Lukács' avant-gardist interlocutors clearly perceived his aesthetic position in these terms. Lukács' claim that the avant-garde had reduced the cultural heritage to a rummage heap, and his occasionally stentorian appeals "zu der glorreichen literarischen Vergangenheit des deutschen Volkes"[14] were easily caricatured as the "pious reverence towards the cultural heritage expected by the executors of a will."[15] On a deeper, structural level, Lukács' efforts to impose upon twentieth-century art the ideals and standards of a genre having its origin in the late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century were also easily understood as a form of historicist conservatism, as a call for literature to go "back" to Tolstoy or Balzac. Precisely such an understanding lay behind Brecht's turning the term "formalism" around and applying it to Lukács' prescriptions for Realism.[16] From this perspective, Lukács' call for contemporary art to take the form of Realism appeared as a parallel to

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[14] "Es geht um den Realismus," in *Die Expressionismusdebatte*, 225.

[15] This statement is from Brecht's reply to the foregoing passage by Lukács (Brecht's comments quoted in *Aesthetics and Politics*, 56).

[16] See "Die Essays von Georg Lukács," in *Die Expressionismusdebatte*, 307-8. See also Eugene Lunn's discussion of this aspect of the Lukács-Brecht exchange in *Marxism and Modernism: An Historical Study of Lukács, Brecht, Benjamin and Adorno* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1982): 87.

the historicizing demand, say, that modern architecture assume the forms of classical antiquity.

These two factors – the first an objective understanding of the significance of the historical sense for Lukács' aesthetics, the second a contentious claim that Lukács was himself locked in a form of historicism – have obscured the significance of Lukács' own critique of historicism within his theory of Realism. Nevertheless, historicism does play a major role as a term of censure for Lukács, in particular in *The Historical Novel*, where he contrasts historicism as a decadent form with the true historical sense exercised by novelists in the tradition of Scott. Surprising as it first seems, Lukács' aesthetics managed to associate historicism with precisely the cultural practices that claimed to make the most radical break with the past and tradition: historicism appeared for Lukács as the fundamental characteristic of avant-garde art and literature.

Appreciating how this could be so requires examining Lukács' account not only of the contemporary state of modernist art, but also of its origins. Lukács viewed modernism as an extension of tendencies first appearing in the Naturalism of the later nineteenth-century.[17] That Lukács could identify the roots of modernist art, with its intentional disregard for conventional techniques of realistic representation, in Naturalism, for which the high burnish of such techniques was essential, makes clear that the status of mimetic representation was not the central issue for Lukácsian Realism. Put another way, there was a level on which the mimetic principle could become so bloated that the result was no longer realism in the positive sense. For Lukács, the hyper-mimetic, "photographic" realism practiced by the Naturalists was thus the disguised forerunner of the anti-mimetic montage techniques of the twentieth-century avant-garde:

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[17] "I would maintain […] that in modern writing there is a continuity from Naturalism to the Modernism of our day – a continuity restricted, admittedly, to underlying ideological principles. What at first was no more than dim anticipation of approaching catastrophes developed, after 1914, into an all-pervading obsession" (from *The Meaning of Contemporary Realism*, quoted in *Marxism and Art: Essays Classic and Contemporary*, ed. Maynard Solomon [Detroit: Wayne State Univ. Press, 1973]: 397).

Entstanden aus der jeder Kunst gegenüber nihilistischen Theorie und Praxis verschiedener dadaistischer Richtungen, "konsolidierte" sich diese Theorie in der Auffassung der Periode einer "relativen Stabilisierung" zu einem prinzipiellen Kunstsurrogat: das unorganische Zusammenklebung von gestalterisch unverbundenen Tatsachen sollte auf Grund dessen als Kunst betrachtet werden, daß sich in ihrer Gruppierung, in ihrem Arrangement angeblich eine besondere schöpferische Originalität äußert. Die so zustande gekommene Montage als Kunst ist einerseits der Gipfelpunkt der falschen Tendenzen des Naturalismus, weil die Montage sogar auf jene oberflächliche, sprachlich-stimmungshafte Bearbeitung der Empirie verzichtet, die der ältere Naturalismus noch als Aufgabe betrachtet hat; andererseits ist die Montage zugleich Gipfelpunkt des Formalismus, da die Verknüpfung der Einzelheiten mit der objektiven inneren Dialektik des Menschen und ihrer Schicksale schon gar nichts mehr zu tun hat [...].[18]

The rather surprising association of Naturalism and Dada was thus effected through the central Lukácsian category of totality – or, more precisely, through the perception of its absence. The link between Naturalist description and Dadaist montage was their shared fascination with "disconnected facts" and their development of techniques (reportage, montage) that exaggerated the disconnection between the details presented. The luxuriant descriptive detail of Naturalism failed to hold together as a structured whole, and so, intentionally or not, produced the same effect as the purposefully anti-totalizing montage techniques of Dada. Therefore, Lukács included Naturalism within the scope of his indictment of modernism as decadent formalism, the hallmark of such decadence being the collapse of a totalizing aesthetic presentation of "objective reality" into a fragmented structure referring to its own internal construction.

Nevertheless, however much Lukács may have insisted on the similarities between Naturalism and modernism, they obviously were not identical. Since Naturalism functions in Lukács' account as a transition phase between the classic realist and historical novels of the early nineteenth-century and the full-blown modernism of the twentieth, it allows some insight into what Lukács felt went wrong

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[18] Lukács, *Der historische Roman* (Berlin: Aufbau-Verlag, 1955): 271. (Hereinafter cited as "*HR*".)

in cultural practices once the bourgeoisie was no longer simply ascendant but had become dominant. The crucial historical moment for the emergence of the line of development that would stretch from Naturalism to modernist decadence is pointed out clearly by Lukács: the revolutions of 1848. In the aftermath of these upheavals, the bourgeoisie in Lukács' account lost its role as the most progressive class; furthering its own interests no longer meant furthering the interests of society as a whole. Faced with "historical competition" from the class it was now forced to oppress in its own interests, bourgeois ideology hardened into less truthful, less pliant, but more easily defended forms. Lukács perceived this ideological hardening primarily in the shift in the dominant understanding of historical change after 1848. Whereas the emergence of the modern historical consciousness – which Lukács characterized as the dialectical understanding of historical change as contradiction – had been one of the great and progressive effects of the triumphant revolutions of the ascendant bourgeoisie (Hegel and Thierry being Lukács' prime examples), the 1848 revolutions marked the emergence of an implicitly reactionary phenomenon: a phenomenon that could be called the modern historic*ist* consciousness. This new, historicist consciousness, in an effort to counter the specter of further historical change, now denied the contradictory nature of historical development once embraced and formulated a notion of linear, evolutionary progress that effectively reduced history to an unthreatening system of sociological laws or to a compilation of curious facts. This retreat from the appreciation of history as a dialectical process of radical contradiction and violent change was exemplified for Lukács by the rise to dominance of Rankean historicism:

> Ranke und die Rankeschule den Gedanken eines sich widerspruchsvoll durchsetztenden Fortschrittsprozesses der Menschheit leugnen. Nach ihrer Fassung hat die Geschichte keine Entwicklungsrichtung, keine Höhepunkte und Niederungen: "Alle Epochen der Geschichte sind gleich unmittelbar zu Gott." Es gibt also zwar eine ewige Bewegung, sie hat aber keine Richtung: die Geschichte ist eine Sammlung und Wiedergabe von interessanten Tatsachen der Vergangenheit.[19]

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[19] *HR*, 186.

In short, by reducing history to laws and isolated details, the historicist consciousness put the past at a safe remove from the present and constructed a firewall to protect against any historical claims the former might raise against the latter.

This shift in historical consciousness provided the framework within which Lukács analyzed the incubation and emergence of modernist cultural decadence. The transition from the Realist and historical novel that had flourished in the first half of the century to the Naturalist novel that would dominate the second half reflected precisely this shift in historical consciousness. Addressing the question of just what art could draw from this new conception of the past, Lukács stated:

> Diese Vergangenheit erscheint, noch viel mehr als die Gegenwart, als ein riesiges farbenschillerndes Chaos. Nichts ist mit dem objektiven Wesen der Gegenwart wirklich objektiv und organisch verbunden, aber eben darum kann die frei umherschwebende Subjektivität dort, wo sie will, und so, wie sie will, anknüpfen. Und da der Geschichte ihre wirkliche innere Größe, die Dialektik ihrer widerspruchsvollen Entwicklung, in Gedanken weggenommen wurde, ist die Größe, die für die Künstler dieser Periode in Betracht kommt, eine malerische, eine dekorative. Die Geschichte wird zu einer Sammlung exotischer Anekdoten.[20]

The past, denied any urgent connection with the present, became for the Naturalists a mere repository of themes and details that might add color to a narrative but contained no cognitive power. This development meant for Lukács a major corruption of the classical historical novel not only because it reduced historical material to the level of trite decoration,[21] but also because it initiated a spiraling process whereby historical detail had to be amassed in ever greater quantities in order to compensate for its lack of objective meaning. Lukács described "das Prinzip der photographischen Echtheit" that underlay Naturalism in the following terms: "Wenn in den Romanen mit

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[20] *HR*, 192.

[21] Lukács stated that "die Abgerissenheit der Gegenwart von der Geschichte schafft dann einen historischen Roman, in welchem die leere antiquarische oder abenteuerliche, spannende oder mythische Exotik einer wahllosen und beziehungslosen Thematik zu einer bloßen Unterhaltungslektüre herabsinkt" (*HR*, 193).

zeitgemäßer Thematik die Spezialwörterbücher immer energischer geplündert werden […] so muß diese Tendenz im historischen Roman zum Archäologismus führen."[22] Thus Lukács saw the details worked into Naturalist narratives as increasing in quantity precisely in proportion to their decreasing significance, thereby becoming caught in a self-perpetuating cycle of exaggeration that took its toll on the formal integrity of the Naturalist artwork. Further, Lukács' often shrill-sounding condemnations of the "perversity" of Naturalism – which continued as a major theme in his criticism of modernist works – were clearly referring to this same process. Because the material was fundamentally barren of meaning, "die Schriftsteller, um nicht einer Monotonie zu verfallen, immer ausgesuchtere, unnormalere, perversere usw. Fälle zum Gegenstand der Darstellung machen müssen."[23] Thus a logical progression led Lukács' critique along the following path: from the pseudo-scientism of the post-1848 historicist consciousness, via the reduction of historical detail to empty decoration, to the exaggerations and "perverse" fascinations of Naturalism. The critique of modernism as formalist and decadent was simply the final extension, the apparently inevitable outcome, of this logic.

Lukács argued the link between historicism and modernism in another way as well. A historicizing Naturalist novel such as Flaubert's *Salammbô* may appear on the surface as the product of an attempt to escape the present through a lush, detailed evocation of the past. While Lukács certainly did not spare this novel from the criticism that it was escapist,[24] he nevertheless went a step further and claimed that, despite the desperate effort to flee from the boredom of bourgeois society into an exoticized past, the heaping of archaic detail in fact served only to lock the novel precisely in Flaubert's banal present. This is a dialectical twist that is central to Lukács' theory of the historical novel: a historical moment could only be represented in a cognitively valuable way if it were represented in some relation to the present, as

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[22] *HR*, 210.

[23] *HR*, 206.

[24] "Aus dieser Einstellung Flauberts folgt, daß er mit programmatischer Konsequenz eine verschwundene Welt auferwecken wollte, die uns nicht angeht. Gerade diese Beziehungslosigkeit war für Flaubert der Anziehungspunkt" (*HR*, 196).

the prehistory of the present.[25] Flaubert's archaeological detail, however, carefully manipulated so that its accuracy had no implications as a prehistory of the present, lost all meaning as a history of the past as well. Despite the careful reconstruction, *Salammbô* according to Lukács had little or nothing to do with ancient Carthage. Because the details served merely for decorative effect rather than as an expression of the objective situation of a historical moment, they constituted nothing more than costumes draped over nineteenth-century bourgeois characters: "Bei Flaubert gibt es keinen solchen Zusammenhang zwischen der Außenwelt und der Psychologie der Hauptgestalten. Und durch diese Zusammenhangslosigkeit wird die archäologische Genauigkeit der Schilderung der äußeren Welt degradiert: sie wird zu einer Welt der historisch-exakten *Kostüme und Dekorationen*; sie ist nur ein malerischer Rahmen, innerhalb dessen sich ein rein moderner Vorgang abspielt."[26]

This phenomenon – which Lukács describes as the "Modernisierung der Gefühle, Vorstellungen und Gedanken der Menschen […], verbunden mit einer archäologischen Treue gegenüber Gegenständen und Gebräuchen, die uns nicht angehen, die also nur exotisch wirken können"[27] – provided him with his second major connection point between the degraded historicist consciousness and the rise of modernist art. Decorative archaism and psychological or linguistic modernization were not contradictory phenomena but rather parallel consequences of the same development: "In den Debatten über den historischen Roman taucht nun die Modernisierung der Sprache oft als *antinomischer Gegensatz* des Archaismus auf. In Wahrheit sind sie *zusammenhängende*, einander wechselseitig bedingende und ergänzende Tendenzen."[28] The paradox of equating archaism with modernization is merely apparent. Since the historicizing details from the start had nothing to do with

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[25] "Und die Neuformung der Ereignisse, der Sitten usw. der Vergangenheit besteht in diesem Fall nur darin, daß der Dichter jene Tendenzen, die in der Vergangenheit bereits lebendig und wirksam gewesen sind, die real historisch zur Gegenwart geführt haben, die aber die Zeitgenossen dieser Ereignisse naturgemäß nicht in ihrer später sichtbar gewordenen Bedeutung erkannt haben, mit jenem Gewicht hervortreten läßt, das sie für das Produkt dieser Vergangenheit, für die Gegenwart, objektiv historisch besitzen" (*HR*, 58).

[26] *HR*, 200. Emphasis in original.

[27] *HR*, 207.

[28] *HR*, 211. Emphases in original.

the past moment they ostensibly recreated, the artistic structure they served to embellish was essentially a disguised modern novel about modern society. This is then a further level on which Naturalism served to break down the organic totality of the Realist historical novel: not only through the uncontrolled proliferation of detail but also through the necessary tension between a decorative, "outer" level of historical detail and a hidden, "inner" referent to contemporary society, through the creation of a "Mischung von äußerlicher Exotik und innerer Modernität."[29]

Just as the theme of fragmentation and exaggeration carried over from Lukács' account of Naturalism to his critique of modernism, the theme of this structural split between archaism and modernization continued even beyond the overtly archaicizing novels of Naturalist historicism. In his polemic with Bloch during the Expressionism Debate, Lukács brought to bear a similar terminology of "outer" layer serving to disguise "inner" essence. Bloch had argued that the Expressionists' use of techniques such as montage and stream of consciousness were required to represent the discontinuous or fragmented character of contemporary society; representing this society through the accepted techniques of Realism would in Bloch's view have constituted a vain attempt to play "Ärzte am Krankenbett des Kapitalismus" or "den Oberflächenzusammenhang wieder[zuflicken]."[30] Lukács accepted Bloch's claim that contemporary reality appears discontinuous and agreed that this is the result of the intensification of capitalist society. But he then stated that this appearance was merely that − an outer appearance that did not go to the core of the matter: "Wenn die Literatur tatsächlich eine besondere Form der Wiederspiegelung der objektiven Wirklichkeit ist, so kommt es für sie sehr darauf an, diese Wirklichkeit so zu erfassen, wie sie *tatsächlich* beschaffen ist, und sich nicht darauf zu beschränken, das wiederzugeben, was und wie es unmittelbar *erscheint*."[31] To accept such surface appearance as reality was the sign that one had been hoodwinked by the ideological distortions of capitalism. Precisely the failing of "die einander rasch ablösenden

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[29] *HR*, 203.

[30] "Diskussionen über Expressionismus," in *Die Expressionismusdebatte*, 187.

[31] "Es geht um den Realismus," in *Die Expressionismusdebatte*, 198. Emphases in original.

modernen literarischen Richtungen der imperialistischen Periode vom Naturalismus bis zum Surrealismus" was that "sie bleiben alle, gedanklich wie gefühlsmäßig, bei dieser ihrer *Unmittelbarkeit* stehen, graben nicht nach dem Wesen, das heißt nach dem wirklichen Zusammenhang ihrer Erlebnisse mit dem wirklichen Leben der Gesellschaft, nach den verborgenen Ursachen […]."[32] When one penetrated below this surface distortion, Lukács continued, what one found was in fact a totalizing image of the present. The image might not be a pleasant one, as it would reveal all of the contradictions and injustice of the present, but it would nevertheless be a continuous and cognitively valuable image of the present as a totality.

The terminology of appearance and essence in Lukács' critique of Expressionism thus echoed his analysis of the outer archaism and inner modernity of Naturalism. The historical decorativism of a Naturalist novel such as *Salammbô* lent it the appearance of being an historical novel, but to accept such appearance was to miss its true nature as a novel of advanced bourgeois society and thus to lose whatever insight could be taken from the novel. In both cases, remaining at the surface level brought the consequence that one remained unaware of, and thus captive to, the deep structural split between surface and essence marring the artwork as a whole. If, however, one worked through to the deeper meaning – this penetration of surface appearance being simply a metaphor for what Lukács termed "mediation" – then that structural split itself became part of the cognitive content of the artwork.

Lukács' theory of Naturalism thus reveals how, in his account, formal structures linked with the emergence of the post-1848 historicist consciousness continued within modernism even once the overtly historicizing gestures had disappeared. The empty, decorative historicist details of *Salammbô* were echoed in the profusion of (for Lukács) unconnected detail in modernist stream of consciousness; the split between outer archaism and inner modernity was deepened in Expressionism's failure to distinguish discontinuous appearance from deeper totality. In other words, the primary structures Lukács identified when criticizing the historicism of the Naturalist novel became separated from the nature of the artwork's

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[32] *Ibid*., 202. Emphasis in original.

content: those same structures could exist in artworks that displayed no historical content. This separation of "historicist" structural flaws from the appearance of overt historical content allowed Lukács to call into question one of the fundamental pillars of the self-understanding of the avant-garde: the understanding of the avant-garde as engaging in a ruthless battle *against* historicism. While what Lukács might have called the "ideology of the avant-garde" perceived itself as fighting a battle through which the obsolete formal languages inherited from the past would be replaced by a new language expressive of the present, Lukács insisted that these new languages were simply a further step along precisely the development they claimed to combat. In Lukács' scheme, it was irrelevant that the Dadaists engaged in iconoclastic gesturing or that the Futurists called for the burning of museums. These movements remained "historicist" by virtue of their inner structure.

II.   The Idealism of Immanence

Lukács' critique of the avant-garde and the modernists in general was for the most part articulated in response to Expressionism. In the debate in *Das Wort* this is explicit, since the debate began as a consideration of whether Expressionism belonged within the Marxist artistic heritage. Lukács' increasing emphasis on the association of modernism with irrationality, culminating in what is probably his most disputed work, *Die Zerstörung der Vernunft*, demonstrates the enormous influence that his interpretation of Expressionism exerted on his account of modernist art as a whole. For this reason it is appropriate to interrogate Lukács' position from the point of view of a figure from outside this debate. The polemics of the Expressionism Debate were merely one version of an aesthetic and ideological conflict being played out in various forms and in different places in the nineteen-thirties. Separating out the particular terms of the Expressionism Debate helps reveal the deeper assumptions of this wider Realism Debate.

Karel Teige's writings are especially useful here for a number of reasons. First, he was never involved in a direct exchange with Lukács, although he engaged in an ongoing effort in the Czechoslovak press to defend avant-garde culture from

detractors of all kinds, including the proponents of Socialist Realism. Second, despite his reputation as the radical theoretical voice of the Czechoslovak avant-garde, he was just as suspicious of Expressionism as was Lukács. He generally portrayed it in similar terms as an unproductive act of desperation demonstrating the dead-end into which bourgeois culture had driven itself. Even in the late twenties, when Teige was already well established as the leading theoretician of the Czech avant-garde and indeed enjoyed a European reputation in particular for his work as a propagator of Constructivism, his suspicion of the legacy of Expressionism was so strong that it still negatively colored his interpretation of Surrealism – which within a few years he would adopt as his own position. Thus in 1928, six years before joining the Czechoslovak Surrealist Group, Teige could defend the Artificialist movement of the avant-garde painters Jindřich Štyrský and Toyen in the following terms: "the term 'Artificialism' also reveals the difference from Surrealist painting, which is so deeply indebted to Böcklin and Expressionism that it is incapable of utilizing the unlimited possibilities represented by the heritage of Cubism, instead degenerating into a literary and formalized historicism."[33] The unrepentant irrationalism of Expressionism was thus suspect not only for Lukács but for Teige as well, whose aesthetic position constantly revolved around attempts to formulate principles for an art of a-rational lyricism that would harmonize with the strict rationalism he demanded of modern architecture.

Teige's writings, therefore, problematize the standard terms of the Expressionism Debate simply because his account is in several respects so similar to Lukács'. Like Lukács, Teige also condemned the empty and excessive irrationalism of certain movements of the avant-garde,[34] and he also identified a latent historicism

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[33] "Ultrafialové obrazy čili artificialismus" ["Ultraviolet Images, or Artificialism"], in *Výbor z díla,* eds. Jiří Brabec, Vratislav Effenberger, Květoslav Chvatík, and Robert Kalivoda, vol. I (Praha: Československý spisovatel, 1966): 321 (hereinafter referred to as "*VzD*"). All translations herein are my own.

[34] In a 1927 review article entitled "Ilya Ehrenburg's Prague Lecture, or Constructivism and Romanticism" Teige accused not only Ehrenburg but also LeCorbusier, Picasso, and Meyerchold of engaging in the "infantile disorder" of a "romanticized maschinism or mechanomania." He insisted that "Constructivism signifies *a principled rejection of the romanticized concept of art in the name of objective, rational, socially conscious scientific work* […]" (in *VzD*/I: 557, emphasis in original).

in the work of some avant-garde artists who were clearly very far from resembling the standard historicism of the academies.[35]

But perhaps most striking is the similarity of Teige's use of the term "realism" itself. Even in his articles from the early twenties, when Teige's theoretical position was becoming rapidly radicalized as he identified himself with the Constructivist avant-garde, Teige lay particular emphasis on the claim of the realism of avant-garde art. As had Lukács, Teige contrasted the proper form of realism with its degraded Naturalist form. He extolled the "direct realism […] (in contrast to the indirect, illusive, descriptive form of realism, i.e., Naturalism), which, after more than four hundred years of empirical and sensual painting, is returning art to its true foundation: cognition of the real [*poznání skutečna*]." [36] That this direct realism had little to do with producing mimetic images was made clear by the further claim that this was "a higher realism of strict formal purity, of an independent and self-governing form, the true opposite of the imitative, visual, optically illusive naturalism of the descriptive and so-called 'photographic' kind."[37] In other words, this realism reached "higher" or beyond the immediate appearance of objects in order to achieve some sort of purer and thus truer expression of their essential reality. That purity was to be judged by formal purity. Teige pointed to Cubism as an example of an art inspired by this understanding of realism and producing forms marked by purity rather than "ornamentality."[38]

Thus a latent Platonism led Teige to oppose the illusionism of standard realist (i.e., "Naturalist") art to the formal purity of a higher realism.[39] This Platonism,

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[35] Most famously in his polemic with Le Corbusier, which will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 4.

[36] "Umění přítomnosti," ["Art of the Present"] in *Život II: Nové umění, konstrukce, soudobá intelektuelní aktivita* [*Life II: The New Art, Construction, Contemporary Intellectual Activity*], ed. Jaromír Krejcar (Praha: umělecká beseda, 1922): 133.

[37] *Ibid.*, 133-34.

[38] *Ibid.*, 133.

[39] For a discussion of Mondrian's identification of a Platonic purity in the harmony of radical abstraction, see Daniel Herwitz, *Making Theory /Constructing Art: On the Authority of the Avant-Garde* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1993): 108-112. See also Reyner Banham, *Theory and Design in the First Machine Age*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1960): 151.

however, did not refer to a transcendent realm, despite Teige's claim that such realism touched upon a "higher" truth. Rather this realism expressed a Platonism of pure immanence: the purity achieved through the lack of all outside reference. Art would only be realistic in this sense if it abdicated all claim to represent anything outside of itself. Realistic art for Teige achieved its formal purity by abandoning the project of description: the work of art "represents only itself. It is not a depiction."[40] Thus this higher realism consisted simply in the presentation of the artwork's own corporeality, which appeared as a form of honesty in comparison to the illusionism involved in descriptive realism. The honest identity of a painting was that it was an assemblage of forms and colors; since the invention of photography had freed painting from the burden of "documentary" tasks, painting had "awoken to new life in pure, unapplied, specific form."[41]

This idealism of immanence would appear to imply that Teige's realism was coldly autonomous, wrapped up in the purity of its introspection. Teige, however, perceived the exact opposite. The immanence of this realism did not cut it off from the outside world but rather presented material reality to its spectator as if magnified through a lens. Immanence brought the spectators' thoughts back down to earth in order to focus them on the true features – and innate beauty – of their surrounding environment. In this manner, Teige understood realism as a sort of reconciliation with material reality, although such reconciliation did not signify resignation but rather an exhilarating aesthetic engagement. This realism was the aesthetic principle that allowed Teige to claim that Constructivism's principle of functional perfection would inherently reveal beauty.[42] The more functionally perfected an object was, the truer it was to its immanent characteristics, the more honestly it would reveal its inner nature

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[40] "Doba a umění," ["Art and the Age"] in *Stavba a báseň: Umění dnes a zítra* [*Building and Poem: Art Today and Tomorrow*] (Praha: Vaněk & Votava, 1927): 46.

[41] "Ultrafialové obrazy," in *VzD*/I: 319.

[42] "[…] *whenever a concrete task or problem receives the most perfected, most economic, most precise and most complete fulfillment and resolution*, then without any additional aesthetic intentions it rises to the purest modern beauty" ("Konstruktivismus a likvidace 'umění'" ["Constructivism and the Liquidation of 'Art'"], in *VzD*/I: 140, emphasis in original).

and thus the more beautiful it would be. This realism, therefore, did not draw art into itself and away from the world; rather it revealed the beauty even of material that was not graced with the transcendent aureole that traditional aesthetics required of art. Teige's realism led him to identify beauty in all phenomena that were characterized by honesty and openness as to their nature. Referring to the organizers of the avant-garde Liberated Theater (*Osvobozené divadlo*) in Prague, Teige wrote that:

> when they seek guidance for their work they no longer seek it in the past and the tradition of the old masters, but rather in the drama of contemporary, vital life; in its faith and its struggles, its games and mass spectacles, in sport and in the music-halls, in the cinema, dance halls, circus, or folk festivals they find the elements of modern beauty […]. Constructivism, which forms the backbone of their program, has led them to eliminate from their work all decorative elements and ornamentation, so that they can build their project from elementary values.[43]

This passage reveals how the notion of a realism of immanence had for Teige a temporal dimension: that which was most honestly "itself" was that which was most characteristically modern. The traditions of the old masters or any references to formal vocabularies from another time constituted a form of transcendence just as did the functions of representation and depiction. Art that "was not depiction," that "represented only itself," thus necessarily revealed openly and without ornament not only its material features but its time and present as well. Realism consisted in the discarding of deceptive garments such as depiction and tradition and the revelation of the present as it really was.

The Realism Debate of the thirties thus was not about realistic versus anti-realistic aesthetics. Rather it invoked the question how one was to break through the outer forms or disguises in which present reality revealed itself so as "diese Wirklichkeit so zu erfassen, wie sie *tatsächlich* beschaffen ist."[44] Both the avant-garde and Realist positions faced the question: what artistic style or method should we

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[43] "Osvobozené divadlo" ["The Liberated Theater"], in *VzD/*I: 161.

[44] Lukács, *loc. cit.*

regard as the true identity, the real face, of the present? The necessity of even raising such a question appeared to set the present off from past epochs. Earlier epochs, or at least so it could seem, had shown their face openly; the artistic style permeating the various manifestations of earlier periods gave those periods a coherent identity. Only the present no longer had its identity spontaneously "given" to it, for all traditions claiming to provide such an identity had become suspect. Thus the appropriate aesthetic style needed to be discovered – it needed to be constructed through theoretical labor. This is what gave the Realism Debate its stridency. The stakes involved were not simply that one might make bad art but that one might prescribe the *wrong* style, that one might fundamentally misrecognize or ascribe to the present a false or dishonest identity. This was the threat understood by Lukács as well as by Teige as the threat of historicism: the threat of imposing an artificial or superficial image onto the present and creating thereby a false style that masked the true physiognomy of the present. Both Realist and avant-gardist held historicism to be the process of creating such masks and passing them off as truth. Each claimed to have identified the deeper reality under the mask.

Chapter Two

THE EXPULSION FROM THE GARDEN

Herder, Nietzsche, and the Critique of Historicism

Wer bloß an meiner Pflanze riecht, der kennt sie nicht, und wer sie pflückt, bloß, um daran zu lernen, kennt sie auch nicht.[1]

Der Ursprung aller Architektur aus Eisen und Glas im Sinne der Gegenwart ist das Gewächshaus.[2]

"Gewiss, wir brauchen die Historie, aber wir brauchen sie anders, als sie der verwöhnte Müßiggänger im Garten des Wissens braucht [...]."[3] Nietzsche's garden of knowledge was no Eden but was rather the site of two sins. The first was the sin of decadence. The spoiled idler, intoxicated by the heavy atmosphere of lush and overgrown vegetation, was content merely to stroll, sniff and examine blossoms in the garden, and perhaps pluck some samples for his collection. Nietzsche elsewhere described this idler as one of the "neugierige Reisende oder peinliche Mikrologen [...]" crawling over the pyramids of past historical accomplishment. The true student of history, who had sought out places "wo er die Anreizungen zum Nachahmen und Bessermachen findet, wünscht [...] nicht dem Müßiggänger zu begegnen, der, begierig nach Zerstreuung oder Sensation, wie unter den gehäuften Bilderschätzen einer Galerie herumstreicht."[4] Garden and gallery were here reduced to forums for self-

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[1] Friedrich Hölderlin, *Hyperion*, in *Werke und Briefe*, eds. Friedrich Beißner and Jochen Schmidt, vol. I (Frankfurt a/M: Insel, 1969): 295.

[2] A.G. Meyer, *Eisenbauten*, quoted in Walter Benjamin, *Das Passagen-Werk*, in *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 5 (Frankfurt a/M: Suhrkamp, 1982): 221.

[3] Friedrich Nietzsche, *Unzeitgemäße Betrachtungen II:* "Vom Nutzen und Nachteil der Historie für das Leben," in *Kritische Studienausgabe*, eds. Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari, vol. I (München and Berlin: DTV and De Gruyter, 1988): 244.

[4] *Ibid*., 258.

indulgence; the idler did not take inspiration for new action from the amassed treasures but satisfied a petty desire to possess. Thus decadence: "Von dem gedankenlosen Verpflanzen der Gewächse rührt manches Unheil her: der Kritiker ohne Noth, der Antiquar ohne Pietät, der Kenner des Grossen ohne das Können des Grossen sind solche zum Unkraut aufgeschossene, ihrem natürlichen Mutterboden entfremdete und deshalb entartete Gewächse."[5]

The second sin was that of the scientist. The scientist's diligence, however, appears in Nietzsche's account to be merely a variant of the decadent's idleness: the "neugierige Reisende oder peinliche Mikrologen" were equivalent sources of annoyance to those seeking instruction in history. The scientist and the decadent were linked through their intemperate desire to amass material and their incapacity to put such material to use. The botanist's samples, as painstakingly organized and carefully stored as the decadent's picture gallery, combined to form nothing more than a curiosity cabinet. Worse yet, the modern scientist's drive to dissect, separate, and categorize had transformed history from a live source of energy into a dead object of observation:

> Und nun schnell einen Blick auf unsere Zeit! Wir erschrecken, wir fliehen zurück: wohin ist alle Klarheit, alle Natürlichkeit und Reinheit jener Beziehung von Leben und Historie […]! Liegt die Schuld an uns, den Betrachtenden? Oder hat sich wirklich die Constellation von Leben und Historie verändert, dadurch, dass ein mächtig feindseliges Gestirn zwischen sie getreten ist? […] Es ist allerdings ein solches Gestirn, ein leuchtendes und herrliches Gestirn dazwischen getreten, die Constellation ist wirklich verändert – *durch die Wissenschaft, durch die Forderung, dass die Historie Wissenschaft sein soll*.[6]

Thus the garden of knowledge expressed the two forces acting on the modern historical sense: on the one hand the self-indulgent torpidity of the decadent, and on the other the stultifying pedantry of the scientist. These two forces, both driven by the greedy desire to accumulate at all costs, had distorted the historical sense into a

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[5] *Ibid*., 264-65.

[6] *Ibid*., 271. Emphasis in original.

mockery of what it ought to have been. From a source of instruction and inspiration to action, the modern historical sense had devolved into a pass-time, or even worse, into a dissolving agent that reduced the accomplishments and drama of history into lifeless specimens suitable only for the private collection or technical catalog.

