Losing Touch: Rethinking Contingency as Common Tangency in Continental Thought

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ABSTRACT

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This dissertation grows out of the collapse of traditional Christian justifications for evil in the wake of Enlightenment critiques of religion and the atrocities of the twentieth century. Skeptical of teleological narratives that sought to domesticate suffering as part of a necessary plan - whether God's plan, or some more secularized ideal of progress - a generation of Critical Theorists adopted the concept of contingency as their central tool for political critique. Defined as the realm of chance, change, and the unnecessary, contingency serves for most contemporary thinkers to remind us that even seemingly natural categories, such as sex, race, and religion could have been otherwise. Yet in using contingency to make sweeping statements about the nature of history, scholars often overlook how contingency is understood on the ground by those who feel their bodies and identities abruptly made unstable. This project seeks to reground contingency in the specificity of human experience by returning to a neglected Christian tradition that understood contingency as a state of finitude, defined in contrast to the necessary, impassive God. For such thinkers, contingency was experienced most acutely in the sense of touch as it renders the body vulnerable to the external world and the passions as they ambush the soul.

Accordingly, this work picks up at one of the last junctures before questions of history swept away the tactile, affective understanding of contingency: the end of the eighteenth century with the influence of Pietism on the Early German Romantics. This work draws this particular moment into conversation with the history of science, literature, and the anthropology of the senses, asking questions about the influence of shifting medical theories on the cultural

understanding of touch; the historical ties between this version of contingency and theories of psychological pathology; and the relationship between literature and theology within this intellectual tradition.

To focus those conversations, each chapter centers on a different situation in which a given thinker experiences contingency through touch or the passions. The opening chapter looks at Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph von Schelling's 1813 philosophical fable, *Ages of the World,* which locates contingency in the uncaused, unconditioned - and ultimately pathological - desire for companionship of an omnipotent will at the beginning of time. The chapter argues that Schelling's depiction of the contingency of desire offers a phenomenology of loneliness that grows out of a broader engagement with the problem of evil.

The second chapter turns to the argument of the poet Novalis (1772-1801) that we experience contingency as a form of wonder that connects us to a divine whole we can only asymptotically approach. This wonder, he thinks, is experienced most clearly through our physical contact with books that impress on us our inability to ever do more than touch upon fragments of knowledge, given the proliferation of texts in the wake of the printing press.

The third chapter reads together Eugène Minkowski's phenomenology of lived space for the mentally ill with Jean Améry's essay on torture during the Third Reich. This chapter pushes against the optimism and revelatory nature of contingency in Novalis by following cases where contingency is experienced as violation through unwanted touch.

The final chapter asks whether contingency is solely disruptive, or if it can be incorporated into lasting social structures, by exploring the work of Michel Serres (1930-present). It argues a model of contingency as "common tangency" underlies his

environmentalism, leading him to urge the creation of a “natural contract” where humans combat global warming from recognition that they are in co-implicated contact with nature, much like lovers during sex.

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Introduction

I.

Late in “Lady with the Little Dog,” Chekhov’s protagonist, Dmitri Dmitritch Gurov, finds himself alone in a hotel room with his mistress. Wan and subdued in his favorite grey dress, Anna Sergeyevna turns toward the snowy window and begins to weep over the hopelessness of their situation, over their need for secrecy from her husband and his wife. The older, jaded Dmitri sits and orders tea, determined to let her “cry it out.” Then, in an impulse at once moved and misogynistic, he stands up.

> He went up to her and took her by the shoulders to caress her, to make a joke, and at that moment he saw himself in the mirror.
>
> His head was beginning to turn grey. And it seemed strange to him that he had aged so much in those last years, had lost so much of his good looks. The shoulders on which his hands lay were warm and trembled. He felt compassion for this life, still so warm and beautiful, but probably near the point where it would begin fade and wither, like his own life. Why did she love him so? He always seemed to women different from what he was, and they loved in him not himself, but the man created by their imagination, whom they had been eagerly seeking all their lives; and afterwards, when they noticed their mistake, they loved him all the same. And not one of them had been happy with him. Time passed, he had made their acquaintance, got on with them, parted, but he had never once loved; it was anything you like, but not love.
>
> And only now when his head was grey he had fallen properly, really in love - for the first time in his life.[1]

Long before I became interested in contingency, German Romanticism, the “slaughter bench of history,” or any of the other topics I am most obviously writing about, this book began with a single image from this passage: the warm and trembling shoulders beneath Gurov’s hands.

When I am asked, I never mention Chekhov, of course. I say I am a philosopher writing about contingency, the opposite of necessity, the realm of chance and change defined in

[1] Anton Chekhov, “The Lady with the Little Dog,” in *Selected Short Stories of Anton Chekhov,* trans. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky (New York: Random House Publishing Group, 2000), 375.

contradistinction to the immutability of eternal institutions or an impassible God. If pressed, I explain that most scholars speak of the contingency of time - that is, of contingency as the domain of chance, unpredictable events that disrupt neat narratives charting history's necessary path from the past to the present. For them, contingency is found in the thought that events could have been otherwise.

By contrast, I go on to clarify, I am interested in another, largely forgotten tradition of thought that draws on contingency's etymological roots in *tangere*, "to touch." I argue that there exists a tradition of philosophers, poets and theologians, most active during the early years of the nineteenth century in Prussia and in twentieth century France, that finds a bodily, emotional dimension to the temporal experience of contingency. For these thinkers, we are not simply thrown by chance into time, as mortal creatures who had no choice in the circumstances of our birth; we are also thrown into constant, unpredictable touch with a physical world that abrades us, resists us, wounds us, and submits to us, all while being ambushed by moods that destroy our sense of equanimity. At its most basic, this intuition insists that we change, we perish, we pass in and out of being, we experience everything that gives content to the notion of contingency as much through the depredations of touch as time.

But these are academic debates, I realized during my own snowy night in conversation with a friend; really I am writing about Chekhov's two lovers. I am writing to understand the warmth of Anna Sergeyevna's shoulders; the capacity of flesh to remind us of our connection to a world that breathes and trembles and radiates its internal heat without us; the resistance of things grasped to our plans; the feeling of fragility that abruptly upends Gurov's smug self-certainty as he caresses his lover's shoulders. Still more, I am writing to understand the

difficulty of separating connecting from erring, and the unutterable strangeness of genuine love arriving after a lifetime of mistaken perceptions, self-delusion, and passing dalliances. These are the experiences of contingency that drive this work.

If I return to Chekhov now, it is in the spirit of the old man in *Fear and Trembling* who first learned and loved as a boy the story of Abraham's temptation. "The older he became, the more often his thoughts turned to that story; his enthusiasm for it became greater and greater, and yet he could understand the story less and less."[2]

II. Contingency and its Critique in Contemporary Thought

Dissertations are not written about the inability to understand a topic, however, at least not openly; they are written in conversation with other scholars, as contributions and corrections to a body of literature. Accordingly, this work stands between roughly three bodies of scholarship: the usage of contingency in contemporary "theory," the concept's role throughout the Christian philosophical-theological tradition of theodicy, and the newly emerging scholarship on the history of the senses, sometimes called the "sensory turn." For the moment, I want to position my project against the first two, closely related topics, before dealing with the scholarship on touch and the senses in the next section.

Bracketing for the moment my theoretical intervention, the basic outline of contingency as used today seems clear enough. Contingency is the opposite of necessity, the realm of chance and instability that exists in contradistinction to the immutability of eternal institutions or an

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[2] Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling,* in *Fear and Trembling/Repetition,* trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), 9.

impassible God.[3] A given thinker might oppose his or her faith in the contingency of history to Hegel's grand vision of the teleological march of progress.[4] Alternately, the more theologically minded might think of Augustine's description of the contingent, creaturely subject as never really at one with itself, but rather condemned to live in some modality of the ephemeral, fluctuating present.[5] Whatever the model, the point seems clear enough: to be contingent is to be prey to chance and change, to pass in and out of being, to be, above all, subject to the vicissitudes of time.

In the last thirty years, the scope of contingency has at once narrowed and assumed a central critical role for those working in "theory," whether as anthropologists, historians, gender theorists, or scholars of religion. To name just a few examples, Judith Butler called out the categories of sex and gender as contingent in order to replace identity essentialism with her theory of performativity[6]; Richard Rorty spent a whole book worrying about the compatibility of the concept with a robust liberal political agenda;[7] Joan Scott castigated historians for reifying "experience" as a transparent category, rather than a culturally informed product of contingent

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[3] OED offers this etymology: "French contingent 14th cent. (Oresme), or < Latin contingent-em touching together or on all sides, lying near, contiguous, coming into contact or connection, befalling, happening, coming to pass, present participle of contingĕre to touch together, come into contact, etc., < con- + tangĕre to touch." OED.com, s.v. "Contingent," http://www.oed.com.ezproxy.cul.columbia.edu/view/Entry/40248?redirectedFrom=contingent#eid (accessed August 16, 2011).

[4] On contingency, see G.W.F. Hegel, *Introduction to the Philosophy of History*, trans. Leo Rauch (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1988), 24. On teleology in Hegel see, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A.V. Miller (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977).

[5] Augustine, *Confession,* trans. Henry Chadwick (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), Book XI.

[6] For one example, see Butler's remark about the problem facing contemporary gender theorists: "To expose the contingent acts that create the appearance of a naturalistic necessity, a move which has been part of cultural critique at least since Marx, is a task that now takes on the added burden of showing how the very notion of the subject, intelligible only through its appearance as gendered, admits of possibilities that have been forcibly foreclosed by the various reifications of gender that have constituted its contingent ontologies." Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 2006) 45-6.

[7] Richard Rorty*, Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (New York: Cambridge, 1989).

events;[8] and finally, Raymond Geuss was reduced to patiently explaining in an article why genealogists could not simply declare a given social institution contingent and consider their critique complete.[9] The projects were all different, but the use of contingency was roughly the same: it was a theoretical hand grenade, meant to detonate ossified social institutions and beliefs by reminding us that, as the product of historical events, there was nothing necessary in how they came to be. Even the most seemingly self-evident categories - sex, race, religion - were the product of chance events, unpredictable decisions, luck, and caprice. Even they could have been otherwise, which meant even they still *could be* otherwise.

And yet, for all of the seeming self-evidence of both the meaning of contingency and its ethical, critical powers, I contend there is a puzzle at the center of the concept. Specifically, I think the term gets used in roughly two different senses, one of which seeks to deny that we can know any causes for events and one that depends on an old-fashioned faith in efficient causality in history. To that end, in the following section I want to sketch two different approaches to understanding the contingency of events. My characterization is heuristic; I am not interested in establishing rigid typologies or definitively categorizing thinkers as adhering to one model or the other. What I am interested in doing is highlighting real inconsistencies in how contingency is deployed in theory and even in popular culture. From there, I want to suggest how the bodily, affective understanding of contingency that interests me complements, clarifies, and even resolves some of the contradictions within these better-known models.

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[8] Joan W. Scott, "The Evidence of Experience," *Critical Inquiry* 17:4 (1991): 779.

[9] Raymond Geuss, "Genealogy as Critique," *European Journal of Philosophy* 10:2 (2002): 209-215, accessed September 5, 2013, d.o.i. 10.1111/1468-0378.00157.

In the first version, contingency signals rupture between epochs, the fundamental discontinuity of historical narratives and a healthy respect for the singularity of events that can never been fully explained by the motivations or actions that preceded them. Critically, this understanding often betrays a deep uneasiness or even wonder at the question of what constitutes a cause in history. To take one example, when Schopenhauer fretted that history, out of all the sciences, could never be subjected to necessary laws, he was worrying that even if we were to line up all of the actions, accidents, beliefs, desires, and motivations that preceded a given event, there would still be an insurmountable gap between that background and the incident itself.[10] We may paper over that abyss with the idea of a cause, but in truth we can never really explain why a starving man revolted rather than laid down and died. Or, to put it in more Humean terms, "A" may be followed by "B," but we do not really know that "A" caused "B," and, anyway, "A" easily could have been followed by "C" or "Z." Foucault's genealogies and his theory of history as divided by epistemic breaks are the most influential versions of this reading of contingency as rupture, but a clearer image might be the pig that runs out of the parlor at the end of Gogol's story "The Overcoat."[11] The contingent event is the pig in the drawing room of history; no one fully understands where it came from or how it burst past the maid, but it is gone before anyone can wrangle it into submission, leaving the room in shambles. This is contingency as the causally undetermined event.

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[10] "Even the most perfect etiological explanation of the whole of nature would never be more in reality than a record of inexplicable forces, and a reliable statement of the rule by which their phenomena appear, succeed, and make way for one another in time and space." Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation: Volume I*, trans. E.F.J. Payne (New York: Dover, 1969), 98.

[11] See Michel Foucault, "Nietzsche, History, Genealogy" in *The Foucault Reader*, trans. Paul Rabinow (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984); Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994).

In the other version, contingency reflects the profound interconnectedness of events. We find ourselves thrown into lives we did not choose, whose boundaries we do not understand, making decisions we can never fully appreciate the ramifications of, under the influence of motivations and moods that will always be partially opaque to us. Heidegger's discussion of thrownness in *Being and Time* is the best-known example of this thought.[12] This version of contingency has even filtered down to popular culture in its own way. Middlebrow movies often play on this understanding of contingency in voiceover interludes, as when the narrator of *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button* intones:

> And if only one thing had happened differently: if that shoelace hadn't broken; or that delivery truck had moved moments earlier; or that package had been wrapped and ready, because the girl hadn't broken up with her boyfriend […] or that woman had remembered her coat, and got into an earlier cab, Daisy and her friend would've crossed the street, and the taxi would've driven by. But life being what it is - a series of intersecting lives and incidents, out of anyone's control - that taxi did not go by, and that driver was momentarily distracted, and that taxi hit Daisy, and her leg was crushed.[13]

The examples are not the same, of course, but in both a basic intuition remains: contingency's capacity to upset our moods, our lives, and our stable self-conception, is a function of our fundamental interdependence with our surroundings. We marvel at contingency, not because it confronts us with how very unstable and unhelpful our notion of a cause is, but because in tracing back the causes of a contingent event we catch a glimpse of the sublime interconnection of all events, all causes.

In practice, of course, the distinction between usages is rarely so clean. In part, I think, these inconsistencies can persist because contingency in contemporary scholarship has become

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[12] Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time,* trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper Perennial, 1962), 175-179.

[13] "The Curious Case of Benjamin Button (2008) Quotes," IMDb, accessed September 5, 2012, http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0421715/quotes.

more of a shorthand for one's political commitments than a rigorously delimited philosophical concept. Take one relatively recent, wholly typical, example from Saba Mahmood's 2005 book *The Politics of Piety.* "If there is anything we have learned from the machinations of colonial feminism and the politic of 'global sisterhood,'" she asserts, "it is that any social or political transformation is always a product of local, contingent, and emplaced struggles whose blueprint cannot be worked out or predicted in advance."[14] For anyone reasonably conversant with the theoretical circles Mahmood runs in, her meaning is relatively clear.[15] She does not believe in teleological narratives, or that the women she studies are determined by some inexorable force of biology, history or culture. Their current lives are the product of innumerable chance desires, aspirations, political maneuvers, economic events, religious practices, and military realities all converging to create a highly unstable present. Thus, we cannot slot them into a narrative of progress, because history is too capricious to admit anything like a moral or meta-narrative; we cannot pretend to understand their lived reality with any degree of comprehensiveness; we ought not blindly apply Western standards of feminism to their social roles without regard for their local traditions; and we certainly should not use any of our dreams of universal values as an excuse to invade their countries in order to "rescue" them.

Mahmood can assume the self-evidence of her meaning because the conversations about contingency today - explicitly or not - derive nearly entirely from the collapse of the theological tradition of theodicy in the last three centuries. The crude outlines of the story are simple

[14] Saba Mahmood, *The Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 36.

[15] I chose Mahmood solely because she was typical in her use of contingency. For similar recent examples, see also Charles Hirschkind, *The Ethical Soundscape: Cassette Sermons and Islamic Counterpublics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 108; and Todd Presner, *Mobile Modernity: German, Jews, Trains* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 20-21.

enough.[16] For nearly the entirety of Christian history, theodicy, or the project of vindicating the goodness and omnipotence of God in the face of suffering, emerged and reemerged in a number of iterations. While the most traditional versions of theodicy subsumed the suffering of earthly creatures beneath some necessary plan of God, any number of canonical philosophical figures in the Enlightenment adopted the tradition for (nominally) secular political ends. Thus, Lessing suggested that religion had been a stage human history needed to pass through in order to reach the rationality of the Enlightenment;[17] Rousseau pieced together a narrative attributing the origin of human suffering to inflamed *amour-propre* in his *Discourse Concerning the Origins of Inequality;*[18] Kant wrote an essay suggesting the suffering brought about by the violent conflict and innate "unsocial sociability" of human groups might be understood as a necessary means for producing the sort of moral, autonomous species capable of administering a maximally just society;[19] and above all, Hegel infamously compared history to a slaughter bench upon which all of the best desires and souls of humanity had been sacrificed in order to make way for the unfolding of freedom in history, primarily through the actions of a few select "world historical" agents, like Napoleon.[20]

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[16] That is, simple enough provided we bracket the fact that nearly all of the terms I am about to use, from the Enlightenment, to secularism, to the political-theological are deeply problematic terms for reasons that are outside of the scope of this work to discuss.

[17] Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, "The Education of the Human Race," in *Gotthold Ephraim Lessing: Philosophical and Theological Writings*, trans. H.B. Nisbet (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 217-240.

[18] Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Discourse Concerning the Origin and Foundation of Inequality Among Men,* in *Rousseau: 'The Discourses' and Other Early Political Writings,* trans, Victor Gourevitch (New York: Cambridge, 1999), 111-188; Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Emile or On Education,* trans. Allan Bloom (New York: Basic Books, 1979); See also Frederick Neuhouser, *Rousseau's Theodicy of Self-Love: Evil, Rationality, and the Drive for Recognition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).

[19] Immanuel Kant, "Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Purpose," in *Kant: Political Writings,* trans. H.B. Nisbet (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 41-53.

[20] GWF Hegel, *Introduction to the Philosophy of History,* trans. Leo Rauch (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1988), 24.

Yet even as these thinkers were championing their own versions of theodicy, the entire project was beginning to strain under attacks from a number of different directions. Most famously, the Lisbon earthquake in 1755 profoundly upset belief in the rationality and goodness of the world for thinkers like Rousseau.[21] Shortly thereafter, David Hume's *Dialogues* were published posthumously in 1776, decimating traditional arguments for the goodness and omnipotence of God. Dostoyevsky's attack on theodicy came in a chapter of *The Brothers Karamazov* (1880) that questioned the morality of becoming reconciled to another's suffering.[22] For all but the most traditional theologians, the enormity of the Holocaust made the idea of trying to fit Jewish suffering into a Christian soteriological framework into an enormous perversity.[23] Finally, most relevantly for Mahmood and likeminded theorists, postcolonial and feminist scholarship took aim at the entire idea of necessary, teleological narratives of progress, arguing that they justified essentialized, exclusionary categories of race, gender, class and sexuality that had been so often used to "other" marginal groups in order to further the oppressive politics of the status quo.[24]

I am necessarily simplifying, but the general point is this: through the twists of history, the entire idea of contingency has become tremendously moralized. To assert the contingency of history means rejecting essentialism, teleology, imperialism, sexism, orientalism and chauvinism in favor of subversive politics and openness to the experience of the dispossessed in history.

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[21] See Susan Neiman, *Evil in Modern Thought: An Alternative History of Philosophy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 1-57.

[22] Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov,* trans. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2002), 236-245.

[23] Kenneth Surin, *Theology and the Problem of Evil* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2004).

[24] Joan W. Scott, "The Evidence of Experience," *Critical Inquiry* 17:4 (1991): 773-797.

With a debate so charged, unglamorous questions of causality almost inevitably drop out. Thus, perhaps it should not be surprising that in asserting the contingency of transformative political struggles Mahmood tells us that she is not an imperialist or universalist or a vulgar hegelian, but explains remarkably little about what she means by contingency. I could perhaps hazard a guess as to which model she sympathizes with, but the more important point, I think, is that she does not think it matters enough to give us that information herself. Practically speaking, she is right. It does not really make a difference for her purposes whether she thinks of contingency as a type of rupture or connection, or how she understands causality in history. Both models allow her to deny that the institutions and practices she studies are in any way immutable, necessary, or infallible. Both allow her to depict her object of study as the product of an incalculable number of minute, forgotten decisions, motivations, natural events, and chance happenings. And if someone as prominent as Mahmood can invoke contingency without ever clarifying what she means by it, is it any wonder contradictory models can coexist unremarked upon?

It is entirely possible these different attitudes toward causality in contingency could be reconciled; that is not my question or my concern. Rather, I am interested in this internal contradiction largely because it shows how completely invisible contingency has become as a concept through the unstated assumption that everyone knows what it means and what it does. Thus, thinkers rarely justify their faith in the critical powers of contingency. Yet why should contingency entail any particular epistemological or political consequence? This is not an idle question; after all, Kierkegaard believed just as much in the contingency of history as Foucault, and he was a royalist.[25]

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[25] See Søren Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments/Johannes Climacus: Kierkegaard's Writings, VII,* Trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), 60.

To be fair, there have been some more nuanced attempts to concretize why, exactly, contingency should possess any critical power. Colin Koopman offers the strongest response to that charge in his recent book on Foucault, *Genealogy as Critique.* He makes the argument that Foucault's genealogies are meant to provide the tools to enact concrete changes by showing how, exactly, institutions are contingent and what events gave rise to them. The work of the genealogy will only trigger the desire to change the status quo, insofar as we already interested in questions of power, politics, and social relations.[26] That may be a fair reading of Foucault, but it dodges my question by presupposing the political commitments that would lead a reader to internalize those contingent events as a critique of particular institutions or a declaration of solidarity with the dispossessed on history; they could just as easily be ingested as an abstract iteration of facts by an apathetic reader. Moreover, most scholars invoking contingency are not doing that work. When someone like Joan Scott writes of the need for a new, literary interpretation of texts in history that "is a way of changing the focus and the philosophy of our history from one bent on naturalizing 'experience' through a belief in the unmediated relationship between words and things, to one that takes all categories of analysis as contextual, contested, and contingent,"[27] she does not do so as a preface to a careful investigation of the specific events that gave rise to the formation of categories. She does so as a shibboleth. I am unconvinced, then, that contingency does the work many contemporary theorists assume.

On an even more basic level, though, even if these contradictory accounts of causality in contingency could be reconciled or their political power justified, the blindness that allows these

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[26] Colin Koopman, *Genealogy as Critique: Foucault and the Problems of Modernity* (Bloomington: Indiana, 2013), 21.

[27] Joan W. Scott, "The Evidence of Experience," *Critical Inquiry* 17:4 (1991), 796.

problems to pass unnoticed would still be troubling. If a century bookended by the birth of Wittgenstein and the death of Derrida has taught us anything, it is that language drives thought. And when a single concept is described simultaneously in the language of connection and disconnection, rupture and continuity, causality and causelessness, we *ought* to take notice. If a whole series of sophisticated thinkers can bat the idea of contingency back and forth without ever remarking on the strange, contradictory meanings ascribed to it, what else might they be overlooking?

This book is my long answer to this question, but the short answer is touch, feeling, and a different tradition of Christian thought, complementary but not reducible to the problem of theodicy. In restricting contingency to questions of events that might or might not have happened, contemporary scholarship has crowded out a much more capacious sense of the term as the lot of impermanent creatures who pass in and out of being, as opposed to the immutable, impassible, necessary God.[28] The upheavals of history and the suffering of humans who cannot see beyond their current lot to grasp God's necessary plans certainly belong to this tradition, but they do not define the entirety of it. Rather, this second version of contingency looks to the etymological root of the word, *tangere,* to touch.

In many ways, this tradition is not so different from the contemporary theories that locate contingency in history. This stream of thought captures all of the key features of contingency as discussed above: its ephemerality, its instability, its non-necessity, and its tie to a finite, circumscribed perspective of a subject that can never abstract itself enough to take a God's eye view of its surroundings. Only, instead of locating the experience of contingency in the

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[28] For the most famous discussion of the necessity of God in the Christian tradition, see Anselm's ontological argument. Anselm, "Proslogion," in *Basic Writings,* trans. Thomas Williams (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2007), 75-98.

coincidences and freak accidents of history, this version draws on the bodily and affective experiences that render us open to the world.

While English colloquialisms, such as "to be touched, to be a soft touch, to be tactful," suggest *some* sort of blurred boundary between touching and feeling, the exact nature of that relation between touch, affect, and contingency, however, is nearly impossible to codify, in part because there is so much variation across time in philosophical theories of affect and the passions. In the following section I will deal at greater length with the contemporary authors who explore the hazy boundary between the tactile and the affective, but for the moment I want to stress the long history Western philosophy has of linking the capriciousness of the passions and the decay of the body to our more general finitude as subjects. Thinkers such as Hobbes, Spinoza, and Schelling shared this common intuition about the contingency of the passions. The anxious feelings of finitude that attend the thought that things could have been otherwise are not incidental to the experience of contingency; rather, being ambushed and buffeted about by feelings we can neither will, nor control, nor fully explain is what gives the concept content. In both touching and feeling, the basic intuition of contingency is there in the fragility, flux and chance that lead to the constant changing and rearranging the boundaries of the self.

For my purposes, interested as I am in German Idealism and Romanticism, Spinoza is the most important predecessor of this equation of contingency with the passions or affect. It may seem perverse to invoke the most famous philosophy of determinism in pursuit of understanding contingency, but his *Ethics* invites it. To simplify a tremendously complicated argument, Spinoza denies any contingency in nature, insisting instead that everything is causally necessitated to be as it is. In making that claim, he distinguishes between two different senses of

contingency throughout *Ethics*. The first usage, found primarily in Part I, defines contingency as whatever is causally undetermined. The second version in Part IV defines "individual things as contingent insofar as, in attending only to their essence, we find nothing that necessarily posits their existence or necessarily excludes it."[29] Or, as Steven Nadler parses that definition, something is contingent "when it is neither necessary by reason of its essence (as God/substance is) nor impossible because its essence involves a contradiction."[30] The second version of contingency undoubtedly exists in Spinoza's determined universe. God or substance is the only necessary being. By contrast we, as humans, along with the rest of world, are contingent because we depend on God for our existence; we would not exist if God did not cause us to be. This is the alternative theological version of contingency I invoked a few pages ago - contingency set up in contrast to a necessary God and whatever attributes that entails, rather than a teleological account of history. (Though, of course, the two locations of necessity are not mutually exclusive).

Even though Spinoza admits contingency in that second, weaker sense, he flatly denies the possibility of the first type of contingency in nature. All things are causally determined by "the necessity of divine nature to exist and produce an effect in a certain way."[31] We might not understand the cause, but that is a product of our ignorance, not a true reflection of the universe. Spinoza goes so far as to say that "A thing is called 'contingent' for no other reason than the

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[29] Baruch Spinoza, *The Essential Spinoza: Ethics and Related Writings,* trans. Samuel Shirley (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2006), PIVD3.

[30] Steven Nadler, *Introduction to Spinoza's Ethics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 105.

[31] Spinoza, *Ethics,* IP29.

deficiency of our knowledge."[32] Reason, however, regards things as they truly are: necessary, i.e. part of a chain of causes.[33]

And this is where emotion comes into his account. We are peculiarly prone to thinking of the emotions as contingent in the sense of causally undetermined. Whenever philosophers write about the emotions, Spinoza claims, they seem to immediately jettison any attempt at a scientific, causal explanation, as if they were suddenly dealing with a phenomenon exempt from all of the usual laws of nature. Instead, they treat humans as subject to their own laws and deride them for inherent defects whenever they are assailed by weakness or frailty. He, by contrast, wants to subject the emotions to the same rigorous laws as all other scientific phenomena. Affect is mediated through the body. "I assign the term 'bondage' to man's lack of power to control and check the emotions. For a man at the mercy of his emotions is not his own master but is subject to fortune, in whose power he so lies that he is often compelled, although he see the better course, to pursue the worse."[34] Spinoza certainly believes that his contemporaries are wrong for treating the passions as outside of the laws of nature, but he crucially recognizes that *something* about the tumult of our passions routinely persuades people that they are prey to chance influences, flung about haphazardly in a stormy world - that is, contingent in the sense of being causally undetermined, not slotted into an orderly chain of events and causes. He acknowledges the peculiar power of the passions to convince the unenlightened of their contingency, even if only as a starting point for teaching them how to master their passions.

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[32] "For if we do not know that the thing's essence involves a contradiction, or if we do know very well that its essence does not involve a contradiction, and nevertheless can affirm nothing certainly about its existence, because the order of causes is hidden from us, it can never seem to us either necessary or impossible. So we call it contingent or possible." Ibid, IP33s1.

[33] Ibid, PIIP44

[34] Ibid, PIV.

There are other examples, however. Hobbes, for instance, equated the human to a machine and built a whole theory of perception, thought, language and society on the assumption that behavior could be reduced to the same sort of mechanistic, necessary laws as any other natural phenomenon. At the very beginning of this theory he invoked the language of touch when he insisted that image of a particular object impresses itself on our mind through the senses. Yet when it came time to explain why the same object provoked indifference in the same person at one moment, rage in the next, his language abruptly shifted to vague references to the "continual mutation" of human constitution that made it, "impossible that all the same things should always cause in him the same appetites and aversions."[35] Contingency entered his mechanistic system with the question of the inconstancy of human passions in response to objects of desire. Still for more recent thinkers in affect theory, such as Sara Ahmed, certain feelings such as happiness are irreducibly linked to the contingent happenings of the world. The very etymology of happiness, she suggests, comes from the Middle English word "hap," connoting chance.[36] Happiness is contingent by definition, because the word literally suggests being favored by fortune or lucky, uncontrollable events.

My point is not merely the broad historical one that this understanding of contingency has been forgotten and ought to be recovered for the sake of a more comprehensive narrative in Philosophy 101. Instead, I think returning to the roots of contingency in touch has a number of virtues. First, it has a certain explanatory power, which augments our understanding of the two usages of contingency in history that I discussed earlier. While it might seem hopelessly

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[35] Thomas Hobbes*, Leviathan: With Selected Variants from the Latin Edition of 1668,* editor Edwin Curley (Hackett Publishing Co: Indianapolis, 1994), 28.

[36] Sara Ahmed, "Happy Objects," *in The Affect Theory Reader*, eds. Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 31.

contradictory or muddled to think of contingency encompassing connection and disconnection in temporal terms, that dual characterization turns out to have its own internal logic if we imagine it to be drawing on the properties of skin and touch. What is touch if not a gesture that draws another close at the same moment it insists on our radical separateness?[37] After all, I may draw close enough to another in touch to feel his blood pulse beneath his skin, but it remains his blood, and we are separated by our skin. The capacity of touch to scar, change and rearrange the self's relation to the physical world, is the bodily analogue to the way time molds and erodes and transforms identity throughout a life. Why not imagine these two versions of contingency as descended from different interpretations of the dual nature of touch, with the first, disruptive model indebted to the capacity of touch to isolate, and the second, connective model influenced by the relational powers of touch?

Second, the situational nature of touch and affect troubles the current, too-easy equation of contingency with subversive historiography. The assumption that to talk about contingency means primarily to marvel that events could have been otherwise has left us with an impoverished understanding of contingency's relationship to time. We certainly recognize contingency most readily in reference to the past, but how much of that can be attributed to the fact that scholarship has cordoned off contingency as a historiographical concept? By making contingency primarily a historiographical problem, we never think to ask if there might be an experience of the groundlessness, the non-necessity of things that is experienced primarily as a

[37] Space prohibits a comprehensive treatment of recent work on skin and touch. See also: Sara Ahmed, ed., *Thinking Through the Skin* (New York: Routledge, 2001); Claudia Benthien, *Skin: On the Cultural Border Between Self and World,* trans. Thomas Dunlap (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004); Constance Classen, *The Deepest Sense: A Cultural History of Touch* (Chicago: University of Illinois, 2012); Steven Connor, *The Book of Skin* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003); Mark C. Taylor, *Hiding* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

foreclosure of future possibilities, or a limitation of consciousness to the present. This point will recur throughout this work, particularly in my discussion of Sartre and Améry.

Finally, most importantly, returning to concrete situations forces us to reevaluate the ethics of our invocation of contingency. I alluded earlier to my worry that reducing contingency to a critique of meta-narratives has bowdlerized the concept, making it shorthand for a critique of the oppressive status quo, but rarely discussing how contingency is experienced on the ground, in the lives of people subject to the instability of events and institutions. Returning to the etymology of the term in *tangere* alleviates that problem by forcing us to grapple with the particular situations and moods that prompt writers to recognize their contingency. If we take seriously the idea that contingency is underpinned by physical and emotional experiences of being open to and influenced by the world, it becomes immediately evident that the modes and situations of touch entail wildly different evaluations of contingency. I am going to be much more hesitant to pass judgment on the value of contingency, either by condemning or valorizing it, if I think that one speaker may invoke it with the memory of being beaten as her model of how her body touches the world, while another does so while thinking of being caressed. This intuition, however, brings me to the second body of literature underpinning my project.

III. Literature of Touch

I am not alone in stressing the situational nature of touch, or its link to affect in my reading of contingency. In the last ten years, a number of books have emerged dealing with the history of the senses and touch more specifically. The bulk of these works emerged from literature and anthropology departments, but complement and are complemented in turn by works of continental philosophy by thinkers such as Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, and Derrida.

In one respect, the motivation for these works belongs very much to the same theoretical moment that has dominated the academy for the last thirty years. Like "the linguistic turn" before it and "the affective turn" contemporaneous with it, the sensory turn launches from the kantian question of what constitutes the conditions for the possibility of knowledge. When we have denaturalized so many other categories - sex, gender, race, religion, class - why leave the traditional division of the senses into five untouched? Why not recover alternate senses abandoned by time, such as the "common sense" of Aristotle, or the sense of heat, or sixth sense? Why not investigate the cultural beliefs and practices that have shaped and altered the relation to the senses throughout time, rather than accept their functioning as some sort of ahistorical fact?

And also like the affective and linguistic turn, the historicization of the senses is inflected with political and ethical worries. As more than one scholar has noted, Western society has elevated sight as the highest sense throughout most of its history, starting with Plato's vision of the Forms onward. In a Western history dominated by "ocularcentrism," the story goes,[38] touch has been derided and ignored as unscientific, base, and animal, in contrast to the objectivity and abstraction of sight. Whereas sight implies a sort of abstraction and transcendental knowing subject, as one scholar puts it, "The senses of touch are multiple, complex, and intertwining."[39]

It would be a mistake to think of this new literature on touch as simply more of the same, however. Nearly all of the authors who write on touch, from Nina Jablonski, to Mark Paterson, to Eve Sedgwick have put their work in explicit conversation with contemporary technological advances and the science of touch. Some treatments of touch have been frankly nostalgic. To

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[38] See Martin Jay, *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought* (Berkeley: University Of California Press, 1993).

[39] Mark Paterson, *The Senses of Touch: Haptics, Affects and Technologies* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic Press, 2007) 6.

take one example, in *Touching Feeling* Eve Sedgwick remarked that touch is the only sense that cannot be technologically enhanced. She was wrong, of course, or at any rate has been proven wrong in the intervening decade since she wrote,[40] but for all that Sedgwick's remark betrayed a common fantasy. A quick ride on the subway shows a world filled with people muffled as firmly as the protagonist in Dürenmatt's short story "The Tunnel," who plugs his mouth with a cigar, his eyes with sunglasses and a newspaper, and his ears with cotton. Headphones have replaced the cotton balls and ipads the newspapers, but the image remains roughly the same. Our senses are muffled and enshrouded with the prosthetics of our choice. Touch allows the dream of immediacy, of unmitigated contact with the material, rather than virtual, world.

This fantasy about the immediacy and naturalness of touch manifests most obviously in references to the biological function of touch, particularly in childbirth. Ashley Montagu wrote one of the earliest sustained accounts in the 1970s in *Touching*. Running over the medical literature current at the time, he argued that touch served to regulate body temperature, foster emotional development, and, most crucially, stimulate an infant's lungs in preparation for its first breaths through the pressure of vaginal contractions during birth. Montagu's account anticipated a whole contemporary culture of midwives, duennas, birthing centers and the fetishization of "natural" deliveries, with all of its attendant complicated gender politics. That is not to say that his science is wrong, but it is to suggest that touch as a sense has been pulled into one of the most potent sites for fantasy and outright projection in Western culture: motherhood.

At its best, the history of the senses pushes against the reduction of touch to the merely biological and ahistorical, most often by unearthing folk traditions and common ritual behaviors

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[40] See Nina G. Jablonksi, *Skin: A Natural History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006).

of touch. And in many ways, this turn to the history of the senses mirrors my own concerns. Steven Connor, for example, supplements Montagu's biological account of touch in the emotional development of the infant with discussions of common superstitions in the early modern period. At one point in his wide-ranging *Book of Skin,* Connor recounts an eighteenth century debate between Daniel Turner and James Blondel, two scientists. Originally published in 1714, Turner's book, *De morbis cutaneis,* was a relatively unremarkable contribution to the science of dermatology, with the exception of an odd twelfth chapter titled, "Of Spots and marks of a Diverse Resemblance, imprest upon the Skin of the Foetus by the Force of the Mother's Fancy: With some Things premis'd of the strange and almost incredible Power of Imagination, more especially in Pregnant Women."[41] The chapter was a patchwork of anecdotes about the transference of events and feelings from a mother to her fetus. Stories ranged from those of a woman who allegedly played with an ape, only to give birth to a child with ape-like appearance, to a woman who had a lizard jump on her breast while pregnant and subsequently gave birth to a scaled baby.[42] In still yet another treatise, Turner related a story of a woman who was seized by such a profound desire for plum cake while pregnant that she later gave delivered her child with, "the exact Resemblance of a Slice of Cake, the Currants interspersed, and regularly depicted, the compass of a Palm, upon its Shoulder."[43] Blondel, a contemporary of Turner, responded to the work with his own essay lambasting the whole idea of communication between the mother and fetus as vulgar superstition. The argument went essentially nowhere, both because Turner responded by merely marshaling more fantastical (and fantastically entertaining) anecdotes, and

[41] Cited in Steven Connor, *The Book of Skin* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003), 101.

[42] Ibid, 103.

[43] Ibid, 104.

because Blondel's valid argument that Turner's stories had no basis in science was undermined by the essential implausibility of his position that mothers were in no ways connected to the children they carried.

For all that it never reached a conclusion, the debate between Blondel and Turner represented the broader collision of folk wisdom about the link between desire and the skin, and more scientific discourses that attempted to discredit such beliefs. Rather than being an isolated crackpot, Connor argues, Turner in fact espoused beliefs common for his time. As Connor points out, the French language even encodes the connection between maternal desire and the skin of her child in the word "envie," which can mean both desire and a birthmark.[44] Nor was the Enlightenment the last time the link between skin and desire would come into play. In the early studies of hysteria made under Charcot at Salpêtrière doctors were fascinated by the capacity of hysterical symptoms to manifest on the skin. In part, doctors ascribed spots of numbness and paralysis to hysteria, in much the same way members of the Inquisition believed that witches could be identified by pricking them with needles and failing to elicit reactions of pain. Other patients suffered from a condition called dermographia today, where skin is so sensitive that even the lightest touch can raise welts in reaction. Among the many, vaguely pornographic photos taken of hysterical women under Charcot's reign, several remain of words traced on patient's backs by their doctors. (One instance, which seems to reveal more about the medical establishment's pathology than the patient's, is simply the doctor's name; another is the word "Satan.")[45]

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[44] Ibid, 104.

[45] See Asti Hustvedt, *Medical Muses: Hysteria in Nineteenth-Century Paris* (New York: Norton, 2011).

Connor, Classen, Paterson and others are not wrong in seeing their work as making novel contributions to the history of touch; Classen's range of historical facts, in particular, is genuinely impressive.[46] Yet the sheer range of sources they draw on at the same moment they disavow any pretense of comprehensiveness often leaves their work feeling curiously scattershot. Read generously, the new theorists of touch mimic, or perhaps perform, the variegated nature and function of touch and skin. Just as skin, "becomes a place of minglings, a mingling of places,"[47] in the words of Connor, in these texts books bound in human skin abut against medieval mystics, modern practices of visiting museums, superstitions about the placement of moles, and long discourses on the nature of itching. In this cabinet of curiosities only one point emerges with any clarity and it is a banality: skin covers a lot.

Yet scattershot or not, this emphasis on the historical rituals and practices surrounding touch does offer an important corrective to the philosophical accounts of touch in the past century. Philosophy, particularly continental philosophy, has advanced its own set of theories about the nature of touch in the last two hundred years. Rather than exploring the social or economic or religious conditions shaping a given period's understanding of touch, however, philosophers have addressed touch primarily as a question of mastery and the nature of human subjectivity. Most of the conversations, whether from Derrida, Sartre, Heidegger, Serres, or Hegel, can be understood as stemming from an ambiguity within the nature of touch itself. Approached from one perspective, touch consolidates boundaries, impressing on each party his or her inviolability and identity. Skin separates; no matter how close I get to another, no matter how distinctly I can feel the thrumming of his heart, we still remain divided by the thinnest wall

[46] Constance Classen, *The Deepest Sense: A Cultural History of Touch* (Chicago: University of Illinois, 2012)

[47] Ibid, 26.

of skin. Approached from the other direction, though, skin undermines the possibility of anything like a self-contained identity. If I ever for an instant imagined I could be a disembodied, autistic subject, acting above and beyond the fluctuations of the world, all I have to do is return to the strike of my fingers against the keyboard or the bouncing of my heels against the wood of the floor. We are in the world through touch like a swimmer in water. I am at every instant created, compromised, distracted and dispersed amidst my surroundings through touch.

Most of the famous accounts of touch in the last two hundred years are aware of this ambiguity in touch and the ethical problems that attend it. In his 1807 *Phenomenology of Spirit,* Hegel famously played on the link in German between the highest concept, *Begriff*, and the word "to grasp," *greifen.* To know at the highest level meant to gather up and grasp all of the preceding intellectual, philosophical, religious and historical developments in his narrative and to synthesize them into a concept. Yet for all of the caricatures of Hegel as a totalizing, tyrannical thinker that would emerge in the twentieth century, the grasping of the *Begriff* in no way entailed separation or isolation from the world; the hegelian subject can grasp the concept only because it has been educated and developed through contact with the world. Conceptualization may - or may not, depending on one's reading - be a form of dominating and mastering the world, but it is certainly not a way of disowning the way in which contact shapes the subject and world in turn.

