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History and the Lesser Death

In Thesis III, the collective reflects upon the interconnected practice of critical theory and history. "*Critical historians . . . recognize that they are psychically, epistemologically, ethically, and politically implicated in their objects of study. . . psychically*, historians should acknowledge and try to work though, rather than simply act out, their unconscious investments in their material. . . *ethically*, historians bear a responsibility toward—are in some way answerable to—the actors and ideas, as well as their legacies and afterlives, being analyzed" (III.6).

What, then, is the role of ethics within the writing of history? And how might our ethics be connected to the psychic stakes we hold in our objects of study? As historians, what is our responsibility to the dead in our present historical moment of danger, what Sigmund Freud termed "the times on war and death" (273)? In cultivating an ethics of listening to, and learning to speak with, the dead, how can we attend to the gravitas of this encounter, in which we are inherently implicated, both consciously and unconsciously?

In our encounter with the dead across time and space, we could be said to inhabit the space of the *barzakh*—a liminal zone or an isthmus. Such an isthmus was conceptualized by the medieval mystic Ibn Arabi (1165–1240) as a space between the existent and the nonexistent, the known and the unknown, "which is neither the one nor the other but which possesses the power (*quwwa*) of both" (qtd. in Chittick, *Sufi Path* 118). Separating the living and the dead, death and resurrection, the corporeal and the spiritual, the *barzakh* is the domain of the imagination and the imaginal world. All humans partake of this imaginal world, and it is most manifest in the realm of sleep and the dream, an imaginal realm of being known as the lesser death (Chittick, *Self-Disclosure* 338–39).

Writing history may be conceptualized as just such a realm of the lesser

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death, in which a communication with the *beyond* of life takes place. In the minor traditions of modern historiography, the ethico-theological implications of writing history have been emphasized and connected to the critique of historicism. Within Walter Benjamin's critique of historicism, the open-endedness of a messianic eschatological future in which "every second of time was the strait gate though which the Messiah might enter" (264) afforded the critical historian the opportunity to recognize "the sign of a Messianic cessation of happening, or, put differently, a revolutionary chance in the fight for the oppressed past . . . in order to blast a specific era out of the homogeneous course of history" (263).

We might imagine Benjamin's cessation, the caesura of the present in which the critical historian is writing history, "in which time stands still and has come to a stop" (262) as analogous to the space of the *barzakh*. Dwelling in the caesura between past and present would not be possible were it not for what Benjamin termed the "here-and-now" (*Jetztzeit*) of history. The past, both of the individual and the collectivity, appears not as a frozen inheritance, nor as a disruption of the present, but as a liminal encounter with death itself, which takes place in the Jetztzeit in which we confront our own finitude and the "work of death." The critical historian "establishes a conception of the present as the 'time of the now' which is shot through with chips of Messianic time" (263).

Such an eschatological orientation of the historian should not surprise us. One need only be reminded of Karl Löwith for whom the modern philosophy of history and the historical consciousness of the Judeo-Christian Occident was "indeed, determined by an eschatological motivation, from Isaiah to Marx, from Augustine to Hegel, and from Joachim to Schelling" (18). Within this view of history, he noted, "the past is a promise to the future; consequently, the interpretation of the past becomes a prophecy in reverse, demonstrating the past as a meaningful 'preparation' for the future" (Löwith 6). Crucially, such a view resonates as well with the ethical orientation of psychoanalysis. In his Seminar on *Ethics*, Jacques Lacan proposed an experimental ethical orientation toward the Last Judgment, conceiving ethics as "the relationship between action and the desire that inhabits it" (313).[1] Such an ethical encounter could only be thought through in relation to the Last Judgment and it stood in explicit contrast to any notion of ethics structured by commonplace understandings of the Good.

Lacanian psychoanalysis places ethics at the core of man's relationship to the Good, as an unconscious dialectical relationship between the subject and the law mediated through enjoyment (*jouissance*). And yet within Lacan's

framework the Good is not imagined as the moral universe of general values (neither "the moral 'ought' of the superego," nor the Kantian categorical imperative), but rather a positive orientation toward what lies *beyond* the formal law, an "antimoralistic ethics" (De Kesel 50–51). For Lacan, ethics referred to the "paradoxical possibility that one can consciously confront oneself with the domain in which one usually disappears, namely the domain of the 'thing,' of *jouissance*" (De Kesel 267). Thus conceptualized, ethics requires a turn away from "the service of goods" (Lacan, *Seminar* 313)—from the instrumental, the self-preservative, in short from the moral and material economy of modern man as we know him to be confined "to the most formidable social hell" (Lacan, "Aggressiveness" 101).

If ethics entails an orientation to our desires and "in the end desire is desire for death and for nothing," then the "Lacanian 'thing' names this stubborn kind of 'nothing.' . . . It is the 'nothing' that would survive us even if we satisfied our (death) desire with the entire world" (De Kesel 101). Is this not the destruction of the world which we are now witnessing? *Das Ding* precisely as a nothing "which would survive us even if we satisfied our (death) desire with the entire world." Preserving this distance, bringing it into view, encircling it; highlighting the modalities in which other traditions have brought this abyss, this gap or *béance*, into view is the purview of psychoanalysis, theology, and by extension, one might argue, critical history.

If the task of the critical historian, in Benjamin's words, is "to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger" then it is only by contemplating our own disappearance, or stated differently, our own death, within a moment of danger that the historian can seize the past "as an image which flashes up at the instant when it can be recognized and is never seen again. . . . For every image of the past that is not recognized by the present as one of its own concerns threatens to disappear irretrievably" (255). In encountering our own disappearance and the deathliness of our drive in the realm of the lesser death we confront the deadly enjoyment of our catastrophic times, confronting *das Ding* as a radical evil around which we must keep our distance and yet ethically orient ourselves. It is in this impossible space where humans confront the excess of their drives that a meaningful historical knowledge might be created. ■

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NOTE

1 I am inspired here by conversations with Stefania Pandolfo and by her "Divine Trial and *Experimentum Mentis*."

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