This garden had not always been this way. Where Nietzsche found rank weeds and poisonous blossoms, others had found the image of order and meaning. The metaphor of history as a garden full of unique and fragile blossoms had been one of the standard tropes of the Historical School, against which Nietzsche's polemic was largely pointed.[7] Yet the origins of the metaphor extend back further. It was Herder who had originally claimed "daß […] man die Erde als einen Garten ansehen könnte, wo hier diese, dort jene menschliche Nationalpflanze in ihrer eignen Bildung und Natur blühet […]."[8] Herder, however, had adopted the metaphor of a garden of history precisely to illustrate his distance from the strict rationalism of Enlightenment science. In contrast to what he deemed the "mechanical" historiography of writers such as Hume, Voltaire, and Robertson, Herder wished to emphasize how history constituted a field of knowledge resistant to the categorical precision and nomothetic universalism of scientific thought. The garden metaphor expressed not only this contrast to mechanical rationality, but also the urgency and relevance Herder attributed to history as a source of knowledge of the present. Herder felt that the accounts of the Enlightenment historians were too heavy with the dust of libraries and

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[7] Although Nietzsche never actually used the term "historicism" in "Vom Nutzen und Nachteil," Karl Heusi has described it as the book "in dem man ihn [i.e., the term "historicism"] vor allem vermuten möchte" (*Die Krisis des Historismus* [Tübingen: Mohr, 1932]: 2). An example of how the vegetative metaphor for history was used in the rhetoric of the Historical School is provided by Georg Gervinus' 1852 Preface to his *Einleitung in die Geschichte des neunzehnten Jahrhunderts*: "Das wenige, was sich von Betrachtung anschließt, erwächst ungezwungen aus den geschichtlichen Hergängen selbst und ist frei von jedem Kunstwort eines Systems und frei von jedem Kunststück der Sophistik. Die Pflanze des tatsächlichen, die hier in typisch-einfacher Gesetzlichkeit erscheint, wird hoffentlich gesund und unverstümmelt gefunden, und an der Blüte des Urteils, die hier und da in Knospen ansetzt, keine Spur einer Treibkunst entdeckt werden" (Berlin: Dom-Verlag, 1921): 9. On Wilhelm von Humboldt's use of the plant analogy to express the organic coherence he felt characteristic of historical knowledge, see Georg G. Iggers, *The German Conception of History: The National Tradition of Historical Thought from Herder to the Present* (S.l.: Wesleyan University Press, 1983): 57.

[8] Johann Gottfried Herder, *Ideen zur Philosophie der Geschichte der Menschheit* (hereinafter "*Ideen*"), in *Herders Sämmtliche Werke*, Bernhard Suphan, ed., vol. XIV (Berlin: Weidmannsche Buchhandlung, 1887): 84. (This edition shall be cited hereinafter as "*SW*" followed by a volume number.)

studies; thus he wished to send the historian out into the fresh air in order to move freely, perceive, and engage with the surrounding world.

Somewhere in the century between Herder's and Nietzsche's visits, therefore, this garden had become dreadfully overgrown. The fresh air had turned into a greenhouse atmosphere. Where Herder had perceived the image of an ordered whole constituted from a myriad of unique and fascinating blossoms, Nietzsche perceived a sprawling collection of weeds.

The deterioration of this garden represents more than just the fate of a particular metaphor. It is indicative of a wider shift in the aspirations and hesitations associated with the category of history. This shift stands out with particular clarity in the light of what Herder and Nietzsche have in common: as two of the most significant figures of the German Counter-Enlightenment, each was concerned to point out the limits and hazards of an absolute faith in reason. They pointed to such limits, however, not by criticizing reason from an anti-rationalist standpoint, but rather by turning the critical principles of Enlightenment rationalism against the Enlightenment itself.[9] Thus both Herder and Nietzsche criticized what they perceived as an arrogantly self-confident and undialectical notion of reason. Herder and Nietzsche described this undialectical rationalism, which engulfed the world but was unable to turn back on itself, and which created a universe in its image by imagining itself to be universal, in remarkably similar terms. The essence of this deficient form of reason for both of them came down to its formalism. Formalism filtered the world through abstract categories, which took priority over individual examples; the compulsively repetitive application of such categories replaced the exercise of vital and productive cognitive energy. Where more supple forms of reason were able to combine

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[9] In regard to Herder this point is made in Robert E. Norton, *Herder's Aesthetics and the European Enlightenment* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1991), introduction and chapter one. Herbert Schnädelbach has argued that historicism in general "praktiziert *Aufklärung über die Aufklärung* und ist als Aufklärungskritik eben nicht einfach *Gegenaufklärung*" (*Philosophie in Deutschland 1831-1933* [Frankfurt a/M: Suhrkamp, 1983]: 54, emphases in original). In regard to Nietzsche, see, e.g., Robert B. Pippin's claim that Nietzsche often appears to try to "out-trump" Kant and the post-Kantians through Kantian terminology (*Modernism as a Philosophical Problem: On the Dissatisfactions of European High Culture* [Cambridge, MA: Basil Blackwell, 1991]: 82).

perceptions into holistic patterns, formalism ruthlessly divided the world so as to fit within its predetermined categories.

While Herder's and Nietzsche's descriptions of this formalism are very similar – in fact at times almost identical – the transformation of the garden indicates where their accounts are deeply at odds. Herder had found the fundamental antidote to formalist rationality in the historical understanding. Since the garden of history represented a field of knowledge consisting entirely of unique and individual events, it was particularly resistant to the application of abstract categories. Thus Herder's assault on formalist reason led him to cast his glance back towards the past: the lessons in logic to be gleaned from the study of history were not an end in themselves but were to help dissolve the habits of rigidly formalist thought that Herder felt obstructed future cognitive development. By the time Nietzsche entered this garden, however, his associations were quite the opposite. The historical appeared as the very soil from which this tangled formalism grew, and the garden of history represented mere raw material for the classificatory systems of the botanist. Nietzsche sought the vital energy necessary to overcome the stifling formalism of modern science not by appealing to history – which had become too deeply enmeshed in scientific classification – but rather by appealing to "life," to the ceaseless re-creation of identity. Nietzsche did, to be sure, admit in "Vom Nutzen und Nachteil" the possibility that history could serve as a source of life for those true seekers able to liberate themselves from the pseudo-scientism of the modern historical consciousness. Nevertheless, the overall rhetorical structure of Nietzsche's argument functioned to ally "life" with presence. Even those moments when Nietzsche identified history as a source for life were made possible because Nietzsche implicitly perceived the historical to have been actualized or made present for a fleeting moment. The deterioration of the garden thus represents this shift: with Nietzsche, resistance against formalist reason no longer cast the glance backward to history, as it had for Herder, but rather forward to the next incorporation of life and to a present that was always just emerging out of the future.

This shift constitutes the foundation of a critique of historicism that was to become one of the ideological pillars of the twentieth-century avant-garde – a crucial

element, so to speak, of the avant-garde's subconscious. The avant-garde artist perceived the dependence of liberal bourgeois culture upon revivals of past forms or systematizations of historical aesthetic traditions as the mark of that culture's impotence. The historicism of that culture appeared to consist in this stifling overabundance of historical knowledge; thus the need for a radical rejection of the past and a new beginning. But in fact what was really at issue was not so much the abundance as the degeneration of the historical in nineteenth-century culture. The critique of historicism for which Nietzsche's "Vom Nutzen und Nachteil" served as the unofficial manifesto identified the impotence of historicism in the conjunction of history and formalism. This conjunction had dissolved history as an active force and given rise to the shallowness of the modern historical consciousness. With Nietzsche the distinction between history and historicism was still perceptible, as he admitted the possibility of a positive and life-producing understanding of history, even though his logic for the most part denied this possibility. For the avant-garde artist of the early twentieth-century, however, the elision between history and historicism had become complete. The debilitating formalism that Herder had tried to resist through the suppleness of historical reason appeared as the defining characteristic of the historical itself.

I.   *The Cultivation of Reason*

Herder's intellectual legacy is often difficult for a modern reader to evaluate. While he is generally regarded along with Hamann as one of the founding figures of the German Counter-Enlightenment, many passages in his writings attest to his deep commitment to Enlightenment ideals. The political implications of Herder's thought are equally hard to assess, as at times he appears as an apologist for a self-satisfied nationalism, and at times as the defender of a liberal, cosmopolitan tolerance.[10]

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[10] These ambiguities have produced drastically differing interpretations of Herder's legacy. Usually associated on the one hand with Goethe and Schiller as one of the founders of Weimar humanism, Herder has on the other hand often been contentiously interpreted by conservative German nationalists as the great defender of a superior German "national genius" (see Bernhard Becker, "Phasen der Herder-Rezeption von 1871-1945," in *Johann Gottfried Herder, 1744-1803*, ed. Gerhard

Herder often appears to have had one foot planted in the nineteenth-century and one foot still in an earlier age. He raised many of the issues that became critically urgent in nineteenth-century culture: issues of national identity, of aesthetic autonomy, of idealism versus vitalism, of tradition versus revolution. Yet he combined and resolved these issues in ways that shortly thereafter became unsustainable. Precisely this combination of proto-modernist questions with pre-modernist answers makes Herder so difficult to classify with twentieth-century terminology.

Such difficulties, of course, would be of limited interest if they did not point to something deeper. Underneath the apparent contradictions in Herder's position lay a concept that he implicitly assumed but never explicitly named: formalist rationality. Teasing out the ways Herder described what now appear to be incompatible positions as forming part of a consistent intellectual project reveals the outline of his critique of formalist rationality. Inversely, examining that critique of formalism helps clarify at least some of the paradoxes in Herder's overall position.

Herder at times appears as an orthodox Enlightenment thinker. This stands forth clearly in passages where he described his vision of a unified human race, of a common human nature linking all societies despite the appearance of radical difference. The very first sentence of *Auch eine Philosophie der Geschichte zur Bildung der Menschheit* announced this vision: "Je weiter es sich in Untersuchung der ältsten Weltgeschichte, ihrer Völkerwanderungen, Sprachen, Sitten, Erfindungen und Traditionen aufklärt: desto wahrscheinlicher wird mit jeder neuen Entdeckung auch der *Ursprung des ganzen Geschlechts von Einem*."[11] Herder was optimistic that increased understanding of the unity-in-variety of humanity would produce a better,

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Sauder [Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verlag, 1987]: 423-36). Simultaneously, however, Herder served as a catalyst in the development of 19th-century Slavic and Pan-Slavic nationalisms (see Peter Drews, *Herder und die Slaven. Materiellen zur Wirkungsgeschichte bis zur Mitte des 19. Jahrhunderts* [München: Sagner, 1990]). Further, Marxist commentators have portrayed Herder as the harbinger of leftist egalitarianism in 19th-century Germany (see, e.g., Wolfgang Förster, "Geschichtsphilosophie und Humanitätsbegriff Herders," in *Johann Gottfried Herder und die progressive bürgerliche Geschichts- und Gesellschaftstheorien zwischen 1720-1850* [Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1979]: 43). With the exceptions perhaps of Hegel and Nietzsche, few modern German thinkers have appeared so differently to so many different interpreters.

[11] *SW*/V: 477. This quote is from Herder's earlier work on the philosophy of history, *Auch eine Philosophie der Geschichte zur Bildung der Menschheit* (1774) (hereinafter "*Auch eine Philosophie*"). Here and in all following citations, emphases are Herder's.

more peaceful society. An understanding of the variety of forms produced by different climates, geography, cultures and traditions, rather than underscoring the divisions between societies, would serve to reveal the common and unchanging characteristics of the human species: "In so verschiedenen Formen das Menschengeschlecht auf der Erde erscheint: so ists doch überall Ein' und diesselbe Menschengattung."[12] Herder believed that this awareness must lead to a sense of solidarity and tolerance, and to a reduction of the violence caused by peoples' sense of difference from each other.[13]

Herder was also convinced of the power of reason to clear away superstition. Stories of men with tails or their feet attached backwards, theories that orangutans might be capable of speech, revealed their absurdity once the true variety and unity of humanity was known:

> Wie viele Fabeln der Alten von menschlichen Ungeheurn und Mißgestalten haben sich durch das Licht der Geschichte bereits verlohren! und wo irgend die Sage noch Reste davon wiederholet, bin ich gewiß, daß auch diese bei hellerm Licht der Untersuchung sich zur schönern Wahrheit aufklären werden.[14]

This commitment to the increase of knowledge and tolerance and to the battle against prejudice and superstition shows Herder's affinities with the mainstream of Enlightenment thought. Nevertheless, the above passage also begins to reveal where he departed from that mainstream. While "light" and "enlightenment" were still the

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[12] *SW*/XIII: 252. Herder's theory of climate illustrates this point well. While Herder has sometimes been interpreted as having emphasized the differentiating effects climate and geography have on societies and customs, he in fact lay more emphasis on what remained constant throughout such variation: "niemand z.B. wird verlangen, daß in einem fremden Klima die Rosa eine Lilie, der Hund ein Wolf werden soll" (*ibid*., 284). On how this emphasis set Herder apart from the major French theorists of climatic influence (Montesque), see Gonthier-Louis Fink, "Von Winckelmann bis Herder. Die deutsche Klimatheorie in europäischer Perspektive," in *Johann Gottfried Herder, 1744-1803*, 173.

[13] Thus Herder contrasted the differences resulting from climatic or cultural variation with the common features that distinguish all human beings from our closest relatives, the apes: "Du aber Mensch, ehre dich selbst. Weder der Pongo noch der longimanus ist dein Bruder; aber wohl der Amerikaner, der Neger. Ihn also sollst du nicht unterdrücken, nicht morden, nicht stehlen: denn er ist ein Mensch, wie du bist; mit den Affen darfst du keine Brüderschaft eingehn" (*SW*/XIII: 257).

[14] *Ibid*., 255.

victors over fable and superstition, the mechanism of enlightenment had changed: where one would expect to find the "light of reason," one finds the "light of history" instead.

That Herder identified history rather than reason as the ultimate source of enlightenment reveals that a major part of Herder's project in fact consisted in a critique of Enlightenment reason. His primary complaint with the model of rationality he found in major Enlightenment thinkers such as Hume or Voltaire was that it was "mechanical." He wrote that: "Der Geist der *neueren Philosophie* – daß er auf mehr als eine Art *Mechanik* seyn müße, zeigt, denke ich, der meiste Theil seiner Kinder. Bei Philosophie und Gelehrsamkeit oft wie unwißend und unkräftig in Sachen des Leben und des gesunden Verstandes!"[15] Herder's use of the term "mechanical" led him, not surprisingly, to oppose it to "life," to the capacities and powers that make human beings into something more than merely intricate machines. The mechanical mode of thought seemed dangerous for Herder because it functioned as a soporific, putting such human capacities to sleep and ultimately withering them away.[16]

Simultaneously, however, Herder gave the term "mechanical" a surprising twist. The claim that Enlightenment rationality ultimately turned society into a "machine"[17] was not a claim about the instrumentality of Enlightenment reason. Herder did not portray Enlightenment thought as having ignored something "higher" or more spiritual in favor of means-end calculation or utilitarian concern with the production of particular results in the most efficient manner. Quite the opposite, Herder argued that Enlightenment reason was not nearly instrumental enough. It had lost sight of the fact that philosophy and theory were not to be ends in themselves but rather tools to achieve particular goals and to provide a means for action:

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[15] *SW*/V: 535.

[16] "Wenn meistens *neue Methoden* in jeder Art und Kunst die Welt veränderten – neue Methoden *entübrigten Kräfte*, die voraus nöthig waren, sich aber jetzt (denn jede ungebrauchte Kraft schläft!) mit der Zeit verlohren" (*ibid*., 534).

[17] *Ibid*., 534.

> Statt, daß in den alten Zeiten der philosophische Geist nie für *sich allein* bestand, von *Geschäften* ausging und zu *Geschäften eilte*, also auch nur Zweck hatte, *volle, gesunde, würkende Seelen* zu schaffen, seit er *allein* stehet und Handwerk geworden – ist er *Handwerk*. Der wievielste Theil von euch betrachtet Logik, Metaphysik, Moral, Physik als was sie sind – Organe der Menschlichen Seele, *Werkzeuge*, mit denen man würken soll![18]

The mechanistic nature of the new philosophy thus did not consist for Herder in some sort of fatal ignorance of what was truly human and a blind adherence to means-end rationality. Rather it consisted in fatal ignorance of real life and in an inability to produce practical results. For Herder, Enlightenment rationality had ceased to produce tools that could be put to practical use. Instead, it merely spun a web of cross-indexed encyclopedias, dictionaries, and philosophical systems that lost all reference to outside reality. The result was mere ivory tower learning:

> Auf dem Papier wir rein! wie sanft! wie schön und groß; heilos im *Ausführen*! bei jedem Schritte *staunend* und *starrend* vor ungesehenen Hindernißen und Folgen. […] *Wörterbücher* und *Philosophien* über alle, ohne eine einzige mit dem *Werkzeug in der Hand* zu verstehen: sind allesammt abrégé raisonné ihrer vorigen Pedanterie geworden – *abgezogener Geist*! *Philosophie* aus zwei Gedanken, die *Mechanischte* Sache von der Welt.[19]

The claim that Enlightenment reason was mechanistic thus implied for Herder not that it was instrumental but rather the direct opposite: that it was autonomous, cut off from real life. "Mechanik" was not opposed to the spiritual but was simply the other face of "abgezogener Geist." Herder's argument against the mechanistic philosophy of the Enlightenment, therefore, surprisingly enough anticipated the sort of accusations that engineers and natural scientists would start leveling against philosophy and art half a century later: that they were self-absorbed, detached from reality, and therefore ineffective or indeed purposeless.

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[18] *Ibid.*, 535.

[19] *Ibid.*, 536-7.

Herder thus arrived at the startling conclusion that the mechanistic philosophers were in fact mere dreamers – "staunend und starrend." Such conclusion was possible only because Herder criticized Enlightenment reason on two fronts: he opposed *Mechanik* not only to feeling (*Empfindung*) but also to activity (*Tätigkeit*) and action (*Handlung*). This association of feeling and action emerges clearly in a key passage in *Auch eine Philosophie*, in which Herder defended the Middle Ages against the charge of having been nothing more than a thousand years of pointless and petty feudal quarrels:

> "Daß es jemandem in der Welt unbegreiflich wäre, wie Licht die Menschen nicht nährt! Ruhe und Üppigkeit und sogenannte Gedankenfreiheit nie allgemeine Glückseligkeit und Bestimmung seyn kann!" Aber *Empfindung, Bewegung, Handlung* – wenn auch in der Folge ohne Zweck, (was hat auf der Bühne der Menschheit ewigen Zweck?) wenn auch mit *Stößen* und *Revolutionen*, wenn auch mit Erfindungen, die hie und da *schwärmerisch*, *gewaltsam*, gar *abscheulich* werden – als *Werkzeug in den Händen des Zeitlaufs*, welche Macht! welche Würkung! *Herz* und nicht *Kopf* genährt! mit *Neigungen* und *Trieben* alles gebunden, nicht mit *kränkelnden Gedanken*! […] Gährung *Menschlicher Kräfte*. Große Kur der ganzen Gattung durch *gewaltsame Bewegung*, und wenn ich so kühn reden darf, das Schicksal zog, (allerdings mit grossem Getöse, und ohne daß die Gewichte da ruhig hangen konnten) die *große abgelaufne Uhr* auf! da raßelten also die Räder![20]

In the above passage Herder described feeling and action as linked faculties of the heart. Only the capacity to feel passionately could produce the impulse to action. Such action might be unwise, irrational, or even destructive, but as a sheer release of energy it served a positive purpose by putting events into motion, even if the direction of that motion might not be under control. The head, the faculty of reason, consequently appeared mired in "kränkelnde Gedanken:" the result was a ceaseless curbing of energy, or a form of contemplation that might be peaceful but was unnourishing and unproductive.

[20] *Ibid.*, 525-6.

This association of feeling and action against mechanical reason is one of the characteristic features of Herder's critique of Enlightenment. Such a double front, however, became unsustainable for most thinkers after Herder. By the early to mid-nineteenth-century, the different sides of Herder's critique had developed in absolutely opposite directions: *Mechanik* could be opposed either to *Empfindung* or to *Tätigkeit*, but not to both. Thus one side of Herder's critique clearly anticipated a conservative, Burkean position valorizing feeling, tradition, and even prejudice over the coldly rational and ruthlessly destructive revolutionary drive. Napoleon's notorious comment that "diffuse metaphysics" lacked "knowledge of the human heart and of the lessons of history"[21] clearly made use of Herderian categories, even if giving them a different political shading. Simultaneously, however, Herder's opposition of *Mechanik* to *Tätigkeit* glorified revolutionary upheaval for its own sake, perceiving it as the rattle of chains and creaking of gears that accompanied the rewinding of the clock of history.[22] This side of Herder's thought valorized action over mere philosophy or theory. Such valorization of revolutionary action led Herder to criticize autonomous reason or paper knowledge in terms that occasionally sound straight out of Marx. Statements such as "Ideen geben eigentlich nur Ideen"[23] show how Herder's claim that Enlightenment thought had lost the ability to function as a tool anticipated Marx's later attack against idealist philosophy as having failed to change the world.

Herder thus straddled several of the conceptual positions that later crystallized as basic oppositions of nineteenth- and twentieth-century culture. Herder was at times one of the Enlighteners, at times their militant critic; at times he anticipated Romantic conservatism, and at times revolutionary socialism. This apparent schizophrenia has, nonetheless, a certain logic to it. That logic lies in the notion of formalism underlying Herder's criticism of Enlightenment reason.

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[21] Quoted in Raymond Williams*, Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, rev. ed. (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1983): 154. Napoleon's comment, which dates from 1812, was made in reference to Destutt de Tracy's science of ideology.

[22] It should be emphasized that the quotation under discussion dates from 1774, and therefore Herder's revolutionary enthusiasm was not an echo but rather an anticipation of the French Revolution.

[23] *SW*/V: 539.

Herder associated mechanical philosophy with the search for generalizing principles. The debilitating autonomy of Enlightenment thought lay in its constant striving for generality. For Herder, the reduction of phenomena to their most general form did not distill their essential characteristics but rather drained them of precisely the qualities that made them real. Seen through the lens of generalization, the real world became merely a collection of imperfect or impure examples from which pure abstract principles were to be derived. Individual phenomena lost the characteristics that set them apart from one another, as such differences appeared merely as the accidental variation obscuring the general rule underlying the particular examples. Once enough examples had been examined that the general rule could be defined, the phenomenal world became unnecessary. In place of the painstaking examination of detail, "wo jeder Vorfall *als der* behandelt und untersucht werden soll, *der er ist* – hat [the new philosophy] darin welch *schönes, leichtes, freies* Urtheil gebracht, nach zwei Vorfällen alles zu meßen und abzuthun! über das *Individuelle*, worin allein *Species facti* besteht, hinüber, sich am hellen, vortrefflichen *Allgemeinen* zu halten."[24] This is not only one of Herder's most important themes but also one of the points where he most significantly influenced nineteenth-century historicism: the rejection of generalizing reason in favor of examination of the individual, unique phenomena.[25]

Herder leveled four major complaints against the generalizing drive he felt characteristic of Enlightenment philosophy. The first, as has been seen, was the production of a philosophical discourse cut off from practical results, that is, of an autonomous philosophical discourse. The displacement of individual form by general rule constructed a wall that Herder felt locked Enlightenment philosophy within an ivory tower. An impassable divide opened up between the real world – where actions were carried out on and through individual phenomena and results produced in particular situations – and the generalized or abstracted universe created by mechanistic philosophy:

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[24] *Ibid.*, 536.

[25] The displacement of the eternal principles of natural law by "eine individualisierende Betrachtung" involving devotion to the unique and particular constitutes the great theme of Friedrich Meinecke's classic *Die Entstehung des Historismus* (München and Berlin: R. Oldenbourg, 1936): 2.

> Zwischen jeder Allgemeingesagten, wenn auch der *schönsten* Wahrheit
> – und ihrer *mindesten* Anwendung ist Kluft! Und Anwendung am
> *einzigen rechten Orte*? zu den rechten Zwecken? auf die einzige beste
> Weise? – Der Solon eines Dorfs, der würklich *nur Eine böse
> Gewohnheit* abgebracht, *nur Einen* Strom *Menschlicher Empfindungen*
> und *Thätigkeiten* in Gang gebracht – er hat tausendfach mehr gethan,
> als all ihr Raisonneurs über die Gesetzgebung, bei denen alles wahr und
> alles *falsch* – ein elender *allgemeiner* Schatte ist.[26]

The *Kluft* Herder described here illustrated two issues. First, this divide separated mechanical reason from action. The *raisonneurs* pondering theoretical legal principles stood on the other side of the gap from the village lawmaker who took action that affected lives. Second, Herder identified this divide as that separating knowledge of the general and knowledge of the particular. The village lawmaker's capacity to act was rooted in an ability to respond to particular situations and circumstances within a well-defined community with concrete problems. The logic of generalizing reason concluded that the actions of the village lawmaker were petty and insignificant because of their failure to apply universally. Herder, however, insisted that it was generalizing reason that was petty because its universal principles could not apply to any particular case. By striving to grasp the universe, generalizing reason had lost the real world: action and practical application remained on the other side of the impasse.

Herder's second complaint against generalizing reason was that, by constantly searching for equivalencies between individual cases, it distorted the phenomena examined. Not only did generalizing reason reduce phenomena to their lowest common denominator in order to formulate the general rule that contained them all. It went a step further and, when confronted with new individual cases, distorted them until they fit within the categories established beforehand. The result of this rigid conceptualization was a form of mass production of knowledge: the categories set up by generalizing knowledge served as molds or forms into which the more pliant material represented by individual phenomena was pressed. Any excess material that flowed over the edge was simply discarded, and the end result was a series of identical

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[26] *SW*/V: 542.

products that all fit the mold used to produce them. The cognitive problem was obviously that these end products were something quite different from the raw material; the original purpose of the conceptual molds had not been to create new objects in their own image but rather to understand and express the raw material itself.

Herder viewed this forced adaptation of the particular to the universal literally as a form of violence. The drive of generalizing reason to produce equivalencies for the purpose of establishing laws of universal applicability was a form of cognitive imperialism. Herder did not hesitate to portray authoritarian rule as the political counterpart to generalizing reason. In Herder's historical narrative, the great example of such an authoritarian political structure was the Roman Empire. Herder's understanding of Rome was pronouncedly negative and, indeed, responded more to Enlightenment historiography on Rome than the actual features of Roman history. He did not perceive Rome as the foundation-builder of a common European culture but rather as the destroyer of untold cultural wealth: "Unglaublich ist der Nachtheil, den Roms Beherrschung an dieser Ecke der Welt den Wissenschaften und Künsten, der Cultur des Landes und der Menschen zufügte."[27] This damage was wrought not only by constant wars of conquest but also by the oppression, "das eherne Joch,"[28] with which Rome forced subject peoples into slavery or servitude and rooted out their native cultures. As much as Herder argued against the reduction of historical phenomena to concepts or symbols, he made this one exception. Roman history represented for him the very symbol of ruthless authoritarianism:

> Der Name knüpfte *Völker und Weltstriche* zusammen, die sich voraus nicht dem Laut nach gekannt hatten. Römische Provinzen! in allen wandelten Römer, römische Legionen, Gesetzte, Vorbilder von Sitten, Tugenden und Lastern. Die Mauer ward zerbrochen, die Nation von Nation schied, der erste Schritt gemacht, die Nationalcharaktere aller zu zerstören, alle in eine Form zu werfen, die "Römervolk" hieß.[29]

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[27] *SW*/XIV: 171.

[28] *Ibid*., 170.

[29] *SW*/V: 500-1.

This passage, with its appeal to "national character," is a good example of the difficulties Herder can present for readers attempting to categorize him through modern political labels. At first site Herder appears to be rejecting Roman civilization by extolling the virtues of narrow provincialism, of ignorance of the surrounding world, or of satisfaction with one's lot, right or wrong. The lament that "die Mauer ward zerbrochen, die Nation von Nation schied" appears as a flagrant apology for an anti-cosmopolitanism. But the passage can also be understood in an entirely different light. For Herder was in fact not so much valorizing national self-satisfaction as he was criticizing the violent suppression of differences for the sake of centralized power. Herder thus refused to assume any of the standard political positions recognizable for a modern reader. The appeal to national character appears conservative, tribally nationalistic, pregnant with intolerance for the village on the other side of the river. But at the same time the lament against the Roman Empire's destruction of different cultures appears as an enlightened or liberal defense of individuality, anti-authoritarianism, a call for toleration of differences.

The point, of course, is not to label Herder with modern political categories but rather to identify the logical principle that united such apparently conflicting implications. That logical principle was the rejection of generalizing reason in favor of examination of the particular. Herder's perception of the cruelty and destructiveness of Roman rule served him as an illustration of the authoritarianism of generalizing reason. The reason why Herder lamented the destruction of walls separating neighboring peoples and cultures was not that it brought an end to ignorant self-absorption but that it cleared a surface on which could be imposed a uniform grid of laws and pre-determined patterns: the *Gesetzte* and *Vorbilder* of the Roman Empire. The physical violence with which the Romans imposed this grid on their provinces was for Herder merely an extreme manifestation of the conceptual violence inherent in generalizing reason.

The historical example of the Roman Empire illustrated for Herder another of the deficiencies of generalizing reason as well: the capacity for seemingly infinite expansion. Generalizing reason produced conceptual systems with a potentially unlimited cognitive capacity. Herder viewed this, however, not as a strength but as the

mark of superficiality. Since such systems forced phenomena into pre-established molds, there was no limit to the number of individual cases such a system could absorb. Indeed, once such a system of conceptual molds was in place, the entire universe was already implicitly accounted for, as the system would not allow any phenomena not to fit within its categories. Thus Herder saw in generalizing reason the threat of a "bad infinity:" the threat of an infinite capacity for expansion that was based on the mere repetition or mechanical copying of an original structure. This was precisely how Herder perceived the expansion of the Roman Empire. Herder's Rome was inflexible and absolutely unreactive to the cultures it swallowed, which was what gave it the ominous capacity to engulf such an enormous territory. The laws and patterns of Roman society (again, in Herder's contentious narrative) applied in unmodified form from the deserts of northern Africa to the foot of Hadrian's Wall. All of the various cultures encountered were simply thrown into "eine Form" as this social administrative system steamrollered over the particular geographical, climatic, and cultural obstacles to its expansion. The expansion of the Empire therefore was not limited by any external factors but merely by internal momentum. The northern boundary must certainly have struck Herder as an appropriate image of the infinite capacity for Roman expansion: a boundary formed not by a river or mountain range, but by a wall that could just as easily have stood a mile, ten miles, fifty miles further north.

Herder perceived several dangers in this capacity for infinite expansion. The first, of course, was the implication of a violent imposition of uniformity, of a cognitive *Gleichschaltung*. Herder was haunted by the sheer cost of such uniformity: the loss of variation, of subtlety, of individual and irreplaceable cultures.[30] The establishment of universal systems, whether social or cognitive, entailed for Herder an impoverishment of the world. The situation was exacerbated, however, by the fact that Herder felt that the bad infinity of generalizing reason did not even produce the advantage it promised, the advantage of greater order in the world. Rather it led to

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[30] "Und was war der Erfolg dieser Mühe? Zerstörung und Verheerung. Ich rechne die Menschen nicht, die von beiden Seiten erschlagen wurden [...] die Aufhebung ihrer Gemeinheiten sammt der Zerstörung ihrer Städte war das größere Unglück, das diesem Lande geschah, weil es bis in die fernste Nachwelt reichte" (*SW*/XIV: 170).

chaos: the conceptual systems of generalizing reasons proliferated uncontrollably, dividing and expanding without end: "Wie überschwemmt mit schönen *Grundsätzen*, *Entwickelungen*, *Systemen*, *Auslegungen* – überschwemmt, daß fast niemand mehr *Boden* sieht und Fuß hat – eben deßwegen aber auch nur hinüberschwimmet."[31] The flood of systems, principles, and analyses swirled beyond control, sweeping the observer away. In the process, everything was put into motion and the real world, the ground on which one used to stand, was lost.

This led to Herder's fourth and final complaint against generalizing reason: the excess, the "Überfluß" produced by the drive to systematize the world, was in itself harmful. The overabundance of explanatory power was inherently debilitating: "Was hilft dem Kranken alle der Vorrath von *Leckerbißen*, den er mit siechem Herzen nicht *geniessen* kann, ja deß Überfluß ihn eben *siechherzig* machte."[32] Herder's critique of generalizing reason thus merged with a critique of modern decadence. The cognitive argument became a social one: the overactive drive to systematization was a form of sickness, sickliness, or disinvigorating luxury. Herder viewed modern European culture as suffering from over-sophistication; the flood of knowledge and wealth had resulted in a loss of virtue and basic moral grounding. Unlike Rousseau, however, Herder did not contrast the debilitating luxury of modern Europe with an abstract state of nature but rather with particular cultures and peoples that, for the European, counted as uncivilized. The lifestyle of the native inhabitants of California functions in the *Ideen* as the epitome of material impoverishment and the raw struggle for survival. Nonetheless, Herder noted, the native Californian was capable of greater generosity and warmer humanity than "das verschwemmte Herz des müßigen Kosmopoliten."[33] Herder did not stop short of pointing out that the wealth and sophistication of modern Europe were founded on a barbarous exploitation of the rest of the world.[34]

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[31] *SW*/V: 540-1.

[32] *Ibid.*, 541.

[33] *SW*/XIII: 339.

