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This Thing of Darkness I Acknowledge Mine

Mien, tien.

Ce chien est à moi, disaient ces pauvres enfants. C'est là ma place au soleil. Voilà le commencement et l'image de l'usurpation de toute la terre.

Mine, yours.

This dog is mine, said these poor children. That there is my place in the sun. Thus the start of and the image of the usurpation of the entire world.

Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*¹

Roseau pensant.

Ce n'est point de l'espace que je dois chercher ma dignité, mais c'est du règlement de ma pensée. Je n'aurai point d'avantage en possédant des terres. Par l'espace l'univers me comprend et m'engloutit comme un point: par la pensée je le comprends.

Thinking reed.

It is not at all in space that I should search for my worth, but rather by the accounts of my thought. Ownership of lands will be of absolutely no use to me. In space the universe contains me and swallows me up like a speck: but in thought, I contain it.

Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*²

Introduction: intimate things

In the previous chapters on the 'now' and on a confessional identity, I addressed the issue of what it is that constitutes the contemporary, considered purely in terms of its temporality. In this chapter, I will build on that, specifically in relation to what I will call 'thisness', a form of intimacy with alterity. We can think of the contemporary, as we have seen, as a kind of intimacy of presence; but that also includes, as well as a reflection on the 'now', a further consideration of that which is most close to me, the 'here' as it were. If we are able to add the question of spatial proximity to the temporal question that we

have already considered, we will eventually be able to arrive at a consideration of what Duns Scotus once thought of as *haecceitas*, a ‘thisness’ that marks the very singularity of any entity. One way of putting it would be to say that, in this chapter, my quarry is ‘this thing of darkness [that] I acknowledge mine’,³ Prospero’s description of Caliban.

I want, then, to address the issue of specificity: of ‘thisness’; and we can begin with a consideration of ‘this thing’. At the start of his meditation on ‘The Thing’, Martin Heidegger thinks of the thing in terms of technological issues of intimacy. Modern technology, he says, has effectively reduced all space and time, shrinking history into a kind of now, and also shrinking geography into a ‘nearness’ as he calls it. ‘The thing’, he then says, is what is specific to the here as well as to the now: it is what is ‘near’ me, as it were.

We see a similar motif in fiction, and specifically in Georges Perec’s 1965 novel, *Les choses*. There, Jérôme and Sylvie are presented as a young couple surrounded by a world of modernity in which modern things equate somehow with a happiness that seems forever to elude them. Their life is not only precarious (dependent on things holding together in the world around them), it is also quietly desperate, in a manner seen in American fiction with the case of the young couple in Richard Yates’s *Revolutionary Road*. In Perec, ‘*Il suffisait que quelque chose craque, un jour ... pour que tout s’écroule. Ils n’avaient rien devant eux, rien derrière eux*’ (‘It was enough that something should crack, one day ... for everything to fall apart. They had nothing before or behind them.’)⁴ Their situation brings them into a present that isolates them from all else, makes them intimate purely with each other.

For Jérôme and Sylvie, a fixation on the things of modernity and on their presence with each other in the plenitude of an intense here-now, as they sit in a restaurant, brings them to a supreme moment of ecstatic pleasure, however briefly:

le bonheur était en eux. Ils étaient assis l’un en face de l’autre, ils allaient manger après avoir eu faim, et toutes ces choses – la nappe blanche de grosse toile, la tache bleue d’un paquet de gitanes, les assiettes de faïence, les couverts un peu lourds, les verres à pied, la corbeille d’osier pleine de pain frais – composaient le cadre toujours neuf d’un plaisir presque viscéral, à la limite de l’engourdissement: l’impression, presque exactement contraire et presque exactement semblable à celle que procure la vitesse, d’une formidable stabilité, d’une formidable plénitude. A partir de cette table servie, ils avaient l’impression d’une synchronie parfait: ils étaient à l’unisson du monde.

happiness lay within them. They were seated face-to-face, they were about to eat, having felt hungry, and every thing – the white rough linen tablecloth, the blue mark of a packet of Gitanes, the china plates, the slightly heavy cutlery, the stem glasses, the wicker-basket full of fresh bread – all this always newly encapsulated the framework of a nearly visceral pleasure, at the edge of a dullness: the impression, almost exactly contrary to and almost exactly the same as that which you get from speed, a feeling of a formidable stability, or of a formidable completeness. Starting with this set table, they had the impression of a perfect synchrony: they were at one with the world.⁵

When we turn to the philosophical explication of these matters, as opposed to these fictional treatments, we see in Heidegger, for example (and, perhaps, of course, it being Heidegger), that this kind of situation assumes a characteristically odd set of tongue-twisting linguistic formulations. The thing, he argues, is essentially that which brings together, in a kind of intrinsic unity, what he calls the ‘fourfold’ of earth, sky, divinities and mortals. What he means, essentially, is that the thing – as opposed to the object – is that which draws itself into itself as a specific manifestation of the world’s presence. At the core of the argument, though, is the establishment of an intimacy between the subject and the thing, an intimacy that Heidegger calls ‘nearness’. We will make more of this below, in what follows.

It is important to note as we advance the argument here that, for Heidegger, a thing is not necessarily an object. The object, by contrast with the thing, would be that which, in the thing, is there *for* a subject of consciousness, that which is available, so to speak, to an I that becomes the subject of perception or cognition. In other words, a Heideggerian object can be appropriated, owned; but a thing – which he elsewhere in the essay describes as a ‘gathering’ – is itself, separate, other than a subject and not immediately accessible to a subject. This thing, then, is, in many ways, a ‘thing of darkness’, its intrinsic condition of a radical otherness making it certainly dark, obscure. Perhaps by definition, we might say that a ‘thing’ is that which is not available to a consciousness as such: as Kant has it (though with a much more sophisticated argument and corollary), the thing-as-such or *Ding-an-sich* is not there ‘for’ me. The error made by Jérôme and Sylvie is that they cannot appreciate this distinction; and, good consumers as they become, they see a world of objects, not of things.

At stake in this, for present purposes, is the question of the substantiality or otherwise of the subject, the I that we have been assuming to be here, now, in the confessional mode: what is this thing that I acknowledge as being so intimate with me that I acknowledge it mine own, my *self*; and behind this (via Shakespeare’s Prospero and Caliban) what is the very nature of property and propriety, the status of *le propre* with respect to confessing or expressing or revealing the status and being of the subject? Another way of putting this would be to ask the question concerning responsibility: can I ‘own’ my actions in the world, or are they beyond me, as it were? We can certainly interpret the world; but can we change it? More pressing still, can we be answerable for any action in the world, including an action that either interpret or changes that world, claiming it as a ‘property’ of the self or of ‘my’ identity?

The answers to these questions are fundamental to any philosophy that tries to consider the ethical or political conditions that attend the roles played by human agents in the determination of freedoms. In his *Conditions of Freedom* lectures, John Macmurray indicates the stakes of the argument. Firstly, he takes it that whatever the self might be, it is first and foremost to be characterized in terms of its practical agency or actions, rather than in terms of its theoretical

self-imaginings. Then, he equates action with freedom: 'To act is to be free,' he writes.⁶ However, to state things like this is too bald, too abstract and theoretical. In refining the position, he points to the paradox of what he calls 'the relativity of freedom'. Unlike other animate beings, humans cannot grasp their own nature: 'There is a gap between the reality of our being and its empirical expression,' and so, 'We are and yet we are not ourselves: *and in this is our freedom*.'⁷ It would follow from this that 'my' self has a relation to 'my' actions, certainly; but the question to be explored here is whether that relation is one of identity, with the consequence in which 'I' can be expressed by the things that I determine as 'mine', including those things that are my actions, my bodily extension into space, my relations of 'nearness' with others or with the things of the world and of history.

