FROM
What is Apparatus?
and Other Essays

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§ What Is the Contemporary?

1.

The question that I would like to inscribe on the threshold of this seminar is: "Of whom and of what are we contemporaries?" And, first and foremost, "What does it mean to be contemporary?" In the course of this seminar, we shall have occasion to read texts whose authors are many centuries removed from us, as well as others that are more recent, or even very recent. At all events, it is essential that we manage to be in some way contemporaries of these texts. The "time" of our seminar is contemporariness, and as such it demands [*esige*] to be contemporary with the texts and the authors it examines. To a great degree, the success of this seminar may be evaluated by its—by our—capacity to measure up to this exigency.

An initial, provisional indication that may orient our search for an answer to the above questions

comes from Nietzsche. Roland Barthes summarizes this answer in a note from his lectures at the Collège de France: "The contemporary is the untimely." In 1874, Friedrich Nietzsche, a young philologist who had worked up to that point on Greek texts and had two years earlier achieved an unexpected celebrity with *The Birth of Tragedy*, published the *Unzeitgemässe Betrachtungen*, the *Untimely Meditations*, a work in which he tries to come to terms with his time and take a position with regards to the present. "This meditation is itself untimely," we read at the beginning of the second meditation, "because it seeks to understand as an illness, a disability, and a defect something which this epoch is quite rightly proud of, that is to say, its historical culture, because I believe that we are all consumed by the fever of history and we should at least realize it."[1] In other words, Nietzsche situates his own claim for "relevance" [*attualità*], his "contemporariness" with respect to the present, in a disconnection and out-of-jointness. Those who are truly contemporary, who truly belong to their time, are those who neither perfectly coincide with it nor adjust themselves to its demands. They are thus in this sense irrelevant [*inattuale*]. But precisely because of this condition, precisely through this disconnection and this anachronism, they are more capable than others of perceiving and grasping their own time.

Naturally, this noncoincidence, this "dys-chrony," does not mean that the contemporary is a person who lives in another time, a nostalgic who feels more at home in the Athens of Pericles or in the Paris of Robespierre and the marquis de Sade than in the city and the time in which he lives. An intelligent man can despise his time, while knowing that he nevertheless irrevocably belongs to it, that he cannot escape his own time.

Contemporariness is, then, a singular relationship with one's own time, which adheres to it and, at the same time, keeps a distance from it. More precisely, it is *that relationship with time that adheres to it through a disjunction and an anachronism.* Those who coincide too well with the epoch, those who are perfectly tied to it in every respect, are not contemporaries, precisely because they do not manage to see it; they are not able to firmly hold their gaze on it.

2.

In 1923, Osip Mandelstam writes a poem entitled "The Century" (though the Russian word *vek* also means "epoch" or "age"). It does not contain a reflection on the century, but rather a reflection on the relation between the poet and his time, that is to say, on contemporariness. Not "the century," but, according

to the words that open the first verse, "my century" or "my age" (*vek moi*):

> My century, my beast, who will manage
> to look inside your eyes
> and weld together with his own blood
> the vertebrae of two centuries?

The poet, who must pay for his contemporariness with his life, is he who must firmly lock his gaze onto the eyes of his century-beast, who must weld with his own blood the shattered backbone of time. The two centuries, the two times, are not only, as has been suggested, the nineteenth and twentieth, but also, more to the point, the length of a single individual's life (remember that *saeculum* originally means the period of a person's life) and the collective historical period that we call in this case the twentieth century. As we shall learn in the last strophe of the poem, the backbone of this age is shattered. The poet, insofar as he is contemporary, *is* this fracture, *is* at once that which impedes time from composing itself and the blood that must suture this break or this wound. The parallelism between the time and the vertebrae of the creature, on the one hand, and the time and the vertebrae of the age, on the other, constitutes one of the essential themes of the poem:

> So long as the creature lives
> it must carry forth its vertebrae,

> as the waves play along
> with an invisible spine.
> Like a child's tender cartilage
> is the century of the newborn earth.