[34] "'Unser System des Handels!' Ob man sich etwas über das Verfeinte der allumfaßenden Wißenschaft denke? Was warens für elende Spartaner, die ihre Heloten zum Ackerbau brauchten, und

But this moral corollary to Herder's critique of generalizing reason did not simply raise a scolding finger at modern Europe. Not only the exploited but also the exploiters paid the price of supporting such decadent abundance. For the price of excessive knowledge was the loss of live experience:

> Glaubet es nicht, ihr Menschen, daß eine unzeitige, maaslose Verfeinerung oder Ausbildung Glückseligkeit sei oder daß die todte Nomenclatur aller Wissenschaften […] einem lebendigem Wesen die Wissenschaft des Lebens gewähren könne […]. Ein mit Kenntnissen überfülleter Kopf und wenn es auch *goldene Kenntnisse* wären; er erdrücket den Leib, verenget die Brust, verdunkelt den Blick und wird dem, der ihn trägt, eine kranke Last des Lebens. Je mehr wir verfeinernd unsre Seelenkräfte theilen, desto mehr ersterben die müssigen Kräfte […].[35]

Herder portrayed the abundance secured by generalizing reason as having been bought at the price of a thinner or watered down form of experience. The "maßlose Verfeinerung oder Ausbildung" did not in fact increase the modern European's range of experience, since it was achieved only by spreading the finite *Seelenkräfte* ever thinner. This form of Enlightenment constituted a slow process of self-mummification: the dead nomenclature of the sciences unfolded interminably like bandages slowly circling and wrapping the body and eyes. The head, too stuffed with knowledge, functioned as a weight on the body, presenting a further obstacle to movement or action. The result of such decadent abundance was thus paralysis and idleness, *Müßigkeit*.

In the above passage, however, Herder also reveals the terms through which he resisted generalizing reason and the physical idleness it produced: "life" and *Lebenskraft*. Herder's principle of vitalism was perhaps his most significant

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für Barbarische Römer, die ihre Sklaven in die Erdgefängniße einschloßen! In Europa ist die Sklaverei abgeschafft, weil berechnet ist, wie viel diese Sklaven mehr kosteten und weniger brächten, als freie Leute: nur Eins haben wir uns noch erlaubt, drei *Welttheile als Sklaven* zu *brauchen*, zu *verhandeln*, in Silbergruben und Zuckermühlen zu verbannen – aber das sind nicht Europäer, nicht Christen, und dafür bekommen wir Silber und Edelsteine, Gewürze, Zucker und – heimliche Krankheit" (*SW*/V: 550).

[35] *SW*/XIII: 336.

contribution to strict philosophical discourse.[36] Precisely this principle of vitalism lay behind the fundamental move of Herder's thought: the turn from the "light of reason" towards the "light of history." Herder signaled this association of history and vitalism through the very metaphors he used to describe history. In *Auch eine Philosophie* Herder described history as a massive and powerful tree:

> Großes Geschöpf Gottes! Werk *dreier Welttheile*, und fast *sechs Jahrtausende*! die zarte Saftvolle *Wurzel*, der schlanke, blühende *Sprößling*, der mächtige *Stamm*, die starkstrebende verschlungne *Äste*, die luftigen weit verbreiteten *Zweige* – wie ruhet alles auf einander, ist aus einander erwachsen![37]

Herder thus perceived history not as a dead nomenclature describing past life, but rather as something itself alive and organic. History was an organic phenomenon not simply because it treated of human beings and their cultures and societies, but also by virtue of the recurring developmental cycles of birth, development, decay and death, through which historical entities passed. For Herder, history – the record of purely human capacities and failings – became a phenomenon of nature. Natural history was the only kind possible.[38]

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[36] For an interpretation of Herder's vitalist principle of *Kraft* as an attempt to address the post-Kantian discourse on the mind-body dichotomy, see Frederick C. Beiser, *The Fate of Reason: German Philosophy from Kant to Fichte* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1987): 145-48.

[37] *SW*/V: 554.

[38] "Der Gott, den ich in der Geschichte suche, muß derselbe seyn, der in der Natur ist: denn der Mensch ist nur ein kleiner Theil des Ganzen, und seine Geschichte ist wie die Geschichte des Wurms mit dem Gewebe, das er bewohnt, innig verwebet" (*SW*/XIV: 244). In the *Ideen*, the conceptual interpenetration of history and nature was heavily influenced by Goethe, with whom Herder was in close contact at the time. This interpenetration constitutes a major difference between Herder's understanding of history and Vico's principle of *verum et factum convertuntor*. Under Vico's principle, history was inherently more comprehensible than nature, since it was the product of human activity. Where Vico's principle strictly demarcated history from nature, Herder's vitalism attempted to identify the two. By the mid-nineteenth-century, of course, such an identification had become absolutely untenable, and thinkers such as Droysen, Dilthey, Rickert and Windelband, far from presupposing an identity of history and nature, faced the challenge of formulating a *Geisteswissenschaft*, or principles of historical cognition, that could claim at least a share of the authority wielded by the *Naturwissenschaften*, which had become the model for rational knowledge as such. Therefore, while Vico's demarcation ultimately triumphed over the Herderian identification of history and nature, the triumph was not in favor of the historical but rather of the natural sciences.

This organic conception of history meant that Herder needed to address the question of historical development. The majority of Herder's contemporaries regarded history as being driven forward by the engine of progress, which culminated in the achievements of contemporary European civilization. For Herder, however, such a notion of progress was incompatible with the organic nature of history. The passage quoted above continues with the question:

> aber wozu? zu welchem Zwecke?
>   Daß offenbar dies *Erwachsen*, dieser *Fortgang* aus einander nicht "Vervollkommung im eingeschränkten Schulsinne sei, hat, dünkt mich, der ganze Blick gezeigt." Nicht mehr *Saamenkorn*, wenns *Sprößling*, kein zarter *Sprößling* mehr, wenns *Baum* ist. Über den Stamm ist *Krone*; wenn jeder Ast, jeder Zweig derselben *Stamm* und *Wurzel* seyn wollte – wo bliebe der Baum?[39]

Progress in the "Schulsinne" involved a simple quantitative increase, but development in the organic sense involved qualitative change and functional differentiation. The yearling could not be viewed simply as an inferior version of the fully-grown tree. And on the fully-grown tree, one could not claim that the trunk or crown was "better" than the twigs and branches, for all had their place and purpose. Variety and multiplicity were preconditions for healthy development of the whole.

Herder was too much of an Enlightener to deny altogether that history displayed some sort of positive development and bore witness to the improvement of the human condition. This is especially clear in the *Ideen*, where Herder occasionally indulged in outright encomia to the marvels of modern engineering, statecraft, and the like. Nevertheless, he was unable to accept the postulate that the present constituted the *telos* of history and the final self-realization of the true form of rationality, or that contemporary principles of rationality could be expanded and applied infinitely. The former claim appeared as a debasement of past generations, and the latter as a banalization of the future.

Herder's way out of this double bind appears at first to be nothing more than a linguistic trick. In *Auch eine Philosophie* he avoided using the term *Fortschritt*,

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[39] *SW*/V: 554.

preferring instead the terms *Fortgang* and *Entwickelung*.[40] In the *Ideen* he went one step further and primarily employed the term *Wachstum*. This last term in particular allowed Herder to combine – or waver between – a standard Enlightenment faith in the progress of history on the one hand and his organic, anti-teleological understanding of history on the other. The term *Wachstum* allowed Herder to make some fairly standard claims about the benefits of progress while bringing those claims into the orbit of the organic and vegetative metaphors he used elsewhere to criticize the notion of progress: "Der Verfolg der Geschichte zeigt, daß mit dem Wachsthum wahrer Humanität auch der zerstörenden Dämonen des Menschengeschlechts wirklich weniger geworden sei; und zwar nach innern Naturgesetzen einer sich aufklärenden Vernunft und Staatskunst."[41] This terminological substitution, however, was more than simply a metaphorical strategy for fudging the issue. In Herder's understanding of *Wachstum*, progress was inseparably linked to history. Development was not a process of correcting and thereby erasing the mistakes of past generations but rather of selective gathering and study of the lessons contained in "der Verfolg der Geschichte." Progress for Herder thus constituted more a process of recovery or cultivation of the past than of discovery of the new.

Consequently, the postulate of a *Wachstum* or flowering of humanity was not incompatible for Herder with the notion that each successive stage of development was complete in itself. The completion or perfect form of the developmental structure was not to be found in its final stage but rather across the entire spectrum of stages. Each stage was complete because none was in fact complete: only when all stages were taken together would the development reveal its real meaning and true shape:

> Die Fortpflanzung der Geschlechter und Traditionen knüpfte also auch die menschliche Vernunft an einander: nicht als ob sie in jedem Einzelnen nur ein Bruch des Ganzen wäre, eines Ganzen, das in Einem Subjekt nirgend existiret [sic], folglich auch nicht der Zweck des

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[40] See Hans Dietrich Irmscher, "Nachwort," in *Auch eine Philosophie der Geschichte zur Bildung der Menschheit* (Stuttgart: Phillip Reclam jun., 1990): 146.

[41] *SW*/XIV: 217.

Schöpfers seyn konnte; sondern weil es die Anlage und Kette des ganzen Geschlechts so mit sich führte.[42]

Understanding the present as the final, perfected stage of development would have required the existence of a transcendental subject that could encompass the whole. But the whole was too enormous for any one subject, even the most advanced, to comprehend. Even the single links of this developmental chain were so grand that they appeared in themselves to form a whole:

> Groß muß das Ganze seyn, wo in jeder Einzelnheit schon so ein *Ganzes* erscheint! in jeder Einzelnheit aber nur auch immer so ein *unbestimmtes Eins*, allein aufs Ganze, sich offenbaret! Wo kleine Verbindungen schon grossen *Sinn* geben, und doch Jahrhunderte nur *Sylben*, Nationen nur *Buchstaben,* und vielleicht *Interpunktionen* sind, die an sich nichts, zum leichtern Sinne des Ganzen, aber *so viel* bedeuten! Was, o *einzelner* Mensch, […] bist du? – und willt, daß sich an dir *allseitig* die Vollkommenheit *erschöpfe*? – [43]

The book of history was simply too huge for any nation or culture – mere letters or punctuation marks on its pages – to master. Even the particular sentence in which such a culture found its place was bigger than any of its elements and gave a meaning only once all had been put together. The period at the end of the sentence might represent the culmination, but it was meaningless without the words that came before.

This notion of a *Wachstum* that on the one hand showed progress and development, but on the other retained the trace of its history in each successive stage, lay at the foundation of perhaps the central and most influential concept of Herder's mature philosophy of history: the concept of culture. Raymond Williams has identified Herder's use of the term "culture" in the *Ideen* as the moment where the term functioned no longer as a synonym but rather as an alternative to "civilization."[44] The crucial innovation lay in Herder's thoroughgoing historicization of the term

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[42] *Ibid.*, 247.

[43] *SW*/V: 584.

[44] Williams, *Keywords*, 89. The later chauvinistic valorization of German *Kultur* over French and English *Zivilisation*, it should be noted, is not present in Herder.

"culture." For Herder, it was impossible to consider the present stage of culture independently of its earlier stages: unlike the concept of civilization, culture necessarily revealed its nature as a palimpsest of its developmental stages. Culture was literally a process of *Fortpflanzung* or "Saat und Ernte:"[45] cultivation whereby that which was planted in the past returned to enrich the present and future. The cultural formations of the past did not die in vain, nor did they disappear altogether, for their remains fertilized the ground and thereby cultivated what came after: "[…] so ist auch kein abgefallenes Blatt eines Baums, kein verflogener Same eines Gewäches, kein Leichnam eines modernden Thiers, noch weniger Eine Handlung eines lebendigen Wesens ohne Wirkung geblieben."[46]

Herder's historicization of culture altered not only the structure but also the very object designated by the term culture. For the significance that Herder attached to every historical phenomenon as contributing to the soil from which later formations grew entailed a second important difference from the term he consciously avoided, "civilization." Culture for Herder did not designate only selected monuments of artistic, intellectual, and scientific achievement; culture was rather everywhere in history, just as every fallen leaf contributed to the soil from which later developments grew. No longer a litany of impressive accomplishments or a pedigree qualifying social or political status, Herder's notion of culture approached what would now have to be called an anthropological status: culture was everywhere, and no historical phenomenon was too insignificant to qualify.

In this manner Herder added a second dimension to the term. Culture was not simply a diachronic narrative but rather a synchronic field upon which various traditions and peoples existed side by side, each in various stages of their own development. All contributed to the overall landscape, even when they had no direct connection with each other. These various "Blüthe des Zeitgeistes"[47] together created the garden "wo hier diese, dort jene menschliche Nationalpflanze in ihrer Bildung und

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[45] *SW*/XIV: 252.

[46] *Ibid.*, 236.

[47] *SW*/V: 527.

Natur blühet."[48] Every expression of *Lebenskraft* was an integral component of this garden, not only the most successful or most decorative. Each plant in this garden deserved respect as a unique and transient phenomenon, and conversely, even the most magnificent flora would eventually wither and die:

> Die Pflanze blühet und blühet ab; eure Väter starben und verwesen: euer Tempel zerfällt: dein Orakelzelt, deine Gesetztafeln sind nicht mehr: das ewige Band der Menschen, die Sprache selbst veraltet; wie? und Eine Menschenverfassung, Eine politische oder Religions-Einrichtung, die doch nur auf diese Stücke gebauet seyn kann; sie sollte, sie wollte ewig dauern?[49]

Herder was of course far from regarding this transience with despair. Such transience did not reveal the pointlessness of human action but rather the self-sufficient nature of *Lebenskraft*. The purpose of cultural phenomena was not the attainment of a state of perfection but simply sheer, transitory existence. Herder viewed this transience of historical phenomena not as the mark of death and decay but rather of life. Only that which was once alive could fade; that which endured eternally had never truly been vital.

This anthropological and radically historicized understanding of culture finally provided Herder with the conceptual tools he required to replace the formalist logic of "mechanical" philosophy. Study of history and culture, which necessarily focused on the uniqueness and irreducibility of its objects of knowledge, immediately revealed the inadequacies of generalizing reason. For Herder, the attempts of historians such as Hume, Voltaire, and Robertson to evaluate the past "nach der *einen Form* ihrer Zeit"[50] was a cognitive appropriation as violent as the Roman Empire's efforts "die Nationalcharaktere aller zu zerstören, alle in eine Form zu werfen."[51] The imposition of alien conceptual standards was the defining characteristic of formalist thought; what

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[48] *SW*/XIV: 84.

[49] *Ibid.,*88.

[50] *SW*/V: 508.

[51] *Loc. cit.*

the study of culture revealed, however, was that it was not possible "mit dem Maasstabe einer andern Zeit zu meßen."[52] Herder was thus led to formulate a cognitive ideal that would avoid this conceptual violence and would allow the unique forms of historical phenomena to reveal themselves without distortion:

> *Ganze Natur* der Seele, die durch Alles herrscht, die alle übrige Neigungen und Seelenkräfte *nach sich modelt*, noch auch die gleichgültigsten Handlungen *färbet* – um diese mitzufühlen, antworte nicht aus dem Worte, sondern gehe in das Zeitalter, in die Himmelsgegend, die ganze Geschichte, fühle dich in alles hinein – nun allein bist du auf dem Wege, das Wort zu verstehen.[53]

In this expression of his vision of a truly historical mode of cognition – one that would avoid the formalist strictures of generalizing reason – Herder coined two terms, *Einfühlung* and *Verstehen*, in a usage that practically set the program for nineteenth-century historicism.[54] Not representing concepts so much as procedures or attitudes, these terms designated the methodological consequence of Herder's notion of culture. *Einfühlung* described a procedure of empathizing with another time or culture so intensely that one left behind the assumptions, values, and standards of one's own time. Rather than taking one's own *Maßstab* wherever one went, one allowed a new standard of measurement to emerge from every different culture. Such empathy thus presupposed a loss of independent subjectivity, a forgetting of oneself, with the aim of thereby coming to a fuller, less distorted understanding of an alien subject. Such alien subject could emerge in its true and unique form because the examining subject imposed no *a priori* cognitive categories upon it. Friedrich Meinecke wrote that:

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[52] *SW*/V: 490.

[53] *Ibid*., 503.

[54] On Herder as the "Schöpfer einer neuen Methode der 'Einfühlung', – dies von ihm selbst geschaffene Wort," see Meinecke, *Entstehung*, 385. On the role of the term *Verstehen* in 19th-century historicist discourse, see Hans Georg Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode: Grundzüge einer philosophischen Hermeneutik* (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1990), especially part II; Schnädelbach, *Philosophie in Deutschland*, chapter 4; and Joachim Wach, *Das Verstehen: Grundzüge einer Geschichte der hermeneutischen Theorie im 19. Jahrhundert*, 3 vols. (Tübingen, 1926-33).

> Verstehen des anderen durch Hineinfühlen […] war nur möglich, wenn
> die starre Scheidung von Subjekt und Objekt fiel, wenn alles mit allem
> zusammenhing und ineinander wirkte, nicht nur kausalmechanisch, wie
> es auch die Aufklärung sich vorstellte, sondern durch eine begrifflich
> nur annähernd, intuitiv und gefühlsmäßig aber rasch zu erfassende
> innere Lebensgemeinschaft und Einheitlichkeit des Ganzen.[55]

The price of empathy was thus the momentary loss of self: a moment when the active judging subject was replaced by passive perception. But for Herder such price was justified by the understanding gained. With the watchwords of empathy and *Verstehen*, Herder felt he had provided the tools for a methodological procedure based not on generalizing reason, but on the anti-formalistic principles of historical reason.

II.   *In the Presence of History*

The second of Nietzsche's *Unzeitgemäße Betrachtungen*, "Vom Nutzen und Nachteil der Historie für das Leben,"[56] unfolded a bitter polemic against the nineteenth-century historical consciousness. Even though the historicism of the Historical School – the unnamed target of Nietzsche's attack – presented itself as a direct outgrowth of Herder's attempts to describe a historical reason, Nietzsche perceived this historicism not as an alternative to but rather as a degenerate form of scientific thought. Thus the reversal revealed in the garden metaphor: the historical consciousness had come to represent for Nietzsche not the cure for, but instead the very source of decadent *Müßigkeit* and deadening, pseudo-scientific formalism.

The forcefulness of Nietzsche's anti-historicist rhetoric in this text gives it at times the appearance of an early modernist manifesto, and it has indeed been read as such.[57] Nietzsche often appears to identify "life" – the positive force that he felt the

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[55] *Entstehung*, 408.

[56] See note 3. Hereinafter cited as "*HL*."

[57] In "Literary History and Literary Modernity" (in *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism*, 2nd ed. [Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1983]), Paul de Man reads *HL* in conjunction with Baudelaire's "The Painter of Modern Life" as an archetypal

historicist consciousness had withered – with the expression of an "incandescent point in time"[58] that began to cool into an ossifying formalism as soon as it slipped into the past. In such a reading of *HL*, modernity and history related to each other like fire and water: history was unequivocally destructive of the vital forces that drove the ceaseless self-creation required by the modernist.[59] Nevertheless, such a modernist reading of *HL* cannot account for other moments where Nietzsche was quite serious about the claim "dass das Leben aber den Dienst der Historie brauche."[60] At such moments Nietzsche appears to be directing his polemic not against history as such, but rather against the degenerate consciousness of history that he deemed characteristic for nineteenth-century Europe. The very title of the text makes clear that Nietzsche intended not only to criticize the abuses of the historical consciousness but also to illustrate the potential usefulness of history as well.[61]

This ambiguity in the status of history in *HL* cannot be resolved by textual analysis, for the ambiguity is objectively present. At times Nietzsche appealed to a vital consciousness of history that was to be rescued from the greedy grip of the historicists; at such moments Nietzsche echoed Herder's prescription of history as the antidote to formalist thought. At other times, however, Nietzsche clearly opposed history and the past unfavorably to the vital energy of the fleeting present moment:

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expression of the modernist temporal structure, illustrating the radicality and paradoxes of that structure.

[58] *Ibid*., 147.

[59] As de Man puts it: "modernity and history are diametrically opposed in Nietzsche's text. Nor is there any doubt as to his commitment to modernity […]" (*ibid*., 148).

[60] *HL*, 258.

[61] For an interpretation attempting to account for this double aspect of Nietzsche's understanding of history, see Volker Gerhardt, "Leben und Geschichte: Menschliches Handeln und historischer Sinn in Nietzsche's zweiter 'Unzeitgemäßen Betrachtung,'" in *Pathos und Distanz: Studien zur Philosophie Friedrich Nietzsches* (Stuttgart: Phillip Reclam jun., 1988). Gerhardt claims that "die theoretisch ohnehin nicht zu haltende Einschätzung der zweiten Unzeitgemäßen Betrachtung als einer 'antihistorischen Kampfschrift' ist auch praktisch widerlegt" and that "das Leben, um das es hier geht, enthält durch die notwendig eingebundene Erinnerung bereits die Voraussetzung der *Geschichtlichkeit*, die ihr unter dem Titel der Historie expressis verbis zugeführt werden soll" (*ibid*., 135 and 141). See also Andreas Huyssen's claim that "texts such as […] the second of the *Untimely Meditations* on the uses and abuses of history demonstrate that they fully understood the dialectic of innovative drive and museal desire, the tension between the need to forget and the desire to remember" (*Twilight Memories: Marking Time in a Culture of Amnesia* [London: Routledge, 1995]: 19).

here he anticipated an avant-garde temporal discourse that vilified the historical *tout court*. Although the ambiguity cannot be resolved, it can be explained by observing that Nietzsche's text marks a crucial shift in the ideological status of the category of history. While Nietzsche retained traces of the Herderian aspiration for the historical as a dissolving agent against formalist thought, the rhetorical momentum of his argument consistently pushed the category of history into an alliance with formalist thought. This is why the judicious balance announced in Nietzsche's title – that history can be useful as well as harmful – hardly comes through in the body of the text. For even when Nietzsche articulated what a vital historical consciousness might look like, he ascribed that vitality to the ability to make history *present*. Nietzsche's text thus illustrates an ideological shift whereby formalist thought could be countered only by the insistence on a vital present. The consequence of this shift was that the notion of historicism – the decadent or degenerate consciousness of history – began to subsume the very category of history.

As far as concerns the concept of formalism that they oppose, Herder's founding historicist texts and Nietzsche's scathing anti-historicist polemic have much in common. The valorization of "life" announced in Nietzsche's title took the form of an ideal of *Lebenskraft*, a term that had been central for Herder as well. Nietzsche understood *Lebenskraft* as sheer expressive force. The direction or manner in which such life force radiated was not so important, and indeed Nietzsche assumed that such force could not be contained by moral considerations. Vitality went hand in hand with injustice: "Es gehört sehr viel Kraft dazu, leben zu können und zu vergessen, in wie fern leben und ungerecht sein Eins ist."[62] In this valorization of expressive force over the ends to which that force moved, Nietzsche echoed Herder's sentiment: "Aber *Empfindung*, *Bewegung*, *Handlung* – wenn auch in der Folge ohne Zweck […] wenn auch mit Empfindungen, die hie und da *schwärmerisch*, *gewaltsam*, *gar abscheulich* werden – […] welche Macht! welche Würkung!"[63] What such life force accomplished, therefore, was simply its own expression, the transformation of

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[62] *HL*, 269.

[63] *Loc. cit*.

difference into a unique, unitary and recognizable shape. Life force represented the "*plastische Kraft* eines Menschen, eines Volkes, einer Cultur […], ich meine jene Kraft, aus sich heraus eigenartig zu wachsen, Vergangenes und Fremdes umzubilden und einzuverleiben, Wunden auszuheilen, Verlorenes zu ersetzen, zerbrochene Formen aus sich nachzuformen."[64] This process of "zu Blut umschaffen,"[65] "digestion," or "incorporation" of outside data of perception into one's body was Nietzsche's extremely visceral way of portraying the process of self-expression (*sich äußern*). *Lebenskraft* served its function therefore by consuming raw materials and transforming them into the expression of a strong and consistent identity.

This expressive ideal lay behind the notion of "style" by which Nietzsche judged the strength of a culture. Nietzsche wrote that "Die Cultur eines Volkes als der Gegensatz jener Barbarei ist einmal […] als Einheit des künstlerischen Stiles in allen Lebensäusserungen eines Volkes bezeichnet worden."[66] Such a unified style was the expression of the *Lebenskraft* of a culture: its ability to transform the myriad elements of which it was composed into characteristic patterns and original forms. Those patterns and forms were the signature of the culture, its recognizable features. The characteristic unity of such a style represented, in short, its ability to construct and express a unique identity.

Nietzsche's understanding of cultural style was different from Herder's notion of culture in its emphasis on the aggressive force involved in expression; at least in Herder's later *Ideen,* cultures appeared more as fragile plants coexisting peacefully than as arrogant competitors vying for their place in the sun. But Nietzsche's understanding of cultural style does recall Herder's identification of every culture as a unique totality or microcosm in which all parts had their place. The association of style with holism remained with Nietzsche until his very last writings. The "Einheit des künstlerischen Stiles" described above reappeared in reverse outline in Nietzsche's description of the style of literary decadence in *Der Fall Wagner*:

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[64] *HL*, 251. Emphasis in original.

[65] *Ibid.*, 251.

[66] *Ibid.*, 274.

> Ich halte mich dies Mal nur bei der Frage des *Stils* auf. – Womit kennzeichnet sich jede *litterarische* décadence? Damit, dass das Leben nicht mehr im Ganzen wohnt. Das Wort wird souverain und springt aus dem Satz hinaus, der Satz greift über und verdunkelt den Sinn der Seite, die Seite gewinnt Leben auf Unkosten des Ganzen – das Ganze ist kein Ganzes mehr.[67]

The idea of decadence that Nietzsche described here, in which the details overpowered the whole, did not simply expresses a characteristic of the style of certain individuals, the modern decadents. It was the condition of a culture: modern decadence. This decadence of modernity is Nietzsche's later formulation of what appeared in *HL* as the weak culture of the modern historical sense. The proliferation of detail in decadence had its precursor in the eclecticism of modern historicist society, with its uncontrolled promulgation of incompatible styles borrowed from past epochs. Eclecticism and decadence were related names for the weakness of modern society: a society that, having lost the capacity to express a powerful identity, merely accumulated details that formed no whole.

What Nietzsche felt the modern age had lost was the ability to draw an experiential horizon. The expression of a strong identity could only take place when *Lebenskraft* had been focused: "Und dies ist ein allgemeines Gesetz: jedes Lebendige kann nur innerhalb eines Horizontes gesund, stark und fruchtbar werden."[68] The failure to draw such an experiential horizon was the cause of the debilitating eclecticism of the modern; a shifting horizon resulted in a continual shifting of perspective that stymied the "Einheit des künstlerischen Stiles" required for a strong culture. Herder had described how the limited experiential horizon of the village lawmaker, the "Solon eines Dorfes," allowed him to take action where the sophisticated legal theorist remained bogged down in theoretical subtleties and "kränkelnde Gedanken". He had similarly contrasted the physical condition and generosity of heart of "uncivilized" peoples who survived under the harshest of

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[67] *Der Fall Wagner*, in *Kritische Studienausgabe*, *op. cit.*, vol. VI, 27. Emphases in original.

[68] *HL*, 251.

conditions with the "verschwemmtes Herz" of the European cosmopolite, sophisticated and experienced but correspondingly jaded and inactive. Nietzsche used a remarkably similar vocabulary in his description of the necessity of a horizon of experience:

> Das historische Wissen und Empfinden eines Menschen kann sehr beschränkt, *sein Horizont eingeengt wie der eines Alpenthal-Bewohners* sein […] und trotz aller Ungerechtigkeit und allem Irrthum steht er doch in *unüberwindlicher Gesundheit und Rüstigkeit* da und erfreut jedes Auge; während dicht neben ihm *der bei weitem Gerechtere und Belehrtere kränkelt* und zusammenfällt, weil die Linien seines Horizontes immer von Neuem unruhig sich verschieben, weil er sich aus dem viel *zarteren Netze seiner Gerechtigkeiten und Wahrheiten* nicht wieder zum derben Wollen und Begehren herauswinden kann.[69]

What Nietzsche and Herder both described with the image of a horizon was the capacity to draw a close to contemplation, consideration, and thus hesitation. The modern propensity to over-reflect on every act was paralyzing. Herder had described the mechanical philosophers of the Enlightenment, "*staunend* und *starrend* vor ungesehenen Hindernißen und Folgen," as unable to put their sophisticated theories to concrete use. For Nietzsche, the modern European was similarly paralyzed by the eclectic abundance of knowledge that prevented the taking of a decisive perspective. The ideal of an experiential horizon thus functioned for both Herder and Nietzsche as a safeguard against a hyperbolic reflection or hyperconsciousness. Reflection had to be cut off somewhere – perhaps randomly, perhaps ruthlessly – if a conclusion was to be reached and acted upon.

Nietzsche described the modern failure to draw such horizons – again, with the same vocabulary as Herder had used – as an *Übermaß* or *Übersättigung*, consumption without hunger. The greed of modern historians prevented them from digesting the mass quantities of historical information they consumed. The information, instead of being transformed by active *Lebenskraft* into an expression of the modern identity, simply remained as an eclectic mass of detail: "Das Wissen, das im Uebermaasse ohne

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[69] *Ibid*., 252. My emphases.

Hunger, ja wider das Bedürfniss aufgenommen wird, wirkt jetzt nicht mehr als umgestaltendes, nach aussen treibendes Motiv […].”[70] The accumulated knowledge weighed on the body and resulted in torpor. Herder's claim that “ein mit Kenntnissen überfüllter Kopf und wenn es auch *goldene Kenntnisse* wären; er erdrücket den Leib”[71] was a more polite formulation but clearly anticipated Nietzsche's image of modern historians incapacitated by indigestion.

The inability to digest what was consumed meant that the modern identity was a split identity. The materials devoured were not organically transformed into an expressive form. Thus the expressive unity of the strong style was shattered by an inner tension between form and content: “das Volk, dem man eine Cultur zuspricht, soll nur in aller Wirklichkeit etwas lebendig Eines sein und nicht so elend in Inneres und Aeusseres, in Inhalt und Form auseinanderfallen.”[72] Nietzsche perceived in this split between content and form the same result that Herder had decried in the case of generalizing reason. Contents were forced into pre-existing forms rather than being allowed to express themselves naturally. Nietzsche wrote: “[…] wie gewaltsam muss die Individualität des Vergangenen in eine allgemeine Form hineingezwängt und an allen scharfen Ecken und Linien zu Gunsten der Uebereinstimmung zerbrochen werden!”[73] But Nietzsche took the critique of formalism one step further than Herder: he did not only disparage the cognitive distortions of formalist reason but found that this rule of form had transformed modern society into a society of outer appearances, role-playing, and dissimulation. The split between content and form served as a device for hiding rather than expressing identities. Paradoxically, the enormous quantities of eclectic historical knowledge infusing modern society ultimately made everyone appear the same: “historische Bildungsgebilde, ganz und gar Bildung, Bild, Form ohne nachweisbaren Inhalt, leider nur schlechte Form, und überdies Uniform.”[74]

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[70] *Ibid.*, 272.

[71] *Loc. cit.*

[72] *HL*, 274.

[73] *Ibid.*, 261.

[74] *Ibid.*, 283.

Thus the modern anemia, the shortage of *Lebenskraft*, the incapacity to express identities, transformed historicist society into a two-dimensional stage set: form with nothing behind it.

Nietzsche criticized the formalism of modern society with a vocabulary very similar to Herder's, but with a reversed temporal valorization: the historical consciousness was not the antidote to but rather the cause of such formalism. Here it is necessary to regard skeptically Nietzsche's remarks to the effect that he was describing the contrast between a positive conception of history, a historical consciousness that was driven by *Lebenskraft*, and the debilitating modern historical consciousness. This skepticism is necessary not simply because his critique of modern historicism is the predominant and more compelling part of his text, but because the very possibility of a history "useful for life" is called into question by his basic logic.

Herder and Nietzsche are on common ground with their notions of an experiential horizon. For both of them, such a horizon focused the consciousness by setting it limits. In this way it brought a halt to a process of reflection that threatened to go on infinitely without ever translating into action. But the mechanisms each posited for setting this horizon were different. For Herder, the methodological means of setting a horizon was empathy. By immersing oneself in the past, one escaped the infinite, paralyzing reflectivity of Enlightenment reason. The momentary loss of self enabled the profound identification with a foreign subject, and thus a profound understanding of the uniqueness and individuality of that subject. It was the loss of self in another subject that in effect brought a halt to reflexivity, by erasing the distance between subject and object. The line of the horizon produced through empathy thus traced the boundaries of that subject's individuality.

Nietzsche, however, understood empathy through the Rankean dictum of *Selbstauflösung*, or as a methodological motto expressing the attempt to achieve a purified objectivity. Nietzsche interpreted the ideal of objectivity as one of the most injurious consequences of the application of scientific standards to history. Objectivity was nothing other than "ewig[e] Subjectlosigkeit,"[75] a passivity or

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[75] *Ibid.*, 284.

