Samuel Weber: Towards A Politics of Singularity

I. The Politics of Protection

0.

Walter Benjamin once wrote that the problem with hypotheses was the temptation "to place them at the beginning" and that it was this temptation that constituted "the abyss of all philosophizing."[1] He formulated this not as a declaration, but as a question, as a kind of suspicion. Hypotheses, and in particular suspicious ones, can and surely are a powerful force producing thought. They can also be fatal to it when they are either ignored or, what often amounts to the same, when they are "placed at the beginning" in the sense of a foundation upon which one can construct, or a cause that simply has to unfold itself. In another sense, however, they can serve as the beginning of thinking as long as they are recognized for what they are: responses to questions that have yet to be asked, but whose validity and relevance have also yet to be demonstrated. From such a demonstration one has the right to expect two things at least: first, a certain coherence of argumentation; and second, a certain ability to cast light on phenomena that are familiar but as such far from being understood: *bekannt* but not *erkannt,* as Hegel put it.

It is in this spirit that I want to share with you what are nothing more, or less, than a series of suspicions, concerning the role of something called "protection" in recent and not so recent political and intellectual life. Here, then, are some suspicions, or conjectures, on the role of "protection" in politics, meaning both in its *theory* and in those *practices* that may be associated with it.

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[1] GS II. 1, p. 141.

1. Because I am going to be discussing primarily recent or contemporary authors: Freud, Benjamin, Derrida, that I want to begin with an extremely brief excursion to what has well been called the foundations of modern political thought, in order to demonstrate how the problems addressed by the contemporary authors draw their importance precisely by being situated in a long, very long tradition.

1651: England is in the midst of civil war. Cromwell has defeated the Royalists and is preparing himself to assume the title, the "Great Protector." Thomas Hobbes begins the concluding paragraph of his treatise, *Leviathan, of The Matter, Forme, & Power of a Common-Wealth Ecclesiasticall and Civill* with the following resumé of the work:

> And thus I have brought to an end my Discourse of Civil and Ecclesiastical Government, occasioned by the disorders of the present time, without partiality, without application, and without other design than to set before men's eyes the mutual relation between *protection and obedience*; of which the condition of human nature, and the laws divine, (both natural and positive) require an inviolable observation. And though in the revolution of states, there can be no very good constellation for truths of this nature to be born under, (as having angry aspect from the dissolvers of an old government, and seeing but the backs of them that erect a new;) yet I cannot think it will be condemned at this time, either by the public judge of doctrine, or by any that desire the continuance of public peace.[2]

In thus emphasizing the object of his treatise as being nothing other than setting "before man's eyes the mutual relation between protection and obedience," Hobbes

[2] Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (Oxford UP: Oxford, 1996), p. 475 (my italics—SW).

closes the circle of the work that began with the following determination of the Leviathan:

> Nature (the art whereby God hath made and governs the world) is by the *art* of man, as in many other things, so in this also imitated, that it can make an artificial animal. […] *Art* goes yet further, imitating that rational and most excellent work of nature, *man.* For by art is created that great LEVIATHAN called a COMMONWEALTH, or STATE, (in Latin, CIVITAS) which is but an artificial man; though of greater stature and strength than the natural, *for whose protection and defence it was intended*; and in which, the *sovereignty* is an artificial *soul,* as giving life and motion to the whole body […] (7)

The raison d'être of the State qua Leviathan is thus non other than to provide the "protection and defence" of natural man, whose fallen and sinful body is vulnerable in a way that the body politic of the Leviathan is not. Which is, of course, not to say that the body politic itself is invulnerable: writing at the time of the English Civil Wars Hobbes could hardly have thought that. Rather, the principle of "protection" informs both the goal of the body politic as well as its own operations: it must protect itself in order to protect its members. And it must afford protection if it is to expect obedience from its members in exchange. The principle of sovereignty thus depends entirely on the ability of the sovereign to protect: itself no less than its constituents.

In what does the protection consist? What is to be protected from what? There are of course multiple answers and aspects to this question. But already from the initial sentences of the *Leviathan*, it is clear that what ultimately has to be protected by the Leviathan is life and livelihoods: above all that of the Leviathan itself, since only as long as it thrives can the lives of its individual members be assured.

It is Hobbes' conception of the Leviathan as an artificial living body, constructed to complement and palliate the vulnerabilities of actual living bodies, that determines its governing principle—that of *sovereignty*. The principle of life, as Hobbes defines it, is that of immanence: "Life is but a motion of limbs, the beginning whereof is in some principal part within," he writes. If it is to be a living body, the body politic must also have its principle of motion "within" itself. Sovereignty is thus determined by Hobbes as "an artificial soul" capable of "giving life and motion to the whole body." The "whole body" here of course is that of the body politic, which includes its various elements, human and non-human "magistrates, and other officers of judicature and execution" which Hobbes compares to the "joints" of the artificial body, wealth and riches: its strength, *salus populi* (the people's safety) its business and finally, "pacts and covenants" said to resemble "that *fiat*" by which God let there be light—and created the world. (7)

But the basic "pact and covenant" is that which proposes to assure the *salus populi* in exchange for the obedience of that *populus* to its laws and decrees. It is not insignificant that this covenant is likened to the divine *fiat,* "by which God let there be light—and created the world." For the exchange of obedience for protection is a direct result of the Christian interpretation of the fall of man. Hobbes quotes Paul (I. Cor. 15. 21, 22): "For since by man came death, by man came also the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive." (ch. 38, p. 298 [239]). In the interval between the departure of Christ and the Second Coming, it is the artificial body politic of the Leviathan that must assure the *salus populi* through "its power of life and death." (38, 1/p. 297 /238). It is this that justifies and maintains the obligation of subjects to obey the sovereign. If the latter fails in its mission to protect, the contract ceases to exist:

> The obligation of subjects to the sovereign, is understood to last as long, and no longer, than the power lasteth, by which he is able to protect them. For the right men have by nature to protect themselves, when none else can protect them, can by no covenant be relinquished. The sovereignty is the soul of the commonwealth; which once departed from the body, the members do no more receive their motions from it. The end of obedience is protection […] And though sovereignty, in the intention of them that make it, be immortal; yet is it in its own nature, not only subject to violent death, by foreign war; but also through the ignorance, and passions of men, it hath in it, from the very institution, many seeds of a natural mortality, by intestine discord. (II. 21, p. 147 [114]

The pages and pages devoted by Hobbes to combating the confusion of the Kingdom of God, in which there would be eternal life, "with the present Church or multitude of Christian men now living, or that being dead, are to rise again at the last day." (IV.44.4, p. 404 [334]—these pages are necessary not simply because of the religious conflicts being fought out in his time between Catholicism and Protestantism, between Church and State, but because the justification of the sovereign State is informed by a notion of "protection" modeled upon Christian redemption and salvation—even if, and this is the crux, access to that redemption is no longer direct in a world that has been both visited and forsaken by God in the form of his "son," Jesus the Christ. What is left behind is the promise of a salvation that in the meanwhile takes the form of public safety, whose protection is the task and mission of the State as Leviathan.

