

## Philosophical Archaeology

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**Abstract** In the perspective of the philosophical archaeology proposed, here, the *arkhé* towards which archaeology regresses must not be understood in any way as an element that can be situated in chronology (not even one with a large grid, of the sort used in prehistory); it is, rather, a force that operates in history—much in the same way in which Indoeuropean words express a system of connections among historically accessible languages, in which the child in psychoanalysis expresses an active force in the psychic life of the adult, in which the big bang, which is supposed to have originated the universe, continues to send towards us its fossil radiation. But the *arkhé* is not a datum or a substance. It is much rather a field of bipolar historical currents within the tension of anthropogenesis and history, between point of emergence and becoming, between arch-past and present. And as such—that is to say, to the extent to which it is something that it is necessarily supposed to have factually happened, and which yet cannot be hypostatized in any chronologically identifiable event—it is solely capable of guaranteeing the intelligibility of historical phenomena, of ‘saving’ them archaeologically within a future perfect, yet not grasping its (in any case unverifiable) origin, but rather its history, at once finite and untotalizable.

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## 1.

The idea of a ‘Philosophical Archaeology’ appears for the first time in Kant. In the *Lose Blätter* for his work of 1791 on the *Progresses of Metaphysics*, he questions himself about the possibility of a ‘philosophical history of philosophy’. Such a history, he writes, ‘is not in itself possible either historically or empirically, but only rationally, that is, a priori. If it expounds *facta* of reason, it cannot borrow them from the historical narration; rather, it should cull them from the nature of human reason, as a philosophical archaeology [*als philosophische Archäologie*]’ (Kant 1942, p. 341). There is an implicit paradox at the heart of such an archaeology. Since it cannot be simply a history of what philosophers ‘have quibbled over the origin, the aim and the end of the matters of the world’ (ibid.), over the ‘opinions (*Meynungen*) which have casually arisen here or there’, it risks lacking a beginning, and proposing a ‘history of things which have not occurred’ (ibid., p. 343).

Kant’s notes come back several times to this paradox: ‘It is not possible to write a history of things that have not occurred, for which only provisions and materials can be given’ (ibid., pp. 342–343). ‘All historical knowledge is empirical ... A historical representation of philosophy therefore tells how, and in which order, “philosophizing” has taken place. Yet the practice of Philosophy is a gradual unfolding of human reason, which cannot have occurred empirically, and which nevertheless has been initiated through mere concepts’ (Kant 1942, p. 340). ‘The history of philosophy is such a peculiar species that in it no story can be told of what has happened without first knowing what should or could have happened’ (ibid., p. 343).

Consider the highly peculiar character of the science that Kant calls ‘philosophical archaeology’. It presents itself as a ‘history’ and, as such, cannot avoid interrogating itself about its own origin: yet, since its object coincides with the end of humanity, thus with the development and the exercise of reason, the *arché*, which it strives for, can never be identified with a chronological date, and therefore, never be ‘archaic’. Moreover, as philosophy has to do not only and not precisely with something that has been, but rather with something that should or could have been, it ends up in itself as something that is, in a certain sense, not yet around, just as its history is a ‘history of things that have not occurred’.

This is why Kant can write, in the *Logic*, that ‘each philosopher builds, so to speak, his work over the ruins (*auf den Trümmern*) of another’ and that ‘philosophy is not something that can be learnt, for the simple reason that it is not yet there’ (Kant 1974, p. 448). Archaeology is, in this sense, a science of ruins, a ‘ruinology’ whose object, without constituting a transcendental principle properly speaking, cannot really claim to be there as an empirically given totality. The *arkhai* are what should or could have emerged, or perhaps what could emerge one day, but for the time being they exist only in the state of partial objects or ruins. They are—like the philosophers who do not really exist—only *Urbilder*, archetypes or original images (Kant 1973, p. 7). And ‘an archetype remains what it is only if it cannot be retrieved. Its use is only that of a plumb line [*Richtschnur*]’ (Kant 1973, p. 7).