"impotentia"[76] that clearly acted as an impediment to action by removing all pretense of interest in the object. Nietzsche described the objective historian in decidedly unflattering terms:

> Aber wie gesagt, es ist ein Geschlecht von Eunuchen; dem Eunuchen ist ein Weib wie das andere, eben nur Weib, das Weib an sich, das ewig Unnahbare – und so ist es gleichgültig was ihr treibt, wenn nur die Geschichte selbst schön "objectiv" bewahrt bleibt, nämlich von solchen, die nie selber Geschichte machen können. Und da euch das Ewig-Weibliche nie hinanziehen wird, so zieht ihr es zu euch herab und nehmt, als Neutra, auch die Geschichte als ein Neutrum.[77]

Objectivity was thus for Nietzsche incompatible with vital *Lebenskraft* because it quelled passion and enthusiasm, and thus the motivation to action. Thus *Selbstauflösung* as a mechanism for achieving objectivity did not bring the phenomenal world closer, as Herder felt empathy would. Rather it ensured that the phenomenal world remained cut off: an object of passive perception with which one did not interact.

But Nietzsche did formulate a different principle that functioned for him much the same way empathy functioned for Herder. Nietzsche described the capacity to forget as the key to the focusing of *Lebenskraft*. Memory accompanied the human psyche as a sort of doom: a chain keeping us from moving forward, or a ghost that "stört die Ruhe eines späteren Augenblicks."[78] Thus the capacity to forget represented for Nietzsche a liberation from the action of a consciousness that continually returned to what had already passed. The act of forgetting thus released Nietzsche from the reflectivity of consciousness just as empathy had Herder. That release was the prerequisite for the exercise of *Lebenskraft* through action: "Zu allem Handeln gehört Vergessen: wie zum Leben alles Organischen nicht nur Licht, sondern auch Dunkel gehört."[79]

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[76] *Ibid*., 285.

[77] *Ibid*., 284.

[78] *Ibid*., 248.

[79] *Ibid*., 250.

Thus Nietzschean forgetting and Herderian empathy both expressed the presupposition that one must "lose onself" in order to gain a more vital capacity. Both functioned as an escape mechanism from the "kränkelnder Gedanke" and from an infinite reflexivity: for Nietzsche, the infinite return of the experienced moment, and for Herder the infinite return of our own conceptual presuppositions. But for Herder this release from the self occurred through a loss of the present: the historian made contact with the past by forgetting the conceptual forms and measures of his or her own epoch. For Nietzsche, this release was effected through the loss of the past, which was abandoned as so much ballast hindering the active subject. This logical progression whereby Nietzsche linked life with action and action with forgetting produced a fundamental tension in *HL*. The initial pronouncement that "das Leben aber den Dienst der Historie brauche, muss eben so deutlich begriffen werden als der Satz […] das ein *Uebermaass* der Historie dem Lebendigen schade"[80] comes under pressure from the terms established elsewhere. Despite Nietzsche's continual provisos that the historical sense is harmful only when taken to excess, and that it is therefore necessary to establish the limit or horizon within which history remains a vital and constructive force, the de facto horizon that emerged from the text is the present. History would be harmless only so long as it were present. *Geschichte* provided a vital impulse if it was still *Geschehen* or action. But the pre-requisite for action was forgetting the past.

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[80] *Ibid.*, 258.

Chapter Three

FLEETING REVELATIONS

Marx and the Deictic Dilemma

> Versuchen wir den Spiegel an such zu betrachten, so entdecken wir
> endlich Nichts, als die Dinge auf ihm. Wollen wir die Dinge fassen, so
> kommen wir zuletzt wieder auf Nichts, als auf den Spiegel. – Diess ist
> die allgemeinste Geschichte der Erkenntnis.[1]

As if fascinated by the mirror image of revolution, Marx repeatedly turned his scrutiny to events he deemed banal but which claimed revolutionary status. Perhaps the most famous such event was the "Umwälzung ohne Gleichen" of the German ideologists, an event whose actors felt themselves involved in "eine Revolution, wogegen die französische ein Kinderspiel ist, ein Weltkampf, vor dem die Kämpfe der Diadochen kleinlich erscheinen."[2] For Marx, of course, such claims were absurd. The only real significance of this false revolution was the frightening depth of delusion it illustrated, "[…] den tragikomischen Kontrast zwischen den wirklichen Leistungen dieser Helden und den Illusionen über diese Leistungen […]."[3] A similar contrast between revolutionary claim and banal reality characterized the 18th Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte. Dressing itself in the rhetoric, gestures, and costumes of its great ancestor, this false revolution only revealed its own comic emptiness of content. Despite the difference between the naïve earnestness of the German ideologists and the shrewd political manipulation of Louis Bonaparte, it is clear that for Marx, the same false

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[1] Friedrich Nietzsche, *Morgenröte*, in *Kritische Studienausgabe*, eds. Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari, vol. III (München and Berlin: DTV and De Gruyter, 1988): 202-3.

[2] *Marx/Engels Gesamtausgabe*, vol. I/5, ed. V. Adoratsklij (Berlin: Marx-Engels-Verlag G.M.B.H., 1932): 7. (This edition hereinafter referred to as *MEGA* followed by a volume number.)

[3] *Ibid*., 8.

revolution had occurred, as it were, twice: the first time as tragicomedy, the second as farce.

What linked these false revolutions was their pretension: the conceited claims that masked a wretched reality. Marx's characterization of these events as unfolding within this gap between appearance and reality was consistent with the characterization he generally used for phenomena he deemed degenerate or alienated. The key term in this characterization was "externality" (*Äußerlichkeit*). This term of course echoes clearly in the very word Marx used for alienation, *Entäußerung*, which was quite literally a "making external." Similarly, ideology for Marx consisted in the false independence of consciousness, which created a realm of "mere theory" that lay external to material reality. The revolution of the German ideologists was farcical precisely because it took place in this realm of mere theory, remaining external to, and thus anything but revolutionary for, the society that produced it. And the second edition of the 18th Brumaire rang hollow precisely because of the way its forms and gestures remained external to its real content.

In contrast to these various alienated or externalized phenomena, Marx implicitly posited an ideal of holistic integration: that which was external was to become once more internal to its source of meaning. Thus de-alienated consciousness would again be smoothly integrated with material reality; the de-alienated individual again coextensive with species being. Externalities would be replaced by dialectical integration.

What is curious, however, is that when describing these images of dialectical integration, Marx displays a stubborn tendency to slip into language that again suggests the externality he decried at the outset. Perhaps the best example of this is the base/superstructure image. Although this image was clearly intended to express a dialectical integration of material relations of production with the products of consciousness, it is infamous for its pliancy in the hands of those who would interpret it quite differently: as expressing the externality or superfluity of the superstructure. Despite the legions of Marxists who, ever since shortly after Marx's death, have

endeavored to recover the dialectical vibrancy of the image, the ambiguity remains.[4] The term "superstructure" (*Überbau*) indeed suggests something floating "above" what is essential, and thus implies that this additional construction is unnecessary or, to shift metaphors, a mere reflection of reality. Such a deterministic interpretation of the image is not only the work of positivist social scientists of the Second International or vulgar apparatchiks of the Third. Marx himself denigrated "mere theory" or "mere philosophy" often enough to give a certain credence to such interpretations, or at least to suggest that this ambiguity is deeply rooted.

The ambiguity at work here is illustrated most clearly in the theory of consciousness Marx developed in *Die deutsche Ideologie*. The concept of de-alienated consciousness Marx described in opposition to ideology was characterized by being absolutely integrated with material reality. The paradox, however, emerges whenever Marx attempted to talk of such de-alienated consciousness independently. For the moment one spoke of such consciousness independently of the material reality with which it was to be integrated, such consciousness again appeared as ideology. This can be termed Marx's deictic dilemma: de-alienated consciousness, because of its absolute integration with material reality, cannot be "pointed to" at all without reassuming the position of externality that characterized its corrupted form, ideology. Put another way, de-alienated consciousness can have no theoretical location, for if it had a location, it would be merely theoretical. Consciousness avoids floating "above" the material, and thus being superfluous, only when it is absent.

This deictic dilemma holds for that other false revolution as well. If *Die deutsche Ideologie* showed the externalized version of consciousness to be ideology, then *Der achtzehnte Brumaire des Louis Bonaparte* showed the externalized version of historical action to be mere playacting and costume drama. What were external were the forms and gestures, which had been borrowed from another historical period rather than emerging from the content of the event itself. This terminology of a historical form at odds with its content, and thus hiding rather than expressing that

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[4] The first figure to try to correct the mechanically determinist reading of this image was none other than Engels himself (see his letter to Bloch of September 21-22, 1890, in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert C. Tucker, 2nd ed. [New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1978]: 760-765).

content, clearly anticipated Nietzsche's characterization of modern historicist culture as one that must "so elend in Inneres und Auesseres, in Inhalt und Form auseinanderfallen."[5] Historicism is thus the proper name for the externalized or alienated form of historical action. Historicized gesture represented a merely ornamental form that floated "above" its content just as ideology floated above the material. Such ornamental layer constituted an inessential and distorting screen that covered over and masked a historical truth.

Thus Marx's deictic dilemma reveals another axis to the critique of historicism handed down to the twentieth-century avant-garde. Nietzsche had formulated the temporal axis of that critique: history that was "useful for life" was inevitably figured as a kind of presence, as a component of the fleetingly incandescent moment in which life force was expended. The paradox that resulted from this formulation was that of self-immolation. Such a presence was already gone the moment one reached out to grab it.

Marx formulated the spatial axis of this critique. True historical action was marked by an absolute integration of form and content. Where such action became alienated or externalized, then the form appeared as an inessential supplement, an ornamental layer applied on top of what was fundamental. This spatial axis, however, brought its own paradox: the moment history became visible by giving form to the present, it became external, and thus slipped into historicism. Truly historical action – the archetype of which was for Marx of course the proletarian revolution – thus could take no historical form: "Die soziale Revolution des neunzehnten Jahrhunderts kann ihre Poesie nicht aus der Vergangenheit schöpfen, sondern nur aus der Zukunft."[6] But this poetry was no more visible than de-alienated consciousness. For the moment one pointed to it, it turned into scripted farce.

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[5] Friedrich Nietzsche, *Unzeitgemäße Betrachtungen II:* "Vom Nutzen und Nachteil der Historie für das Leben," in *Kritische Studienausgabe*, eds. Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari, vol. I (München and Berlin: DTV and De Gruyter, 1988): 274

[6] Marx, *Der achtzehnte Brumaire des Louis Bonaparte* (Moskau: Verlag für fremdsprachige Literatur, 1950): 228. (Hereinafter "AB".)

I.   The Conceits of Consciousness

Marx's ideal of a consciousness cured of ideology posited its absolute integration with all other activities involved in the production of material existence.   Such a consciousness constituted a form of labor because of its inseparability from the life-process: "Das Bewußtsein kann nie etwas Andres sein als das bewußte Sein, und das Sein der Menschen ist ihr wirklicher Lebensprozeß."[7]   De-alienated consciousness equaled existence, and existence consisted in the production of the conditions of life. Marx implicitly associated this condition with a pre-Lapsarian state.   At some originary moment, consciousness had in effect been material, or in some vague way had formed such a completely transparent window onto the material life-process that there was no way to conceive of it independently. Marx wrote: "Die Produktion der Ideen, Vorstellungen, des Bewußtseins ist zunächst unmittelbar verflochten in die materielle Tätigkeit und den materiellen Verkehr der Menschen, Sprache des wirklichen Lebens.   Das Vorstellen, Denken, der geistige Verkehr der Menschen erscheinen hier noch als direkter Ausfluß ihres materiellen Verhaltens."[8]   The de-alienation of consciousness thus involved the recovery of this transparency that consciousness had originally ("zunächst") possessed.

This original state had been disrupted in Marx's account by the inevitable development of the division of labor. The division of labor was itself an inseparable and unavoidable component of the development of that "material activity" with which consciousness had originally been so thoroughly integrated. Yet a particular moment in that development sundered the integrated whole and set consciousness off on a trajectory bearing only a mediated relation to processes of material production. Marx wrote that:

> Die Teilung der Arbeit wird erst wirklich Teilung von dem Augenblicke an, wo eine Teilung der materiellen und geistigen Arbeit eintritt.   Von diesem Augenblicke an *kann* sich das Bewußtsein

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[7] *MEGA* I/5: 15.

[8] *Ibid.*, 15.

> wirklich einbilden, etwas Andres als das Bewußtsein der bestehenden Praxis zu sein, *wirklich* etwas vorzustellen, ohne etwas Wirkliches vorzustellen – von diesem Augenblicke an ist das Bewußtsein im Stande, sich von der Welt zu emanzipieren und zur Bildung der "reinen" Theorie, Theologie, Philosophie, Moral etc. überzugehen.[9]

This moment thus represented the birth of ideology from a spiritualized consciousness. Where others might find a triumphant milestone in human development – the emergence of free-standing consciousness – Marx perceived the beginning of an insidious process, the first step in a development that would find its inane culmination in the effulgent but empty pronouncements of the German ideologists.

The reason Marx sensed this moment as one of loss rather than emancipation was its structural similarity to the externalizations he had long associated with the state of alienation. In the *Ökonomisch-philosophische Manuskripte* of 1844, in which Marx had first elaborated in detail his thoughts on the process of alienation, Marx had written: "Worin besteht nun die Entäußerung der Arbeit? Erstens, daß die Arbeit dem Arbeiter *äußerlich* ist, d.h. nicht zu seinem Wesen gehört […]. Der Arbeiter fühlt sich daher erst außer der Arbeit bei sich und in der Arbeit außer sich."[10] Alienation (*Entäußerung*) was thus a process of division whereby that which should have been integrated became externalized (*äußerlich*). Marx largely retained this concept, if not the term, of alienation in *Die deutsche Ideologie* when he described the division within each individual between a personal identity and a historically accidental ("zufällig") class-determined identity.[11]

The connection between this understanding of alienation as externalization and Marx's understanding of ideology, however, becomes particularly clear in Marx's descriptions of the manner of operation of the ideological mind. The peculiar logic of ideology is visible, for example, in Marx's analysis of the idealist historian. Marx had in mind those forms of historical analysis that "in der Geschichte nur politische Haupt- und Staatsaktionen und religiöse und überhaupt theoretische Kämpfe sehen können,

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[9] *Ibid.*, 21. Emphases in original.

[10] *MEGA*, I/3: 85.

[11] See *MEGA*, I/5: 65.

und speziell bei jeder geschichtlichen Epoche *die Illusion dieser Epoche teilen* müssen."[12] The ideological element of such approach would at first sight appear to lie in the misguided emphasis on spiritualized narratives such as religious or political dramas, the "theoretical struggles" that simply drew one's attention away from the material conditions that allowed such dramas to be enacted in the first place. Alternately, the ideological element might appear to lie in the acceptance of each epoch's illusions about itself, illusions resulting in an account that could not fail to be ideological in the sense of class-biased since it served to justify and protect the interests of a ruling class. These are obviously significant aspects of the ideological character Marx described here. But they are more the expression than the mechanism of ideology. Marx described the conceptual structure that produced these ideological errors as follows:

> Die ganze bisherige Geschichtsauffassung hat diese wirkliche Basis der Geschichte entweder ganz und gar unberücksichtigt gelassen, oder sie nur als eine Nebensache betrachtet, die mit dem geschichtlichen Verlauf außer allem Zusammenhang steht. Die Geschichte muß daher immer nach einem außer ihr liegenden Maßstab geschrieben werden; die wirkliche Lebensproduktion erscheint als Urgeschichtlich, während das Geschichtliche als das vom gemeinen Leben getrennte, extra-überweltliche erscheint.[13]

The conceptual structure that prevented the idealist historian from connecting those various ideological narratives with the "real base" from which they sprouted was the conjecture of an "external standard."   Such external standards introduced the appearance of a division between a grandiose, true realm of history and a banal history of everyday life. The existence of an external standard thus resulted in a division between a historical realm "above" and one "below." The idealist historian was convinced that what lay above was the essential narrative of history and of greater interest than the historical noise constituting the underlying everyday life. But Marx perceived such higher realms as something "extra-überweltliche." Detached from the

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[12] *Ibid*., 28. Emphasis in original.

[13] *Ibid*., 28.

real base of history, such narratives were external, extraneous, supplemental and thus divorced from deeper meaning.

The foregoing examples of Marx's use of the concept of externalization reveal a significant characteristic of that concept. The various externalizations that accompanied the state of alienation did not simply divide what should have been whole: they divided it, as it were, unequally. One part of the original phenomenon – whether it be labor, the individual, or the historical understanding – lost the organic relation it once had to the essence or *Wesen* (laborer, species being, or relations of production) that gave it meaning. Thus the two parts resulting from such division had to be evaluated differently. One part represented what was externalized: made supplemental and losing its deeper meaning, this was the part that, properly speaking, was alienated in the sense of *entäußert*. The other part, the essence, or that from which the first part was externalized, remained essentially intact. Nonetheless, the essential core did become more difficult to perceive: encased in or hidden behind the externalized term, its significance appeared more distant. Thus the ideologist-historian overlooked the significance of everyday life as it became hidden behind the idealist narratives that were foregrounded precisely by virtue of being externalized.

This structure of essence and supplement precisely describes the relation of mental and material labor in *Die deutsche Ideologie*. Material labor remained the core that gave meaning to human activity and constituted the essence of human activity. Mental labor took on the character of supplemental activity that was not only void of meaning in itself but, even worse, obscured and disguised the true significance of material labor. Marx described this double action of mental labor as the conceit of consciousness. In his account of the emergence of mental from material labor Marx had claimed that "[v]on diesem Augenblicke an *kann* sich das Bewußtsein wirklich einbilden, etwas Andres als das Bewußtsein der bestehenden Praxis zu sein, *wirklich* etwas vorzustellen, ohne etwas Wirkliches vorzustellen."[14] Marx used the term "conceit" (*Einbildung*) over and over again in *Die deutsche Ideologie* in connection with consciousness. The term simultaneously described two processes. First,

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[14] *Loc. cit.*

consciousness perceived its own fall into ideology and the shattering of its original unity in a surprising manner. Rather than feeling unhappiness or a sense of loss, consciousness gained an exaggerated sense of importance and self-satisfaction: consciousness became, literally, conceited. At the same time, consciousness began to attribute to the realm of thought or imagination (*Einbildung*) a degree of reality properly belonging to material phenomena. The inappropriate conceitedness of consciousness, therefore, sprang from the importance it attributed to its own products, that is, to products of the imagination or "mere conceits." Consciousness perceived itself and its products as the driving force of history, forgetting or at least underplaying in its self-satisfaction the influence that material factors such as production, technology and property relations had on its forms. This conceit of consciousness, which blinded it to its own nature, was the reason why the division of mental and material labor could not constitute for Marx a liberation and why it could "*wirklich etwas vor[…]stellen, ohne etwas Wirkliches vorzustellen.*" The independence of consciousness was only apparent, a delusion, but by accepting this delusion as the truth about itself, consciousness committed an error that was all too real.

Marx felt it essential to counter the conceit of consciousness by regaining a holistic view of history. Where ideology only perceived the narratives that it itself had spun, and thus continually admired itself in the mirror while ignoring everything it deemed beneath its dignity, the holistic view of history Marx described would cast its scrutiny on the totality of historical phenomena:

> Diese Geschichtsauffassung beruht also darauf, den wirklichen Produktionsprozeß, und zwar von der materiellen Produktion des unmittelbaren Lebens ausgehend, zu entwickeln und die mit dieser Produktionsweise zusammenhängende und von ihr erzeugte Verkehrsform, also die bürgerliche Gesellschaft in ihren verschiedenen Stufen als Grundlage der ganzen Geschichte aufzufassen und sie sowohl in ihrer Aktion als Staat darzustellen, wie die sämtlichen verschiedenen theoretischen Erzeugnisse und Formen des Bewußtseins, Religion, Philosophie, Moral, etc. etc. aus ihr zu erklären und ihren Entstehungsprozeß aus ihnen zu verfolgen, wo dann natürlich auch die Sache in ihrer Totalität (und darum auch die Wechselwirkung dieser verschiedenen Seiten auf einander) dargestellt werden kann.[15]

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[15] *MEGA*, I/5: 27.

The difference between this conception and the idealist historiography was not merely that one favored one "realm" rather than the other. The difference was that while the idealist conception always resulted in a division between history and ordinary life, between the extraneous standard and everything below, the materialist conception "hat in jeder Periode nicht, wie die idealistische Geschichtsanschauung, nach einer Kategorie zu suchen […]."[16] Idealist history set up a category and explained it, but could not explain the material ground of history. Thus it had to relegate that material ground to the realm of nature and posit an antithesis between history and nature. The materialist conception of history, on the other hand, required no such antithesis: it not only explained the material ground of history but the ideological forms above it as well. In fact, the materialist conception operated on the understanding of a "Wechselwirkung" between material ground and forms of consciousness. Therefore, because the forms of consciousness did not lie outside its scope of explanation, the materialist conception produced what the idealist conception could not: a depiction of history as a totality rather than as a division.

II.   Transparency and Inversion

Such a totalizing conceptual structure thus revealed once again the essence that had, under ideology, been hidden behind the supplement. The forms of consciousness would no longer obscure or block one's view of the material ground beneath them, but rather would be transparent to that ground, revealing clearly the dialectical "Wechselwirkung" between the elements that had previously appeared independent of each other. This model of transparency seems the necessary consequence and only possible alternative to Marx's understanding of ideology as division and externalization. Nevertheless, a central tension in *Die deutsche Ideologie* consists in the simultaneous existence of this model with another model for consciousness having

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[16] *Ibid*., 27.

very different implications. This second model effectively abandoned as utopian the aim of re-achieving a non-ideological form of consciousness. In this model – so influential for the development of Marxism in the nineteenth-century and so often decried as vulgar in the twentieth – consciousness did not represent a prodigal son whose return was eagerly anticipated and whose future reintegration with material practice vehemently asserted. Rather, consciousness appeared as a realm of falseness and illusion for which no rehabilitation could be possible. Consider Marx's sarcastic discussion of the ideologist's perplexity regarding

> Wie man denn eigentlich "aus dem Gottesreich in das Menschenreich komme", als ob dieses "Gottesreich" je anderswo existiert habe als in der Einbildung und die gelahrten Herren nicht fortwährend, ohne es zu wissen, in dem "Menschenreich" lebten, zu welchem sie jetzt den Weg suchen, – und als ob das wissenschaftliche Amüsement, denn mehr als das ist es nicht, das Kuriosum dieser theoretischen Wolkenbildung zu erklären, nicht gerade umgekehrt darin läge, daß man ihre Entstehung aus den wirklichen irdischen Verhältnissen nachweist.[17]

Here Marx equated the *Einbildung* characteristic of consciousness with *Wolkenbildung*, or mere castles in the air. Consciousness appears as simply a realm of self-indulgent curiosities and amusements. To be sure, Marx is talking here about the German ideologists, so it is clear that this is intended as a negative example. But his scorn is so intense that he leaves no theoretical space for the ideal of any kind of consciousness other than such ideology. For such idealistic indulgence could only be brought to an end by an approach that "bleibt fortwährend auf dem wirklichen Geschichts*boden* stehen."[18] The schema of castles in the air floating above the "real ground" of history pitted an innate ethereality of consciousness against the solidity and undeniable truth of material activity. As a result, consciousness called for the epithet "mere" and could be dismissed as empty talk, pure speculation, or self-indulgent philosophizing. The difference between consciousness and ideology collapses here so

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[17] *Ibid.*, 29.

[18] *Ibid.*, 27.

entirely that the prospect of ever returning to a de-alienated consciousness appears to have vanished altogether.

Once consciousness appeared as an object of scorn in this manner, the conceptual structure for economic determinism was obviously already in place.[19] For this model retained the structure that Marx attributed to vulgar idealism but simply reversed the terms. The realm of material production assumed the exclusive claim to reality that the idealists had ascribed to the various forms of consciousness. This process of inversion clearly left its mark on some of Marx's most famous images for historical materialism, such as the *camera obscura* or Hegel standing on his head. Although surrounding passages may imply that something more than a simple inversion is taking place, the fact remains that simple inversion is what these images express most powerfully.

The point, obviously, is not to claim that deep down Marx was actually an economic determinist; there is too much counter-evidence to accept such a conclusion. But neither should one dismiss those moments in Marx's texts that do indeed support such determinist logic. The point is to acknowledge two contradictory models between which Marx moves as if they were fully compatible: on the one hand the model in which consciousness is governed by the ideal of integration with material activity, and on the other hand the model where consciousness is secondary, illusory, or at best a reflection of material production, which was portrayed as the only solid ground for real knowledge.

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[19] Raymond Williams has described this aptly: "The uses of 'consciousness' and 'philosophy' depend almost entirely on the main argument about the futility of separating consciousness and thought from the material social process. It is the separation that makes such consciousness and thought into ideology. But it is easy to see how the point could be taken, and has often been taken, in a quite different way. In a new kind of abstraction, 'consciousness' and 'philosophy' are separated, in their turn, from 'real knowledge' and from the 'practical process'. This is especially easy to do with the available language of 'reflexes', 'echoes', 'phantoms', and 'sublimates'. The result of this separation, against the original conception of an *indissoluble* process, is the farcical exclusion of consciousness from the 'development of men' and from 'real knowledge' of this development. But the former, at least, is impossible by any standard. All that can then be done to mask its absurdity is elaboration of the familiar two-stage model (the mechanical materialist reversal of the idealist dualism), in which there is *first* material social life and *then*, at some temporal or spatial distance, consciousness and 'its' products. This leads directly to simple reductionism: 'consciousness' and 'its' products can be *nothing* but 'reflections' of what has already occurred in the material social process" (*Marxism and Literature* [Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1977]: 61).

The terminology of totality Marx used in his earlier descriptions of a consciousness transparent to material reality clearly has no place in this "mechanical materialist reversal of the idealist dualism."[20] In the model of inverted realism, the material is complete in itself. Confronted with a consciousness irretrievably divided from the material, floating above it as if resting on a cloud, the correct response could no longer be to seek to integrate what hovered above with what lay below into a totality, as it was in Marx's critique of the extraneous standard on idealist history. The correct response could rather only be to focus attention on the real ground below without becoming distracted by the shadow play taking place above. The palace revolutions in these castles in the air thus became mere symptoms or reflections of "real" contradictions being worked out below; they could be easily explained by material factors, but such explanation did not so much integrate them into the material as reveal their utter lack of substance. The inversion model thus portrayed the material as self-sufficient. Consciousness became parasitic, and the ideological division between mental and material became insurmountable.

Why did Marx oscillate between these two models, the latter of which rejected the ideal motivating the former? Why did he vacillate between viewing the reintegration of consciousness as a historical project of the first magnitude and scorning "mere" consciousness as an irredeemable source of self-indulgence and delusion? That this oscillation could result from a slip in logic is unlikely. Quite the contrary, the oscillation resulted from logical consistency: despite the tensions between the two models, the inversion model always lay implicit within the transparency model. Inversion and transparency were two moments of a single system. One emerged from the blind spot of the other.

Why this should be so becomes clear from a closer consideration of Marx's ideal of de-alienated consciousness. Such a consciousness was to constitute a perfectly transparent window onto material life: "Wie die Individuen ihr Leben äußern, so sind sie. Was sie sind, fällt also zusammen mit ihrer Produktion […]."[21]

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[20] Williams, *loc. cit.*

[21] *Ibid.*, 11.

Consciousness equaled expression, which equaled being, which equaled production: consciousness, therefore, equaled production. Through this chain of identities, consciousness effectively evaporated and could not be pointed to as an independent phenomenon. Marx's transparency model did not so much integrate consciousness and material production as make them identical.

The problem was how such a de-alienated consciousness could ever be represented. Given the transparency model, consciousness was no more representable than a pane of glass: one could either depict the frame or the distortions in the glass, which in such analogy would be equivalent to depicting ideology rather than de-alienated consciousness, or one could depict the panorama revealed behind the pane of glass, which was the panorama of material production. De-alienated consciousness itself, however, remained unrepresentable. This is the deictic dilemma of the transparency model. Consciousness was "there" only so long as it was alienated. De-alienated consciousness could be represented only in the form of an ideal generated from the negation of that alienation. Once that ideal was posited as achieved, however, the object desired – consciousness – disappeared.

This is why the "vulgar" inversion model did not constitute a mere logical or rhetorical slip. Inversion stepped in precisely at this blind spot of transparency, made necessary by the impossibility of representing something figured as absolutely transparent. That inversion brought with it its own blind spot hardly needs to be stated. For such an inverted idealism, consciousness always remained supplemental: "mere" consciousness, empty theory, self-indulgent philosophy. Such a consciousness could be represented, but only as an ornamental appendage or distorting screen imposed onto "real," that is, material reality. The blind spot of inversion, in other words, was that it was incapable of even formulating the ideal of de-alienated consciousness. The dilemma of Marx's model of consciousness thus lay between these two blind spots: de-alienated consciousness could not be represented or pointed to without already having it fall back into ideology, without already re-assuming its parasitic position above the material. Consciousness either disappeared or became superfluous. Between autonomy and identity there was no third way.

III.   Revolution as Revelation

The issue of representation returned in *Der achtzehnte Brumaire des Louis Bonaparte*. The representability of revolution, or the proper manner of such representation, is raised by the opening contrast between 1789 and 1851, between uncle and nephew. The oppositions Marx raised in the opening lines between tragedy and farce, original and repetition, present and representation all clearly portrayed Louis Bonaparte's *coup d'état* as a false affair, while 1789 served as the foil revealing that falsity. The rhetorical power of Marx's contrast has made this into one of his most famous passages, but the contrast does introduce a certain confusion. For within a few lines it becomes clear that the real contrast Marx wishes to emphasize is that between bourgeois revolutions (in whatever form) and socialist revolution. Whereas bourgeois revolutions "beschwören […] ängstlich die Geister der Vergangenheit zu ihrem Dienste herauf,"[22] socialist revolution "kann ihre Poesie nicht aus der Vergangenheit schöpfen, sondern nur aus der Zukunft."[23] From this angle the similarity between the uncle and the nephew appears more important than the differences. That similarity consisted in the borrowing of past forms for the actions of the present. Bourgeois revolutions, in other words, transformed the present into representation.

These revolutions, therefore, were marked by a tension between the content they contained and the form in which it was represented. In bourgeois revolution, form attempted to generate meaning so to speak from within itself rather than by drawing on content. Because the forms did not emerge as the expression of a content, they had to be borrowed from another source. This is why for Marx bourgeois revolution was forced to conjure up past forms or "Namen, Schlachtparole, Kostüm, um in dieser altehrwürdigen Verkleidung und mit dieser erborgten Sprache die neue Weltgeschichtsszene aufzuführen."[24] Bourgeois revolution required such resurrection

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[22] *AB*, 226.

[23] *Ibid*., 228.

[24] *Ibid*., 226.

of the dead "um sich über ihren eigenen Inhalt zu betäuben."[25] The self-conscious Roman rhetoric of the French Revolution, the ancient drapery its main protagonists felt themselves to be animating once more, the Old Testament posturing of the English Revolution, all expressed this gap between content and form.

Once again the falsity Marx perceived took the structure of essence and supplement. One could describe the relation of form and content in *Der achtzehnte Brumaire* as one of alienation: form had become external to content. Precisely because the forms were externalized and thus foregrounded as costume, mask or theatrics, the essence of the revolutionary action, its content, was hidden.

Both 1789 and 1851 shared this alienated structure, but there was obviously a difference between the events. Marx's expression of this difference as a shift in genre from tragedy to farce indicated that more than just a difference of degree was involved. While the English and French Revolutions involved an element of self-deception or theatrical delusion, there was no question that these were in fact historical turning points of the first magnitude. The bourgeoisie may not have been capable of looking at itself honestly in the mirror and comprehending what it really represented, but its accession to power truly shook European society to its foundations. Thus, while the antiquarian forms and gestures with which it expressed itself did not emerge from its underlying content, 1789 at least had a real content: the victory of bourgeois capitalism over aristocratic feudalism. The situation in 1851 was quite different in Marx's account. This replay of a replay of course had some kind of significance as a historical fluctuation or as a symptom, but nothing near the magnitude it claimed for itself. The consolidation of finance capital in France was a local event representing a significant variation in bourgeois power structures, but it was no revolutionary paradigm shift. Thus what made 1851 into farce was that it did not simply hide the true features of what was occurring, but attempted to hide its true pettiness.

The contrast between 1789 and 1851, therefore, was that between true historical action (albeit enacted in historical costume) and mere historicist pose. While the French Revolution was unable to face its true features in the mirror, Louis

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[25] *Ibid*., 228.

Bonaparte was unable to stop admiring himself. Louis Bonaparte thus shared a basic characteristic of the German ideologists: conceit. The fine figure Bonaparte admired in the mirror was, needless to say, simply the product of a flattering uniform and a carefully calculated pose – there was nothing more to it. Because of this absence of content, Bonaparte's posturing formed the counterpart to the German ideologists' castles in the air. In both cases the bombast rested on nothing solid. The degree of alienation in both cases had reached a level causing a qualitative change: the theatrical gestures had literally no meaning other than as the sign of a profound depth of alienation. The French Revolution required deciphering, but a meaning would ultimately be found; similarly, an alienated worker might appear as an utterly mechanized example of humanity, but closer contact would reveal a unique soul. The false revolutions of Louis Bonaparte and the German ideologists, however, were sheer pretence.