Politics in this perspective is thus dependent upon a function of protection that is intrinsically paradoxical, if not aporetic. For the State that is entrusted with the protection of its subjects must itself be protected—it must protect itself, qua State, in order to fulfill its function of protecting its subjects. It must safeguard the Christian

promise of salvation not directly, through ecclesiastical means, but indirectly, through the assurance of public safety and security, which in turn presupposes its ability to protect itself. Self-protection thus becomes the first and foremost task of the state, and of the politics that is informed by it.

But if the obedience required by the State depends upon its ability to protect those who are to obey, and if the model of such protection is based on the Christian promise of redemption, the question arises of how those who are to obey can decide whether or not the contract is being fulfilled, whether or not they are being afforded the protection they require. Without providing an answer, Hobbes describes the problem as the impossible task of construing infinity:

> Whatsoever we imagine is *finite*. Therefore there is no idea, no conception of anything we call *infinite.* No man can have in his mind an image of infinite magnitude; nor conceive infinite swiftness, infinite time, or infinite force, or infinite power. When we say any thing is infinite, we signify only, that we are not able to conceive the ends, and bounds of the things named; having no conception of the thing, but of our own inability. And therefore the name of God is used, not to make us conceive him; (for he is incomprehensible; and his greatness, and power are unconceivable;) but that we may honour him. […] No man can conceive anything, but he must conceive it in some place; and endued with some determinate magnitude; and which may be divided in parts; nor that any thing is all in this place, and all in another place at the same time; nor that two, or more things can be in one, and the same place at once. […] (3.12, p. 19)

It should be noted in passing—we may have occasion to return to it—that Hobbes conceives thinking as the production of images, on the basis of what he calls the "senses," and in particular, on the basis of what is interpreted as the *visual perception*

of objects as forms or figures, which is to say, as located "in some place; and endued with some determinate magnitude" and consequently, as excluding the possibility of existing in more than "one, and the same place at once." From this it results that whatever legitimacy that can be accorded sovereign states will have to be grounded in an experience or consciousness informed by what I will call *unitary localizability*: a single body in a single place at *one and the same place and time.*

This suggests how the "self" that must be protected at all costs by the Leviathan has to be conceived: as a single body occupying a single place at once and the same time. The singularity of the body thus localized individualizes the self, makes it this self and not another. However, since neither time nor place stand still since the Adamitic fall and expulsion from the Garden of Eden, the self cannot simply rely on its bodily localization to assure its ability to be—which is to say, to *stay*--one and the same, it is only as the external but indispensable vessel of the soul that it can assure this function. The political correlative of this is the relation between State and Territory: the latter must be contiguous in order for its soul, the Leviathan, to have a self to protect. But the stability of that contiguity is determined by what it excludes as well as what it includes. By what it excludes as other States ruling over other territories, and by the terms of the pact or covenant by which its subjects exchange obedience for protection.

But this structural instability, this permanent state of urgency is in fact a state of emergency in the most literal sense, since it derives from the *emergence* of the Leviathan itself. The latter is constituted through the decision of a multitude of individuals, living on a common, contiguous territory, to constitute a state in order to better protect themselves. They give up whatever powers they have and invest them in this new, artificial being, the Leviathan. This creates however a fundamental

contradiction: the multitude becomes a "people", that is a political body, only by abandoning its prerogatives qua individuals to the sovereign State. But in thus creating the State that is designed to protect them, they tend to abolish themselves as an independent political entity, as a people. As the French political theorist, Gérard Mairet, puts it in his introduction to the French translation of the Leviathan:

> The unity of a people thus created does not have its center in this same people, like the circle in geometry, because the center of gravity of the unity of a people is exterior to itself: it is the sovereign designated by the people. At the very instant when the individuals speak, they cease to be individuals in a multitude, and form a people; but this people in turn, at the moment when the sovereign is instituted, disappears *qua people*. The people finds the center of its being outside of itself (in the sovereign). It exists only as a linguistic fiction, without reality since its corporeality is entirely incarnated in the sovereign.[3]

Although Hobbes does not make explicit the paradox of a people dissolving itself at the moment that it incarnates itself in the Leviathan, the effects of this problematic incarnation emerge in the following passage:

> This done, the multitude so united in one person, is called a COMMONWEALTH, in Latin CIVITAS. This is the generation of that great LEVIATHAN, or rather (to speak more reverently) of that *Mortal God,* to which we owe under the *Immortal God,* our peace and defence. For by this authority, given him by every particular man in the commonwealth, he hath the use of so much power and strength conferred on him, that *by terror thereof,* he is able to conform the wills of them all, to peace at home, and mutual aid against enemies abroad. And in him consisteth the essence of the commonwealth; which (to define it,) is *one person, of whose*

[3] Gérard Mairet, "Introduction," Hobbes, *Léviathan* (Gallimard: Paris, 2000), p. 42.

> *acts a great multitude, by mutual covenants one with another, have made themselves every one the author, to the end he may use the strength and means of them all, as he shall think expedient, for their peace and common defense.* (Ch. 18, 2.13, p. 114).

Since all the "power and strength" of the assembled individuals has been transferred to the Leviathan, the result of that transfer is the simultaneous institution and dissolution of the very self—that of the "people"—that the Leviathan is created to protect. As a result, the "terror" through which the State is able to "conform the wills of them all, to peace at home and mutual aid against enemies abroad," becomes a means not only of defending the body politic but also of constantly reconstituting it, or rather, of repeating its auto-constitution which converges with its auto-dissolution. It is like a pilot light that in being lit, constantly goes out. It is in the blinking light of terror that the Mortal God pursues its ever-problematic mission of self-protection.