## 2.

That an essential dishomogeneity, a constitutive interval, is present in every authentic practice of history between the *arché* which it explores, and a factitious origin, is the idea at the basis of Foucault's essay of 1971, *Nietzsche, la généalogie, l'histoire*. The essay's strategy is instantly clear: it consists in playing genealogy, the model of which Foucault traces back to Nietzsche, against any quest for an origin. In this perspective, it can even be useful to seek an alliance with history: 'Genealogy does not oppose history... it opposes, on the contrary, the metahistorical display of ideal meanings and indefinite teleologies. It opposes the research of "l'origine"' (Foucault 1994, vol. II, pp. 136–137). To this end, Foucault distinguishes, among the terms used by Nietzsche: *Ursprung*, which, as the black beast from which one should keep one's distance, he reserves for 'l'origine', and two words 'which better than *Ursprung* define the very object of genealogy' (ibid., p. 140): *Herkunft*, which he translates as 'provenance', and *Entstehung*, 'point of emergence'. If Nietzsche rejects the research of origin, this is because *Ursprung* designates

a thing's exact essence and purest possibility, its identity accurately folded back on itself, its shape which precedes and resists all that is exterior, accidental and subsequent. The quest of such an origin is the attempt to find 'that which had been there before', the 'core' of an image that is in perfect correspondence with itself; it expresses the wish to consider as adventitious all the vicissitudes, tricks and travesties that have taken place; to get rid of all the masks, in order to let a primary identity finally reinstate itself (ibid., p. 138).

It is against this idea that the genealogist goes to war. Not because he would not be in search of something like a beginning. But what he finds 'at the historical beginning of things' (ibid.), is never 'the preserved identity of their origin'.

To make the genealogy of the values, of morals, asceticism, knowledge, will never be the same as to search for their 'origin' disregarding history's episodes as 'inaccessible'; it will mean, on the contrary, to linger on meticulousnesses, on triggering factors at the outset of things... The genealogist needs history to exorcise the chimera of the origin (Foucault 1994, vol. II, p. 140).

The French term *conjuré*, which here we have translated as 'to exorcise', is at the cross-road of two meanings which are diametrically opposed to each other: 'to evoke' and 'to ward off'. Perhaps also these two meanings are not opposed. After all, in order to exorcise something—a ghost, a demon, a danger—one has first of all to evoke it. The alliance between the genealogist and the historian finds its sense in this 'evocation–expulsion'. Years later, in an interview in 1977, the same gesture will define the relationship between genealogy and the subject: one must be able to include the constitution of the subject within one's plot of history, precisely in order to be able to dispense with it once and for all:

Through the fact of dispensing with the constituent subject, we need to get rid of the subject itself, to achieve an analysis which accounts for the constitution

of the subject as part of the historical plot. This is what I would call genealogy: recording the constitution of knowledge, discourses, the scope of objects, etc., without having to refer to a subject (ibid., III, p. 147).

The operation at stake in genealogy consists of the evocation and elimination of the origin and the subject. What is it, though, that occupies their place? After all, we are still striving to revert to something, to the moment in which knowledge, discourses, or the scopes of objects, had been constituted. Only this 'constitution' takes place, so to say, in an origin-free zone. But where are provenance (*Herkunft*) and emergence (*Entstehung*) located, if they are not, and cannot ever be, in the position of an origin?

### 3.

The identification, in any historical research, of a fringe zone or a heterogeneous state, a state which result from a position of chronological origin rather than qualitative alterity, is in fact not owed to Nietzsche, but rather to the theologian Franz Overbeck who is likely to have been Nietzsche's most lucid and faithful friend. Overbeck calls *Urgeschichte*, prehistory, this dimension, with which any historical research—not only of the history of the Church—must necessarily confront itself:

Only starting from the essential difference between prehistory and history it can be explained why prehistory enjoys such a particular consideration. Prehistory is in fact a more significant and decisive history than any other history, and this absolutely not only in the case of the history of the Church. Emergence-history (*Entstehungsgeschichte*) is, in the history of anything alive, of any life in general, incomparable (Overbeck 1966, p. 53).