Of course, the idea of touch as grasping and implicitly mastering and molding fell out of favor for most of the twentieth century. On the contrary, if any thought guides the last century of philosophy on touch, it is that touch can never really master what it holds; to be touched always means to be touched in turn. Touch undermines any simple binary between subject and object, knower and known, self and world. Thus, when Heidegger wanted to undermine the sharp

distinction between subject and object in *Being and Time*, he turned to the language of hands and touch. Most of the time, he suggests, Dasein does not recognize the tools he uses as separate objects. It is only when a hammer breaks and hangs limply in two parts in my hand that I recognize it as an object, or, in Heidegger's language, that it becomes "present-at-hand," *vorhanden,* instead of "ready-to-hand," *zuhanden.*[48] In everyday life, touch serves to efface the difference between myself and the world, allowing me to feel continuous with the objects I hold.

Or then there is Sartre, who was first enchanted by phenomenology's promise that he could talk of things "as he touched them."[49] In *Being and Nothingness,* Sartre imagines a scenario where a sadist, who longs to reduce his victim to pure, mindless, suffering flesh, is thwarted by the nature of touch. No matter how the sadist twists and bruises and bites the body of his victim, one of two things always happens. Either the sufferer submits, declaring himself to be pure flesh in a free act of will that defies the power of the sadist to strip away all consciousness, all agency. Alternately, if he does succeed in reducing the victim to a panting body, the sadist no longer understands, "how to utilize this flesh. No goal can be assigned to it because I have effected the appearance of its absolute contingency. It is *there*, and it is there *for nothing*. As such, I cannot get hold of it as flesh; I cannot integrate it into the complex system of

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[48] Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time,* trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper Perennial Classics, 2008), 26, 98.

[49] In *La force de l'âge,* the second of Simone de Beauvoir's three autobiographies, she tells of the evening in 1933 when Sartre decisively turned toward phenomenology and, with it, to a serious study of Heidegger's thought. The two were out to dinner with Raymond Aron, a contemporary who had graduated with the highest honors from the École Normale Superiure in 1928. Dissatisfied with the choice between the Bergsonians and Neo-Kantians that dominated the French intellectual scene at the time, like many of his contemporaries, Aaron left for Germany to study with Husserl and Heidegger. He had only just returned to France the night that de Beauvoir describes. "We ordered the speciality of the house: apricot cocktails," she recounts. "Aaron pointed to his glass: 'You see, my friend, if you are a phenomenologist, you can talk about this cocktail, and that is philosophy.' Sartre grew pale with excitement, or nearly so. This was precisely what he had wished for years: to talk of things *as he touched them* and that this was philosophy." Cited in Ethan Kleinberg, *Generation Existential: Heidegger's Philosophy in France, 1927-1961* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2007), 116 (my emphasis).

instrumentality without its materiality as flesh, its 'fleshiness' immediately escaping me."[50] He then concludes on a note particularly relevant to my project, "I can only remain before it in a state of contemplative astonishment or else incarnate myself in turn and allow myself again to be troubled, so as to place myself once more on the level where flesh is revealed to flesh in its entire fleshiness." Even at its extreme of grasping, clenching, manipulating, touch only succeeds in revealing the uselessness of inert flesh. Flesh short circuits the entire logic of instrumentality, because to use it for something would be to transform it again into a tool and lose its distinctive character as flesh, but to remain faithful to its facticity or "thereness" would mean either to lapse into a "state of contemplative astonishment" or to answer its call by relinquishing my own orientation toward the future by becoming flesh in turn.

Derrida echoes and even advances the Sartrean skepticism about the possibility of mastering another through flesh in *On Touching.* During a reading of Levinas, Derrida pauses to consider the idea that touch, at best, moved asymptotically toward another's flesh, only ever reaching a boundary, a limit, or empty space. For Levinas, the impossibility of a caress ever arriving at what it seeks belongs in part to the nature of femininity who is always stroked but never stroking, violable but, as the "Eternal Feminine," inviolable, "unseizable, dying without murder, swooning, withdrawing into her future, beyond every possible promise to anticipation."[51] In his mocking, faux astonishment at Levinas's portrait of the woman who lies back and accepts caresses without caressing in turn, Derrida reiterates the point he made earlier

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[50] Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness,* trans. Hazel E. Barnes (New York: Washington Square Press, 1993), 525.

[51] Cited in Jacques Derrida, *On Touching Jean-luc Nancy*, trans. Christine Irizarry (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), 86.

in the book when discussing Aristotle, namely there is no eternal, immutable, contextless touch. As he writes:

> What, then, is a treatise of touch that says nothing about this: "Who touches whom? And how?"; "Who strikes whom? Who strokes whom? And why? And how?" Let us insist again that various causes or qualities do not come and modify or modalize one single, selfsame, presupposed generality of what we conveniently term the "caress" and the "blow." There again, they constitute a multiplicity without the horizon of a totalizable unity.[52]

Yet even Derrida at the moment he insists on contextualizing touch, somehow misses, or ignores, or fails to see altogether, the question posed by the grammatical inverse of the sentence: "Who is touched by whom? And how? Who is struck by whom? And why?" The history of touch in Western thought remains overwhelmingly the history of the outstretched hand, the toucher not touched, the sadist thwarted, not his victim violated or even the masochist gratified. That oversight, as much as my skepticism of the unjustified faith in the critical powers of contingency, brings me to the shape of my project.

IV. Structure and Text Choice

My driving motivation throughout this work has been twofold. First, I wanted to uncover and reconstruct a way of thinking about contingency that has been largely lost. Second, in doing so I have sought above all to take seriously the costs of contingency. I alluded to this desire previously when discussing the practical problems with equating contingency with a form of subversive historiography - i.e., that such a move does not work because it is historically unjustified. My point here is the moral sister of that practical one: we *ought not* unreflectively to embrace contingency as serving subversive, leftwing causes because in doing so we overlook the lived reality of those who experience their lives to be unstable, unpredictable, contingent. In

[52] Ibid, 69.

blithely assuming that the contingency of events allows for reform of present institutions by showing their fallible, changeable roots, we are subsuming the lives wrecked by those upheavals under a political ideal just as surely as any rightwing hegelian. In both cases, contingency on the ground is effectively skirted over.

In attempting to reinflate contingency into a rounded concept with costs as real as its potentials, I have confined my work primarily to the last two hundred years of continental philosophy, starting with German Romanticism. The decision might initially seem an odd one for linguistic reasons. In German the word used most often for contingency is "Zufall," which can also be translated simply as "chance" and lacks the etymological link to touch found in English and French. Nevertheless, there are good historical reasons for understanding Schelling and Novalis as part of this larger tradition of focusing on the bodily and affective experiences of touch, most notably their connection to Spinoza.

That connection was part of a broader social, political, philosophical and theological history that makes German Romanticism a period suited to understanding the promise and potential of contingency. We know unequivocally, both through their personal writings and the history of the time period, that most of the key figures of early German Romanticism read Spinoza enthusiastically in the wake of the 1785 Pantheism Controversy.[53] Novalis, for example,

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[53] In 1785, after several years of increasingly acrimonious correspondence with Moses Mendelssohn, Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi published his conversation with the most central figure of the Enlightenment, Gotthold Lessing. Apparently in a private conversation in 1780, Lessing claimed to be a pantheist, to think there was no other philosophy than Spinoza's and that all philosophy ends there. The stakes were roughly this: Lessing was so widely esteemed that if Jacobi were right, all of philosophy would be thrown into question as ending inevitably in fatalism and atheism. Mendelssohn rushed out a manuscript defending Lessing, only to die from a cold caught on the way to the printer; Jacobi countered that philosophy proved the need for a leap of faith. The seeming insolubility of the quarrel led the way for Kant becoming a major figure, particularly once Karl Leonhard Reinhold published his *Briefe über die kantische Philosophie* (1786) arguing that Kant provides a third way between atheism and fideism. It also, unexpectedly, made it acceptable for any number of major thinkers, ranging from Goethe, Novalis, Hölderlin, Herder, Schlegel, Hegel, Schleiermacher, to come out as Spinozists. For more, see Frederick Beiser, *The Fate of Reason: German Philosophy from Kant to Fichte* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994).

praised the "God-intoxicated Spinoza," while Schelling enthusiastically adopted pantheism in his *Treatise on the Essence of Human Freedom.* As a result, we know that these thinkers were aware of the bodily affective tradition of contingency Spinoza inhabited, with all of its profound uneasiness with the capacity of emotions to upend our equilibrium.

At the same time, the late eighteenth century was also the era of the French Revolution and Pietism, with its emphasis on the personal, affective experience of God. As Frederick Beiser has argued in *The Fate of Reason,* the far leftwing of the German Enlightenment, particularly those hailing from a pietist or Counter-Reformation background, increasingly turned to Spinoza and pantheism. Disenchanted with the hierarchy of the Lutheran Church, these radicals felt that the Reformation has ended by betraying its initial insights into the priesthood of all believers, freedom of conscience, and necessity of a person relationship with God. While Luther had achieved his direct connection to God through the Bible, after Spinoza published his *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* arguing for a historical interpretation of scripture, the literal authority of the Bible came into question. Unable to trust the authority of the Bible and alienated from the formal structure of the Church, many of these thinkers looked inward for an immediate experience of the divine.[54] The God of pantheism, they reasoned, was internal and accessible to anyone who reflected on herself, whereas the God of theism only selectively revealed himself to the external world.[55] In Heine's words, pantheism became, "the religion of the radicals."[56]

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[54] The most famous example is Friedrich Schleiermacher, *On Religion: Speeches to its Cultured Despisers,* ed. Richard Crouter (New York: Cambridge university Press, 1994).

[55] Frederick Beiser, *The Fate of Reason: German Philosophy from Kant to Fichte* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994), 51.

[56] Ibid, 51.

Thus, the early German Romantics, particularly Schelling and Novalis, began to write at a moment when the tradition of studying the contingency of the passions in order to master them collided with the belief that the passions offered a unique mode of accessing God. While the ethical project of mastering emotions dropped out of conversations about contingency for Schelling and Novalis, deep ambivalence about the affirmability of contingency remained.[57]

That ambivalence is what makes early German Romanticism so fruitful for resurrecting this forgotten theory of contingency. It is a moment when contingency is at once divinized - literally, in Schelling's case - capable of reuniting the finite subject with God or the Absolute, while devastating traditional claims to knowledge of the whole of nature. Frankly hubristic intellectual projects collapse under crippling doubt about the limits of knowledge. In pursuing the contours of that ambivalence, I am not denying the liberatory potential of disruption; the final chapter on Serres is meant to engage sympathetically with those arguments. Rather, I am correcting for a certain theoretical line that embraces contingency as the disorienting, world-shattering site of creativity, or the prerequisite for critique, without ever attempting to seriously reckon with the value of the projects destroyed.

By doing so, I am also returning to the religious roots of contingency, at least in spirit. While I have no interest in reviving the project of theodicy, I do believe Christian thought historically had the virtue of taking seriously the suffering contingency so often entailed. Augustine, for example, might have disavowed the reality of contingency by insisting on the ultimate reality of God's necessary providence, but his *Confessions* is a wonderfully sensitive depiction of what it feels like to live as a mortal creature in contrast to an eternal creator.

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[57] For more examples of mastering the passions, see Susan James, *Passion and Action: the Emotion in Seventeenth-Century Philosophy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

However troubling or alien his soteriological framework might look today, it allowed him and the tradition that followed him to develop a tremendously sophisticated anthropology that attended to the experience of being at odds with oneself, dispersed in the world, lost in through our senses, and longing for something unnameable. In the pages that follow, I am trying to capture something like that approach.

To that end, I have structured each chapter around particular situations and moods where contingency shows up, ranging from loneliness in Schelling's cosmogony; to illness and the material basis of knowledge in book culture throughout Novalis's encyclopedia; to wonder, torture, and Merleau-Ponty's concept of the schizophrenic's "dark space" in Jean Améry's Holocaust memoirs; to love in Michel Serres's account of subjectivity in an age of environmental catastrophe. My text and topic choices have been in part a matter of chance; I have written about the tactile understanding of contingency where I found it in canon dominated by the historical reading in vogue. They have also been an effort to offer a range of experiences of contingency, from the devastating to the cautiously constructive. For all that, the texts I have chosen are not random or disconnected. Concepts - particularly illness, desire, and place - as well as questions of subjectivity, materiality, and the autonomy of material things, have knit together the chapters, often reemerging at different points in different registers across the text. The final section will explain those scenarios in greater detail, but before concluding with those chapter summaries, I want to add a note on methodology and style.

V. Methodology and Style

I am not a historian of philosophy. Throughout this work I have tried to be attentive to the scholarship on the figures I have dealt with, as well as surrounding philosophical, scientific,

and literary debates, but my argument is not primarily a historical one. I am not attempting to trace a line of transmission or construct a genealogy for this version of contingency and lack the archival training even if I wanted to do so. Nor am I particularly invested in contributing to the secondary literature on any of the figures I discuss. I *do* make a point of offering my own or corrected translations where necessary and in drawing on other texts by the figures I discuss where illuminating, but I make no claim to be comprehensive in reading their works or their biographies. I will never venture an opinion about whether Schelling's philosophical oeuvre is coherent, or if Novalis had a fair reading of Reinhold or Fichte. For some of the figures I treat, such as Novalis and Serres, this alternative understanding of contingency can be understood as a key theme in their work; for others, such as Merleau-Ponty, my reading distorts their work as a whole by focusing on a relatively peripheral concern or one major work at the expense of others.

Instead, this project should be read primarily as a constructive one in the tradition of continental philosophy. Accordingly, its success should be measured by how persuasive or illuminating my account of contingency is. Since the traditional textualists who have read excerpts of this work have expressed puzzlement over its shifting genres, voices and styles, it is also worth noting that, as a continental philosopher, I write in a tradition that has not recognized firm distinctions between literature, philosophy, and theology since Kant. Novalis and Schelling experimented with form because they believed the aesthetic experience offered a glimpse of the Absolute that would otherwise be inaccessible to reason; I follow in that tradition, even if the experience I am interested in capturing is a tactile, existential one, rather than a revelatory one.

VI. Chapter Summaries

My first chapter picks up at a moment when this older paradigm of the passions begins to definitively break down: the turn of the nineteenth century in Prussia. I open with a discussion of Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph von Schelling's 1813 philosophical fable, *Ages of the World.* In Schelling's account, the universe and God itself initially were unified in one quiescent, all-powerful will. In an inexplicable moment, this all-encompassing will fractures and gives birth to a blind, desiring will that seeks some fullness to its lack, some object to satisfy its desire. In later works, Schelling very explicitly equates the caprice of this desire with contingency. In a moment of despair, this will creates an opposing will that embodies affirming, creative essence in contrast to its emptiness and need. With the creation of this opposing will, the universe itself is split between the push and pull of negation and affirmation. This dual nature, Schelling thinks, continues to structure human desire to this day.

In this chapter my main argument is threefold. First, Schelling picks up on the association between contingency and the passions found in earlier thinkers such as Hobbes, but fundamentally revises the relation between desire and the external world. The passions remain unpredictable and subject to chance, but they are no longer elicited in response to some external object. Instead, there is a free-standing reservoir of passion that latches on to or creates some object to satisfy its need essentially at random. Second, by couching this version of desire in terms of cosmology, Schelling rejects the possibility of ever reining in the passions. We cannot subdue or make rational the impulses of passion because the very nature of the universe is born from unpredictable, contingent, unknowable longing. Third, even though Schelling forecloses the possibility of mastering desire, he remains deeply ambivalent about whether this vision of psychology can be affirmed. I make this argument by offering a close reading of Schelling's text,

with particular attentiveness to the language of illness he uses when discussing longing, in order to claim that it is best understood as a phenomenology of loneliness shaped by broader theological disagreements about the nature of God and the type of human knowledge possible.

If Schelling spoke on a cosmic level of the contingency of the passions, Novalis, the subject of the second chapter, worked his way to his own understanding of contingency through his engagement with print culture, poetry, philosophy, and science. In doing so, he concretized the understanding of illness Schelling invoked. This section begins with a recent article by Chad Wellmon arguing that the poet and philosopher Novalis began work on an unfinished encyclopedia, called *Das Allgemeine Brouillon* (1798-9) as a reaction against the proliferation of books that gave the illusion of a disembodied public. To counter that trend, Novalis attempted to understand knowledge as contingent on contact with the material, particular book that stimulated the mind; knowledge would be local and contingent, rather than timeless and universal. I contextualize this belief in terms of the scientific theories of the day by Albrecht von Haller and John Brown, both of whom had tactile theories of health that attributed illness to understimulation of the nerves. Novalis, who saw this understimulation as characteristic of the modern person's alienation from her senses, thus sought to emphasize contact with the book to re-ground the reader in her body and revitalize her constitution. Yet the encounter with the book also impressed upon the reader the impossibility of ever transcending her finite perspective and filled her with wonder at her imbrication in a world of chance connections that brought the book to her hands. This wonder feeds into Novalis's larger theological, philosophical project by offering a revelation of a pantheistic whole that can never be reached or mastered, but only approximated in our infinite striving to attain it.

The third chapter takes up the question raised by Novalis about the relation among place, wonder, and the recognition of contingency, but seeks its darker implications. In it, I read Jean Améry's autobiographical essay describing his torture during the Third Reich with Maurice Merleau-Ponty's description in *The Phenomenology of Perception* (1945) as a type of "dark space" described by the schizophrenic, where distance dissolves between a person and the external world, creating the experience of contingency as the touch of objects violates boundaries. For Améry, the confrontation with his fragility and contingency is figured as a type of exile, with his body as the home he can never feel fully at ease in after its boundaries were breached by another's blow. This chapter is meant to counter the hopefulness of Novalis by exploring a case where an awareness of contingency is imposed by violent touch and becomes, as a result, pathological.

I end by asking whether or not the experience of contingency is solely disruptive, or if it can be incorporated into lasting social structures. I open with Michel Serres's discussion of contingency and eroticism in *The Five Senses,* which offers an account of contingency, dependency, and co-implication with the world experienced through the shifting boundaries of bodies as they caress each other. I argue this model of contingency as "common tangency," underlies his environmentalism, leading him to urge the creation of a "natural contract" where humans combat global warming from recognition that they are in constant, co-implicated contact with nature, in much the same way as two lovers during sex.

Chapter One

FWJ Schelling's *Ages of the World*: Contingency and the Most Forsaken Loneliness.

I. Introduction

In July 1944, the introduction to Jason Wirth's translation of Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph von Schelling's 1815 *Die Weltalter* calmly informs us*,* a plane bombed Munich. There was more than one plane - it had been four years since Churchill instituted the retaliatory firebombing of German cities in earnest - but the editor only has interest in one. This particular plane struck the library of the University of Munich where, five years earlier in 1939, a German scholar named Horst Fuhrman had stumbled across a chest in the library's basement, haphazardly crammed with sheaves of previously unknown manuscripts in the tiny, meticulous handwriting of Schelling. At the time, Fuhrman counted two set and corrected versions, as well as twelve substantially different handwritten versions of Schelling's unfinished, restlessly rewritten magnum opus, *Ages of the World,* henceforth *Die Weltalter.*[58] Prior to this only one version had been known to scholars, the longest extant manuscript, written in 1815 and published by Schelling's son. After three days of fire bombing that number would shrink again to three: one from 1811, one from 1813, and one from 1815. Long overshadowed by his former friend and rival, Hegel, it would take another fifty years before the second draft of Schelling's strange, fragmentary work made it to any significant scholarly audience in English, courtesy of the new translation, the patronage of Slavoj Zizek, and, perhaps, a few million dead.

These history-charred parchments tell a half-literary, half-philosophical myth about the origin of the universe and God, written in anticipation of an era when "truth becomes fable and

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[58] Jason Wirth, Translator's Introduction to The Ages of the World: (Fragment) from the Handwritten Remains of Third Version (c. 1815), by Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph Schelling (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000), vii.

fable truth." In them, an all-encompassing will fractures from longing and in a completely free, contingent act, sets off in search of a counterpart in a move that will eventually snowball into the creation of the universe. Shadowed by the almost allegorical mystique of the library in flames, it is hard to resist reading the text as exemplifying an understanding of contingency as the rupture of unnecessary, unexpected historical events that upend easy, logical narratives, and return us instead to the fragile instability of a world of things that constantly pass in and out of being.[59] Yet, I want to suggest that there is another way of reading the contingency that propels this narrative, one less of immolation, ruptures, and reversals than connection and contact: one faithful to the root of the word contingency in English, *tangere, "*to touch*."* In this reading, what gives the concept content is the physical and emotional experience of a world filled with things that wound, resist, yield, react and interact with each other; these forms of constant contact with an unstable environment are ultimately what allow the thought that things could have been otherwise to show up as an existential problem.

For Schelling, following a long tradition of thinkers who equate the passions with contingency, the form of connection that propels his narrative is a primarily affective one, as seen in the will's blind search for another. However, I want to resist the implication that just because Schelling writes of the contingent movement of desire that the story he tells is therefore arbitrary or completely illogical. For that reason, I want to begin by placing his equation of contingency, connection, and feeling in the context of his thought, particularly his time among the early German Romantics in Jena at the end of the eighteenth century. This mix of theology and psychology guides my reading of the 1813 version of his text, and leads me to argue that

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[59] For example, see Markus Gabriel, "The Contingency of Necessity," in *Mythology, Madness, and Laughter: Subjectivity in German Idealism,* ed. Markus Gabriel and Slavoj Žižek (New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2009), 81.

interpreting the dynamic of the wills he describes psychologically, as providing a phenomenology of loneliness, as well as theologically, as engaging with traditional Christian metaphors of theodicy, reveals a deeper logic to his use of contingency with ethical ramifications that echo in the present.

II. History and Background

At the time he was composing the second version of *Die Weltalter,* however, Schelling could have foreseen nothing of false starts and endless revisions, conflagrations and obscurity. Nothing in his early career suggested a future of dusty basements for his work, though perhaps the older, wearier Schelling of the 1840s who wrote that, "there is in every deed, in all the toil and labor of man himself nothing but vanity,"[60] might have guessed at it. Unlike his former friend and rival, GWF Hegel, who had been mockingly referred to as "the old man" by his peers for his plodding, methodical nature, Schelling was all restless energy and precocity. Born in 1775 in Leonberg, Württemberg, he spent his early years first attending a monastery school where his father was an Orientalist professor and pastor, and then a Latin school, before being admitted to the Tübinger Stift at the age of sixteen, a full four years younger than usual. He graduated with a degree in theology, though his interests gradually shifted toward philosophy, particularly once he began reading the work of Kant and Fichte. After a few years of working as a tutor, Schelling was called in 1798 to Jena to serve as an unpaid professor of philosophy. He was only 23 and had just gotten a job at Jena, the center of everything.

Descriptions of Schelling at that time sometimes read like a bad romance novel, filled with remarks about his "stubborn chin, curly hair, and flashing eyes."[61] Still, in a time and place

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[60] Ibid, 93-4/7.

[61] Tillette, 63.

filled with unorthodox thinkers and artists, Schelling was noteworthy. Nearly all the great thinkers of Early German Romanticism and German Idealism lived in Jena in the late 1790s - the philosopher Johann Gottlieb Fichte (1762-1814), who was at the time hailed as the heir to Kant; Hegel (1770-1831), without whom there would have been no Marx; the poet Novalis (1772-1801), whose melancholy image of the blue flower is still invoked as a symbol of longing; the brothers August (1767-1845) and Friedrich Schlegel (1772-1829), who started the avant-garde journal *Athenaeum*, which sought to combine the literary and philosophical one hundred and fifty years before Derrida; and Dorothea Veit (1764-1839), daughter of the famous Jewish figure of the Enlightenment, Moses Mendelssohn, and a novelist in her own right who scandalized society by running off from her first husband with Friedrich Schlegel. Even Wolfgang von Goethe visited, often dropping by to see Caroline Schlegel (1763-1809), August's wife and co-translator of Shakespeare into German, a thoroughly remarkable woman whose daughter from her first marriage recent scholars suspect might have been Goethe's.[62]

When Schelling arrived Fichte was the center of the philosophical world. In what is surely one of the most ironic charges in philosophy, Fichte rose to fame by criticizing Immanuel Kant's work as insufficiently systematic. The "all-crushing Kant," he argued, had given us an account of perception and the human faculties, but had failed to derive his system from an indisputable first principle. Moreover, in his effort to limit the scope of human perception, Kant had posited a distinction between representations, how objects appear to us, and the things-in-themselves. Fichte objected to the idea that there was a whole reality inaccessible to our reason. Thus, he tried to solve the dual problem by creating a first principle, an experience so basic that

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[62] See Fiona Steinkamp, "Introduction" to *Clara, or, On Nature's Connection to the Spirit World* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002).

all of human perception could be derived from it. Yet that principle had to be accessible to human knowledge, not grounded in the thing-in-itself. Fichte claimed to have solved both problems by grounding all perception and all of Kant's philosophy in self-consciousness.

It would take me far outside of the scope of my discussion to go through any of the details of Fichte's extremely complicated work. (Fichte, in fact, was such a notoriously incomprehensible writer that he once out of exasperation with his critics published a book titled, "A Crystal Clear Report to the General Public Concerning the Actual Essence of the Newest Philosophy: An Attempt to Force the Reader to Understand.") In broad outlines, though, the situation was this: Fichte had made human perception the measure of all reality. Human subjectivity might be opposed by external forces, particularly nature, but Fichte had full faith in the right to subordinate nature to human needs.

Schelling, who had once been an ardent admirer of Fichte, came to break with him and become famous in his own right over exactly this question of nature. In surely one of his most prescient critiques Schelling anticipated a long train of critics who accused modernity of instrumentalizing nature when he castigated Fichte for seeing in nature only lumber for for human tools, rather than a subject of value in its own right.[63] As a recent essay by Bruce Matthews argues, "Cutting straight to the heart of modernity's capitalist ambitions, Schelling demands that we stop exploiting nature by making it subservient to our immediate 'economic-teleological ends' as if it had no inherent value."[64] Instead, Schelling reversed Fichte's relation between the subject and nature, imagining reality as an organism, with the human subject as the

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[63] See most famously on this point Heidegger's essay, "The Question Concerning Technology" in Martin Heidegger, *the Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays* (New York: Harper, 1982).

[64] Bruce Matthews, "The New Mythology: Romanticism Between Religion and Humanism." *The Relevance of Romanticism: Essays on German Romantic Philosophy* (New York: Oxford, 2014), 211

highest manifestation of nature. We are not prior to nature or in a position of control; we are nothing less than nature's efforts to become aware of itself. Which is to say our subjectivity, our awareness, always depends on nature, a much larger, independently existing reality we can never fully access. This is a point I will return to.

When Schelling began work on the second draft of *Die Weltalter* in 1813, he was only 38, still a relatively young man, but his life and thought looked tremendously different from his years in Jena. The social circle that had seemed so promising when he was 23 was a wreckage. Novalis had died in 1801, Schelling had decisively fallen out with Fichte, and the Schlegel brothers broke with Schelling altogether after he had a very public affair with August's wife, Caroline Schlegel, a woman ten years older than he. He married Caroline and moved from position to position, running into constant conflict with his Catholic colleagues. Then, in 1809, Caroline contracted a short illness and died.

The loss of Caroline had been a profound one. To be sure, Schelling had remarried the year before he began writing the second draft of *Die Weltalter* to a friend of Caroline's he sometimes seemed to confuse with his dead wife. Still, the woman who had once written him letters daydreaming about greeting him some morning by tracing the sign of the cross down his face with soft kisses (forehead, lips, left eye, right) was gone and by all accounts he never fully recovered from that loss. Even ten years after her death, Schelling declined the request of her sister to return some of Caroline's old letters, explaining that her memory was still too painful to allow him to go though her old belongings.[65] He certainly never published again, instead writing

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[65] For more on Schelling's relationship with Caroline, see Xavier Tilliette, *Schelling: Biographie* (Paris, Calmann-Lévy, 1999).

and rewriting the same fragment of a story about a will that wanted to return to nothingness but was trapped by the demands of life.

His philosophical preoccupations looked just as different from his personal. The concerns that had once led him to angrily accuse Fichte of having *Bauernstolz,*[66] the self-satisfied pride of a farmer who uses nature solely for his own crude ends, had remained, but instead of looking for the unassimilable source of human subjectivity in nature, Schelling had increasingly turned toward psychological explanations, most clearly through his engagement with the problem of evil. His shift in interests had begun before Caroline's death. In 1809 he had published his treatise*, On the Essence of Human Freedom,* or *Die Freiheitschrift,* as an effort to rehabilitate the project of theodicy.[67] It was the last piece Schelling would publish in his lifetime. A recent work by Michelle Kosch has persuasively argued that one of Schelling's major preoccupations was to reject the entire tradition in theology that defined evil in negative terms, as lack or privation of goodness.[68] Instead, following Kant's 1793 work, *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone,* Schelling defines evil as a radical choice to act against the moral law. Like Kant, Schelling locates that decision prior to time.

To give a very brief summary: there are, Schelling thinks, a light and dark force, in constant struggle from the beginning of time. Even God is implicated in the struggle. Within God, it takes the form of the struggle between revelation (light) and concealment (darkness). In humans this takes the form of a struggle between the universalizing tendency of the good and the

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[66] SW 1/7, 47.

[67] FWJ Schelling, *Philosophische Untersuchungen über das Wesen der menschlichen Freiheit und die damit zusammenhängenden Gegenstände (1809),* in *Schellings Werke, V. 4,* ed. Manfred Schröter. München, (C.S. Beck and R. Oldenbourg, 1954), 571-721.

[68] Michelle Kosch, *Freedom and Reason in Kant, Schelling, and Kierkegaard* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 44-49.

active self to preserve its particularity. People are free because they choose their characters, which side will win, in a decision outside of time. If it sometimes seems as as if the entirety of our history is the inevitable unfolding of our characters into deeds and desires it is because the only true moment of freedom came before our birth. We chose our destiny when we opted for light or darkness. Everything that came after is the necessary consequence of that free choice.

Two consequences emerge from Schelling's version of theodicy that matter for my reading of contingency in *Die Weltalter.* First, in locating the origin of evil in an absolutely undetermined leap of the will, Schelling begins to think of the ground of reason specifically as contingent or undetermined. Second, in limiting contingency to a leap of the will, Schelling begins to think of contingency in terms of personality and desire. The equation of contingency and the passions is central to my reading of *Die Weltalter,* so let me explain what I mean by both points.

Regarding my first point: in his 1842 Berlin lectures, later collected as *The Grounding of Positive Philosophy,* Schelling told his students that all sciences are based on presuppositions that can never be justified. Whether language, physics or philosophy, all falter before the question of why there should be anything at all.[69] In a certain sense, this admission could be seen as continuous with his early preoccupation with respecting nature as something with an independent reality. Taking as his example the existence of the ether thought to produce light, Schelling confesses that, "It seems to me something so contingent that I cannot even comprehend it and thus cannot accept as actually explained any phenomenon that depends on it."[70] To

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[69] *The Grounding of Positive Philosophy,* 95.

[70] F.W.J. Schelling, *The Grounding of Positive Philosophy: The Berlin Lectures,* trans. Bruce Matthews (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007), 91; F.W.J. Schelling, *Einleitung in die Philosophie der Offenbarung oder Begründung der positiven Philosophie,* in *Schellings Werke, V. 6.* Ed. Manfred Schröter (München, C.S. Beck and R. Oldenbourg, 1954), 5.

imagine that concepts comprise or adequately reflect the world is rank narcissism. All of the great systems of thought that presuppose reason, like Spinoza's, or try to show the development of reason, like Hegel's, begin too late. The true philosopher needs to begin by tracing the origin of reason in the non-rational, the arbitrary, the merely contingent. And while that ground might have been nature in earlier iterations of Schelling's work, by 1809 he begins to find the origin of reason in personality.

That brings me to my second point. As early as his *Freiheitsschrift,* Schelling was already invoking the language of personality in contrast to the abstract, systematizing version of reason that attempts to grasp the Absolute without regard for "the demands of spirit as well as those of the heart and those of moral feeling."[71] Instead, he writes, "Only in personality is there life, and all personality rests on a dark ground that indeed must therefore be the ground of cognition as well."[72] From there, he went on to make the following argument. The only thing that can propel both creation and reason into development is a real opposition or internal difference. This is found not in the evolution of the concept, as Hegel would suggest, but, rather, in the play between having and wanting found in the desire of the will. Or, put otherwise, there is no motivation internal to reason to be forever negating its definitions, seeking out contradictions, false premises and otherwise unraveling at night the cloth woven during the day. Reason may offer us the tools to push beyond previous theories, but the motivation for doing so lies in psychological grounds. Only wanting, both in the sense of lacking and desiring something beyond itself, makes possible reason's capacity for self-negation and differentiation, its endless

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[71] F.W.J. Schelling, *Philosophical Investigations into the Essence of Human Freedom,* Trans. Jeff Love and Johannes Smith (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006), pp. 75.

[72] Ibid, 75.

search for its immediate, incomprehensible, contingent basis.[73] Will is basic; reason is one development thereof. If you want the ground of reason, the contingent basis of thought that we can only shrug helplessly before, you have to look at desire.

Die Weltalter was Schelling's attempt to describe the flux of this ever-changing will that gives rise to both thought and the world; it is the problem of human subjectivity made cosmic. Allow me, then, to recount more fully the content of this work, before drawing my conclusions about the relation between philosophy, theology, contingency and feeling in Schelling's broader project. There are three versions of the text, as mentioned, and while I will draw upon the other two where useful, it is really the second one I want to dwell with. The 1813 version, then, runs roughly as follows.

Prior to the creation of the world, prior to time, prior, even, to God understood as a personal deity, there existed eternity. Eternity is not a perspective on the entirety of time, or even a primarily temporal phenomenon. Rather, it is an inaccessible state, where all time, space, matter, and possibility exist in potential form. It is a will, but a totally passive, inactive will, also called, "the will that wills nothing." In this space outside of time, the "will that wills nothing" produces in itself the "eternal will." How or why remains unclear, but the eternal will is characterized by a blind, restless longing for the will that wills nothing, a yearning that all life shares. Everything desires above all this return to stillness and nothingness. It is desire in its purest form, but blind desire which does not know what it seeks, called by Schelling *Sehnsucht*. Eventually, experiencing only emptiness and longing, the eternal will conceives of itself as pure negation or lack, and is renamed by Schelling "the negating will." One way to read the negating

[73] Ibid, 135-7/66.

will is as the active form of the will that wills nothing; while the first lacks any desires whatsoever, the second actively, nihilistically wills nothing.

Unable to find satisfaction within itself, the eternal will, now the negating will, assumes that its object must exist outside of itself as plentitude, the fulness to its emptiness. In doing so, it produces pure essence, or the "affirming will." Yet, despite thinking the fullness of essence would satisfy it, the negating will finds itself in conflict with it. Only with the perspectival shift that allows the affirming and negating wills to understand themselves as a unity do they reach any satisfaction. Together, the two wills form spirit, or *Geist*, simultaneously the link between life and eternity, and at one with eternity. Once *Geist* comes into being it too, in turn, seeks its complement. As the opposite of spirit is matter, *Geist* takes on a primitive body, making a spiritual-corporeal essence that shines through objects into the present. Spirit and matter at this point are two aspects of the same thing.

My analysis ends with the creation of this early matter, but, to give a very abbreviated summary, the rest of the narrative runs as follows. *Geist* shapes matter to reflect the possibilities latent in eternity and holds it up before eternity as a fleeting vision of its own essence. Gradually, spirit pulls eternity to itself, allowing eternity to recognize itself for the first time in the possibilities *Geist* holds up to it. This mirror draws it out of its passivity through this vision of itself and, in doing so, transform it into an active will. At this point, Schelling retroactively - and opaquely - insists that everything he had described in the relation between the negating and affirming wills had been passive. However, he insists that the struggle between the negating and affirming wills now becomes an active contradiction. The conflict sharpens, the negating will takes on the active, destructive character of wrath, while the affirming will or essence assumes

the identity of love. Where the two contradictory wills exist, so too does the third will of their unity. This is the "absolute I of divinity."[74]

In a flash of decision, wrath gives way to love. "The Eternal takes that part of its essence which - although not in fact the less significant - it is freely persuaded by love to regard as the less significant and makes it into the very innermost and strongest force at the beginning of existence [Daseyn]."[75] Wrath or the negating will contracts, giving primacy to the affirming will of revelation, and allowing creation to begin. This is the deed that must forever remain unconscious, the inaccessible ground of creation.

At the center of this story of wills that want is the first, inexplicable break of the eternal will from the will that wills nothing. It is an incomprehensible event, an unjustified moment that the text dances uneasily around and that Schelling himself will come to renounce by his 1815 draft, a fact I will return to later. Schelling himself labels it a mystery even in 1813, writing:

> Now the great riddle of all time originates precisely here, the riddle of how anything could have come from what is neither externally active nor is anything in itself. And yet life did not remain in that state of immobility, and time is just as certain as eternity. Indeed, to the casual glance the later even seems driven out by the former; a world full of movement, full of conflict and strain of all forces seems to have taken over the place where the highest indifference, eternal rest, and universal satiation once dwelt. There have always been those who claimed that this riddle was easy to solve[...]But these words are without sense.[76]

Despite Schelling's insistence on the inexplicability of the will, I want to argue that its movements have a logic of their own. Not one that will ever make a syllogism, granted, but a

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[74] FWJ Schelling, The Ages of The World (1813), Trans. Judith Normal, in The Abyss of Freedom/Ages of the World, by Slavoj Žižek and FWJ Schelling (Ann Arbour: University of Michigan Press, 1997), 170; FWJ Schelling, Die Weltalter Fragmente: In den Urfassungen von 1811 und 1813, ed. Manfred Schröter (München: Bilderstein Verlag und Leibniz Verlag, 1946), 170.

[75] Ibid, 181/181.

[76] Ibid, 135/135.

psychological logic that make its movements explicable, even if not necessary. This is the logic of loneliness, shaped by the theological commitments that so worried Schelling, for what, after all, is loneliness if not suffering in the absence of the other? It is the effort to escape this initial state of loneliness that makes the eternal will's longing for another coherent; it is this experience of being ambushed and buffeted about by feelings neither controlled nor fully explained as it seeks connection with an unknown other that becomes the model for - or rather, *is* - the experience of contingency.

What is less easy to give so succinctly is a full explanation of Schelling's attitude toward these developments and the theological or philosophical concerns that ultimately shape the form loneliness comes to take. With that caveat, let me turn to the first stage in his narrative: desire.

III. Diseased Desire

In my discussion of Schelling's Berlin lectures, I established the primacy and contingency of wanting for his thought. In my discussion of the 1813 draft of *Die Weltalter* I gave that wanting a particular context. Now I want to narrow the discussion even further to Schelling's particular characterization of wanting, its relation to epistemological claims, and his assessment of its relative goodness or affirmability. We have this contingent will. Now how does it act? What characterizes it? Why? These questions can be addressed by turning to the related metaphors of theodicy and by thinking through the connotations of Schelling's specific term for wanting: *Sehnsucht.*

Sehnsucht is the eternal's will's blind longing for something absent, namely eternity. The blindness of this desire is emphasized repeatedly, raising the question why and what is it that it cannot see? The answer, I think, should be approached by way of contrast to the philosopher's

state and mode of knowledge. The human exists in this piece as a foil to the eternal will. Thus, we learn what it means for *Sehnsucht* to be blind by exploring what it is for the philosopher to know.

This becomes evident in a passage about the role and motivations of the philosopher. Early on Schelling characterizes most thinkers as driven to philosophize about this "tranquil realm of the past," out of hope that they can, "genuinely get behind the great process in which they are partly spectators and partly compassionate participants." Most, however, "lack the requisite humility; they wish to begin everything straight away with the highest concepts and bypass the mute beginnings of all life."[77] In its German entirety, the text runs like this:

> Es hat von viele gelüftet, in dieß stille Reich der Vergangenheit einzudringen, und so in eigentlichen Verstand hinter den großten Proceß zu kommen, von dem sie theils Zuschauer, theils mithandelnde und mitleidende Theile sind. Aber den Meisten fehlte es an der gehörigen Demuth, in dem sie alles gleich mit dem höchsten Begriffen anfangen und die Stummen Anfänge alles Lebens überspringen wollten.

A few key things get lost in Norman's translation of this text. To start, the presence of community. In German, the philosopher finds herself as *mithandelnde* and *mitleidende,* co-acting and compassionate, always as finite, thrown, and suffering with another, even another as nebulous as eternity. Relatedly, the language of "Proceß" could either be translated as process, or as trial, suggesting the traditional project of a theodicy. Finally, the term for concepts here is *Begriff,* the grasping concept Hegel uses. By switching to an aural metaphor and claiming that the true source of interest is "mute beginning of life," Schelling is suggesting that the grasping, conceptual mode of knowledge of the bad philosopher is so inadequate to its object that it cannot even begin to adequately address it. After all, how do you grasp silence with a hand?

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[77] Schelling, Ages of the World 1813, 148/148.

This use of metaphor, of course, is all continuous with Schelling's critiques of the capabilities of reason I outlined at the beginning of this piece, as well as the broader context of Schelling's work on the problem of evil at the time. I had alluded earlier to Schelling's fight against theodicies that attributed evil to the absence of good. One of the oldest metaphors in Christianity for that lack is blindness. What we experience as evil, the argument goes, from the proper perspective vanishes or can be understood as a deficiency of goodness. The blind man does not suffer a real evil; rather, he simply lacks the goodness of sight. In a closely related argument, Augustine compares all of the evil in the world to the black lines in a painting- jagged fissures in the landscape when viewed from too close, but necessary for the harmony of the whole from God's perspective.[78]

Attributing blindness to *Sehnsucht,* then, could be read as making a double argument. First, it is a radical rejection of the sort of transcendent God who could ever make contingency disappear from a certain vantage point. It even mocks this tradition that finds it so easy reckon with evil; the thinker who seeks reassurance in a divine vision of the goodness of the whole finds only empty longing and incomprehension. Second, Schelling is also trying to show the idea of lack or blindness as an active ill, not simply something passively suffered, in the way I might, say, consider my inability to fly a lack. God is broken, and everything, human, divine, or otherwise, is fractured, finite and blind. Schelling's universe is broken all the way to the bottom.

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[78] Augustine writes that, "Just as in a painting the black becomes beautiful in the context of the whole, so too immutable divine providence presents this whole contest for our instruction." Cited in Hans Urs von Balthasar, The Glory of the Lord II: Studies in Theological Style: Clerical Styles, Trans. Andrew Louth, Francis McDonagh, and Brian McNeil C.R.V. (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1984), 127-129. Von Balthasar then goes on to note that Augustine's "assertion of the ethical non-necessity of sin and its consequences and that of its aesthetic necessity is not just important for Augustine alone; its significance for the millennium that which follows him can hardly be overestimated" (Von Balthasar, 128).