The other great theme—and this, like the preceding one, is also an image of contemporariness—is that of the shattering, as well as of the welding, of the age's vertebrae, both of which are the work of a single individual (in this case the poet):

> To wrest the century away from bondage
> so as to start the world anew
> one must tie together with a flute
> the knees of all the knotted days.

That this is an impossible task—or at any rate a paradoxical one—is proven by the following strophe with which the poem concludes. Not only does the epoch-beast have broken vertebrae, but *vek*, the newborn age, wants to turn around (an impossible gesture for a person with a broken backbone) in order to contemplate its own tracks and, in this way, to display its demented face:

> But your backbone has been shattered
> O my wondrous, wretched century.
> With a senseless smile
> like a beast that was once limber
> you look back, weak and cruel,
> to contemplate your own tracks.

3.

The poet—the contemporary—must firmly hold his gaze on his own time. But what does he who sees his time actually see? What is this demented grin on the face of his age? I would like at this point to propose a second definition of contemporariness: The contemporary is he who firmly holds his gaze on his own time so as to perceive not its light, but rather its darkness. All eras, for those who experience contemporariness, are obscure. The contemporary is precisely the person who knows how to see this obscurity, who is able to write by dipping his pen in the obscurity of the present. But what does it mean, "to see an obscurity," "to perceive the darkness"?

The neurophysiology of vision suggests an initial answer. What happens when we find ourselves in a place deprived of light, or when we close our eyes? What is the darkness that we see then? Neurophysiologists tell us that the absence of light activates a series of peripheral cells in the retina called "off-cells." When activated, these cells produce the particular kind of vision that we call darkness. Darkness is not, therefore, a privative notion (the simple absence of light, or something like nonvision) but rather the result of the activity of the "off-cells," a product of our own retina. This means, if we now return to our thesis on the darkness

of contemporariness, that to perceive this darkness is not a form of inertia or of passivity, but rather implies an activity and a singular ability. In our case, this ability amounts to a neutralization of the lights that come from the epoch in order to discover its obscurity, its special darkness, which is not, however, separable from those lights.

The ones who can call themselves contemporary are only those who do not allow themselves to be blinded by the lights of the century, and so manage to get a glimpse of the shadows in those lights, of their intimate obscurity. Having said this much, we have nevertheless still not addressed our question. Why should we be at all interested in perceiving the obscurity that emanates from the epoch? Is darkness not precisely an anonymous experience that is by definition impenetrable; something that is not directed at us and thus cannot concern us? On the contrary, the contemporary is the person who perceives the darkness of his time as something that concerns him, as something that never ceases to engage him. Darkness is something that—more than any light—turns directly and singularly toward him. The contemporary is the one whose eyes are struck by the beam of darkness that comes from his own time.

4.

In the firmament that we observe at night, the stars shine brightly, surrounded by a thick darkness. Since the number of galaxies and luminous bodies in the universe is almost infinite, the darkness that we see in the sky is something that, according to scientists, demands an explanation. It is precisely the explanation that contemporary astrophysics gives for this darkness that I would now like to discuss. In an expanding universe, the most remote galaxies move away from us at a speed so great that their light is never able to reach us. What we perceive as the darkness of the heavens is this light that, though traveling toward us, cannot reach us, since the galaxies from which the light originates move away from us at a velocity greater than the speed of light.

To perceive, in the darkness of the present, this light that strives to reach us but cannot—this is what it means to be contemporary. As such, contemporaries are rare. And for this reason, to be contemporary is, first and foremost, a question of courage, because it means being able not only to firmly fix your gaze on the darkness of the epoch, but also to perceive in this darkness a light that, while directed toward us, infinitely distances itself from us. In other words, it is like being on time for an appointment that one cannot but miss.

This is the reason why the present that contemporariness perceives has broken vertebrae. Our time, the present, is in fact not only the most distant: it cannot in any way reach us. Its backbone is broken and we find ourselves in the exact point of this fracture. This is why we are, despite everything, contemporaries. It is important to realize that the appointment that is in question in contemporariness does not simply take place in chronological time: it is something that, working within chronological time, urges, presses, and transforms it. And this urgency is the untimeliness, the anachronism that permits us to grasp our time in the form of a "too soon" that is also a "too late"; of an "already" that is also a "not yet." Moreover, it allows us to recognize in the obscurity of the present the light that, without ever being able to reach us, is perpetually voyaging toward us.