The crisis of intimacy

The question of the contemporary is, almost by definition as we saw in my previous chapter, a problem of representation. A presentation of the present must always involve a re-presenting, which has the effect of marking the present moment with the passage of time, making it not self-identical or introducing difference into the deictic 'now'.⁸ The contemporary – the 'with-time-ness' of the present moment – thus has the effect of introducing an element of heterogeneity and difference into what is or should be regarded intuitively as homogeneous, self-identical, the self-present as such. This, as we now know, is actually more complicated than it appears.

There is, however, a second very obvious complication to the contemporary. The term, operating as a deictic, shifts its sense depending on where and when it is spoken. It therefore requires a subject of consciousness, an I, in relation to which something can be proposed precisely as the contemporary of the I. Perhaps yet more specifically, it requires *this* I, *hic ego* as it were, the I in all its own intrinsic specificity and singular identity; and that I needs, in turn, something close to it or at least deictically noted by it. It is perhaps better to start to think of the contemporary not in terms of a noun, but rather in terms of a verb. Contemporaneity is *what happens* when an I is produced as a subject sharing a time – even a transitory moment – with an event, and producing in that relation a specific solace, the solace of identification and of identity, the comfort of knowing this thing, even 'this thing of darkness', as mine own, as it were. Contemporaneity in this state of affairs or in these circumstances produces a fiction of the self as an entity that persists in time and across the various events which make up that self's history or biography, the 'self-life-writing', as it were, that allows the I to be stated or to exist.⁹

Contemporaneity, in these terms, would be the drive to turn the Heideggerian 'thing' into an 'object', to appropriate a moment in history; and, simultaneously,

thereby to identify the subject in relation to their objects, through their others. It is no doubt within the necessary intimacies of the confessional text, as our most deictic of literary forms, that we will find this most clearly at work. When Erich Auerbach considered the problem of representation in *Mimesis*,¹⁰ he turned for a telling example to Augustine, whose *Confessions* is a text in which, necessarily almost, the subject of the discourse appears to be present 'here, now'. Augustine, as we have already seen, is at many times at pains to indicate the presence of himself in and through the text, however problematic it may be. In Book 10, Chapter 3, Augustine writes:

What does it profit me, then, O Lord ... I ask, also to make known to me in your sight, through this book, not what I once was, but what I am now? I know what profit I gain by confessing my past, and this I have declared. But many people who know me, and others who do not know me but have heard of me or read my books, wish to hear what I am now, at this moment, as I set down my confessions.¹¹

In passing, we should note here that the question that will arise for us, following this, is the bleak one of whether and in what possible manner one can 'survive' confession. What, indeed, would survival mean, in this context? Can the I persist after the confessional act; or, otherwise expressed, what is at stake in *bearing witness*? Is the I transformed or transfigured by confession; and, if so, what is it that 'survives' the act of confessing? For one such as Albert Camus – for whom 'a guilty conscience needs to confess. A work of art is a confession' – this would be a question about the survival (as opposed to the death) of the author. Remaining for the moment more closely with the Augustinian text and Auerbach's response to it, we see that Auerbach notes in this text a new attitude to time, an attitude which we can see clearly replicated at the beginning of an emergent modernity in the eighteenth-century novel in England, a novel whose concerns were marked by a desire to be 'writing to the minute', to 'this' minute, a journalistic identification with and description of present or modern times.¹²

First, Auerbach indicates the key stylistic break that Augustine makes from his erstwhile normative classical traditions, a stylistic break into a modernity of sorts. Considering a passage from Book 6, Chapter 8, of *Confessions* (in which Augustine describes his young former pupil and friend, Alypius, as a man who all but loses his humanity in his obsessions with the brutal fighting in the gladiatorial arena in Rome), Auerbach notes the prevalence of what he characterizes as a specifically 'Christian' style of parataxis, that linking of narrated events by 'and then ... and then ...', the very condition that E.M. Forster would much later describe as the absence of plot. Here is Auerbach:

Instead of the causal or at least temporal hypotaxis which we should expect in classical Latin ... [we get] a parataxis with *et* [*and*]; and this procedure, far from weakening the interdependence of the two events, brings it out more

emphatically: just as in English it is more dramatically effective to say: He opened his eyes and was struck ... than: When he opened his eyes, or: Upon opening his eyes, he was struck.¹³

This part of *Confessions* is one where Augustine describes in some detail his relation to Alypius, who in some ways is Augustine's own version of a thing of darkness that he has to acknowledge. Alypius has been a friend and student of Augustine; but, as we find out in Book 6, their relation has become somewhat distanced. Alypius is tempted by the 'easy morals' at Carthage; and, though he and Augustine clearly like each other, a dispute between Augustine and the father of Alypius has driven a wedge between them, so that Alypius is no longer technically Augustine's pupil (though Augustine reveals that Alypius does attend at least some of Augustine's lectures). Things get worse still when Alypius goes to Rome, where he becomes totally caught up in the brutal savagery of the gladiatorial arena and its spectacles of blood and frenzy.

But Book 6 has started, not with Alypius at all, but rather with what is essentially a further description of a critical period when Augustine himself converts. He has been struck, he tells us, by the behaviour of his mother, Monica, who unquestioningly obeys the bishop Ambrose,¹⁴ and he is very aware of his mother's belief that he, Augustine, will change. Augustine, with the benefit of hindsight as he writes, now, is able to state that he was about to pass through 'that which doctors call the crisis'.¹⁵ This crisis involves an attitude to God that can only be described as a *crisis of intimacy*, a crisis pertaining to space and to the occupation of space.

We can recall that Augustine began his *Confessions* with the question of whether God was in him or he in God; and that spatial thinking (who 'contains' whom?) persists in Book 6, especially in Chapters 3 and 4. There, he describes the role that Ambrose plays in the conversion. Sitting listening to the preaching of Ambrose, Augustine understands that 'I learned that your spiritual children ... do not understand the words *God made man in his own image* to mean that you are limited by the shape of a human body.'¹⁶ From this, Augustine then again ponders the relation of God to spatial extension, and, crucially, he begins the transition whereby he moves from thinking in spatial terms towards thinking in terms of what we can call that crisis of *representational* intimacy, in the form of a nearness: the likeness that is constitutive of metaphor or simile, as it is also of the representations that shape democracy.

Here is what he writes:

O God, you who are so high above us and yet so close, hidden and yet always present, you have not parts, some greater and some smaller. You are everywhere, and everywhere you are entire. Nowhere are you limited by space. You have not the shape of a body like ours.¹⁷

This is how Chapter 3 ends; and then he starts, in Chapter 4, to consider the nature of this likeness. Essentially, when Augustine speaks of likeness here, he

is indicating the start of his conversion (and, of course, in Chapter 5, he points out explicitly that 'From now on I began to prefer the Catholic teaching').¹⁸ The conversion requires a change of thought; and one in which he turns not simply to faith (for he still indicates the potency of reason here), but rather to a mode of resolving his *spatial* conundrum from the very start of the text.

In brief, what he does here is to resolve the question of spatial perspective by thinking not just of bodies 'approaching' each other, but instead in terms of an essential intimacy, which he calls 'likeness'. He acknowledges himself as a thing of darkness, so to speak, that has now come into an assimilation with God. God acknowledges him, as Prospero does Augustine's fellow African, Caliban. It is as if God is using the very words that Shakespeare will give to Prospero; and it is in this way that Augustine realizes – makes real – his essential intimacy with God, appropriated, as it were, by God. Appropriation here, of course, does not mean simple ownership; rather, it is the 'making proper' of Augustine, or Augustine coming to be or *becoming* what he now is, eternally converting in the text.¹⁹

This assimilation is central to the conversion. From here, Augustine is God's. And, in the same way as God acknowledges Augustine as God's own thing, so now (in likeness to God) Augustine will acknowledge Alypius as his, as Augustine's. A key passage here is at the very end of Book 6, Chapter 8. We have been expecting to hear about some possible reconciliation between Alypius and Augustine; but instead, Augustine disappoints us and defers the telling of any such reconciliation. At the end of the chapter, he describes Alypius almost as a lost cause, a man characterized by 'a diseased mind', obsessed as he has become with the gladiatorial contests in Rome. Then Augustine addresses God: 'Yet you stretched out your almighty, ever merciful hand, O God, and rescued him from this madness. You taught him to trust in you, not in himself. But this was much later.'²⁰

In this, Augustine does several things. Firstly, he defers the story's ending, projecting the temporality of the text forwards in time such that the now of writing is projected to futurity. At the same time, he already reveals the content of that futurity, bringing the future into a direct alignment with the present (Auerbach's 'figural' time, as we will see in a moment). Next, and more importantly, he indicates that God, not Augustine, saves Alypius. However, the chapter has demonstrated such an intimacy between God and Augustine that, essentially, when God saves Alypius he can do so through the mediating body of Augustine himself. It is thus that Augustine 'claims' Alypius, essentially, as a thing of darkness (the diseased mind) that can be acknowledged as 'mine'. That which was other becomes *propre*.