However, the lack is not just any lack; rather, it stems from a mystery peculiar to the experience of loneliness and is a point, I think, in favor of my reading of the text. When the eternal will gave birth to itself it already was part of eternity. This brings us back to the problem posed in my initial discussion of the break: how could the eternal will feel the lack of something to which it belonged? I hold to my assertion that this is *intellectually* unfathomable. Psychologically, though, this is an incredibly common experience: it is the question of how it is possible to be lonely in a crowd. There are others present who can be conceptually known, and, yet, none are felt as present. The blindness of the eternal will is affective, not conceptual, but at this stage there is no distinction between those two types of knowledge. By depicting a state in which the inability to feel the other as present collapses into the inability to know the other as present, Schelling engages with disjunction between the objective presence of community and the emotional sensation of isolation. It is an unanswered question in this text, more a mystery than a problem. If the foundation of Heidegger's philosophy is wonder that there is something *rather* than nothing, the foundation of Schelling's thought in this book is wonder that we see something *as* nothing.

At this point I have given, hopefully, a reasonable argument for how Schelling's characterization of the eternal will's *Sehnsucht* as blind longing for something absent is shaped by his reaction against a specific tradition of theodicy, his own conviction of a pre-rational basis to the concept, and his concerns about the limits of human reason. I would be remiss, however, if I did not mention the connection between *Sehnsucht*, theodicy, and Hegel, most immediately because of the role the distinction plays in some passages I will analyze in the next section.

Schelling's reappropriation of blindness is as much as rejection of Hegel, who participates in the tradition of theodicy that allows contingency to disappear into necessity through the metaphor of sight, as it as it is to anyone else in that intellectual tradition.[79] While showing how all of human suffering is part of the necessary process of reason evolving Hegel famously attributes the social distinction of master and slave - the distinction Marx would pick up in his critique of alienated labor - to frustrated desire. Put very briefly, in the stage directly before the master-slave dialectic, a rudimentary subject, or self-consciousness, approaches others solely through desire, *Begierde.*[80] At that stage, self-consciousness wants to affirm itself as an independent being by negating or destroying the object of its desire. It finds, however, that destruction to be ultimately unsatisfactory because self-consciousness still depends on the existence of the other even in destroying it. There is no satisfaction of desire - however selfish or destructive that desire may be - without an other. Moreover, desire returns the moment it is satisfied, forcing the self-consciousness to seek out satiation yet again.

This earliest form of desire morphs into a need for recognition for the self-consciousness. Hegel's master-slave dialectic occurs when self-consciousness encounters another. Self-consciousness now seeks the other's recognition of its own self-sufficiency, or *Selbständigkeit,* through the willingness of the other to utterly negate itself, to declare that it is nothing and the first self-consciousness is everything. The two do battle, one, struck all at once with fear of its own mortality, capitulates, and so the Master-Slave relation is born. *Begierde* is the earliest

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[79] I am thinking, in particular, of the famous passage by Hegel where he asserts that in order to cast off the melancholy of contemplating the suffering of history, we must, "return to the selfishness of standing on a quiet shore where we can be secure in enjoying the distant sight of confusion and wreckage." G.W.F. Hegel, *Introduction to the Philosophy of History,* Trans Leo Rauch (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1988), 24.

[80] See GWF Hegel, "Herrschafft unde Knechtschaft" in *Phänomenologie des Geistes,* in *Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel: Gesammelte Werke, V. 9.* Ed. Wolfgang Bonsiepen and Reinhard Heede (Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verlag, 1980), 109 - 116.

motor driving self-consciousness for Hegel, in a way similar to *Sehnsucht* for Schelling. *Begierde,* however, has the connotation of bodily desire. While certain commenters label it animal desire, strictly speaking that is not quite correct, as animals do not have egos at stake.[81] In contrast to *Sehnsucht, Begierde* has an object that it focuses on, in contrast to the aimless longing of *Sehnsucht.* It responds to something present, even if that thing turns out to be inadequate.

If Hegel's *Begierde* fed into a relatively traditional project of theodicy, Schelling's play on the etymology of *Sehnsucht* suggests that, whatever his goals in 1809, by 1813 he was having serious doubts about its viability. To the non-native speaker, *Sehnsucht* sounds like a combination of *sehnen* - to long or yearn - and *suchen* - to seek. The combination elegantly captures the main features of the eternal will's desire: its restlessness, its dissatisfaction, its constant search for an unknown desideratum. However elegant, though, and however impossible it may be to erase that initial impression, *Sehnsucht* actually possesses a different etymology. *Sehnen* remains "to long or to yearn," but *sucht* turns out to stem from *Sucht,* which in turn derives from *siechen,* to sicken.[82] *Sucht,* then, is not a search, but rather an illness. In the 19th century it was a strictly medical term, usually diagnosing illnesses of excess. So to be *fettsüchtig* would be to suffer from too much fat, to be *fallsüchtig* would mean to suffer from an excess of falling, which is to say, to suffer from epilepsy. The *schwindsüchtig* were ill with consumption, while the *wassersüchtig* had edema, or dropsy. Through the adoption of terms such as *Tobsucht,* madness, and *Mondsucht,* lunacy, *Sucht* began to acquire a more psychological dimension. From there, the

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[81] For an example of that tendency, see Judith Butler, S*ubjects of Desire: Hegelian Reflections in Twentieth-Century France* (New York: Columbia University Press,1987), 33.

[82] Günther Drosdowski, Paul Grebe, compilers, *Duden Etymologie: Herkunftswörterbuch der deutschen Sprache* (Mannheim/Zürich: Dudenverlag, 1963), 694.

connotation of the word expanded to include a sense of unhealthy dependence, as in alcoholism, or *Trunksucht.* Today, in common parlance, to be *süchtig nach* something means to be "hooked on it."

Sehnsucht, therefore, could be read in two senses. First, as an illness of excessive desire. Second, as an obsession. While Schelling was undoubtedly operating within the first sense of the term, his description of the eternal will also points toward the second. Indeed, the play between the two that had been implicit in the 1813 version of the text becomes fully visible in the 1815 manuscript. Describing the eternal circular movement of the three potencies - or, in the vocabulary of the 1813 version, the negating will, affirming will, and Geist, the unity of the two - Schelling states:

> In that eternally commencing life there lies the wish to escape from the involuntary movement and from the distress of pining. And through its simple presence, without any movement, (since it is still pure conation itself), that which is higher, magically, so to speak, rouses in that life the yearning for freedom. The obsession (*Sucht*) abates into yearning (*Sehnsucht*), wild desire turns into a yearning to ally itself, as if it were its own true or highest self, with the will that wills nothing, eternal freedom.[83]

This, Schelling goes on to assert, is the moment we should hold to above all others as central to this narrative.

Sucht can be softened into *Sehnsucht* in the 1815 narrative at the point at which the originary forces are impelled to ally themselves with the highest state, the noncontradiction of eternity. They recognize or posit eternity, however, out of the conviction that there must be something other than their own miserable play with each other. If we were to translate this to the 1813 narrative - which might be a questionable move - this would be equivalent to saying that the driving emotion up until the moment that the affirming and negating will join together to find

[83] Schelling, *Ages of the World 1815*, 27-8/610.

their unity as *Geist* is *Sucht,* obsession, and that *Sehnsucht* proper only begins after that point. The 1815 text obviously does not support that reading, as it uses *Sehnsucht* throughout. However, seeing the relation between *Sucht* and *Sehnsucht* made explicit in this later text does allow us to plausibly read the earlier use of the term as containing this darker element.

There is something, then, sick, excessive, pathological even, about this originary split. This dimension of illness brings both loneliness, and *Sehnsucht* as the modality of desire proper to it, close to two others: anxiety and melancholia. Structurally, all three are affective responses to nothing-in-particular; clinically they are all seen as forms of illness or deviance. Schelling sets his piece in a sort of primordial emotional swamp, which makes it difficult to tease out the differences between the three. This seems correct to me, intuitively; I am not so sure the three are easily separated in normal life.

In following Schelling's depiction of the originary will as blind, restless longing, I was led to his rejection of a certain strain of theodicy and, by extension, to the question of the relationship between the philosopher and the experience of eternity she hopes to describe. While my discussion of this was necessarily brief, it nonetheless is the key to the discussion that follows on the transformation of the eternal will into the negating will, because it makes visible the unthinkability of the eternal will's solitary suffering. And so it is to the type of suffering unique to this prehistory that I want to turn now and, with it, the next major moment of contingency.

IV. The Negating Will and Insufferable Suffering

The eternal will does not remain pure yearning for eternity for long. Driven by diseased desire and blind intuition, it comes to negate itself. In doing so it creates the affirming will, the

something to its nothing, but not before Schelling drops one of the most interesting remarks in the entire text. "Wäre aber auch nicht dieses überfließende und sich mittheilende Wesen," he comments, "so wäre die anziehende Kraft leer und eigentlich wirkungslos, unerfüllt und sich selbst unleidlich."[84] In her 1997 translation of the second *Weltalter* manuscript, Judith Norman renders this sentence thus: "But without this overflowing and communicative essence, the attracting force would be empty and genuinely ineffectual, unfulfilled and unbearable [unleidlich] to itself." Norman herself recognizes an inadequacy in her version by including in brackets the original of one German word: *unleidlich.*

While *unleidlich* can mean "unbearable," for the remainder of this chapter, I want to break from Norman's translation and hold, instead, to the root of the word, "leiden," "to suffer," by rendering it as "insufferable." Though the change may seem trivial, the literal-minded fidelity to the German makes visible the question of what counts as insufferable in Schelling's text, and, in doing so, illuminates - however briefly and inadequately - the circumstances that drive the negating will to create its opposite, the next moment in this text. What follows, then, is in some sense an artificial abstraction from the narrative Schelling gives, a counterfactual reconstruction of what the negating will would look like before the emergence of the affirming will. Only by doing so is it possible to understand the type of suffering proper to *Sehnsucht* that directs the movement of the narrative, ultimately creating the need for the justification of the universe that underlies the project of the theodicist-philosopher, at the same moment it undermines it.

I call it "counterfactual," because the moment is shuttled to the side as soon as raised through the subjunctive. "Es wäre sich selbst unleidlich"; it *would be* insufferable to itself, if not

[84] Schelling, *Weltalter* 1813, 139/139.

for its other, but the other is there, instantaneously, soothing and saving from the possibility of paralyzing, impossible suffering. A grammatical trick rescues Schelling from pursuing this claustrophobic thought and allows him to transform the stakes into those of the familiar drama of two forces circling, sparring and reconciling. *Krapp's Last Tape* becomes *Pride and Prejudice.*

But nothing is clear without this thought: not what drives the eternal will to feel itself as and transform itself into pure lack, nor what prompts it, now as the negating will, to produce its opposite in a moment of incomprehensible creativity. And we, as good post-freudian readers, no longer have the option of accepting the throwaway, disavowed remark as inconsequential, so I want to linger on this disavowed word in a mythical text: *unleidlich.*

At the root of it lies *leiden,* to suffer, and from *leiden* it is only an extra syllable to *leidenschaft,* passion. In both English and German, the verb "to suffer" hovers between two senses: first, to bear or endure. I suffer an insult; I suffer through a meal, an evening, a night. It is suffering as sufferable. The second is what Levinas pointed to in his essay, "Useless Suffering," when he described suffering as, "the unassumable," "l'inassumabilité." More than simple "sense datum," suffering is a "negative synthesis" of mental content, not just, "consciousness of rejection or a symptom of rejection, but this rejection itself: a backward consciousness, 'operating' not as 'grasp,' but as revulsion. A modality."[85] Suffering is what I cannot endure or take upon myself; it prostrates me. The two meanings are opposed, and yet united in experience. I continue to suffer my suffering even as it overpowers me at every moment. It is clear enough

[85] Levinas is explicitly contrasting this to the synthesizing function of the imagination in Kant. Emmanuel Levinas, *Entre-Nous: Thinking-of-the-Other,* trans. Michael B. Smith and Barbara Harshav (New York: Columbia University Press,1998), 91; Emmanuel Levinas, "La souffrance inutile," in *Entre Nous: Essais sur le penser-à-l'autre* (Paris: Bernard Grasset, 1991), 107.

that the philosopher suffers in this ordinary sense that holds the two experiences together. It is clear because she does go on.

This is not the suffering of the negating will in 1813, imagined as *unleidlich*, but it is a real form of pain nonetheless that Schelling took extremely seriously - seriously enough that it was the moment in the first draft that drove the originary forces to posit a primordial unity. The 1811 text develops this idea at enormous length through its metaphor of the beating heart, tying it to love, desire, and fear. This early image prepares the possibility of thinking the insufferable, while expanding our understanding of the sufferable. And so, as is so often the case in my reading Schelling, I want to dwell with the familiar in order to open the way to the unthinkable.

The most extensive use of this metaphor comes in his 1811 manuscript, when Schelling describes the relation between the negating will, also called wrath, the affirming will, alternately named love, and the existing will, which binds the two together as subject and object. Yet the union is an unhappy one. Once joined in the will to existence, a "silent longing for the division [Scheidung]" of the two arises."[86] Yet this desire exists only so long as love prevails as the dominant feeling. As soon as its expansive, effusive nature moves the unity toward dissolution, wrath senses this division and, in terror of losing existence, draws the two back together. Love, then, assumes the outward, expansive movement of the diastole, while wrath becomes the contracting force of the systole. Meanwhile, the existing will, or will to existence, as the tie between the two, cannot leave the struggle between the two wills without forfeiting its existence altogether.[87] Thus, "In the conflict between these two struggling wills it [the will to existence]

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[86] F.W.J. Schelling, *Die Weltalter (1811)* in *Die Weltalter Fragmente: In den Urfassungen von 1811 und 1813.* Ed. Manfred Schröter (München: Bilderstein Verlag und Leibniz Verlag, 1946), 34, my translation.

[87] While recognizing that "the will to existence" and "the existing will" do not mean the same thing, Schelling's language switches back and forth between "Wille zur Existenz" and "existirende Wille" without differentiation. Consequently, my discussion follows the particular terminology in German of whatever passage I am discussing.

loses its own freedom and becomes, as the first throbbing point, so to speak, the beating heart of Godhood, that in the never-ceasing systole and diastole seeks peace and never finds it."[88]

Desire is not *Sehnsucht* here. Rather, it is, "die Begierde zur Existenz," the lustful, bodily desire Hegel invokes in *The Phenomenology of Spirit.* Given my earlier analysis of desire in *Die Weltalter,* this choice of wording calls for some explanation. It could simply be that in 1811 Schelling had not yet developed his own language of longing and so adopted *Begierde* as a crude counterpoint to Hegel. Alternately, it could be that Schelling used *Begierde* to underscore the corporeality of the heart metaphor. Finally, it could be he had a static understanding of *Sehnsucht* throughout the three manuscripts and so deliberately chose *Begierde* to signal a more immediate, less pathological type of desire. If Schelling chooses a term for desire that lacks the morbid connotation of an illness, perhaps it is because he thinks the contracting will's momentary panic and hunger for existence the absolutely appropriate response to its situation.[89] In its dark inward cringing, the contracting will understands what the expanding will does not: there is no existence without this struggle between love and desire. And yet, unlike the constant awareness of *Sehnsucht* that propels the later narrative, this knowledge fades in and out, remembered and forgotten with every pulse of the Godhead's beating heart.

In the pulsing imagery of the beating heart he captures the constant and deeply conflicted vacillation between the desire to merge with another in love, and the selfish, inward-drawing impulse to cannibalize the beloved. Implicitly underlying the struggle is another metaphor of the suffering heart: the broken heart. The rhythmic contraction and expansion of affirmation and

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[88] Schelling, *Weltalter 1811*, 35, my translation.

[89] This could be read as parallel to the moment in the struggle unto death in the *Phenomenology,* where the slave realizes for the first time that its entire existence is at stake in a moment of terror and so surrenders to the master.

negation, love and desire, is already a play between the metaphor of the heart as love, and its biological dimension. And, as we have seen, Schelling does have history of linking suffering to the language of biological infirmity, whether blindness or the *Sucht* of *Sehnsucht.* It is not so much of a leap to spend a few moments contemplating how and why biology, metaphor, suffering and philosophy come together.

To do that, I want to make a move that would please, I think, the thinker who once argued that "philosophy has acquired....such a deep and internal bearing on poetry, that from now on ... the destiny of both can only be a common one."[90] I am going to turn now, for illumination, to a brief detour into the 1945 poem "Beethoven," by Albrecht Haushofer. Written while imprisoned for his part in a plot to assassinate Hitler, "Beethoven" was found on Haushofer's corpse by his brother, along with eighty other poems, called *The Moabit Sonnets*. It tells the story of a piano lesson from Haushofer's youth. Bored of the "throbbing triplets of Opus two," he played, instead, "Opus a hundred and eleven." "My teacher, a white-haired mistress of the art,/ let me play on, just nodded, and - in reflection:' 'The man who wrote that way was a deaf man./ You'll understand it only in later years.'/ She was silent. 'When someday your heart is broken/ and goes on beating and has to go on beating." His teacher seats herself, plays, and the poem ends with the narrator remarking, "Often during these days it comes into my mind/ the way she played that time, my dead teacher."[91]

A broken heart is a cliché, of course - even the paradigmatic one - but in its banality it reveals something essential about suffering and its ordinary everydayness. To label suffering

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[90] Schelling, *Grounding of Positive Philosophy,* 97/12.

[91] The German runs: "Die Meisterin der Kunst in weißen Haaren, sie ließ mich spielen, nickte nur und sann: 'Der so geschrieben, war ein tauber Mann. Verstehen wirst Du's erst in späten Jahren.' Sie schwieg. 'Wenn Dir einmal das Herz gesprungen und weiterschläagt und weiterschlagen soll.'" Albrecht Haushofer, "Beethoven," trans. M.D. Herter Norton in *Moabit Sonnets* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co, 1978), 40, 41.

ineffable has become *de rigueur,* but more often than not that move smuggles in a sense of the spectacular. The catatonic becomes our model of broken speech, and we forget the other ways in which we mean or fail to mean, speak or fail to speak. We miss something vital when we allow the sufferer's stuttering to obscure the painful, unremarkable fluency of non-meaning in day-to-day speech. Thus, it *matters* that Haushofer's imagery presses up against the limits of language, not by fractured syntax or cryptic allusions, but by a cliché, a phrase so commonplace as to be emptied of content, and by reference to the rhythm of a heart. These lines say nothing, because both biology and banality murmur below the register of consciousness in their familiarity.

And yet, in this cross-fertilization of silences, the cliché briefly blossoms with content. The beating of the broken heart becomes both familiar and strange. Familiar, because what could be more intimate than my heart? Strange, because my heart becomes something that beats first despite me, then despite itself. German grammar makes this uncanny dimension even clearer. "My" heart is not broken; "das Herz," *the* heart, is broken to me. Abruptly, my heart reveals itself as something foreign, as biology strains against metaphor and discredits my identification of self with body. No matter how often I insist that my heart is breaking, my physical heart never stops with pain. Words do not do anything here; if any imperative exists, it comes comes from the opposing insistence that my heart, "weiterschlägt, und weiterschlagen soll." Something in me refuses to recognize my suffering. This is what fills the cliché of the broken heart with content; this is what makes the exchange between the sufferable and the unassumable possible. The very rhythm of the lines, the parallelism of unequal length that echoes the uncertain ebb and flow of the beating, injured heart, but also captures this movement of pain and contradiction that nevertheless constitutes a unity.

All of this is important because it captures something commonplace. Yet, however illuminating, however interesting, this vision of suffering should not be conflated with what Schelling terms *unleidlich.* The insufferable, I think, is very close to the unassumable that Levinas mentioned earlier. Looked at in more detail, it becomes clear that the language Levinas uses to describe the unassumable echoes extraordinarily closely Schelling's critique of the bad philosopher. "'Unassumability," Levinas begins:

> does not result from the excessive intensity of a sensation, from just some quantitative 'too much,' surpassing the measure of our sensibility and *our means of grasping and holding*; but an excess, an unwelcome superfluity, that is inscribed in a sensorial content, penetrating, as suffering, the dimensions of meaning that seem to open themselves to it, or become grafted onto it.[92]

Suffering cannot be grasped; in French it is what, "passant la mesure de notre sensibilité et de nos moyens de saisir et de tenir," that which operates, "non comme 'prise', mais comme révulsion." Just as Schelling ridicules the thinker who wants to begin by seizing the highest concept, *Begriff*, so too does Levinas suggest that it would be all wrong to think we could get a handle on suffering, if only we could somehow be made stronger or more capacious. The unassumable eludes mastery as the radically heterogeneous, in the same way the mute beginnings of life can never be held by concepts.

But if I hesitate to collapse the insufferable into the unassumable, it is because I think Levinas uses it far too freely. It is a real weakness in his analysis that he considers all suffering unassumable.[93] If the discussion about Schelling has made one thing clear, I hope it is that the interplay between the unassumable and the sufferable is a deep type of suffering in its own right. No, Schelling is more sophisticated than Levinas in this instance. He understands the difficulty

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[92] Levinas, 91; Levinas, 107.

[93] Ibid, 92.

of envisioning a type of suffering that is purely unassumable, insufferable, which is why he brackets his own vision of the *unleidlich* twice: once by placing it in a myth set before time, and once over by relegating that thought to a hypothetical through grammar. But if I am correct, what, then, makes the difference between the Levinas's unassumable and Schelling's *unleidlich*? In brief: the absence of an other. The eternal will, in its loneliness, is nailed to itself. It is suffering without an outside. And that is why it creates an other in the affirming will, so it can have an object, an escape. The essence of the insufferable is total isolation inaccessible to us, as *mitleidende und mithandelnde.*

While this might seem speculation or eisegesis at its worst, Schelling worries explicitly about this point in a diary entry. On his birthday in 1810, tersely noted as, "the first without Caroline," Schelling muses on the possibility of becoming so lost in mourning that the outside world ceases to register. "No passion is in itself unconquerable," he begins, in a fragmentary, telegraphic entry.

> The most wrathful can suppress their wrath in the presence of the king. The most sensual his sensuality before the eyes of chastity and virtue. In order to master his passion, man always needs something exterior that rattles him, occupies him, tenses him. - Will it always do this for him? [...] We remain unmoved by the most apposite warnings of Providence. Or these exterior counterforces are lacking. We languished in the most forsaken loneliness. Nothing comes to us that rattles us. When are we pulled away from the one thought that buries itself ever deeper inside us... No friend, no glance, no ray of outside help or hope stands us in good stead.[94]

The phrase, "the *most* forsaken loneliness," "der verlassensten Einsamkeit," as a superlative, suggests a gradation of loneliness, with the total absence of others at the extreme.

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[94] FWJ Schelling, "Appendice I: Calendrier de Schelling pour l'annee 1810," in *Stuttgarter Privatvorlesungen: Version inédite, accompagnée du texte des Oeuvres,* Ed. Miklos Vetö (Torino: Bottega D'Easmo, 1973), 214, my translation.

But what are these other forms of loneliness? The most obvious candidate for a contrasting understanding of loneliness would be one that contains a negative relationship to community, whether as something despaired over, hoped for, or lost. The touching that does not touch, the loneliness that has nothing to do with isolation, this can be the sense of forsakenness in the crowd, or the feeling that slips between two people in a moment of intimacy, when the faltering small talk of domesticity lapses into silence or recrimination. Vulnerability becomes suffocating, and intimacy is snowed over with revulsion, boredom, and disgust. Yet, loneliness only shows up in those moments as a problem because of love; loneliness here is a type of betrayal by love. However, there is the loneliness of loss that shades into melancholy. Who could doubt that my loneliness at the death of a family member or the abandonment of a lover means something different than the bitter collapse of a marriage? But who would deny that it is loneliness all the same?

The loneliness of the negating will is something else altogether, though: a feeling of pure aridity, the gnawing absence both of affection and an object of affection. The negating will suffers not just from the absence of anything to love *it*, to disburden it of itself through distraction, or tenderness, or companionship; it suffers from a lack of anything to love. And not just anything to love - anything to hate, to desire or face with revulsion. Love cannot be a problem because we are not yet at the point where we can love. In this moment when there is no distinction between affect and knowledge, when there is no conceptual knowledge of the other's presence to counteract the feeling of her absence, the negating will faces the possibility of total isolation and desolation.

This situation leads us back to the problem of the philosopher, who set out to understand the drama she found herself within. The problem of absolute solitude can never really be accessed from the thinker's starting point in theodicy. The philosopher is driven to think because she finds herself thrust into a situation she did not make, participating in a drama she only half-understands, surrounded by actors whose roles remain opaque. Her thought reacts to others. By contrast, everything the eternal will does responds to the absence of an other. Any effort to sympathetically assume the state of total solitude that drives the eternal will betrays the insight sought. What would it means to describe or bear witness to another's absolute isolation? The project is incoherent; the philosopher always misses the problem. The consolation she sought through knowledge turns out to be inaccessible and, by extension, the book we are reading impossible.

Schelling speculated about this state in a moment of extreme grief, but, in doing so, he was forced to imagine an interiority without a world filled with enemies to distract through their mockery, or children to burst into consciousness with their deaths, or friends to break through isolation in their need to be protected in one's arms. The thought reemerged in 1813, only to be shied away from, yet again. And so, having birthed a world in contingency from diseased desire, his narrative was propelled forward into the first real moment of creation from a dual need to escape this insufferable suffering and an ache for affirmation that carried with it the first possibility of companionship, touch.

V. Joyful Union, Flesh

With this vertiginous feeling of the *unleidlich,* Schelling offers a glimpse of the stakes in his tale. The narrative gathers all of its weakness around two points: the restless, blind longing of

the eternal will, and the negating will's fear of being swept under the most forsaken loneliness. However, while *Sehnsucht* spawned purely negative possibilities, in the form of the negating will, the disavowed moment of insufferability created the affirming will, the first character with a positive identity in this play. Both instances betray a sort of helpless thrashing amid groundlessness, but the second goes somewhere different with it; it transitions into a new model of contingency, less about breaking from the past or expected future, than reacting in unexpected ways to contact with another. At the center of this transformation lie the themes of mistakes, commitment and flesh that will eventually flower into the notion of contingency held by Sartre, Serres, and others yet to come.

Thus, it is with the role of the mistake in *Die Weltalter* and the philosophical problems that poses that I want to start, in this, the last section of this chapter. The mistake I mention is not an obvious one, but it is a crucial one, tracing back to the question of whether or not the formation of the affirming will even is a moment of contingency at all. At times, Schelling seems to think the exact opposite, imagining the affirming will as the necessary corollary to the negating will. Certainly, this reading runs, the eternal will and the negating will might not have come into being, but, once that process begins, the negating will creates automatically the affirming will as its mirror opposite. The two are co-constitutive terms, such that one cannot be thought without the other. Thus, the genesis of the affirming will could be read as the necessary outcome of an ungrounded, contingent event.

In truth, the 1811 and 1815 versions of the text support this reading, mentioning the functional counterparts to these terms only ever together. Thus, the three potencies of 1815 are the basic units of that particular cosmogony, the founding differentiation that makes possible the

thought of unity. Likewise, the call and response of wrath, love, and the will to existence in the beating heart of 1811 presupposes the connection among the three. Only in the 1813 text do we get more than a a glimmer of the possibility that the couple might have been otherwise. In part, we see that in the hypothetical passage about how the negating will would be insufferable in the absence of its twin. Even more clearly, though, we see this possibility in the initial meeting between the two wills.

Having created essence, or the affirming will, to provide some relief, the negating will is chagrined to find itself in opposition to it, condemned to be "strictness and severity as opposed to the mildness of the essence, to be darkness as opposed to the light, to be an eternal No that conflicts with the Yes."[95] Starting a new paragraph, Schelling goes on to say, "But the will seeks indifference - or rather it longs for indifference with a presentiment that is not knowledge. Thus, through a progressive effect of its desiring force, the will posits for itself indifference, or the unity that liberates it from conflict and allows it to recognize itself as one with its opposite."[96]

The immediate dissatisfaction of the negating will with essence strongly suggests that the creation of the affirming will is a mistake, not a moment of necessity. Why else would the negating will abandon the affirming will to renew its longing for eternity, if not because it felt as if it had gotten something wrong? It misunderstood its object of desire and gave birth to the affirming will out of its misperception. The significance of this fact for Schelling's narrative should not be overlooked; this mistake renders the alienation from eternity permanent.

Schelling explains this point in a portrait of the first, happy moments when the affirming and negating will discover each other as complements. "If the eternal will...could ever stop

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[95] Schelling, Ages of the World 1813, 143/143

[96] Ibid.

working, everything would return into nothing and it would again be nothing as it had once been. But after this force achieves totality and recognizes itself in the unity of spirit, this one-sided relation cancels itself again [hebt sich auf].'[97] From there, Schelling repeats his discussion of how the negating will and affirming will call to each other in order to unify in *Geist*. Nothing could have begun without the eternal will's blind longing for eternity, but given that eternity is a state of total quiescence the eternal will's search for it can only be understood as a desire for its own annihilation. A will that seeks only its own dissolution may be powerful, but is hardly stable. All it has to do is stumble across its desideratum for the whole dynamic to collapse back in on itself.

The unity of the negating and affirming wills in *Geist* blocks that possibility, though how is not entirely clear. The most obvious reading is that the negating will, affirming will, and *Geist* can be read as the same basic force of desire in different permutations. The first moment when the eternal will negated itself transformed it into the negating will. After the negating will creates the affirming will, its orientation shifts, so it is no longer pure self-negation; rather, it is self-negation longing for affirmation. It can no longer be pure self-denial if it is defined by its pleasurable union with something else. Thus, recognizing itself as part of a new totality, the eternal will cancels its own self-perception as unadulterated nothingness. Under that reading, the eternal will cannot stop working because it has come to realize a fundamentally different relationship with eternity; once it recognizes itself as one with eternity through its mediation with the affirming will, it can no longer return to that unmediated desire for non-contradiction that was so perilously close to nihilism. To stop willing would mean to forget its place in eternity.

[97] Ibid, 144/144-5.

Reading the creation of the affirming will as a mistake does more than simply clarify the narrative, however; it also sharpens Schelling's depiction of loneliness. I mentioned earlier the similarity between the longing of the eternal will and emotions like anxiety and melancholy. My suggestion was that loneliness, or at least its modality of desire in Schelling, *Sehnsucht,* had the same basic structure as the two; it was an affective response to a lost or absent object. While I think that remains correct, the genesis of the affirming will illuminates an important difference. Whereas anxiety and melancholy react to a lost object, loneliness in Schelling *creates* that loss.

I mean this in two senses. First, on occasion, it creates objects on which to focus, as a form of relief; most notably, the negating will, in its earliest moments, posits and creates an opposite for itself, the affirming will. But secondly, the point needs to be stressed that the eternal will was a part of the will that wills nothing until it began to desire. Schelling is not claiming that loss is originary. Rather, he is claiming that the *sense* of loss is originary. Everything was unified, prior to this mistake that took unity to be isolation, and then went out in search of an object which it could desire and for which it could suffer. Desire effects loss, it does not stem from it. The constant emphasis on the yearning of creation for the quiescence of eternity points to a claim buried in Schelling's cosmogony: not only *could* creation have happened differently or not at all if the negating will had chosen otherwise at this juncture, in some sense it *should* have happened differently.

Above all, in stressing the darkness in Schelling's vision, I want to resist the tendency to appropriate him too readily for postmodern concerns. Nothing would be easier at this point than to label contingency as moments of creative unsettling, the disruption that is the source of all invention. Everything horrifying and unsettling about these moments of disorientation would

ultimately become affirmable as the condition for the possibility of philosophy or creativity, even if the experience itself proved ultimately unendurable. Schelling was writing about the creation of the world, but in his ambivalence about this collapse of the original unity and the creation that comes from it, he captures something more broadly applicable: namely, if we believe the projects we engage in, out of hope of making the world a home, to be of some value - if, in short, we are more than simple nihilists - we ought to hesitate in affirming their destruction, regardless of what the outcome might be.

Schelling allows me to push this interpretation because he himself assigns different values to the two moments of contingency. Despite the fact that both seem tied to mistaken perceptions in fairly obvious ways, Schelling only ever labels one of them, the split of the eternal will from eternity, as a mistake. This assessment comes somewhat obliquely two years later, in his 1815 draft of *Die Weltalter,* when he asserts that, "A transition from unity to contradiction is incomprehensible. For how should what is in itself one, whole and perfect, be tempted, charmed, and enticed to emerge out of this peace? The transition from contradiction to unity, on the other hand," he continued, "is natural, for contradiction is insufferable to everything and everything that finds itself in it will not repose until it has found the unity that reconciles or overcomes it."[98]

In this passage Schelling dismisses the previous narrative as misguided, even going so far as to reverse its basic premise. This move, I think, is interesting less because of the critique of his former position than because of the vehemence of his rhetoric. So far as it goes, Schelling only notes the obvious logical flaw in his 1813 position. Yet, what had been described in 1813 as the

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[98] Schelling, Ages of the World 1815, 12/595. Schelling's use of "unleidlich" in this context reflects this shift in his narrative. Whereas in 1813 the most primal form of suffering was loneliness or absolute solitude, here it becomes the more quotidian conflict or self-hatred or even despair, and so the use of *unleidlich* shifts accordingly. This switch is part of the reason I have chosen to focus on the 1813 version.

eternal will "giving birth to itself," becomes by 1815 a type of seduction. Singularity breaks from unity because it is "tempted, charmed, and enticed," and what had once been a fertile moment becomes a type of fall. The allusion to Genesis seems clear enough; equally clear are the ramifications of that language. Condemning his previous position as absurd did not satisfy Schelling. Rather, he had to transform the split of the eternal will into a moral failing.

So why such rhetorical excess, if the problem is a simple logical one? There is no obvious resolution for this conundrum. The best suggestion I can make is that Schelling finds the draw of commitment even more compelling than the lure of rest. In part, I think his argument demands such a stance. I could imagine a universe where the attraction of eternity is so strong that it inexorably pulled the eternal will and the negating will back into itself, like an infinitely dense metaphysical black hole. Schelling could have easily enough thought the same, yet he didn't and he couldn't. An origin like that would have done nothing to help him explain the genesis of time or the world. Therefore, in order to combat the lure of eternity, he needed to posit another, countervailing force.

This dynamic is contradiction; it is the shifting relations between the negating and affirming will; it is what becomes the struggle between love and wrath. The connection between two forces can be one of conflict, as in the early hostility between the negating and affirming wills, or it can be one of joyful union, like when the two come to recognize their unity in *Geist.* The point is that all of these modes of interaction assume a pair, bound together in some sort of relationship, and all of them, in some fashion, have the power to block the return to the will that wills nothing. Contingency does not disappear in any sense from the narrative after this point, but it does come to take place within the constraints of certain possibilities or relations, rather

existing as a pure break from the past, as with the *Sehnsucht* of the eternal will. Henceforth, contingency takes place in the context of the world.

Part of this world is defined by its materiality. Thus, before ending my chapter, I want to discuss the final way that Schelling's narrative points toward the understanding of contingency shared by later thinkers: his fleeting description of the earliest matter through flesh. Once the conflict between the affirming will and negating will is overcome by the perspectival shift that allows them to see each other as united in *Geist,* ur-matter, or the "first, most tender corporeality" immediately come into existence.[99] Just as the negating will found its complement in the affirming will, *Geist,* the unity of the two, must seek, in turn, *its* twin. As the opposite of spirit is matter, *Geist* must generate or encounter a body, in order to make itself whole. "The whole is thus a spiritual-corporeal essence... The spiritual and corporeal find themselves to be two sides of one and the same existence."

Consonant with Schelling's previous statements about the role of the past, the early mixture of spirit and matter persists in the present, though not as something immediately accessible to the senses. Rather, Schelling finds it in the "sparkle and shine of life" that objects possess, that indescribable, vibrant excess of things. "Though indeed ungraspable [ungreifliches]," he notes,

> it is not, for that matter, unremarkable [unbemerkliches]....Among the most corporeal things, metals in particular have always been regarded as individual sparks of light from this essence, glimmering in the darkness of matter. A universal instinct divined the presence of this essence in gold, which seemed most closely related to the spiritual-corporeal essence by virtue of its most passive qualities, its almost infinite ductility, its softness and tenderness, which render it so similar to flesh and result in the greatest indestructibility.[100]

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[99] Schelling, Ages of the World 1813, 148/148.

[100] Ibid, 151/152.

It is this matter that alchemists sought, “never gold, but rather the gold of gold, as it were.”

Flesh takes on the key characteristic of the affective, pre-conceptual knowledge the philosopher sought and failed to find: it is “ungreiflich,” ungraspable, at the same time it is assigned adjectives, such as “softness” and “tenderness” that could be either emotional or tactile. The primary affective mode is now erotic, as Schelling describes “bliss” of essence and the “rejoicing” of the negating will in the “quieted hunger of its desire,” but the essential point remains; it belongs to the hidden ground of creation that cannot be grasped by the concept, *Begriff*.

All of the moments of contingency that occur from this point forward involve flesh and, with it, the possibility of some sort of physical touch. I do not want to overstate my claim. There is not yet a fully working model of the relation between contingency, touch, affect and flesh. Nonetheless, Schelling does offer here, however tentatively, a reading of flesh primed to become a fluctuating boundary between self and world, or spirit and matter. The contingency of a will seeking contact with another, buffeted about by its desires, is no longer disembodied. Rather, flesh itself defines the experience henceforth, by yielding, caressing, teasing, and fluctuating in contact with its other, in the same way skin undulates under the pressure of a hand. It is fluid, passive, receptive and in its instability totally unsuitable for being rendered an instrument for future projects. In this moment we begin to see one way in which touching and feeling might underpin the concept of contingency.

VI. Conclusion

Schelling did not remain in obscurity for the rest of his life, writing and rewriting his fragmentary fable. In 1842, he was summoned from retirement by Friedrich Wilhelm IV to take

the chair of philosophy in Berlin previously held by Hegel, with instructions to "slay the dragon-seed of Hegelian pantheism" and lauded as not "a common professor, but a philosopher chosen by God and called to be the teacher of the age."[101] It was, as Karl Jaspers remarked, "the last great event of the German university that actually engaged the interest of the public."[102]

To a reactionary public, Hegel had become the enemy, with his tale of *Geist* coming to consciousness through history read as an effort to "reduce the human being to the immanent order of society, politics, or history."[103] Schelling, by contrast, with his talk of "the dark ground" of "personality" in creation was received as providing a philosophical basis for Christian personalism, a 19th-century movement that broke from the 18th century's understanding of individuality in terms of an abstract citizen's or subject's possession of rights, in order to return to a much more particularistic, Christian conception of the individual as defined by unique capacities that ought to be cultivated through *Bildung*.[104] For a brief time, then, Schelling was hailed the foremost thinker of Christian personalism and orthodoxy. [105]

Warren Breckman was thinking of Schelling's politics when he wrote in a later study of the period that, for all of Schelling's "metaphysical pathos," his thought entailed some

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[101] Cited in Warren Breckman, *Marx, the Young Hegelians, and the Origins of Radical Social Theory* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999). pp. 63.

[102] Bruce Matthews, Translator's Introduction to *the Grounding of Positive Philosophy: The Berlin Lectures,* by Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph von Schelling (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007), pp. 7

[103] Breckman, 14

[104] For a much more comprehensive discussion of this, see Walter Breckman's book, *Marx, The Young Hegelians, and the Origins of Radical Social Theory.*

[105] In part, Breckman argues, this was a philosophical argument about whether or not the subject was identical with the person. Strictly speaking, as he notes, in Kant's philosophical usage the subject is "that conscious apperceptive unity which recognizes itself as the active agent of knowledge. A tension between the concepts of 'subject' and 'person' began to appear once it was recognized that even if Kant himself conceived the subject as a conscious and autonomous human individual, in truth the concept of the subject *per se* says nothing about the *particular* identity of the subject...Hence the ease with which post-Kantian philosophers could extend Kant's epistemological argument about the subject from the conscious human 'I' to 'God' or 'Absolute Spirit.'" (Breckman 12).

devastatingly reactionary implications.[106] While I agree with him, my worries are different ones: Schelling, I think, represents an extreme in a conversation that accepts as a matter of course feelings as unsought, unstable and ungovernable.

By the time Schelling writes - the same time that the articulation of the bodily and emotional underpinnings to contingency really picks up momentum - the ethical project of mastering the passions has more or less entirely dropped out of the conversation. And *that* is what I find so interesting and so worrying about *Die Weltalter.* Schelling paints the loneliness of the eternal will as alternately disruptive, inventive, and erring, but at no point controllable. He divinizes the blind, headlong rush of feeling, insisting that its nature underpins our own. In doing so, he belongs to a broader movement beginning in German Romanticism, continuing through Heidegger's *Stimmungen* that hapless Dasein finds itself in without any indication as to why, to contemporary affect theory's insistence on the sub-linguistic interstitial charge between bodies. With the exception of psychoanalysis and some neo-Aristotelians, feelings in contemporary thought just *are*, and while they might be deployed to disrupt the subject or gender norms, no one really worries about directing them.

Part of my project seeks to tell the story of how that came to pass, traversing in the process the influence of theological debates, scientific theories, and art on the philosophical tradition. Part of it, though, questions how we ought to evaluate the erosion of the ideal of emotional control. In an era of "feeling from the gut" I am not so sure we ought to be sanguine about these shifts.

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[106] Breckman, 63.

Schelling leaves us with a vision of the contingency of desire as a disease without a cure - as a disease too primal to ever be cured. It would take Friedrich von Hardenberg, better known as the poet Novalis, to literalize that language of sickness, and in the process offer his own vision of contingency, not as the disease but as the cure.

Chapter Two

Contingent Contact: Books, Bodies, and the Absolute in Novalis's Romantic Encyclopedia.