II.

If one compares the early "deconstructive" texts of Derrida with those written in the last fifteen years of his life, one can discover first an underlying consistency, and second, within it a significant shift. The consistency can be described as a focus upon the problem of identity and identification, as epitomized in the concepts of the self, the I and the subject. The shift takes place in the way the deconstruction of these categories is construed. In one of his earliest and ground-breaking texts, *Speech and Phenomena,* Derrida demonstrates how the Husserl of the *Logical Investigations* seeks to map out a sphere in which thinking, equated with self-consciousness, can constitute itself without getting caught in the "external" and indeterminable relativity of linguistic signification. The crux of Husserl's demonstration reposes on the notion

of self-perception: the speaking subject hears-and-understands-itself (*sich vernimmt*) without having to depend essentially upon a system of signification that inevitably introduces distance and indeterminability in its operation. The key term used by Husserl in this context, and which Derrida highlights, is that of *Selbstaffizierung,* auto-affection:

> The operation of "hearing oneself speak" is an auto-affection of a unique kind. On the one hand, it operates within the medium of universality; what appears as signified therein must be idealities that are *idealiter* indefinitely repeatable or transmissible as the same. On the other hand, the subject can hear or speak to itself and be affected by the signifier it produces, without passing through an external detour, the world, the sphere of what is not "his own." Every other form of auto-affection must either pass through what is outside the sphere of "ownness" or forego any claim to universality. When I see myself, either because I gaze upon a limited region of my body or because it is reflected in a mirror, what is outside the sphere of "my own" has already entered the field of this auto-affection, with the result that it is no longer pure. In the experience of touching and being touched, the same thing happens. In both cases, the surface of my body, as something external, must begin by being exposed in the world.[4]

The concept of auto-affection is, so Derrida argues in this early text, never "pure" in the way Husserl would have it: as "affection" it always involves an opening, an "exposure in the world" and to the outside, to what is alien and unappropriable. Husserlian Phenomenology, as a "metaphysics" of "presence," is also "a philosophy of life," which is to say, a philosophy that insists on the immanence and integrity of

[4] J. Derrida, *Speech and Phenomenon,* translated and introduced by David B. Allison (Northwestern UP: Evanston, 1973), pp. 78-79.

life, in regard to which "death is recognized as but an empirical and extrinsic signification, a worldly accident." (10)

The Husserlian effort to construct a notion of "auto-affection" that would be "pure"—i.e. purified of all constitutive relation to the external and the alien—is thus already, implicitly, interpreted by Derrida as a defensive effort to protect the notion of a "self" that could "express" itself without losing itself in a process of signification that is irreducibly heterogeneous. Derrida's demonstration, which we cannot elaborate here, consists in displaying that the very process of repetition that Husserl invokes to distinguish "ideality"—that which stays the same over time and space—from empiricity harbors within itself an irreducible dimension of difference as well as sameness, and that these two cannot be radically disassociated from one another. This "primordial structure of repetition that […] govern[s] all acts of signification"—which will later be designated as "iterability" by Derrida—is here mobilized to reveal that there can be no representation that is simply expressive, in the sense of establishing an uninterrupted continuum between the consciousness of a speaking subject and his speech. As a function of repetition or iteration, all "ideality" is always in advance composed of sameness and difference, and thus is never simply self-identical or "ideal". Or, as Derrida puts it:

> Auto-affection is not a modality of experience that characterizes a being that would already be itself (*autos*). It produces sameness as self-relation within self-difference; it produces sameness as the nonidentical. (82)

Derridean deconstruction thus has as its initial object the "self," the "*autos*" of auto-affection, of *Selbstaffizierung* or self-presence. *Speech and Phenomenon* concludes with the following words:

> Contrary to what phenomenology—which is always phenomenology of perception—has tried to make us believe, contrary to what our desire cannot fail to be tempted into believing, *the thing itself* always escapes.
>
> Contrary to the assurance that Husserl gives us […] "the look" cannot "abide." (104—my italics--SW)

In the over 40 years that Derrida wrote and published, a primary focus of his attention remained the "self," and its inevitable but futile efforts to "assure" itself of its identity in a self-identical world, a world of "things in themselves." A necessary correlative of this project was that of exploring the various ways in which "our desire cannot fail to be tempted into believing" that such is the case—that we inhabit a world of "things in themselves" in which "the look" might be able to "abide." And the mechanism that drew his attention again and again, in demonstrating both why such desire had to be continually reassured and also could never be satisfied with any assurance, remained the same: the "repetitive structure" of all signification, of all marking and demarcation, of all identification and hence, of all identity—but which, as irreducibly heterogeneous, inevitably came to mark with a sameness that is never simply identical. The very existence, in English, of the word "selfsame" bears witness to this sameness that is never simply self-identical.

So much then for the continuity to which I have referred. The shift with which I am concerned emerges during the last decade of his writing, beginning (to my knowledge at least) in 1993 with *Specters of Marx,* and elaborated and transformed in books such as *Politics of Friendship* (1994), *Faith and Knowledge* (1996) and culminating no doubt in *Rogues* (Fr: 2003). It is marked by the introduction of a term that resembles the earlier one I have been discussing sufficiently to make its divergence from it all the more worth reflecting upon: the term, *autoimmunity*. In place of the earlier

"affection," the notion of self is now linked to that of "immunity." The context of the two terms explains the shift, at least in part. Here, three points can be noted.

1. *First*, the titles of the books mentioned all deal either directly or indirectly not exclusively or primarily with philosophy, but with politics (this fact becomes even more evident if we add another text in which Derrida elaborates the notion of autoimmunity, the interview given shortly after September 11, 2001, to the Italian writer, Giovanna Boradorri, published some years later in English under the title—surely not from Derrida--*Philosophy in a Time of Terror*). The only partial exception is the book, *Faith and Knowledge*, which, as its subtitle indicates, is concerned with *The Two Sources of "Religion" at the Limits of Reason Alone*. But Derrida's discussion of "religion" clearly places it in a context that is political—both geopolitical and in in its own, quite distinctive way, "biopolitical."