In contrast to these bourgeois revolutions, socialist revolution would according to Marx be characterized by an absolute transparency. Marx's claim that this revolution would take its poetry not from the past but from the future clearly indicated an end to the borrowing of form endemic to bourgeois revolution. The content and form of socialist revolution would exist transparently to and in "Wechselwirkung" with each other in the same manner that Marx described de-alienated consciousness and material production as being "unmittelbar verflochten," the former as the "direkter Ausfluß" of the latter. Terry Eagleton has described this holistic image of immediacy and balance as Marx's "aesthetic ideal:" "the emancipated society, for Marx as much as for the Rousseau from whom he has learnt here, is an aesthetic interfusion of form and content. An interfusion of form and content, in fact, may be taken as Marx's aesthetic ideal."[26] This aesthetic ideal can be expressed in another way: socialist revolution for Marx represented the revelation of the true identity of the present. 1789 had been too afraid to look upon its own features, and thus borrowed costumes from the past; 1851 had no real identity, and thus constituted a walking, power-grabbing phantom uniform. The socialist revolution according to Marx would

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[26] Terry Eagleton, *Ideology of the Aesthetic* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990): 210.

finally lay down the masks and shed the costumes. For the first time an honest physiognomy would be revealed. Only in socialist revolution would the identity of the present be revealed as it really was.

Marx described this revelation of the content of the present as follows: "Die Revolution des neunzehnten Jahrhunderts muß die Toten ihre Toten begraben lassen, um bei ihrem eigenen Inhalt anzukommen. Dort ging die Phrase über den Inhalt, hier geht der Inhalt über die Phrase hinaus."[27] The content of this revolution would not be determined or distorted by the application of dead forms but would reveal itself in the spontaneous creation of new, transparent forms. Marx's formulation, however, points to a complication in this aesthetic ideal of form and content existing in perfect balance. For Marx speaks not of a balance but of content "going beyond" the phrase ("über die Phrase hinaus"). Instead of transparency, as the aesthetic ideal would lead one to expect, this formulation suggests rather a complete submersion or disappearance of form into content. This has led Eagleton to suggest that at moments Marx's aesthetic ideal becomes radicalized into a notion of the sublime. The Marxist sublime in Eagleton's words is:

> less a matter of discovering the expressive forms "adequate to" the substance of socialism, than of rethinking that whole opposition – of grasping form no longer as the symbolic mould into which that substance is poured, but as the "form of the content", as the structure of a ceaseless self-production.[28]

Socialist revolution thus did not draw the line at the point where form and content came into aesthetic harmony, but rather crossed that line and shattered form altogether so as to liberate content absolutely.

The radicalization of the aesthetic ideal into a Marxist sublime again had its counterpart in the theory of ideology. That counterpart was Marx's move from describing the ideal of consciousness' transparency to material production to emphasizing the need to dispel the illusions of ideology by focusing on the "real

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[27] *AB*, 228-29.

[28] *Ideology of the Aesthetic*, 215.

ground" of history. Just as the extreme case of the German ideologists pushed Marx to the more radical formulation of consciousness as hopelessly ideological and innately supplemental, the move here from the aesthetic ideal to the Marxist sublime appears to have been motivated by the radical formalistic emptiness of the second edition of the 18th Brumaire. Since the 18th Brumaire appeared as not simply an imbalance but as the utter submersion of content under form, Marx responded by inverting the terms and calling for the submersion of form under content. The farce of Louis Napoleon thus drove Marx literally from the ridiculous to the sublime.

But again, this radicalization also has a deeper cause. That cause is the problematic nature of representing something that has gone beyond all boundaries of representation. Eagleton describes this dilemma as follows:

> What is in question here is the whole concept of a representational aesthetics. Previous revolutions have been formalistic, engrafting a factitious "phrase" or form onto their content; but the consequence of this is a dwarfing of the signified by the signifier. The content of socialist revolution, by contrast, is excessive of all form, out in advance of its own rhetoric. It is unrepresentable by anything but itself, signified only in its "absolute movement of becoming", and thus a kind of sublimity.[29]

This calling into question of a representational aesthetics is nothing other than the return of Marx's deictic dilemma. Just as de-alienated consciousness slipped through one's fingers the moment one tried to grasp it, socialist revolution similarly resisted representation. Representation would necessarily impose form on its content. Socialist revolution, however, precisely by being so true to itself and by consisting so absolutely in its own unique content, could not take form. The heart of this paradox lies in Marx's implicit understanding of socialist revolution as a moment of revelation, a moment when the face and identity of the present are revealed. Such an absolute presence cannot be represented: the moment when that identity is revealed is accompanied so to speak by a flash that momentarily blinds the observer. Once that

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[29] *Ibid.*, 214.

moment can finally be represented, it has lost its privileged status, and the real identity of the present remains "out in advance of its own rhetoric."

Marx's deictic dilemma thus resulted in a situation where true consciousness and the true face of the present were representable only when absent. Both became transparent or invisible once posited as achieved. This dilemma would perhaps itself appear merely theoretical did it not reemerge in the struggles of twentieth-century aesthetics to purge itself of historicism. The Realism Debate, as was argued in Chapter One, largely revolved around the issue of how to represent the physiognomy of the present. The two sides of that debate made use of a discourse calling for elimination of the distortions of historicism: for a shedding of the costumes and lowering of the masks so as to reveal the present in naked honesty. But this gesture of revelation proved problematic. The crux of the Realism debate was precisely the impossibility of determining when the historicist mask had in fact been lowered.

Marx's deictic dilemma helps explain why this was so. The aesthetic grounding of the avant-garde was Marx's transparency model.[30] Just as for Marx consciousness was to become integral to material production and thereby cease to exist as an external, ideological supplement, so art for the avant-garde had to cease to be art, had to purify itself through self-immolation until transforming into a social or political fact. Marx's conflict of materialism against ideology reemerged as the conflict of politics against autonomous art, or more generally, as the praxis versus theory dilemma of crucial importance especially to the architectural discourse of the avant-garde. Hence the avant-garde's ceaseless involutions on itself and constant self-recreation: for the moment it took form it had already betrayed the ideal of transparency. Just as Marx, when confronted with this dilemma, slipped into the model of inversion so as to be able to point to his topic, so too did the adherents of Realism. The theory of reflection was the *camera obscura* translated into an aesthetic principle. Under this principle, art turned into a shadow realm, projecting images not of a higher, brighter world, but rather of sober forces of production. The embarrassing

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[30] For an excellent discussion of the ideal of transparency among the Russian Constructivists, see Daniel Herwitz, *Making Theory/Constructing Art: On the Authority of the Avant-Garde* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1993), chapter 2.

dilemma of the reflection model was how to save art from being anything beyond ornamental shadow play or distorting ideology, in short, "mere" art.[31] Between them, the protagonists of the Realism Debate repeated the strategies of transparency and inversion put forward by Marx. But the revelation sought, the face of the present, remained elusive.

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[31] H. R. Jauß has expressed this as follows: "a materialist history of art which reduces the whole range of aesthetic problems to a mere critique of ideology can no longer give any reason for its interest in the art of the past" ("The Idealist Embarrassment" in *New Literary History* 7 [1975]: 193).

THE STYLE OF THE PRESENT

Teige and the Question of Dualism

> Was erstens die *Würdigkeit* der Kunst betrifft, wissenschaftlich betrachtet zu werden, so ist es allerdings der Fall, daß die Kunst als ein flüchtiges Spiel gebraucht werden kann, dem Vergnügen und der Unterhaltung zu dienen, unsere Umgebung zu verzieren, dem Äußeren der Lebensverhältnisse Gefälligkeit zu geben und durch Schmuck andere Gegenstände herauszuheben. In dieser Weise ist sie in der Tat nicht unabhängige, nicht freie, sondern dienende Kunst. Was *wir* aber betrachten wollen, ist die auch in ihrem Zwecke wie in ihren Mitteln *freie* Kunst.[1]

In late 1922, the Czech avant-garde circle *Devětsil* released two group publications. The first, *Revoluční sborník Devětsil* [*Devětsil Revolutionary Almanac*],[2] appeared under a plain cover of somber, almost military green. Inside the design was heavy with text and with woodcut illustrations of a vaguely Cubist quality. The main critical articles, written by Karel Teige, attempted to redefine and thereby resuscitate the slogan of "proletarian art" that *Devětsil* had adopted as its own in 1921. The second publication was entitled *Život II* [*Life II*][3] and appeared only a few months later. This cover, abandoning the disciplined design of the earlier anthology, displayed a collage superimposing an automobile wheel over a Doric column, beyond which lies the open sea. The body of the publication utilized a variety of experimental layouts and typefaces, with illustrations juxtaposing ocean liners to Tibetan architecture, and

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[1] G.W.F. Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Ästhetik*, in *Werke*, vol. 13 (Frankfurt a/M: Suhrkamp, 1986): 20.

[2] *Revoluční sborník Devětsil*, eds. Karel Teige and Jaroslav Seifert (Praha: Večernice V. Vortel, 1922).

[3] *Život II: Nové umění, konstrukce, soudobá intelektuelní aktivita* [*Life II: The New Art, Construction, Contemporary Intellectual Activity*], ed. Jaromír Krejcar (Praha: umělecká beseda, 1922).

modernist sculpture to Native American totem poles or snow-plow trains, very much in line with the "new spirit" proclaimed shortly before by Le Corbusier. *Život II* had little to say about proletarian art but much about purism, constructivism, new media such as cinema and photography, and the primacy of the machine for contemporary cultural production.

The appearance of these two publications within such a short period does not simply bear witness to the speed with which *Devětsil* developed away from a program fairly provincial in shape[4] towards concerns just being taken up by the international avant-garde at that time. This swiftness also suggests that, despite the apparent revolutionary shift that the covers of the publications illustrate, the transformation was in fact evolutionary. There was but a short step from proletarian art, with its nostalgic ideal of a coming "Socialist Gothic" that would end the perceived aesthetic "interregnum"[5] by creating a modern folk art for the proletariat, to the radical embrace of technology exhibited in *Život II*.[6]

The ease of this inversion from millenarian expectations of *renewal* to confident optimism in the *new* represents more than just a footnote to an account of Teige's development as an avant-garde theorist of European significance. Rather, it suggests that the boundary separating historical nostalgia from militant hostility to past cultural forms is permeable. Given Teige's development towards an ever more radical functionalism − well illustrated by his later criticism of no less a figure than Le Corbusier for practicing "historicism" − the question then arises of how much this

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[4] To be sure, *Devětsil's* theory of proletarian art was influenced by the Soviet *Proletkult* movement, primarily as mediated by S. K. Neumann in the journals *Kmen* and *Červen*. Nevertheless, the theory of proletarian art, with its leading themes of *lidovost* (popular character) and tendentiousness, was very much a response to particular cultural dynamics in the early period of the first Czechoslovak republic.

[5] See, e.g., "Nové umění a lidová tvorba" ["The New Art and Folk Production"] in Stěpán Vlašín, ed., *Avantgarda známá a neznámá*, vol. I (Praha: Svoboda, 1971): especially 152 and 154.

[6] The smoothness of this transition is especially marked in the theoretical texts by Teige, since not all of his work appearing in *Život II* was actually composed after the articles from the earlier volume. To complicate the matter even further, the article "Proletářské umění" ["Proletarian Art"] (co-authored with the poet Jiří Wolker and appearing under the latter's name in *Var* I/9 [271-275]), must have been written only shortly before Teige's revisionist main piece in *Revoluční sborník Devětsil*, "Nové proletářské umění" ["The New Proletarian Art"]. (Both articles were delivered as lectures in the Spring of 1922 and, perhaps significantly, neither originally appeared under Teige's name.)

later, radical position might retain traces of the nostalgia expressed openly in the early calls for proletarian art.

Such traces are in fact evident in the basic structure of Teige's theoretical program between 1923 and 1930. The most characteristic feature of that program was Teige's simultaneous articulation of the twin poles of Constructivism and Poetism. Teige clearly envisioned this dual structure as the expression of a dialectical unity within a series of opposed terms: rationality and irrationality, purposeful action and anti-instrumental *Wohlgefallen*, scientific functionalism and pure lyricism, and everyday life and aesthetic elation. While the project of delineating a consistent theoretical framework for the avant-garde out of mutually incompatible characteristics displays an open utopianism, in Teige's case this utopianism was not the product of a theoretician's greed. Rather, this utopianism (the aim of reconciling the irreconcilable) can be shown to issue from precisely the most earthbound element of Teige's thought: his hard-headed functionalism. The prime interest of Teige's dual program, therefore, lies neither in his formulations of Constructivism or Poetism taken independently, nor even in his juxtaposition or attempted dialectical synthesis of the two poles. The significance of the dualism lies in the distinctness with which Teige unwittingly betrays that Constructivism cannot even exist without Poetism. Poetism, the apparent opposite of Constructivism, is actually its inevitable logical consequence; Poetism would be there in shadowy outline even if it were not explicitly articulated.

The utopianism in Teige's dualism – which at first appears as naïve exuberance or willful positing of a unity of opposites – is thus the mark of theoretical consistency: the very purity of Teige's Constructivism was what summoned its radical antithesis. That such utopianism was unavoidable, rather than simply a choice or a theoretical oversight, was due to its origin in the inversion described above. Poetism thus represents the trace of Constructivism's origin in historical nostalgia.

Teige's theoretical position in the mid- to late twenties largely developed through attempts to resolve the contradictions resulting from his denial of this historical nostalgia at the base of Constructivism. The contradiction that was really crucial here was not, as one might expect, any of the particular conceptual tensions between Constructivism and Poetism. Those tensions functioned more as the fuel for

the dialectical engine: their combustibility was what kept Teige's system moving forward. What ultimately revealed the overall route as a dead-end, however, was the very structure of the dualism itself. The critique of historicism that formed an integral part of Teige's theory of Constructivism centered precisely on the identification of a conceptual dualism marring the integrity of historicist architecture: a conceptual dualism that for Teige took material form in the application of a decorative layer of historical ornamentation on top of a functional structure that should have been deemed complete in itself. Given the importance of this critique in Teige's writings of the twenties, the appearance of a parallel dualism in the Constructivism-Poetism structure is striking indeed. Teige himself exerted considerable effort to avoid having Poetism appear as a decorative addendum to the severe teachings of Constructivism: effort that not only involved ever more laborious formulation of the dialectical unity of the poles but that also drove him to articulate his Constructivism in ever more radical tones (as Le Corbusier was to experience first hand). These efforts, however, opened up a vicious circle: the more radically Teige pushed the limits of Constructivism, the more insistently Poetism appeared as its ultimate promise – while at the same time the more difficult it became to justify this dual structure given the standards of Constructivism.[7]

The source of this dilemma must be sought in those few short months in late 1922. For what occurred in Teige's theoretical position roughly in the period between preparation of *Revoluční sborník Devětsil* and *Život II* was a miniaturized and accelerated version of the shift explored in Chapter 2 in relation to Herder and Nietzsche. For this reason Teige's dilemma is not simply the record of an error: it

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[7] 1929-30 was a pivotal period in this respect. It not only witnessed the disbanding of *Devětsil* during the course of the so-called "Generational Discussion," but for Teige also culminated in the breakdown of the Constructivism-Poetism dualism, primarily due to the contradiction at issue here. Teige came to see the heart of the Generational Discussion in the "crisis of criteria" characterizing avant-garde artistic theory (Poetism) in contrast to the conceptual clarity of avant-garde architectural theory (Constructivism). For the next several years Teige focused his attention almost exclusively on architectural theory, and when he did return in 1934 to artistic theory in the form of Surrealism, he did not attempt to resuscitate the "unified field theory" of the avant-garde that had been so characteristic of and problematic for his work in the twenties. Surrealism and functionalist architecture co-exist peacefully in Teige's writings of the thirties, but he never formulated them as a dialectical pair as he had Constructivism and Poetism. (For an analysis of the implicit connections between Teige's later functionalism and Surrealism, see Rostislav Švácha, "Surrealismus a architektura," in Lenka Bydžovská and Karel Srp, eds., *Český surrealismus, 1929-1953*, [Praha: Argo & Galerie hlavního města Prahy, 1996]: 268-279].)

replays and reveals a paradox fundamental to the avant-garde thesis of a radical rejection of the past. At issue here is the shift from a perception of the present as existing in a historical vacuum, with the consequent attempt to address this by navigating some sort of reinsertion into the historical flux, to the perception of the present as being mired in a surfeit of historical detritus, calling forth the attempt to address this through a radical clearing of the tables and a new instauration. Teige's understanding of Constructivism has its roots in his early nostalgic longing for a new historical style that would lead the present out of its aesthetic interregnum and give it a standing equivalent to the great historical styles, and to the Gothic above all. But the promise of Constructivism to create such historical standing quickly became predicated on its radical rejection not only of all traces of historical decorative systems, but also of the very gesture of measuring oneself against the past.

I.   *From Socialist Gothic to Style of the Present*

The claim that socialist revolution would create the conditions for the emergence of a new and all-encompassing artistic style – often referred to as a "Socialist Gothic" – was a common element of the rhetoric of proletarian art.[8] Teige used this idealized image to describe an art that would stand in some sort of immediate relation and be spontaneously comprehensible to the masses rather than only to an elite. He claimed that such a wide social grounding had been achieved most effectively by Gothic art:

> In antiquity, Christian art was a secondary, derivative, immature style and only in the Romanesque period, when the break between the old and the new worlds occurred, did it expand to cultural and stylistic [*slohové*] dimensions […], then to transform into the Gothic, which was able to develop into the most typical style. In socialist society, just as in the Gothic, there will be no difference between the ruling art and the underlying current of primary production. Popular [*lidové*]

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[8] See, e.g., Jiří Wolker [and K. Teige], "Proletářské umění," in *Dílo Jiřího Wolkera*, ed. Miloslav Novotný, vol. I, 5th ed (Praha: Václav Petr, 1930): 292; and Vladislav Vančura, "Nové umění" ["The New Art"], in *Host* 3 (1923): 120.

proletarian art will achieve the same power as that which created the Gothic cathedrals.[9]

This image of the Gothic thus provided Teige with a model for the criterion of *lidovost* (popular character) that played such a prominent role in his understanding of proletarian art. At the same time it functioned as an image to hold up in contrast to the autonomy of art in bourgeois society. From this perspective, capitalism appeared has a force that had alienated art from its natural function by pushing it along a course of autonomous development and separating it from the everyday concerns and interests of the great mass of people. Proletarian art, by preparing the ground for a modern art that would be *lidové* as the Gothic had allegedly been, thus promised a release from the constraints of autonomous art and a return to the direct interconnection of art and everyday life that had been deformed in bourgeois society. In this way, Teige implicitly linked the revolutionary action of proletarian art with a process of historical restoration. Proletarian art cleared the path for a return to the historical process of stylistic development that had been interrupted by the autonomy of art under capitalism.

The precedent for Teige's use of the Gothic as a symbol of artistic and stylistic integrity, at least as concerns Czech influences,[10] is easy to locate. The literary and art critic F. X. Šalda, whom Teige described in 1927 as the "founder of Czech

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[9] "Nové umění proletářské," originally in *Revoluční sborník Devětsil*, here quoted from Karel Teige, *Výbor z díla*, eds. Jiří Brabec, Vratislav Effenberger, Květoslav Chvatík, and Robert Kalivoda, vol. I (Praha: Československý spisovatel, 1966): 60-1. (This edition hereinafter referred to as "*VzD*" followed by a volume number.) All translations herein, unless an English edition is cited, are my own.

[10] This symbolic image of the Gothic can, of course, also be found in other contexts of the early avant-garde. A relevant example is Gropius' 1919 Bauhaus program, which called for "a new guild of craftsmen" that would forge the "new structure of the future, which will embrace architecture and sculpture and painting in one unity and which will one day rise toward heaven from the hands of a million workers like the crystal symbol of a new faith" (in Ulrich Conrads, ed., *Programs and Manifestoes on 20th-Century Architecture* [Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1970]: 49). Gropius' text was illustrated with a woodcut by Lyonel Feininger depicting a shining cathedral. The Gothic as a symbol of a society that was integrated rather than divided into areas of specialization reassumed importance in the 1930s in the rhetoric of some members of the Prague Linguistic School, as is discussed by Jindřich Toman, *The Magic of a Common Language: Jakobson, Mathesius, Trubetzkoy, and the Prague Linguistic Circle* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1995): 181-83.

modernism" and the "herald of a new era in our cultural life,"[11] had written in 1904 of "the new Gothic, an iron Gothic" portended by modern industrial structures.[12]   For Šalda, the Gothic was simply the most natural image for connoting the enormous potential for social cohesion contained in the true artistic styles. This strong definition of style (designated by Teige with the word *sloh* in Czech, a word that lacks the connotations of style as passing fashion or modish design often attached to the word *styl*) implied the power to reveal the various unrelated manifestations of a particular epoch as creating some sort of recognizable whole.   In Šalda's words: "Style is nothing other than conscience and consciousness of the whole, consciousness of mutual coherence and connection […]. Style is in conflict with everything that breaks this unity, with everything that takes up and isolates details from the whole, links from the chain, beats from the rhythm."[13]   The true styles, by linking isolated details into a whole, thus revealed a distinct and recognizable physiognomy for an entire historical epoch. Šalda's emphasis on the organic totality characterizing strong artistic styles, in its turn, recalled Nietzsche's description, in the second of the *Unzeitgemäße Betrachtungen*, of the ideal of "unity of artistic style in all the expressions of the life of a people."[14]   Through Šalda, therefore, Teige's early exaltation of the Gothic as "the example of an epoch that is stylistic [*slohové*] beyond reproach"[15] strongly echoed the

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[11] "Vůdce české moderny" ["The Leader of Czech Modernism"], in *VzD*/I: 248. On Šalda's influence on the *Devětsil* generation, see also Vratislav Effenberger, "Nové umění," in *VzD*/I: 582.

[12] F. X. Šalda, "Nová krása – její genese a charakter" ["The New Beauty – Its Genesis and Character"], in *Boje o zítřek: Meditace a rapsodie, 1898-1904*, here quoted from vol. I of *Soubor díla F. X. Šaldy*, eds. Jan Mukařovský, Václav Černý, Felix Vodička, and Jiří Pistorius (Praha: Melantrich, 1948): 97.

[13] *Ibid.*, 93. It should be noted that Šalda does use the word *styl* here in this passage.

[14] Friedrich Nietzsche, *Unzeitgemäße Betrachtungen II*: "Vom Nutzen und Nachteil der Historie für das Leben," in *Kritische Studienausgabe*, eds. Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari, vol. I (München and Berlin: DTV and De Gruyter, 1988): 274. On the influence of the *Unzeitgemäße Betrachtungen* on Šalda, and on how Nietzsche's critique of historicism became intertwined with Šalda's critique of the formal eclecticism of the *Lumír* generation, see Vladimír Kafka, "F. X. Šalda a německá literatura," in *Studie a úvahy o německé literatuře* (Praha: KRA, 1995): 32, 45, and 89. Equally evident here is Šalda's indebtedness to Nietzsche's well-known description of the "style of literary decadence" in *Der Fall Wagner* (in *Kritische Studienausgabe*, vol. 6, 21). See the discussion of these passages in Chapter 2.

[15] "Umění přítomnosti," in *Život II*, 132.

ideal of an integrated, creative epoch that Nietzsche had held up in contrast to the weak, historicist culture of the nineteenth-century.

Equally important for Teige's reception of this terminology, however, was Šalda's association of this strong notion of style with a proto-constructivist discourse. Šalda opposed the integrity of the true styles to the ornamental architecture of historicism and of much of the Czech Succession. A direction for modern architecture, Šalda insisted, would not be found in any new ornamental vocabulary but rather in the strict logic of industrial structures. Šalda wrote of the power of the impression made "by a huge railway bridge, bare, desolate, without ornament, the sheer embodiment of constructive thought," and concluded that "the new beauty is above all the beauty of purpose, inner law, logic and structure."[16] Since Šalda was first and foremost a critic of literature and painting, such an emphasis on the style-creating capacity of functional architecture is perhaps surprising. But this language almost certainly reflects the influence of Jan Kotěra, one of the groundbreaking architects of Czech modernism and a student of Otto Wagner, with whom Šalda co-edited the Succession journal *Volné směry* at the time.[17] In this manner Šalda set an important precedent for Teige through his application of terms stemming from the discourse of early architectural modernism – in particular the terms "ornament" and "eclecticism" – to art and culture in general.[18]

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[16] "Nová krása," 97-98. See also Šalda's 1909 note upon the opening of the Secession-style Municipal House in Prague: "So the scaffolding has come down and now one can clearly see *what* will be representing [Prague]: […] something immensely petty despite its enormous size; a sort of magazine kiosk on a larger scale. And next to it looms that fantastic, black Gothic tower, the [15th century] Powder Tower, that pithy verse from a stone poem, masculine and robust like the age from which it comes. It does not represent anything: it simply *is* what it is. Standing before it, you feel shame from the bottom of your soul for the representational piece of cardboard next to it and for the age with a paper soul […, which] forgets that before one can represent, one must *be* something […]" ("Representační dům pražský," in *Soubor díla F. X. Šaldy*, vol. 16, 433).

[17] Kotěra was the only figure of the Czech turn-of-the-century whom Teige considered to rival Šalda in significance (see *VzD*/I: 246-8).

[18] Further, as Markéta Brousek has pointed out, Šalda's transmission of such proto-constructivist concerns must be added to the influences on the early Teige alongside Soviet Constructivism and French Purism (Le Corbusier) (see Brousek, *Der Poetismus. Die Lehrjahre der tschechischen Avantgarde und ihrer marxistischen Kritiker* (München: Carl Hanser Verlag, 1975): 103.

This ideal of the true style served as the context for Teige's account of the failure of art in the bourgeois era. Bourgeois art had never succeeded in creating such a style, but the reason for this was not that artists in bourgeois society had been incapable of creating forms sufficiently beautiful or powerful. Teige had enormous (if selective) respect for the artistic accomplishments of the nineteenth-century, and often emphasized how groundbreaking many of those accomplishments had been. Nor did Teige, even though a political radical, blame the failure to develop a true style on the absence of progressive political views among many of the most powerful or aesthetically progressive nineteenth-century artists. No matter how strongly the vision of an individual artist in the nineteenth-century may have been motivated by concern for social issues or by outright socialist allegiances (Teige pointed to Courbet and Van Gogh as examples), no matter how brilliant the aesthetic achievement may have been, and no matter how pervasive the influence on the later development of art, all remained the visions of individuals. No such vision was so powerful that it could succeed, through sheer persuasiveness, to force its way to lasting cultural dominance. The vicious circle of bourgeois culture was, indeed, that precisely the aesthetic power of its greatest artists perpetuated and deepened the most insidious feature of its art: individualism, chaos, and the simultaneity of incompatible visions. To "think" or "will" one's way out of this dilemma was impossible. Every coherent proposal for a way out of the chaos simply took its place as one more monadic vision, and increased thereby the chaos.

Teige's explanation of this situation made use of a fairly orthodox Marxist argument. For a true style to gain hold, there needed to be a minimum level of social continuity. Previous ruling classes had aimed to preserve the existing relations of production, which constituted the bases of their power. This resistance to change, disastrous as it may have been for the establishment of more just class relations, did produce fertile ground for art. Precisely the social stagnation of pre-bourgeois societies had resulted in the continuity necessary for the development of a true style. As Marx had observed in *The Communist Manifesto*, however, the ruling position of the bourgeoisie was no longer based on preserving but rather on constantly revolutionizing the relations of production. For Teige, the resulting "overturning of

production, […] creating chronic uncertainty and nervousness," and the repetition of cycles of overproduction and economic crisis, all resulted in an analogous "pathological acceleration of the development of modern art, which cannot settle on a definite form of stylistic expression."[19] This was ultimately why, in Teige's view, bourgeois art was condemned to a chaotic individualism. This was also why the emergence of a true style was contingent not upon strength of aesthetic vision but rather upon revolutionary change of the structure of society. Proletarian art functioned only as an anticipatory vision, or as Teige termed it, a *předobraz*; the true Socialist Gothic could only emerge out of a transformed society: "Style will only come with the new social order."[20] Artistic and political revolution were thus linked for Teige not merely by a shared spirit of rebelliousness – which was of course a dominant feature even of bourgeois art – but by logical necessity.

This account of the necessary stylistic failure of bourgeois art served Teige as the basis for a further thesis: that bourgeois art inevitably tended towards historicism. The pathological acceleration of production displaced art away from the present:

> […] bourgeois society, which is, on the whole, essentially anaesthetic, provided no positive impulses for art; hence historicism and the romantic turn to the past, the flight from everyday and class realities, appeared for several decades to be the only salvation from the general banalization of art. […] The artist, under the influence of historical and economic-political shifts and circumstances, lived cut off from the mass of society. In such a state of emergency, the artist – incapable of living in a vacuum – invents a different society, which belongs to either the past or the future. Acting either as historian or rebel, the artist addresses his work to fictional societies or collectivities. […Art] lives off of the spirit of negation, its gaze fixed on the past and the future.[21]

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[19] "Umění přítomnosti," in *Život II*, 127. See also "Doba a umění," ["Art and the Age"] in *Stavba a báseň: Umění dnes a zítra* [*Building and Poem: Art Today and Tomorrow*] (Praha: Vaněk & Votava, 1927): 29.

[20] "Umění přítomnosti," in *Život II*, 127. See also "Nové umění proletářské," in *VzD*/I: 62-63, and "Umění dnes a zítra," in *Revoluční sborník Devětsil*, 198.

[21] "Nové umění proletářské," in *VzD*/I: 44-45. See also "Doba a umění," in *Stavba a báseň*, 39.

This flight from the present meant that "the connection between art and the spectator was broken."[22] The artist in bourgeois society did not speak to the surrounding society, but in spite of it. Thus pushed into a relation of tension with the present, the bourgeois artist could express critical distance only through flight to spatial or temporal distances, that is, through exoticism or historicism (which Teige viewed as simply variations on a single theme). No matter how justified or critical such negation of the present may have been, the result was indistinguishable from the dreamy nostalgia of the passive bourgeois citizen:

> When frightened spirits feel the present to be too cruel, too unrelenting, too uncertain, that is when the perfect beauty of the past makes itself felt. [… People begin to] live in the past or in far-off places, in dream or in reminiscence: in their minds they undertake adventurous voyages to long-past centuries or to the moon, the dead planet. Historicism, exoticism, and the revival of the Rousseauist idyll – these anachronistic forms of Romanticism turn the mind from concrete tasks and present life.[23]

Aesthetic negation, in other words, was socially affirmative.[24] Or translated into Teige's emerging Constructivist terms, art under capitalism had lost its functional

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[22] "Umění dnes a zítra," in *Revoluční sborník Devětsil*, 189.

[23] "Doba a umění," in *Stavba a báseň*, 31. It should be pointed out that exoticism, the excitement of long-distance travel, and the discovery of the "primitive" were also major ingredients of Poetist rhetoric in the mid-twenties. Teige never explicitly contrasted these two forms of exoticism. Poetist exoticism, however, was largely driven by the parallels between the ultra-exotic and the ultra-modern: Tibetan architecture was inspiring largely for its similarities to the American skyscraper; the excitement of discovering far-off lands was inseparable from the excitement over the ocean liner or airplane that brought one there. In this way, exoticism, technology, and cosmopolitanism were always linked themes in Teige's texts on Poetism. They expressed the development of closer ties between previously isolated cultures and peoples as well as the emergence of a "world culture" of modernism. In this Poetist exoticism reflects James Clifford's description of "the discovery of things 'nègre' by the European avant-garde[, which was] mediated by an imaginary America, a land of noble savages simultaneously standing for the past and future of humanity – a perfect affinity of primitive and modern" (*The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art* [Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1988]: 198).

[24] For a comparison of Teige's sociology of art with Marcuse's account of affirmative art, see Květoslav Chvatík, "Karel Teige a Herbert Marcuse o společenské funkci umění," in *Melancholie a vzdor: Eseje o moderní české literatuře* (Praha: Československý spisovatel, 1992): 57-74. (German version: "Herbert Marcuse und Karel Teige über die gesellschaftliche Funktion der Kunst," in Axel Honneth and Albrecht Wellmer, eds., *Die Frankfurter Schule und die Folgen* [Berlin: de Gruyter, 1986].)

efficacy. Historicist art (in Teige's broad sense, which included any kind of escapist art), through its forced abnegation of any meaningful role in the structure of capitalist society, became merely ornamental: art could perhaps cover over the banality of the present, but could do nothing to effect change.

Teige also linked the historicism of bourgeois art to his claim about the endemic individualism of art under capitalism. He wrote:

> The economic conditions of the nineteenth-century led society to individualism, to that criminal level of anarchy in life and ideology which made style impossible, corroded the pristine collective pathos of the age of *Empire* and, through stylistic degeneration, spread the cruel plague of historicizing eclecticism in architecture, transforming cities and streets into a regular museum full of frightful exhibits.[25]

Teige thus equated the chaotic individualism that accompanied the loss of a true style with the eclecticism of historicist architecture. Just as the literary styles of, say, a Hugo and a Baudelaire were too incompatible to be regarded as facets of a single, over-arching style, so the various historical revival styles of nineteenth-century architecture could never come together into a recognizable unity. Individualism and eclecticism were parallel for Teige because both consisted in a plurality of self-enclosed and incompatible systems existing side-by-side. Just as individualism meant that no particular artistic vision could claim authority or primacy over its competitors, eclecticism also suffered from a lack of any solid criterion with which to distinguish any one of the systematized historical styles available to the architect as the primary or true style of the age. The somewhat desperate question that served as the title to Heinrich Hübsch's 1828 polemic on architecture – "In What Style Should We Build?"[26] – captures well Teige's point about eclecticism. The very possibility of raising such a question indicated that none of the potential answers – Neo-Hellenic,

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[25] "Nové umění proletářské," in *VzD*/I: 44. See also "Doba a umění," in *Stavba a báseň*, 39.