I. Introduction

Years before Schelling dreamed of the searching *Sehnsucht* of his fractured immortal will, and centuries before a chance bomb sent his manuscripts up in flames, Prussian intellectuals bandied about a different illness in their articles and letters: *Lesesucht,* sometimes called *Büchersucht* or *Bücherwut,* the reading sickness, or book madness.[107] *Something* was wrong with the new, too-easy circulation of pamphlets, monographs, and journals in the age of the printing press, many agreed, but the symptoms and the consequences of contracting this illness were an open question. For Johann Gottfried von Herder, the problem lay in the grand delusion that a reading public could exist unbound from time and space.[108] His teacher, Johann Georg Hamann, echoing that thought, mockingly dedicated his *Socratic Memorabilia* to "the Public, or Nobody, the Well-Known."[109] In Leipzig, a bookseller published a pamphlet called, "A Plea to My Nation: On the Plague of German Literature," begging the literate public to *please* stop contributing to the flood of texts too numerous for anyone to master.[110] Goethe, whose overwrought novella *The Passion of Young Werther* inspired a rash of young lovelorn men to button their yellow waistcoats and empty bullets in their skulls, muttered darkly that the real

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[107] Terry Pinkard, *German Philosophy 1760-1860: The Legacy of Idealism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 7.

[108] Johann Georg Heinzmann, *Appel an meine Nation: Über die Pest der deutschen Literatur* (Bern, 1795), 125. Cited in Chad Wellmon,"Touching Books: Diderot, Novalis, and the Encyclopedia of the Future," *Representations* 114, No. 1 (Spring 2011), 65.

[109] Johann Georg Hamann, "Socratic Memorabilia" in *Writings on Philosophy and Language,* trans. and ed. Kenneth Hayes (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 4.

[110] Wellmon, *Touching Books,* 65.

issue was Romanticism, symbol of everything sick about the age.[111] And Novalis, the youngest of these thinkers, gathered up all of their complaints into his sigh that the distracted, abstracted intellectual man, troubled by his alienation from his body and lacking anything more substantial to cleave to, "clings so strangely like thin and meager moss to the printer's vignette."

The language of illness is not new in this work. In the last chapter I explored Schelling's equation of contingency with the sightless and sickened longing of a primal will in a philosophical fable about the origin of time, God, and evil. I suggested that the real content of contingency for Schelling came not from abstract arguments about freedom in contrast to necessity, but in the turbulence of this originary will as desires and fears that it could neither understand nor control tossed it helplessly about, as in a whirlwind. At every moment this story reminded the reader that to be in contact with another - even negatively, even imaginatively, even in frustrated desire - is to be vulnerable to chance events that throw the boundaries of the self and other into a state flux; that is to say, to be contingent is to share a state of common tangency with others, both psychologically and physically. For Schelling, that meant to suffer from *Sehnsucht,* a type of unappeasable desire that etymologically derives from the German for longing, *sehnen,* and sickness, *siechen.*

Although I suggested this illness bore affinities to melancholia or anxiety, I left it vague enough that my readers might be forgiven for thinking it a somewhat dramatic metaphor and classing my opening discussion of *Lesesucht* as more of the same. This chapter seeks to correct that impression by picking up the connection among contingency, illness, desire, and touch

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[111] As Goethe remarked in his conversation with Johann Peter Eckermann, "I call the classic *healthy*, the romantic *sickly*...Most modern productions are romantic, not because they are new, but because they are weak, morbid, and sickly." Johann Wolfgang von Goethe and Johann Peter Eckermann, *Conversations of Goethe and Johann Peter Eckermann,* trans. John Oxenford (Cambridge: Da Capo Press, 1998), 305.

established in the previous chapter and deepening it by contextualizing it within the medical theories of the day. My entry point to this conversation is an unfinished text called *Das Allgemeine Brouillon* (1798-99) written by the last lamenter of *Lesesucht* I mentioned, Novalis. With Novalis's encyclopedia the epic wash of longing first introduced by Schelling's fable reappears, but narrows, centered on a reader's encounter with a book in a moment that is at once an illness, a revelation, and the paradigm of contingency. In the pages that follow, I argue that contingency exists on four interlocking levels in Novalis's philosophical work, particularly his 1798 unfinished encyclopedia *Das Allgemeine Brouillon.* First, it is a reaction against the mass production of books in the late 18th century, grounded in a particular phenomenology of reading. Second, his emphasis on contingency emerges out of both his philosophical commitments to anti-foundationalism of contemporary critics of Fichte and his theological belief in pantheism. Third, the decision to locate contingency in touch belongs to a much broader scientific conversation that figured the origin of illness in tactile terms. Finally, it depends on moods that both reveal our contingency and overcome it, particularly as modeled for us in fairy tales. Ultimately these four levels of his thought clarify the stakes and complexity of Novalis's own theory of Magical Idealism and broaden the conversation about contingency.

II. *Das Allgemeine Brouillon*: Reception and Historical Background

If Schelling's work was wholly lost through indifference for close to a century, a certain version of Novalis nearly disappeared for the opposite reason. The European, particularly German and French, intellectual establishment adored Novalis - or rather, they adored their favorite version of him.[112] He was the slender young man with light flowing locks, brilliant

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[112] For a succinct summary of Novalis's reception history, see Kristin Pfefferkorn, *Novalis: A Romantic's Theory of Language and Poetry* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), 9-29.

brown eyes, and large, expressive hands, as fine and pale as his nearly transparent forehead, who died tragically young after a life marked by loss.[113] When his beloved child-fiancée, Sophie von Kühn, passed away at the age of fourteen, Novalis wrote the melancholy, lyrical *Hymns to the Night,* which would establish him as one of the greatest writers in all of German literature. He composed fragments, poetry, and even an incomplete novel; he was the source of epigraphs for Heidegger and Blanchot; he was the poet of pain and pining. And when in 1805, a scant four years after his death, a friend wrote a memorial essay unglamorously titled, "Friedrich von Hardenberg Assessor of Salt Mines in Saxony and Designated Department Director in Thuringia," Novalis's admirers were scandalized as only wealthy young artists can be at the reminder that their favorite poet was a scientist who worked for a living and sometimes went by "Fritz."[114]

It is not entirely surprising, then, to learn that for most of the century that *Das Allgemeine Brouillon* was lost in the hands of private collectors it was often ripped apart and stitched together as a collection of fragments, similar to his earlier work, *Pollen.* A restored version with subject headings was not published until 1929, while a chronological reconstruction of the

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[113] As Ludwig Tieck wrote in his memorial essay about Novalis, "Novalis was tall, thin, and of noble proportions. He wore his light brown hair in falling locks, which at that time was less common than now. His brown eyes were bright and brilliant, and the complex- ion of his face, particularly his forehead, was almost transparent. His hands and feet were a bit too large and with fine expression. His demeanor was typically cheerful and good-natured. For those who only judge people by the common standard, according to manner and ambition, or by the standard set by fashion, Novalis is invisible. To the more discerning eye, however, he manifests the phenomenon of Beauty. In profile and expression, his face closely resembled St. John the Evangelist, as we know that face from the lovely, large painting by Albrecht Dürer, found in Munich and Nuremberg." Ludwig Tieck, "Ludwig Tieck Biography of Novalis 1815" in *The Birth of Novalis: Friedrich von Hardenberg's Journal of 1797 with Selected Letters and Documents,* trans. Bruce Donehower (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007), 134.

[114] August Cölestin Just, "Friedrich von Hardenberg, Assessor of Salt Mines in Saxony and Designated Department Director in Thuringia, 1805," in *The Birth of Novalis: Friedrich von Hardenberg's Journal of 1797 with Selected Letters and Documents,* trans. Bruce Donehower (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007), 110 - 126.

entries had to wait until Hans-Joachim Mähl's edition in 1968.[115] That entire history goes a long way toward explaining why scholarship has only recently begun to consider Novalis's philosophical work as significant in its own right.

Whatever archival abominations they might have committed, the previous owners of *Das Allgemeine Brouillon* were alive to a genuine peculiarity about Novalis's manuscript. Namely, why would Novalis - a poet and thinker famous for his fragments - choose to write an encyclopedia, especially at the very moment the whole project seemed so obviously untenable? As noted in the introduction to this chapter, Prussia was brimming with anxiety about the printing press and the encyclopedia stood at the center of this anxiety. After all, how could the one genre devoted above all to ordering and categorizing knowledge cope with the sheer mass of books being produced? In the pages that follow I want to begin addressing these question by following the recent scholarship of Chad Wellmon in exploring how the material conditions for the production of books influenced Novalis's decision to write his own idiosyncratic encyclopedia. I suggest that Novalis became interested in the encyclopedia precisely because the proliferation of printed material that undermined the traditional aspirations of the encyclopedia to comprehensiveness opened a space for him to challenge the disembodied Enlightenment ideal of *Bildung* by reimagining the role of the material book in knowledge. That critique and new emphasis on the materiality of books must be understood as continuous with Novalis's engagement with the antifoundationalist critiques of Fichte and Reinhold.

As practiced in Novalis's day, the encyclopedia was primarily a bloated, Sisyphean attempt to gather together scientific discoveries scattered across languages and continents into

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[115] David W. Wood, introduction to *Notes for a Romantic Encyclopedia: Das Allgemeine Brouillon,* by Novalis, trans. David Wood (Albany: State University Press of New York, 2007), xiv.

one orderly, hierarchical book. The most famous French encyclopedists, Diderot and D'Alembert, had invited this top-down approach to knowledge when they described their endeavors primarily as mapping the branches of the sciences. As D'Alembert writes:

> It [the Encyclopédie] is a kind of world map, which is to show the principal countries, their position and their mutual dependence, the road that leads directly from one to the other. This road is often cut by a thousand obstacles, which are known in each country only to the inhabitants or to travelers, and which cannot be represented except in individual, highly detailed maps. These individual maps will be the different articles of the Encyclopedia and the Tree or Systematic Chart will be its world map.[116]

While Wellmon insists that Diderot and D'Alembert had a relatively nuanced awareness of the arbitrariness of encyclopedic entries and understood themselves as providing one out of many possible maps of knowledge, their eighteenth-century successors largely lacked their self-reflectivity. Instead, writers such as Christian Heinrich Schmid insisted on creating in the encyclopedia a *universal* map.[117] For Schmid and the tradition he represents, to know is to abstract oneself from the tumult of life and survey from above, while the encyclopedia acts as a handbook that saves the reader from ever confronting the wholly unknown. This paradigm of knowledge is a familiar one, stretching from Plato, to Augustine's God, to Hegel's spectator watching the shipwreck of world history from the shore, right down to the British Orientalists in Egypt and beyond.[118] It is the position of God the spectator in contrast to the suffering, changing, fluctuating, creaturely world of contingency.

Contingencies, however, were undermining the encyclopedia's pretensions to comprehensiveness even as Novalis began to write. After nearly a century of warfare that

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[116] Cited Chad Wellmon, *Touching Books*, 68-9.

[117] Ibid., 72.

[118] For example, see Timothy Mitchell, *Colonising Egypt* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1991).

devastated the population, the ‘German’ printing industry began to thrive in Novalis’s era.[119] From 1740 to 1800 the number of books listed in the catalogue for Leipzig’s book fair, the center of the German printing industry, climbed from 755 to 2,569, more than tripling the number of texts in circulation.[120] There were local societies conducting scientific experiments, individual publications on their results, and a porous set of boundaries separating science, alchemy, and magic.[121] The pandemic of printing brought two of the ideals of the Enlightenment into conflict: the expansion of knowledge and the ethical duty of educating the public. Knowledge thrived through specialization, made possible by clusters of conversations in journals, but that very depth of detail undermined the imperative to make knowledge useful and broadly accessible. There was simply too much being created too fast to ever begin to properly survey it.

Novalis, in short, arrived at the moment when the material conditions that made encyclopedias possible and necessary - the proliferation of knowledge and scientific material in the wake of the invention of the printing press that seemed to demand some sort of organization - had decisively undermined the possibility of that endeavor. He was fully aware of that fact, explicitly addressing it in an unpublished dialogue written at the same time he was composing *Das Allgemeine Brouillon.* The dialogue, telegraphic as it is, sets up Novalis’s critique of *Bildung* and teleology. For that reason, I am going to spend the next few paragraphs recounting it before turning to the question of how it ties into the problem of contingency.

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[119] Like Terry Pinkard, I am using “German” loosely to refer to the German-speaking lands of the slowly disintegrating Holy Roman Empire, since Germany, strictly speaking, did not exist. See Pinkard, *German Philosophy,* 1.

[120] Wellmon, *Touching Books,* 65.

[121] For example, see Robert Darnton, *Mesmerism and the End of the Enlightenment in France* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986).

The dialogue opens with two friends quarreling over the latest book catalogue from the Leipzig fair. Both agree that the contemporary age suffers from an overabundance of books, but they differ on the import of that fact. Interlocutor A, the figure of Enlightenment rationality, begins by lamenting the black letters crawling over the page. "What a burden are these letters!" he exclaims, before noting that the contemporary human "is characterized 'by his fatal habituation to the printed nature.'"[122] Interlocutor B counters by praising the intellectual vibrancy of a culture that circulates more "honest and worthy ideas" than all of the competing cultures combined. He goes on to compare books to mines. "Everywhere we are bringing together the crude ore or the beautiful molds—we are melting down the ore, and have the skills to imitate and surpass the molds."[123] Books are material, earthy, and - as the metaphor of mines suggests - raw materials to be refined and reshaped for use.

Embedded in Enlightenment logic, Interlocutor A dismisses the idea as absurd, a reduction of books to fragmentary physical object. He insists instead that each book belongs to an educational chain that exists as part of a timeless, necessary systematic order.[124] The ideal book would be an encyclopedia that placed each individual book in its appropriate position. Mockingly, Interlocutor B rejoins, "It goes with you and with many like the Jews. They hope eternally for the Messiah, and he is long since here. Do you believe, then, that human destiny or, if you will, the nature of humanity first needed to frequent our lecture hall in order to experience what a system is?...Contingencies [*Die Zufälle*] are the sole certainty - the configuration of

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[122] Cited in Wellmon, *Touching Books,* 82.

[123] Ibid, 83.

[124] Novalis [Friedrich von Hardenberg], *Schriften. Die Werke Friedrich von Hardenbergs*, ed. Richard Samuel, Hans-Joachim-Mähl, and Gerhard Schulz, 6 vols. (Stuttgart: Verlag W. Kohlhammer, 1983), 2: 662-3: 31-35.

contingencies - your encounter is not chance, but rather law."[125] He then goes on to argue that every book has fertilized some ground, even if only that of the author who composed it. There *is* no system of books filling holes in our knowledge in the inexorable movement of progress; there are only contingencies, only chance encounters with books that can never be entirely sterile. The natural metaphors of "fruit," "trees," and "fertilization" are more than poetic license for Interlocutor B; they signal a very real belief in the physical continuity between books and the material world of Nature.

That is the moment Interlocutor B makes the central suggestion of the dialogue: what if there were no abstract realm of ideas, only books in their materiality, in their tactility, in their heft? What if, in his words, "*Es gibt nur noch Bücher"?*[126] There are only books. Yet even as the quantity of books grows, we are becoming alienated from their materiality. "Why else do we cling so strangely," he muses, half-wistfully, half-wryly, "like thin and meager moss to to the printer's vignette?"[127] We grow even thinner as time progresses, clinging desperately to the the materiality of the wooden blocks even as our own senses grow more abstract as we learn to focus on ideas, not things. Soon, Interlocutor B says sadly, "We will see books, but no things[...] We will no longer have even our five bodily [*leibliche*] senses."[128]

The dialogue ends on an explicitly theological note, left out of Wellmon's retelling. Interlocutor A, the representative of Enlightenment thought, is forced to renounce books or, at

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[125] In German, the passage reads, "Es geht dir und vielen, wie den Juden. Sie hoffen ewig auf den Messias, und dieser ist scho längst da. Glaubst du denn, daß Menschenschicksal oder, wenn du willst, die Natur der Menschheit erst nöthig hat unsre Hörsäle zu frequentieren, umzu erfahren, was ein System ist[...] Die Zufälle sind die einzelnen Thatsachen - die Zusammenstellung der Zufälle - ihr Zusammentreffen ist nicht wieder Zufall, sondern Gesetz." Ibid., 2: 662: 5-12, my translation.

[126] Ibid., 2: 663.

[127] Ibid., 2: 663:8.

[128] Cited in Wellmon, *Touching Books,* 84; Novalis, *Werke,* 2: 663: 5-8.

any rate, declares himself to be so hemmed in by bad books that he wonders if it might not be better to restrict his intellectual company, rather than fritter his life away without having thereby won anything eternal for his efforts. Interlocutor B, suddenly jovial, rebukes him: "You speak like a religious man - Unfortunately, you meet a pantheist in me - to whom the immeasurable world already is quite wide enough."[129] With this abrupt confession, Novalis's text declares its loyalty to the realm of contingency. He renounces the Enlightenment thinker's pure-minded quest for the necessary, immutable and eternal in favor of the material world filled with people, books, and things that pass in and out of being.

Novalis packs a tremendous amount into a few pages. For the moment, I want to bracket the references to theology and the dwindling of the senses for later sections. Instead, I want to focus on one line: "Contingencies [*Die Zufälle*] are the sole certainty - the configuration of contingencies - your encounter is not chance, but rather law." Read without context, the dialogue sounds like nothing so much as a Chekhov play, filled with characters talking past each other. There are some commonalities, of course. Both speakers agree that Interlocutor A, the figure of the Enlightenment, dreams of a disembodied, orderly chain of knowledge, where one book links neatly on to the previous. Likewise, they both agree that the proliferation of printed material is sweeping away any reasonable hope of getting a handle on knowledge. Based on that shared recognition of the printing industry, Interlocutor B argues that the Enlightenment ideal of an abstract, orderly system of knowledge is practically impossible to attain; nowhere, however, does he argue that it is wrong. Put otherwise, Interlocutor B never offers a reason why the Enlightenment ideal of education could not be a regulative ideal in the kantian sense. The two

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[129] "Du sprichst, wie ein Religios - Leider triffst du einen Pantheisten in mir - dem die unermeßlichen Welt gerade weit genug ist." Novalis, *Werke,* 2:664: 1-2.

figures could easily decide that a system of knowledge, however incomplete and impractical, was nonetheless a worthy aim to guide their actions. Yet both characters skip past that possibility. Why?

To answer that question, we have to turn to recent literature on Novalis's critique of foundationalism, particularly in the work of Manfred Frank. As Frank and others have recounted, from 1790-1 Novalis was the student of Karl Leonhard Reinhold (1758 - 1823). Reinhold, along with Fichte, were the dominant interpreters of Kant during the 1790s and were particularly famous for criticizing Kant as insufficiently systematic. Kant, Reinhold's critique ran, had failed to justify the necessity of the categories or to ground his system in the idea of a whole and then deduce the (necessary) relation of the parts to each other.[130] Thus Reinhold, and later Fichte, decided that to save Kant from the charge of arbitrariness he had to reground the kantian system in a first principle from which all subsequent propositions can be derived. The first principle was meant to be self-explanatory; the maximally general term under which all other concepts existed as subspecies; both the sufficient and necessary source of all propositions; and a self-evident truth. They chose as their first principle, in different forms, Kant's transcendental unity of apperception.

In the years following Novalis's time studying under Reinhold he came to associate with a group of critics of foundationalism, among them Friedrich Immanuel Niethammer and Friedrich Schlegel. For Niethammer, the true problem with Reinhold's effort to make representation a first principle of philosophy was that self-awareness is a contingent empirical proposition. Reinhold grounds his philosophy in a phenomenological account of consciousness

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[130] For more on this dispute, see Frederick Beiser, *The Fate of Reason: German Philosophy from Kant to Fichte* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987).

and it is "impossible to get from a contingent empirical proposition to an apodictically a priori valid proposition."[131] In later years, Novalis's friend Friedrich Schlegel would expand Niethammer's skepticism of Reinhold's foundationalism to a much broader point. As he wrote in *Athenäum,* "Philosophy, like epic poetry, always begins in the middle and it is impossible to present philosophy and to add to it piece by piece, so that the first piece would be by itself completely grounded and explained."[132]

I contend that Novalis's insistence on the contingency of our encounter with books as central to knowledge should be read as expanding his critique of foundationalism to include a material dimension. It is not simply that thinking begins in a certain time or place and seeks to expand outward until it discovers the limits of its knowledge. Rather, the philosopher is embodied in a very real sense. Thinking depends on the physical books; *this* book, in *this* time and place is the condition for the possibility of knowledge.

In part, this emphasis on the material book as a means to knowledge is a reflection of his dismissal of Cartesian mind-body dualism.[133] At points, he even marveled that such a bizarre and unnatural idea had ever come into being. Thus, the creation of knowledge had to be as much a bodily, physiological process as a mental one. He solved this problem by creating a model of epistemology where knowledge needed to be stimulated by some external object. Books were uniquely suited to bridge the chasm between self and world, inner and outer, as he noted when he

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[131] Cited in Manfred Frank, *The Philosophical Foundations of Early German Romanticism,* trans.Elizabeth Maillan-Zaibert (Albany: SUNY Press, 2008), 32.

[132] Frank, *Foundations,* 9

[133] For a broader discussion of Novalis's attitude toward Descartes, see Frederick Beiser, *German Idealism: The Struggle Against Subjectivism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008), 428.

remarked that "The essence of a letter is to excite a certain train of thought."[134] As physical objects, books stimulate the body, arousing it to action. As partly spiritual, however, they also stimulate the mind by triggering memory.[135]

One way of understanding this point is to turn to Bernard Stiegler's much more contemporary account of technology as a form of prosthetics. The human, Stiegler asserts early on in *Technics and Time,* "exceeds the biological."[136] His powers are at every turn extended, created, and amplified by, "the evolution of the 'prosthesis,' not itself living, by which the human is nonetheless defined as a living being, [the prosthesis] constitutes the reality of the human's evolution, as if, with it, the history of life were to continue by means other than life."[137] The prosthesis is much, much more than the false leg that straps on to an amputated stump. Rather, it is every tool that blurs the boundaries between "natural" human powers and their surroundings, from the knives that act as our claws because our unadorned hands are soft and ill-suited for hunting, to our clothing that serve as the pelts to clothe our naked skin, and finally, to our computers that become our memory as we click save and forget. These are not externalities we can shed, in Stiegler's theory. Technology has altered the course of our evolution in a completely literal, biological fashion, by accelerating the development of our increasingly complex brains. And, at any rate, if there ever was a time when we would consider human a naked *homo sapien*

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[134] "Der Buchstabe . . . [ist] eine Hülfe der philosophischen Mittheilung, deren eigentliches Wesen in Erregung eines bestimmten Gedanckengangs besteht." Novalis, *Schriften*, 2:522. Cited in Wellmon, *Touching Books*, 101.

[135] Wellmon, *Touching Books*, 87.

[136] Bernard Stiegler, *Technics and Time 1: The Fault of Epimetheus,* trans. Richard Beardsworth and George Collins (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 50.

[137] Ibid, 50.

shorn of language, money, and even so much technology as a stick meant to prod a hole to be human in any meaningful sense we passed that era long ago.

I think there are other less philosophical, more intuitive ways of understanding how material books connect us to contingency. One is to understand the point as a reflection on the peculiar history that brought a given book to my hands. Particularly in Novalis's day, before the digital revolution we enjoy, the existence and circulation of books depended on the material conditions that made that circulation possible. If Königsberg had not been a major center for trade with the British, who wanted a port to ship the Baltic lumber they used in their ship masts, perhaps Kant never would have read Hume and we would all still be Wolffians.

Under that reading of Novalis, the effort to write a new, peculiar encyclopedia that emphasizes contingencies is nothing less than a gauntlet thrown down simultaneously to the foundationalism of Fichte and the disembodied ideal of knowledge. He chooses to reinvent the encyclopedia, not some other genre, precisely because it is the form most freighted with ideals of systematicity and universality. If he can transform the encyclopedia, he can show the inconsistencies inherent within the ideal of knowledge it represents.

Yet it is not enough to see Novalis's encyclopedia as solely a critical or polemical project. Rather, to understand the format he chooses, we have to return to his remark about pantheism and investigate the religious dimension of the project.

III. Religion

The condition for the possibility of the encyclopedia, of this grand project of uniting the sciences, turns out to be the material book that escapes me and reminds me of my own humble position as a reader bound by time, space, and conditioned by an idiosyncratic history that

illuminates certain passages while leaving other pages blank. Contingency in Novalis in my analysis this far is twofold. It inhabits the physical book which belongs not to a necessary, unbreakable chain of ideas that stretches on to encircle the entire world, but to the press that stamps its ink on to pages, to the merchant who haggles with foreign cities to buy its paper, and even to the bomb that obliterates it without a trace. The book is contingent because it passes in and out of being, and is constructed at every level by a series of chance decisions. And I, as a reader, am forced to recognize myself as equally contingent the moment I pick up this artifact in *this* place, with just *this* capacity to pay attention and no more. We are both - book and reader alike - returned to our fleshy fragility as we touch each other.

That is a revelation of sorts. But the chastened recognition of my own contingency in the act of reading is more than a check on my world-conquering philosophical presumptions, or even the condition for an ultimately unsustainable attempt to order knowledge; it is one of many encounters with chance and thus, in Novalis's words, "contact with a higher being - a problem, and the *data* of the active religious *sense."*[138] That is to say, it is a *positive* source of religious knowledge. How that comes to pass and what religion looks like will be the subject of this section, first in a consideration of the theological roots of the encyclopedia's structure, and then in an analysis of how the chance encounter with books feeds into a much broader set of philosophical and theological beliefs about the human relation to the infinite or absolute.

Any discussion of religion in *Das Allgemeine Brouillon* inevitably centers on the meaning of entry 557, "My book shall be a scientific Bible - a real, and ideal model - and the seed of all books." Earlier scholars, such as Hans Blumenberg, speculated that Novalis meant to write a

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[138] Novalis, *Notes for a Romantic Encyclopedia: Das Allgemeine Brouillon,* trans. David Wood (Albany: State University Press of New York, 2007), 161; Novalis, *Werke,* 3: 901.

Romantic Gospel of sorts. Such a work would be a response to Lessing's call at the end of *the Education of the Human Race* for "a new, eternal gospel, which is itself promised in the elementary books of the new covenant."[139] Novalis *did* in fact consider in 1799 collaborating with Ludwig Tieck, Friedrich Schlegel, and Schleiermacher to compose something along those lines, though it ultimately never came to fruition. In contrast, most contemporary scholars tend to interpret the term "Bible" as a catchall, or a "*Gattungsbegriff*" for any book meant to organize a discipline as a whole. Under this reading, we should understand Novalis's project as more akin to popular guidebooks, such as "the Bartender's Bible" than to the Christian Bible.[140]

Ultimately, though, this debate seems misguided. While I agree with contemporary thinkers that *Das Allgemeine Brouillon* cannot be feasibly understood as a Gospel in any straightforward sense, buzzwords do not define the presence of religion. Even if the word "bible" were dropped altogether from Novalis's encyclopedia, his work would still be implicated in theology, both through the reliance on analogy throughout the work and by his consistent coupling of chance with revelation.

Novalis's reliance on analogy structures *Das Allgemeine Brouillon* and explains some of the idiosyncrasies of the text, particularly when compared to more traditional encyclopedias. The sheer strangeness of that structure does not immediately present itself to the new reader of

[139] Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, "The Education of the Human Race" in *Lessing: Philosophical and Theological Writings,* trans. H.B. Nisbet (New York: Cambridge University Press), 238.

[140] The confusion, David Wood writes in his introduction to the English translation of *Das Allgemeine Brouillon,* stems in part from an exchange Novalis had with Schlegel roughly at the same time he began work on his encyclopedia. Novalis was delighted to learn that just as he was conceiving his own project, Schlegel was likewise thinking of beginning a Bible of his own. However, while Novalis's book attempted to provide a "body" for the sciences, Schlegel wanted to write "a new Gospel." For all of his enthusiasm about the sympathy between their minds betrayed by their simultaneous turn toward the idea of a Bible, Novalis ultimately found Schlegel's project strange, remarking frankly that he thought it, "illusory and obscure." Cited in David Woods introduction to *Notes for a Romantic Encyclopedia: Das Allgemeine Brouillon* by Novalis (Albany: State University Press of New York, 2007), xix.

Das Allgemeine Brouillon. Like other encyclopedias, it has entries with different headings. Those entries are relatively short, sometimes a few lines, sometimes a page or two, but never much longer than that. Yet, the headings are not alphabetized, or even put in *any* discernible order, though they are idiosyncratically numbered. And the headings are strange, not least because they repeat throughout the text at apparently random intervals, but never suggest cross-references to other topics. Rather than soldering together individual entries on countries or birds or continents, *Das Allgemeine Brouillon* speaks of sciences, disciplines and genres. Some typical entry headings include "physiology," "mathematics," "philosophy," "medicine," and "encyclopedistics," by far the most common category. Instead, the categories are organized around analogies of the relationships between sciences.[141] As he notes in his clearest discussion of encyclopedistics, he devotes one hour each day to studying, "encyclopedistics in general. This includes scientific algebra—equations. Relationships—similarities—equalities—effects of the sciences on each other."[142] Rather than each entry relating vertically to a species or genus of a particular concept, it connects laterally to different sciences and to different readings of itself. Novalis denies the reader a stable perspective on the sciences she studies, shuffling her instead from question to question.

The reliance on analogy feeds into a broader epistemic humility undergirding Novalis's work. At the time when Novalis wrote, there was a debate raging about the use of analogy in scientific work. Was it unscientific and unrigorous, or a mark of a thinker's willingness to accept

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[141] "ENCYCLOPEDISTICS. Analogical analysis (Analysis—art of finding the unknown from out of the known). Analogical equations—and problems." Novalis, *Notes for a Romantic Encyclopedia: Das Allgemeine Brouillon,* trans. David Wood (Albany: State University Press of New York, 2007), 17; Novalis [Friedrich von Hardenberg], *Schriften. Die Werke Friedrich von Hardenbergs*, ed. Richard Samuel, Hans-Joachim-Mähl, and Gerhard Schulz, 6 vols. (Stuttgart: Verlag W. Kohlhammer, 1983), 3: 98.

[142] Ibid, 34; Novalis, *Werke,* 3:233.

his own limitations? Analogy was one of the greatest points of contention between Kant and the generation that followed him. For example, Kant famously rebuked the work of Herder, his former student, for using analogy as a form of philosophical reasoning, despite the fact that Herder cribbed the method from Kant's early work, *Allgemeine Naturgeschichte und Theorie des Himmels*.[143] Analogy was insufficiently rigorous, the argument ran, incapable of proving scientific truths and substituting instead illegitimate speculation as fact. In a magnificently haughty moment, Herder retorted:

> Just as our whole psychology consists of figurative terms, for the most part it was a single new image, a single analogy, a single striking metaphor that gave birth to the greatest and boldest theories. The philosophers who declaim against figurative language and themselves serve nothing but old, often uncomprehended, figurative idols are at least in great contradiction with themselves [...] But how so? Is there in this "analogy to the human being" also truth? Human truth, certainly, and as long as I am a human being I have no information about any higher.[144]

In the previous section, I read Novalis as consistently referring back to his implication and imbrication in a much wider natural, spiritual, and intellectual world. He used analogy and unorthodox arrangement of his encyclopedia entries to do that work methodologically; he made reference to the material dimension of the book he wrote and the contingency of his reader to do the same philosophically.

In doing so, Novalis was participating in a theological tradition as much as a mathematical one. While analogy first arose among Greek mathematicians such as Achytas and Euclid to denote proportions or equal ratios between two sets of numbers, theologians in the

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[143] For more on this dispute, see Frederick Beiser, *The Fate of Reason: German Philosophy from Kant to Fichte* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987), 152.

[144] Johann Gottfried von Herder, "On the Cognition and Sensation of the Human Soul (1778)" in *Johann Gottfried von Herder: Philosophical Writings,* trans. and ed. Michael Forster (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004) 188-9.

intervening centuries had transformed it into one of the primary ways of speaking about an ungraspable God or, alternately, extrapolating legal rulings for new social situations based on rules or verdicts found in scriptures. The Neoplatonists used analogy in two senses: first, to speak about God, and second to "provide a principle of unity between various levels of reality."[145] As Mondin goes on to explain, for the Neoplatonists, "reality is proportionately distributed in different degrees. This proportionate distribution is called analogy. The degree of reality of something is is designated by its definite 'proportion' to things of higher and lower grades."[146] Similarly, Thomas Aquinas offered the most famous Christian example of this trend when he argued that humans were so far beneath God that they could not properly be understood as sharing the same qualities any more than human love could be equated to the relation between a drone and its queen in a hive; yet, given that humans were created in the image of God, their goodness could at least point toward God's transcendent version of the same quality. Thus, human qualities, like goodness, could only be analogous to God's version of goodness.[147]

Novalis was hardly a traditional theist in Aquinas's line, but I do think it is worth considering his use of analogy as a piece with both this theological tradition of touching upon a great reality that cannot be fully articulated and his insistence on understanding the reader as embedded in the world. Contingent contact with books offers one example of the revelatory powers of chance - a concept inseparable from the unnecessary and contingent - that Novalis alludes to throughout his philosophical writings. He writes his most significant passage on

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[145] Battista Mondin, *The Principle of Analogy in Protestant and Catholic Thought* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1963), 3.

[146] Ibid, 4.

[147] Ibid., 3.

chance in his first volume of philosophical fragments called *Pollen.* The passage opens with Novalis dismissing the idea that humans can never rise above their senses as tantamount to equating human with animals. He does admit that doing so is extraordinarily difficult for man, writing:

> It is true under these circumstances reflection, the discovery of himself - is very difficult, since he is so ceaselessly, so necessarily connected with the change in our other circumstances. But the more conscious of these circumstances we can be, the more lively, powerful and ample is the conviction which derives from them - the belief in true revelations of the spirit. It is not seeing-hearing-feeling- it is a combination of all three-more than all three-a sensation of immediate certainty - a view of my truest, most actual life - thoughts change into laws - wishes are fulfilled.
>
> The phenomenon becomes especially striking at the sight of many human forms and faces - particularly so on catching sight of many eyes, expressions, movements - on hearing certain words, reading certain passages - at certain views of life, world, and fate. Very many chance incidents, many natural events, particular times of day and year bring us such experiences. Certain moods are especially favorable to such revelations. Most last only an instant - few linger - fewest of all remain.[148]

The crux of the difficulty Novalis locates is embodied in the shift in person in the first sentence. In German it runs, "Freylich ist die Besonnenheit in diesem Zustande, die Sich Selbst Findung - sehr schwer, da *er* so unaufhörlich, so nothwendig mit dem Wechsel *unsrer* übrigen Zustände verbunden ist." "Er," "he," refers clearly enough to "der Mensch" introduced in the previous sentence who seeks to find "himself" [*Sich Selbst*], but in the latter half of the sentence, the subject switches abruptly to "*our* circumstances." I take this shift to be both signaling just how difficult that man's goal is to attain. In a certain sense, if it were his own circumstances that were hopelessly bound up in his circumstances of reflection, he would be halfway to a solution. To be able to delineate "my" circumstances, a sphere proper to my own life and action, would be to have at least a start on the question of what constitutes my self and my concerns. Novalis's

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[148] Novalis, "Miscellaneous Observations" in *Novalis: Philosophical Writings,* trans. Margaret Mahony Stoljar (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997), 26-27; Novalis, *Werke,* 22: 420: #23. Translation modified.

grammar, however, undermines that pretension of (relative) autonomy by reminding us that circumstances are never solely one's own; they are always tied to other people. *Nothing* is really ever solely mine, not so long as I covet things other people can see, admire landscapes where others walk, and own objects that brush up against other objects.

We have no choice, then, but rise to the glimpse of our truest self by going through our embodied, embedded senses, because the content of revelation, for Novalis, is not some self isolated from the world; it is a glimpse into a whole where everything is connected. The link he draws between chance moods and events that momentarily allow us to see that fact is not accidental. Rather, the very essence of chance, contingency - of the fact that events and moods and objects can come from other quarters of the world to disrupt our lives - is that it clues us into a reality where everything is connected, everything touches.

But what sort of touch does Novalis envision between the human and divine? Mystical union? Endless longing? The answer, I think, comes from the line I cited a few pages ago: "All chance is wondrous—contact [*Berührung*] with a higher being—a problem, and the *data* of the active religious *sense.*"[149] Put simply, contact always has a double meaning of distance and closeness. He states that fact baldly in certain passages, but the very structure of his sentence mirrors that relation. Here em dashes set contact apart as a fragment that both breaks and sutures together two halves of a sentence that would never make a symmetrical whole. Does the interjection "—contact with a higher being—" make the transition from the wondrous to a problem, from affect to intellect, from an adjective to a noun, more or less jarring? I am never sure, even after all of the hours I have spent reading this line.

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[149] Novalis, *Das Allgemeine Brouillon,* 161; Novalis, *Werke,* 3: 901. In German, the sentence runs: "Aller *Zufall* ist wunderbar - Berührung eines höhern Wesens - ein Problem *Datum* des thätig religiösen *Sinns."*

I do know that Novalis riffs on that disruptive, connective ambiguity with other structures throughout the text. In other places contact comes in a parenthetical remark, as in entry 295 on "cosmology": "(No connection without separation. Contact is both separation and connection.)"[150] Still in others contact or touch functions less as an interruption than as one in a series of words, sentences, and clauses telegraphed to the reader, as when Novalis jots down the following: "904. Instinct, as the feeling of need and incompleteness—is also the feeling of cohesion, of constancy—the conductive—orientating sense of touch itself—(Thus it is instinct that causes the bolt of lightning to strike down into the metal chain.) The raw, synthetic completing impulse—is a transitory—pointlike ego."[151] The entirety of *Das Allgemeine Brouillon,* taken as an aesthetic, visual object, hangs together by dashes that at once push their way between words and lasso them back together to form new cadences and new meanings. I believe this is not an accident; rather, the text, taken as an aesthetic object, serves as a synecdoche for Novalis's theology, a vision of a whole at once connected at every part and riddled with empty spaces of disjunction.

As such, I would argue, *Das Allgemeine Brouillon* provides clues on how its reader should approach both itself, qua text, and the whole or the infinite it stands in for. Or, perhaps given Novalis's love of analogy, a better way to formulate this proposition would be to say that the reader's relation to the text in front of her is analogous to the subject's relation to the whole. What do I mean? Return, for a moment to the passage I just cited. At its base, Novalis suggests, instinct - the most primal, unreasoning, pre-rational facet of any creature - is a feeling of wanting. Yet in its sense of incompletion and need, instinct creates a coherent identity of sorts,

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[150] Novalis, *Das Allgemeine Brouillon,* 44; Novalis, *Werke,* 3: 295.

[151] Ibid, 161; 3:904.

albeit of a creature reaching out in every direction, fumbling to feel out the contours of its surroundings. Lighting strikes the links of a metal chain because it is incomplete within itself; the eye of the reader runs from letter to letter, word to word, dash to dash in order discover in their connection the meaning of the passage that she wants; and the subject blindly gropes for the totality that surrounds her, knowing herself best in the moments when she is most sensitive to the circumstances that surround her.

Novalis's emphasis on incompletion, contingency, and particularity feeds into an understanding of revelation of the whole as irreducibly particular. He makes this clearest when discussing the philosopher who attempts to build systems out of her insights. As he writes**,** "The representation of the philosophy of philosophy will always have something of an individual philosophy in it. Equally the poet represents only individual philosophy, and moreover anyone, no matter how vigorously he may acknowledge the philosophy of philosophy, will in practical terms be only more or less an individual philosopher, and despite all his striving he will never be entirely able to step out of the magic circle of his individual philosophy."[152] All philosophy, all thought, can never be anything but particular, shaded by individual experience, location, and - as Novalis suggests in the passage cited earlier about recognizing one's truest self - moods. And that means that the experience of thumbing through a book, of feeling myself thrown against my contingency in my contact with a world that eludes and the horizon of my thoughts cramped and confined by the position of my body, is not merely incidental. It is exactly the point; it is exactly what Novalis takes to be the central insight of philosophy. Contingency always has a double movement for Novalis. It at once lets us touch a an immeasurable reality, while it throws us back

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[152] Novalis, "Logological Fragments I" in *Novalis: Philosophical Writings,* trans. Margaret Mahony Stoljar (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997), 48.

on our particularity. Chance is never mere, empty chance; it is always an opening into a broader reality. Yet there is nothing outside of chance, at least not for me. There is nothing other than that moment of contingency realized in my reading, my contact with new knowledge; there are only books.

IV. Illness

And yet, this very sensitivity to the thingness of books, to the heft and depth of volumes that may molder in a forgotten trunk in a Bavarian basement, or be recycled into the grease-stained paper wrapped by Victorians around their cheese, or simply sit mutely on my shelves makes me suspicious of Wellmon's emphasis on reading. It is not much of a challenge to the narcissistic sovereignty of scholarly reason to replace the old dream of a philosophy that could master the world with a new theory of books. Putin steps down as Prime Minister to become President and a philosopher-poet politely declines to claim knowledge of the Absolute, only to feign blushing astonishment that *books* turn out to provide privileged access to reality. I understand the generous reading, of course: books are only the starting point in the revolt of things. Wellmon's Novalis emphasizes books because it is the fastest way to unseat the smug certainty of his educated readers. After all, if books - the most basic tool of our trade, the object of our study and the harvest of our labor - can escape us, what does that mean about the subjects we actually write about? Stressing the alterity of books, in this interpretation, really displays the profoundest humility, rather than the self-absorption I so uncharitably ascribe to the enterprise.

Bracketing the issue of whether or not the generous reading is correct, the question remains: *does* Novalis really privilege the material book as offering unique access to our contingency and, by extension, revelatory contact with an ungraspable whole? Might there be

another encounter with contingency, another set of motivations for grappling with our fragile place in time and space germane to a less rarefied and less literary crowd? I believe so. Books and the moods in which we encounter them are central to Novalis's account of contingency, I argue in this section, but they belong to a much deeper experience of contingency rooted in the science of the senses during Novalis's era and, crucially, the suffering of the sickened body.

In particular, to understand what Novalis meant by touch and how it came to assume such a central place in his epistemology, we have to spend some time with the work of Albrecht von Haller (1708 - 1777) and John Brown (1735-88), two scientists Novalis mentions explicitly in *Das Allgemeine Brouillon* who offered a tactile model of illness, energy, and neurosis. Haller, the elder of the two thinkers, was a Swiss poet and physiologist. On April 22, 1752 he presented his most famous scholarly paper to the scientific society at Göttingen, *A Dissertation on the Sensible and Irritable Parts of Animals.* Starting in 1746, Haller experimented on 190 different animals, ranging from goats, to dogs, to frogs. After six years of burning skin, lacerating tendons, severing nerves, opening the skulls of conscious dogs and pouring acid on their uteri, Haller emerged with a new theory of sensation and motion. He proposed two main properties of muscles: irritability and sensibility. "I call that part of the human body irritable, which becomes shorter upon being touched," he begins, before continuing:

> I call that a sensible part of the human body, which upon being touched transmits the impression of it to the soul; and in brutes, in whom the existence of a soul is not so clear, I call sensible, the Irritation of which occasions evident signs of pain an disquiet in the animal. On the contrary, I call that insensible, which being burnt, tore, pricked, or cut till it is quite destroyed, occasions no sign of pain nor convulsions, nor any sign of change in the situation."[153]

[153] Albrecht von Haller, "A Dissertation on the Sensible and Irritable Parts of Animals," *Bulletin of the Institute of the History of Medicine* v. 4 (1936): 658-9.