2. This word, biopolitical, which Derrida does not use, brings us to the *second* aspect of the shift I am describing. The term, "autoimmune," comes from the life-sciences, and in particular from medicine, not philosophy. It thus suggests a shift, from the discourse of philosophy to that of the life sciences. To determine just what may be new, here, in Derrida's work, is complex, since as we have just seen, deconstruction constituted itself in an encounter with what Derrida, in *Speech and Phenomenon* describes as a "philosophy of life." (SP, 10). In this respect, the question of "life" was already at the heart of Derrida's earliest writings. The "metaphysics of presence" thereby appears as a defensive effort to offer "assurances" to a desire all too ready to accept the same no matter what cost: assurance that life could be construed as pure immanence, as life present to itself, and that death could consequently be seen as its external and extraneous other. Life was thus to be considered as the "norm," and death as the exception. But in his reading of Husserl, Derrida demonstrated that the

very arguments that sought to purify "auto-affection" from all constitutive relation to alterity also irrevocably estranged it from the self-identity of an "I," whose ideal "significance" (*Bedeutung*) had to be universally intelligible in the absence of the singular entity uttering it and designated by that utterance. This might thus enable the mark "I" to outlive the presence of its original author or referent, but it did not establish the domain of pure interiority, of pure self-affection that was required to establish a transcendental, i.e. lasting process of thought. This suggests one aspect of the shift in question, namely from the singularity of the "I" to the generality of a self whose identity could now be construed of as being species-specific rather than tied to individuals. This search for a self-contained and meaning-ful *norm* thus shifts from the effort to describe the auto-affection of an individuated, albeit also transcendental consciousness, to a discourse centered on the generality of living species, also known as the "life sciences."

At the same time, however, Derrida, in adopting the term, "auto-immunity" clearly seeks to detach it from the biomedical normality that construes it as an essentially *pathological* process. For Derrida, *autoimmunity* does not designate an illness that more or less accidentally befalls an intrinsically healthy organism, no more than "autoaffection," in its "impure," and differential dimension, could be construed (I repeat here the passage quoted previously) as

> a modality of experience that characterizes a being that would already be itself (*autos*). It produces sameness as self-relation within self-difference; it produces sameness as the nonidentical. (82)

And yet this passage also suggests the considerable distance that separates the term, *auto-affection* from its successor in Derrida's later work. For whereas auto-affection could be said to "produce sameness as the nonidentical," *auto-immunity* seems much more sinister: in seeking to protect the organism, it attacks and destroys it. Or rather, in the singular interpretation given the term by Derrida, it attacks and destroys *itself:* namely, the protective defenses of the system. The mechanisms and processes that seek to protect a living system against threats from without, attacks its own defenses thus rendering the organism all the more vulnerable to destruction.

Or—and this complicates the process—rendering it more open to transformation. And it is this that enables Michael Naas, in an extremely helpful and comprehensive discussion of the concept, to suggest that the term functions as "the last iteration of what Derrida called for more than forty years *deconstruction*."[5] Autoimmunity is thus both suicidal and self-transformative. Or rather, it *is* suicidal, and it *can be—but is not necessarily—*transformative. This, at least is what emerges from several—although not all—of its formulations in the writings of Derrida, and perhaps most clearly in one of, if not the earliest of its articulations. In *Specters of Marx,* Derrida uses the term to describe an attitude shared by both Marx and the object of his scathing critique in the German Ideology, *Max Stirner*:

> Both of them love life, which is always the case but never goes without saying for finite beings: they know that life does not go without death, and that death is not beyond, outside of life, unless one inscribes the beyond in the inside, in the essence of the living. They both share, apparently like you and me, an unconditional

[5] Michael Naas, ""One Nation … Indivisible": Jacques Derrida on the Autoimmunity of Democracy and the Sovereignty of God," *Research in Phenomenology,* 36, 1 (2006), p. 15.

> preference for the living body. But precisely because of that, they wage an endless war against whatever represents it, whatever is not the body but belongs to it, returns to it: prosthesis and delegation, repetition, difference. The living ego is autoimmune, which is what they do not want to know. To protect its life, to constitute itself as unique living ego, to relate, as the same, to itself, it is necessarily led to welcome the other within (so many figures of death: difference of the technical apparatus, iterability, non-uniqueness, prosthesis, synthetic image, simulacrum, all of which begins with language, before language), it must therefore take the immune defenses apparently meant for the non-ego, the enemy, the opposite, the adversary and direct them at once *for itself and against itself.*[6]

In order to protect itself, the "living ego" must not just defend against what it considers to be foreign—it must also "welcome the other within" in the different forms of technical protheses, substitutes, supplements and simulacra of all sorts, and also language and its antecedents. This dependence on the foreign, ego-alien, complicates the task of the immune system. If it protects by attacking only those elements that it considers alien to its body, then it runs the risk of impoverishing, weakening and ultimately destroying that body. And thus, it can come to do what for many years medical science considered exclusively as an abnormal and pathological process[7], namely, attack itself, which is to say, attack its ability to attack antigens. To fulfill its mission of protection, it must turn against the system of protection itself,

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[6] J. Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, translated by Peggy Kamuf (Routledge: New York & London, 1994, p. 141.

[7] In the past few decades this attitude has changed radically in the life-sciences, which has recognized the usefulness and necessity of attenuating immunological reactions in order to "protect" the system—as in the case of organ transplants, the most obvious example of the dependency of the "self" upon "others" in order to survive.

against itself. Autoimmunity thus emerges as the aporetic norm of the singular living being: it can only survive by protecting against its own protection.

The passage from *Specters of Marx* links autoimmunity to *life in the singular,* which is to say, to the individual body and to the first person singular, the ego or I. But it is only in *Faith and Knowledge,* that the political potential of autoimmunity begins to emerge with clarity:

> Community as com-mon autoimmunity. No community, which would not cultivate its own autoimmunity, a principle of sacrificial self-destruction ruining the principle of self-protection (the preserving of the integrity of the self), and this in view of some sort of invisible and spectral sur-vival. This self-contesting attestation keeps the autoimmune community alive, which is to say, open to something other and more than itself: the other, the future, death, freedom, the coming or the love of the other, the space and time of a spectralizing messianicity beyond all messianism.[8]

"Community," political and otherwise, thus is the product not just of "the principle of self-protection" seeking to preserve "the integrity of the self"—the self as integral and integrating—but of the protection that protects against protection, in the sense of excluding or neutralizing what is held to be alien and extraneous. The latter includes "space and time of a spectralizing messianicity," as well as "the future, death, freedom" and "the coming or love of the other."