This means that any historical phenomenon is, according to Overbeck, divided in *Urgeschichte* and *Geschichte*, prehistory and history, which are connected, but not homogeneous, and stand in need of diverging methodologies and precautions. Prehistory does not simply coincide with the chronologically more ancient:

The basic feature of prehistory is to be a history of what emerges (*Entstehungsgeschichte*); it is not, in spite of what its name could apparently suggest, a history of that which is very old (*uralt*). It could even be very young, but in any case the property that would originally qualify it is neither old nor young, and cannot be grasped directly, just as history in general cannot be grasped through its relationship to time. A relationship to time, history receives solely from the observer's subjectivity. No more than history at large, prehistory is bound to a particular place within the time-continuum (ibid., p. 57).

At first sight, the heterogeneity of prehistory has an objective foundation, because 'history starts only where monuments become intelligible and there is availability of reliable written testimonies. Behind and beyond those lies prehistory' (ibid., p. 53). While we are not dealing, in reality, with an objective element, but with a

constitutive heterogeneity inherent in the historical inquiry itself, which finds itself every time anew confronted with a past that is, so to speak, of a special kind, Overbeck points out at once, in order not to leave any ambiguity: ‘prehistory, too, is about the past, but in a special sense’, a sense according to which ‘the veil, which is suspended above every tradition, thickens to the point of impenetrability’ (Overbeck 1966, p. 53). Already in the study *Über die Anfänge der patristischen Literatur* (1882), Overbeck had distinguished, in this sense, *christliche Urliteratur* from *urchristliche Literatur*; in the posthumous work he specifies that ‘the past of an *Urliteratur* is not a simple past, but a qualified past or a past raised to the second power—a “more-than-a-past” [*Mehr-als-Vergangenheit*] or a “super-past” [*Übervergangenheit*]: there is nothing or almost nothing “past” in it’ (ibid., p. 55).

The fact is that history and prehistory, united in origin, at a certain point separate irrevocably:

In the history of every organism there comes the time in which the boundaries which separate it from the world are not any longer subject to change. In this moment, prehistory and emergence-history (*Entstehungsgeschichte*) separate from history. Thence the similarity that likens this moment to death, and the ease with which we can identify, in any history in the usual sense of the term, the signs of a history of decadence (*Verfallsgeschichte*). *Verfallsgeschichte* dissolves the bonds that prehistory had created between elements ... If, therefore, in the realm of things that have a life and a historical efficacy, one has to distinguish between their pre-historical epoch and the historical one, it is prehistory which lays the foundations of their historical efficacy (ibid., p. 53).

Not only prehistory and history are distinct and nonetheless connected: the historical efficacy of a phenomenon itself is inseparably linked to this distinction.

The elements that, in history, we are used to considering as separate, coincide in prehistory immediately, and manifest in their living unity. Overbeck’s example is the case of a ‘book’. Within prehistory, it

acts as the closed unit of itself and its author... to take the book seriously means to know nothing else of its author, nothing apart from the book itself. The book’s historical efficacy is based on the unit formed of both; yet, as its efficacy progresses, this oneness dissolves, until, in the end, the book lives by itself, and no longer by its author within it. At this moment, the time of literary history has come, the fundamental motive of which is the focus on the author, on the authors of those books which by now are the only ones to remain alive... At this stage, the book... acts separately from its author; yet, at this same moment starts a process at the inevitable end of which the book will, once upon a time, have stopped to have any effects at all (ibid., p. 54).

#### 4.

Whoever is involved in historical inquiry must sooner or later confront this constitutive heterogeneity, embedded in research as such. And must do so in the

form of the critique of the tradition and of the critique of sources, both of which impose special precautions. Critique does not concern only antiquity as a particular aspect of the past; it concerns first of all the way in which it has been constructed in a tradition. Overbeck, who had worked for a long time on patristic sources, is perfectly aware of this:

There is no history without tradition—yet, if in this sense all history is accompanied by tradition, this does not mean... that the thing called a tradition remains forever identical... In order to write history one must access to its exposition through a preliminary and untiring work: this is the critique of tradition. To the extent to which historiography presupposes critique, and to the extent to which critique involves justified claims to autonomy, there is also a well-founded argument that traces each period backward to its tradition, and it makes a lot of good sense to ask the question of a tradition of prehistory, indeed to ask if this tradition of prehistory is not more powerfully characteristic than the tradition of any other period (*ibid.*, p. 52).