The nerves, and above all, the skin, were the site of sensibility in Haller's account, just as the muscles were for irritability. The two properties never co-existed in the same organ. A nerve, no matter how plucked or prodded, never contracts in pain, while muscles continued their irritable spasming often long after death itself. "Irritability," Haller concludes, "therefore is independent of the soul and the will."[154]

Haller's research prompted a new set of investigations into the nervous system during the 1750s and 1760s, with particular attention to the role of nervous disorders in the genesis of diseases.[155] One of Haller's followers was the professor at Edinburgh, William Cullen (1712-90), who briefly taught John Brown and employed him as a tutor of his children. The relationship fell apart, however, when he accused Brown of plagiarizing his ideas. Brown eventually was forced to complete his medical degree at St. Andrews in 1779, after nearly a decade studying at the University of Edinburgh. A year later he published *Elementa Medicinae,* the text that underlies so many of Novalis's theories.[156] Brown's work launched from Haller's distinction between irritability and sensibility. He wrote, "all states of life, man and other animals differ from themselves in their dead state, or from any other inanimate matter in this property alone: that they can be affected by external agents, as well as by certain functions peculiar to themselves."[157]

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[154] Ibid, 678.

[155] This tack was in conflict with the prevailing school of thought that attributed disease to imbalances in the humors. See John Neubauer, "Dr. John Brown (1735-88) and Early German Romanticism," *Journal of the History of Ideas,* Vol. 28, No. 3 (July - September, 1967): 368.

[156] Ibid, 368.

[157] Ibid, 369.

In contrast to Haller, Brown believed that organism are not solely passive. Instead, each at birth receives a certain degree of "excitability." As to what excitability was or how exactly it interacted with stimuli or "exciting powers," Brown pleaded ignorance. The exciting powers were a combination of external stimuli, such as heat, food, and air, and internal stimuli, including thoughts and the emotions. Excitability formed a triad necessary for life with the internal and external exciting powers. While the exciting powers fed on excitability, draining it faster than it could be renewed as life progressed, the cessation of either excitability or the exciting powers would result in immediate death. The powers that made life possible inexorably and directly ended in death; the only question was how quickly.

Health, then, depended on the proper balance of stimulation. Overstimulation resulted in sthenic diseases of exhaustion, while understimulation led to asthenic diseases that, at their extreme, culminated in death. Brown accordingly thought that diseases could be treated by adjusting the amount of stimulation the patient received. As he considered most diseases asthenic, he prescribed in theory spirits and seasoned food. In practice, though, he usually recommended opium as faster and much more efficacious. Following his own advice too well, Brown eventually died wrecked by his drug and alcohol addictions.

Plausible or not, Brown's work matters to our account because it introduced singularity and contingency into Haller's mechanistic, tactile account of the nerves through the discussion of health. Haller's scientific model of irritability was always, at base, a tactile one. He pricked a muscle and it contracted; he plucked a nerve and it sent pain data to the soul. Haller's experiments were controlled, and the laws he derived from them were regular, mechanistic, and consistent. Brown kept the importance of touch, but introduced contingency into Haller's

orderly account by pursuing sickness to its most individual level. Perhaps he might have avoided the philosophical embarrassment of inventing excitability if he had been willing to leave his theory of stimulation on a more general level and made the basic suggestion that health was determined by over- or under-stimulation. Instead, he asked a more personal question: why am I prone to illness and another not? Why does the battering of my senses by a common world leave me exhausted and ill, and another seemingly untouched? Why this disease? Why now? Why me? That was where his account broke down. That was where contingency entered in the form of excitability.

Brown's work began to gain popularity in Germany after 1795, when A.K. Weikard translated his *Elementa Medicinae* into German, but the theory of irritability circulated earlier, most notably in Johann Gottfried von Herder's (1744 - 1803) references to Haller in his 1778 *On the Cognition and Sensation of the Human Soul.* Herder taught in Jena alongside Novalis's teacher, Friedrich Schiller, and we know Novalis read Herder's work, based on the admiring references he makes to his prose in *Das Allgemeine Brouillon.*[158] The connection matters because Herder combined the British theories of irritability with a belief that the acuteness of the senses is historically and even biographically conditioned. Novalis will pick up on that set of concerns and go on to pathologize them. For that reason, allow me to linger a bit longer on Herder before returning to Novalis.

In his 1778 piece, Herder turned to irritability in order to bridge the mind-body divide, casting the workings of the nerves as at once a physical and psychological phenomenon. In many ways, Herder's early writings on the senses anticipated Brown's notion of excitability, by

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[158] Novalis, *Das Allgemeine Brouillon,* 66; Novalis, *Werke,* 3:419).

attributing the workings of the nerves to an unquantifiable sensitivity. In a 1766 essay, "*On the Change of Taste: On the Diversity of Taste and of Manners of Thought Among Human Beings,"* Herder addressed the question of relativism in taste.[159] A philosopher, he observes, must be struck by the differences in taste across nations. Unlike Kant in his later work, however, Herder dismisses the effort to subsume taste under a universal standard and turns, instead, to differences in the sensitivity of the senses to account for these discrepancies. Herder believes in broad, national, racial differences in the senses, noting, significantly for our purposes, that Europeans have exceptionally weak senses because they are so accustomed to abstract thought. Yet, senses also differed from individual to individual, for a combination of biological, autobiographical, and utterly unknowable reasons. "No human being," he insists, "is exactly in agreement in feeling with another, because it cannot easily be the case that in two human beings the whole structure of the nerves is *entirely* tuned in a single way. That is why so many people have a *stubbornly idiosyncratic* sense of feeling which noticeably deviates now in this matter and now in that from the sensation of another person."[160]

After musing on other examples of the singularity of nerves - one man's voluptuous thrill at caressing velvet, another's shudder at the yelp of a dog, a third's desire to jump out of his skin at the sight of a particular color - Herder asks whether or not it would be possible to prevent "such a *stubbornly idiosyncratic* sort of sensation."[161] Flicking the question aside, Herder rejoins, "hardly!," noting that so much depends on the structure of nerves. "Their fiber-web has so to

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[159] Johann Gottfried von Herder, "On the Change of Taste: On the Diversity of Taste and of Manners of Thought Among Human Beings," in *Johann Gottfried von Herder: Philosophical Writings,* trans. and ed. Michael Forster (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 247-256.

[160] Ibid, 251.

[161] Ibid, 252.

speak received a pitch that is peculiar to it through a *contingent event*" that may have happened in the womb.[162] Which is not to say that the senses are wholly outside of individual control. Herder thinks social norms do a tremendous amount to shape the squeamishness or coarseness of individuals, turning the sensitivity of the senses into a mark of class and conformity to gender norms. I would need to climb into another woman's body to understand whether or not we really shared the same sense of touch.

Novalis follows Herder in insisting on the historical contingency of the senses as we now know them, yet goes even further by pathologizing them. Wellmon yet again offers the best account of Novalis's stance, this time in an article called "Lyrical Feeling: Novalis's Anthropology of the Senses." Like Herder, Novalis suggests that the contemporary experience of the senses changes across time and space. Novalis goes even farther than Herder, though, suggesting that not even our current division of the senses into five is constant. In his *Fichte Studien,* Novalis mulls over the possibility of a single sense that would preexist and ground the individual senses of touch, taste, sight, smell and hearing.[163] When Novalis speaks of this originary, unified sense as grounding the others, Novalis means that touch, taste, and smell would be "modifications, individuations of the category sense." This "total sense" would be a product of the imagination, as opposed to the individual senses that belong to physiology. Yet the total sense can not be thought directly; it is, in Novalis's words, "negative material."[164] Any discussion of it must proceed apophatically, through the individuated senses we possess.

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[162] Ibid, 252, my emphasis.

[163] Chad Wellmon, "Lyrical Feeling: Novalis' Anthropology of the Senses" *Studies in Romanticism*, Vol. 47, No. 4 (Winter, 2008): 460-2.

[164] Cited in Wellmon, *Anthropology of the Senses,* 461.

Nevertheless, the world Novalis dreams of where we have access to a single, primordial sense is not our own; rather, we live in one where bodily experience is rent apart at every turn. I mean the division into individual senses, yes, but also a more fundamental cleavage between the types of senses. Novalis believes that we possess two separate sets of senses: an inner, that takes as its stimuli mental phenomena, and an outer, that responds to the external world. Borrowing from Brown and Haller, he maps this distinction on to the concepts of sensibility and irritability, so that sensibility perceives internally produced mental or nervous experiences, while irritability does the same for external, worldly events. The two types of senses exist separately, but can form any number of relations with each other. Ideally, the two would be in perfect harmony, with neither the inner nor outer sense dominating the other. In his fondest dreams, Novalis even imagines that they might harmonize together so well that the distinctions would be blurred and, in Wellmon's summary, "Future senses would mediate not just from world to mind but from mind to world."[165] Or, put otherwise, that the inner sense or mind, as Wellmon names it, would not simply perceive and receive mental or nervous phenomena; it would be able to actively change the external world through thought alone.

I will return to that startling thought in the final section of this chapter; for the moment, I want to stress the historical contingency of the relationship between the inner and outer senses. If historical and bodily contingency come together for Herder in the imperceptible events in the womb that string an individual's nerves to a certain pitch, for Novalis the same occurs on a broader cultural scale when technological, intellectual, social, and spiritual developments come together to influence the balance between the inner or outer senses. Our senses - inner and outer

[165] Ibid, 462.

- could be otherwise and have been otherwise, which must have been something of a relief for Novalis to conclude, since he firmly believes that the current state is in a rather bad way.

The contemporary world is sick, Novalis believes, from the intellectual culture of abstraction I opened this chapter by discussing. As he writes in entry 274, "Too much abstraction produces asthenia—too much reflection, sthenia. I must reflect a lot more and abstract a lot less. I already possess enough irritability. An acute thinker is a sensitive meter—an extremely subtle reactant."[166] In essence, then, the push of Enlightenment encyclopedists, of the entire intellectual culture of systematizing, is not a neutral one. Rather, it deadens our senses by pulling us away from the world or teaching us to see, as Novalis puts it, books, not things. Yet we need a certain amount of stimulation by the world in order to remain healthy. We, as a culture, suffer from diseases of exhaustion and understimulation. Our inability to see the world of things we live in, to recognize the material basis of knowledge, is not a problem for simply philosophical or ideological reasons; it is actively making us ill.

Perhaps this chapter could end here, having suggested a reading of Novalis that makes the bodily, affective experience of contingency central to his critique of foundationalism and the abstract ordering of knowledge, the religious experience of pantheism, and his diagnosis the illness of the modern European. Yet a diagnosis is not yet a cure. What that cure might look like and how it fits into his account of contingency will be the topic of my final section.

V. Affliction, Fairy Tales and Magical Idealism

This section might initially seem undermotivated. After all, if Novalis believes that he, like his culture more generally, suffers from sthenic diseases and names the whole edifice of

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[166] Novalis, *Das Allgemeine Brouillon,* 41; 3: 274.

disembodied, placeless knowledge as a part of the cause, it seems we should return to an emphasis on the contingent, material book outlined in the first section of this chapter. The idea that an awareness of contingency has liberatory potential on both a physical and intellectual plane is consistent with the centrality I have given the experience in his thought. Nevertheless, a problem remains: we suffer from understimulation from the senses but if we were to go in the opposite direction and emphasize the awareness of the physical world contingency brings, what would prevent us from contracting a whole new host of diseases from overstimulation? The answer, I think, lies in Novalis's theory of Magical Idealism, his skeletal, idiosyncratic philosophy that sought to gain total control over the senses, and in his theory of the fairy tale that I believe offers a model of how to do so while remaining faithful to the religious valuation of chance. To that end, I want to conclude this chapter with a discussion of how Magical Idealism answers for Novalis that third question from Kant's canon of pure reason: what can I hope for?

Magical Idealism, often uncomfortably skirted around or tactfully omitted from histories of philosophy, is at its center an answer to Kant's question; it tells us we can hope for health. But what was Magical Idealism? Where does it fit into Novalis's thought? Novalis makes only passing mention of Magical Idealism, mainly in *Das Allgemeine Brouillon*, but also in his *Vorarbeiten* of 1797. Contemporary scholars agree that Novalis considered it to be his own, personal philosophy, even calling it, "Mein magischer Idealismus" at points.[167] There is less consensus on whether or not Novalis abandoned it in the final few years of his life, but for my purposes that is not terribly important. Despite the telegraphic nature of his remarks on it, a reasonably clear sketch of the system has emerged in recent years.

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[167] Cited in Frederick Beiser, *German Idealism: The Struggle Against Subjectivism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008), 421.

The main aim or hope of Magical Idealism is to gain the power to voluntarily control our senses in the same way we now direct our thoughts, will, and speech. This aspiration rests on the distinction between inner and outer sense that I mentioned in the previous section. Most discussion of this depends on entry 338.

> If you are unable to make thoughts indirectly (and fortuitously) perceptible, then try the converse, and make external things directly perceptible (and at will)—which amounts to saying, if you are unable to transform thoughts into external things, then transform external things into thoughts. If you are unable to make a thought into something independent, something separate from yourself—and therefore also something extraneous —that is, into an externally occurring soul, then proceed in the opposite manner with external things—and transform them into thoughts.
>
> Both operations are idealistic. *Whosoever has both completely in his power, is a Magical Idealist.* Shouldn't the perfection of each of these two operations be dependent on the other?[168]

As Frederick Beiser summarizes it, "Thanks to our powers of attention and abstraction, Novalis writes, we have control over our internal senses. We have the power to determine what we perceive within ourselves by abstracting from, or directing our attention to, some things rather than others."[169] If we can do so for our inner sense, the thought runs, why not our external senses?

In addition to mastering the senses, Novalis also suggests that the Magical Idealist should strive to increase the amount of internal stimuli we receive until it matches the external. "The external stimulus is already present in its immeasurability," he writes, "and is for the most part under the control of the artist. Yet how slight is the inner stimulus in contrast to the outer. Thus the main concern facing the artist of immortality is the gradual increase in the inner stimulus. In this regard, aren't we then justified in pronouncing what the poets have already strangely foretold

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[168] Novalis, *Das Allgemeine Brouillon,* 51; Novalis, *Werke,* 3:338.

[169] Besier, *German Idealism,* 422.

—that the Muses alone grant immortality. The scholarly class too now appears in a new light. My Magical Idealism."[170] If we think back to my earlier discussion of how he imagines a world where the internal and external senses are in harmony, it becomes clear that the capacity to sense at will is grounded in the equitable and harmonious relationship between inner and outer sense. We will never get to the state of willful control over the body until inner and outer senses work so seamlessly in tandem that the stimuli affecting one can affect the other. We are at the moment too overwhelmed by the external, too little focused on the internal, for all of the abstraction of the Enlightenment encyclopedia.

If all of this sounds like my discussion of Brown, it ought to do so. Brown's influence - no matter how bad his science - does a lot to make Magical Idealism more sympathetic as a project. Taken cold, Magical Idealism sounds either like the most hubristic form of mastery possible within the modern project, or frankly absurd. It would seem that Novalis's desire to direct his senses where he willed would undermine the contingency of our contact with knowledge that I began with in my discussion of the encyclopedia. What good would it do to rescue books from their liquidation into abstract ideas, if we one day hope to gain total control over how we sense the books we hold? At least the roots of the project in medicine remind us that the starting point for Novalis is sickness; at least Brown reminds us that Novalis was seeking health.

There are other reasons to hesitate before dismissing Magical Idealism immediately; to start, the centrality of aesthetics to his vision of the world we might create means that our new relation to contingency and the senses is not nearly as soulless as might be expected. Once we gain complete control over our senses, Novalis thinks, we will be able to live in a world of our

[170] Novalis, *Das Allgemeine Brouillon,* 62; Novalis, *Werke,* 3:399.

own creation. He means this in two different respects, I think. First, Novalis genuinely considers himself part of the tradition of Idealism because he believes our perception depends on our own creative activity. He happily follows Kant's suggestion that we never simply perceive something as it is; rather, we always bring something to perception, whether by synthesizing intuition and concepts in Kant's case, or in voluntarily directing the senses to an object, in Novalis's. Moreover, he follows Kant in arguing that we know something because we make it. As he writes, "We know something only insofar as we *express* it - i.e. can *make* it. The more completely and diversely we can *produce, execute* something, the better we *know* it. We know a thing perfectly when we can communicate it, arouse it everywhere and in all ways - if we can produce an individual *expression* of it in each organ."[171] (It is worth noting that "express" in this sentence is "ausdrücken" in German, with "drücken" as the same verb for "to print.") Given my analysis of the encyclopedia thus far, I think the etymological link points back to the material basis of Novalis's transcendental project. It implies that "to express" is not solely an intellectual, cognitive exercise; rather, it involves a material alteration of the world, as when thoughts are transformed into printed books. Under the influence of Fichte, however, Novalis argues that our cognitive faculties obey the commands of the will. In essence, knowing depends on making, and making depends on willing, therefore the world in which we dwell depends on the will itself.

Second, fully realized Magical Idealism would not solely be a state in which we would master and manipulate nature; rather, it would mean becoming more receptive to stimuli. The end state would be an aesthetic one, where internal and external senses enjoyed a harmonious free play with each other, without either losing their identity. Novalis, however, explicitly

[171] Novalis, *Logological Fragments II,* 79.

models his vision on the work of art, specifically the novel, where, “the voluntary appears like chance and the chance voluntary.”[172] Controlling our senses, then, is as much a creative, receptive endeavor as an effort of mastery. It involves passivity and manipulation all at once.[173]

Though the novel may model Magical Idealism brought to fruition, another literary genre, the Märchen or fairy tale, serves the much more complicated function of coaching us on how to view our current era of suffering and contingency, while also training us in how to emotionally orient ourselves toward the promised future. I want to end, then, by briefly analyzing how fairy tales serve within Novalis’s work to create an uneasy resolution between the revelatory and pathological connotations of contingency.

The link between contingency, fairy tales, and religion is relatively easy to establish. At the start of a chapter titled, “Toward a Metaphysics of Märchen,” Kristin Pfefferkorn offers a catalogue of the relationships between myths, *Märchen,* fairy tales, legends, sagas, and fables. The details are less important than her conclusion that *Märchen* “is a secularized myth, which not infrequently serves the myth as graveyard.”[174] The key feature of the *Märchen* in her reading is that it “matter-of-factly assumes and the proceeds to illustrate the sudden and inexplicable intervention of chance in the orderly affairs of man and nature.”[175] Fairy tales are propelled by chance - chance meetings of old crones in the woods, chance conversations with talking frogs and chance acts of kindness to helpless children or animals.

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[172] Cited in Beiser, *German Idealism,* 424.

[173] This is continuous with Novalis’s stance on creativity and genius, namely it requires both the cultivation of exacting skill of one’s craft and the chance breath of inspiration.

[174] Kristin Pfefferkorn, *Novalis: A Romantic’s Theory of Language and Poetry* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), 150.

[175] Ibid, 158.

We can see the centrality of chance in Novalis's own definition of fairy tales, or the *Märchen.* "A fairy tale, is really a dream picture—devoid of all coherence—An ensemble of wondrous things and happenings—a musical fantasy for instance—the harmonious effects of an Aeolian harp—Nature herself." Pausing to meditate on the structure of a fairy tale, Novalis continues, "If a story is introduced into a fairy tale, then this is already a foreign intrusion.—A series of clever, entertaining attempts, an alternating conversation, and a masquerade—are all fairy tales. We are dealing with a higher fairy tale, if without putting to flight its spirit, we introduce some element of understanding into it—(coherence, meaning—etc.)"[176] At other places, he classes Goethe's *Bildungsroman, Wilhelm Meister,* as a fairy tale of sorts.[177] Novalis makes it clear that the world of a fairy tale is not our own. It is a "dream image," a world of pure chaos where "the whole of Nature must be interwoven in a wondrous manner with the entire spirit world."[178] As such, it is absolutely opposite, though similar, to the world of history, and a "prophetic representation of a world to come." None of this should sound particularly new. As established, Novalis's ideal future is a world of wholeness, where inner and outer sense, spirit and nature, worked and communicated seamlessly in tandem.

As Pfefferkorn reads it, Novalis's fascination with the fairy tale stems in part from the way it mirrors our own dual experience of time as quantitative and qualitative. On the one hand, the fairy tale is nominally linear and its plot depends on a fairly conventional flow of time, where one event succeeds another. On the other hand, it is shot through with moments of chance, when

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[176] Novalis, *Das Allgemeine Brouillon,* 171; Novalis, *Werke,* 3:986.

[177] "87. ROMANTICISM. Absolutization—universalization—classification of the individual moment, of the individual situation etc. is the real essence of romanticizing. Cf. [Goethe's] Wilhelm Meister. Fairy Tale." Ibid, 14; 3:87.

[178] Ibid, 35; 3:234.

liminal beings disrupt the steady march of minutes and jerk the story sideways in order to briefly unveil divine meaning or order.[179] However, while Pfefferkorn reads the temporality of fairy tales as fundamentally descriptive of our inner lives, I would argue that for Novalis they are also prescriptive.

Because fairy tales portend a future world, I believe they serve a didactic purpose in Novalis's thought. They tell us something about how and what we ought to will in order to emulate most closely the world to come. The key way in which they do so is in modeling a version of synthesis effected by desire. Novalis's version of synthesis when discussing the fairy tale is very distant from the hegelian version, where internal contradiction necessarily propels a concept to incorporate its opposite meaning. Rather, synthesis is only ever arrived at indirectly. When discussing synthesis in terms of theories, Novalis suggests that a higher synthesis of two opposing theories naturally occurs when each is brought to perfection.[180] In fairy tales, two contradictory terms come together and a third results accidentally, as an unexpected result of seeking and desiring another end altogether.

This synthetic structure becomes most important for my project in a passage Novalis writes advocating the application of the synthesis found in fairy tales to our feelings toward illness. "A significant feature in many fairy tales," Novalis muses in note 653,

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179 Pfefferkorn, 158-9.

180 See entry 488: "The syncritical operation is dealt with eo ipso—thus if all the conditions for its appearance are present, then the highest comes about of itself. (Indirect construction of the synthesis). (The synthesis never appears in concrete form).
The critique is the thesis—theory and countertheory are the antitheses.— The complete development of the thesis—depends on the complete development of the theory and countertheory, and vice versa. With the final stroke of the pen, the syncritical operation—the regular development of the simple thesis—of the simple equation, is likewise perfected—to become the completely developed thesis— the developed equation." Ibid, 86; Novalis, *Werke,* 3: 488.

is that if the impossible becomes possible—then immediately something else impossible also unexpectedly becomes possible—that if man overcomes himself, he simultaneously overcomes Nature—

and a wonder occurs, granting him the opposite pleasure in the very moment the opposite displeasure becomes pleasurable. The conditions for magic, e.g., the transformation of the bear into a prince the moment the bear becomes loved etc. Likewise in the fairy tale of the two genies. Perhaps a similar transformation would take place if man began to cherish the affliction in the world—In the instant man became fond of the illness or pain, the most enticing desire would repose in his arms—imbuing him with the highest positive pleasure. Mightn't illness be the means to a higher synthesis?—The more terrible the pain, the higher the hidden indwelling pleasure. (Harmony). Perhaps every illness is the necessary beginning of an inner union of 2 beings—the necessary beginning of love. Enthusiasm for illnesses and pain. Death—an intimate union of loving beings."[181]

Fairy tales, with the religious data they offer us in their contingent encounters and the impossible synthesis always at their axis, allow us to fumble after this impossible, desirable moment when chance and necessity become indistinguishable. We are, perhaps, in our own fairy tale, if we could only see it.[182] Our chance encounters are not with crones in the woods, but with sights and sounds that strike our senses, bombarding and disrupting the order of our fevered frames. And in this story, we are not expected to redeem a frog or a bear with our love, but the suffering of our bodies. Fairy tales are the models of the impossible synthesis we must perform.

Or rather, fairy tales are the models of the impossible synthesis we must allow to happen of its own accord. Fairy tales, and really the entire discussion of synthesis, counsel patience and the restructuring of our desires. In the end, for all of the talk of magical thinking that makes our thoughts immediately affect the world and the injunctions to bring our inner and outer senses into equilibrium, the possibility of ever realizing the aims of Magical Idealism hinges on a

[181] Ibid, 120; Novalis, *Werke,* 3:653.

[182] Novalis even says as much: "It is only because of the weakness of our organs and of our contact with ourselves that we do not discover ourselves to be in a fairy world. All fairy tales are only dreams of that familiar world of home which is everywhere and nowhere. The higher powers in us, which one day will carry out our will like genies, are now muses that refresh us with sweet memories along this arduous path." Novalis, *Logological Fragments II,* 68.

remarkably tenuous thought that the final synthesis of inner and outer will happen of its own accord. In the interim, all that remains is the attempt to love the affliction of our contingent, suffering bodies in the hope pain will be snatched away and they will become lovable in truth.

VI. Conclusion

In a century filled with grandiose and slightly mad philosophical projects, Magical Idealism has the distinction of being just too strange for serious philosophical rehabilitation. Even Manfred Frank, the biggest living proponent of Novalis's philosophical significance, focuses exclusively on his critical work and never once mentions Magical Idealism. I am not saying that Magical Idealism has been neglected, exactly.[183] Yet while Schelling has spawned a new industry, with scholars claiming him for everything from environmentalism to psychoanalysis, Novalis receives at best historical treatment.[184]

This is a work about the affective and bodily experiences that make up our concept of contingency. It is about the moments when we are ambushed by feelings we can never control, touches that leave us sometimes raw, sometimes open, sometimes connected, but always aware of our fragility as unnecessary creatures who pass in and out of being. Schelling expanded the contingency of loneliness into the founding myth of God and the universe. My next chapter on Jean Améry will be equally dramatic in some respects, turning as it does to an account of torture in the Third Reich. Dramatic does not necessarily mean gratuitous, I hope; plenty of people

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[183] Frederick Beiser has a very good chapter on it in *German Idealism: the Flight from Subjectivism,* and most of the introductions to Novalis's translated works deal with it in passing.

[184] Frederick Beiser makes a similar observation, attributing the problem to Novalis's use of the term "magic." Coming from the question as a scholar of religion trained in continental philosophy, I would identify a different deterrent. Given the number of people who will quite cheerfully write about Walter Benjamin and the Kabbalah, I doubt that the occult dimensions to Novalis would frighten off all scholars. Rather, I think the problem is that those theorists who might find the religious, mystical dimension of Novalis attractive would never seriously entertain the underlying assumption that our thoughts are under our control, much less make the leap that therefore we should strive to direct our senses.

know loneliness, even if they would never attribute it to God, and plenty of people - women especially - have had their bodies violated, even if they have never seen the inside of a prison cell. Stark situations often allow us to see their quotidian contours more clearly.

Novalis offers a much more ordinary vision of contingency in the books that we read and in the bodies that betray us. We see our loved ones sicken, sadden and die, and when we write books, sometimes the rhythm of our prose keeps time to the mortality of those we love. Novalis himself would be dead within two years of abandoning *Das Allgemeine Brouillon.* Contingency radiates through his work, from the book we hold, to the hand that touches it, to the pantheistic whole we glimpse in moments of chance, and while, yes, the science he uses is obsolete, and yes, the pantheism he espouses may ring as somewhat sloppy, his thought never gets lost in itself or in unbridled abstraction. There is always *some* experience of illness or leafing through a novel that grounds his thought.

Novalis leaves us with a tenuous, if guarded, hope for a cure for our illness, but it is a cure based on outmoded medicine. In the twentieth century a new branch of science, psychology, would come along with its own therapeutic norms and flatly contradict Novalis's dream that by returning to place and contingency we could establish a new, healthier relationship with the world.

Chapter Three

Violating Touch and the Dark Space of Subjectivity

I. Introduction

What Novalis misses in his talk of grasping books, what he glosses over or fails to feel altogether, is a different, violent, violating form of touch. Like Schelling, who once dreamed of a force that might "rattle him [...] tense him," and by doing so pull him from his "most forsaken loneliness," Novalis imagines the European as sick with an excess of interiority. Her skin has hardened, leaving her insensible to an external world and withering away from lack of stimulation - Europe as a continent full of Bronte heroines. Recognizing contingency, for Novalis, means returning to the local with its irreducible abundance of *things* that exist in specific *places,* not dispersing one's self in the abstract realm of thought. It means relearning how to be touched and moved by a world that exists without us so that we might be healthy once again. It means, above all, reordering the senses to dissolve hardened boundaries between sight and touch, interior and exterior, self and world. Desperate as they are for contact, he and Schelling simply have no space for imagining the sort of disorientation and vulnerability that come from coerced, unwanted touch. That is not to say that either man is naive or dead to the darker side of contingency as touch. They understand as well as anyone the truism that to touch is always a form of connection and disconnection at once, and that the chance contact with the world they see as so basic to subjectivity cannot be unambiguously affirmed. Yet in their obliviousness to violation as a basic mode of experiencing touch and, correspondingly, contingency, they miss a different understanding of contingency centered on a dissolution of boundaries and a return to space undifferentiated by subject or objects.

It would take a darker century, marked by mental institutions, war, genocide, and torture to make the contours of that violating, vertiginous version of contingency clear. That century would produce the starkest challenge seen yet to Novalis's vision of contingency as the subject's connection to the absolute through the rootedness in the local. Through the work of Eugène Minkowski, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Jean Améry and Jean-Paul Sartre it would pose a very different set of questions: What if we can only experience the true vulnerability of contingency, of being flesh, at the moment all of the protective boundaries of place and personhood have been forcibly stripped away? What if contingency does not simply ambush us or overwhelm us? What if awareness of our contingency were so disruptive that we could only be made to recognize it by force? How would we evaluate contingency then and what might the repercussions of that experience be?

These are some of the questions I will pursue in this chapter, beginning with a reading of contingency as a form of abnormal relation to space experienced by the schizophrenic set out in Merleau-Ponty's *The Phenomenology of Perception,* before turning to Jean Améry's account of torture in order to explore the conditions under which Merleau-Ponty's vision of contingency might be felt by a healthy person. To reach those points, though, my story has to begin much earlier at Sainte-Anne's Hospital for the Insane in Paris during the the first half of the twentieth century with the work of a largely forgotten philosopher-psychologist, Eugène Minkowski.

II: The Space of Contingency

Sainte-Anne's was not a typical mental hospital in 1926, when Eugène Minkowski first began making the rounds among the mad that would become the basis of his work on schizophrenia, space and time. To begin with, it was old, even compared with its much more

famous sister hospital, the Pitié-Salpêtrière where Jean-Martin Charcot's treatment of hysteria drew a young Sigmund Freud in 1885. The first hospital built on St.-Anne's current site dates back to the thirteenth century, receiving the name of St. Anne in 1651. Up until 1788, when it was rebuilt as fully functional hospital, St. Anne's served as a working farm where the mad, denied any better treatment, could find some sort of normalcy and therapy in tilling the land. In 1863 Napoleon III designated it a mental hospital once again and assigned Baron Haussman, the man responsible for much of the redesign of Paris, to find an architect for its new grounds.[185] Despite the changes in psychiatric treatment in the century since St.-Anne's was farmed by the patients, the grounds retained much of their idyllic character. The buildings, even today, retain the sweeping stone facade of the Second Empire, while the grounds are filled with carefully manicured gardens, light-dappled veranda, and marble statues of mermen, mischievous angels, and graceful headless women.

While it may have been old when Minkowski began his peculiar mixture of phenomenology and psychopathology, it was innovative. Patients were encouraged to learn manual trades, such as carpentry, and to find grounding in the world through the work of their hands. The doctors, particularly Dr. Gaston Ferdière, encouraged artistic expression among inmates and even went so far as to stage shows of their work, turning St.-Anne's into a hub for artists affiliated with the Surrealist movement. Andre Breton, Alberto Giacometti, Marcel Duchamp, and Joan Miro all visited St.-Anne's in the 1930s and 1940s, while any number of local artists attended Ferdière's lectures on clinical psychiatry from 1934-38. When the Nazis

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[185] "Centre Hospitalier Sainte-Anne: Historique," Centre Hospitalier Sainte-Anne, accessed January 27, 2015, http:// http://www.ch-sainte-anne.fr/Etablissement/Historique. For more detail on the work and intellectual life during the era of Minkowski at Sainte-Anne's, see Edward Shorter, *A History of Psychiatry from the Era of the Asylum to the Age of Prozac* (Edison: Wiley, 1997).

staged their exhibit on “Degenerate Art” in 1937, comparing modern art with the drawings of the insane, St.-Anne’s responded with its own exhibit of over 200 patient pieces.[186] And when the Germans summarily turned all of the mentally ill patients out on the street during the occupation, a band of doctors who belonged to the Resistance continued treating their former patients in old quarry tunnels nearly a hundred feet below St.-Anne’s.

In short, St. Anne’s was hardly the stereotype of an early psychiatric institution, filled with endless identical corridors, dark rooms, straightjackets, and doctors interested, at best, in restraining patients they saw as subhuman. It is more than a little ironic, then, that it was in this singular, vibrant place, founded on centuries of cultivating the earth, designed as a monument to the state, transformed into a salon for the most daring artists of the day, that the Russian-born emigre Eugène Minkowski first noticed patients drowning in disorientation. It was there he came to the insight that would be central for Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s account of contingency nearly a decade later: sanity is constituted by a normal affective relation to place and space, and the inability to recognize place is the essence of madness.

In his Sorbonne lectures of 1949, Merleau-Ponty would call Minkowski, “the first ‘witness among us” of phenomenology in France,[187] but in 1926 he was only a new doctor, not altogether young, without much of a name for himself. Born in 1885 to a Jewish family in St. Petersburg, Russia, he began a medical degree in Poland before antisemitic repression drove him to finish his degree in Berlin. By the end of his degree he had drifted nearly entirely away from medicine to the study of philosophy, eventually moving to Zurich with his wife where they both

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[186] Lucienne Peiry, *The Origins of Outsider Art,* trans, James Frank (Paris: Flammarion, 2001), 51.

[187] Herbert Spiegelberg, *Phenomenology in Psychology and Psychiatry: A Historical Introduction,* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1972), 233.

studied psychiatry. During World War I, Minkowski served in the French army, even winning the Croix de Guerre for bravery. Eventually, after several years working in Switzerland, Minkowski found his job in Paris at St. Anne's and began to publish pioneering work on schizophrenia. Then, in 1933, deeply influenced by the work of Henri Bergson, whom he personally knew, Minkowski published *Les Temps Vécu,* or *Lived Time,* his only work to be published in English.

By most any standards, Minkowski's work was a flop. It was self-published in a limited run of one thousand copies, using a sum of money he pooled together with his father. *Les Temps Vécu,* draws heavily on Bergson's work on the experience of time and Minkowski's own 1923 article "Etude psychologique et analyse phenomenologique d'un cas de melancolie schizophrénique."[188] At the center of the work is Minkowski's observation that his schizophrenic patients lack the capacity to project a future based on their present experience. While the healthy person can relate to the future through any number of acts, such as hoping, praying, desiring, expecting, and acting morally, the schizophrenic is cut off from those basic modes of being. Even more significantly, echoing Heidegger, Minkowski suggested that schizophrenia cuts subjects off from the confrontation with death that gives shape to the activity of becoming in our lives.

Although at least one scholar has voiced the suspicion that, "Minkowski's phenomenology of time is nothing but a loan from Bergson,"[189] *Les Temps Vécu* broke from Bergson and offered genuinely innovative work in the book's second half where Minkowski

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[188] "Etude psychologique et analyse phenomenologique d'un cas de melancolie schizophrénique," in *Journal de psychologie normale et pathologique* XX (1923), 543-8. Cited in Spiegelberg, 238.

[189] Spiegelberg, 243.

offered an analysis of "lived space," or "*espace vécu.*" It is that section of analysis, with its emphasis on pathological experiences of space, that Merleau-Ponty would draw most heavily on in formulating his understanding of contingency in his 1945 work, *The Phenomenology of Perception.*

Merleau-Ponty came to Minkowski's thoughts on madness as part of a broader meditation on the phenomenology of space. We always find ourselves in space, he insists, with no possibility of stepping outside of it. The most primordial type of space takes the form of depth that is not yet anchored in the particularity of things. As Sue L. Cataldi notes in her study on Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of embodiment, "On principle, the primordial spatial level, 'on the horizon of all our perceptions,' can never be reached. As the first level, it cannot be spatially particularized, because it cannot be referred to a preceding anchoring setting '*anywhere'* to be expressly perceived."[190] It always precedes any act of perception, but is in no particular place and cannot be expressly perceived or grasped. Space serves as the groundless ground of all perception, the perceptual analogue to Schelling's will.

Our first "hold" on the world is that of "blind adherence."[191] Merleau-Ponty terms this originary grasp on the world "contingency" and suggests that while we ultimately lose sight of it as we become better and better oriented in the world, it makes meaningful our subsequent perceptions of space. It also establishes a form of "communication with the world more ancient

[190] Sue L. Cataldi, *Emotion, Depth, and Flesh: A Study of Sensitive Space: Reflections on Merleau-Ponty's Philosophy of Embodiment,* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993), 36.

[191]Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Phenomenology of Perception,* Translated by Colin Smith, (New York: Routledge Classics, 2002), 296.

than thought."[192] This blind grasp of space, however, gives way to a more directed way of moving in space as we come to inhabit it through intentional grasping. As soon as actions begin to sync up with objectives a new "sens" - a deliberately polysemous reference to the senses and sense, meaning - develops, bringing with it a definite sense of direction. As Cataldi notes, all we have to do is think about the struggle of babies to stand upright and coordinate enough with their surroundings to, for example, drink from cups in order to understand the transformation Merleau-Ponty sees in play.[193] Contingency, then, is a type of presubjective, borderless continuity between self and world that leaves us utterly open to any change in our surroundings.

Philosophically, this abandonment of blind adherence of contingency in favor of directed grasping is also a shift from a presubjective openness to the world to the subject-object distinction. Part of that process of coming to believe that personal subjectivity exists in contradistinction to objects in the world involves acquiring a different sense of depth that allows for distance between things. In discussing the normal experience of depth, Merleau-Ponty frames his theory in contrast to the traditional empiricist account. Thinkers such as Berkeley had explained away the vision of depth as breadth seen from the side, arguing that depth would disappear altogether, if we could only gain the proper perspective. For Merleau-Ponty, however, this explanation relies on a God's eye perspective of space that the spectator can never assume. It also misses the basic experience of depth. While breadth and height contrast two discrete

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[192] In full, Merleau-Ponty writes: "Nor does this blind adherence to the world, this prejudice in favor of being, occur only at the beginning of my life. It endows every subsequent perception, of space with its meaning, and it is resumed at every instant. Space and perception generally represent, at the core of the subject, the fact of his birth, the perpetual contribution of his bodily being, a communication with the world more ancient than thought. That is why they saturate consciousness and are impenetrable to reflection. The instability of levels produces not only intellectual experience of disorder, but the vital experience of giddiness and nausea, which is the awareness of our contingency and the horror with which it fills us." Ibid, 254.

[193] Cataldi, 43.

object, depth blurs and envelops objects. Depth implicates and contracts both time and space in one process. As Cataldi parses Merleau-Ponty's position, "Phenomenologically, we see (or 'our gaze holds') something (in front of us) from *here* at its place *there - at the same time.* The here and the there are contemporary in our experience."[194] Whereas a physicist, she goes on to explain, "must separate the here from the there, both spatially and temporally, in explaining how the light there at location A at time *t* strikes the eyes here at location *B* at time t_1...[For Merleau-Ponty] it is possible to see things from here over there at the *same* time because they, and we, are held (together and apart) in the thickness, in the depth, of the same 'living present.'"[195] Depth unites and separates. At the same time that my here is linked to there, I also see that there is a place where I am not.

For healthy people, our orientation in the living present involves a mixture of what Merleau-Ponty calls "clear space" and affective attachments. Clear space is a type of public, impartial space, "in which all objects are equally important and enjoy the same right to existence."[196] For the normal person, all clear space is shot through with affective commitments that make particular places significant, drawing them closer. Merleau-Ponty traces the association of feeling and direction back to "primitive man," for whom, he writes, "There is a mythical space in which directions and positions are determined by the residence in it of great affective entities."[197] It would be a mistake, however, to imagine that any society ever outgrows this affective dimension to its topography. Merleau-Ponty cites a range of examples to prove his

[194] Ibid, 42.

[195] Ibid, 43.

[196] Merleau-Ponty, *The Phenomenology of Perception,* 334.

[197]Ibid*,* 332.

point, from the common labeling of morals as either 'high' or 'low,' to the shifting perspective of the villager who, upon hearing that his capital has been invaded, suddenly feels the surroundings that had comprised his whole reality as an exile from the world. Our experience of space is always a mottled mixture of the personal and public; that is what allows us to navigate the world and experience it as meaningful.

On occasion, however, this careful combination of depth, distance, public space and personal commitments collapses, allowing something much closer to the experience of primordial depth, and its attendant experience of contingency, to reemerge. Merleau-Ponty discusses this phenomenon later in his chapter on space, when he turns to the writings of Eugene Minkowski. I mentioned earlier that Minkowski believed that schizophrenics were defined by their truncated sense of time. Merleau-Ponty, in the passages I am interested in, focuses on Minkowski's parallel observations about the schizophrenic's disordered, affective relation to space. In contrast to the healthy person, whose constantly shifting perception of depth always holds objects at a greater or lesser distance, the schizophrenic inhabits something that Merleau-Ponty alternately calls "pure depth," "dark space," or "absolute space."[198] Pure depth is felt as the confusion of the ego with the darkness that surrounds it, an impersonal space that, in Minkowski's words, "palpitates at the base of our being ... It seems to go beyond the ego, yet we feel it to be the true source of our life. Taken in itself, this depth appears to have something

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[198] Merleau-Ponty's language leaves it ambiguous as to whether or not we are supposed to read this version of depth as the primordial depth that exists at the horizon of all perception. He writes that, "This primordial depth confers upon the other its significance"(*The Phenomenology of Perception,* 310). However, as Cataldi notes, the "other" is ambiguous. Read in reference to the preceding pages, it seems to be claiming that the relational depth experienced by the living body is primordial for the unsatisfactory, mathematical version of Berkeley and the other empiricists. However, if read with reference to the discussion that follows, "other" may mark a transition reintroducing the primordial notion of "pure depth" that confers significance to the relational depth just described. For a number of reasons that seem convincing - most importantly that the description of relational depth does not satisfy his criteria for the primordial spatial level as the horizon of all perception that can never be reached - Cataldi opts for the second interpretation.

impersonal in it; however, it is, above all, when we strive to give to the world what is most personal in us that we feel our *elan* coming from the depths of our being."[199] In this space, everything is too close, depth too tangible, too much "mine."