In order for a community to survive—and a community that does not have a certain duration is not a community—it must protect not just against its own system of protection, but it must protect against the prevailing actualization of that system as a

[8] Jacques Derrida, *Faith and Knowledge…*, in: *Jacques Derrida, Acts of Religion*, edited and introduced by Gil Anidjar (Routledge: New York & London, 2002), p. 87.

unified self. In short, it must protect against the principle of sovereignty, which, since Bodin and Hobbes, has served as the defining principle of the State and, in the period of liberal individualism, also increasingly of its individual members, qua Egos.

For Derrida, one of the privileged if infinitely problematic sites from where this link between Ego and State can and should be pursued—although this has not yet been developed very far—is Psychoanalysis. That this has not happened, despite an auspicious beginning in the work of Freud, is due not simply to external resistances, but also to internal ones. In a long interview with Derrida, the French historian of Psychoanalysis, Elisabeth Roudinesco, asks him if the resistance of universities to Freud and his followers is not the result of "fear of the unconscious."[9] Derrida's reply probably surprised her:

> A "subject," no matter of what kind (whether individual, citizen, or state) constitutes and institutes itself only out of such "fear," and therefore it always has the force or *the protective form* of a dam or a barrier (*un barrage*). It interrupts the force that it then stores and channels. For despite their differences, which are never to be forgotten, our European societies always stand under the aegis of something like *an* ethical, legal and political "system," *an* idea of the Good, of Right and of the Commonwealth [*cite*]. […] What I in abbreviated form here call a "system" and an "idea, must be *protected* against that which might threaten it from psychoanalysis—which nevertheless arose in Europe and in the person of Freud continued to be thoroughly informed by a European model of culture, of civilization and of progress.

[9] Jacques Derrida, Elisabeth Roudinesco, *For What Tomorrow?* Jacques **Derrida** and Elisabeth **Roudinesco**, Translated by Jeff Fort (Stanford UP: Stanford, 2004). Page numbers in the text refer to the French edition (Flammarion: Paris, 2003).

> This "system" and this "idea" are designed above all to resist whatever is felt to be a threat. For the "logic of the unconscious"[10] remains incompatible with that which determines the identity of ethics, of the political and of the juridical not only conceptually, but no less in its institutions and consequently in the experiences of human beings. (290)

Psychoanalysis thus challenges, so Derrida, not simply an established discipline or series of disciplines: psychology, medicine etc.—but rather an entire "system" of Western culture and civilization, in its "ethical, legal and political" dimensions. But this is a challenge that has not simply been rejected by those institutions, but also—and this is perhaps more serious—been largely ignored in everyday life, and this not just *outside* of the psychoanalytical institutions:

> If psychoanalysis were to be taken seriously, really, practically, there would result an earthquake that is difficult to imagine. Something indescribable. Even for psychoanalysts. (290)

This unimaginable "earthquake," that is scrupulously ignored by both institutions and individuals, is nevertheless in full swing, but so deeply embedded in everyday experience that it is difficult to discern and easy to overlook:

> In the meanwhile this seismic threat plays itself out within ourselves, within each single individual. In our lives, as we know only too well […] we generally act as though psychoanalysis had never existed. Even those who, like ourselves, are convinced of the inescapable necessity of the psychoanalytical *revolution*, or at least of its *questions,* still act in their lives, in their ordinary language, in

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[10] Derrida puts this (Lacanian) phrase in quotes to signal that it is not one that he endorses, but rather questions throughout this interview and elsewhere, since in his eyes, psychoanalysis does not merely establish another form of "logic," even one of the Unconscious.

> their social experience as though nothing had happened [...] In an entire realm of our lives we act as though we still believed, at bottom, in the sovereign authority of the I, of consciousness etc., and employ the language of this "autonomy." We know, to be sure, that we speak several languages at once. But that makes almost no difference, either in our souls or our bodies, whether the body of each individual, the body of society, the body of the nation, or the body of the discursive and juridical-political apparatus. (291)

The "questions" of psychoanalysis thus cut across and link the realms of what is usually separated as "individual" and "collective," "personal" and "institutional" experience, and its cut goes to the root of the modern notions of subjectivity as autonomous. Instead, the subject, "no matter of what kind: individual, collective or institutional […] constitutes itself only out of fear," as an instance of protection. Protection therefore, like auto-affection and auto-immunity, is not something that befalls a subject already constituted as self-consciousness. Rather, self-consciousness constitutes itself as identical in, through and *as* that response to danger that we call *fear*. And this, Derrida asserts, is as true on the institutional and political level, as it is on that of individual experience.

This is why the notion of "sovereignty" becomes for Derrida not simply a political notion, but more generally one that sustains—and is sustained by--the modern notion of an autonomous self. In a keynote speech held in the summer of 2000 before an international meeting of psychoanalysts in Paris, Derrida situates the link between individual, collective and categorical "sovereignty" by relating it to what he designates as a "metaphysics of sovereignty" in an age of "globalization":

> The world, the world-wide process of globalization, with all of its consequences—political, social, economic, legal, technical-scientific etc.—resists without a doubt psychoanalysis. […] It

> mobilizes against it not only a model of positive science, which can be positivist, cognitivist, physicalist, psycho-pharmalogical, genetic, but also at times a hermeneutics that becomes spiritualist, religious or simplistically philosophical; in this mobilization participate institutions, concepts and archaic ethical, legal or political practices that are informed by a distinct logic, namely by a certain metaphysics of *sovereignty* (autonomy and omnipotence of the subject—whether individual or statist—freedom, egological will, conscious intentionality, or, of you prefer, the ego, ideal-ego, super-ego etc. The first gesture of psychoanalysis will (have to) be to provide an account of the unavoidability [of this mobilization], although at the same time it will have to aim at deconstructing its genealogy—which also traverses a cruel murder.