[26] See Heinrich Hübsch, et al., *In What Style Should We Build? The German Debate on Architectural Style*, trans. Wolfgang Hermann (Santa Monica: Getty Center for the History of Art and the Humanities, 1992).

Spitzbogenstil, *Rundbogenstil,* etc.– could ever be definitive.[27]   The plurality of historicist styles was inescapable: in place of a unified style there were mere stylizations, drawing architecture into the conceptual orbit of fashion.[28] For Teige, a choice for one or another of the available stylistic systems could express nothing other than individual preference, taste, or interpretation.

Teige's critique of historicism thus had two distinct dimensions, corresponding to his use of the terms "ornament" and "eclecticism." The former term delineated the vertical dimension.   The cleft separating ornament from structure in historicist architecture was the material expression of a much deeper tension within bourgeois art: the severed connection between art and its public, or between art and its present. Ornament – and Teige, like Šalda, did not restrict his use of this term only to architecture – was thus the scarlet letter for the sin of art's autonomy. The presence of ornament betrayed that where there should have been "conscience and consciousness of the whole," there was instead a pernicious dualism. Further, because ornament was (from the logic of Constructivism) superfluous, it only served to cover over, and thus hide from view, what was of structural importance. In Teige's model of historicist architecture, therefore, the system of historical ornamentation that was applied to the self-sufficient structure constituted a deception: a historical disguise that sought to hide the true form and identity of the present. In this equation of historical ornament with lie, Teige's critique of historicism revealed the depth of its dependence on Nietzsche's account of the dishonesty, deceptiveness, and protective *Innerlichkeit* of modern historicist culture.

The horizontal dimension of Teige's critique, expressed in the term "eclecticism," related not to tensions within the individual artwork but rather to the overall make-up of the cultural landscape. This horizontal dimension thus indicated

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[27] However much Teige's prejudice against nineteenth-century eclecticism may now appear one-sided, his interpretation of the inherent open-endedness of historicist styles had some justification: in 1898 – 70 years after Hübsch's text – the title of an article in the leading Czech art journal *Volné směry* on the Prague Architecture and Engineering Exhibition posed the exact same question! See Otakar Nový, *Česká architektonická avantgarda* (Praha: Prostor, 1998): 80.

[28] See "K teorii konstruktivismu" ["On Constructivist Theory"], in *VzD*/I: 363; and "Výtvarná práce sovětského Ruska" ["Creative Work in Soviet Russia"], in *VzD*/I: 272.

the existence of independent aesthetic systems existing side-by-side but without any essential connection. Like the partial systems that Lukács had identified as one of the consequences of reified rationalism, these individual eclectic systems were complete in themselves and for this reason mutually exclusive. The internal consistency of each unit resulted in the chaotic inconsistency of the cultural landscape viewed as a whole.

Teige's critique of bourgeois art as inherently historicist thus emerged from the context of his theory of proletarian art. Teige in this period (1921 through mid-1922) portrayed the present as just starting to emerge from an aesthetic interregnum that stretched back to the beginning of art's autonomy under capitalism. Proletarian art could only guess at and try to lay rough foundations for what would emerge as the next truly *lidový* and all-encompassing historical style – the Socialist Gothic to emerge out of the ashes of revolution. The historicism of bourgeois art, therefore, had less to do with the dominance of historical themes than with the situation in this historical interregnum: bourgeois art was historicist precisely because it did not belong to any true historical style. Capitalism had interrupted the great narrative, and the Soviet revolution was the first sign that such narrative was to be taken up again. Thus Teige's theory of proletarian art implicitly understood revolution in its etymological sense: as a return – at a higher level of development of course – to an earlier state, that is, as the return to history.

With the publication of *Život II* and Teige's increasing focus on Constructivism, this scheme changed. To be sure, there was a fairly natural evolution from Teige's proletarian art rhetoric to his Constructivist terminology. Even within his theory of proletarian art, with its suspicion of the cult of the machine,[29] Teige had begun to introduce functionalist rhetoric in the name of "life" and of the reunion of art with the masses and the everyday. He stated, for example, that "art is a function of life,"[30] and that "*in the new world art has a new function. There is no need for [the new art]* to serve as an ornament or decoration of life, for the beauty of life, bare and

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[29] Teige in this period was critical not only of the Italian Futurists for their aestheticization of the technology of war (see "Obrazy a předobrazy," in *VzD*/I: 26) but also of the "maschinism" he felt characterized much of the Soviet avant-garde (see Teige's review of Ehrenburg's *Yet It Turns*, quoted in *VzD*/I: 520).

[30] "Nové umění proletářské," in *VzD*/I: 52.

powerful, does not need to be painted over or disfigured with dangling ornaments."[31]
Only a short step was required for this vitalist celebration of the beauty of unadorned life to develop into a purist celebration of the beauty of the unadorned machine: "The beauty of a machine, of an automobile, is the beauty of reality and of the pure form, which doesn't need to be dolled up with ornaments or crowned with poetry."[32]

Underneath this apparently evolutionary rhetorical shift, however, a major change had occurred in the temporal scheme by which Teige defined the avant-garde. Rather than merely anticipating the end of an interregnum, Constructivism already revealed what was coming:

> A simple glance at the world is enough to reveal the error of the common statement that we live in a styleless age. A style is emerging continuously right before our eyes, not from aesthetic manifestoes or the interiors of ateliers, but rather from the collective and in many cases anonymous, disciplined, and directed work of laborers and technicians.[33]

With the adoption of Constructivism, Teige felt that the step into the new style no longer lay in the future but had already been taken. Constructivism identified the "determining feature of the contemporary epoch of culture and civilization […]" and represented, therefore, "*the style of the present.*"[34]

This shift in the status of the present altered Teige's view of the past as well. The first indication of this was that, by the end of 1922, the metaphor of socialist cathedrals and the expectation of a coming Gothic completely disappeared from Teige's vocabulary. Such rhetoric was now denigrated as an expression of reactionary

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[31] "Umění dnes a zítra," in *Revoluční sborník Devětsil*, 199. Emphasis in original.

[32] "Foto Kino Film," in *Život II*, 158.

[33] "K nové architektuře" ["Towards a New Architecture"], in *VzD*/I: 112.

[34] "Konstruktivismus a likvidace umění" ["Constructivism and the Liquidation of Art"], in *VzD*/I: 129. Emphasis in original.

nostalgia and historicism.[35] More significantly, however, Teige began to use the term "historicism" less and less as a historical category describing nineteenth-century bourgeois art and increasingly as a term describing a deficient aesthetic structure. The more the term became de-historicized in this manner, the more Teige began using it to describe all art before Constructivism. Where previously Teige had opposed bourgeois art to the organic unity of Gothic forms, by the mid- and later twenties this contrast between creative Gothic and parasitic neo-Gothic had disappeared. Teige portrayed even medieval art as an unstable "compromise" between aesthetic and utilitarian functions:

> This compromise was the stylistic, historical, essentially medieval trinity of fine arts: architecture as the leading art, then painting and sculpture. The individual arts then went through a similar process of compromise: the architectural styles [*slohy*] were various compromises between practical and aesthetic functions, between construction and decoration. Painting was a compromise between depiction and self-regulating color composition: wherever the color harmony did not have the upper hand over the task of depiction, painting also became architectural decoration.[36]

Gothic in this formulation no longer represented an ideal totality: while its compromise solutions perhaps "balanced" the practical and aesthetic functions more deftly than did bourgeois architecture, they were marked by the same essential tension between construction and ornament. With this shift, even the historical styles came to represent for Teige only superficial or fashionable changes of form:

> The most important cultural fact that the intellectual and revolutionary avant-garde owes to the great and celebrated communist Revolution is that today we stand at the gates of an enormous, complete, all-encompassing revolution – in this sense the first revolution in art that

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[35] See Nový, *Česká architektonická avantgarda*, 188. Teige later singled out for criticism along these lines the early Bauhaus under Gropius, despite the fact that proletarian art had used similar imagery at that time. See "Deset let Bauhausu" ["Ten Years of the Bauhaus"], in *VzD*/I: 478.

[36] "K teorii konstruktivismu," in *VzD*/I: 361-62.

does not mean a mere exchange of one fashion, one school, one generation, for another.[37]

Constructivism thus no longer occupied the position of a restoration or a modern Gothic. Rather it represented a clean break with all previous "decorative" architecture, a radical new beginning.

Where proletarian art had portrayed the historicism of bourgeois art as the result of its existence within the historical vacuum created by capitalism, Constructivism elided all differences between historicism and the very category of history. Everything that had come before the clean sweep of Constructivism now bore for Teige the stigma of historicism. Precisely the de-anchoring of the term as a label for a particular phenomenon in nineteenth-century art allowed Teige to transfer the negative connotations associated with bourgeois historicism to the past as a whole. The temporal scheme supporting Teige's adoption of Constructivism thus rested on a paradox: Teige's elision of history and historicism in effect meant that the entire history of culture had to have unfolded in a historical vacuum. Only with the new instauration of Constructivism, that is, with the radical rejection of the past, could a "truly" historical epoch commence.

This enormous referential expansion of the term "historicism" was reflected by its increasing proximity in Teige's rhetoric to the more abstract term of "formalism." Teige of course did not use the term formalism as would his later antagonists in the realism debates of the thirties, and his use of the term cannot be understood in the standard context of a form/content distinction. Quite the contrary, the more Teige inveighed against formalism, the more he emphasized that "art is not compatible with ideological content, with thematic tendentiousness."[38] The more he insisted that Constructivism was "not concerned with forms,"[39] the more he celebrated the "liberation of form"[40] as embodied in automobile designs, airplanes, and functionalist

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[37] "Výtvarná práce sovětského Ruska," in *VzD*/I: 272.

[38] "Doba a umění," in *Stavba a báseň*, 45.

[39] "Konstruktivismus a likvidace umění," in *VzD*/I: 129.

[40] "Doba a umění," in *Stavba a báseň*, 51.

architecture. Formalism designated for Teige rather any general discourse that preceded and attempted to predetermine individual cases. He insisted that forms must emerge not from a pre-given system or formula (which he derisively termed "*a priori* aesthetics"), but from the dictates of the particular situation: in effect, another way of stating that form must follow function. Ornament and eclecticism, which betrayed the application of an *a priori* system hindering the natural expression of structure, thus turned out to be simply subcategories or particular manifestations of formalism.

Once formalism emerged as the major derogatory term in Teige's critical vocabulary, Teige had in effect replayed within a few years the same shift that had occurred in the century between Herder's and Nietzsche's major statements on historicism. As was examined in Chapter 2, that shift became perceptible with Nietzsche's echo of the notion of formalism that Herder had used to characterize the "mechanical" rationality of the Enlightenment. While Herder, however, had opposed such formalist logic through his "turn to history" and the logic of empathy connected therewith, Nietzsche had opposed formalist logic through the appeal to a ceaseless self-recreation, that is, through an appeal to a self-immolating yet incandescent presence. In this way, formalism came to represent for Nietzsche not the opposite but rather the essence of the historical. The result of this conceptual fusion of history and formalism was a notion of historicism that had seminal influence on the temporal logic of the later avant-garde. The pervasiveness of that influence is demonstrated precisely by Teige's unwitting adoption of the Nietzschean notion of historicism upon his turn to Constructivism. The paradox lurking in this notion, however, soon left its imprint on the very structure of Teige's theoretical program.

II.   *The Dead-Ends of Dualism*

Constructivism had barely assumed the center stage in Teige's theoretical discourse when it suddenly had to share the spotlight. Over the course of 1923, the credo of Poetism – Czech culture's most original contribution to the interwar avant-garde – emerged as a counterpart to Constructivism. While Poetism was formed from a confluence of sources (Teige and the poet Vítězslav Nezval being the most

important[41]), the conjoining of Constructivism and Poetism into a double program was entirely Teige's contribution.[42] At first sight, the conjunction is strange indeed. While in this period Teige was establishing an international reputation as one of the most ideologically severe proponents of Constructivism,[43] in Czechoslovakia he was becoming equally known for statements such as the following definition of Poetism:

> The art that Poetism brings is casual, jesting, fantastic, playful, unheroic, and amorous. It contains not a trace of Romanticism. It was born in an atmosphere of invigorating conviviality, *in a world that laughs* – what matter if it should shed a tear. The humorous disposition holds sway, pessimism has been sincerely left behind. The emphasis has shifted away from stuffy workshops and ateliers and onto the experiences and beauties of life; it reveals a path coming from and going nowhere, tracing circles in a wonderfully fragrant park, because that is the path of life. The hours are carried in on blossoming roses. Is this a fragrance? Is this a memory?
>
> Nothing – nothing other than the lyric-plastic excitement at the spectacle of the modern world. Nothing other than a loving inclination towards life and all of its manifestations, a passion for modernity, modernolatry, to borrow a term from Umberto Boccioni. Nothing other than happiness, love and poetry, the things of paradise, which money cannot buy and which are not of such consequence that anyone would kill for them. Nothing other than joy, magic, a more optimistic faith in the beauty of life. Nothing other than the immediate data of sense perception. Nothing other than the art of passing the time. Nothing other than a melody of the heart. A culture of miraculous dazzle. Poetism wishes to make life into an enormous amusement undertaking. An eccentric carnival, a circus of feeling and imagination, the drunken wobble of a strip of film, a miraculous kaleidoscope. Its muses are

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[41] On this double origin of Poetism, see Brousek, *Der Poetismus*, 81-87.

[42] Bedřich Václavek (also a member of *Devětsil* in the twenties, although in the thirties a proponent of Socialist Realism), following Teige, developed a similar dual program around the poles of *čistá a účelná tvorba* (see Oleg Sus, "Estetické antinomie v české levé avantgardě," in *Estetické problémy pod napětím: meziválečná avantgarda, surrealismus, levice* (Praha: Hrnčířství a nakladatelství Michal Jůza & Eva Jůzová, 1992): 12-34.

[43] In 1923 Teige became editor of the architectural journal *Stavba* and quickly turned it into a leading European tribune for Constructivism (see Vratislav Effenberger, "Nové umění," in *VzD*/I: 593; and Rostislav Švácha, *The Architecture of New Prague, 1895-1945* [Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1995]: 328).

kind, tender, merry; its glances are as fascinating and incomprehensible as the glances of a lover.[44]

This Poetist paradise, with its eudemonism and emphasis on anti-instrumental action, is clearly a very different place than the space of Constructivism, characterized by the "anonymous, disciplined and directed work of laborers and technicians."[45] The terms appear to be not complimentary but rather contradictory. Where Constructivism demanded discipline, order, and a pragmatic outlook, Poetism celebrated the free play of imagination and the carefree indulgence of the senses. Essentially, this tension was the consequence of the simultaneous exaltation of hyper-rationality and of a lyrical irrationality.

Teige's case for the plausibility of such a conjunction of opposites has several aspects. The most important of these was the claim that both Constructivism and Poetism brought about a radical restructuring − indeed total elimination − of the very category of art. Teige wrote of Constructivism:

> If we consider Constructivism to be *the style of the present*, to be the determining feature of the contemporary epoch of culture and civilization, then we must emphasize that Constructivism does not introduce a new formalistic program, an *a priori* aesthetic order, but that it abandons all traditional formulae and forsakes the nine muses of classical Parnassus: it is not concerned with forms, *but with functions*. The domain of all previous art is formalism. Constructivism announces the rejection of formalism through functionalism. It has nothing to do with a new artistic formula for the basic reason that *it has nothing to do with art*. […] With Constructivism, we advance to *the systematic liquidation of art*.[46]

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[44] "Poetismus" ["Poetism"], in *VzD*/I: 123-24. This text from 1924 constitutes Teige's classic statement on Poetism, and is commonly referred to as the "first Poetist Manifesto" to distinguish it from the 1927 "Manifest Poetismu" ["Manifesto of Poetism"] (*VzD*/I: 323-59). I shall refer to it herein as the "Poetism Manifesto."

[45] *Loc. cit.*

[46] "Konstruktivismus a likvidace umění," in *VzD*/I: 129-30. Emphases in original. In Teige's account, Suprematism had performed the final liquidation of painting: Malevich's white canvas had brought abstraction to its *ne plus ultra*. Suprematism could go no further, and consequently Malevich devoted himself to analytical work and Rodchenko and other leading Suprematists moved on to Constructivism, for which the liquidation of art was no longer the goal but the starting point (see "Dnešní výtvarná práce sovětského Ruska," in *SSSR: úvahy, kritiky, poznámky*, ed. Bohumil Mathesius [Praha: Čin, 1926]: 158).

The claim that Constructivism represented the style of the present went hand-in-hand with the thesis of the liquidation of art: aesthetic renewal emerged from the disappearance of the aesthetic. Teige thus argued that the very category of art had been complicit in the stylistic failure of the period prior to the emergence of Constructivism. By this account, movements that still understood themselves through reference to the term "art" inevitably took the form of prescriptive aesthetics. Their claim to authority could ultimately be reduced to a demand: the demand that a particular prescription be accepted by a community, or the demand that art thereafter be made in this or that image. Such positing of *a priori* systems, however, landed one squarely in the dilemma that Teige had identified as the eclecticism or individualism of bourgeois art, since no external criterion could possibly determine the choice between one or another of the competing aesthetic systems.

Teige insisted that Constructivism, through its involvement in the liquidation of art, had ceased making the kind of *a priori* demands made by artistic movements. Rather than inventing a set of principles and arguing for its general validity, the Constructivist merely listened carefully and followed those principles that imposed themselves necessarily from the nature of modern life. Necessity – measured through the strict criterion of functionality – was the guarantee that Constructivism expressed deeply rooted, communal realities rather then arbitrary, individual choices. Teige therefore perceived Constructivism not as a set of theses to be accepted or rejected, but rather as sober recognition of present realities. In this way, the emergence of Constructivism as an aesthetic paradigm or style of the present presented no contradiction to the claim that Constructivism undertook the liquidation of art. The liquidation of art in the previous understanding as *a priori* system or formalism was in fact a prerequisite for the emergence of a communally binding aesthetic paradigm.

With Poetism, Teige undertook a second attack on the category of art.[47] Extending a line of argument that went back to the ideal of *lidovost* in the proletarian

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[47] Teige's program of the 1920s thus seems a textbook case of what Peter Bürger has described as the aim of the "historical" avant-garde: the negation of art as an institution (*Theory of the Avant-Garde*, Michael Shaw, trans., [Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1984]).

art period, Poetism identified not only artistic genres of mass culture – Westerns, sentimental novels, slapstick comedy, and other forms of "low" art – but even non-artistic activities such as sports, folk celebrations, the circus or carnival, as the source of a new aesthetic vision. [48] The clown, the traveler, and the amateur athlete were to displace the painter and writer as the unacknowledged legislators of the age. Thus Teige did not intend Poetism as a new artistic movement that would create its own characteristic forms of painting, sculpture, and literature, but rather as an assault on the very notion that art was to be found in such traditional activities. The Poetism Manifesto is in fact organized around a series of claims about what Poetism is *not*: it is not literature, it is not painting, it is not an "ism," it is not in the end even art at all. The scarcity of claims about what Poetism actually *is* reflects its status as an atmosphere or state of mind. Teige concludes his list of all the things that Poetism is not with the claim: "Poetism is above all a *modus vivendi*."[49] The key word, of course, is "*vivendi*." By turning its back on the traditional genres of art, by encompassing any activity, no matter how banal, so long as it was performed with enthusiasm, Poetism was to express the immediacy of its contact with life. Poetism thus represented an art that:

> welcomes every promising hypothesis, sympathizes with experimentation, and whose methods are as gentle, as rich in sources, as inexhaustible as life itself. […] If there is a new art and if it is what we designate as POETISM, the art of life,
> 　　*the art of living and enjoying*,
> then in the end it must be as self-evident, as delightful, as accessible as sport, love, wine, and all other delicacies. It must not be a profession but rather a general need.[50]

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[48] Teige had written as early as 1922 that the inspiration for proletarian art was to be found in "Westerns, Buffalo Bills, Nick Carter novels, sentimental novels, American movie serials or Chaplin's grotesques, amateur comedy theater, variété jugglers, wandering minstrels, clowns and acrobatic circus riders, Springtime folk celebrations, a Sunday football match, in short, almost everything on which the cultural life of the vast majority of the proletariat thrives. These literary forms – many of you will say: deformities – are nowadays truly the one and most characteristic popular [*lidovou*] literature" ("Nové umění proletářské," in *VzD*/I: 58).

[49] "Poetismus," in *VzD*/I: 126.

[50] *Ibid.*, 121. Emphasis in original.

By abandoning the traditional genres of art, Poetism was to discover sources of aesthetic experiences more powerful, fresher, and more deeply rooted in the new possibilities offered by modern civilization, than any form of painting or literature, no matter how revolutionary, could ever conjure. To describe this double movement of Poetism as both a rejection of art and a rediscovery of the aesthetic, Teige adopted a phrase from the Soviet Constructivist Ilya Ehrenburg, which became one of the most frequently repeated mottoes in Teige's articles in the mid-twenties: "The new art has ceased to be art."

These two claims – that Constructivism involved the "liquidation of art" and that Poetism's "new art has ceased to be art" – reveal the primary contact point between the two sides of Teige's program. The shared critique of the standard notion of autonomous art was to reveal the apparently contradictory dualism as moments of a single dialectical argument: the recovery of an effective form of aesthetic experience demanded the abandonment of art. Constructivism dissolved and resolved art into functionality: "the word 'art' [*umění*] *comes from the verb 'to be able'* [*umĕti*] *and its products are artifacts* [*umĕlosti*][…]. Art is simply a way of using a specific means for a specific function, and both function and means are more or less exchangeable quantities."[51] Poetism, meanwhile, dissolved art into the notion of a "new beauty" that would be capacious enough to include areas and activities that had previously been stigmatized as extra- or anti-aesthetic. Poetism's new beauty would thus storm the physical barriers that Teige felt had confined bourgeois art within autonomous spaces: the museum, the church, and the gallery.

Teige's vision of the dialectical unity of Constructivism and Poetism is best expressed in his metaphor of a reunited urban fabric:

> The new, endless, blossoming beauty of the world is the daughter of contemporary life. It was not born from aesthetic speculation, from the Romantic atelier mentality, but simply results from purposeful, disciplined, positive production and from the life activity of the populace. It has not taken root in cathedrals or galleries; out on the

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[51] "Konstruktivismus a likvidace umění," in *VzD*/I: 130. Emphasis in original.

streets, in the architecture of the cities, in the invigorating green of the parks, in the bustle of the harbors and in the furnaces of industry, which provide for our primary needs – this is where the new art finds its home. It does not dispense formalized prescriptions: modern forms and formulations are the result of purposeful work, produced with perfected methods under the dictates of an objective and of economics. This new beauty has taken the engineer's equation and filled it with poetic vision. Urbanism, the science of city planning, thus results in works both captivating and poetic; the delineation of the ground plan of life, a fore-image of the future, a utopia that the red future shall realize. Its products are the instruments of wealth and happiness.[52]

The Poetist liberation of art from the confines of the museums and cathedrals thus led straight onto the streets, into the city, and onto the stage of modern life. But it led even further, going all the way to the fringes of the city, to the factories and housing projects, redeeming these zones from the stigma of being extra-aesthetic. Thus Poetism's new beauty led directly to those urban areas developing under the aegis of Constructivism. The topographical metaphor of a city no longer divided into representative zones of aesthetic escape and banal zones of material necessity – of center versus surroundings – is the clearest image of how Teige envisioned Constructivism and Poetism as forming an integrated whole.

The holistic urge that lay behind Teige's conjoining of Constructivism and Poetism stands out clearly when the context of his critique of historicism is recalled. The dialectical joining of Constructivism and Poetism was directly motivated by the desire to overcome the eclecticism dividing cities into zones governed by different aesthetic principles. With the discovery of beauty in the functional, and with the production of aesthetically pleasing objects that were integrated with everyday life through their functionality, the dual program aimed at ending the division of modern culture into structural and decorative realms. The dualism was thus to inaugurate the "unity of artistic style" Nietzsche had called for half a century earlier.

The radicality of this totalizing drive – as well as the outline of the aporia to which it led – emerged in full force during Teige's 1929 polemic with Le Corbusier over the latter's Mundaneum project. Although Teige had been a tremendous admirer

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[52] "Poetismus," in *VzD*/I: 122.

and had been enormously influenced by Le Corbusier ever since their first meeting in mid-1922,[53] Teige perceived the Mundaneum project as in effect a design for an avant-garde cathedral. Teige stated that "in its obvious historicism and academicism, the Mundaneum project shows the present non-viability of architecture thought of as art."[54] Le Corbusier responded to this criticism with the claim that "aesthetics are a fundamental human function" and contrasted his own "quest for harmony" with the "police measures" of those utilitarians (Teige) who equated all elegant solutions, all aesthetic effectiveness, with ideological apostasy.[55] Le Corbusier indicated that Teige had failed to appreciate that architecture must appeal not only to the brain but also to the passions. Functionality was only the first step for the architect: what transformed a mere building into architecture was the further step whereby the architect addressed the task of making the functional structure beautiful as well. Le Corbusier concluded that "the function beauty is independent of the function utility; they are two different things."[56] Teige, it appeared, had overlooked the beauty function.

Examining the polemic with Le Corbusier in the context of Teige's other writings on Constructivism, however, it becomes clear that Le Corbusier misunderstood Teige's point. Teige was quite as committed as Le Corbusier to the precept that avant-garde architecture be beautiful. His disagreement, however, was precisely with the postulate of an independent beauty function. Teige claimed that the beauty of architecture could only originate in its strict functionality. Four years before the Mundaneum polemic Teige had written:

> It could be objected that certain machines, even though perfectly functional, may still be ungainly or ugly. […] We could respond that an ungainly machine calls for further perfecting, that its ugliness is a

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[53] This meeting in Paris was certainly one of the main catalysts behind the development of Teige's position between *Revoluční sborník Devětsil* and *Život II*. Le Corbusier together with Ozenfant contributed an original article to *Život II* entitled "Le Purisme" (*Život II,* 8-16).

[54] Karel Teige, "Mundaneum," trans. Ladislav Holovsky *et al.*, in *Oppositions* 4 (1974): 89.

[55] Le Corbusier, "In Defense of Architecture," trans. Nancy Bray *et al.*, in *Oppositions* 4 (1974): 94.

[56] *Ibid.*, 98.

symptom of incompleteness. We assert that *the more a machine is perfected, the more beautiful it will be*. And it will be absolutely perfected, and consequently beautiful, only if the perfection of its practicality, and not beauty, has been the constructer's sole interest. Given two machines with the same purpose and whose practical perfection is judged to be equal, but one of which is uglier, do not doubt that *the second, more beautiful machine will also be the more functional in practice*.[57]

In other words, beauty would be found only when it was not sought.[58] Teige's problem with Le Corbusier's Mundaneum project thus had nothing to do with the beauty of the end result, but with the act of seeking beauty somewhere outside of function:

> According to Le Corbusier, architecture as art believes that its mission begins where construction ends, namely with the rational solution and products of the engineer. It aspires to eternity, while the engineer responds to actuality. […] In short, according to this argument, to become dignified as architecture, there must be added some "plus" to the rational solution. Now this "plus" can either help purposefulness and strengthen function, in which case it is simply purpose and function and is not a "plus," or hinder it, in which case it is of course a minus. Further, it can neither help nor hinder, in which case it is superfluous and unnecessary, and that is a minus as well.[59]

In Teige's view, this structure of the "plus," or of a supplement added on to something already whole, betrayed that Le Corbusier's beauty function was nothing other than a more subtle form of ornamentation. While Le Corbusier felt that the beauty function completed the work begun by the utility function and thereby created a whole, Teige perceived an already self-sufficient whole being destroyed through the addition of a superfluous supplement. Hence Le Corbusier's "obvious historicism:" the claim that one added aesthetic value after completion of the functional structure was for Teige

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[57] "Konstruktivismus a likvidace umění," in *VzD*/I: 141. Emphases in original.

[58] This is a paraphrase of Jaromír Krejcar (see Rostislav Švácha, *The New Prague Architecture*, 270).

[59] Teige, "Mundaneum," 91.

the theoretical equivalent of completing a building by covering it with, say, a Neo-Renaissance façade.

Teige's hardnosed advocacy of the strictest functionalism, therefore, was not the expression of a dry, humorless rationalist applying "police measures" against those with greater visions for architecture, as Le Corbusier had suggested. Teige's vision of the promise held by Constructivism was just as grandiose as Le Corbusier's, as Teige's premise of a style of the present makes clear, and his expectation of a new beauty was also no less intense, as the credo of Poetism expressed. Teige even went so far as to claim that the rigor of functionalism, by eliminating the stifling formalism represented by an ornamentalizing beauty function, would return humanism to architectural form.[60] The strictness of Teige's functionalism was, therefore, precisely the result of the enormity of his claims for Constructivism: the claim that it would heal the basic diremptions of modern culture, the insidiousness of which was made clear by the way eclecticism and ornamentation could creep into the work even of a modern master such as Le Corbusier. The radicality of Teige's functionalist rationalism issued directly from the radicality of his totalizing vision.

This utopian hope for an integrated modernist culture clearly caught Teige in a vicious circle, expressed in the paradoxes that Le Corbusier refused to admit: a new beauty would only result from a radical elimination of the independent beauty function, and a humanist architecture would only emerge from the insistence that architecture take its measure from the machine and from its function. The ideals of beauty and humanism thus became unattainable the moment they were openly named; they needed to remain, as it were, always beyond the horizon if they were ever to be reached. These paradoxes, however, are not the sign of a logical failure on Teige's

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[60] "Constructivism, abandoning worn-out aesthetic principles, returned to man as the measure of all things" ("K teorii konstruktivismu," in *VzD*/I: 365). Statements like this demonstrate the difficulty with interpreting the Mundaneum polemic through Le Corbusier's own terms, as is done by Kenneth Frampton in "The Humanist v. Utilitarian Ideal" (*Architectural Design* 37.3 [1968]). Frampton largely equates Teige's position with that of Hannes Meyer, and identifies them as representatives of the emerging radical and dogmatic utilitarian wing of the modernist movement. However, examining Teige's critique of Le Corbusier in the context of claims such as those quoted above – and bearing in mind the larger conjunction of Constructivism with Poetism – clearly reveals that the interpretation of the Mundaneum debate as the opposition of Teige's utilitarianism to Le Corbusier's humanism runs against the problem that Teige was neither a utilitarian nor an anti-humanist.

part. Indeed, given the functionalist premise, Teige's position is much more consistent than Le Corbusier's appeal to architecture as "spiritual food."[61] These logical quandaries resulted rather from precisely the meticulousness of Teige's functionalist logic and the extremity of his totalizing claims.

The final expression of this vicious circle was, of course, Teige's dual program itself. Why did the effort to theorize avant-garde culture as an organic, totalizing unity take the form of a dualism of Constructivism and Poetism? How could this programmatic pairing of terms avoid repeating the historicist dualism of structure and ornament that Teige had all along taken such pains to eliminate? Was not Poetism simply a disguised form of the independent beauty function that Teige had criticized so vehemently in Le Corbusier? Appeals to the dialectical unity of the terms are obviously insufficient. The dualism degenerates too easily into undialectical formulations, several of which have gained a foothold in the secondary literature on Teige. Primary among these are formulations favoring one pole of the dualism as the primary element of Teige's program and viewing the other pole as the logical complement to the first;[62] or the formulation of the dualism as an attempt to achieve comprehensiveness through a simple proclamation of the unity of opposites.[63] Such formulations never raise the most challenging and most productive questions for an

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[61] Le Corbusier, "In Defense of Architecture," 95.

[62] Very few accounts in fact avoid viewing Teige's dual program primarily through the lens of either Poetism or Constructivism. The best treatments of the program as striving for a dialectical unity are Vratislav Effenberger, *Realita a poezie: K vývojové dialektice moderního umění* (Praha: Mladá fronta, 1969), especially 187-222, as well as his concluding essays to each volume of *VzD*; Oleg Sus, "Totožnost člověka uprostřed víru," in *Estetické problémy pod napětím,* 35-47; and Květoslav Chvatík, *Smysl moderního umění* (Praha: Československý spisovatel, 1965), especially 76-77, 80, and 87. The hazards of interpreting either of Teige's programs as primary and the other as subordinate are well illustrated in Vladimír Müller, *Der Poetismus. Das Program und die Hauptverfahren der tschechischen literarischen Avantgarde der zwanziger Jahre* (München: Otto Segner, 1978). While describing Constructivism as the "notwendige Ergänzung des poetistischen Lebenstils" (33), Müller quotes a passage from the Poetism Manifesto in which Teige in fact describes Poetism as the complement to Constructivism.