All of us - not just schizophrenics - experience some degree of this altered relation to space at night. As Merleau-Ponty writes, drawing on Minkowski:

> Night is not an object before me; it enwraps me and infiltrates me through all my senses, stifling my recollections and almost destroying my identity. I am no longer withdrawn into my perceptual look-out from which I watch the outlines of objects moving by at a distance. Night has no outlines; it is itself in contact with me and its unity is the mystical unity of *mana*...It is pure depth without foreground or background, without surfaces and without any distance separating it from me. All space for the reflecting mind is sustained by thinking which relates its parts to each other, but in this case the thinking starts from nowhere.[200]

"The distress felt by neuropaths in the night," he concludes, "is caused by the fact that it *brings home to us our contingency,* the uncaused and tireless impulse which drives us to seek anchorage and to surmount ourselves in things, without any guarantee that we shall always find them."[201] Our sense of contingency and disorientation can be borne on the occasional dark night; the effects become devastating, though, when the schizophrenic is ejected from a common world and swallowed by dark space.

With the dissolution of distance between subject and object in dark space, the schizophrenic loses the ability to limit his awareness of touch. Merleau-Ponty's schizophrenic feels awareness everywhere, overwhelming him. He is like a man without skin, subject to touch he can neither distance himself from nor resist. At every moment, he experiences himself as

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[199] Eugène Minkowski, *Lived Time: Phenomenological and Psychopathological Studies,* trans. Nancy Metzel, (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1970), 52.

[200] Merleau-Ponty, *The Phenomenology of Perception,* 330-331.

[201] Ibid, 331, my italics.

utterly porous, his identity fluctuating as grass bends under foot, clothing rustles against his skin, shadows streak across his face. I think Merleau-Ponty can be read as deliberately referencing Roquetin in Sartre's *Nausea* when he describes this experience of contingency, particularly when he writes of contingency "as the the vital experience of giddiness and nausea, which is the awareness of our contingency and the horror with which it fills us."[202] In the pages before Roquetin recognizes contingency as the key to understanding his nausea, he writes constantly, frantically about objects growing strange in his hand and imposing themselves on his attention. He no longer feels himself as a man grasping a fork; instead, he becomes an extension of the utensil, "which now has a certain way of having itself picked up."[203] "Objects should not touch because they are not alive," he wails. "You use them, put them back in place, you live among them: they are useful, nothing more. But they touch me, it is unbearable. I am afraid of being in contact with them as though they were living beasts."[204] This is the experience of contingency for the unhealthy adult: the inability to shift our attention at will and decide what we will or will not register as touching us creates a destructive continuity between the self and the world. Put otherwise, sanity, healthy subjectivity is founded on the ability *not to feel* touch, to become only selectively aware of what brushes up against us, to relegate things into the category of objects.

Merleau-Ponty neatly sums up the stakes of maintaining a normal experience of space, which is to say, the stakes of surmounting our contingency. "What protects the sane man against delirium or hallucination is not his critical powers," he insists,

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[202] Ibid, 254.

[203] [203] Jean-Paul Sartre, *Nausea,* trans. Lloyd Alexander, (New York: New Directions, 1964), 4.

[204] Ibid, 10.

> but the structure of his space: objects remain before him, keeping their distance and, as Malebranche says of Adam, touching him only with respect. What brings about hallucinations and myths is a shrinkage in the space directly experienced, a rooting of things in our body, the overwhelming proximity of the object, the oneness of man and the world, which is, not indeed abolished, but repressed by everyday perception or objective thought.[205]

Repressing awareness of our contingency does nothing less than found the entire non-pathological experience of subjectivity.

Years later, Merleau-Ponty came to rework his language of dark and clear space into his notion of flesh, *la chair*. As one scholar neatly summarized it, flesh is, "a pre-subjective, elemental corporeality of which the world is made before 'I' am there."[206] Echoing his engagement with Minkowski, Merleau-Ponty described flesh as self-occluding, dark, voluminous, deep matter that creates perception by "folding over itself" and creating opening or hollows for perception. "My flesh and that of the world therefore involve clear zones, clearings, about which pivot their opaque zones."[207] These clear zones make possible vision of a common world; without them flesh would remain obscure, dark, invisible.[208] Human perception takes place in one such clear zone of flesh.

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[205] Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception,* 339.

[206] Cathryn Vasseleu, *Textures of Light: Vision and Touch in Irigaray, Levinas, and Merleau-Ponty,* (New York: Routledge, 1998), 60.

[207] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible,* Trans. Alphonso Lingis. (Chicago: Northwestern University Press, 1969), 148.

[208] Cataldi offers a thought experiment that might clarify what, exactly, Merleau-Ponty is talking about in his discussion of folds. "Try to see the rest of your body as 'belonging' - 'out there,' to visibility - in the field of sensibility, as a 'thing among things.' This is one mode of what I call 'opening up onto from out of perceptibility.' If you persist with this exercise, you can begin to experience the percipient or seeing 'side' of your body as a caved-in effacement of a (good) part of your (sensible) face, as a cavity filled with your vision. Now think of your face as a recessed surface, 'folded over on itself,' and notice how difficult it is to say where, precisely, your seeing starts. the seeing side seems to underlie even the region where you 'know' your eyes to be" (66).

The concept is obscure and reams have been rightly written on it. I mention it only to say that even Merleau-Ponty could not remain faithful to the darkness of his original insight. The great virtue of *The Phenomenology of Perception,* the virtue missing from Derrida, Nancy, and Merleau-Ponty's own later, related work on flesh, is its ability to imagine, for a moment, hostile touch from the recipient's end and union with the world as crushing. By the time he writes *The Invisible and the Invisible* that sensitivity dulls. Dark space becomes flesh and the impersonal space "that palpitates at the base of our being" ceases to be an object of horror an nausea. Under one reading, flesh even opens up a wonderful dimension of creatureliness that allows me to recognize my personal history as always a continuation of a prepersonal world.

All of which is to say that I think Merleau-Ponty's and Minkowski's discussion of contingency as dark space needs a different heir, with a different notion of flesh, if only because their account leaves open too many questions in its richness. Most pressingly, in framing the experience of contingency as the domain of "neuropaths," illness, and madness, Merleau-Ponty naturalizes dark space. (There is, after all, no pathology outside of the framework of an organism). In doing so, he at once renders the collapse of boundaries familiar - this repressed sense of space, like all forms of the repressed, threatens to return to all of us - and distant - in all probability, though, I am not singled out and prostrated by illness. That ambiguity of whether the experience of dark space is always pathological, always a sign of neurosis, points toward a different question: What, exactly, have Minkowski and Merleau-Ponty given us? Is it a phenomenology of madness, of schizophrenia, as it appears, or is it more generally a phenomenology of violation?

The question matters because just a few years after Minkowski published his work on schizophrenia, history would intervene, creating a new class of people who could not will who and what touched them through the brutality of a hostile Reich. Minkowski, who spent the war years helping Jewish children escape Europe, would personally come to see altogether too many other situations where things - or rather, people - do not touch with respect. Those victims pose a new set of questions. If Minkowski and Merleau-Ponty really are describing violation, if dark space can swallow us all, given enough world-historically bad luck, how does that happen? After all, Merleau-Ponty's claim should not be understated: there is no subjectivity without the repression of contingency. So given how central it is to Merleau-Ponty's account to the formation of the subject and sanity to keep objects at a proper distance, to disown our contingency, what would it take to make a person confront his or her contingency? What is the boundary between non-pathological space and dark space? Is a blow simply enough to shell the walls of selfhood and hurl us back into unity with the world, or are our defenses so strong that we need more preparation before we can be forced to recognize our contingency? In short, how thin are the walls between our selves and our contingency? To begin to answer those questions, I want to turn now to a man who described experiencing something very close to dark space through the violation of torture under the Third Reich: the Austrian-Jewish essayist, Jean Améry.

III: The Self as Home

In 1935, two years after Minkowski published published *Les Temps Vécu* to an indifferent public, Améry, or Hans Mayer, as he was called then, sat in a Vienna cafe reading his death sentence in a newspaper. That, at least, was how he recounted that afternoon in later years when he wrote, "I do not believe that I am inadmissibly projecting Auschwitz and the Final Solution

back to 1935 when I advance these thoughts today [...] To be a Jew, that meant for me, from this moment on, to be a dead man on leave, someone to be murdered, who only by chance [*nur durch Zufall*] was not yet where he properly belonged."[209] In the end, it would be Améry's own hand that would end his life in 1978, twelve years after his radio broadcasts and essays about his experience in Auschwitz lifted him out of obscurity, but for as long as he lived, Améry remained insistent that his vulnerability, his exile, the sense of statelessness within his own skin that made his death inevitable, began that day in Vienna.

What changed that day was not only Améry's sense of security or faith in the stability of the world or even his assumption that his bodily autonomy would remain unviolated, though all of those beliefs would be stripped away in the years to come. Rather, I want to suggest in the following pages that the sense of foreboding and estrangement he felt that day marked the beginning of an impoverishment in his relationship to places that ended in his torture. This confluence of place and torture is not a coincidence, I want to argue. To Améry, driven from his country, home and exile would be the defining categories of his life.[210] By reading Améry's Auschwitz essays together with contemporary literature on place by Robert Harrison and Marc Augé, I argue that home home serves such a vital function for the possibility of meaning for Améry that he constructs the narrative of his years leading up to his torture as a slow migration inward of home, ultimately rendering his body a place. Put otherwise, home *shrinks*; the circle

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[209] Jean Améry, *At the Mind's Limits: Contemplations by a Survivor on Auschwitz and Its Realities,* trans. Sidney Rosenfeld and Stella P. Rosenfeld (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1980), 86; Jean Améry, *Jenseits von Schuld und Sühne: Bewältigungsversuche eines* Überwältigten. In *Jean Améry: Werke, Band 2,* ed. Irene Heidelberger-Leonard, (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 2002), 154.

[210] Four out of his five Auschwitz essays even mention a place within the first line. "At the Mind's Limits" starts by recounting a conversation about Auschwitz, "Resentments" opens with a journey through Germany, "How Much Home Does a Person Need" depicts Améry's illegal border crossing into Belgium, and "Torture" concerns the Belgian fortress Breendonk. The only essay *not* to begin with immediate reference to a place is the final one, "On the Necessity and Impossibility of Being a Jew." In its own way, though, that essay is the most overtly concerned with place out of all of them.

of the familiar, the expected, contracts, leaving an increasingly impoverished and hostile world. This reduction of home to the boundaries of the body ultimately make possible the collapse of all sense of self in torture that mirrors the idea of dark space.

None of what I just described - the slow constriction of place, imprisonment, torture, rise to fame, or lonely death by sleeping pills in a hotel - seemed at all likely at Améry's birth in a small Austrian village in 1912. He was born into a nearly entirely assimilated Jewish family to a schoolteacher and soldier. As he would write in later years about his upbringing:

> I see myself as a boy at Christmas, plodding through a snow-covered village to midnight mass; I don't see myself in a synagogue. I hear my mother appealing to Jesus, Mary, and Joseph when a minor household misfortune occurred; I hear no adjuration of the Lord in Hebrew. The picture of my father-whom I hardly knew, since he remained where his Kaiser had sent him and his fatherland deemed him to be in the safest care - did not show me a bearded Jewish sage, but rather a Tyrolean Imperial Rifleman in the uniform of the First World War.[211]

Améry encountered antisemitism in his upbringing, but did not think much about it, either as a child or a literature and philosophy student in Vienna, even when a student at university called him a Jew and knocked a tooth out during a fight. "Yes, we are Jews, and what of it?" he answered his schoolmate matter-of-factly. "Today my tooth, tomorrow yours, and the devil take you, I thought to myself after the beating, and bore the gap proudly like an interesting dueling scar."[212] No one in the family, he would candidly explain, bothered to hide or deny their Jewish origin. He simply was a Jew, "just as one of my schoolmates was the son of a bankrupt innkeeper: when the boy was alone the financial ruin of his family may have meant next to nothing to him; when he joined us others he retreated, as we did, into resentful embarrassment."

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[211] Ibid, 83; 2: 150

[212] Ibid, 85; 2: 153

Whatever its intimations of darker events to come, Améry's upbringing sensitized him to the psychological importance of place and home. He was a man raised in rural Austria, fully steeped in folk traditions and rhetoric of the fatherland, and his love for that life shows unmistakably, if defensively, throughout his writing. Accordingly, his vision of a healthy relationship to place is tinctured with nostalgia in a way Merleau-Ponty's talk of dark and clear space simply is not. Out of that wistful remembrance of a lost home, Améry builds a larger theory where home serves three purposes: to make possible memory, to ground comprehension of human behavior, and to secure the individual from *Zufall,* chance, contingency.

Améry first addresses the role of home in memory in his essay reflecting on the inner life of the exile, "How Much Home Does a Person Need?" It is possible, of course, he reflects, that one day everything that makes up a home - the countless different objects imbued with memory and emotions, the hammer handle worn away to fit the pattern of my palm - will become interchangeable, disposable, replaceable. A new generation may come that trades in houses the way we replace outdated cars, but home will mean something different for them, provided it continues to make any sense at all. For Améry's generation, though, home requires objects that tell stories, a table whose nicks bear witness to the local craftsman who sculpted and sanded it. Home "gives access to a reality that for us consists of perception through the senses."[213] Not just history, then, but also the senses themselves will become foreign when the future arrives, bringing with it cities understood as demographic tables and homes reduced to blueprints.[214]

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[213] Ibid, 57; 2: 111

[214] For a very similar worry about the loss of place, see Robert Harrison's *Forests: The Shadow of Civilization, (*Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002).

Stated baldly, Améry's first claims about the nature of home sound either grandiose, banal, or woefully sentimental. Of course particular objects trigger memories, but how is it in any way legitimate to jump from that somewhat obvious observation to the claim that objects make memory possible? One response would be to return to my discussion of Bernard Stiegler's work in the previous chapter. Under that reading, things - all things - are prosthetics for memory. We build a world of chairs, ladles, hammers and tables in order to externalize our memory. Objects become extensions, our labor and our history realized in physical products.

While I think the link to Stiegler is a productive way of thinking about Améry's claim, I am less interested in rehashing that connection than putting his work in conversation with the work of contemporary scholar Robert Harrison on the link between place and memory. Harrison's 2003 book, *Dominion of the Dead,* belongs to a group of thinkers, largely influenced by Heidegger, worried about the erosion of place in the contemporary, globalized world.[215] The way thinkers, such as Marc Augé, Harrison, and Heidegger define place differs, but nightmare vision of what replaces place is roughly similar to Améry's: it is a the world of identical airports, stocked with McDonald's, that lead to highways marked with interchangeable billboards, that take you to buy anonymous kitsch.[216] Throughout the book, Harrison defines place by way of contrast with two opposites: space and wilderness. Space is a mathematical construct that allows for the plotting of points. For Harrison, the modern grid of city blocks presupposes an understanding of humans as inhabiting empty space that they shape according to the demands of logic, rather than in encounter with a world. Wilderness, by contrast, is placeless, not because

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[215] See, in particular, Martin Heidegger, "Building, Dwelling, Thinking" in *Poetry, Language, Thought,* trans. Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper Perennial Classics, 2013), 141-160.

[216] Marc Augé**,** *Non-Places: An Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity,* trans. John Howe (New York: Verso Books, 1995).

nature has been eradicated by human mastery, but because there it lacks all signs of human presence. Early on, he asserts, "A place is defined by its boundaries, its intrinsic limits, its distinctly local 'here' that remains fixed in space even as it perdures in time... Places are located in nature, yet they also have human foundations."[217]

As a way of explaining what he means by place, Harrison cites a Wallace Stevens poem called "Anecdote of the Jar." "I place a jar in Tennessee,/ And round it was, upon a hill./ It made slovenly wilderness/ Surround that hill./ The wilderness rose up to it,/ And sprawled around, no longer wild."[218] The jar, Harrison suggests, provides a "measure of human containment," around which the wilderness converges. Yet a place does not just consist of boundaries or signs of human presence. That is what a place *needs,* but what it is, in a more fundamental sense, "is where time, in its human modes, takes place."[219] And this human mode is that of mortality.

In insisting on this, Harrison draws from Vico's *The New Science,* specifically the passages where he describes the three defining features of human life as belief in Providence, the institution of marriage, and burial of the dead. The earliest inhabitants of the earth - giants, in Vico's narrative - lived in natural time, an endless cycle of birth and death. Gradually, though, the most pious began to bury their dead and mark their graves.[220] As the burial posts multiplied, humans began to attend more closely to their genealogies, in the process creating history, human time, and property. Graves created the first places; they tamed the wilderness, like Stevens's jar, and carved out a narrative or linear progression from the endlessness of wilderness. He even

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[217] Robert Pogue Harrison, *The Dominion of the Dead,* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 18.

[218] Ibid, 18.

[219] Ibid, 19..

[220] Giambattista Vico, *The First New Science,* Trans Leon Pompa, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 90.

explicitly references the link between the home and the dead in antiquity when he claims that the hearth, in its original form, was the sacred fire on the altar of the dead. Citing the argument by Fustel de Coulanges that the house had its origins in ancestor worship, Harrison writes, "The ancient house was first and foremost an institution by which, or *in* which, the dead were lodged and preserved in their being."[221] The descendants, the inhabitants of the house, thought of the hearth as the coals of the sacred fire on the altar, and figured the house's sheltering walls not as protection from the elements, but, rather, as protection *by* their ancestors. "A house, in sum, was a place where two realms - one under and the other on the earth - interpenetrated each other."[222] In Harrison's account, then, the private realm of the home is the quintessentially historical one, as the site where the dead are buried.

It is useful to think of Améry in conjunction with Harrison because Harrison illuminates both the presuppositions and blind spots of Améry, in the process giving a firmer sense of what a place is than Améry ever does. In many ways, Améry anticipates Harrison's concerns. He loathes and distrusts the slow erosion of place, marked by memory, and its replacement with the abstract, mathematical space where citizens "settle at topographical points but are subject to eviction anyway," and who primarily relate to a city through "the statistical tables that anticipate demographic development."[223] He acknowledges the grounding presence of the dead when he insists on behalf of his generation that, "We need a house of which we know who lived in it before us."[224] Because of his removal from home, however, Améry remains blind to the uncanny

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[221] Harrison, 38.

[222] Harrison, 39

[223] Améry, 57;

[224] Ibid, 57; 2: 111

dimension of a home where the living and the dead "interpenetrate" each other. Remarkably, given that Améry and Freud overlapped, Améry never even mentions the idea of the *unheimlich,* the uncanny dimension that underpins the home. After all, as work by Anthony Vidler has shown, the *heimlich* and the *unheimlich* are inseparable in origin, with the concept of the *heimlich,* the homely, encompassing the cozy, the safe, the comfortable, *and* the brutal, the hidden cruelties of a home.[225]

Améry's blindness to the uncanny dimension of home, and to the possibility of darkness within it, lead him to assign a second function to home. As he would later write in an essay reflecting on exile, "Reduced to the positive psychological content of the idea, home is *security."*[226] Specifically, home offers the security of a framework for knowledge. To be sure, that framework can be stultifying. "I buy a newspaper and am 'a man who buys a newspaper' [*ein Mann der eine Zeitung kauft*]," Améry reflects. "The act does not differ from the image through which I anticipated it, and I hardly differentiate myself personally from the millions who performed it before me. Because my imagination did not suffice to entirely capture such an event? No, rather because even in direct experience everyday reality is nothing but codified abstraction. Only in rare moments of life do we truly stand face to face with the event and, with it, reality."[227] Exile, at least to some degree, begins to harry the foreigner out of his neat web of abstractions. Bodies, words, gestures, were suddenly uprooted from all context, reduced to "sensory reality, but not interpretable signs."[228] He relates one story from his first

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[225] See Anthony Vidler, *The Architectural Uncanny: Essays in the Modern Unhomely* (Boston: MIT Press, 1994), 24.

[226] Améry, 46; 2: 94.

[227] Ibid, 26; 2: 63.

[228] Ibid, 47; 2: 96.

days in Belgium of sitting across a table from a large, coarsely-built Flemish man, sharing a beer, and feeling utterly incapable of telling whether his companion was a respectable bourgeois citizen or a thug about to punch him in the face and rape his wife. Every interaction suddenly had become inscrutable.

This inscrutability and perilousness of exile pushes Améry to his third realization: home is opposed to chance. "One feels secure, however, where no chance occurrence [*Ungefähres*] is to be expected, nothing completely strange [*ganz und gar Fremdes*] to be feared. To live in one's homeland means that what is already known to us occurs before our eyes again and again, in slight variants."[229] While a life spent entirely at home can be stifling and provincial, homelessness bewilders. With this discussion of home, the content of chance or contingency becomes clearer. If Améry were claiming that the unexpected, inexplicable, or the "chance occurrence" could never occur in one's native land, he would be talking utter nonsense. Of course the unexpected and unnecessary come to pass at home. Rather, when Améry references chance he has something much closer to my project in mind, namely a certain affective orientation toward the unnecessary and unexpected that makes it show up as such. Confrontation with chance or the unexpected is attended by some sort of spiritual disequilibrium, and thus inheres more in a mode of knowledge than in an actual event. In shifting the conversation from logical to psychological questions, the binary transforms from that between contingency and necessity into that between contingency and security, contingency and home. Contingency, then, is in some way tied to a certain experience of place and will only fully reveal itself at the moment home disappears altogether for Améry.

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[229] Ibid, 47; 2: 96.

Given the sheer range of meanings home has for Améry, however, its different functions need to be peeled away before he is fully confronted with his own contingency. His sense of security first began to erode the day the Nuremberg Laws "made me formally and beyond any question a Jew," and thus "quarry of Death."[230] His formal exile to Belgium in 1938 uprooted him permanently from the objects that reminded him of his history and the interpretive framework that made his interactions with other people comprehensible. All of that is true, even obviously so, but even then the language he uses to describe home does not disappear fully until his torture; rather, the language of place gets redirected toward his body. When all other places are shut off from him, his body becomes a place.

Let me step back for a moment and ask what I am claiming. What would it even mean to claim that the body is a place - not that it inhabits places or is *like* a place, but *is* a place? Like Harrison, Stevens, and Casey, the the body would need some sort of boundary that marked the passage of mortal time. I contend it has one: the skin. This thought has a certain intuitive logic. As in English, German has a number of colloquial phrases tying the skin to home, such as "to feel at home in one's skin," with eyes as "the window of one's soul," and so on.[231] Likewise, in a very basic sense our skin is record of our past, showing signs of age and damage; it wrinkles,

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[230] Ibid, 85; 2: 153.

[231] For a more complete discussion, see Claudia Benthien, *Haut: Literaturgeschichte, Körperbilder, Grenzdiskurse, (*Reinbeck bei Hamburg: Rowohlt Taschenbuch Verlag, 1999), Chapter 2.

spots, thins, tans, burns, scars, and stretches.[232] Moreover, biologically, the skin gives us over to life and to relation in the first moments of birth. As Ashley Montagu notes in his review of the science of touching, the pressure on the fetus's skin as the mother's contractions force it out stimulate the respiratory system, making possible the transition into postnatal life, while the level of caressing immediately after birth could be correlated to the relative anxiety of the child in later life, with less contact associated with more emotional disturbance.[233] These are biological facts that nonetheless underly the construction of the social.

For Améry, even after home has been stripped away through exile, the unviolated, intact skin still ties him to a social world through "the expectation of help." So long as I can feel on my skin what I want, or, at any rate, objectify it such that I do not feel identical with it, I can maintain "the expectation of help." "The expectation of help," he writes, "the certainty of help, belongs to the fundamental experiences of men and also to animals. The expectation of help is even a constitutive element of the psyche."[234] The child who falls instinctively expects the mother to run to his aid, just as wounded soldiers awaits the sirens of the red cross.[235] The full, normal range of temporality, for Améry, is associated with the expectation of help. As long as I

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[232] There is also another way of understanding the skin's connection to place, namely, as a vessel that surrounds and contains place. I am thinking here of Edward Casey's discussion in *The Fate of Place* of Aristotle's earliest understanding of place as similar to 'being in a vessel' (54). What Aristotle meant by the analogy, as Edward Casey explains, was, 'As a vessel, such as a glass or a jug, surrounds it content – say air or water – so place surrounds the body or group of bodies within it" (55). Place, while surrounding the object it contains, remains distinct from it. Yet the analogy is imperfect because, unlike an actual vessel, places cannot move. Consequently, Aristotle expanded his definition to 'the first unchangeable limit (*peras*) of that which surrounds,' or, alternately, 'the inner surface of the innermost unmoved container of a body' (56). Place, then, creates boundaries and limits, not by the imposition of human order as something receptive, passively waiting to be filled with an object, but, rather, as something actively circumambient (55). This understanding of place as containing and surrounding bodies would fit well with moments when Améry's language positions skin more as a border or protector, rather than identical self. For example, when he says, "My skin surface shields me against the external world" (28)

[233] Ashley Montagu, *Touching: The Human Significance of Skin,* (New York: Harper & Row, 1986), 60-5.

[234] Améry, 28; 2: 67.

[235] ibid, 28; 2: 67

can expect at every moment someone will come to my aid, I remain connected to a past filled with loved ones and friends, as well as to a future from where help arrives. In that sense, Améry echoes Minkowski's point about the ability to project forward into time defining a normal psychic life. The inviolate skin belongs to the world of mothers, friends, siblings, and lovers, but also to ambulances, pretty Red Cross nurses, and the wounds of war. That is to say it belongs to biology, institutions, relations, history, and a world. It is, in some non-trivial way, *historical*.

Thus, the skin acts as a boundary, preserving the individual's history, sovereignty, and even faith in social relations. As Améry writes, "the certainty that by reason of written or unwritten social contracts the other person will spare me - more precisely that he will respect my physical, and with it also my metaphysical, being. The boundaries of my body are also the boundaries of myself. My skin surface shields me against the external world. If I am to have trust, I must feel on it only what I *want* to feel."[236]

Now, even by Améry's own account, skin is only really the boundary of the self in exceptional moments. He states quite explicitly that in most circumstances when struck he can dissociate from his body or in striking back make the attack a reciprocal one. As he says, "I can expand in urgent self-defense, objectify my corporeality, restore the trust in my continued existence."[237] Améry knows this. In his final essay of this collection, "On the Necessity and Impossibility of Being a Jew," he recounts a moment in Auschwitz when a Polish guard beat him for some trifle. In a moment of defiant clarity, he struck him back. "That it was I, the physically much weaker man, who succumbed and was woefully thrashed, meant nothing to me," he writes. "Painfully beaten, I was satisfied with myself.... because I had grasped well that there are

[236] Ibid. 28; 2: 67

[237] Ibid, 28; 2: 67

situations in life in which our body is our entire self and our entire fate."[238] This memory clearly figures as a revelation of sorts in Améry's narrative, one that breaks from the intellectual knowledge that the body and self belong together in a way reminiscent of his earlier remarks on language.

Yet sometimes, in the moment of total helplessness, objectification is no longer possible and the equation of self with body opens the way for the overwhelming annihilation of the sense of self. For Sartre's Roquetin that moment came when he began to feel all of the little lifeless things touching *him,* rather than just his body; for Améry it arrived with the first blow of the Gestapo after his 1943 arrest for distributing subversive pamphlets in Belgium. Handcuffed, unable to resist, he would feel the first blow as a violation, "a rape, a sexual act without consent" and, as such, "a physical overwhelming by the other [that] becomes an existential consummation of destruction altogether."[239] The violating touch of torture, I will argue in the next section, is what finally destroyed Améry's sense of home and place, propelling him into a something very similar to Merleau-Ponty's notion of dark space by transforming his body into what Améry would call *Fleisch,* flesh.

IV: *Verfleischlichung,* or Living in Dark Space

On July 23, 1943, a Gestapo officer named Praust bound Améry's hands behind his back, slid the shackles over a long, broad hook at the end of a chain, and hoisted him up until he hung suspended a meter above the floor. For a few minutes Praust beat him with a horsewhip, demanding names and addresses of his comrades in the Belgian Resistance, while Améry struggled to hold himself aloft through strength alone. Then:

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[238] Ibid, 90-1; 2: 162.

[239] Ibid. 28; 2: 67.

> there was a crackling and splintering in my shoulders that my body has not forgotten until this hour. The balls sprang from their sockets. My own body weight caused luxation; I fell into a void and now hung from my dislocated arms, which had been torn high from behind and were now twisted over my head. Torture, from the latin *torquere,* to twist - what a visual instruction in etymology![240]

With that Mayer claimed, reflecting from a distance of twenty years and the safety of his French pseudonym, Jean Améry, the moment of torture was complete; Praust had effected the "transformation of the person into flesh [*Verfleischlichung*]."[241] This experience would linger with Améry until his suicide in 1977, but not as a normal memory. Rather, it created a fundamentally different relationship to the body, permanently exiling the victim into this state of flesh. "If from the experience of torture any knowledge at all remains that goes beyond the plain nightmarish," he muses toward the end of the essay, "it is that of a great amazement [*einer großen Verwunderung*] and a foreignness in the world that cannot be compensated by any sort of subsequent human communication."[242]

I began this chapter with an explication of Merleau-Ponty's vision of contingency experienced through a dark space, where the self is overwhelmed by touch. Uncertain whether dark space was meant to be strictly pathological or a possibility open to us all, I asked whether dark space is meant to provide a broader phenomenology of violation and what it would take for a non-schizophrenic to come to inhabit that space of alienation. Améry's work suggested that anyone, in theory, could be driven to experience something like dark space, provided his or her normal sense of place could be stripped away in preparation by politics, exile, and the gradual contraction of home to the boundaries of one's skin. The fall is the final collapse of place. It is a

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[240] Ibid, 32: 2: 73.

[241] Ibid, 33; 2: 74.

[242] Ibid, 39; 2: 84.

fall, above all, into space, but also into language, as his tortured body twists; into flesh, as his sense of self vanishes, blotted out by his body; into time, as his past recedes into the moment of purely present pain; into wonder, as he gropes his face in the aftermath, astonished at having been at once groundless and still there; and into contingency, in this fall that gives him up to *Zufall,* chance*,* as the meaning he formerly found from a firm footing in place definitively recedes, leaving him dangling, vulnerable, and incapable of making sense of or predicting the world once exiled from the stability of a familiar home.

Even as Améry's work suggests similarities with Merleau-Ponty's vision of dark space, as I will describe in the pages that follow, differences remain. Appropriately enough, one of the key differences concerns a concept that means very different things for each man: flesh. While Merleau-Ponty keeps the discussion of violation purely in spatial terms, Améry signals an abrupt change in categories by describing his feelings in the aftermath of torture in terms of becoming flesh, or "incarnation," with all of the simultaneously animalistic and Christian resonances that entails. To understand violation on Améry's own terms, I want to spend the last few pages exploring his concept of *Verfleischlichung* as an experience of wonder, with its own implications for time and language, before tying it back to Merleau-Ponty's dark space.

Verfleischlichung, the transformation from man to meat, begins with the first blow. With the first blow, the expectation of help that Améry found so crucial to the normal psychic functioning of humans and animals collapses. Everything the prisoner had anticipated as an abstract possibility - torture, death - suddenly becomes a present certainty. "They are permitted to punch me in the face, the victim feels in numb surprise and concludes in just as numb certainty: they will do with me what they want. Whoever would rush to the prisoner's aid - a

wife, a mother, a brother, a friend - he won't get this far."[243] When that boundary is violated, the past and all of its relationships that shaped it recede to insignificance and a new temporality is introduced - one first of numb expectation and then of no expectation at all. His entire history, his identity shaped by family, friends, loved ones, and commitments recede to insignificance.

Yet when Améry speaks of *Verfleischlichung* as "the consummation of destruction," he means more than just the annihilation of the expectation of help. To become flesh, it is not enough to look at one's past as another, unreachable world; the world itself needs to be destroyed in pain. Drawing on Bataille's work on the Marquis de Sade, Améry describes torture as the "the total inversion of the social world," where the torturer seeks to "nullify this world [...] by negating his fellow man" because "[...] he wants to realize his own total sovereignty."[244] To be sure, Améry admits, a world consisting entirely of torture, death and destruction cannot sustain itself. The torturer, however, does not want to completely nullify the world; he wants to have the *power* to nullify the world. It is enough that, "A slight pressure by the tool-wielding hand is enough to turn the other - along with his head, in which are perhaps stored Kant and Hegel, and all nine symphonies, and the World as Will and Representation - into a shrilly squealing piglet at slaughter."[245] Mastery, true mastery, exists in the ability to torture and to choose when to stop torturing. Under that reading, the torturer dominates the prisoner by inflicting pain without being caught up in the dynamic of torture or dependent on the torture victim to reflect back his own mastery. When he has finished, Améry drily notes, "He himself can then smoke a cigarette or sit

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[243] Ibid, 27; 2: 67.

[244] Ibid, 35; 2: 77.

[245] Ibid, 35; 2: 77.

down to breakfast or, if he has the desire, have a look in at the World as Will and Representation."[246]

To understand Améry's insistence on the complete mastery of the torturer and the strange timelessness of flesh, it is worth looking *Verfleischlichung* in conjunction with Sartre's description of sadism in Sartre's *Being and Nothingness.* The same year that Améry hung suspended from his shattered shoulders in the fortress of Breendonk, Jean-Paul Sartre published in Paris *Being and Nothingness.* Améry knew Sartre's work and admired it, particularly his small treatise on anti-Semitism. In the years before his radio broadcasts of his Auschwitz essays made him famous, Améry even sought to interview Sartre and was crushed to receive a polite, impersonal note from his secretary declining due to lack of time.[247]

So Améry certainly read Sartre's most significant work and the phenomenology of sadism that emerges three-fourths of the way through, even if his explicit reference points in "Die Tortur" were to Bataille and Hegel. It starts with a discussion of desire, essentially an aimless, troubled longing, significant for Sartre as one of the only moments where consciousness ceases its endless efforts to escape its own facticity through transcendence. So long as the lover dwells in his own flesh, caressing the other in such a way as to incarnate him or her as flesh in turn, this desire can be sustained. Flesh here is not the same as the active body, which is always transcending itself as it projects itself toward new possibilities; rather, it is profoundly passive, appearing as, "the pure contingency of presence."[248] Flesh is *there* in the way the body normally

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[246] Ibid, 35; 2: 77.

[247] Cited in Irène Heidelberger-Leonard, *The Philosopher of Auschwitz: Jean Améry and Living with the Holocaust,* (New York: I.B. Tauris, 2010), 77-8.

[248] Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness,* trans. Hazel E. Barnes (New York: Washington Square Press, 1993), 506.

is not. However, this “double incarnation” of each as flesh invariably fails in the standard heterosexual encounter at the moment of penetration, because the penetrating partner seizes hold of the other once again as an instrument. Desire clarifies, settling on a particular object - an orgasm - and so loses the factical, troubled, undirected quality of flesh.

The sadist begins with this failure. He longs to transform the other into flesh, to “strip the Other of the acts which hide him,” and thus grasp hold of his freedom as body, but without becoming flesh himself. The only way to accomplish this is to use the Other’s own body as an instrument for incarnating the Other as flesh, by means of pain. Yet this is ultimately impossible, in part because it is always the sufferer’s free choice to declare himself pure flesh, to submit, making the sadist’s domination ultimately empty. The other issue is the inherent conflict between flesh and instrumentality. So long as the sufferer’s body is being used as an instrument, it always points beyond itself to other possibilities in the future. It is not yet the “pure contingency of presence.” Yet, there is a different problem if the sadist successfully reduces the other to flesh.

> When the incarnation is achieved, when I have indeed before me a panting body, then I no longer know how to utilize this flesh. No goal can be assigned to it because I have effected the appearance of its absolute contingency. It is *there*, and it is there *for nothing*. As such, I cannot get hold of it as flesh; I cannot integrate it into the complex system of instrumentality without its materiality as flesh, its ‘fleshiness’ immediately escaping me. I can only remain before it in a state of contemplative astonishment or else incarnate myself in turn and allow myself again to be troubled, so as to place myself once more on the level where flesh is revealed to flesh in its entire fleshiness.[249]

[249] Ibid, 525.

Mastery is ultimately unachievable. Either the sadist is in the process of breaking his victim but is still defied by some hint of spirit that points beyond the pure presence of flesh into the future, or he has succeeded in breaking his victim, leaving him with a heap of useless, senseless flesh.[250]

Parallels exist between Sartre's vision of incarnation, of a body rendered flesh and thus unfit for instrumental use, and Améry's concept of *Verfleischlichung.* Sartre makes explicit the link between flesh, contingency, and temporality that Améry only alludes to through wordplay. If place is defined by boundaries that protect and secure the body from chance and root an individual in the past, Améry's drop into a void that renders him pure, quivering present flesh is also a fall into the insecurity of *Zufall,* contingency, and a fall into a present pain with no future possible. Like Sartre, then, Améry breaks from the model that can only find the groundlessness of contingency in past narratives. For both, the real recognition of contingency comes in the present completely stripped of any expectation or projection into the future. It is not in the past we recognize the indeterminacy of events; it is in the present when pain cuts us off from any past experiences that would allow us to guess or project into the future.

For all of those similarities and his respect for Sartre, though, I take it to be a deliberate move on Améry's part to draw on Bataille rather than Sartre. As someone who was actually tortured, rather than simply someone who imagined it, Améry has no patience for Sartre's suggestion that the sadist's mastery can never be fully realized. He is simply not interested in

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[250] Merleau-Ponty came to criticize this insistence on binaries that characterized so much of Sartre's work, interestingly for lacking a sense of depth. "The problem of negativity is the problem of depth," Merleau-Ponty jots down in his working notes to *The Visible and the Invisible.* Continuing, he muses, "Sartre speaks of a world that is not vertical, but in itself, that is, flat, and for a nothingness that is an absolute abyss. In the end, for him depth does not exist, because it is bottomless" (237). For more on Merleau-Ponty's disagreements with Sartre, specifically regarding the body, see Martin C. Dillon, "Sartre on the Phenomenal Body and Merleau-Ponty's Critique," in *The Debate Between Sartre and Merleau-Ponty,* edited by Jon Stewart, 121 -143. (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1998). *See also* Monika Langer, "Sartre and Merleau-Ponty: A Reappraisal" in in *The Debate Between Sartre and Merleau-Ponty,* edited by Jon Stewart, 93 -120. (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1998).

Sartre's curiously disembodied belief that the torture victim can choose when to submit and become flesh. Rather, Améry is much more interested in the circumstances under which a person becomes flesh and the ramifications of that transformation.

That difference in emphasis accounts for a subtle disparity between the role of wonder or "contemplative astonishment" in each man's thought. Améry's account of wonder grows directly out of his emphasis on the legacy of torture. Sartre frames contemplative astonishment as a choice for the sadist; he can choose to stare in wonder at the flesh incarnated before him, or to incarnate himself in turn. In that sense, wonder catches him off guard but can always be disavowed. Améry echoes that language of wonder when he writes of the torture victim's, "*großen Verwunderung*" upon emerging from his torment and marveling that even after torture, "you still have a forehead that you can stroke with your shackled hands, an eye that can be opened and closed, a mouth that would show the usual lines if you could see it now in a mirror, he still exists."[251] For Améry, though, wonder imposes itself; no other possibility presents itself to the victim faced with contingency. Wonder overpowers him.

We can see Améry's passivity in the face of wonder as part of a deliberate play on the link between *Verwunderung* and *Wund* in German. In some respects, he anticipates Mary-Jane Rubenstein's book, *Strange Wonder: The Closing of Metaphysics and the Opening of Awe.* Wonder, for her, begins with wounds. Early on in the text, she cites an etymological connection between wonder, which derives from the Old English term *wundor,* and its German cognates *Wunder* but also *Wund,* or gash, wound.[252] She then lists a number of obsolete "phraseological

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[251] Améry, 39; 2: 84.

[252] Mary-Jane Rubenstein, *Strange Wonder: The Closure of Metaphysics and the Opening of Awe* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 9.

uses," including "dreadfully, horribly, terribly." "Wonder, then," she concludes, "is inherently ambivalent." What follows is her analysis of the role of wonder as a mode of attentiveness to "the stubborn inscrutability of the everyday," drawn in contrast to curiosity and puzzlement, which subside once the unknown is discovered and its causes or conditions brought to light.[253] While "the wound of wonder," as she puts it, can never remain permanently open, it plays a necessary ethical and philosophical role by unsettling pretensions to mastery. Wondering before the "groundlessness of things" creates the condition for the possibility of philosophy itself, even as the modern thinker seeks to shut it down in order to secure his or her thought.

Wonder certainly has for Améry all of the connotations Rubenstein draws out - dread, horror, awe, overwhelming force - but Améry's version of wonder also points toward a demand Améry seems to feel to find a new way of talking about wonder, wound and contingency that is only superficially compatible with Rubenstein's work. To be clear: nothing Rubenstein says conflicts with Améry's account. Like her, he marvels at the everyday; he is awed by the "stubborn inscrutability" of his hands, his forehead; he experiences wonder at the moment his world is rent open. The difference comes down to the spirit in which they note the link between wonder and wounds. For Améry, Rubenstein's account can only exist as part of "the net of codified abstractions" referenced before. The wounds are metaphysical and metaphorical for wonder, they hold open at best the possibility of philosophy, but they never bleed, they never fester, they never ooze. They are words - violent words, graphic words, strong words - but in the end curiously insubstantial words that refer only to other words, other images, other abstractions, whatever their aspirations. So far as my research can tell, Améry never addresses Saussurean

[253] Ibid, 7.

linguistics that came to dominate so much of poststructuralism, where words gain meaning by way of reference to other words, but referents, things, lie beyond the system. Yet I think it is possible to understand Améry's remark about codified abstractions as pushing toward a similar point about how language ordinarily functions. Words never really sync up with things most of the time; we comprehend them but we never really *apprehend* them on a deep affective level.