The concluding allusion to the "cruel murder" recalls how, in both Totem and Taboo and in *The Man Moses and Monotheistic Religion*, Freud links the process of civilization to the murder of the founding figure, be it the Primal Father in the speculative Primal Horde, or be it Moses as the Egyptian, that is alien, founder of the Jewish people. However skeptical he remains as to the historical accuracy of such speculations, Derrida insists on their symbolic significance as reminders of the violence required by all institutionalization, whether individual (of the ego) or collective (of the state or nation). The notion of indivisible sovereignty, with its powers over the life and death of its subjects, is here characterized as a power of *mobilization,* setting into motion for the purpose of affirming the Self—and consequently of resisting that aspect of psychoanalysis that calls into question the Self and its autonomy. The "metaphysics of sovereignty" defends its system against the challenges of a psychoanalysis that however is also part of it, and that therefore acts in a similar manner. The resistance, once again, comes not just from without but as always, also from within:

> For this resistance is also a resistance against itself. There is something wrong [*il y a un mal*], at any rate *an autoimmunizing function* within psychoanalysis as everywhere else, a rejection of itself, a resistance against itself, against its own principle, against its *own principle of protection*. (20)

If such an "autoimmunizing function" is as inevitable as it is ubiquitous, the question then becomes that of distinguishing between its different directions and effects. It can either insist on preserving and protecting what cannot simply be protected: the given, actual self-identity of the institution or the individual. Or it can offer an opportunity to transform that self-identity by no longer simply protecting it, as it was, but opening it to a transformation, to the heterogeneity that it has always contained, but also sought to reduce and dissimulate.

This is why Derrida includes the "metapsychological" concepts of psychoanalysis, including, as we have seen, the triad of ego, superego and id, in the list of concepts belonging to the "metaphysics of sovereignty." And why his interest in psychoanalysis has always been situated on its margins: either there where Freud disrupts his previous system deliberately, as in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle,* or there where he allows himself to be drawn into areas that are difficult to integrate in the existing psychoanalytic conceptuality, as in his famous essay on *The Uncanny.*

That essay has often been read—perhaps first by Hélène Cixous—as itself being "uncanny". Freud claims that he has long since ceased to have any direct experience of the "uncanny," and therefore has to resort to literary examples, whereas, as Ernest Jones, his biographer, long ago noted, he interrupted writing the essay precisely until he reached the age of 63, because he was afraid of dying at the same age as his father. In the text, Freud gives as an example of an "uncanny" belief in numbers, the number 62—but without of course acknowledging that the significance it had had for himself

and the writing of the text. But there is a more systemic explanation for Freud's uncanny excursion in the uncanny, a realm he seeks to appropriate for his psychoanalytic system. At the time he is writing the essay, he is in the process of rethinking the entire bases of the system, associated with the so-called "pleasure principle." Part of that system was the tenet that anxiety—the general class to which "the uncanny" in part belongs (but does not exhaust). Under the aegis of the "pleasure principle," anxiety was seamlessly integrated into the Freudian system as the result or effect of repression, itself explained as a result of the pleasure principle. A representation came to be associated with displeasure, and was therefore repressed, banished from consciousness, and replaced by a substitute-formation, by another "idea". When the substitute-idea lost its power to keep the repressed, unpleasant representation from becoming conscious, there occurred a "return of the repressed," which—so this "first" psychoanalytic theory of anxiety—brought with it the experience of the "uncanny"—that which had long been familiar but precisely because of its familiarity could not be integrated into the "household" of self-consciousness.

However already in that essay, Freud had to acknowledge that this explanation fell short of being satisfactory, since not every "return of the repressed" produced anxiety, and not every anxiety could be equated with "the uncanny." A few years later, after discarding the "pleasure principle" due to his discovery of the "repetition compulsion" and the "death drive," Freud also reversed his first theory of anxiety into a second one. According to this theory, most fully elaborated in the 1926 essay, *Inhibition, Symptom and Anxiety,* Anxiety was no longer the effect of repression but its cause. And this inversion did more than just operate an exchange of places between anxiety and repression. For in placing anxiety at the origin of repression,

Freud acknowledged, at least implicitly, that his psychoanalytic system was incapable of providing an adequate causal explanation of psychic structure. For anxiety, as he emphasized in the 1926 text, presupposes something like an Ego or a proto-Ego, which therefore has to be reckoned with from the beginning, as it were, even before the Ego can fully constitute itself. The Ego, for Freud, is on the one hand not given from the start—it has to be developed, and a certain form of repression is required for its development. But at the same time, if anxiety functions as the cause of repression, then the Ego has to be somewhere in the wings, inasmuch as anxiety is defined by Freud as the "reaction of the Ego to danger." "Danger," Freud explains, is a relational concept: it is always a danger *for* or *to* something else. In this case, the danger involved has to be defined in terms of the disruption that it can bring to the psychic instance or agency—the Ego--that seeks to establish a certain degree of unity and coordination among the differing components of the psyche, between "id" (or "it") and super-ego. Now the Ego, as Freud describes it, is not there from the beginning: it is formed through a gradual process that Freud describes in a late, unfinished essay, his last attempt to provide a synoptical overview of his entire system, *Outline of Psychoanalysis*:

> Under the influence of the surrounding real external world, a part of the Id (It) undergoes a particular development. Originally equipped as an exterior surface with organs for the reception of stimuli and with an apparatus for *protection against stimuli* [*mit den Organen zur Reizaufnahme und den Einrichtungen zum Reizschutz*], a particular organization emerges that from now on will mediate

> between It and external world. This realm of psychic life we assign the name, *I* [or Ego].[11]

This passage, written in 1939, takes up almost literally an earlier description written some 20 years earlier in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920), but with a significant shift. In the earlier text, which for the first time places the development of a "protective shield" (*Reizschutz*) at the core of psychic formation, described not the development of the I (Ego) but rather that of "consciousness". At first, however, Freud describes the process as though it concerned the development of an organic system per se, not a psychic one:

> This little fragment of living substance is suspended in the middle of an external world charged with the most powerful energies, and it would be killed by the stimulation emanating from these if it were not provided with a protective shield against stimuli. It acquires the shield in this way: its outermost surface ceases to have the structure proper to living matter, becomes to some degree inorganic and thenceforward functions as a special envelope or membrane resistant to stimuli. […] By its death, the outer layer has saved all the deeper ones from a similar fate—unless, that is to say, stimuli reach it that are so strong that they break through the protective shield. *Protection against* stimuli is an almost more important function for the living organism than *reception of* stimuli.[12]

Even before he arrives at the description of the "death-drive," a certain "death"—that of the surface "membrane"—becomes the condition of survival for the organism, and as we shall see, also for the psyche—and ultimately for the Ego. Only such a "death"—the transformation of organic to inorganic matter—creates that "protective

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[11] S. Freud, *Abriß der Psychoanalyse,* GS XVII, p. 79. My translation and emphasis—SW.