When Auerbach writes about this, considering primarily the style of writing and the prevalence of parataxis, he is essentially concerned with a style whose function is to replace time by space. The modernizing style of allegedly Christian parataxis produces a new and different conception of time, argues

Auerbach. It necessitates what he calls ‘figural’ interpretation, in which events are seen to be linked not by cause and effect and not even in a necessarily linear chronology. Events in figural time are connected when ‘occurrences are vertically linked to Divine Providence, which alone is able to devise such a plan of history and supply the key to its understanding’.²¹ That is to say, in this figural time, events are linked by dint of the fact that their significance always depends upon a single referent (in Auerbach’s case a transcendental one called Divine Providence) which acts as their self-evident and single horizon of interpretation. The secular version of this would be that which assigns the place of Divine Providence to the self: character. In my next section, I shall consider a text that does just this, in a narrative move that refers everything back to the intimacy of the subject.

The emergence of character as the constitution of modernity

We might see the *crisis of intimacy*, as I have called it, in terms of the relations between characters, in terms of the fundamentals of ethics: love (and, behind that, beauty). What Augustine is describing in Book 6 essentially has to do with the movement and power of likeness or becoming-intimate as a founding condition for the possibility of love – in that book, love of God, love of the mother, and love between Alypius and Augustine. We can turn to a later, equally ‘confessional’ text, to get a fuller grasp of this, as a founding condition of the attitudes to time and historical becoming that shape our modernity. The intimacy in question, if we look at a wider range of textual materials, is an intimacy between the I and the things of the world: it is an intimacy that allows us to trace the foundation of what will be the great cornerstone of fiction within modernity, the establishment of character as ‘point-of-view’, of character as *position* or as ‘that which is posited’ and that can ‘acknowledge’ the things of its world.

When René Descartes made his *Méditations*, he also decided that his readers would benefit from a shorter explanation of his text, explicitly one that will outline the theory that governs those meditations. In the 1630s, he set himself the task of writing what is essentially a confessional text, the *Discours de la méthode*, published in 1637. In exactly the same way that Descartes ushers in a modern age of philosophy, so he also ushers in a certain normative mode of thought, and one that becomes foundational to the modern novel and its obsession with – or, if that is felt to be too strong, its grounding in – character.

In the *Discours*, Descartes presents himself as a modestly heroic figure. He begins by indicating that he is rather unexceptional: not only is ‘*le bon sens ... la chose du monde la mieux partagée*’ but also, ‘*Pour moi, je n’ai jamais présumé que mon esprit fût en rien plus parfait que ceux du commun*’

(‘good sense [is] the most widely shared thing in the world ... For my part, I have never presumed that my mind would be in any way more perfect than everyone else’s’).²² He goes on to say that, notwithstanding his unexceptional status, a number of very specific things have happened to him, things that make him what he is as a unique individual. He might be the victim of all sorts of deception in terms of what he thinks about the world and reality; but he wants to submit himself for judgement, in a phrase that is unquestionably part of the confessional lexicon:

je serais bien aisé de faire voir, en ce discours, quels sont les chemins que j’ai suivis, et d’y représenter ma vie comme en un tableau, afin que chacun puisse juger.

I would be very comfortable in revealing, through this discourse, which roads I have taken, and to show my life as in a painting, so that anyone might judge.²³

Fairly quickly, however, we will see him adopt a tone that is closer to the mode and mood of the later Rousseau in his great confessional text, when he indicates more fully the nature of his uniqueness. Having made the decision to doubt and to search for truth within himself, he is quick to point out that this is a dangerous path, and not one to be recommended to everyone:

La seule résolution de se défaire de toutes les opinions qu’on a reçues auparavant en sa créance, n’est pas un exemple que chacun doive suivre ... Mais, comme un homme qui marche seul et dans les ténèbres, je me résolus d’aller.

The sole resolve – to rid oneself of all the opinions that one has received beforehand as beliefs – is not an example that each and everyone should follow ... But, like a man who walks alone and through darkness, I resolved that I would go forward.²⁴

In this last analysis, therefore, Descartes does eventually present himself as unique, a very specific thing, a ‘thing that thinks’ a thinking substance, as it is reported in the lengthier and more substantial *Méditations*.

This thing-that-thinks is characterized as a man who, though fully aware of what we would now call cultural relativism, nonetheless believes that there are some fundamental truths available to him, and that he will find them by examining his own experience and thought, rather like examining his own conscience. What he realizes, aware as he is of how truths seem to vary depending on one’s culture (he gives the examples of how different the world will look if one is Persian or Chinese, for instance), is that he can come to know his *inner* world of thought. Very importantly, he argues that he cannot know with any certainty at all the world of exteriority. Our thoughts are at our disposal, so to speak, and available to us in ways that the exterior world and its happenstances are not:

il n’y a rien qui soit entièrement en notre pouvoir, que nos pensées, en sorte qu’après que nous avons fait notre mieux, touchant les choses qui nous sont extérieures, tout ce qui manque de nous réussir est, au regard de nous, absolument impossible.

there is nothing that lies entirely in our power, other than our thoughts, so that after we have done our best, with regard to exterior things, all that fails to remain is, with respect to us, absolutely impossible.²⁵

Given this, he can turn inwards and produce the famous *je pense, donc je suis*, as his first principle of philosophy or metaphysics. In Part 4 of the *Discours*, he turns explicitly to the order of his metaphysics, and comes to the general conclusion that what he can know is, fundamentally, the laws of geometry. These laws are fundamentally laws of space and of proportion. He can prove things about a triangle, say, without the necessity of there actually being any material triangle in existence. This is to say, having started out by claiming that his project is fully *empirical*, he ends up by suggesting that what he experiences is always in the world of his own inner mind, and therefore that he is simply examining the content of his own mind, a mind that, he says, is explicitly divorced from the body and from exteriority as such. His is what we have termed in earlier chapters a purely *formal* knowledge.

The ‘confession’ of Descartes, then, is one where, actually, he cannot be held accountable for anything historical, for anything that actually happens in a material realm of exteriority. This, I contend, is why he begins the text by claiming his likeness to others, but ends it by stressing his singularity, his unlikeness. For him, then, there is no crisis of intimacy with other human beings, no Augustinian *conversion*; instead, only a ‘spirit of geometry’ that tells him how the world *ought* to be, not how it is.

Some years later, another French thinker – almost certainly Blaise Pascal – wrote another brief text, a *Discours sur les passions de l’amour*. Pascal (assuming his authorship) makes a distinction in this discourse between ‘*deux sortes d’esprit: l’un géométrique et l’autre qu’on peut appeler de finesse*’ (‘two kinds of mind: the one geometric and the other what one might call a spirit of finesse’).²⁶ The first of these – the geometric spirit – is characterized by solidity and inflexibility: certainty, in short, the certainty that one has with what Descartes had called clear and distinct ideas. The second, however, has a suppleness of thought that allows for the subject to perceive the world of exteriority and to have a relation with it. As he writes it:

L’esprit de finesse ... a une souplesse de pensées qui l’applique en même temps aux diverses parties aimables de ce qu’il aime : des yeux il va jusqu’au cœur et par le mouvement du dehors il connaît ce qui se passe au-dedans.