Yet sometimes words flash up, made meaningful by chance or wonder or sheer, bloody bad luck. In those moments, the root of torture in "torquere," to twist, syncs up with a falling, cracking body. The closest analogue to Améry's treatment of language here is Walter Benjamin's thoughts on history. For Benjamin history largely proceeds in a monotonous, mythic time, where like succeeds like and nothing new ever arrives or is really experienced as present. Yet sometimes, that dull, monotonous picture of time is punctured by curiously vivid echoes of the past. As he famously writes, "The true picture of the past flits by. The past can be seen only as an image which flashes up at the instant it can be recognized and is never seen again."[254] For Améry language functions in much the same way. Most of the time, we speak of wonder as a wound because it saps systematic thought of energy or undermines grand metaphysical palaces, but sometimes we really, truly recognize wonder as a wound because someone is staring at the blood welling up around crusted and raw manacled hands in disbelief. The body punches through abstraction in the same way the ideals of Rome punched through the consciousness of Robespierre and became live once again in the French Revolution.

That heightened sense of awareness, of apprehension, is the paltry prize Améry gets from his years of exile, torture, displacement, homelessness. Uprooted from the anesthetizing security

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[254] Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History" in *Illuminations,* trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken, 1969), 255.

of home, where everything is a repetition of the same and thoughts drift by as comfortable abstractions, Améry reinvents his relationship to language. He becomes open to fragility, insecurity, contingency; he learns to see objects and tie words to his body; to live in a state of alienated wonder. Of course, unlike Benjamin or Rubenstein, Améry has no revolutionary hopes for his moments of clear perception. This is to be expected. If academics actually meant that wonder was rooted in wounds that bled, or contingency was a sense of fragility imposed when one person violently touches - horsewhips - another, they would never speak so glibly about the need to remain open to the destructiveness of wonder. Rather, they would have to actually take seriously the idea that efforts to suture them close are a wholly understandable response. When a real wound opens and refuses to close, you don't start writing *Being and Time*; you die.

Or in Améry's case, you linger, estranged from your body until you eventually kill yourself. In the years that passed after his torture, he never regained the security of place and home that he found so central for security. You can see that aftermath most clearly in the opening pages of "Torture." While in the years leading up to his torture he spoke of himself in constant reference to the *gemütlichkeit* of home, the security and comprehensibility that comes with belonging to a land, in the opening pages of "Torture" he reflects back on his experience by setting up a rhetorical symmetry between his fragile, now fleshy body and the space of his torture. If becoming flesh meant catapulting from one type of space - that is, place - into another, darker space, it also meant transforming the place of his imprisonment into a type of body in turn. All of his language surrounding the fortress Breendonk, in short, marks it as a place made flesh.

The piece begins years after the fact. “Whoever visits Belgium as a tourist,” it opens in a conversational tone, “may perhaps chance upon Fort Breendonk, which lies halfway between Brussels and Antwerp.”[255] After introducing his imaginary tourist, Améry turns to Breendonk’s history, listing its various uses: a fort during WWI, headquarters of King Leopold during the brief Belgian resistance to the Nazis during 1940, “a kind of small concentration camp” under German occupation. “Today,” the first paragraph concludes, “it is a Belgian National Museum,” untouched from the days Améry was interred in it, complete with a faded picture of Himmler on its wall and a red and black Nazi flag on the table.

One paragraph is enough to establish the traits of flesh that by now are so familiar. To start, he links the fortress to homelessness and the presence of chance through the figure of the tourist. In truth, the English translation actually undersells the strength of that connection. While “to chance upon” transforms chance into an action, a verb tied to the subject, the tourist, in German chance is a noun. In its entirety the sentence runs, “Wer als Tourist Belgien besucht, den mag vielleicht ein Zufallsweg nach dem halbsweg zwischen Brüssels und Antwerpen gelegenen Fort Breendonk führen.” “To chance upon,” then, really is, “ein Zufallsweg ... führen,” to follow a path of chance or, perhaps, contingency. Chance does not lead to a place or occur within a place; rather, it *is* a place, “ein Zufallsweg.” But “ein Zufallsweg” is not a place in the way a home or a farm might be in certain readings. It neither surrounds, nor protects, nor defines a fixed, unmoving spot. Rather, it propels the traveler always further away from any stable reference point. And who is the traveler if not the person away from the familiarity of home?

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[255] Améry, 21; 2: 55.

This tourist in a strange land finds himself in a strange time - the time of a museum. A museum, from one perspective, is a place from the past sticking out in time, a memorial to something in danger of being lost. From another, though, a museum is a place that has never left the present of whatever event marks it, in the case the moment of torture that took place within it. Like the fleshy body, the fortress remains suspended in the present of torture, cut off from the future that might bring with it a new meaning or identity, and severed from the past relationships that had once defined it.

"Whoever was tortured, stays tortured,"[256] Améry states. "Whoever has succumbed to torture can no longer feel at home in the world."[257] In some sense, Améry remained that museum, frozen in time, shuttled about on a *Zufallsweg,* until he died. That inescapability of flesh, that exile from the clear space of public life, is what ultimately marks the difference between Merleau-Ponty, Minkowski and Améry. To a large degree, Améry can be read as agreeing with Merleau-Ponty. It does seem at points as if the difference between place or home and flesh are ones of degree. All of the essential elements of flesh - its lack of boundaries, its instability, its openness to chance - are prefigured in his discussion of exile and homelessness, even if his body remains a type of sanctuary. Nonetheless, even if we do read place and flesh existing on a continuum, in Améry they are historically conditioned in a way they are not in Merleau-Ponty. Merleau-Ponty's pure depth comes out of the vocabulary of illness, while Améry's comes from the Third Reich.

That historicity of flesh is what traps Améry in dark space at the same time he superficially moves beyond it. The schizophrenic can be treated and her illness managed.

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[256] Ibid, 34; 2: 75.

[257] Ibid, 40; 2: 85.

Améry, though, maintained a sense of double consciousness regarding his fleshiness until he died. He was at once trapped in his cell at Breendonk and aware that the world had moved beyond that moment, that space. He was, as he once remarked, "nail[ed] [...] onto the cross of his ruined past" [258] by his resentments, demanding absurdly, impossibly that the past be made right again. I want to leave Améry here, at once a corrective and a question mark to Minkowski's and Merleau-Ponty's schizophrenic left enshrouded in the dark, brought home to his "contingency, the uncaused and tireless impulse which drives us to seek anchorage and to surmount ourselves in things, without any guarantee that we shall always find them."

V. Conclusion

Wonder, for Améry, comes only after the world-destroying moment of wounding. Which is to say that wonder, like incarnation, arrives from a long, vexed history of what it means to touch and to be touched that, in this moment, came down to a question of what Améry understood by place. The devastation of the wound had to be prepared for by stripping away, bit by bit, the sheltering, stabilizing presence of place, until its only remaining vestige was concentrated in the boundaries of the skin. Only at the moment could the violating touch thrust Améry permanently from the common world of place into the dark space of flesh and contingency.

Am I convinced that Améry represents the only experience of wonder, or that the space of wonder and the space of contingency will, in the end, always turn out to be the same? Not at all. Wonder seems to be only one moment in the experience of contingency, and contingency as only one experience of a very particular type of space. But there is a certain logic in Améry's appeal

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[258] Ibid, 68; 2: 128.

to place and space throughout his account. The moment of wonder and the recognition of contingency for Améry involved the dissolution of what Arendt called a world. All of the supporting narratives, beliefs, and relationships that function to make the everyday the invisible backdrop to our lives had to be suspended, in Rubenstein's account, or destroyed in Améry's, to make visible the bewildering groundlessness of bodies and things. And a world, among many other things, is made of places and particular orderings of distance - affective and otherwise - in space, sometimes through the rules of touch. Given that, how could there *not* be a type of space that might better prepare the way for wonder? And how could the type of touch that propelled Améry into the experience of his own contingency *not* be implicated in the construction or destruction of a world?

In the end, for all of the complexity of Améry's attitude toward place, space and flesh, there remains something very simple about his discussion of flesh. He is writing about vulnerability. If he uses the word flesh, it is, in part, because it is the only word he has to capture his amazement that we are so thinglike and fragile at the same moment, with so little to stand between us and anything that might harm us other than a scrap of human hide.

The hopelessness of Améry's insight is never clearer than the moment he bursts out in his third and final autobiography, *Örtlichkeiten, Places:* "This poor bundle of all too vulnerable flesh, intangible emotions and impressions, this poor human skin that wants only to protect itself from icy cold and burning heat. One can never make enough allowances for mankind, whose physically vulnerable existence crushes and devours him from within."[259]

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[259] Cited in Irène Heidelberger-Leonard, *The Philosopher of Auschwitz: Jean Améry and Living with the Holocaust,* (New York: I.B. Tauris, 2010), 183.

With that, Améry leaves us with the darkest meditation yet on the fragility of flesh and the costs of contingency. The only question left is whether that account of contingency is so dark as to foreclose any exit into a better world?

Chapter Four

Inside the Shipwreck of History: Michel Serres and the Ethics of Contingency

I. Introduction

Strangely enough, one answer to my question about contingency and the limits of despair begins with a sinking ship. Early in his lectures on the philosophy of history*,* G.W.F. Hegel mulled over the blind passions, selfish interests, and cramped, narrow-minded desires that served as "the springs of actions in this theatre of activity" as world history pushed ever closer to realizing its goal of perfect freedom.[260] Warming to the subject, he went on to write:

> Without rhetorical exaggeration, we could paint the most fearful picture of the misfortunes suffered by the noblest nations and states, as well as by private virtues - and with that picture we could arouse feelings of the deepest and most helpless sadness, not to be outweighed by any consoling outcome. We can strengthen ourselves against this, or escape it only by thinking that, well, so it was at one time; it is fate; there is nothing to be done about it now. And finally - in order to cast off the tediousness that this reflection of sadness could produce in us and to return to involvement in our own life, to the present of our own aims and interest - we return to the selfishness of standing on a quiet shore where we can be secure in enjoying the distant sight of confusion and wreckage.[261]

History was "a slaughter bench," he would conclude, "upon which the happiness of nations, the wisdom of states, and the virtues of individuals were sacrificed." Or, as he would explain at other moments in the text, history is lived in the shipwreck, where every illness, unexpected death and deep betrayal is experienced as a moment of contingency - as unplanned, unexpected, and unpredictable. Philosophy, by contrast, takes place from the safety of the shore, where distance dissolves the illusion of contingency and allows human suffering to be understood as part of a necessary movement of Spirit.

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[260] G.W.F. Hegel, *Introduction to the Philosophy of History*, trans. Leo Rauch (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1988), 23.

[261] Ibid, 24.

For all that I have spent the previous three chapters of the work arguing against the paradigm of contingency Hegel sets up that allows the whole concept to be reduced to a set of squabbles about the lines between chance and necessity in history, I have not managed to answer the question Hegel poses when he reproaches the spectator who wallows in the contemplation of irredeemable suffering: can contingency build anything? Does awareness of our contingency inevitably bring nausea, horror, and vertigo that we must repress in order to get on with the business of building a stable psyche, as in Merleau-Ponty's account, or can contingency itself found its own type of ethical relations with the world?

I have concerned myself instead throughout this work with stitching together an old, forgotten version of contingency, one that gains meaning not from its opposition to necessity or in debates about causality in history, but through its etymological roots in *tangere,* to touch. This work has been focused on the physical and affective modes of contact with the world that give rise to a thinker's experience of contingency, whether in Schelling's equation of contingency with the diseased, blind desire of a primal will, or Novalis's experience of contingency in culturally produced illness of *Bücherwut*, or Améry's forced unification with his surroundings through violating touch. Throughout the entirety of this work, I have insisted on taking seriously the costs of contingency in order to avoid slipping into a facile valorization of instability as the site of creative disruption, but have neglected to ask whether its flux always destructive or is there, nonetheless, the potential for creating an ethics out of our vulnerability? If so, what might that ethics look like?

That hole in this work brings me to the final thinker I will address: the French philosopher of science, Michel Serres (1930-present). If Hegel wrote as the spectator watching

the wreckage of history safely from the shore, nearly 150 years later Michel Serres would compose his own meditation on contingency from his perspective of a sailor struggling to escape a blazing, sinking ship. Where Hegel sees the wreckage at a distance, Serres gropes his way through a dim and smoke-filled room on his hands and knees. In the that chapter follows, I will use the imagery of the shipwreck to pull out Serres's own sophisticated theory of contingency rooted in touch and subjectivity. While that theory may seem to be a self-sufficient and fully realized account of the connection between contingency and touch, I argue that it in fact poses problems for his other commitment to reimagining the senses as mingled, non-hierarchical, and continuous with the external world. I end by suggesting that Serres ultimately sacrifices his commitment to a fully developed account of mingled senses in favor of religious, ethical relation to the world grounded in his account of contingency as a form of touch.

II. Subjectivity

Unlike Hegel's account, the sinking ship in Michel Serres's 1985 book, *The Five Senses,* begins with a literal sinking ship. And like much of Michel Serres's early life, the ship was shadowed by war. Born to a bargeman in 1930, his early years were marked by the catastrophes of the twentieth century. The Spanish Civil War occurred when he was six; the blitzkrieg when he was nine; the collaboration and deportation to concentration camps under the Vichy regime when he was ten; the Liberation and its score settling in France when he was fourteen; and Hiroshima when he was fifteen. Even eroticism in those early years was marked by death; the first woman he saw naked was a girl being lynched by a crowd.[262] Those formative years were followed immediately by the French colonial wars in Vietnam and Algeria. "In short," as he told

[262] Michel Serres, *Conversations on Science, Culture, and Time,* trans. Roxanne Lapidus (Ann Arbour: University of Michigan, 1995), 3.

Bruno Latour in a 1990 interview, “From age nine to seventeen, when the body and sensitivity are being formed, it was the reign of hunger and rationing, death and bombings, a thousand crimes.” For the young Serres, then, it was, “War, always war. Thus, I was six for my first dead bodies, and twenty-six for the last ones.”[263]

Nevertheless, he continued to explain, “the son of a bargeman becomes a sailor,” naturally, as a matter of course. So in 1947, lured by his native affinity for the sea and propelled by his more pragmatic need for a scholarship, Michel Serres joined the French navy. He remained there for another two years, until his scruples about serving the cause of violence in the atomic age drove him out in 1949 to study mathematics. This draw of the sea and deep uneasiness toward his occupation form the backdrop of the story he tells at the beginning of *The Five Senses* that grounds his account of contingency in subjectivity and touch. Subsequent sections will probe the inconsistencies and commitments undergirding that account of contingency, but for the moment I am limiting my task to storytelling and explication.

The story begins after months of practice drills in the navy when Serres finds himself trapped in a ship on fire. He offers no explanation for the source of the fire, in keeping with the section’s title “Birth,” and writes with all the ignorance, immediacy, and limited vision of the present tense. All he knows is that there is smoke, followed by the noise of bodies rushing down the manhole, and that then, suddenly, terrifyingly, he is absolutely alone. The door barred, he realizes his only possible exit is the porthole. He crawls across the room under a thick layer of acrid smoke, reaches the exit, and begins to unscrew the rusty flanges that hold the glass shut. At first the screws resist him. Slowly they give. When he finally pries the window open, a blast of

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[263] Ibid, 2.

air and water floods in, whipping the smoke behind him into a suffocating whirlwind. He pushes his head through, only to recoil from the douse of wintry wind and water. Instinctively, his body cringes back inside, only to be driven out the porthole again almost immediately by the sound of munitions exploding in the background. With no other choice, he inches his head through, then one arm, then one wrist and then stalls, stuck. As he writes, "I remain there, motionless, vibrating, pinioned, gesticulating within the confines of the fixed neckpiece, long enough for me to think, no, for my body to learn once and for all to say 'I' in the truest sense of the word [...] No mistake about it, since my life quite simply depended on this dark, slow, blinding meditation."[264]

He is inside, burning, about to die with only his head and arms poking into the sea, when a giant wave comes and propels him forward, freeing him up to his waist. Almost as soon as he begins to praise God for his liberation, another wave crashes, tilting the boat over and jamming his ribs back in the porthole, leaving him trapped once again inside. With the ship on fire, and he himself half inside, half outside, trapped between suffocation and freedom, Serres comes to the first key insight for his argument: the self is only a point of awareness or identity. It is irreducibly bodily, but not coterminous with the body. If he were identical with his body, with his subjectivity evenly diffused from his feet to his forehead, he would have felt trapped until the moment he fought fully free. Instead, the crisis forced him to economize his sense of self, to recognize the exact point dividing his life from his limbs. After a few more waves shuttling him between inside and outside, Serres eventually escapes, propelled out by the force of the waves.

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[264] Michel Serres, *The Five Senses:A Philosophy of Mingled Bodies*, trans. Margaret Sankey and Peter Cowley (London: Continuum International, 2008), 19.

"Since my near shipwreck," he concludes, "I have come accustomed to calling this point the soul. The soul resides at the point where the I is decided."[265]

While the shipwreck taught Serres to recognize the localized nature of the soul, quiet observation of his own body brought him to his second set of claims about subjectivity: normally the soul wanders under the influence of touch. There are limits to its travels, as Serres learned in his crisis. Not every place can be "the point where the 'I' is decided" in moments of extremity. Instead, our bodies are mottled with points of exquisite sensitivity, as well as parts too remote to ever become the site I call "I." As he notes, when I bend down to clip my toenails, the blade only ever touches my toes; I may feel as if I am grasping the scissors, but I never feel as if it is my self, my very being, touched by the blade.[266] But when I press my finger to my lips, my sense of self flits back and forth, with awareness at one moment entirely in the pads of my thumb as it bears down on my mouth, then the next in my lips as they kiss back my suddenly object-like hand. Physically, everything remains the same: fingers and lips meet. Yet, "The I vibrates alternately on both sides of the contact, and all of the sudden presenting its other face to the world, or suddenly passing over the immediate vicinity, leaves behind nothing but an object[...]

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[265] Serres, *The Five Senses*, 20.

[266] A better example would be to compare the experience of touching both my feet and my face with my hands; introducing an inanimate object obscures the parallel, because obviously scissors are never going to feel themselves to be subjects. The point, as I take Serres, is that nothing will ever happen to my feet that will make me feel as if my soul is at stake, no matter what touches them. I owe this point to Todd Berzon.

Pure chance, each time."[267] My body becomes at once subject and object, with touch pulling my awareness behind it from spot to spot.[268]

French, perhaps, allows Serres more easily to think this idea through the construction, "Je me brosse les cheveux." Like German, it suggests by way of grammar whole regions of the body - the hair, the teeth - that are impersonal, not me, for all that they grow in my head. English, by contrast, flattens the entirety of my body into a possession. In English, it is "my" hair, not "the" hair that I brush, even if I live my entire life feeling my hair as little more than an object. Which is not to say that Serres claims certain areas could never house anyone's awareness and sense of self; rather, he thinks each body is idiosyncratic in that respect. Each of us possesses "zones where this contingency does not" -and does - "come into play," which we could come to recognize, if only we accepted the idea that our bodies could be simultaneously subject and object.[269]

The language of "zones of contingency" brings me to the question of how Serres understands the relation between contingency, subjectivity and touch in *The Five Senses*. Why, aside from the etymological roots of contingency in *tangere*, does he see any particular connection between touch and contingency? The answer, I think, has a few different, interlocking parts. Most obviously, the areas of potential subjectivity or objectivity are

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[267] Serres, *The Five Senses,* 22-23.

[268] The other, arguably more famous discussion of subjectivity in Serres comes in his discussion of "the quasi-object," which has been picked up by Brian Massumi in *Parables of the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation.* The idea is simple enough. When a player kicks the ball in a soccer game, what is the object and what is the subject? Nominally, the player who kicks the ball is the subject and the ball the object. In reality, though, formulating the situation in such a way mistakes the grammatical subject for the philosophical one. As Massumi summarizes the question, "But if by subject we mean the point of unfolding of a tendential movement, then it is clear that the player is not the subject of the play. The ball is." The ball organizes the players around it in a way no other single element of the game can. Or, more specifically, the ball is a quasi subject. Brian Massumi, *Parables of the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), 73..

[269] Serres, *The Five Senses,* 23.

contingent, in that they cannot be universalized or located according to any unwavering, necessary law of sensitivity on the body. Rather, they are the product of a whole history of being injured, trapped, caressed, and otherwise touched that interacts with a native, idiosyncratic predisposition to feel places on the body more or less keenly. There is nothing necessary or predictable or determined about where I can feel my soul at stake. These zones are contingent because they bear the marks of history.

Moreover, these areas of sensitivity or dullness provide the landscape on which my experience of touch unfolds, and Serres can be read as suggesting that touch provides the basic intuition of unpredictability, flux, and connection underpinning the experience of contingency. That instability is the deeper point behind Serres's example of the hand touching lips. Even in the most seemingly self-enclosed, static situation - a body touching itself, motionless - the line between touching and touched travels. Even if we were able to completely control or will what came in contact with our body, like Novalis dreamed, the experience of instability, flux, contingency, would remain in the constant, uncontrollable migration of the soul as touch alights on it in one moment as an object of touch and in the next moment a subject. Though Serres never states as much bluntly, in emphasizing the link between touch and chance he can be read as making the argument that flightiness of feeling is a much more fundamental experience of contingency than all of the upheavals of history. Long before we wake to awareness of the uncertainty of hopes and plans in history, or the way that events depend on an unforeseeable chain of previous events, we find ourselves in bodies that sting us to wakefulness with the sensation of feet that have fallen asleep or blinding stabs of pain that momentarily jerk us away from our thoughts and focus all of our awareness on a banged elbow.

That being said, we do not live in some sensory deprivation chamber, with nothing to observe except the feeling of our skin folding over itself or our hands touching our lips; we live in a world that constantly caresses, abrades, and wounds us. Thus, in his clearest statement of the link between contingency and touch, Serres writes, "The skin is a variety of contingency; in it, through it, with it, the world and my body touch each other, the feeling and the felt, it defines their common edge. Contingency means common tangency; in it the world and the body intersect and caress each other."[270]

I wrote a moment ago about pain as a form of contact with the world but, as his language suggests, Serres finds the paradigmatic example of contingency as common tangency in the caress. Much of his analysis of subjectivity and contingency remains the same when he turns to the erotic encounter. Like the shipwreck, the point of perception or soul still travels, only this time, his lover's caress drags awareness across the skin as a magnet does a pile of iron filings. At one moment the sense of self matches the staccato drum of his lover's fingers as they tap the ridges of his spine, and at the next it rushes to his lips as he bends down to kiss her shoulder. Awareness orients itself around this unstable point, leaving tracts of flesh temporarily insensible as they fade to the background, only to be awakened in the next instant through some chance shift of skin.

Serres highlights the caress, I think, because it undermines even the pretense of controlling the conditions of sensation. The two bodies connect and disconnect in a series of movements that exceeds the sum of individual actions. One partner's decision to stoop down for a kiss shifts the balance of weight and the angle of contact for both, creating in turn a different

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[270] Ibid, 80.

vector of desire that pulls the soul in anew. The site of awareness, the soul, for both partners, is created in a common, contingent act; it changes through openness to each other and the world.

In his interviews, Serres often denounces polemical philosophy as an expression of the agonistic culture that bred the world tragedies of his youth.[271] All the same his equation of contingency with the caress and a very particular, egalitarian version of the caress, at that, *is* a polemic of sorts - or at the very least a stand for a tremendously optimistic vision of how human subjectivity emerges from the world. He writes of the caress not as an act of a master attempting to dominate, subdue and transform the other in a vehicle for his pleasure, as in Sartre.[272] Nor does he reduce the caressed feminine other to a passive recipient of his pleasure or occasion for his revelation of the infinitude of the other, as Derrida accuses Levinas of doing.[273] For that matter, he has no account of the violent, violating or indifferent touch of others and things, as in Merleau-Ponty's discussion of the dark space of the schizophrenic. On the contrary, he actively rejects the moment of sadism underpinning so many accounts of touch in phenomenology, writing, "No, I do not objectify, freeze, ensnare or rape you as that tedious old marquis would have done. And I do not expect you to do as I do. For that you would have to become a ghost or an automaton."[274] Instead, the caress in all of its mutuality, gives birth to the soul.

I am not convinced Serres contributes anything particular novel or subtle in his account of the caress, but his decision to feature the gentle lover's touch as the model of common tangency sets up the ethical project that drives his later work. I will address that project in the

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[271] Latour, *Conversations with Michel Serres,* 120.

[272] Jean Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness,* 494-533.

[273] See Derrida *On Touching Jean-luc Nancy,* 66-91.

[274] Serres, *The Five Senses,* 27.

sections that follow; for the moment, I want to conclude with an argument for taking seriously the novelty of the theory of contingency and subjectivity just explained, particularly given that Serres - strangely - is so seldom read as a serious philosopher. Recent literature discussing *The Five Senses* has focused on Serres's concept of the soul, specifically stressing its liminality, its ability to be at once on the edge of perception and the center of all sense of self, how it is born out of contact with others.[275] If Serres only offered the insight that the boundaries of the self are poorly defined or subjectivity is created on the margins in contact with others, or even that my knowledge is always bodily, I would not be writing this chapter. Not because I disagree with any of those assertions, but because they would only amount to tinkering with insights that have long since become dogma in theory circles. Continental philosophers have spent the last two hundred years arguing against the autonomous self, whether in Hegel's vision of the creation of subjectivity through battling desires in the master-slave dialectic, or Kierkegaard's insistence on the self's constitution in relation to God,[276] or Freud's various iterations of the unconscious, or Carol Gilligan's advocacy of an "ethic of care" that reflects the way relations with others fashion the core of feminine identity.[277]

No, the interesting question is not "how is my capacity to know, to reflect, to feel myself any sort of subject created in conjunction with others and the world?" Rather, the novel question Serres poses is "*where* do I know?" Or put more specifically, "where on my body do I know, where do I feel myself to be a self and where just a clumsy bundle of limbs?" What does it mean

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[275] Steven Connor, *The Book of Skin* (London: Reaktion Books, 2004), 30.

[276] Søren Kierkegaard, *The Sickness Unto Death: A Christian Psychological Exposition for Upbuilding and Awakening,* trans. Howard Hong and Edna Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983).

[277] Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice: Psychological theory and Women's Development* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993).

that I can feel parts of my body as vital to my life and identity, and others as expendable in the right circumstances? Serres poses the question in the form of the drowning sailor; I would recast it in the image of a crippled man dragging his nerveless leg behind him. What is that limb to him? Does he still feel it part of his very self, or does it register as a wooden object, his in the abstract, but an alienated, lifeless intrusion in practice? That insight works best on the level of phenomenology. The experience of the soul might not be comprehensive, it might not cover every situation or have much to say about moments of vertiginous self-dissolution, but it allows us to see something. The fact that it only allows us to see something about our experience of touch, and even optimistically is not an oversight, as I will argue: it is a tactical decision that at once sets up and undermines the ethical commitments that Serres makes to history and the environment.

III. Mingled Senses

In one respect, it seems as if this work could stop here. Serres, more than any other thinker I have discussed, makes explicit the link between contingency and touch. When he writes that, "Contingency means common tangency,"[278] we know now that he is not trading in vague generalities or platitudes about the embodiment of the subject. He means that I experience myself as subject to chance, fragile, and contingent, not primarily because of an illness that devastates my family or an assault on my body, as in Novalis and Améry, but because I can recognize at every moment the way the point of my awareness, my soul, is jerked about my body with every passing, unpremeditated contact with another's hand. My sense of self is dependent - contingent - upon physical contact with the world. I find contingency in the topography of my

[278] Michel Serres, *The Five Senses,* 80.

body that has been stippled with points of sensitivity and hollowed with valleys of dullness from a lifetime of being touched or deprived of touch, all through the actions of others I cannot control. Finally, I feel contingency in the way touch itself vibrates, rendering one part of my body subject and the other object randomly, without my volition. Contingency is constant; I only have to focus to become aware of it at any moment.

There is, however, a crack in Serres's model of contingency that rumbles up from internal fault lines in his thought. We see it most clearly in the moment that he writes, "Things mingle together and I am no exception to that, I mix with the world which mixes with me."[279] Taken out of context, the lines seems a reiteration of the point made by his theory of contingency: subjectivity and objectivity mingle within my own body, making it impossible to distinguish between my self and some external, objective world. In reality, though, Serres is making the much deeper point that breaking down the idea of an autonomous subject is just cosmetic work, so long as we continue to believe that our bodies can be broken into separate, orderly spheres ruled by different senses.

Put otherwise, how fundamental could any theory of mingling, blurred boundaries between self and world be that is grounded in the division of senses into five, distinct spheres? It would be strangely incongruous to insist on the porousness of boundaries between self and world, or inside and outside, while all the while quarantining the senses to their proper organs, such that scent belongs solely to the nose, sight to the eyes, and touch to the hand. If touch is so fluid, could it transgress more than the boundary between subject and object, or toucher and touched? Might it also spill over the distinction between touch and sight, or touch and taste and

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[279] Ibid, 80.

sound? And in that case, what would it even mean to talk about the tactile roots of contingency at all? Why not the tactile-aural-visual roots of contingency?

I want to save the last question I just asked for the next section and instead focus for a few pages on why Serres's account of subjectivity and his broader intellectual commitments demand a reevaluation of the traditional division of the senses, and what his philosophy of mingled senses looks like. I will do so primarily by placing his account of touch in conversation with some of the thinkers he rebels against, focusing on the eighteenth-century thinker, Abbé de Condillac, and the strange grouping of philosophers, theologians, and scientists under the influence of Heidegger who think of touch primarily through the figure of a hand wielding a tool.

The historical stakes of challenging the traditional division of the senses are perhaps easiest to understand for a man who insisted, "Violence was already the major problem - and has remained so, all my life."[280] The reasons to be wary of the five senses are no less true for being well-tread in recent scholarship. Western thought, from Plato forward, has privileged detached, abstracted sight among all of the senses, which promoted a sense of distance and irresponsibility from the surrounding society. Colonial scholars have often attributed lesser keenness to the senses of indigenous people - particularly the sense of pain - to provide biological grounding for their racism, or, alternately have projected unparalleled sensitivity on "primitive man" as a basis for their mythology of civilization's fall from some romanticized state of nature.[281] This line of argument has even cropped up in the second chapter of this work, in my discussion of Herder's belief that the contemporary European lack the same degree of sensitivity as Africans.

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[280] Serres, *Conversations with Serres,* 7.

[281] For an overview of the orientalist history of theorizing the senses, see David Howes, *The Empire of the Senses: The Sensual Culture Reader* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2005).

Moreover, even a desultory skim through philosophy - much less psychology or neuroscience - shows alternatives to the current canonical senses of touch, taste, sight, smell, and hearing. Why not have a sense of temperature or weight or speed or balance? For that matter, why not acknowledge the historical variety in the senses? Democritus thought all senses were a variation on touch. Aristotle modeled his senses on the four elements, with vision correlated with water, smell with fire, air with sound, and touch with air, all the while flirting with a fifth *sensus communis* that mediated between the other four.[282] Francis Hutcheson argued in the 18th century for a moral sense;[283] Locke posited an "inner sense" that observed the self thinking[284]; and folk tradition, of course, holds to a sixth sense for perceiving the occult. To switch into kantian language, the condition for the possibility of subjectivity may be touch, but touch must be historicized as one out of many possible senses canonized through the whims of history.

Serres makes both of these criticisms of the senses more or less explicit throughout his work, but his most pointed engagement with the history of the senses comes in his allusions to the 1754 *Traité des Sensations* by Étienne Bonnot, Abbé de Condillac. The treatise was a thought exercise intended to examine "the senses one by one, distinguishing precisely the ideas we owe to each, and observing how they instruct us."[285] It took as its means the fantasy of a statue, possessing all of the human senses latently, only waiting to have them awakened one by one. The first third of the book runs relatively quickly through smell, hearing, taste, and sight,

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282 Connor, *The Book of Skin,* 2.

283 Francis Hutcheson, An Essay on the Nature and the Conduct of the Passions and Affections with Illustrations on the Moral Sense (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund Inc, 2003).

284 John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. P.H. Nidditch (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), II.1.iv.

285 Étienne Bonnot, Abbé de Condillac, *Condillac's Treatise on the Sensations,* trans. Geraldine Carr (London: The Favil Press, 1930), xxx.

attributing memory to smell, bodily pleasure to hearing, hunger and increased delight to taste, and color, without space, to sight. In each of these four modes, the statue identifies what it senses with itself. Rather than smelling something, it believes itself to *be* smell, and so on for hearing, taste, and sight.

Touch, however, is Condillac's true interest, taking up half of the book. With touch, Condillac's statue learns for the first time how to distinguish itself from others. In the first moments, the statue begins to touch itself and to touch objects, gradually learning to distinguish itself as a discrete body. "When it comes to learn that it is something solid, it is, I imagine, much surprised not to find itself in all it touches."[286] It extends its arms outside of itself, not knowing what it will meet. This moment of surprise turns quickly into anxiety, and a desire to know where it is in space. It grasps itself and objects, gradually coming to understand the dimensions of space. As its sense of self becomes clearer and clearer, its emotions turn outward. "Its love, its hate, its fear, have no longer its own modifications as sole object: there are tangible things which it loves, hates, fears, desires and hopes for."[287]

Some of Serres's other criticisms of Condillac are obvious. For Condillac touch separates, stabilizes, and - after a brief rush of anxiety - gives the statue the means to settle into a stable ego amid discrete objects. Obviously Serres has little use for that model of subjectivity, or the idea that touch serves to separate us from our environment.   His deeper, more fundamental objection, however, comes down to the limitation of the senses to particular organs, most clearly in the case of touch. Condillac belongs to a long tradition of thinkers from Gregory of Nyssa to André Leroi-Gourhan, who locate touch primarily in the hand. At one point, musing on the

[286] Ibid, II: v: 6.

[287] Ibid, II: vi: 7.

finitude of touch, Condillac imagines a fantastical hand with even finer motor control and even more surface area. "Ought we not suppose that the hand would be of still greater value were it composed of twenty fingers, each with a greater number of articulations?" he asks. "And if these were an infinity of parts all equally mobile and flexible, would it not be capable of a kind of universal geometry?" Reluctantly, he dismisses the idea, writing:

> It is not enough that the parts of the hand should be flexible and mobile, the statue must also be able to notice them one after another, and form exact ideas of them. What knowledge could it gain of bodies by means of touch if it had only imperfect knowledge of the organ it uses in touching? And what possible idea could it have of that organ if its parts were infinite? It would pass its hand over an infinity of little surfaces; but what would be the result? [...] The study of its hands would be too vast for it; it would use them without ever knowing anything about them and would only acquire confused ideas.[288]

Upon first reading this fantastical passage - which sounds so much like an image out of a Salvadore Dali painting - it is not immediately clear why equating touch to the hand should be problematic. After all, Condillac explicitly denies the reduction of touch to grasping or molding the world. Serres would likely object to the implication that we can know even the limited hands we have, but, whatever his prejudices, Condillac does not subscribe to some caricatured Enlightenment belief in the possibility of total knowledge or mastery over the world. We have the hands we deserve: seeking, searching, but circumscribed.

A generous reading might even put Condillac in line of thinkers who have linked touch, technology, and biology in the figure of the hand.[289] In part, this tradition of thought can be

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[288] ibid, XII: 2 130 - 1.

[289] See Thomas A. Carlson, *The Indiscrete Image: Infinitude and the Creation of the Human* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008); Jeffrey L. Kosky*, Arts of Wonder: Enchanting Secularity - Walter De Maria, Diller + Scofidio, James Turrell, Andy Goldsworth* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012); Bernard Stiegler, *Technics and Time I: the Fall of Epimetheus,* trans. Richard Beardsworth and George Collins (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998).

attributed to Heidegger's influence. When he sought to describe in *Being and Time* the subject's relation to objects in everyday life, he famously turned to the language of tools and hands. In everyday life, *Dasein* experiences tools as a seamless part of the world, ready at hand, or *zuhanden;* it is only when they break that *Dasein* experiences them as objects, existing in opposition to itself.[290] In equal part, though, this trend can be attributed to the influence of the French anthropologist, André Leroi-Gourhan. In 1964 Leroi-Gourhan argued that the human brain was able to develop to its current level of sophistication because - to grossly abbreviate his argument - once our species began walking upright, our hands were freed for grasping and manipulation.[291] Under the dual influence of Leroi-Gourhan and Heidegger, a number of thinkers began associating the hand's use of tools with a distinctively human way of being in the world that challenged the old Cartesian subject-object divide. Instead of using tools as an expression of our mastery over a world apart and subordinate to us, the argument goes, we create technology as a type of prosthetic to compensate for our physical and instinctual weakness. We lack the defined features, such as claws, that make other animals so exquisitely suited for their environment. Our clever, clawless, multi-purpose hands have no choice but to create spears and knives and ploughs to compensate for our relatively defenseless bodies. Thus, in making we are

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[290] Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time,* trans. John MacQuarrie and Edward Robinson, (New York: Harper Collins Press, 1962), 91- 149.

[291] These possibilities might have remained mere abstractions, if the adoption of upright posture had not simultaneously involved transformations within the skull. The bone structure no longer had to support the "stresses of cranial suspension," that is, the weight of the skull hanging downward, or the "traction stresses" tearing into food. Instead, the jaws and teeth shrank as the face became disengaged from the back of the skull, creating different possibilities of movement for the tongue, as well as new spatial arrangements for the brain. That meant we no longer had to carry food in our mouths and could develop speech as well as tools, which in turn created a feedback loop in the brain. As speech and the creation of increasingly sophisticated tools led to new paths and possibilities within the brain, which, in turn, allowed for the development of even more complex linguistic, technological, and social systems or tools. André Leroi-Gourhan, *Gesture and Speech,* Trans. Anna Bostock Berger (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1993).

made by our surroundings. Technology becomes an expression of human fragility and heteronomy, rather than the tool of an autonomous, dominating subject.

It seems as if Serres's version of contingency should slot quite nicely into this tradition of theorizing the hand: what could be a better example of the bodily experience of flux, finitude, and co-constitution with the environment than a theory of evolution that attributes language and thought to the work of our hands? Nevertheless, Serres makes remarkably few references to the hand in his discussion of touch, I think because he believes *any* account that confines a sense to a particular organ has already gone astray by obscuring the independent reality of the natural world and transforming it into a mere vehicle for human development or perception.

Stay with the hand for a moment, even though I think Serres would make the same argument against reducing vision to our eyes or hearing to ears. In thinking of touch primarily in terms of hands, we implicitly assume the position of the one initiating touch, whether in building, molding, crafting or caressing. Even granted that touching means being touched in turn, localizing touch in the hands leaves the movement far too uni-directional for a thinker who attributed the discovery of his soul to the heaving of an inanimate metal ship. There is no space for tree branches that fall on our heads, or puddles that arc up to cover our legs, or sand that blows in our faces, or a soccer ball that draws the players after it. There is no space for non-human agency. No matter how friendly this new version of *homo faber* may be, he still has very little grasp of a world that moves him first without being molded by him. Emphasis on the hand as the organ of touch, or correspondingly, eyes as the organs of sight, creates the wrong sort of subject for Serres. It overemphasizes our agency and misses the true extent of our vulnerability,

as well as the reality of the material world. At the very least, collapsing touch into the grasping of hands obscures the vast expanse of flesh that can manipulate nothing.

No, Serres privileges the skin over the hand. As Steven Connor explains it in *The Book of Skin,* the skin, for Serres, has a unique place because, unlike all of the other organs, it extends over the entire body. It is neither localized in place nor limited in function. Rather, it is the "milieu" of all the other senses. "If all the senses are milieux, or midplaces where inside and outside meet and meld," Connor explains, "then the skin is the global integral of these local area networks, the milieu of these milieux."[292] Put otherwise, the senses are already the place where the internal organs of the body meet the external world. Thus, sound meets the ear drum in hearing, sweet or savory foods meet the tongue in taste, and so on. The skin, however, goes one further; it provides the meeting place for all of the senses.

Serres offers the clearest example of the mingling senses in his description of Pierre Bonnard's oil painting, *Nue au Miroir* (1931). The passage follows a woman tracing her lips with lipstick, her cheeks with rouge, her eyes with shadow. As he writes:

> She follows exact pathways; she emphasizes the eye and the gaze, accentuates with color the place to be kissed, crowning the zone of words and taste, underlines hearing with an earring, traces bridges or links wells of color between the wells or the mountains of the senses, draws the maps of her own receptivity. With cosmetics, our real skin, the skin we experience, becomes visible; through adornment the particular law of the body is revealed, just as by means of crosshatching, colors or curves on a map, the ordered world displays its landscapes. The ordered, chaotic, unruly nude wears on her skin the fleeting common place of her own sensorium - hills and dales on which currents from the organs of hearing, sight, taste or smell, ebb and flow, a shimmering skin where touch calls forth sensation. Cosmetics reproduce this summation or mixture and attempt to paint them, differently according to different social conventions....I imagine the reason we do not

[292] Connor, *Book of Skin,* 27.

> have a ring hanging from our nose, as other peoples do, is that we have forgotten the sense of smell.[293]

Her lips become at once an object of touch as she smooths her lipstick and a visual marker of where she hopes to be touched and tasted by her lover later that night. The act of applying makeup has become so banal that we fail to see it as an act of signaling the mingling of senses, as Serres does, or a way of highlighting the multifarious sites where the body receives the world.

In writing about Bonnard's painting, Serres speaks of the model's act as a form of "cosmetography," highlighting the etymological tie between "cosmic" and "cosmetic" in the ancient Greek "kosmos," "to order." The wordplay neatly highlights the ontological and even theological stakes underpinning Serres's insistence on the mingling senses. The point is not just that the senses simply do not work in this neatly divided way and that it would be bad phenomenology to pretend that they do. Nor is his objection solely the moral one that we *ought not* subscribe to an understanding of the senses that allows us to compartmentalize our experience of the material world. Rather, his point is the much stronger ontological one that if the senses - and by extension our body - were to be neatly segregated from each other, that isolation would be at odds with the basic structure of existence as Serres imagines it.

The most lucid articulation of the theology running beneath his work comes in his book *Angels,* a coffee table tome filled with images of angels and architecture, interrupted by a conversation between two airport employees. "I see angels - which, incidentally, in case you didn't know, comes from the ancient Greek word for messengers," the woman remarks to her lover. Then, meditating on her job as a physician within an airport, she continues, "Don't you see - what we have here is angels of steel, carrying angels of flesh and blood, who in turn send

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[293] Serres, *The Five Senses,* 34.

angel signals across angel air waves [...] All we really are is intermediaries, eternally passing among others who are also intermediaries. But the question is, where is it all leading? Because I spend my life here, in this never-ending flow of passengers, communications, conveyers, messengers, announcers and agents, because my work is at this intersecting point of a multitude of networks all connected to the universe."[294] Everything mingles; everything is forever passing from one place to the next without ever arriving, the senses as surely as ships.