[12] *Beyond the Pleasure Principle,* (Bantam Books: 1972), pp. 52-53.

shield" that is necessary if the organism is to survive. In a certain sense, then, "trauma"—the breaking-through of the protective shield—is the condition against which the organism, consciousness and the Ego will have to defend and protect itself: not just at the origin, but constantly thereafter as well. Everything then depends on just how this process of protection is to be construed.

In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* Freud throws out a number of suggestive speculations, without being able to develop any of them. The first describes the process of defense and protection as a kind of sampling that implies both being able to localize the "direction and nature of the external stimuli" (53) and also then being able to organize it in a way that diminishes its traumatic potential. This involves the development of what might be called "attention," although Freud does not—later, in Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety, he will however call attention to a related defensive process, which he calls "isolation" and which involves separating the potentially dangerous stimulus or representation from its ramifications and connections to other things. Since the danger comes not from individual sources but rather from their cumulative and disintegrative connections, such "isolation" is as if not more effective than "repression" in the traditional sense. It is, Freud notes, also very difficult to identify—one could also say, to "isolate"—since it overlaps with what is the core of so-called "normal" thought processes, namely what is called "concentration". When therefore in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* Freud emphasizes both the spatial and temporal aspects of the "sampling" of potentially threatening stimuli—and he even goes so far as to speculate that the "Kantian theorem that time and space are 'necessary forms of thought'" (Kant of course speaks of Anschauung, intuition, literally: "looking-at", rather than of "thought" in general)—what he is actually describing is the use of spatial-temporal coordinates to *locate* and thus

partially to neutralize the potential threat to consciousness, the ego and indeed to life itself.

To understand wherein this threat, this danger against which the Ego defends through both through its "protective shield" and through anxiety, as a "signal" of a potential "danger," requires interpretation. Freud himself tends to formulate the threat in terms of an excess of energy, a quantitative amount of energy that cannot be absorbed by the system—organic or psychic—that it "threatens". But given that the two "systems" concerned are first of all, consciousness, and second of all, the Ego, we can reformulate the nature of the threat involved: the quantitative excess that threatens the Ego and Consciousness is one that cannot be *integrated* into the systems concerned. What is at stake is an irreducible multiplicity or differentiality that as such threatens the *unity of consciousness and of the Ego.* Indeed, it is not consciousness as such that is threatened—and indeed, consciousness as such is, as Freud recognizes again and again, a far more mysterious and enigmatic entity than is commonly realized—but rather the *unity of a consciousness that therefore must be understood as self-consciousness.* It is the unity of a consciousness that seeks to repeat itself as one and the same, despite the irreducible differences involved in all repetition. Hence, the "demonic" quality of the "repetition compulsion" that Freud acknowledges in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle:* it is demonic, but also fascinating, precisely insofar as it entails a repetition that does not come full circle, that produces the "same" but without resolving it in the unity of a "self". It is this that makes it demonic, but also automatic: a repetition that produces the "same" as the "nonidentical," to recall the formulation of Derrida. It entails "sameness without self" if by self is understood self-identity.

The protective defense against this "danger" always involves the effort to reduce multiplicity to unity, difference to identity, sameness to self. And since the "danger" comes not simply from "without" but also from "within"—since the "protective shield" is required in order to establish the very difference between outside and inside, and therefore continues to impinge upon the inside that depends upon it, i.e. upon the outside—one, if not the preferred mechanism for protecting against internal difference is what Freud calls "projection,"

> the tendency to treat them [stimuli] as though they were acting, not from the inside, but from the outside, so that it may be possible to bring the shield against stimuli into operation as a means of defence against them. This is the origin of *projection,* which is destined to play such a large part in the causation of pathological processes. (Beyond, 56)

Earlier on in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* Freud introduces a distinction that is by no means specific to the discourse of Psychoanalysis, but that can be extremely illuminating in the context of this discussion of *protection through projection*: that between "fear," "anxiety," and "fright" or "terror" [*Schreck*]:

> "Anxiety" describes a particular state of expecting the danger of preparing for it even though it may be an unknown one. "Fear" requires a definite object of which to be afraid. "Fright" [or Terror] however is the name we give to the state a person gets into when he has run into danger without being prepared for it: it emphasizes the factor of surprise. I do not believe that anxiety can produce a traumatic neurosis. There is something about anxiety that protects its subject against fright and so against fright-neuroses. (30)

If we take this description together with Freud's speculation about how a certain "sampling" can function as a protective measure, by determining the "direction" in which the danger comes, we see how time and space can be mobilized and perhaps

even constructed as a framework in which such protection can be construed: time and space are "forms" in which a potential danger can be located as an object of "*Anschauung*," to recall the Kantian term, in which space and time are defined as "forms" of "outer" and "inner *Anschauung*" respectively. We see here how misleading the consecrated English translation of *Anschauung* as "intuition" can be: for what is at stake in this context at least is the possibility of literally being "looked *at*," and thereby localized, identified and potentially at least assimilated and brought under control. This in turn presupposes a certain distance, *through* which one can look "at" something, envisage or imagine it. What ultimately has to be "protected" then is the distance that separates the perceiver from the perceived, subject from object—separates but also joins through the supposed homogeneity of the space "in between".

The three interrelated terms, *fear, anxiety and terror* (my translation for *Schreck*), are thus all part of a single process: that of responding to and protecting against an unassimilable alterity or difference, that per se cannot be unified or reduced to the self-same. "Anxiety" thus mediates between the relative stability of fear, and the relative instability of terror or fright: it involves, as Freud stresses, a certain "preparedness," (Angstbereitschaft), which in turn is directed as much to the future as to the past. To the past, since it cannot imagine or envisage the danger without recurring to memory and reproducing analogous situations; and to the future, since precisely the danger is always yet to come. The child's game of throwing the spool out of the playpen and then hauling it back, accompanied by the sounds, oooo---aaa, which Freud translates as "fort-da": gone-there, indicates how certain repetitive gestures can be used to mimic the "preparedness" that is required to protect the Ego from future losses and threats. But qua repetition, what returns as "there" is never simply "here"—it returns as the "same" perhaps, but never simply as the self-same,

never a simple unity. What returns can therefore be designated as the after-effect of the "singular," which is a differential and relational notion that can be experienced only in its disappearance, only in its "traces" as the early Derrida might have said. The "singular" in this sense if very different from the "individual," if we take this term literally. For the "singular" is always divided in and of itself, always separated from the self-same, and it is this that constitutes both its uniqueness and also its inaccessibility. We can never experience the singular in and of itself, directly, but only in what remains, what is "there" but never simply "here": the resource of the German "da", which is not simply "dort" (the equivalent of "there" as opposed to "here"). What is "da" is both here and there, and thus never simply in one place at a time: a body, perhaps, but not in the sense defined by Hobbes, taking up a definition that goes back to Aristotle, as that which can only be in one place at one time and can also never share that place with anything else.