5.

A good example of this special experience of time that we call contemporariness is fashion. Fashion can be defined as the introduction into time of a peculiar discontinuity that divides it according to its relevance or irrelevance, its being-in-fashion or no-longer-being-in-fashion. This caesura, as subtle as it may be, is remarkable in the sense that those who need to make

note of it do so infallibly; and in so doing they attest to their own being in fashion. But if we try to objectify and fix this caesura within chronological time, it reveals itself as ungraspable. In the first place, the "now" of fashion, the instant in which it comes into being, is not identifiable via any kind of chronometer. Is this "now" perhaps the moment in which the fashion designer conceives of the general concept, the nuance that will define the new style of the clothes? Or is it the moment when the fashion designer conveys the concept to his assistants, and then to the tailor who will sew the prototype? Or, rather, is it the moment of the fashion show, when the clothes are worn by the only people who are always and only in fashion, the *mannequins*, or models; those who nonetheless, precisely for this reason, are never truly in fashion? Because in this last instance, the being in fashion of the "style" will depend on the fact that the people of flesh and blood, rather than the *mannequins* (those sacrificial victims of a faceless god), will recognize it as such and choose that style for their own wardrobe.

The time of fashion, therefore, constitutively anticipates itself and consequently is also always too late. It always takes the form of an ungraspable threshold between a "not yet" and a "no more." It is quite probable that, as the theologians suggest, this constellation depends on the fact that fashion, at least in our

culture, is a theological signature of clothing, which derives from the first piece of clothing that was sewn by Adam and Eve after the Original Sin, in the form of a loincloth woven from fig leaves. (To be precise, the clothes that we wear derive, not from this vegetal loincloth, but from the *tunicae pelliceae*, the clothes made from animals' skin that God, according to Genesis 3:21, gave to our progenitors as a tangible symbol of sin and death in the moment he expelled them from Paradise.) In any case, whatever the reason may be, the "now," the *kairos* of fashion is ungraspable: the phrase, "I am in this instant in fashion" is contradictory, because the moment in which the subject pronounces it, he is already out of fashion. So, being in fashion, like contemporariness, entails a certain "ease," a certain quality of being out-of-phase or out-of-date, in which one's relevance includes within itself a small part of what lies outside of itself, a shade of *démodé*, of being out of fashion. It is in this sense that it was said of an elegant lady in nineteenth-century Paris, "Elle est contemporaine de tout le monde," "She is everybody's contemporary."

But the temporality of fashion has another character that relates it to contemporariness. Following the same gesture by which the present divides time according to a "no more" and a "not yet," it also establishes a peculiar relationship with these "other times"—certainly

with the past, and perhaps also with the future. Fashion can therefore "cite," and in this way make relevant again, any moment from the past (the 1920s, the 1970s, but also the neoclassical or empire style). It can therefore tie together that which it has inexorably divided—recall, re-evoke, and revitalize that which it had declared dead.

6.

There is also another aspect to this special relationship with the past.

Contemporariness inscribes itself in the present by marking it above all as archaic. Only he who perceives the indices and signatures of the archaic in the most modern and recent can be contemporary. "Archaic" means close to the *arkhē*, that is to say, the origin. But the origin is not only situated in a chronological past: it is contemporary with historical becoming and does not cease to operate within it, just as the embryo continues to be active in the tissues of the mature organism, and the child in the psychic life of the adult. Both this distancing and nearness, which define contemporariness, have their foundation in this proximity to the origin that nowhere pulses with more force than in the present. Whoever has seen the skyscrapers of New York for the first time arriving from the ocean

at dawn has immediately perceived this archaic *facies* of the present, this contiguousness with the ruin that the atemporal images of September 11th have made evident to all.