[63] See, e.g., Jaroslav Anděl's claim that "unlike other, better-known movements and organizations, which advanced one dominant principle (either rational or irrational), Devětsil […] sought to achieve the improbable goal of wedding opposing artistic tendencies by capturing the polarities of the modern world and celebrating its beauty; this goal was expressed in the group's slogan: 'Constructivism/Poetism'" ("The 1920's: The Improbable Wedding of Constructivism and Poetism," in *The Art of the Avant-Garde in Czechoslovakia, 1918-1938* [S.l.: IVAM Centre Julio Gonzalez, 1993]: 21).

understanding of the Constructivism/Poetism conjunction, and those are Teige's own questions: how does this conjunction avoid repeating the historicist dualisms it rejected at the outset, and if it fails to avoid them, what antinomies lie behind this situation?

The difficulty with the claim of dialectical unity emerges clearly from the image Teige chose to express such unity. He wrote that: "*Poetism* is the crown of life, the basis of which is Constructivism. It builds on Constructivism's foundation."[64] The image is clearly meant to express the interconnection of base and crown, and the incompleteness of either element taken independently. But, like Marx's metaphor of base and superstructure to which it alludes,[65] the image seems equally effective in suggesting the division between or the independent existence of the two elements. In fact, Teige's image compulsively reproduces the fate of Marx's: it slips from an expression of dialectical unity to one of static dualism. Teige's critique of historicism provides a vocabulary to describe this slippage: the conceptual model of base and superstructure all too easily degenerates into the model of structure and ornament. Through such slippage, the second element (Poetism, or for Marx, the superstructure) appears not as the dialectical counterpart and completion of the first but rather as something supplemental, unnecessary, or parasitic.

Teige's attempt to stipulate the unity of Constructivism and Poetism thus repeats the logical conundrum examined in Chapter 3 in relation to Marx's theoretical formulation of a non-ideological, that is, materialist consciousness. Constructivism provided Teige with the same firm logical ground that Marx held with the theory of historical materialism. For both Marx and Teige, this firm ground seemed to offer a promised land: the rigor, the hardheaded sense for reality opened up a vision of harmony and integration of the mental and the material. Poetism was Teige's name for this promise of harmony. But Poetism presented the same problem that the premise of a non-ideological consciousness did for Marx. Either Poetism was "there," in which case one could point to it but it degenerated into simply another program, an

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[64] Teige, "Poetismus," in *VzD*/I: 123.

[65] The comparison to Marx's base/superstructure image is discussed in Sus, *Estetické problémy pod napětím*, 40.

a priori aesthetic system, or an ornamental layer applied on top of the integral structure of Constructivism and thus reproducing the historicist dualism; or Poetism was "not there," in which case it was Constructivism alone. Precisely the rigorous internal consistency of Constructivism, however, was what had caused Poetism, as the experience of harmony, to appear in the first place, and thus the vicious circle began again. The promised middle ground symbolized by the images of base and superstructure, foundation and crown, emerged as a true utopia: it was nowhere.

Teige's dualism thus should not be interpreted as consisting of two poles of equivalent status or as a straightforward combination of two programs. Constructivism contained a certain corpus of principles deriving from the central criterion of functionality, but Poetism was by its nature averse to programmatic formulation. In response to the question "what is Poetism?" Teige had responded that it "is casual, jesting, fantastic, playful, unheroic and amorous." Poetism was a "life atmosphere,"[66] a *modus vivendi*, and no more precise definition was possible. Teige's second Poetist manifesto in fact took aim precisely against the formulation of Poetist principles, which Teige felt were leading away from the molten experience itself. From a series of metaphors or an inspiring vision, Teige feared Poetism was turning into a movement or school, that is, was ossifying into a formalism.[67] Thus the relation between Poetism and Constructivism was not one between counterparts or equivalent items in a series. Teige's program was not strictly speaking a dual one because Poetism could have no program.

The dilemma of this dualism therefore could not be avoided: no more moderate formulation or adjustment to the dual program could have saved Teige from the reemergence of the dualism he had sought to overcome. Constructivism was to implement its radically totalizing vision by rooting out eclecticism and ornament through rigorous application of the criterion of functionality. Poetism, on the other hand, had no corresponding criterion or program because it represented simply a

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[66] "Poetismus," in *VzD*/I: 123.

[67] See "Manifest poetismu," in *VzD*/I: 326.

manner of perception,[68] a *modus vivendi*. In Teige's formulation, Poetism was nothing more nor less than the enthusiastic reception of the world created by Constructivism. Poetism was therefore the necessary result of Constructivism fulfilled: it was the experience of a world in which totality had been achieved. Poetism would have been there in theory even if Teige had never named it in practice. For Poetism – which destroyed the pristine purity of the totality claimed by Constructivism – emerged spontaneously from precisely those totalizing claims.

Poetism's spontaneous emergence from the claims of Constructivism was the awkward reminder of Constructivism's origin. The new instauration and rejection of all historical models upon which the emergence of Constructivism as the style of the present was predicated still bore the sign of their origin as the anticipation of a modern Gothic. The original complaint against bourgeois historicism had been its lack of historical plenitude: the interregnum signaled by the failure to develop a true style. But Constructivism had taken this account of the failure of historicism and made of it the failure of history; or conversely, the hopes originally placed in a renewal had been displaced into a faith in the new. Constructivism's style of the present thus harbored within itself the paradox that, while calling for the rigorous rejection of the historical, the result was still understood as the re-inscription into history. Poetism expressed this paradox. Poetism was the celebration of the new instauration and the achievement of a totality, but a celebration that simultaneously marred that totality and revealed that the instauration had taken the form rejected at the outset as the mark of historicism. The elision of historicism and history is characteristic not only of Teige's Constructivism but is definitive of the avant-garde hostility to the past. Poetism reveals the bad conscience of this hostility: its inseparability from historical nostalgia. The avant-garde critique of historicism, confusing historical plenitude with the rejection of history, thus took the form of a critique of a dualism it was condemned to repeat.

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[68] Vítězslav Nezval claimed that "Poetism is a method of viewing the world so that it becomes a poem" (quoted in Květoslav Chvatík, *Bedřich Václavek a vývoj marxistické estetiky* (Praha: Československý spisovatel, 1962): 79.

Chapter Five

FORGETTABLE EXPERIENCES

Benjamin and the Consciousness of Memory

Hluboké ticho. – Z mokrých stěn
Kapka za kapkou splyne,
A jejich pádu dutý hlas
Dalekou kobkou rozložen,
Jakoby noční měřil čas,
Zní – hyne – zní a hyne –
Zní – hyne – zní a hyne zas.

"Jak dlouhá noc – jak dlouhá noc –
Však delší mně nastává. - - -
Pryč myšlenko!" – a hrůzy moc
Myšlenku překonává. –
Hluboké ticho. – Kapky hlas
Svým pádem opět měří čas.[1]

I.   Aura and Ornament

Benjamin's *Passagen-Werk* is populated by a gallery of social types: among the better

known are, for example, the flaneur, the collector, and the prostitute. One of the less

familiar is the idler, or *Müßiggänger*. This idler has been fairly active, however, for

he appears to have wandered in from Nietzsche's text of sixty years earlier. A number

of attributes connect Benjamin's idler with Nietzsche's. Benjamin explicitly linked

the figure of the idler with the concept of so-called bad infinity: "Der Müßiggang hat

die Anweisung auf unbegrenzte Dauer, die dem bloßen Sinnengenuß, von welcher Art

er auch sei, grundsätzlich abgeht. (Ist es richtig, daß die "schlechte Unendlichtkeit",

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[1] From Karel Hynek Mácha, *Máj* (1836), in *Dalekát' cesta má* (Praha: Evropsky literární klub, 1943): 43. ("Deep silence.— Down the dripping walls,/Drop after drop declines,/Their hollow voice as they strike the floor,/Resounding through the darkened cell,/As if measuring out the night/ Sounds – dies – sounds and dies –/Sounds – dies – sounds and dies once more//"How long the night – how long the night –/Yet a longer still awaits me.----/Out, thought!" – and the horror's might/Numbs the thought completely./Deep silence.— The falling drops decline/And their voice measures out the time.)

die im Müßiggang vorwaltet, als Signatur der bürgerlichen Gesellschaft bei Hegel vorkommt?)"[2] Nietzsche's idler had also been insatiable, "begierig nach Zerstreuung oder Sensation,"[3] wandering among the heaped treasures of the art collection or among the luscious foliage of the garden. Further, Nietzsche's *Müßiggänger* had a *Doppelgänger* in the "wissensgieriger" modern scientist, who, consuming facts without hunger, had infected the study of history with the demand that it draw no horizon to its knowledge. For Nietzsche, the idler perceived the world as a collection of curiosities to be handled, briefly admired, and left behind, resulting in the bad infinity of a sensationalism never to be satisfied. Benjamin's idler was similarly addicted to the phantasmagoria of the commodity: "Die Erfahrung ist der Ertrag der Arbeit, das Erlebnis ist die Phantasmagorie des Müßiggängers."[4] The atmosphere in which Nietzsche's idler moved and breathed was the humid air of historicism. Benjamin's association of the idler with *Erlebnis*, the thinner, de-oxygenated form of experience characteristic of a commodified society, was similar: in both cases the idler drew a peculiar sustenance from the changed atmosphere, the "decadence" of modern society.

With Benjamin, however, the idler had left the garden and become a creature of the city. The arcades in particular, with their wealth of commodities on display, provided the idler ideal hunting grounds. This chain of associations would suggest that Benjamin's focus on the arcades as the focal point for his dialectical image of the nineteenth-century should be interpreted in the context of the post-Nietzschean critique of historicism traced in the preceding chapters. Much evidence can be found for such an interpretation. The very architectural structure of the arcades represented one of the sharpest birth pangs of the architectural avant-garde. Benjamin noted that the revolutionary structural principles introduced by iron and glass construction were

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[2] Walter Benjamin, *Das Passagen-Werk*, in *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. V, (Frankfurt a/M: Suhrkamp, 1982): 969. (This edition cited hereinafter as "*GS*" followed by a volume number.

[3] Friedrich Nietzsche, *Unzeitgemäße Betrachtungen II:* "Vom Nutzen und Nachteil der Historie für das Leben," in *Kritische Studienausgabe*, eds. Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari, vol. I (München and Berlin: DTV and De Gruyter, 1988): 258.

[4] *GS*/V: 962.

held in check by the ornately decorative historicism in which they were draped. As Susan Buck-Morss has noted, "the architectural style of the Paris arcades was emblematic of the warring tendencies of engineering and 'art.'"[5] This tension between the progressive structural materials and techniques of the engineer and the regressive ornamental language imposed on them by the artist resulted in an overall falsity or deceptiveness of form. Benjamin wrote: "Es gibt also Masken der Architektur und in solcher Maskierung steigt die Architektur um 1800, wie zu einem bal paré<,> geisterhaft an den Sonntagen überall um Berlin herum auf."[6] The arcades thus represented the architectural archetype of the split between inner content and outer form that Nietzsche had identified as the hallmark of the modern European, a split resulting in a deceptive culture of the mask.

Following the formulations of the architectural historian Siegfried Giedion, Benjamin translated these terms into Marxist vocabulary.[7] He associated ornament with the boredom of the commodity and the courageous innovative drive of the engineer with that of the proletariat. Discussing Giedion's photo illustration of an iron bridge, Benjamin wrote: "Marxismus. Denn wer sonnst als Ingenieur und Proletarier ging damals die Stufen, die allein erst das Neue, Entscheidende – das Raumgefühl dieser Bauten – ganz zu erkennen gaben?"[8] Here Benjamin echoed what had long been standard truisms of Constructivist and even pre-constructivist discourse on engineering as the source of modern architectural value: one recalls, for example, F. X. Salda's pronouncement in 1904 on viewing a vast iron bridge that "the new beauty is above all the beauty of purpose, inner law, logic and structure," which had such an influence of Teige.[9] Teige's identification of the new beauty with constructivism and

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[5] Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1989): 126.

[6] *GS*/V: 213.

[7] On Giedion's decisive influence on Benjamin's understanding of modern architecture, see John McCole, *Walter Benjamin and the Antinomies of Tradition* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1993): 184-85 and 229-30.

[8] *GS*/V: 218. In this and the preceding sentence, I have largely repeated Buck-Morss' discussion of this quotation in *The Dialectics of Seeing*, 127.

[9] See the preceding chapter, page 91.

the liquidation of art clearly was founded upon the same understanding of a struggle between progressive engineering and regressive art that Benjamin identified in the arcades. Finally, Benjamin's fascination with the writings of Paul Scheerbart and glass architecture shows the significance for him of the ideal of modern architecture as an absolute transparency.[10] In short, ample evidence would suggest that Benjamin's understanding of the significance of the arcades moved within the terms of an architectural critique of historicism deeply indebted to Nietzsche's formulation in the second of his *Unzeitgemäße Betrachtungen*.[11]

Except that, of course, the situation is not that straightforward. For the discourse of the architectural avant-garde, ornament was nothing other than the element destroying transparency; clinging to the functionalist structure like barnacles, the presence of ornament signaled the need for a stiff cleaning so as to scrap those layers of sediment off the surface of the structure. Despite any number of passages where Benjamin referred to this discourse without a hint of critical distance, he at other times made statements that are absolutely incompatible with such discourse. He commented, for example, on a statement by Giedion:

> "Abgesehen von einem gewissen Haut-goût-Reiz, sind die künstlerischen Drapierungen des vergangenen Jahrhunderts muffig geworden" sagt Giedion. […] Wir aber glauben, daß der Reiz mit dem sie auf uns wirken, verrät, daß auch sie lebenswichtige Stoffe für uns enthalten – nicht zwar für unser Bauen, wie die konstruktiven Antizipationen der Eisengerüste es tun, wohl aber für unser Erkennen wenn man will für die Durchleuchtung der bürgerlichen Klassenlage im Augenblick da die ersten Verfallszeichen in ihr erscheinen. […G]enau so, wie Giedion uns lehrt, aus den Bauten um 1850 die Grundzüge des heutigen Bauens abzulesen, wollen wir aus dem Leben <und> aus den

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[10] On Benjamin's relation to the writings of Scheerbart, see in particular Pierre Missac, *Walter Benjamin's Passages*, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholsen (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1995): chapter 6, especially 158 ff.

[11] On Nietzsche's influence on the emerging discourse of architectural modernism, see Tilmann Buddensieg, "Architecture as Empty Form: Nietzsche and the Art of Building," and Fritz Neumeyer, "Nietzsche and Modern Architecture," both in Alexandre Kostka and Irving Wohlfarth, eds. *Nietzsche and "An Architecture of our Minds"* (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute for the History of Art and the Humanities, 1999): 259-284 and 285-310, respectively.

scheinber sekundären, verlorenen Formen jener Zeit heutiges <Leb>en, heutige Formen ablesen.[12]

Far from viewing the "artistic drapery" as a disguise to be shed and discarded, Benjamin claimed here that such ornamental drapery contained "vitally important material." While not going so far as to argue that this material could serve as any sort of model for a present architecture, as did the anticipatory constructive features of the "iron scaffolding" that had been hidden under the drapery, Benjamin did make a strong claim that the attraction or fascination exerted by these soon-to-be-discarded forms was something to be taken quite seriously – indeed, that it comprised cognitive value. Benjamin's fascination with the trappings of a culture marked by the fading traces of cultic and traditional practices, his sustained attention to the final shimmers of the auratic and of the weightier form of experience he termed *Erfahrung* as they disappeared under the changes wrought by industrial production, have often been deemed the sign of a fundamental nostalgia or ambivalence in his thought.[13] From this angle the arcades would seem to have presented themselves to Benjamin so forcefully precisely because of the wealth of auratic traces that still clung to the cast-iron structure. This process of sifting – which may be regarded as either self-indulgent or serious – is expressed in those moments when Benjamin interpreted the flaneur's aimless wandering as a social critique of the utilitarian transformation of time and experience under capitalism, or in the image of the rag-picker, collecting discarded rags that represented, so to speak, precisely the tattered shreds of the "artistic drapery" that the engineers pulled off the face of modern architecture.

Indeed, there was a certain ambivalence: the cognitive data contained in this material was indeed "a tangle of both anticipatory and fettering elements."[14] The non-

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[12] *GS*/V: 572.

[13] See, for example, Fredric Jameson, *Marxism and Form: Twentieth-Century Dialectical Theories of Literature* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press: 1974): 60; Jürgen Habermas, "Walter Benjamin: Consciousness-Raising or Redemptive Critique," in *On Walter Benjamin*, ed. Gary Smith (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991): 106; Eugene Lunn, *Marxism and Modernism: An Historical Study of Lukács, Brecht, Benjamin, and Adorno* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1982): 172; and McCole, *Antinomies of Tradition*, *op. cit.*, Introduction.

[14] Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing*, 143.

functional forms into which the new materials were twisted often represented a coefficient of historical drag, hampering the emergence of appropriate forms allowing the true capacities of these materials to be used. In this way Benjamin pointed to industrial buildings in the form of classical temples,[15] an early proposal to have railways run on granite roads,[16] an early design for a locomotive that ran like a horse,[17] even the inefficient use of the "zu früh gekommenes" glass and iron in the arcades themselves, which gave them their characteristically drab lighting, as if in an aquarium.[18] These absurdities and monstrosities were simply the result of a parallax between technological potential and formal creativity: "Welche Formen, die für unser Zeitalter bestimmend werden, in den Maschinen verborgen liegen, beginnen wir erst eben zu ahnen."[19]

On the other hand, these forms could also harbor a positive and creative energy. Benjamin made the following "Versuch, von Giedions Thesen aus weiterzukommen. Er sagt: 'Die Konstruktion hat im 19. Jahrhundert die Rolle des Unterbewußtseins.' Setzt man nicht besser ein: 'die Rolle des körperlichen Vorgangs', um den sich dann die 'künstlerischen' Architekturen wie Träume um das Gerüst des physiologischen Vorgangs legen?"[20] These non-functional outer forms could thus also function as the site of dream images of the future. As Buck-Morss describes it:

> By attaching themselves as surface ornamentation to the industrial and technological forms which have just come into existence, collective wish images imbue the merely new with radical political meaning, inscribing visibly on the products of the new means of production an ur-image of the desired social *ends* of their development. In short, even as they mask the new, these archaic images provide a symbolic

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[15] *GS*/V: 213.

[16] *Ibid.,* 218.

[17] *Ibid.,* 217.

[18] *Ibid.,* 211-12.

[19] *Ibid.*, 217.

[20] *Ibid.*, 1027.

representation of what the human, social meaning of technological change is all about.[21]

If the surface ornamentation at some times served as the fetter that prevented the present reality from manifesting itself fully, it served at other times as the image that helped portray the image of the future.

But the real force of the arcades as a dialectical image does not lie in this balance between progressive and regressive functions of the images contained within their walls. Rather it lies in a complication revealed in the post-Nietzschean critique of historicism and the understanding of history involved therein. For that critique, history always appeared in the conceptual form of an ornamental or phantasmagoric outer layer that prevented the recognition of the true material content of the present. The tension between the outer layer of historical form and the inner content of the present appeared as a debilitating dualism: thus the attempt to sweep off the outer formalistic layer in order to arrive at the "Einheit des künstlerischen Stils" Nietzsche had posited as the mark of a strong cultural identity.

For Benjamin, however, the totality underlying this ideal was inherently problematic. Always suspicious of totalities as the bearer of false mythologies, Benjamin's consistent response was to apply a logic of montage that would shatter totalities into fragments that could be remounted into conceptual constellations.[22] This logic of montage, which represented a reformulation of the theory of allegory contained in Benjamin's earlier book on *Der Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels*, thus functioned as an anti-organicizing strategy for reducing vital symbolic meanings to "dead" raw material. For Peter Bürger, Benjamin's logic of montage reflected a fundamental component of the logic of the avant-garde in general:

> Artists who produce an organic work […] treat their material as
> something living. They respect its significance as something that has

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[21] *The Dialectics of Seeing*, 117. Emphasis in original.

[22] On how the "privileging of the fragmentary over the total and integral has left its traces in every area of Benjamin's thought," see, e.g., Michael W. Jennings, *Dialectical Images: Walter Benjamin's Theory of Criticism* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1987): 54 ff.

grown from concrete life situations. For avant-gardistes, on the other hand, material is just that, material. […] Whereas the classicist recognizes and respects in the material the carrier of a meaning, the avant-gardistes see only the empty sign, to which only they can impart significance. The classicist correspondingly treats the material as a whole, whereas the avant-gardiste tears it out of the life totality, isolates it, and turns it into a fragment.[23]

Precisely this logic of montage and of smashing of totalities was what made Benjamin suspicious of the attempt simply to do away with the ornamental casings in which both ideological fetters and utopian dream images were contained, in order to leave only the shining purity of the structure. The logic of a search for fragments that could be imbued with meaning, rearranged into constellations whose meaning would be contingent on the time and place of their construction, led Benjamin rather to turn his attention to precisely that which the post-Nietzschean critique of historicism regarded as utterly valueless: the historicizing and ornamental detritus swept off of the façade. "Methode dieser Arbeit: literarische Montage. Ich habe nichts zu sagen. Nur zu zeigen. Ich werde nichts Wertvolles entwenden und mir keine geistvolle Formulierungen aneignen. Aber die Lumpen, den Abfall: die will ich nicht inventarisieren sondern sie auf die einzig mögliche Weise zu ihrem Rechte kommen lassen: sie verwenden."[24] By using this detritus for the construction of dialectical images, therefore, Benjamin no longer regarded it as sheer waste or mere supplement.

Thus Benjamin pointed to a tension between two avenues of avant-garde logic: the critique of historicism and the critique of organic totalities. By turning the screws of the logic of montage ever tighter, Benjamin's focus turned not to the bare, holistic structure to be revealed, but rather to the fragments left behind. Thus, ironically, precisely that aspect of Benjamin's thought most often perceived as nostalgic – the fascination with the fragments of the auratic – could claim its justification in the avant-gardiste gesture of fragmentation. Inversely, if one accepted Benjamin's suspicions of totalities, then it was precisely the radical critique of historicism that

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[23] Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. Michael Shaw (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1984): 70.

[24] *GS*/V: 574.

appeared nostalgic due to the holism informing its ideal of an utterly self-consistent style.

This tension had the result that in a number of cases, Benjamin's use of terminology that appeared to be drawn from the post-Nietzschean critique of historicism turned around and functioned as a critique of that tradition of critique. This is revealed most clearly in the case of his use of the term historicism itself. Benjamin perceived one of the prime characteristics of historicism in the shallowness of its understanding of time. This shallow understanding of time determined the basic conceptual procedure of historicism, which, Benjamin stated, "ist additiv: sie bietet die Masse der Fakten auf, um die homogene und leere Zeit auszufüllen."[25] Historicism thus understood historical phenomena – people, events, epochs – as mere indifferent material to be stuffed into a temporal structure conceived as a homogeneous container. The individual qualities of the historical phenomena were erased in such process and transformed into sheer historical volume. The result was a "continuum" in which the entire historical timeline might be weighted with facts, but those facts themselves were reduced to mere placeholders or points on the continuum, and their position along the timeline resulted from contingency rather than from internal correspondence.

Benjamin's portrayal of this homogenous temporal continuum clearly echoed Lukács' concept of reification. Lukács, in his description of the deleterious effects of modern rationalism, had claimed: "Thus time sheds its qualitative, variable, flowing nature; it freezes into an exactly delimited, quantifiable continuum filled with quantifiable 'things' (the reified, mechanically objectified 'performance' of the worker, wholly separated from his total human personality): in short, it becomes space."[26] Benjamin in effect repeated this notion of a reified perception of time and attributed it to historicism.[27] Here Benjamin's formulation appears to parallel the

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[25] *GS*/I: 702.

[26] Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1971): 90.

[27] Michael Jennings points out that "Benjamin found in Lukács' emphasis on reification a model upon which to base the modification of his own historical analysis in light of Marx" (*Dialectical Images,* 72). On Lukács' influence on Benjamin, see also Ferenc Feher, "Lukács and Benjamin: Parallels and Contrasts," in *New German Critique* 34 (1985): 125-138.

post-Nietzschean critique of historicism. For Benjamin just as for Nietzsche, Lukács, and Teige, historicism resulted from the convergence of history and formalism. Formalist logic transformed individuality into abstraction and replaced closed organic structures with an open-ended, "bad" infinity. Benjamin's description of the historicist continuum, with its propensity to devour "masses" of facts and its "additive" structure, clearly echoes this notion of formalism.

Benjamin's formulation, however, contains one major difference from the other versions of this critique of historicism examined so far. Both Herder and Nietzsche, despite the differing valorizations they placed on the historical sense, had perceived the danger of formalist logic in its breakdown of totalizing vision and its antipathy to holistic models for knowledge. Not only Lukács but also Teige, despite their opposed conclusions about how to represent the physiognomy of the present, took over this opposition of formalism to holism. But Benjamin's suspicion of totalities of any kind led him to view rather the homogenous continuum itself as a monstrous, devouring totality, ready to absorb all of history into its structure.[28] It was for this reason that Benjamin claimed: "Der Historismus gipfelt von rechtswegen in der Universalgeschichte."[29] In order to liberate historical phenomena from this oppressively totalizing structure, Benjamin sought a historical method that would allow one "eine bestimmte Epoche aus dem homogenen Verlauf der Geschichte herauszusprengen."[30] Only once the historical matter lay scattered in fragments could the historical materialist select and arrange them in a meaningful manner.

Benjamin was thus rigorous in his application of the logic of montage to the critique of historicist time as a reified continuum. Sensing the taint of nostalgia that clung to the opposition of formalism and totality – a taint that had caught Teige in his

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[28] Buck-Morss, quoting Adorno's interpretation of Lukács' influence on Benjamin in this respect, writes: "Both Benjamin and Lukács demonstrated that 'the petrified life within nature is merely what history has developed into.' But Lukács, relying on Hegel's philosophical legacy, was led ultimately to a totalizing conception of metaphysical transcendence, whereas Benjamin, schooled in the very different tradition of the Baroque allegorical poets, remained focused on the fragmentary, transitory object" (*Dialectics of Seeing*, 160).

[29] *GS*/I: 702.

[30] *GS*/I: 703.

dilemma of a dualism that would not go away – Benjamin strictly ruled out the possibility of regaining totality even through the gesture of a radical rejection of the historical. The way out of the continuum would obviously not be found by crawling backwards, but neither would it be found by movement forward if the telos of that movement appeared simply as the negative outline of what had been rejected. The only alternative was to smash the entire structure and make what use one could of the pieces.

This destructive gesture was Benjamin's avant-garde gesture: expressive of a conviction that the truth about the present was to be found only in its broken fragments. But this radically fragmenting move was motivated also by this other side of Benjamin's critique of historicism: "Die Vorstellung eines Fortschritts des Menschengeschlechts in der Geschichte ist von der Vorstellung ihres eine homogene und leere Zeit durchlaufenden Fortgangs nicht abzulösen."[31] Benjamin linked the concept of progress (*Fortschritt*) with linear forward movement (*Fortgang*). The empty temporal corridor in which such movement necessarily took place thus became the site where historicism crossed paths with a faith in open-ended progress and future reconciliation. Benjamin's attempts to limit this critique of progress to a critique of Social Democracy were not terribly convincing. For what was really implicated by his critique of progress was the model of a cutting edge, a most advanced stage, fundamental not only to all Marxism[32] but expressing the very essence of an "avant-garde," whether political or artistic. Benjamin's avant-gardist gesture of smashing the reified conception of time into fragments thus turned around and bit its own tail. The commitment of a political or artistic movement to the invigorating power of the future and of revolutionary change in fact represented an inability to break out of the reified notion of a temporal continuum. The characteristic that the avant-garde movements felt most separated them from historicism – the devotion to the future and to

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[31] *GS*/I: 701.

[32] As Rolf Tiedemann has put it: "Selbst as Marxische Vertrauen in die Entfaltung der Produktivkräfte hypostasierte den Fortschrittsbegriff und mußte Benjamin angesichts der Erfahrungen des zwanzigsten Jahrhunderts als unhaltber erscheinen" ("Einleitung des Herausgebers," in *GS*/V: 31).

technological progress – became in Benjamin's formulation precisely what the two had most in common.

A similar reversal is enacted by Benjamin's theory of the dialectical image. Benjamin envisaged the dialectical image as a tool with which to dismantle the usual representational structures used to construct historical images. He claimed that "[d]iese Bilder sind durchaus abzugrenzen von den 'geisteswissenschaftlichen' Kategorien, dem sogenannten Habitus, dem Stil, etc."[33] Again, Benjamin identified the implicit holism that lay in the strong notion of style so central for Nietzsche and for Teige, a holism harboring a nostalgia that effectively turned Teige's notion of a "style of the present" into an oxymoron. And again, Benjamin's response was to bring to bear the logic of montage. Hence the dialectical image functioned through "constellations" that suddenly illuminate a historical truth for a particular moment in the present. The material for such images first had to be obtained by exploding historical totalities into fragments: the task of the historical materialist was thus "eine bestimmte Epoche aus dem homogenen Verlauf der Geschichte herauszusprengen; so sprengt er ein bestimmtes Leben aus der Epoche, so ein bestimmtes Werk aus dem Lebenswerk."[34] The resulting dialectical image was neither an image in miniature of a particular historical moment, nor the expression of a *Zeitgeist*, nor the revelation of a hidden, "true face" of a historical object. The dialectical image did not capture a permanent historical truth but represented rather a freeze-frame image taken in the midst of complex movement, an image that possessed relevance only for a fleeting moment, after which the constituent fragments would be released back into their dialectical movement. Such "Dialektik im Stillstand"[35] thus expressed the logic of montage not only in its structure as an assemblage of fragments, but also in its intrinsic association with a transient moment of the present.

The raw material of such a dialectical image was provided by the detritus of history; the act of bringing these fragments together into a constellation a form of

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[33] *GS*/V: 577.

[34] *GS*/I: 703.

[35] *GS*/V: 578.

citation. Benjamin regarded such citation as redeeming or reactivating the energies latent in the historical material, but only for a fleeting moment. For Benjamin, the archetype of such reactivation was the citation of Rome by the French Revolution: "So war für Robespierre das antike Rom eine mit Jetztzeit geladene Vergangenheit, die er aus dem Kontinuum der Geschichte heraussprengte. Die französische Revolution verstand sich als ein wiedergekehrtes Rom. Sie zitierte das alte Rom genau so wie die Mode eine vergangene Tracht zitiert."[36] This concept of citation, however, not only served as a conceptual link between montage and redemption, thereby permitting Benjamin to move between the discontinuous modes of thought of the political and the theological. It also contained an implicit critique of the manner in which the avant-garde temporal logic had defined itself in opposition to historicism. For in the standard critique of historicism that Nietzsche had formulated so forcefully, quotation was one of the prime negative features of historicism. Quotation for Nietzsche was the cultural practice of decadence, and decadence was the dissolution of a strong identity into eclecticism, of style into fashion. The formal quotation utilized, for example, by historicist architecture in the shape of neoclassical, neogothic, and neobaroque styles appeared from this angle as nothing other than a passive repetition of the great achievements of the past, the sign of an inability to create original forms and thus of historical exhaustion. Benjamin's notion of redemptive citation thus functioned as a critique of the manner in which avant-garde temporal logic distinguished itself from historicism. Historicist quotations served for Benjamin as the material for literary montage. Characteristic historicist and avant-garde gestures – quotation and montage – thus appeared to be not hostile but rather moments of a single process.

The result of this self-critique of avant-gardist logic was that the idea that modern culture or society was infected by some sort of dissatisfying condition that could be termed "historicism" no longer appeared as a claim that the present was caught in the grip of the past. The linkage of historicism and history that constituted Nietzsche's legacy to the avant-garde was weakened, but precisely through the intensification, not rejection, of the avant-garde logic of montage. The consequence of

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[36] *GS*/I: 701.

this disengagement of historicism from the historical meant that Benjamin needed to locate the ground of his critique of historicism in a different conceptual structure. He found that structure in the theory of historical experience.

II.   *The Calendar and the Clock*

Benjamin's theory of experience attempted to describe a shift in the form of experience in modernity: a shift he designated with the terms *Erfahrung* and *Erlebnis*. The broad terms of that shift were as follows: *Erfahrung* denoted experience accumulated over time and providing an ongoing sense of structure to one's perception of the world. For Benjamin, *Erfahrung* was closely linked to the experience of tradition as a shared body of knowledge: *Erfahrung* was experience that bound a community. By contrast, *Erlebnis* designated experience passed through at a given moment without leaving any trace in the form of broadened knowledge. *Erlebnis* was a form of experience that remained confined to the individual and was extinguished as soon as it was lived through. For Benjamin, *Erfahrung* used to be the primary form of experience; it was what was taken for granted when one spoke of a person being "experienced."[37] During the nineteenth century, however, *Erfahrung* had become an ever more rare and privileged form of experience as it gave way to the increasing preponderance of experience as *Erlebnis*. *Erlebnis* represented one of the by-products of advancing capitalism: the extension of reification into the deepest structures of human experience. Reification was of course always embodied in a manner of perception or experience. *Erlebnis*, however, represented the intrusion of reification into not only the perception of objective phenomena but into the very experience of time, which appeared as quantified and hardened into a continuum. The concept of *Erlebnis* thus formed an integral part of Benjamin's critique of historicism.