The spirit of finesse ... has a suppleness of thought that can apply it simultaneously to likeable parties that are different from those that one loves: from the eyes, it proceeds to the heart, and it is able to understand what is going on in the inner world from looking at external gestures.²⁷

With this kind of spirit, love becomes possible, in short. We have the possibility of the crisis of intimacy that Augustine described, a state of affairs in which it

becomes possible to engage with another human being, and acknowledge them in their separate uniqueness, a uniqueness that is modified by likeness, the nearness that makes them a ‘thing’, as it were, as opposed to being an object (which would solidify the identity of the subject perceiving them).

Pascal also wrote explicitly ‘Sur la conversion du pécheur’ – ‘On the conversion of the sinner’ – probably around 1653. That text seems to extend the question of love, and takes it more fully into a consideration of what happens when a sinner converts or turns to God. Pascal describes the movement as one where the sinner becomes less fixated on the things of the world or exteriority that have previously been her or his solace. There is a radical disturbance in the sinner’s mind or soul, leading to a radical uncertainty:

D’une part, la présence des objets visibles la touche plus que l’espérance des invisibles, et de l’autre la solidité des invisibles la touche plus que la vanité des visibles. Et ainsi la présence des uns et la solidité des autres disputent son affection.

On one hand, the presence of visible objects touches it [the sinner’s soul] more than the hopes placed in those that are invisible, and on the other hand the solidity of those invisible touches it more than the vanity of those things that are seen. And thus the presence of the one and the solidity of the other fight for its affections.²⁸

Importantly, the question now becomes one of establishing not only intimacy with God but actual assimilation to God, appropriation of the sinner by God, as it were: the acknowledging by God of this thing of darkness, the sinner. The sinner comes to realize the transitoriness of all that has given them pleasure; but realizes equally, and by contrast, the essentially non-temporal nature of God. Things that one loves become less innately lovable if they are transitory, argues Pascal; and thus, by contrast, God becomes the most obvious site for a more fulfilling happiness:

Sa raison [la raison du pécheur] aidée des lumières de la grâce lui fait connaître qu’il n’y a rien de plus aimable que Dieu et qu’il ne peut être ôté qu’à ceux qui le rejettent, puisque c’est le posséder que de le désirer, et que le refuser, c’est le perdre.

His reasoning [the reasoning of the sinner] helped by the light of grace makes him realize that there is nothing more lovable than God and that he can only be taken away from those that reject him, since *to desire him is to possess him*, and to refuse him is to lose him [emphasis added]²⁹

Here, love is characterized in terms of a possession; and, importantly, this possession depends upon the sinner realizing what Auerbach calls ‘figural’ time: that is, the sinner has to eschew their historical being and attachment to the things of the world, realizing the world’s temporal nature and thus its transitoriness. This takes us back into Augustine territory and back directly into the question of this figural time.

In its literary manifestations, figural time constructs the position of an omniscient narrator whose single point of view on the ostensibly divergent elements of the narrative guarantees the univocal meaning of the entire story. 'Figural time' is essentially the phrase that Auerbach uses to characterize the position of God, as that which unifies what are ostensibly 'fragments' of time that have no immediate or unmediated apparent intrinsic link: it is the time that unifies all world history. This can become, in fiction, either the position of an omniscient narrator or, more usually in fact, simply what we call 'character' in terms of point of view. The point of view gives the figure, or the ethos, in relation to which diverse happenings in the story can be unified or in relation to which they can make coherent sense.

To put it in the terms I have used above, in this figural time, events are linked by the fact that the subject position that marks their temporality is that of a transcendent God, who sees all 'contemporaneously'. The result, as Auerbach points out, is the *homogenization* of time and, as a corollary, the production of what becomes known as a 'Universal History', a history in which each and every event or happening is fundamentally a part of the same single story, interlinked in a way that produces a *spatialized* pattern or geometric image. In fiction, the homogenization is that which apparently makes the character self-identical, that which gives them a local habitation and a name.

Thus, in this state of affairs, we can prioritize 'point of view' in narrative: point of view becomes important – as the relativizing term that it is intended to be – if and only if we have or if we can infer a universalizing and homogenizing viewpoint that transcends all others: a plenitudinous eye or God. In such a history, of course, there can actually be no 'event' as such: such a history precludes the possibility of change in time, and that would be the very substance of an event or of a becoming.

The question of capital is also involved in this. In the case of Jérôme and Sylvie, in Perec's *Les choses*, we can trace a clear trajectory to their lives. When they first start to have money, very early in the novel, the things of their world all become as new: '*Ils changeaient, ils devenaient autres ... Tout était nouveau*' ('They were changing, they were becoming different people ... Everything was new').³⁰ Towards the end of the novel, 'exiled' in Tunisia, they find themselves in an Arab market, where they buy nothing: '*Ils passaient, amusés ou indifférents, mais tout ce qu'ils voyaient demeurait étranger, appartenait à un autre monde, ne les concernait pas*' ('They would pass by, amused or indifferent, but everything they looked at remained foreign, belonged to another world, had nothing to say to them').³¹ their whole world at this point goes hollow. The novel traces the typical bourgeois existence in which people 'discover' or reveal themselves in and through 'their' objects, only to find later that this is a vacuous 'exoticism' – what Marx would have called alienation – that deprives them of any historical existence.

Modernity as a mood and as a mode

It is perhaps for these reasons that Lyotard took a particular interest in Augustine, claiming him as a paradigmatic example of a certain version of modernity. Like Auerbach, Lyotard considers 'the modern' to be a matter of mood or of attitude (a matter, if you will, of the 'subject-position', the ethos of an I) rather than as a simple indicator of temporality, or of modernity construed in terms of before-or-after-ness or mere chronology. For him, the modern is very definitely not to be understood simplistically as a period (and thus, by logical extension, the postmodern cannot be thought of simply as that which comes 'after' the modern). In short, we might say that 'the modern' or even, more controversially, cultural modernity itself, is a matter of the establishment and legitimation of a subject position that replaces a mystical God with an implied totalizing 'point of view', an *implied* if not ever actually existing or actually graspable omniscience.

There have been various versions of this, of course; but my contention here is that they are all simply variants on this theme of the legitimation of an implied transcendent point of view or ethos. We might think, for example, of Hegel's conception of *Geist*, and that great *Geistesgeschichte* in which 'Spirit' progressively approaches the condition of 'Absolute Knowing'. Hegel, of course, was Christian; but, for more obviously secular versions of this, we might think of the growth of the European academies and their drive to become some kind of repository of total knowledge. At what might seem a more workaday level, we can think of Samuel Johnson's great *Dictionary of the English Language* project, the establishment of a kind of 'ur-text' that contains the possibility of all that can be said or meant. More ambitious still is the *Encyclopédie* of Denis Diderot, for example; and, alongside this, we can see that rival project, written about extensively by Alasdair MacIntyre, of the construction of the ninth edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*.³²

In all of this, what we see is the development in the grand philosophical style of something that happens at a micro-level in literature, with the development of European fiction in particular. In fiction, especially in the novel, we see the gradual normativity of the text being established around competing points of view, competing characters or *ethoi*, each complete in themselves, but each having only a relative knowledge. Behind them all lie what we have long since learned to call implied authors, such as a Gustave Flaubert or a James Joyce, ironizing and distanced; and, in that establishment of a distance, authors forging precisely the very opposite of what Augustine finds in his relation to Alypius.

What happens here is that the text proposes a number of specific or relativized points of view, which we call characters; and the relativism proposes, without necessarily realizing it, an implicit totalizing point of view, a point of

omniscience that is offered as possibility or as potential. One way of putting this would be to say that the God is still there, but has re-established a distance, and thus hands over the intimacy to the relation between characters and reader: in the secular novel, we are tempted by the possibility of an absolute knowing – that is what writers like Joyce or Flaubert offer – without ever actually grasping it. They are trying to reopen time. The omniscient point of view – that which is proper to the realization of a figural time – proposes only homogeneous time, a time that ‘takes no time’ to fulfil itself, so to speak. Homogeneous time knows no history. In fictions where the writer establishes a distance from such a point of view, rather than an intimacy with it, what we witness is the attempt to reinstate the very possibility of history, of a time that knows no fulfilment and that remains open to futurity.