It is this definition of bodies and places, based on a certain notion of identity as isolation, that Benjamin, following Freud (but unaware of his thoughts on "isolation") picks up in his study of Baudelaire and relates, as did Freud before him, to memory. Or rather, to different sorts of memory: to that which is presupposed by "Erlebnis," by a so-called "lived experience" that seeks to protect itself by putting experiences temporally in their proper places, by isolating them—and *Erfahrung,* which, although Benjamin does not stress this, is constructed on the verb, *fahren,* to travel or traverse, and thus entails movement and alteration.

> Perhaps the special achievement of shock defense is the way it assigns content an exact place in time [*eine exakte Zeitstelle*] in consciousness, at the cost of the integrity of the content. That would be the greatest achievement of reflection. It would make the incident into an *Erlebnis*—a lived experience. If it is omitted, what

> would ensue is the joyful [*freudige*] or (mostly) unpleasant terror [*Schreck*] that according to Freud sanctions the failure to defend against shock.[13]

It should be noted that Benjamin, via a word-play on the name of Freud (=freudig: joyful), opens up what Freud himself does not easily acknowledge, although he is later obliged to concede that non-integrated "tensions" can indeed be a source of pleasure and not merely pain.[14] In short, for Benjamin the unitary perspective of self-consciousness and of the ego do not constitute the court of last resort. It is significant that his notion of an "experience" that cannot simply be reduced to a notion of "life" based on the unity of self-consciousness—*Erlebnis*—is made in the context of a discussion of poetry, that of Baudelaire, or literature more generally, that of Proust for instance. The latter provides Benjamin for a model of "awakening" in which the unity of the body and the unity of consciousness are dislocated simultaneously, when Marcel recalls via the experience of individual bodily members, no longer integrated into the body as an organic whole, container of an equally unified self. Instead of the self-contained body, it is the non-integrated relations of individual bodily members to singular contexts that constitutes the "experience" as one of irreducible alterity:

> Un homme qui dort tient en cercle autour de lui le fil des heures, l'ordre des années et des mondes. Il les consulte d'instinct en s'éveillant et y lit en une seconde le point de

[13] GS I.2, 615; SW 4, 319 (translated modified—SW).

[14] In "The Economic Problem of Masochism," Freud comes to the belated realization that there are certain "tensions" that can be pleasurable, and certain relaxations that can be painful, of which sexual experience is the most obvious instance. From this he concludes that the equation of tension with displeasure, at the basis of the "pleasure principle," cannot be sustained, and that instead of an absolute increase or decrease in tension, it may be questions of "rhythm" that are more relevant to the discrimination of please and displeasure.

la terre qu'il occupe, le temps qui s'est écoulé jusqu'à son réveil; mais leurs rangs peuvent se mêler, se rompre. Que vers le matin, après quelque insomnie, le sommeil le prenne en train de lire, dans une posture trop différente de celle où il dort habituellement, il suffit de son bras soulevé pour arrêter et faire reculer le soleil, et à la première minute de son réveil, il ne saura plus l'heure, il estimera qu'il vient ä peine de se coucher. Que s'il s'assoupit dans une position encore plus déplacée et divergente, par exemple après dîner assis dans un fauteuil, alors le bouleversement sera complet dans les mondes désorbités, le fauteuil magique le fera voyager a toute vitesse dans le temps et dans l'espace, et au moment d'ouvrir les paupières, il se croira couche quelques mois plus tôt dans une autre contrée. (5)

> (A man asleep holds in a circle around him the thread of hours, the order of years and of worlds. He consults them instinctively in waking up, and reads there in a second the point of the earth that he occupies, the time that has passed before his wakening; but their ranks can become mixed, break apart. If towards morning, after a night of insomnia, sleep overtakes him as he is reading, *in a posture too different from that in which he habitually sleeps,* and all that is necessary is for him to raise his arm to stop the sun and make it go backwards, and at the first minute of his wakening, he will no longer know the time, and will think that he has just gone to bed. And if he falls asleep in a position even more displaced and divergent, for example after dinner seated in an arm-chair, the transformation will be complete in worlds out of orbit, the magic armchair causing him to travel at great speed in time and in space, until at the moment of opening his eyes, he will believe that he fell asleep several months earlier in another country.)

Benjamin, who refers to Proust but does not cite this passage, surely had it and others in mind when he made his distinction between *Erlebnis* and *Erfahrung,* between "lived experience" and "experience" that is not simply "lived," if by lived is meant, as it usually is, that which is reducible to the specious unity of self-consciousness. Instead, the dislocation of the body into singular members and nonunifiable experiences traversing multiple places at one and the same time, dislocates that one

and the same and opens it to an experience of events that are as singular as they are finite. Or rather, *indefinite*: the never entirely definable singularity of events that are "one" but never simply the "same".

Thus, the sovereignty of the subject is dislocated by an experience of the indefinite singularity of events that inevitably entails both pain and pleasure, fright and joy. By a "motion of limbs" that, as we remember, was Hobbes' definition of life. But it is a life that cannot be assimilated or reduced to the unity of a "whole body," the correlative of that wholeness of the body politic without which sovereignty, as indivisible, cannot be conceived.

That Benjamin turns to literature and poetry, that of Baudelaire and Proust, to find instances of that experience of singularity that is neither simply protective nor projective, that does not turn anxiety into a "signal," as Freud puts it, through which to "prepare" for an assimilation of what is to come. That anxiety, and even terror— can be a source of "pleasure" if not of joy, is an experience that increasingly informs politics today. But whether that pleasure can be acknowledged without being entirely assimilated—whether in short not just a poetics, but a politics of singularity can come to replace the politics of the sovereign self, remains an open question.