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[37] "Diesen Abstand und diesen Blinkwinkel schreibt uns eine Erfahrung vor, zu der wir fast täglich Gelegenheit haben. Sie sagt uns, daß es mit der Kunst des Erzählens zu Ende geht. Immer seltener wird die Begegnung mit Leuten, welche rechtschaffen etwas erzählen können. […] Es ist, als wenn ein Vermögen, das uns unveräußerlich schien, das Gesichertste unter dem Sicheren, von uns genommen würde. Nämlich das Vermögen, Erfahrungen auszutauschen" (*GS*/II: 439).

Erfahrung, the form of experience rooted in tradition, represented layered historical experience; *Erlebnis* represented historicist experience.

The temporal dimension involved in these different forms of experience led Benjamin to define their mechanisms through a consideration of the function of memory. The text "Über einige Motive bei Baudelaire" equated *Erfahrung* with the Proustian *mémoire involuntaire* on the one hand, and *Erlebnis* with *mémoire voluntaire* on the other. The precious rarity of *Erfahrung* found its counterpart in the unexpectedness of *mémoire involuntaire*; neither could be forced. *Erlebnis* and *mémoire voluntaire*, on the other hand, both functioned through an active, conscious drive.

Benjamin defined this activity of the consciousness as the decisive mechanism transforming *Erfahrung* into *Erlebnis*. The structure and endurance characterizing *Erfahrung* reflected its safe harbor within the memory: the retention and protection of experience by memory allowed experience to be gathered in the form of personal wisdom or communal tradition. Benjamin claimed, however, that the intervention of consciousness prevented the lodging of experience within the memory. Invoking the authority of Freud, Benjamin stated "'daß Bewußtwerden und Hinterlassung einer Gedächtnisspur für dasselbe System miteinander unverträglich sind.'"[38] Consciousness in this model did not simply prevent the ingress of experience into memory: consciousness indeed consisted precisely in the annihilation or evaporation ("Verpuffung") of memory: "'das Bewußtsein entstehe an der Stelle der Erinnerungsspur.'"[39] The memory of experience, in other words, provided the fuel for consciousness. The fuel was of course consumed in this process, and thus consciousness of experience necessarily meant the annihilation of such experience, its obliteration from memory. Benjamin concluded:

> Erinnerungsreste sind vielmehr "oft am stärksten und haltbarsten, wenn der sie zurücklassende Vorgang niemals zum Bewußtsein gekommen ist." Übertragen in Prousts Redeweise: Bestandteil der mémoire

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[38] *GS*/I: 612. Benjamin is quoting here from Freud's *Jenseits des Lustprinzips*.

[39] *Ibid.,* 612. Benjamin here is again quoting Freud.

involuntaire kann nur werden, was nicht ausdrücklich und mit Bewußtsein ist "erlebt" worden, was dem Subjekt nicht als "Erlebnis" widerfahren ist.[40]

Erlebnis thus arose from the consciousness of experience. Such consciousness was purchased at the cost of depth and permanence of experience, since the experiential material was consumed before its admittance to the harbor of memory.

This model provided Benjamin with an historical explanation for the increasing predominance of *Erlebnis* in modern experience. Modern experience was ever more marked by such interventions of consciousness because of the increasing frequency with which modern productive forces confronted one with the experience of shock. In the experience of shock, consciousness served a positive function as a protective mechanism or "Reizschutz." Consciousness drained the traumatic energy from such shock experiences, allowing the subject to master those threats, forget them and move on. Benjamin described this defensive function of consciousness with an image from *Les Fleurs du Mal*: consciousness "parried" such shocks. Although this parrying was a necessary survival tactic in a milieu where "Chockerlebnis zur Norm geworden ist," the result was that an ever greater portion of modern experience was transformed into *Erlebnis*:

> Daß der Chock derart abgefangen, derart vom Bewußtsein pariert werde, gäbe dem Vorfall, der ihn auslöst, den Charakter des Erlebnisses im prägnanten Sinn. […] Je größer der Anteil des Chockmoments an den einzelnen Eindrücken ist, je unablässiger das Bewußtsein im Interesse des Reizschutzes auf dem Plan sein muß, je größer der Erfolg ist, mit dem es operiert, desto weniger gehen sie in die Erfahrung ein; desto eher erfüllen sie den Begriff des Erlebnisses."[41]

Modern experience thus took place through a protective screen of consciousness. This screen of consciousness, however, not only protected but also isolated: the experiences with which the subject was regularly confronted were annihilated in self-defense before they could leave any lasting trace.

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[40] *Ibid*., 612-13. The quote, again, is from *Jenseits des Lustprinzips*.

[41] *Ibid*., 614 and 615.

Such hyperactivity of consciousness fundamentally altered the perception of time. Benjamin wrote: "Vielleicht kann man die eigentümliche Leistung der Chockabwehr zuletzt darin sehen: dem Vorfall auf Kosten der Integrität seines Inhalts eine exakte Zeitstelle im Bewußtsein anzuweisen."[42] *Erlebnis* splintered the integrated experience characteristic of *Erfahrung* into pieces that could each be assigned a precise point in time. Time as structured through *Erlebnis* thus functioned in a manner effectively identical to what Benjamin described elsewhere as the empty continuum of historicism. Where historicism engulfed "die Masse der Fakten" in order to hang such facts upon a timeline and thereby to fill the empty and homogenous temporal continuum, the parrying by consciousness sliced events into units small enough that each could be pinned to a discrete moment. Separated and isolated in this way, such events lost their "integrity of content" as well as their threatening potential.

Thus time in *Erlebnis* was experienced differently than in *Erfahrung*. A quantitatively equivalent stretch of time was qualitatively incomparable. Benjamin evoked this difference metaphorically: *Erfahrung* unfolded in the space of the days measured by the calendar, while *Erlebnis* marched to the rhythm of seconds measured by the clock. There could be no translation between these units of measurement: a calendar day represented more than 86,400 consecutive seconds. The days of the calendar provided, so to speak, a space generous enough to contain events in all the integrity of their content; the seconds of the clock, on the other hand, represented so many tiny pins upon which only the analyzed and dissected remnants of psychological events could hang.

Calendar days measuring *Erfahrung* were of course for the most part an antiquated phenomenon, rooted in cultic ritual and religious rites. Benjamin did, however, find something similar in the modern experience of revolution:

> Die große Revolution führte einen neuen Kalender ein. Der Tag, mit dem ein Kalender einsetzt, fungiert als ein historischer Zeitraffer. Und es ist im Grunde genommen derselbe Tag, der in Gestalt der Feiertage, die Tage des Eingedenkens sind, immer wiederkehrt. Die Kalender zählen die Zeit also nicht wie Uhren. Sie sind Monumente eines

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[42] *Ibid.*, 615.

Geschichtsbewußtseins, von dem es in Europa seit hundert Jahren nicht mehr die leisesten Spuren zu geben scheint.[43]

The French Revolution represented a final enactment of the *Feiertag* as day of commemoration in the sense Benjamin ascribed to older forms of experience, still echoing their origins in cultic ritual. Since that moment, however, such a resonant historical consciousness had disappeared without trace. The modern European, for whom the reified historicist consciousness corresponding to *Erlebnis* had become the norm, was thus "cast out" of the calendar: "Die Anerkennung einer Qualität mit der Messung der Quantität vereint zu haben, war das Werk der Kalender, die mit den Feiertagen die Stellen des Eingedenkens gleichsam aussparen. Der Mann, dem die Erfahrung abhanden kommt, fühlt sich aus dem Kalender herausgesetzt."[44]

Benjamin traced the consequences of this modern experience of temporality through several characteristically modern social types. The most important of these was the gambler. The gambler's occupation was the purest expression of the lack of depth or direction in the clock time of *Erlebnis*. Benjamin, playing on an implied pun in Baudelaire, claimed that the gambler's gaming partner ("la Seconde") was always "der Sekundenzeiger."[45] For the gambler, each throw of the dice, each draw of the cards, represented a new start or "Immer-wieder-von-vorn-anfangen"[46] that had no influence on the next draw, left no trace, and produced no lasting structure – it simply evaporated in the space of a moment. This gesture was thus the very enactment of *Erlebnis*, a gesture echoing the rhythm of the ticking clock. Benjamin felt that this compulsive repetition of a beginning that was simultaneously an end and that never led anywhere connected the gambler's gesture – the short hand movements of the throw of the dice or draw of the cards – with a whole series of characteristically modern gestures: the clicking of a snapshot, the lifting of a telephone receiver, or the

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[43] *Ibid*., 701-2.

[44] *Ibid*., 642-3.

[45] *Ibid*., 636.

[46] *Ibid.,* 636.

strike of a match. Most significantly, however, this gesture connected the activity of the idle gamer with that of the overworked wage laborer:

> Aber was ihr [the factory worker's labor] nicht abgeht, das ist die Vergeblichkeit, die Leere, das Nicht-vollenden-dürfen, welches viel mehr der Tätigkeit des Lohnarbeiters in der Fabrik innewohnt. Auch dessen vom automatischen Arbeitsgang ausgelöste Gebärde erscheint im Spiel, das nicht ohne den geschwinden Handgriff zustande kommt, welcher den Einsatz macht oder die Karte aufnimmt. Was der Ruck in der Bewegung der Maschinerie, ist im Hasardspiel der sogenannte coup. Der Handgriff des Arbeiters an der Maschine ist gerade dadurch mit dem vorhergehenden ohne Zusammenhang, daß er dessen strikte Wiederholung darstellt.[47]

These repetitive gestures – short and rhythmic like the ticking of the secondhand – thus represented for Benjamin the physical movements through which *Erlebnis* was played out. The gambler and the wage laborer were no different at the end of their day than at the beginning: that time had indeed elapsed could be discerned only from the position of the hands of the clock.

The "Immer-wieder-von-vorn-anfangen" of these gestures reflected the process by which consciousness evaporated ("verpufft") the traces of memory. Consciousness of experience was a continuous starting over again with nothing gained. This overactive consciousness thus transformed into a consciousness of the sheer passage of time. Benjamin identified this consciousness with Baudelaire's motif of *spleen* in *Les Fleurs du Mal*: "Aber im spleen ist die Zeitwahrnehmung übernatürlich geschärft; jede Sekunde findet das Bewußtsein auf dem Plan, um ihren Chock abzufangen."[48] Such hyperconsciousness of the empty passage of time was in effect nothing more than a counting of the seconds until one's death. *Erlebnis* had little to do with life after all, but rather resembled the interminable wait before the carrying out of a death sentence. Thus the gambler – for whom the luxury was available, unlike for the laborer – was in fact attempting to flee this horrifying thought, the consciousness of approaching death. The neurotic addiction to the game represented a desperate need

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[47] *Ibid.*, 633

[48] *Ibid.*, 642.

for a narcotic, or a "Rauschgift […], mit dem die Spielenden das Bewußtsein zu übertäuben suchen, das sie dem Gang des Sekundenzeigers ausgeliefert hat."[49] That this narcotic simply mimicked the rhythm of what it was supposed to anaesthetize against, however, revealed the hopelessness of the gesture. The relentlessly ticking seconds fell like bars forming a cage from which the modern subject would find no easy escape.

Benjamin perceived a similarly futile gesture in philosophical efforts to heal the wounds of historicism. Benjamin found the major, if problematic, representatives of such philosophical efforts in the *Lebensphilosophen* from Dilthey to Klages und Jung ("der sich dem Faschismus verschrieben hat"[50]). The most exceptional figure in this tradition, according to Benjamin, was Bergson, who attempted to escape the dissatisfactions of *Erlebnis* by grounding experience in the *durée*. In Benjamin's eyes, Bergson had merely exacerbated the situation; far from moving beyond historicism, he merely reproduced it in another form:

> "Der Metaphysiker Bergson unterschlägt den Tod." Daß in Bergsons durée der Tod ausfällt, dichtet sie gegen die geschichtliche (wie auch gegen eine vorgeschichtliche) Ordnung ab. […] Die durée, aus der der Tod getilgt ist, hat die schlechte Unendlichkeit eines Ornaments. Sie schließt es aus, die Tradition in sie einzubringen. Sie ist der Inbegriff eines Erlebnisses, das im erborgten Kleide der Erfahrung einherstolziert.[51]

Just as did the gambler's attempt, Bergson's attempt to escape the consciousness of death reproduced precisely that from which it fled: the bad infinity of ornament, the mere outer garment or costume of *Erfahrung*.

Benjamin thus described Bergson's false sublation of *Erlebnis* as an express route straight back to the historicism it sought to escape. What this demonstrates is that Benjamin's critique of *Erlebnis* allowed him to disconnect his critique of

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[49] *Ibid*., 636.

[50] *Ibid*., 608.

[51] *Ibid*., 643. Benjamin's quote is from Max Horkheimer, "Zu Bergsons Metaphysik der Zeit."

historicism from the category of history. Bergson ended up in historicism even when formulating a theory expressing the resonant *durée* of the present moment. Historicism for Benjamin was a form of experiencing not history, but *time* – and thus historicism need not use the past tense. Historicism in the present tense was *Lebensphilosophie* (or at other times Social Democracy); in the future tense it was the ideology of progress.

This represents a fundamental break with the post-Nietzschean critique of historicism. The temporal logic articulated so forcefully by Nietzsche and subsequently developed into hyperbolic dimensions by the interwar avant-garde responded to its dissatisfactions with modern experience by formulating the ideal of an incandescent presence. The vision of de-alienated experience was thus thoroughly temporalized and invested in a static opposition of past versus present. This led to contradictions that remained remarkably similar over the time-span separating Nietzsche from Teige. Both the theses of "history in the service of life" and of a "style of the present" express the limitations of this static opposition of past and present. Nietzsche effectively formulated his notion of "useful" history as a form of presence, while Teige effectively formulated his ideal of true presence as a form of history.

Benjamin, however, instead of articulating the problem of historicism in terms of a need to liberate oneself from a suffocating historical inheritance and to start anew with a *tabula rasa*, articulated the problem as one of the *consciousness* of history. The consciousness of history, the accumulation of historical knowledge, produced the neurotic, inescapable awareness of one's own position in history: an awareness that inevitably turned into a nervous insecurity or questioning of that position. Just as the consciousness of present experiences prevented their entrance into memory and led to their degradation into the thinner form of *Erlebnis*, the consciousness of historical experience – which was nothing other than the essence of tradition – precluded the inhabiting of a secure and resonant historical identity. Instead, such a consciously experienced historical identity transformed into the awkwardly self-conscious movements of a play-actor. The historicism of, say, Wagnerian theatrical culture, or of its political counterparts in the 18th Brumaires and Neuschwansteins of the later

nineteenth-century, lay not so much in the mimicry of past forms – tradition had always expressed itself through the use of inherited forms – as in the consciousness of the gesture.

This formulation of the problem of historicism in terms of historical consciousness was already partially implicit in Nietzsche as well. Nietzsche's emphasis on the necessity of forgetting was clearly directed at breaking out of the ever-accelerating cycle of hyperconscious calculation that reduced action to mere pretence or deception. The problem, however, was that such consciousness, once attained, could not be reversed. Forgetting cannot be an act of the will, for that would make it a conscious act. Nietzsche's insistence on the gesture of forgetting implicitly shifted the issue from that of the tyrannical grip of consciousness to the tyrannical grip of the past. The escape route appeared to lead through the singularity of a present that had always just slipped out of reach. Thus given Nietzsche's terms, history that was "useful for life," de-alienated history, history released from the debilitating grasp of historicism, could be nothing other than history that effectively constituted a present.

This dilemma of consciousness had of course appeared explicitly in Marx's theory of ideology as alienated consciousness. Consciousness that was locked in the movement of its own inner transactions signified for Marx a consciousness that had lost touch with the essential reality of its present, with the present as it really is. Marx's solution was to formulate the ideal of de-alienated consciousness as a clear window onto that essential reality. But this transparency ideal solved the problem of independent consciousness literally by making it disappear: Marx effectively equated de-alienated consciousness with material reality. The result was that the unshakable fellow traveler of this ideal of transparent consciousness was the vulgar reflection model, wherein consciousness provoked a guilty conscience since it represented a useless supplement or wasteful luxury. Thus Marx faced the dilemma that the moment he tried to theorize de-alienated consciousness as an independent entity, he had already failed in his goal, for such an independent consciousness was by definition already ideology. Nietzsche's faced a similar paradox: to arrive at a history that would be useful for life, one had to forget the past. To achieve what they sought – to avoid

reproducing consciousness and history in the form of a decoration or disguise – Marx and Nietzsche had both had to abandon what they sought.

Benjamin offered no solution to this paradox. The very terms through which he formulated his meta-critique of historicism were grounded in their own transience, their applicability to a *particular* moment only – itself the sign that the critical force of Benjamin's theory of experience had been purchased dearly. Nevertheless, his theory of experience and the consciousness of memory did produce terms allowing formulation of the paradoxes invoked by the consciousness of history. Such a "weak" critical force is perhaps the only one possible.

Conclusion

FROM POSTMODERNISM TO POST-HISTORICISM?

The temporal presuppositions and prejudices associated with the term "avant-garde" can easily appear too obvious to require investigation. The connotations of forward movement, of a cutting edge, and of the conquering of new territory, are immediate and undeniable. Such connotations seem at first to leave no alternative to the temporal scheme whereby the avant-garde valorization of the future stands opposed to concern for the past, and whereby the avant-garde ideal of innovation and self-recreation stands in stark contrast to the alter ego by which it was haunted: "historicism," the captivity to tradition and inherited form.

Nevertheless, putting pressure on the avant-garde critique of historicism reveals that such a stark temporal contrast is indeed problematic. While this critique ostensibly castigated historicism for its excessive investment in the category of the historical, what lay underneath this argument was in fact the complaint with the shallowness of the historicist consciousness. Historicism was thus not so much the condition of a culture suffering from a "surfeit of history" (Nietzsche's "Überfluß") as of a culture existing in a historical vacuum or interregnum, dependant upon borrowed identities. Paradoxically, precisely the avant-garde commitment to the future was, in the logic of this critique, the move that would endow the present with a deeper understanding of itself and thus with a true historical identity. As Alan Colquhoun has described it in reference to the architects of the interwar avant-garde: "only by looking toward the future could they be faithful to the spirit of history and give expression in their works to the spirit of the age."[1]

The question then becomes what consequences should be drawn from an appreciation of this paradox. The point is certainly not to add another item to a checklist of contradictions in the logic of the avant-garde and thereby imply that some

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[1] *Modernity and the Classical Tradition: Architectural Essays, 1980-1987* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1989): 14.

sort of "error" or "naiveté" inheres in that logic. Rather, the problem may lie with our own sense − now, in a period when the severity of the avant-garde rejection of the historical has long since lost its compelling force − that the complications raised by this critique of historicism no longer apply to us.

One of the more significant of the various phenomena claiming the label of postmodernism is the assertion that the last quarter-century or so has witnessed the return to a historical sense (which may be understood in a variety of ways) after the excesses of the avant-garde temporal paradigm. As Matei Calinescu formulates it: "abandoning the strictures of the avant-garde and opting for a logic of renovation rather than radical innovation, postmodernism has entered into a lively reconstructive dialogue with the old and the past."[2] Andreas Huyssen has traced this development closely, describing how in the 1960's postmodernism first "revitalized the impetus of the historical avant-garde and subsequently [in the 1970's] delivered that ethos up to a withering critique."[3] This shift has generally been regarded as having two causes. The first is simply the success and subsequent exhaustion of the avant-garde temporal model: the sense that, as Irving Howe commented, the "search for the 'new' […] has become the predictable old."[4] It would appear that the avant-garde logic of incessant innovation and reinvention inevitably had to reach a stage where the most radical reinvention possible was the complete inversion of the very logic of innovation itself. Huyssen refers to this as "the novelty of no longer fetishizing the new,"[5] and Gianni

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[2] *Five Faces of Modernity: Modernism, Avant-Garde, Decadence, Kitsch, Postmodernism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1987): 276. See also Marshall Berman, *All That Is Solid Melts into Air: The Experience of Modernity* (New York: Penguin, 1988): especially 36 and 332-3; Ihab and Sally Hassan, eds. *Innovation/Renovation: New Perspectives in the Humanities* (Madison: Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 1983; and Astradur Eysteinsson, *The Concept of Modernism* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1990): 121-2.

[3] *Twilight Memories: Marking Time in a Culture of Amnesia* (London: Routledge, 1995): 17. Huyssen traces this development in greater detail in chapters 9 and 10 of *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism* (Bloomington: Univ. of Indiana Press, 1986).

[4] "The New York Intellectuals," in *The Decline of the New* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1970): 259. It is worth noting that Howe's comment was made right around the moment Huyssen identifies as the transition of postmodernism from a revitalization to a critique of the historical avant-garde.

[5] *Twilight Memories*, 6.

Vattimo terms it the "dissolution of the category of the new."[6] Some commentators take this observation one step further and portray this shift as having been catalyzed by an increasing sense of the "naiveté of modernism's ideologically and aesthetically motivated rejection of the past."[7] The exhaustion of the avant-garde temporal paradigm could then be viewed as at least partly due to the revelation of the sheer destructiveness of the logic of innovation, the feeling that it had led not to the promised cleansing fire of aesthetic renewal but rather to an impoverishment of contemporary experience: to the aesthetic "emptiness" of a pure white canvas or glass-and-steel curtain wall and to the silence of a literature without narrative.[8]

The second cause often pointed to is the enormous development of modern media and communications technology. The ever-increasing ease with which temporal and spatial boundaries are actually or apparently overcome in the era of CNN, the World Wide Web, and mobile telecommunications networks has resulted in a shrinkage of the temporal register within which many people's everyday lives are lived. This implementation of an "omnipresence" in practice was inconceivable in the period of the historical avant-garde, for which the rejection of history remained a revolutionary slogan, an aesthetic ideal, or a theoretical postulate. The result is that contemporary history appears to many as "the history of that era in which, thanks to the use of new means of communication (especially television), everything tends to flatten out at the level of contemporaneity and simultaneity, thus producing a de-historization of experience."[9] For Huyssen, the "synchronicity" brought about by new communications technology constitutes a major impulse for the return of a concern

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[6] *The End of Modernity: Nihilism and Hermeneutics in Postmodern Culture*, trans. Jon R. Snyder (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1988): 4.

[7] Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (London: Routledge, 1988): 30.

[8] See, e.g., Umberto Eco, *Postscript to* The Name of the Rose, trans. William Weaver (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovitch, 1984): 67.

[9] Vattimo, *The End of Modernity*, 10. Fredric Jameson also speaks of "the emergence of a new kind of flatness or depthlessness" in the postmodern, although he does not necessarily connect this to the issue of technology (*Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* [Durham: Duke Univ. Press, 1991]: 9).

with memory and "extended structures of temporality,"[10] which he identifies in the contemporary popularity of the museum as a mass medium:

> The museal gaze thus may be said to revoke the Weberian disenchantment of the world in modernity and to reclaim a sense of non-synchronicity and of the past. In the experience of a transitory reenchantment, which like ritual can be repeated, this gaze at museal things also resists the progressive dematerialization of the world which is driven by television and the virtual realities of computer networking. The gaze at the museal object may provide a sense of its opaque and impenetrable materiality as well as an anamnestic space within which the transitoriness and differentiality of human cultures can be grasped. Via the activity of memory, set in motion and nurtured by the contemporary museum in its broadest and most amorphous sense, the museal gaze expands the ever shrinking space of the (real) present in a culture of amnesia, planned obsolescence and ever more synchronic and timeless information flows, the hyperspace of the coming age of information highways.[11]

For Huyssen then, the contemporary museum – transformed from earlier incarnations as a shrine of high culture into a mass medium with the potential for critical destabilization of widely accepted truths – provides a temporary but healthy refuge from the flattening of experience through technology. For this reason, the ideological opposition of progressive modernity v. reactionary museum, so central for the historical avant-garde, can no longer hold.[12]

These two causal factors – the first a development in the dialectic of modernism, the second in the technology of modernity – would thus at first sight appear to portray the situation confronted by postmodernism as the more or less direct inverse of that addressed by the critique of historicism inherited by the avant-garde from Nietzsche. Huyssen phrases it thus: "Nietzsche's polemic addressed the hypertrophy of historical consciousness in public culture, while our symptom would seem to be its atrophy. […] Thus our fever is not a consuming historical fever in

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[10] *Twilight Memories*, 9.

[11] *Ibid.*, 34.

[12] See *ibid.*, 21.

Nietzsche's sense, which could be cured by productive forgetting. It is rather a mnemonic fever that is caused by the virus of amnesia that at times threatens to consume memory itself."[13] In other words, where the avant-garde critique of historicism had reacted against an overly magnified historical consciousness, postmodernism confronts the historical vacuum created by a triumphant modernism and the advance of technology.

Here is where closer investigation of the critique of historicism reveals its consequences for our contemporary situation. For the historical vacuum addressed explicitly by much of postmodernism was addressed implicitly by the avant-garde critique of historicism as well. Yet we continue to view these aspects of postmodernism as a reaction against, or a pendulum swinging away from, the excesses of that critique. The point is certainly not to deny that much of postmodernism construes itself precisely as such a reaction and formulates its terminology directly in opposition to avant-gardism or high modernism. The point is rather to acknowledge that the temporal dilemma at work here may be complicated enough that no such "reversal" or "return" is possible without ignoring central tensions in the avant-garde temporal paradigm.[14]

An example may illustrate how this oppositional scheme tends to break down. James Clifford has forcefully described how the standard representational practices of anthropology often serve to locate tribal cultures in a de-historicized, mythic time. Analyzing the exhibition of the Hall of Pacific Peoples at the American Museum of Natural History in New York, Clifford notes how photographs taken recently of aboriginal cultures often bore captions in the past tense, while photographs or artifacts

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[13] *Ibid.*, 6-7.

[14] I am clearly oversimplifying somewhat here. Certainly no one has argued (as if they could) for a straightforward return to nineteenth-century historicism. The reversals and returns of postmodernism are always enacted with the simultaneous introduction of new terms – memory, irony, multiplicity, and so on – that essentially change the dynamic of this postmodern historical consciousness. Be that as it may, the scheme that "avant-garde = rejection of history" and "postmodernism = renewed concern with history" *is* commonly presupposed, and this is the issue I am trying to complicate here.

from the turn of the century would be described in the present tense.[15]   By thus relegating these cultures to a mythic time – either "a vanishing past or an ahistorical, conceptual present"[16] – such anthropology preserves the image of a "pure" culture that cannot be touched by Western modernity without vanishing or losing its essential identity.   Thus the task of this anthropology appears as the task of collecting, assembling, and re-creating the characteristic expressions of such cultures before they disappear.   As Clifford puts it: "in this temporal ordering the real or genuine life of tribal works always precedes their collection, an act of salvage that repeats an all-too-familiar story of death and redemption. […] At the Hall of Pacific Peoples or the Rockefeller Wing the actual ongoing life and 'impure' inventions of tribal peoples are erased in the name of cultural or artistic 'authenticity.'"[17]   An alternate model of ethnography, Clifford suggests, would return such cultures to a truly historical temporal register in which change, adaptation, and advance would not be perceived as "impurities" but rather as evidence of the continuing vitality of such cultures.   As he describes it: "[…] one can at least imagine shows that feature the impure, 'inauthentic' productions of past and present tribal life; exhibitions radically heterogenous in their global mix of styles; exhibitions that locate themselves in specific multicultural junctures; exhibitions in which nature remains 'unnatural' […]".[18]   Clifford finds an example of something akin to this in a particular exhibition on Asante art and culture which displayed not only "pure" cultural products but also "evidence of the twentieth-century colonial suppression and recent renewal of Asante culture […], along with color photos of modern ceremonies and newly made 'traditional' objects brought to New York as gifts for the museum."   The result of such representational strategy was that "[t]he tribal is fully historical."[19]

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[15]   See *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1988): 202.

[16]   *Ibid.*, 201.

[17]   *Ibid.*, 202.

[18]   *Ibid.*, 213.

[19]   *Ibid.*, 210-11.

This impure ethnography clearly seems to share in the general return to the historical that constitutes such a significant part of the postmodern critique of the avant-garde. In particular, the emphasis on impurities and a vital eclecticism that Clifford associates with this historicizing ethnography is deeply at odds with the holistic vision of a true style so central for both Nietzsche and Teige. From this angle the postulate of a true style appears as an essentializing fiction that whitewashes out the true traces of history: the accidental, the makeshift, the disruptive or the local. From another angle, however, Clifford's vision of an impure ethnography appears strikingly Nietzschean in its celebration of vitality, creative appropriation of foreign elements (for example, the traces of colonial rule or even of contact with ethnographers), the ability to digest outside stimulae and turn them into impulses for original self-expression. Representing these cultures in an historical mode thus involves perceiving the expressions of their ongoing life: "The historical contacts and impurities that are part of ethnographic work […] may signal the life, not the death, of societies."[20] Most striking, however, is that Clifford figures this return to the historical largely as a process of recognizing traces of the *present.* Clifford comments that "[…] in most of the Hall of Pacific Peoples history has been airbrushed out. (No Samoan men at the *kava* ceremony are wearing wristwatches; Trobriand face painting is shown without noting that it is worn at cricket matches.)"[21] The impurities that return these tribal cultures to an historical register thus consist in the signs of their ongoing development in the present.

Here is where the line that would separate an anti-historical avant-garde from an historicizing postmodernism begins to blur. Clifford's ethnography, just as had Teige's Constructivism, associates historical identity with the recognition of the true face of the present. The photograph of a New Guinea girl wearing necklaces ornamented by photographers' flash bulbs[22] functions similarly to Teige's call to find Poetism in the factory: both function to recuperate what had hitherto been excluded

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[20] *Ibid.*, 201.

[21] *Ibid.*, 202.

[22] See *ibid.*, 211.

(from the purity of "culture" on the one hand and of the "aesthetic" on the other) in the name of a positive acknowledgement of contemporary reality. In the former case this recuperation is presented as the return to the historical and a celebration of the eclectic; in the latter case as the escape from the historical and the overcoming of eclecticism. But these opposed terms meet in the identification of a vital and creative present identity.

If the line between the avant-garde rejection of history and postmodern historicism can blur so radically, perhaps that line is not the most appropriate to use in drawing our cultural categories. A different angle on these categories can perhaps be found by arranging them into a chart:

Anti-Historicizing	**Historicizing**
Monolithic Modernism (-)	Polymorphous postmodernism (+)
- *Flattening of experience*	- *Memory and local diversity*
- *Global uniformity*	- *Multicultural eclecticism*
Critique of historicism (+)	Traditionalism (-)
- *Overcoming weak eclecticism*	- *Sees loss of tradition, communal ties*
- *Finding pattern, style of present*	- *Weak relativism*

Table 1: Avant-Garde vs. Postmodern Temporal Biases

This chart represents in slogan-like fashion four general positions possible towards the issues discussed above. The two fields on the left represent, respectively, negative and positive perceptions of the avant-garde (or, many would claim, generally modernist) hostility to history, while the two fields on the right represent positive and negative perceptions of the postmodern return to an eclectic historicizing mode. The upper left-hand box, labeled "monolithic modernism," represents the negative perception of a triumphant modernism that has erased all diversity: what Marshall Berman has described as the "expressway world"[23] of faceless skyscrapers rising on the ruins of neighborhoods that had possessed unique characters, and the banal uniformity of the

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[23] See *All That Is Solid Melts Into Air*, 164-171 and chapter V.

modern metropolis even in countries enormously distant from each other. The upper right-hand box represents a particular postmodern response to monolithic modernism: the emphasis on local traditions and on their mixing and adaptation, on "the diversity of history and geography"[24] as an antidote to the "absolutism"[25] of the modern. Here is where the general trends of a postmodernist historicism discussed above would fall. The lower fields represent, respectively, the avant-garde critique of historicism that has been examined in the foregoing chapters, with its critique of weak, eclectic borrowing through the positing of forceful stylistic expression; and a neo-conservative critique of the postmodernism, which shares the focus on the return to greater temporal anchoring but identifies the postmodern strategy of eclecticism as contributing to rather than ameliorating the loss of secure historical identity (this position has remained outside the above discussion). These categories are very general, of course, and one could certainly refine and add to them. The point here, however, is simply to point out how the decisive dividing line is generally regarded as that separating the left-hand column from that on the right: separating the anti-historicizing positions from the historicizing ones. What the present discussion of the avant-garde critique of historicism aims to suggest is that a more productive line of thought may be one that runs along a rising diagonal: one that tries to negotiate the points of contact between the avant-garde critique of historicism and a "polymorphous postmodernism." That such points of contact exist has been demonstrated by the example of Clifford's ethnography; finding the terminology to express such contact, however, is a task the present dissertation has not undertaken. Were it undertaken, such an investigation might find that attempts to articulate a break with avant-garde temporal paradigms through various historicisms and returns to the past in fact remain caught within the temporal presuppositions they criticize.

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[24] Stephen Toulmin, *Cosmopolis: The Hidden Agenda of Modernity* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1990): 156.

[25] See, e.g., Wolfgang Welsch's claim that "the more radically one rejects everything pre-existing, the more exclusive and binding the ground gained through radical innovation must be. To the degree that one destroys all bridges with tradition and negates all alternatives to modernism, modernism itself becomes tendentially absolute" (*Unsere postmoderne Moderne*, 3rd ed., [Weinheim: VCH. Acta Humaniora, 1991]): 156. (My translation.)

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