These characters in modern fiction are rather like those Persians and Chinese described by Descartes in his *Discours*. There, we recall, Descartes begins by acknowledging his own historical position: he is aware of the great tradition of knowing that precedes him, the tradition of knowledge as encompassed in the great books. He argues that, though it is important to read and know those books, one must remember that they are effectively set in the past; and we need instead to be alert to what is happening in the present moment. The danger, as he sees it, is that ‘*lorsqu’on est trop curieux des choses qui se pratiquaient aux siècles passés, on demeure ordinairement fort ignorant de celles qui se pratiquent en celui-ci*’ (‘since one is too curious about things that went on in centuries past, one remains ordinarily extremely ignorant of what’s going on in the present one’).³³ So, he will concentrate on ‘looking within’, as Virginia Woolf would much later put it in her famous essay on ‘Modern Fiction’.

In doing this, though, he is aware that what he is essentially doing is removing any underpinning of his own thought. He compares his work to the rebuilding of a house, when one has knocked down the previous abode. In this state, one needs a *provisional* place to be; and he argues that, even though Persians and Chinese might have many better thoughts than those of which he will be capable, nonetheless he thinks it wiser to take as normative the values and customs of those among whom he has to live. Here, what is happening is that he is accepting pragmatically what we will later call ideology: accepting unquestioningly the underlying norms and values of his peers. Thus, while we can ‘visit’ the views of others, nonetheless, Descartes will always eventually find a philosophy that is consistent with what is taken for knowledge in the totality of his contemporary world. That becomes his normative horizon. This is what makes the *Discours* not only a confessional text, but also a proto-*Bildungsroman*.

In the modern European novel, we become equally aware of such relativism; but the novel proposes the placing of the reader in the implied point of view of total knowledge. In short, we might say that the project of modernity – in

literature at least – is to make the reader into a substitute for a lost or absent God. This is a variant on the position described by Jean-Paul Sartre, when he wrote that ‘the best way to conceive of the fundamental project of human reality is to say that man is the being whose project is to be God ... To be man means to reach toward being God. Or if you prefer, man fundamentally is the desire to be God.’³⁴ The novel is the modern European form that gives a secular substitute for such a desire.

Lyotard adds to the discussion of Augustinian temporality a further specifically ‘modern’ element, derived from the philosophy of what we now usually call the early modern period. He adds the subject-position in our other great confessional text, Descartes’s *Discours de la méthode*. That subject-position ascribes to itself precisely the mastery implicit in the Augustinian notion of Divine Providence, and enables thereby the production of the specific literary form of omniscient, plot-dominated narrative, such as we have it developed and extended in the novel at least from the European eighteenth century onwards. The culmination of this combination of temporal attitude (temper) and masterful subject upon whom the meanings of history itself are seen to depend is in the production of the *Bildungsroman*, a form in which the horizon of interpretation, and thus the ultimate referent, is not a form of Divine Providence but rather the secularized version of this: a unified, if fictional, human self, a human subject thought to persist across a period of time: a locus, therefore, of stability amidst change, or a locus whose very identity as stability allows us to perceive change at all, from a ‘point of view’. That is to say, of course, that this produces the human subject in the form of a transcendent monotheistic – indeed Christian – God. The trick of the novel as a form is to deny the actual existence of a God, while producing the sense of an ‘absolute knowing’ that characterizes the reader. Instead of there being an intimacy between God and human, there is a kind of total identification of the ‘God-project’ in the place of the reader, who assumes that transcendent position or spatial point of view of omniscience, however deferred that omniscience may be by the plot. The foundation for all such modern fiction is Descartes, in whose work we see the ‘secularization’ of God in the form of an intimacy with human character, the ‘Self’.

In this, the reader ‘arrests’ the flow of time, or rather they are the locus for that arrest; but in being so, they also arrest their own possibility of engaging with history or with events. The task for the Benjaminian historical materialist is to make the activity of reading properly historical, to make it an event.

Auerbach indicates quite clearly what happens in this state of affairs to the notion of the contemporary, or the now: ‘the here and now is no longer a mere link in an earthly chain of events, it is simultaneously something which has always been and which will be fulfilled in the future ... This conception of history is magnificent in its homogeneity.’³⁵

We might set alongside this passage an interesting comment from Lyotard's essay on 'Time Today', in which he addresses Leibniz's *Monadology*. From this text, Lyotard points out that:

God is the ultimate monad to the extent that he conserves in complete retention the totality of information constituting the world. And if divine retention is to be complete, it must also include those pieces of information not yet presented to the incomplete monads, such as our minds, and which remain to come in what we call the future. In this perspective, the 'not yet' is due only to the limit on the faculty of synthesis available to the intermediary monads. For the absolute memory of God, the future is always already given. We can thus conceive, for the temporal condition, an upper limit determined by a perfect recording or archival capacity. As consummate archivist, God is outside time.³⁶

The function fulfilled in relation to time by God for Augustine is analogous to the function fulfilled by forms of information technology today: it is the very eradication of historicity as such. Lyotard goes on:

Complete information means neutralizing more events. What is already known cannot, in principle, be experienced as an event. Consequently, if one wants to control a process, the best way of doing so is to subordinate the present to what is (still) called the 'future', since in these conditions the 'future' will be completely predetermined and the present itself will cease opening on to an uncertain and contingent 'afterwards'. Better: what comes 'after' the 'now' will have to come 'before' it.³⁷

Perec's *Les choses* dramatizes this, as Perec points out that, in twentieth-century France, a young man, having done his studies and his military service, effectively has his life before him, but a life already lived, in which there will be no new events no matter how much may 'happen' to him:

il sait avec certitude qu'un jour viendra où il aura son appartement, sa maison de campagne, sa voiture, sa chaîne haute-fidélité. Il se trouve pourtant que ces exaltantes promesses se font toujours fâcheusement attendre: elles appartiennent ... à un processus dont relèvent également ... le mariage, la naissance des enfants, l'évolution des valeurs morales, des attitudes sociales et des comportements humains.

he knows with certainty that a day will come when he will have his apartment, his house in the country, his car, his hi-fi. He nonetheless finds that, irritatingly, these great promises make him wait: they belong ... to a process out of which come also marriage, the birth of children, the development of moral values, social attitudes and human behaviours.³⁸

In this state of affairs, as Jérôme and Sylvie believe, impatience becomes the twentieth-century virtue. Seeing the future already in store, as it were, they know they can wait; but they want the future to always already have arrived: '*C'est en cela sans doute qu'ils étaient ce qu'il est convenu d'appeler des intellectuels*' ('It's no doubt this that makes them what we have come to call intellectuals').³⁹ They find fault in everything because the world fails, in the present moment, to

live up to their abstract idea of it, an idea whose realization lies in the future. They cannot open themselves to time, and to the event which would mean that the future might actually remain unknown, or, better, heterogeneous with respect to the presence of the subject here-now. That is to say, they cannot see that the things of the world may *not* exist simply and purely *for them* or for appropriation by them and their consciousness. Like intellectuals, they feel they need to *understand*, almost as a privilege.