All of the puns about cosmetics and cosmos, angels and airplanes and messengers, could be seen as wordplay, meant to give more gravitas about banal observations about the interconnection of the contemporary technological world. After all, Serres clearly does not think that airplanes are literal angels, complete with flaming swords and invitations to a virgin birth. I think, though, that reading would be ungenerous. He adopts the language of religion because he wants to signal that this egalitarian mingling and traveling from connection to connection, place to place, is the most basic structure of the universe. The sentiment is religious in the same way Novalis was when he wrote about the unattainable Absolute that can only be glimpsed in our endless striving to attain it.

Yet all of this - cosmology and cosmetics alike - leaves us with a problem. What does this theory of mingling senses mean for his account of contingency? If the division of the senses is arbitrary, both historically and conceptually, why think of contingency primarily in terms of touch, rather than touch-sound, or touch-taste? After all, take Serres's favorite example of two lovers: how do you differentiate between the touch of lips against another's flesh and the taste of the salt of sweat on skin? Moreover, *all* senses, according to Serres, involve the mingling of

[294] Michel Serres, *Angels: A Modern Myth* (Flammiron, 1995), 9.

inner and outer, self and world. If we were cut off from touch, if we were lepers, we would not suddenly be inured to the unpredictability of sudden shifts of our environment. We would still have the daily ritual of eating, with its sharp shock of flavor, followed by satiation, and a renewal of appetite. What testifies more completely to our bodily dependence on the world than hunger pangs interrupting work? Alternately, why not locate the experience of contingency in sight? The constant movement of our landscape impresses a sense of transience and finitude as surely as touch. Or why not write a theory of contingency told through the sensation of sound whizzing by us? All of which is to say, what makes the project of reading contingency as tangency - that is, *my* project - anything more than the cheap exploitation of etymology?

IV. The Birth of Physics

The problem I have arrived at, then, is this: everything Serres writes can be read as a protest against the crass reduction of the material world to a vehicle for thought. He begins by attacking the degradation of objects outside of the body to mere tools for a human knower by re-imagining subjectivity as generated through touch. Step one of his argument undermines the self-contained subject by insisting that there is no knowledge without contingency, and no contingency without touch. I cannot be a sovereign subject lording over a mute world of things when at any moment my own body can become dead weight or wake to awareness only through the touch of others and objects. Step two uses that same logic to take aim at the entire history of thought that reduces the organs *within* the body to vehicles for senses. Serres castigates the tradition of Condillac that divides the senses, quarantining taste to the tongue, sight to the eyes, and touch to the hand. He wants a promiscuous theory of the senses, where all sensations run together; he wants a respectful theory that does not reduce the organs to vehicles for the senses;

and he wants an egalitarian theory, free from the baggage of the Western tradition that is forever imposing hierarchies among the senses, most often with sight as the queen.

These commitments are at odds. They are at odds because of the mechanics of his arguments - practically speaking, Serres never does mingle his account of contingency as common tangency with any other sense - and they are at odds because his theory of the tactility of contingency is so central to his understanding of what it means to know and exist as a self that questioning the link between contingency and touch would introduce a deep arbitrariness into the center of his work. Put otherwise, if contingency, subjectivity and his entire challenge to the separation between self and world necessarily grow out of the experience of touch and only touch, there is a hierarchy of divided senses. His egalitarian ideals of mingled senses become lip service that simply obscure the reinstantiation of the old model, albeit with the new twist of making touch the top sense, rather than sight. Alternately, if I can arrive at his theory of contingency and subjectivity slotting in any sense I please, I am both admitting the essential arbitrariness of his work and making the senses interchangeable in the service of a preconceived theory. In that case, Serres is not really dealing with specificity of each sense and has just a utilitarian attitude toward the body as the most vulgar caricature of an Enlightenment thinker.

Thus, this section investigates how deep Serres's commitment to thinking of contingency through touch actually goes, and whether or not the apparent pride of place given to touch in his theory of contingency can be reconciled with the egalitarian impulse behind his discussion of the senses. To attempt to answer those questions, I want to place *The Five Senses* in line with an earlier work by Serres that attempts to combine contingency, touch, and science, this time by

rehabilitating one of the earliest accounts of contingency in philosophy, the epicurean atomic swerve, or the “clinamen.”

The book I am speaking of, *The Birth of Physics* (1978), belongs to the earlier stage of Serres’s career when he often wrote monographs on single figures, such as Zola, Carpaccio, and Leibniz. This particular work centered on Titus Lucretius Carus’s poem, *De rerum natura* or *On the Nature of Things.* Rumored for centuries to be a Roman citizen driven mad by a love potion and only capable of writing in fits of lucidity, Lucretius (c. 99 BCE- c. 55 BCE) composed his sole surviving work on the topic of epicurean atomic physics.[295] The poem had six books, covering the basic principles of atomism; the mind and soul; theories of sensation and thought; the emergence of the world; and explanations for various celestial phenomena.

Historically, the poem has been more often praised for the fineness of its Latin than the subtlety of its science. Some of the disdain for Lucretius’s version of science stems from the potted history of atomism common during the time that Serres composed his study.[296] While modern atomism has mathematical principles to support it and raise it to the level of a universal science, the story goes, ancient atomism was little more than a lucky guess, arrived at solely because ancient thinkers sought a maximally reductive explanation for the behavior of the universe. The greater reason for the skeptical eye cast at Lucretius, though, comes from one particular doctrine within the text: “the clinamen,” or “swerve,” which, significantly for our purposes, introduced contingency, in the sense of indeterminacy and unpredictability, into the Epicurean cosmogony.

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[295] Of course, given that this rumor comes solely from the Catholic Patriarch Jerome, it has very little credibility among contemporary scholars.

[296] For more on the reception of Lucretius, see Stephen Greenblatt, *the Swerve: How the World Became Modern* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co, 2011).

The clinamen developed as a response to a fundamental problem in the Epicurean account of creation that runs roughly as follows. Epicurean thought imagined creation as beginning in a void filled with eternal atoms, impossibly small particles of all shapes and sizes. In everyday life, matter is never destroyed or created; rather, new shapes and creatures are born out of different configurations of colliding atoms. In the void, however, all things fall in parallel at equal speed. Since parallel lines by definition never meet, how did atoms begin to collide and create the world as we experience it?

The swerve was meant to answer this question. "When the atoms are being drawn downward through the void by their property of weight," Lucretius writes, "at absolutely unpredictable times and places they defect slightly from their straight course, to a degree that could be described as no more than a shift of movement. If they were not apt to swerve, all would fall downward through the unfathomable void like drops of rain; no collisions between primary elements would occur, and no blows would be effected, with the result that nature would never have created anything."[297] The clinamen, then, is this imperceptible inclination or swerve that allows for the creation of the world.

While the general point of the swerve seems clear enough, scholars continue to question the details. What causes the swerve? Is it the uncaused cause, as Cicero once derisively remarked,[298] or does it derive from a separate cause, in the way weight and speed do? How often do atoms swerve? Did it happen once, setting into motion creative chaos, or do atoms swerve constantly? Can Lucretitus's insistence on sensory experience as our only path to knowledge

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[297] Lucretius, *On the Nature of Things,* trans. Martin Ferguson Smith (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2001) 40-1.

[298] Cited in Jeffrey S. Purinton, "Epicurus on 'Free Volition' and the Atomic Swerve," in *Phronesis* Vol. 44, No. 4 (1999): 253.

ever be reconciled with the argument for the swerve, which insists that, "it is a plain and manifest matter of observation that objects with weight, left to themselves, cannot travel an oblique course when they plunge from above - at least not perceptibly; but who could possibly perceive that they do not swerve at all from their vertical paths?"[299]

Lucretius deals explicitly with none of these worries. Instead, after stressing the incalculable nature of the swerve, he imagines how the colliding atoms form new shapes, tastes, smells, and textures, depending on the different shapes of the interlocking atoms. For example, Lucretius imagines, water must be made from rounded, smooth atoms linking together in order to be so liquid and silky. By contrast, salt or vinegar, things that taste pungent or sharp derive from jagged atoms that hook together and pierce the tongue.[300] All of our sensations can be traced in one way or another to the collision of atoms and their impingement on our senses. In this respect touch is by far the most important senses for Lucretius, which he admits when he writes in a moment of unusual rhetorical grandiosity, "For the holy gods are my witness that touch, yes, touch, is the sense of the body, when something extraneous insinuates itself into it, or when something born within affects it [...] or again when, in consequence of a collision, the atoms are disturbed within the body itself and the commotion confuses our senses."[301] Even sight depends on the passage of atoms through the retina; even taste requires the abrasion of particles against the tongue.

Once he has explained the senses, Lucretius then goes on to make the most perplexing claim for the clinamen in the work. Not only does the swerve lead to material creation,

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[299] Lucretius, *The Nature of Things,* II: 200 - 260.

[300] Ibid, II: 460-470.

[301] Ibid, 46.

somehow it also makes possible volition that cannot be strictly explained by the determinism of circumstances. If there were only the endless mechanical chain of atom hitting atom, Lucretius reasons, every action would be determined from the ground up by the orderly and inevitable chain of atomic collisions. Yet experience tells us that we humans, as well as "living creatures all over the earth," possess will that, "enables each of us to advance where pleasure leads us, and to alter our movements not at a fixed time or place, but at the direction of our minds."[302] We can see the power of volition everywhere, from the horse who has to pause before exiting a suddenly open stall while it waits for its mental will to be translated into movement, to the power we feel within our breasts to resist the jostling of the crowd. Since nothing can come from nothing, there must be some sort of cause that allows for freedom and indeterminacy in action. This factor, Lucretius concludes, "that saves the mind itself from being governed in all of its actions by an internal necessity, and from being constrained to submit passively to domination, is the minute swerve of atoms at unpredictable places and times."[303]

Reams of scholarship have been written on the question of how Lucretius's libertarianism fits in with account of atomism, if at all.[304] For Serres, though, that question primarily serves to shuffle the swerve sideways into questions of subjectivity, free will, and agency at the expense of the more profound scientific insight. More to my point, it also corrals the concept of contingency into a relatively constricted conversation about necessity, freedom and indeterminism at the expense of the more material definition that Serres has been pursuing.

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[302] Ibid, 41.

[303] Ibid, 42.

[304] For an older review of how the relationship has been historically understood, see M. Van Straaten, "Two Studies in Greek Atomists by D. J. Furley," in *Mnemosyne,* Fourth Series Vol 27 (1974), 315-318. For more recent work, see Jeffrey S. Purinton, "Epicurus on 'Free Volition' and the Atomic Swerve," in *Phronesis* Vol. 44, No. 4 (1999): 253.

Thus, he begins *The Birth of Physics* by claiming he wants to rehabilitate the Lucretian swerve from the charge of being a logical absurdity or moment of pseudo-science based in metaphysical speculation rather than mathematical laws.[305] That dismissal of Lucretius grows naturally out of our post-Newtonian world. We have been trained by Newtonian sciences to think of physics as first a science of solids, Serres thinks. After all, the rotation of the planets began as a calculation of how solid bodies influenced each other's orbits through gravity, while the basics of the atom are still taught to schoolchildren as a question of how the nucleus, the center of an atom's mass, attracts or repels neutrons and electrons. It seems natural enough to assume that the atoms should be the linchpin of ancient atomism as well and, by that metric, judge the theory wanting. Under Serres's reading, though, that assumption gets ancient atomism exactly backwards. There is no atomism without the atom, of course, but the atom matters less than the swerve, which *does* have a mathematical basis, not in geometry or calculus, but in the differential mathematics of Archimedes.

Specifically, the swerve comes from a treatise written by Archimedes about whether a tangential line touches a circle at more than one point. He ultimately proved that the two only touched at one infinitesimally small point and, in the process, created the smallest possible angle. This imperceptible, incalculable slant where circle and tangent touch is called in ancient Greek treatises the "angle of contingency." We might think of it instead as the swerve. In Serres's reading, this confrontation with the immeasurably small angle of contingency is even more basic, more infinitesimal than the atom itself. The atom should not be understood as a free-standing concept that suddenly, arbitrarily, has the idea of an erratic, unobservable angle inserted to

[305] Michel Serres, *The Birth of Physics,* trans. Jack Hawkes (Manchester: Clinamen Press, 2000), 82.

smooth out the flaws in the Epicurean creation myth or to erect a pseudo-origin for free will. Rather, the true mathematical basis for epicurean physics that gives the whole enterprise rigor comes from this debate about the angle of contingency.[306]

Moreover, *The Birth of Physics* offers a second set of reasons why the swerve seemed plausible at the time, rather than simply the philosophical embarrassment it has largely become. While we assume physics describes the motion of solid objects, more often than not Greek physics had in mind fluid mechanics. While the swerve may seem absurd in abstraction, he explains, read as an observation about the flow of water, it suddenly becomes much more plausible. Serres cites the example of water running through a glass pipe. As we watch it flow, occasionally eddies appear. We can at best chart the statistical likelihood of their emergence, but we cannot predict them in advance or say with any certainty what specific confluence of factors cause them to emerge. We cannot, in short, explain why *this* eddy emerged in *this* space *now.* As he writes, "For it to carry weight, knowledge should have nothing to say about chance distribution. What Lucretius say, however, remains true - that is, faithful to the phenomenon: turbulence appears stochastically in the laminar flow. Why? I don't know why. How? By chance, with regard to space and time."[307]

While Serres's reading may seem a relatively low-stakes effort to take seriously an unjustly derided author, the beginning sentence of this quotation - "For it to carry weight, knowledge should have nothing to say about chance distribution" - introduces the real stakes of his argument. *The Birth of Physics* rails against nothing less than the whole model of science that invests truth in unchanging laws at the expense of unruly reality. From the Renaissance

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[306] Ibid, 10-11.

[307] Ibid, FFN

forward, Serres argues, science has implicitly drawn a distinction between laws and events. Laws say that gravity necessarily pulls objects directly downward; the event disrupts that trajectory with a slight eddy. The law says light comes on when I flick a switch; the event happens the moment when the bulb unexpectedly blows out. The fact that we consider the predictable action to be a law, fundamental to the working of physics but chance turbulence as an aberration says more about our model of laws than the nature of the universe. Lucretius appeals to Serres precisely because he elevates the event, the chance disruption to the status of a law. Under that reading, building the swerve into the Epicurean creation story should not be read as an absurdity or moment of pseudo-science; rather, it should be understood as the sign of a drastically different set of priorities about what phenomena are basic enough to the world we live in to count as a scientific law. And for Lucretius - or at least Serres's Lucretius - contingency, chance distributions and stochastic turbulence in the laminar flow all count as fundamental.

Serres wrote *The Birth of Physics* in 1978. I have no doubt a contemporary scientist could take issue with his characterization of science, particularly given advances in the last thirty-five years. I am also sure a conscientious Lucretius scholar would find plenty to contest in his reading of *De rerum natura.* But, as Rousseau once said, "Let us put aside the facts, for they have nothing to do with the matter at hand." Whether or not Serres gets Lucretius "right" matters less than figuring out what he gets out of Lucretius and, equally importantly, what he discards.

So what does it mean for a twentieth-century author to argue that we need to take seriously the physics of ancient atomism, practically speaking? It certainly cannot entail swallowing the epicurean cosmogony whole, with its account of jagged atoms held together by

interlocking edges. Michel Serres first trained as a scientist; he knows all of the developments of subatomic physics as well as anyone and all of the reasons Lucretius's account cannot hold as stands. And yet, Serres undoubtedly thinks Lucretius gets something profoundly right about knowledge and our most fundamental experience of the world as one filled with chance fluctuations. How much he thinks Lucretius gets right depends on whether you commit to strong or weak reading of the connection between *The Birth of Physics* and *The Five Senses.*

In the strong reading, the language of "tangency" from *The Birth of Physics* seamlessly becomes "common tangency" in *The Five Senses.* In this version, there is nothing arbitrary or incidental in his account of touch's role in the formation of subjectivity and contingency in his retelling of the shipwreck, at least when it comes to his intellectual development. Rather, from his early days when he used the tangency of epicurean atoms to challenge the systematic exclusion of chance from scientific laws, Serres has clearly been fascinated by the capacity of the slightest touch to send bodies and events tumbling askew. The work on Lucretius expands the role of touch and contingency in Serres's thought from issues of where and how I know, to questions about the inadequacy of scientific explanations and the space for suffering. Any work on the senses simply makes explicit the implications of earlier work; the experience of touch is one instant in a universe defined and created by colliding, connecting, contingent atoms.

In the weak reading, Serres's account of touch, subjectivity and contingency in *The Five Senses* supersedes his discussion of the *clinamen.* The physical dimension of contingency remains a constant preoccupation, of course, but *The Five Senses* draws out the role of touch that had been previously implied, while simultaneously restricting the scope of contingency. To be sure, structuring subjectivity, and undermining the distinction between the self and the world are

tremendously important roles for contingency and touch, but not when compared to the earlier implication of the *clinamen* in questions of cosmology and the limits of science. At best, the uncaused cause, the unpredictable shift of the atom, finds a new home in the example of touch wandering from finger to lips. The real paradigm of cosmology for Serres moves to the woman applying makeup in the mingling of senses. Touch and contingency become one moment among many other ways of relating to the world.

Both readings, however, dodge the question I ended the previous section with: is touch the only sense that can build this bodily account of contingency? I have established by this point in the work that Serres has good historical precedent for drawing an account of contingency out of touch. Any number of thinkers, from Spinoza, to Sartre, to Merleau-Ponty, have explicitly or implicitly drawn on the etymological roots of contingency in *tangere* to build their accounts of being at once connected and disconnected, rooted and uprooted, dependent and fragile. Serres even has strong reasons for positioning himself in the tradition of Lucretius specifically. Lucretius draws on a mathematical definition of contingency that moves the conversation away from academic distinctions between freedom and necessity to the concreteness of a mathematical problem; he validates or grounds Serres's belief that the experience of contingency is a function of touch by offering a model where everything comes back to the chance touch of atoms cascading into atoms; he offers an alternative model of science that grows out of the unpredictability of the event, rather than the idealized regularity of laws.

Historical precedent and logical necessity are not the same, though. Even if Serres wanted to use this tactile theory of contingency in touch as a starting point, nothing mandates that his account of contingency must draw *solely* on touch, particularly given his insistence on

mingling senses that have historically been held apart. So why not give an account of contingency rooted in a truly mingled sense of sight-sound-taste-touch? The answer, I think, goes back to the theory of subjectivity I outlined in the first section. Touch teaches us to recognize not just the instability of our world, but also the mobility of our selves. Go back to the initial definition of the soul as "the place where the 'I' is decided." How would that work with the senses of sight or sound or taste? We can experience ourselves as both subjects and objects because our soul wanders, leaving at one minute an expanse of our skin the site of all selfhood and subjectivity, at other moments a wooden object. A more expansive understanding of touch could perhaps include the touch of food on the tongue or noise on our eardrums, and thus expand the experiences that contribute to our sense of contingency, but it is not so clear that the other senses could be equally expansive. Serres likes the skin precisely because of its promiscuity. The skin is the most fundamental site of mingling, the place of the mingling of mingling. So why shift the site of contingency, of mingling between self and world, to another, more localized sense?

I, frankly, cannot see any other option than to read Serres as following Lucretius in understanding contact as fundamental to the operation of all of the senses. The senses may mingle for Serres, but only because they meet at the skin. His language traps him, with all of its emphasis on skin and boundaries and tangency, into imagining the senses as only capable of mingling under the auspices of touch. It might be a version of touch that contains the other senses - it certainly is a version of touch that has moved far beyond simple images of hands grasping hammers - but that move nonetheless reasserts a hierarchy of the senses, with all of the problematic historical associations that invokes. It would seem that the senses in that scenario

are not mingling, so much as subsumed under the sense of touch. Why Serres feels justified trading his dream of an egalitarian theory of mingled senses for the hegemony of touch remains a question for the following, final section.

V. The Natural Contract

Contingency may be basic for Serres, found in everything from the touch of a lover's hand that draws out our sense of self, to the swerves and collisions of the *clinamen* in the center of matter, but it does more than create us, or overawe us, or render us vulnerable to the world. Contingency is the central religious experience for Serres, and religion does not end with creation or even the communication of technological angels. Rather, everything in his thought, from his theory of subjectivity, to his tactile version of contingency, to his philosophy of mingled senses pushes him toward a new theology grounded in an ethical obligation to the world. It is for this theology that he sacrifices the egalitarian vision of mingled senses, I argue, and thus it is with this trajectory of his thought I want to end, beginning with his definition of religion and the reasons he attributes to our alienation from it, before ending with his ethics of contingency.

Religion in Serres does not look much like any of the canonical theories, either in religious studies or in their more popular forms. He does not make the mistake of simplistically equating religion with beliefs or reducing it to a community-building institutions among humans. Nor is he particularly interested in traditional terms such as the sacred and the profane. Instead, mid-way through his 1990 book, *The Natural Contract,* he comes to define religion through a reflection on the superciliousness of the modern age when it thinks about the rites, songs, and prayers performed in secret by priests and monks. "Amnesiacs that we are," we imagine that the priests who dressed and fed and coddled their icons mistook out of childlike simplicity the statue

for the divine, and adored it as a god.[308] But, he goes on to write, "No: they were giving to the thing itself, marble or bronze, the power of speech, by conferring on it the appearance of a human body endowed with a voice. So they must have been celebrating their pact with the world."[309] Likewise, we forget why the Benedictine and Carmelite monks arose before dawn to sing, "matins and lauds, the minor hours of prime, terce, and sext."[310] They were not marking the passage of time in the day, "they were sustaining it."[311] Without their rites, they believe, time itself would break. Their prayers and verses carry each moment into the next, sustaining the world, weaving together the continuity of time.

We could read the monks as madmen, or as wild narcissists who believed they had the power to make God stone - if not flesh - and propel the earth each day in its orbit around the sun. To make that ungenerous dismissal, though, misses the very roots of religion in thought. According to experts, Serres argues, the word religion comes from two possible etymological roots. The first is the Latin word *religare,* to attach. The second, more plausible word, means "to assemble, gather, lift up, traverse, or reread."[312] But these experts, he continues, "never say what sublime word our language opposes to the religious, in order to deny it: *negligence.* Whoever has no religion should not be called an atheist or unbeliever, but negligent."[313]

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[308] Michel Serres, *The Natural Contract*, trans. Elizabeth MacArthur and William Paulson (Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press, 1995), 47.

[309] Ibid, 47.

[310] Ibid, 47.

[311] Ibid, 47.

[312] Ibid, 47.

[313] Ibid, 48.

We, the amnesiacs, look with incomprehension on the religion of responsibility of the old at least in part because language alienates and stands between us, the senses, and the physical world. Language abstracts, dealing with the senses only to point out their inadequacies and failures, as when Descartes doubts his hand. To be sure, Serres believes, language once constituted the original insight of religion. Over and over, different cultures and cults have announced their idiom as the fulfillment and perfection of all language. In *Genesis* the word becomes the breath, the spirit moving over the waters before the first day of creation. In *John*, the word becomes flesh, the incarnation of God. In linguistics and forms of Analytic philosophy, language is categorized, and described "scientifically using algorithms, equations, codes, formulae." Or, "in any case," Serres writes in a jab at the contemporary fascination with language among the followers of Derrida and poststructuralism more generally, thought "excludes from philosophy everything not related to language."[314]

More than that, words anesthetize us. They fill our bodies and blunt our experience of our surroundings. Serres first introduces this thought early in the second chapter, returning to the imagery of the ship. This time, instead of throwing him in contact with his soul, the ship is a metaphorical one made of language that disrupts his peace by carrying a buzzing, squawking, rumbling herd of tourists. Their language encases them like the hull of the ship, gliding through the air like water. Encased as they are in thoughts and words, exclamation and excerpts from guide books, the tourists do everything but arrive and observe. "Bathed in silent air, yellow and blue, alone, outside, I give a chance to the given, which the collective ruckus expels; I give a chance to those senses anesthetized by language. The group devotes itself to its own din, revels

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[314] Serres, *The Five Senses,* 246.

in its own roar, notices little outside of itself. It resembles a sick body, rumbling from the clamor of its own organs. What health would it recover if it were one day to fall silent?"[315]

Yet Serres reads signs that this religion of the word will soon pass in the fascination we have with language. "Today we take an active interest in this constant law because we are beginning to lose it. We are witnessing the the last reverberation of the centuries-old shock which caused us to be born at the same time as language; we are witnessing it in its death throes."[316] The increasingly grandiose claims made for language in the 1980s reflect the orgiastic period of decadence before the collapse of an era. We can see the signs of that collapse coming in the decline of prose, Serres believes. Whereas once even farmers spoke with a degree of eloquence, today the most educated alternate between stammering out rambling non-questions and luxuriating in the technical voluptuousness of jargon that obscures and deadens thought. We write badly because old-fashioned precision of language begins to feel strange in our mouths as we tumble into a new regime of thought.

Is this sentiment rank nostalgia? Of course. Philosophers, at least, have been writing terribly for centuries, and decades before Derrideans came to be George Orwell felt comfortable starting an essay with the matter-of-fact observation, "Most people who bother with the matter at all would admit that the English language is in a bad way." Although the constant volley of cliches in the public pains Serres, he welcomes the end of language. "Being enclosed in language," he thinks, "stops us from seeing that the noise that it makes veils and and overwhelms the things which compose our world, and causes them to vanish."[317] By contrast, science, data,

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[315] Serres, *The Five Senses ,* 89.

[316] Ibid,, 246.

[317] Ibid, 88.

the paradigm of thought he imagines coming next, shares with the soothsayers of antiquity an attentiveness to the natural world. Like the haruspices of Rome who watched the birds for signs of the time, scientists assume a world that exists without them and whose meaning perdures, regardless of whether or not the collective can ever give voice to the logic that governs its motions.[318] The future is a messianic one: when science fully arrives and "word becomes flesh," we will be freed from the narrowness of anthropocentrism, the anesthetizing function of words, the sickness of constant divisions into disciplines, categories, organs, abstraction.

In later years, when writing *The Natural Contract,* Serres suggests we will be rescued from abstraction and anthropocentrism despite ourselves. Regardless of the trends of technology or the internal necessity of thought, with the advent of climate change we *must* attend to the global or perish. He opens his argument with an image of two fighters grappling in quicksand, taken from a painting by Goya. "With every move they make, a slimy hole swallows them up, so that they are gradually burying themselves together. How quickly depends on how aggressive they are: the more heated the struggle, the more violent their movements become and the faster they sink in."[319] The plight of the combatants increasingly reflects our own. After centuries of profound indifference to the natural world on the part of Western society, "the mute world, the voiceless things once placed as a decor surrounding the usual spectacles, all those things that never interested anyone, from now on thrust themselves brutally and without warning into our schemes and maneuvers."[320] Climate change has forced us to make the modern equivalent of Pascal's wager: we either believe in it, and we create a natural contract that recognizes the same

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[318] Ibid, 102.

[319] Michel Serres, *The Natural Contract*, 1.

[320] Serres, *Natural Contract,* 3.

obligations to the earth that the social contract demands for fellow humans, or we disbelieve in it and carry on with our lives as before. If the first case, if we are wrong, we lose nothing, but if we are correct we win the right to continue on as agents in history. In the second case, if we are right we win the ability to carry on with the status quo, but if we are wrong we suffer a catastrophe and potentially lose everything.

The problem, the danger, the possibility of this wager comes down to the same point made by Maurice Blanchot forty years earlier in an essay wonderfully titled "The Apocalypse is Disappointing." Reviewing a recent work by Karl Jaspers about the necessity of a new global politics to combat the dangers of a nuclear apocalypse, Blanchot mused about why such works - so unobjectionable on the surface - always seemed to unsatisfactory to him. He concluded that they presupposed a unified global citizen, as if humanity had magically become a gigantic Hamlet pondering whether to be or not to be. And yet, nothing justified that assumption. Countries remain engrossed in their own self-interests, sometimes hostile, sometimes conciliatory toward its neighbor nations, while individuals continue to cheerfully pursue their own desires, hatreds, and demons. In the absence of a genuinely unified humanity that could make decisions about the future of the world as a whole, the apocalypse remained a monstrous banality, capable of wiping the earth out randomly, thoughtlessly, for reasons abstract and peripheral to most of those who would die. In the face of such meaningless destruction, Blanchot concluded, what could we say except the trite but true phrase, "It would be better to prevent it."[321] The global subject Jaspers and now Serres envisioned has yet to be created.

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[321] Maurice Blanchot, "The Apocalypse is Disappointing" in *Friendship,* trans. Elizabeth Rottenberg (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1971), 104.

To reach that global subject, we need individual subjects who recognize their environment as more than something that surrounds them, at a distance; we need subjects who recognize they are co-constituted with and shot through by the material world. In short, we need something very much like the theory of subjectivity Serres developed in *The Five Senses.* Much like Hegel in *The Phenomenology of Spirit,* Serres writes in such a way that each level of his thought is isomorphic to the previous one. His environmentalism is really his theory of subjectivity writ large. Drowning in quicksand is not equivalent to a caress, of course, but both examples assume reciprocity in touch. The lover cannot shift his weight without having his partner's skin flow to meet him in turn, and humans cannot emit carbon into the air without it melting our icecaps in turn. In each scenario Serres imagines a type of radical equality, with the binaries of subject-object, man-nature, and lover-beloved all dissolving and re-forming in turn. There can never be an untouched toucher, or a fixed, stable subject amidst a world of contingency. His demands for a new natural contract depend on this assumption; it allows him to position his ethical demands as based in the pragmatic fact of our co-implication with the physical world.

Until that moment comes when language gives way to science and we recognize ourselves as subjects with skins, imbricated in a world brimming with things that shape us, slap us, caress us, bruise us, trip us, birth us and bury us, Serres can at best compose a transitional book, hemmed in by the words he struggles to escape. Writing in 1985, he wants no truck with the scholarly movements of the day that think of language - or worse, literature - as a matter of semiotics, with words referring to words and signs to signs, theoretical movements that saturate every crevice of the world with words. He seeks, instead, in the words of one commenter, "a

geography, an earth-writing, a writing that mimics the autography of the earth."[322] He wants a language of things and a literature of stories, not signs or symbols, a language that might model the new, healthier relation between thought and things that he thinks we need to save us from the apocalypse.

Above all, he wants his writing to be a map. Not a map in the sense that the encyclopedists of Novalis's day imagined it, as a sort of abstract overview of scholarly terrain that allows for careful navigation among pre-scouted trails, but a map as the tattered reflection of the landscape. A map is not a photo, for Serres, that might dream of capturing the world as it is and reduce the user to an impartial spectator hovering above it. Instead, a map traces and creates a world, as much by leaving out detail as by faithfully following it. A cartographer may decide to compose a map of roads or rivers, mountains or trains, and in that sense impose her vision on what she draws, but at some point her license ends. A map unmoored from the world as it finds it is not a map; it is a painting. The true writer who manages to escape the sterile repetition of books and ideas always in some sense follows the cartographer in her fidelity to the found. Late in *The Five Senses* the cartographer and the writer even blur together as Serres plays on the dual meaning of *pagus* as "page" and "field."[323] "What world is created by the rag stitched patiently from thousands of already ploughed pages and by the thousands we hope are ahead of us," Serres asks, "what country is embellished by them, what land do they map, what body do they dress? [...] How is this map to be stuck on the countryside, to the ground of moving flesh, to erectile spring growth, in celebration of sensation, for it is thus each page is erected. A work of art is

[322] Stephen Connor, introduction to *The Five Senses:A Philosophy of Mingled Bodies*, by Michel Serres, trans. Margaret Sankey and Peter Cowley (London: Continuum International, 2008)*,*15

[323] Michel Serres, *The Five Senses,* 236-7.

dead without this conjunction, sterile without this bracketing together," he judges, before concluding that, "Pages do not sleep in language, they draw their life from the *pagi*, the countryside, the flesh and the world."[324]

The writer-as-cartographer echoes or even mimics the structure of touch in his composition. Just as touch bring together points of sensitivity and dullness, subjectivity and objectivity, so too does Serres see his work as basting together words and the world. His favorite tactic is that of the long variegated list, where clauses nestle within clauses, and metaphors abut and abrade without ever losing sight to the driving point. Take, for a moment, the sentence just cited: "What world is created by the rag stitched patiently from thousands of already ploughed pages and by the thousands we hope are ahead of us, what country is embellished by them, what land do they map, what body do they dress?" Images of sewing, writing, plotting, and adorning all blend together, but thoughtfully, all descending from the play he makes on *pagus,* the page, and *pagus,* the countryside. These images are scenes that make no pretense of being a comprehensive image of the whole, but they are not, for that reason, fragments. They connect, they bring together local realities without rebelling against the possibility of completed meaning or the possibility of a larger reality. The sentence sutures together the images like touch, and touch, in Serres's words, "involves stitching together, place by place. Pointillist, if you like, or impressionist, moving between sections and localities, it creates maps, varieties, veils."[325] Or again, as he writes a few pages later, "Touch involves local patches activated or created by

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[324] Ibid, 238.

[325] Ibid, 138.

contact and brought together into an ocellated fragment, and skates about in flattened out dimensions of irregularly shaped patches and imprecise tacking."[326]

It would be a mistake to imagine Serres does not recognize the tenuousness of his hope that humans may recover from their negligence in order to recognize their responsibility, their continuity with the natural world, their contingency. His entire philosophical project grows out of a commitment to uncertainty and finitude; the most basic insight to all of subjectivity is that we are constituted by chance contact we can neither control nor will. Philosophizing about science can even be seen as the greatest commitment to finitude a thinker can make. Years will roll by and some unknown percentage of the theories that seem so certain today, just like mesmerism and irritability in Novalis's and Schelling's day, will be radically revised or discarded or proved to be deeply, definitively wrong. Yet unlike the frequently despairing, internally oriented line of Protestant thinkers, stretching from Jacobi, to Kant, to Kierkegaard, to Barth, Serres does not leap into despair, or anxiety, or acceptance of his own unacceptability; he makes a fideistic leap into a joyful, pagan affirmation of the material world and our responsibility to it. As he writes, "Without being able to prove it I believe, like soothsayers and haruspices, and like scientists, that there exists a world independent of men...I believe, I know, I cannot demonstrate this world exists without us."[327]

VI. Conclusion

Serres has the most optimistic version of touch addressed in this work. Unlike "that tedious marquis," touch does not violate or traumatize or casually upend lives. He speaks of the caress, not the blow, not the slap, not the grasp, to the clenched fingers wrapped white around

[326] Ibid, 141.

[327] Ibid, 102.

another's arm. That decision limits his analysis by leading to a tremendously sunny vision of contingency. The difficulties and darknesses of his version of contingency are not the abrupt dissolution of self and sanity found in the dark space of Merleau-Ponty's schizophrenics. The responsibility demanded by his new religion depends on envisioning touch as the caress, the most reciprocal and egalitarian of all of the types of touch discussed.

Yet for all of the temperamental differences between Serres and the Romantics before him, in some sense he draws out the logical conclusions of many of their projects. It is no coincidence that Novalis dreamed of an alternate arrangement of the senses nearly two hundred years earlier or, for that matter, that this work began with Schelling and ends with Serres. More than all of the scholars who write monographs on Schelling's influence on psychoanalysis or deconstruction, more than all who write careful explications of Novalis's politics or histories of the influence of the French revolution on the Schlegels, Serres is the real heir to those short years of intellectual ferment in Jena. I can think of no other writer today who theologizes science and poeticizes philosophy in the same way. There are differences between Serres and the German Romantics - Serres writes in the wake of phenomenology and two world wars, to state the two most obvious - but there are deeper similarities in their striving after some revelation of an interconnected, unreachable whole from the position of a finite, contingent subject.

Epilogue

Ending with Serres acts in some ways as a reproach. A reproach to Schelling, who turned his story of battling wills into an explanation of human psychology; to Novalis, who sought in his wondrous contact with the whole a way to heal his battered senses; to Améry, who adopted the language of flesh and incarnation to express his exile from his body; to the whole history, in short, of Lutheran theologians and continental philosophers who psychologize religion without ever attending to the responsibilities, rituals, and demands religion makes *for* the world. Which is not to say that these thinkers are shallow, opportunistically adopting religious vocabulary to make a rhetorical point. It is clear enough that these traditionally religious tropes do some sort of work for them, however intellectualized and foreign their interpretation of religion may be to the orthodox. Nevertheless, for Serres their version of religion is incomplete, self-involved, *negligent.* Religion does not exist solely as a sounding board for our existential woes about suffering, or to offer us an intuition of our insignificance, though it serves those functions well enough. It makes demands.

When I first began writing this work, my concerns were just as psychologically-minded as anyone's in the Lutheran genealogy of philosophy of religion. After years of watching brutal takedowns at talks, seeing indignation feed indignation online, and reading monographs that peddled pique but rarely made it to an audience that might disagree with them, I became convinced there was something deeply wrong with our entire cultural attitude toward feelings. I often found myself thinking of a rebuke Oscar Wilde once made to his former lover, Lord Alfred Douglas, after their relationship had ended in ignominy and prison for Wilde.

> The fact is that you were, and are I suppose still, a typical sentimentalist. For a sentimentalist is simply one who desires to have the luxury of an emotion without paying

> for it. You think that one can have one's emotions for nothing. One cannot. Even the finest and most self-sacrificing emotions have to be paid for. Strangely enough, that is what makes them fine. The intellectual and emotional life of ordinary people is a very contemptible affair. Just as they borrow their ideas from a sort of circulating library of thought - the Zeitgeist of an age that has no soul - and send them back soiled at the end of each week, so they always try to get their emotions on credit, and refuse to pay the bill when it comes in. You should pass out of that conception of life. As soon as you have to pay for an emotion you will know its quality, and be the better for such knowledge. And remember that the sentimentalist is always a cynic at heart. Indeed sentimentality is merely the bank holiday of cynicism.[328]

It seemed to me that the sentimentality Oscar Wilde diagnosed in his lover exactly fit the world around me, where technology has given us an unprecedented opportunity to feed on second-hand misfortune and luxuriate in an aimless wash of emotions we are never expected to act on or temper.

Contingency, for me, was at the center of sentimentality, in part for historical reasons. We are heirs to an European tradition Spinoza gave voice to when he described our experience of the passions by writing, "We are driven about in many ways by external causes, and . . . like waves on the sea, driven by contrary winds, we toss about, not knowing our outcome and fate." Like Spinoza, like Hobbes, our desires ambush us, upsetting us, surprising us, repulsing us, appalling us, and enchanting us. Yet more often than not we neglect the ethical project behind Spinoza's vision of the passions that drove him - like Aristotle, the Stoics, Jane Austen, Charlotte Bronte and nearly every other moral philosopher prior to the eighteenth century - to struggle to subdue his passions. Nowadays, if we think at all about the profound wariness philosophers have historically had of lawless desire, we pity them or revile them as repressive. Rarely do we wonder if they understood something in their careful pruning of their inner lives that we have

[328] Cited in Michael Tanner, "Sentimentality," in *Art and Morality,* ed. Jose Bermudez and Sebastian Gardner (New York: Routledge, 2006), 95.

forgotten, even as we ruefully note the constant bombardment of advertisements and op-eds that mass manufacture desire and divert our libidinal energy into the acquisition of things. In that regard, we descend more truly from Schelling, who may have doubted the goodness of contingent passions, but nonetheless divinized them.

On a narrower academic scale, the Wilde quotation also seemed apt because contingency itself is a concept we have not "paid for" - not really, at least. Like trauma and genealogy, contingency used to *mean* something. It used to have the genuine power to blast open smug positivist assumptions about the nature of history and shake us out of our bland acceptance of the solidity of the past. Now it has settled into comfortable middle age, not so much discredited as taken for granted by a new generation of theorists. Through rote invocation we have drained contingency of life and reduced it to jargon. We have forgotten, if we ever knew, how to recognize it outside of opaque monographs in the darkling prose of someone like Wallace Stegner when he writes, "I am concerned with gloomier matters: the condition of being flesh, susceptible to pain, infected with consciousness and the consciousness of consciousness, doomed to death and the awareness of death. My life stains the air around me. I am a teabag left too long in the cup, and my steepings grow dark and bitter."[329] In writing this work I have done my best to return contingency to the irreducibly literary insights of Stegner, and so practice an ecology of words.

However psychological or intellectual my initial motivations might have been, though, the demands of the work soon intruded and pushed my thought in other directions. I had started with Schelling, Novalis, and early German Romanticism more broadly. While I might have gone

[329] Wallace Stegner, *All the Little Live Things* (New York: Penguin, 1991), 4.

in looking for thoughts on touch, passion, contingency and subjectivity, they were preoccupied with the production of the most sophisticated body of work on nature found in the entirety of the Western canon. Inevitably, half-consciously, nature worked its way into this work elliptically, at first through historical background and then, more substantially, in increasingly prominent discussions of place. This skein might not be the most prominent one, but it is the one I feel most genuinely indebted to these thinkers for spinning.

Through their quintessentially Germanic preoccupation with nature, these thinkers I have lived with for the past several years have taught me to see contingency as more than disruption or destabilization or uprooting that throws the subject back on itself; they have taught me to see it as an experience that invariably returns us to a world. In the moment I recognize my contingency, I may latch on to that world with longing like Schelling, or wonder like Novalis, or nauseated alienation like Améry, or love like Serres. Whatever my mood, a world filled with trees and lakes and buildings and things that touch me always shows up in the moment I recognize my contingency for the simple reason that there is no touch, no contingency, outside of the context of a world.

That revelation brings me back to the religion of responsibility for Serres. He would say, I think rightly, that the psychological costs of contingency can only be half of the story. If we want to recognize the full breadth of contingency and imagine a different, more earthly, less *negligent* basis of religion than continental philosophy has provided to date, we have to begin by admitting something like this.

We live in a world of stones, saplings, lilacs, and books. When I rest my hand on the trunk of an old and time-weathered tree, its crumpled, roughened bark gouges momentarily

whitened rivulets in my palm. And when I let my arm fall, those lines may stream off my wrist and vanish, and my forgetful flesh may plump out exactly as before, but the rock I stoop to pick up is smooth and warm from a private covenant with the sun it never asked me to witness. The flower sends out its scent without me and the book, no matter how many papers I write about the technology that produced it, or the networks of exchange that delivered it, still bears the whiff of cigarettes and the circles of scotch stains some stranger left on its jaundiced pages. It resists me. It exists without me. I may rip it, trample it, burn it, destroy it, but I am until the end articled to finitude, the same as it, a perishable creature no higher or different from the world of things that surround me.

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