Historians of literature and of art know that there is a secret affinity between the archaic and the modern, not so much because the archaic forms seem to exercise a particular charm on the present, but rather because the key to the modern is hidden in the immemorial and the prehistoric. Thus, the ancient world in its decline turns to the primordial so as to rediscover itself. The avant-garde, which has lost itself over time, also pursues the primitive and the archaic. It is in this sense that one can say that the entry point to the present necessarily takes the form of an archeology; an archeology that does not, however, regress to a historical past, but returns to that part within the present that we are absolutely incapable of living. What remains unlived therefore is incessantly sucked back toward the origin, without ever being able to reach it. The present is nothing other than this unlived element in everything that is lived. That which impedes access to the present is precisely the mass of what for some reason (its traumatic character, its excessive nearness) we have not managed to live. The attention to this "unlived" is the life of the contemporary. And to be contempo-

rary means in this sense to return to a present where we have never been.

7.

Those who have tried to think about contemporariness have been able to do so only by splitting it up into several times, by introducing into time an essential dishomogeneity. Those who say "*my* time" actually divide time—they inscribe into it a caesura and a discontinuity. But precisely by means of this caesura, this interpolation of the present into the inert homogeneity of linear time, the contemporary puts to work a special relationship between the different times. If, as we have seen, it is the contemporary who has broken the vertebrae of his time (or, at any rate, who has perceived in it a fault line or a breaking point), then he also makes of this fracture a meeting place, or an encounter between times and generations. There is nothing more exemplary, in this sense, than Paul's gesture at the point in which he experiences and announces to his brothers the contemporariness par excellence that is messianic time, the being-contemporary with the Messiah, which he calls precisely the "time of the now" (*ho nyn kairos*). Not only is this time chronologically indeterminate (the *parousia*, the return of Christ that signals the end is certain and near, though not at a calculable

point), but it also has the singular capacity of putting every instant of the past in direct relationship with itself, of making every moment or episode of biblical history a prophecy or a prefiguration (Paul prefers the term *typos*, figure) of the present (thus Adam, through whom humanity received death and sin, is a "type" or figure of the Messiah, who brings about redemption and life to men).

This means that the contemporary is not only the one who, perceiving the darkness of the present, grasps a light that can never reach its destiny; he is also the one who, dividing and interpolating time, is capable of transforming it and putting it in relation with other times. He is able to read history in unforeseen ways, to "cite it" according to a necessity that does not arise in any way from his will, but from an exigency to which he cannot not respond. It is as if this invisible light that is the darkness of the present cast its shadow on the past, so that the past, touched by this shadow, acquired the ability to respond to the darkness of the now. It is something along these lines that Michel Foucault probably had in mind when he wrote that his historical investigations of the past are only the shadow cast by his theoretical interrogation of the present. Similarly, Walter Benjamin writes that the historical index contained in the images of the past indicates that these images may achieve legibility only

in a determined moment of their history. It is on our ability to respond to this exigency and to this shadow, to be contemporaries not only of our century and the "now," but also of its figures in the texts and documents of the past, that the success or failure of our seminar depends.

Notes

What Is an Apparatus?

1. Translators' note: We follow here the common English translation of Foucault's term *dispositif* as "apparatus." In everyday use, the French word can designate any sort of device. Agamben points out that the torture machine from Kafka's *In the Penal Colony* is called an *Apparat.*

2. Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972–1977*, ed. C. Gordon (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), 194–96.

3. Jean Hyppolite, *Introduction to Hegel's Philosophy of History*, trans. B. Harris and J. B. Spurlock (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1996), 21.

4. Ibid., 23.

5. Martin Heidegger, *Basic Writings*, ed. D. F. Krell (New York: Harper Collins, 1993), 325.

6. Translators' note: See *Théorie du Bloom* (Paris: Fabrique, 2000), by the French collective Tiqqun. The allusion is to Leopold Bloom, the main character in James Joyce's *Ulysses.*

The Friend

1. Diogenes Laertius, *The Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, vol. 1, trans. R. D. Hicks (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1972), 465.
2. Jacques Derrida, *Politics of Friendship*, trans. G. Collins (London: Verso, 1997).
3. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, trans. W. Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Vintage Books, 1968), 312, §582.

What Is the Contemporary?

1. Friedrich Nietzsche, "On the Uses and Abuses of History to Life," in *Untimely Meditations*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 60.

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