My collocation of Auerbach and Lyotard helps strengthen the claim that a Universal History is, paradoxically, peculiarly devoid of historicity. In its homogeneity and implicit simultaneity, its time is oddly 'empty', emptied of events; and, in its 'magnificent homogeneity', its time is also extraordinarily anti-social or at least non-social, non-communal: it is a time that cannot be lived 'together' and is thus 'non-contemporary', anathema to any now-time or *Jetztzeit*. If the ultimate referent of the now is always the transcendental, be it God or a fictionalized transcendental subject, then the now as experienced by specific human agents is always entirely isolated from the temporal existence of all other human agents. Emmanuel Levinas indicates the contradiction implicit in this conception of temporality when he shows, in *Le temps et l'autre*, that 'time is not something made by a singular and isolated subject ... rather it is the very relation of a subject with others'.⁴⁰

In what remains of this present chapter, I shall indicate, firstly, the contradictory philosophy of identity at work in the prevalent conception of homogeneous time; and, secondly, I shall advance the case for a different order of temporality, one that is capable of attending to the specificity of 'the thing here', and also to the possibilities of experience of 'thisness'.

Time under arrest

Aesthetic modernism, by which I mean here that explosion of aesthetic experimentation across Europe from 1848 to 1939, infiltrating the United States at the turn of the century, advances a specifically new conception of the human subject of consciousness. As Virginia Woolf famously put it, 'on or about December 1910 human character changed'.⁴¹ In some ways, the conception of this new subject is extremely optimistic, in the weak sense (the non-philosophical sense) of that term: the subject's individuality, considered as something pre-existing its historical construction or enactments, is seen as a bolster for the emergent modern democracy in which an individuated autonomy is the condition of social existence.⁴² Yet it is exactly such an autonomy which – in its deviation into the validation of individualism and of the priority of the subject over the objects of a supposedly exterior or externalized world – eradicates historicity (that exterior world) precisely at the moment when it appears most fully to be internalizing the movement of history itself.

Put more bluntly: the human subject is no longer seen in this as simply the victim of a history to which it is subjected, as an emergent bourgeois democracy claims the principle of subjective autonomy and the possibility of active intervention and determination of history by the individuated subject of consciousness. 'I' am/is free precisely to the extent that I am 'I', or, axiomatically, the modern subject is free to shape and determine its own history. Yet this, while seeming to offer the subject the possibility of internalizing the movement of history (and thus controlling it, subduing it to the identity of the self), does so at the cost of that very heterogeneity which is of the essence of historical change. Instead of history as event (in the Lyotardian sense of the event as the non-predetermined), we have history as narrative, in which the identification of the subject of the narrative is of paramount importance and in which such an identification makes the subject omniscient, transcendent and therefore expelled from the movement of history itself: in short, the subject as Descartes, so to speak. Modernism, in this Cartesian mode and manner, claims and denies history simultaneously: it generates the 'scandal' or threat of human diversity in order to forestall the possibilities of genuine, fundamental historical change or in order to forestall events.

This is clear in the thinking of a writer such as T.S. Eliot. Like Augustine, he too pondered the question of time, both in his poetry and in his criticism. While in *Four Quartets* he appeared to be able to conceptualize a present moment which is rendered non-self-identical through the irruption into the present of time past and of time future, in his criticism such a state of affairs seems to elude him. The most obvious theoretical site for discussion here is his essay on 'Tradition and the Individual Talent' in which he argues – seemingly at one with the thought of the later *Four Quartets* – for the necessity of acquiring 'tradition', an acquisition that requires a specific critical mood or attitude. It is part of the work of a critic, argues Eliot, to see literature whole, rather akin to the way in which history might appear to Divine Providence in Auerbach's description of 'figural' interpretation; and, writes Eliot, 'this is eminently to see it not as consecrated by time, but to see it beyond time; to see the best work of our time and the best work of twenty-five hundred years ago with the same eyes'.⁴³

Yet this tradition, like the historical sense which Eliot claims is so crucial to it, is not inert. He writes that:

The historical sense involves a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence ... The historical sense, which is a sense of the timeless as well as of the temporal and of the timeless and the temporal together, is what makes a writer traditional. And it is at the same time what makes a writer most acutely conscious of his place in time, of his contemporaneity.⁴⁴

For Eliot, of course, the point of acquiring such tradition is in order to facilitate the becoming of the 'individual talent', a talent marked by a specific *identifiable* consciousness whose validation or legitimation lies not (as Eliot

indicates at length himself) in personality, but rather in the subject as the *medium* for poetry and for the tradition itself. In this arrangement, history (or the tradition) becomes dependent for its articulation (or its narration) on the identity of the subject of consciousness in whose grasp (or voice) it is recorded or archivally maintained. Eliot, thus, sees tradition as instrumental in the construction of a philosophy not of personality but of identity; and such a philosophy is inimical to temporality itself. It is for this reason that Eliot can comfortably claim in his poetry that easy intimacy among past, present, future: all three are dependent upon the logical priority of the subject who narrates – in ‘figural’ fashion – their interrelations or their fundamental identification with each other. Identity – and this is the meaning of Levinas – is the counter to history; and the formulation, thus, of a history based upon the priority of the modern autonomous subject is inherently anti-historical or non-historical. I do not claim that this state of affairs is anything other than paradoxical, even counter-intuitive.

Walter Benjamin would seem to be, at first glance, an ally in countering the figural or sacred interpretation of history implicit in Eliot’s position. In his ‘Theses on the Philosophy of History’, he consistently distinguishes historical materialism (which is good) from historicism (which is bad). He writes that, ‘Historicism rightly culminates in universal history’, and goes on to argue that ‘Universal history has no theoretical armature. Its method is additive; it musters a mass of data to fill the homogeneous, empty time’.⁴⁵ That additive principle, essentially the very parataxis (‘and then ... and then ...’) adverted to by Auerbach, reappears here with its concomitant product: homogeneous, empty time. For Benjamin – more restless, less optimistic, than Auerbach in these matters – such a time is not yet and cannot yet be history: ‘Materialist historiography, on the other hand, is based on a constructive [i.e. geometric rather than additive] principle. Thinking involves not only the flow of thoughts, but their arrest as well.’⁴⁶

It is such an ‘arrest’ that is to be taken up in later philosophy as the attitude of time required for the ‘event’: that eruption into a theoretically comprehensible schema or order of things of some unforeseeable item which demands, but which cannot have, its recuperation into the predetermining theory which has produced its possibility in the first place. This ‘arrest-event’ is that which makes no sense according to the terms, conditions and norms of the very theory of history that has produced it for our inspection. ‘Auschwitz’ has become a classic example of this for some postmodern thinkers in that Auschwitz ostensibly cannot be ‘explained’ by the terms of modernity and enlightenment, even if it has been produced in terms recognizable to the very same reason that shapes enlightened modernity as such.⁴⁷ The eruption of the event is thus the interruption of our norms by something rather ‘singular’ (idiosyncratic, *purely* and literally ‘autonomous’, giving itself its own laws); and, insofar as it is singular in these terms, this event is the introduction of – or,

better, *presentation* of – that which was not promised or foreseen, and thus of that which was not always already *represented*, always already a matter of representations.⁴⁸

The idea of a ‘contemporary’ which would be a ‘real presence’ – not implicitly subject to representation – is important to Benjamin. He argues, as we have seen, for the importance of the *Jetztzeit*, a ‘now-time’ in Thesis 14, claiming there that ‘History is the subject of a structure whose site is not homogeneous, empty time, but time filled by the presence of the now.’⁴⁹ So far, this appears to be the demand for a different order of time from that enjoyed by Eliot. Benjamin appears to criticize historicism on the grounds not only that it represents history as seen from the point of view of the victors in those struggles that are constitutive of history itself, but also – and more fundamentally – on the grounds that it *represents* at all, and especially from a *point of view*, a term whose very semantics stress the idea of a spatialized homogeneous time. The *Jetztzeit* in its full ‘nowness’ is inimical to the Eliotic principle that time past is contained in time future, or that past, present and future all commingle under some sacred sign or horizon of interpretation. And yet, in Appendix A to his ‘Theses’, Benjamin comes so close to Eliot as to be almost indistinguishable from him. It is in this appendix that he argues for a complexity in the notion of historical cause and effect. He rejects simple linearity, describing that as a way of telling history that is like telling rosary beads (in ‘Christian’ fashion), and argues instead that the historian must ‘grasp the constellation which his own era has formed with a definite earlier one. Thus he establishes a conception of the present as the “time of the now” which is shot through with chips of Messianic time’.⁵⁰

This ostensible indecision between two contrasting notions of time is perhaps resolved slightly more clearly in Thesis 16. There, Benjamin argues for the indispensability of a concept of the now which is not merely a transition, a now in which time has, as it were, stopped. In the argument, we get an especially vigorous metaphor, which is all the more striking or eventful and arresting for the fact that nothing elsewhere in the ‘Theses’ prepares the reader – or indeed Benjamin – for it:

Historicism gives the ‘eternal’ image of the past; historical materialism supplies a unique experience with the past. The historical materialist leaves it to others to be drained by the whore called ‘Once upon a time’ in historicism’s bordello. He remains in control of his powers, man enough to blast open the continuum of history.⁵¹

The first sentence here is unsurprising, and strengthens the claim that there are two competing conceptions of history in contest: the universal and homogenizing set against the discrete, particular and heterogeneous. But from where does the metaphor which suddenly follows this sentence emerge? What we have here is not an argument as much as a characterization of the historical materialist: a fictional self or subject in a narrative situation. Benjamin produces,

through the metaphor, a construction of the historical materialist as a character in a tale; he is identified as the austere and manly master of the self or of his own subjectivity, the autonomous ruler of his own body. He is the autonomous subject, unthreatened, unseduced by any dissolution of his material corporeal self, a self dedicated to itself, determined to open a future rather than dwell in the arms of a female past of 'Once upon a time'. Yet the effect is, nonetheless, that of the narrative which begins 'Once upon a time, there was a historical materialist who, though tempted by the seductions of the world, yet remained above them, the austere subject of a consciousness in control of his objects or those others against who he defined himself and maintained himself in readiness for worldly actions.' This self-dramatizing is a re-run of Descartes, the modern philosopher doubting the external world and then refiguring it entirely based upon his own *dubio* and *cogito*. It is Augustine, the paratactician, who wanted to resist the seductions of the world – but 'not yet'; it is Eliot, the sacred critic, austere denying personality (and thereby indirectly gaining it).

What remains constant throughout these examples is the construction of a philosophy of identity (or more precisely a philosophy of subjectivity) which, as I have indicated, is not only modernist but also non-secular (Christian, messianic, sacred) and hence profoundly anti-historical or non-historical. The 'now' of modernity does not – cannot – exist as such. It can only exist as a transitional and asymptotic moment between a past and a future. The function of history in these terms is to bolster the illusion or fiction of the self, a self which had been threatened by temporality itself right from the moment in Enlightenment when Hume argued against any philosophy based on the foundational principle of a stable selfhood. For the remainder of this present chapter, I shall look at a counter-position to what I have described here as the denial of history that we usually call 'modernity', the modern or (in management-speak) modernization.

The escape from intimacy; confession as the failure of *Selbstdarstellung*

For Levinas, time is the condition of our relation with alterity as such. That is to say: time is the condition of our being and of our sociality. The 'other' that conditions the self is a temporal and not a spatial other. I want to extend this slightly and to make the case that the now – or contemporaneity – can occur as a historical event if and only if it is marked by an intrinsic heterogeneity: now cannot happen now, so to speak.

In the 'figural' view of the now as described above, history is homogenized: the singularity of the historical event is lost under the sign of representation as the historian, ideally omniscient, constructs a universal history in which

the single event makes sense as the representation of another event in relation to which it constructs its horizon of interpretability, or in which semiotic constellations are constructed, to be mastered by the individual consciousness of the subject of history, the human and individually identified agent.

I propose here instead a different notion of contemporaneity, one which demands the necessity of precisely attending to singularity and to the heterogeneity of the events constitutive of historical activity, agency and being. The philosophy which will help us to lay this most bare is perhaps that of Clément Rosset. Across a series of books, Rosset argues that the real is real if and only if it cannot be duplicated, and hence that an event is real (or 'historical' to put it in the terms of my argument) if and only if it is inimical to a primary representation, if and only if it is conditioned by its idiosyncrasy and its unimaginability.⁵²

While the source of an offensive modernity such as that described earlier might be found in Augustine's Christian parataxis, we might find an alternative – I am tempted to say postmodern – attitude or mood in the thinking of Duns Scotus. I do not propose here an in-depth engagement with Scotist philosophy; rather, all I wish to retain from his thinking is the familiar importance of *haecceitas* or 'thisness': that attention to specificity which is recapitulated not only in the philosophy of Rosset but also in that of Deleuze, Agamben and other recent 'anatheoretical' thinkers.⁵³ Instead of prioritizing the individuality of the subject (as in the modern), Scotus prioritizes the individuality of the object of cognition, in an uncanny prefiguration of the 'fatal strategies' that we find in the much more recent, and often avowedly 'postmodern', thinking of Jean Baudrillard.⁵⁴ For Scotus, the world consists of singularities; and, for the poet who was most directly and overtly influenced by Scotist philosophy, Gerard Manley Hopkins, such an attitude resulted in a peculiar warping of language. There is no prevalence of parataxis in Hopkins's poetry, but rather the attempt to render everything in an object at once: its presence or nowness.

The peculiarity of Hopkins's language is increasingly revisited and made apparent in some more recent writing. There is a stylistic feature developing, influenced if not by Hopkins then by poets of a high modernity such as William Carlos Williams and Wallace Stevens. In this style, we find increasing attention to what we can see as 'not ideas about the thing but the thing itself' (as in the Stevens poem of that title) and an increasing belief in a specific materialism or empiricism that suggests that there are 'no ideas but in things' (as Williams reiterates in *Paterson*). We have seen the same in the French *nouveau roman*, whose early critics, struggling to find a way of describing these odd novels, coined the term '*chosiste*' to try to encapsulate what they held in common. There is a post-Heideggerian poetry of 'The Thing' itself; and this, this thing that I acknowledge mine, while at one level simply a matter of style, carries with it a philosophy as well.⁵⁵

Some examples of the style can be found in the later poetry of Seamus Heaney, most obviously in the collection called *Seeing Things*, where we read, for instance, of 'The deep, still, *seeable-down-into* water' (emphasis added) in a seemingly deliberately clumsy phrase clearly reminiscent of Hopkins. What the phrase means is 'still water, deep down into which you can see'; but in Heaney's phrasing, the emphasis is on the water *as object*, and the subject ('you' or 'one') *has disappeared*. Or consider, for another paradigmatic example from this same collection, lines such as:

Willed down, waited for, in place at last and for good.
Trunk-hasped, cart-heavy, painted in ignorant brown,
And pew-strait, bin-deep, standing four-square as an ark

... cargoed with
Its own dumb, tongue-and-groove worthiness
And un-get-roundable weight⁵⁶

In all these examples, as with Perec, we witness a renewed attention to the material otherness of a real and historical world. The importance for these writers, conditioned as they are by this new empiricism in writing, is no longer in the exploration of the subject's consciousness, but rather in the exploration of the material sensuality or sensuousness of the object itself in all its resistant and recalcitrant materiality, a materialism deemed to be unamenable to representation or even to consciousness at all. It is as if we begin the twentieth century with Virginia Woolf's famous call to 'look within', only to end it with a writing that determinedly looks outward, in puzzlement, concerned for this objective reality that we call worldliness.

Contemporary literature is playing out one of Baudrillard's fatal strategies, going over to the world of the object in the interests not of preserving some philosophical principle of reality but rather in the interests of finding out what might be the real in all its heterogeneity, in all its unavailability for human consciousness or for the subject. Further, this 'reality' is unavailable not because of its distance in space from the subject (not because it is 'outside' of consciousness), but because its perception depends upon a *temporal* difference that allows the subject to exist in time, to 'become' across time, as it were.

A similar thing had been attempted before in some European cinema, in which the vision of alterity began to supersede the exploration of the 'point of view' itself. It is clear in *L'année dernière à Marienbad* by Alain Resnais, for instance, where narrative gives way to the fixed stare of the camera on things, even to the point of offering the human characters to us as if they themselves were mere objects. We find such priorities also in the cinema of Robert Bresson, where an attention to the ostensibly trivial object defuses the characterological or subjectivist interest of the film, and stresses instead what it might mean

actually to 'see' an object. For Bresson and some of his contemporaries, such seeing must be of the nature of an event: that is to say, the object of sight resists comprehension as a semiotic counter in some grander 'vision' that the subject may have (or even a vision that renders the subject up to us as such). In other words, the thinginess of the world resists theorization.

This is a cinema not of seeing so much as of witnessing. In witnessing, some of the fundamental aspects of cinema are subverted. Ostensibly, cinema is, above all, a visual artform. However, at least since the advent of talkie cinema, there has been a steady tendency to circumvent the sensuality (or sensibilities) of the visual with the sense-making (and rationalities) of dialogue.⁵⁷ This becomes evident in a certain strain in cinema, such as that of Barry Levinson, wherein dialogue and the possibilities of communication are paramount. It is central to a film such as Francis Ford Coppola's *The Conversation* of 1974; and it has a much more recent directness in a film such as Tom Hooper's *The King's Speech* (2010). In films such as these, we are encouraged to turn the sensuality of the image into the abstraction of reason through the primacy of a dialogical impulse. In short, what is said is more important than what is seen, for what is said makes sense, whereas what is seen demands a visceral response that may defy signification.

A cinema of witness, however, is one that tends to reverse those priorities. Thus, for example, Bresson opens *Une femme douce* with a sequence in which the camera is focused on the handle of a door. A woman enters the frame and opens the door, and we hear the noise of something falling. The camera advances through the now open door, and we see a table and flower-pot falling on the veranda. Beyond this, there is a further noise, that of a car screeching to a halt on the road below. The camera cuts to a shot, taken from ground-level, of a white scarf falling through the air. At no point, yet, have we seen a human face; every body in the frame appears without a headshot of any kind. It is only after we have seen the falling of the table and pot, and the falling of the scarf, that we then see also a body, face down, on the ground. Our inference, at this point, that a woman has jumped from the balcony (that is, our 'making sense' of the scene) happens only long after we have been required to attend to the visual aspects of the scene, denied any human point of view. In this way, we become not voyeurs of the suicidal jump, but witnesses. We are forced to have a kind of sensual response to an act that we do not directly see; and that response is shaped and informed by the upturned life on the table (the broken flower-pot as it falls to the floor of the veranda) and, above all, by the white scarf falling gracefully and slowly towards us on the ground. We *make sense* of what we see; we *feel* and thus know, as from the inside, what we witness.⁵⁸

The philosophical stakes of this are perhaps best revealed, not entirely surprisingly, in a literary as opposed to an abstract philosophical text. Ian McEwan's *The Child in Time*, though perhaps romanticizing to some extent the notion of an infantile attitude to the world, nonetheless hits on the effect

which I am aiming to describe in this alternative contemporaneity. At one key moment in the text, Stephen, the father of the disappeared child, Kate, imagines in her absence how she might see the world before him:

It needed a child, Stephen thought, succumbing to the inevitable. Kate would not be aware of the car half a mile behind, or of the wood's perimeters and all that lay, beyond them, roads, opinions, Government. The wood, this spider rotating on its thread, this beetle lumbering over blades of grass, would be all, the moment would be everything. He needed her good influence, her lessons in celebrating the specific, how to fill the present and be filled by it to the point where identity faded to nothing. He was always partly somewhere else.⁵⁹

What Stephen appreciates is a seduction of the subject by the objects that constitute the subject as a consciousness at all. The result is the loss of a sense of progressive linear time, and its replacement by a now, a *Jetztzeit* that is not part of a larger schema of history at all, a now that in fact cannot be narrated, since it does not consist in a moment of transition between past and future. It is instead a now which, in all its attention to alterity and heterogeneity, allows the very possibility of the experience of an event in time at all.

The modern, by contrast, is that world inhabited by Stephen who is 'partly somewhere else', whose now is always a transitory movement; but this is Stephen, now and here, Stephen who has lost identity to become this, an event in which he is a constituent part but which he does not control in an act of subjective appropriation of the world or of history.

The now, the here, the *this* are all deictics that depend for their significance, value or meaning on the subject in relation to which they are spoken or to which they owe their existence. The modern – let us call it 'figural' – attitude to this is the attitude that breeds a philosophy of identity in which the now, the here, the this are thought to exist *for* the subject of consciousness; and as such, therefore, they have no existence in their own right.

In philosophy, as I have argued above, we have seen this expressed most fully in Descartes; and Cartesian philosophy is what grounds this entire project, this modernity that places the subject at the centre of meaning. Further, Cartesian philosophy deploys a concept of God to guarantee the being of the objects, the thisness of the world; a being that is now itself, in fact, dependent upon the subject – for the being here is dependent on its meaning in the whole schema. This, therefore, is actually pre-Copernican.

These objects, existing *for* the subject of consciousness, the Cartesian I, find themselves in a position where their *haecceitas* is stripped from them as they are reduced to the status of being but an element in the constitution of a specific subject who enjoys, courtesy of the reification of the now, here and this as commodities, the solace (actually a fiction) of identity and mastery. The non-figural attitude is one which, by contrast, returns to the deictic its own specificity, even to the point of endangering that 'solace of good form' – that identity – of the subject of consciousness.⁶⁰ It is in this latter state that

contemporaneity can take place, can 'happen'. Paradoxically, the modern, then, knows no contemporaneity: it is only what we might now more comfortably call the postmodern, in its openness to the undetermined, that can make the contemporary happen or become an event.

Yet we must also recall that the postmodern is but a mood or an attitude and not something that is of necessary recent date. The mood in question here is one that is shaped by an attention to the alterity of the world, an alterity that means that the world is not there *for* a subject of consciousness, and a world therefore whose meaning does not depend upon the identification of a stable point-of-view (character or ethos) from which it is viewed. Such a mood is one that may be rather anguished, for it is a mood that acknowledges that the subject, always *now* in history, must fill that now with the exercising of a judgement; but this judgement must be made *without criteria*, and most especially without the solace of a criterion that is grounded in the identity of the self. The counter to such a mood is that which says, 'I judge this as an x, y, or z', where x, y, or z is an official identity (working-class female; Muslim; gay man; Arab, etc.). There *is* no such identity; or rather, better, in a properly confessional mode, identity both *is* and *is not* at once. Identity depends upon alterity.

Thus it is that, at an earlier historical moment, Prospero comes to acknowledge himself in his other, 'this thing I acknowledge mine', this Caliban, in *The Tempest*. It is in the intimacy with his other that Prospero can actually 'confess' himself; but that intimacy gives him (and Caliban) a problem with language. 'I gave you language', Prospero famously tells Caliban; and Prospero, expecting thanks for this, gets only curses. His error is to believe that, in giving Caliban language, Caliban will want to speak that same language: his error is to believe that Caliban can be Prospero's intimate 'likeness'. What the play shows, instead, is the spatial distance between them. It shows that the existence of both characters depends upon a kind of absolute distance that allows them to remain as 'things' – a thing of darkness – and, as things and not objects, they do not exist *for* each other. They simply cannot comprehend each other.

The final paradox, then, is that, for a confession to be genuine and a matter of real historical experience – for it to be an event – it cannot be comprehended as something that is amenable to a 'me, here'. If you confess to me, the confession is only genuine if I cannot understand it (though I may yet witness it). This way, not only can you and I undergo confession as an experience that has a real historical substance and content, but also we refuse the solace in which confession allows for that mode of 'forgiveness' in which we forget the distance that separates us, or that allows us to 'identify' with each other in a fallacious intimacy that is sometimes called 'reconciliation'. Confession is much more serious than that: it potentially shatters the world, breaking the here into distinct and fragmented parts, and shattering the now into historical becoming. That is confession as event; and as an event in which we can finally properly acknowledge the things of darkness that are never ours alone.