What the critique of traditions and sources has to deal with is not a metahistoric beginning, but the structure of historical research as such. It is in this sense that it is necessary to re-read the pages which, in §6 of *Being and Time*, Heidegger dedicates to the ‘destruction of tradition’ and in which it is possible to perceive echoes of Overbeck’s thought. The famous distinction between ‘history’ (*Historie*) and ‘historicity’ (*Geschichtlichkeit*) expounded, here, is not something metaphysical nor, even less, does it boil down to the simple opposition of object and subject. It becomes intelligible as soon as one looks at its reference to its own context, which is precisely the distinction between tradition and critique of sources:

The tradition that hereby gains dominance makes what it ‘transmits’ so little accessible that initially and for the most part it covers it over instead. What has been handed down it hands over to obviousness; it bars access to those original ‘wellsprings’ out of which the traditional categories and concepts were in part genuinely drawn. The tradition even makes us forget such provenance altogether. Indeed, it makes us wholly incapable of even understanding that such return is necessary (Heidegger 1927/1970, p. 21).

We must in fact confront the ‘destruction of tradition’ with this stiffening of the tradition in order to make possible that ‘regression to the past’ (*Rückgang zur Vergangenheit*: *ibid.*), which coincides with the access backward to the sources.

Overbeck calls ‘canonization’ the dispositive [*dispositif*] through which the tradition obviates the access to the sources (Overbeck 1966, p. 56); this is of course particularly relevant for the Christian literature concerning ‘origins’. There are, obviously, also other methods of preventing or controlling the access to the sources. One of them, present in modern culture, is represented by the academic disciplines which, by defining and regulating the edition of the texts, transform the very access to the sources into a tradition of its own, namely into the science of the manuscript tradition. Philology certainly operates a necessary and helpful criticism of this tradition, yet what it cannot do is *ipso facto* reinstate as a source the text it generates, constitute it as the point from where the tradition takes its source. The source,

understood as a point of emergence, does not coincide with the documents of the manuscript tradition, even if obviously it is not possible to access the source without passing through the first-hand analysis of that tradition. The opposite, though, is not true: one can access the manuscript tradition without looking at the source from which it flows (and someone who has some familiarity with current philological practice, knows that this is in fact the rule, whilst the return from the manuscript tradition to the *Urgeschichte*—and, thus, the capacity of renewing the knowledge of that tradition—is the exception).

But what is it that the researcher returns to, when he takes up the problem of the critique of tradition and canon? It is clear that the problem here is not merely philological; the very philologically necessary cautions give rise to complications when one is dealing with *Urgeschichte* and *Entstehung*. To access the sources in a new way, beyond tradition, is not possible without putting into question the very historical subject which one tries to attain. That which is in question is thus the epistemological paradigm of research itself.

We could provisionally call ‘archaeology’ the practice which, within any historical investigation, has to do, not with the origin, but with the question of the point from which the phenomenon takes its source, and must therefore confront itself anew with the sources and with the tradition. Also the archaeology cannot take up the challenge of the tradition without deconstructing the paradigms, techniques and practices by means of which it regulates the forms of transmission, conditions the access to the sources, and determines, in ultimate analysis, the status of the knowing subject. The point of emergence is here, thus, both objective and subjective and situates itself at the threshold of undecidability between object and subject. No fact emerges without giving rise, at once, to the emerging of the knowing subject itself: the operation on the origin is, at the same time, an operation on the subject.

## 5.

At every familiar historical split at which we arrive, there is an important caveat that should be observed before accepting to presuppose a pre-historic (or in any case more primary) unitary stage preceding it. Consider, for instance, the division between the religious sphere and the profane juridical sphere. These distinctive characters appear to us—at least to some extent—as well-defined. Yet, in entering an archaic stage, one is often tempted to surmise a precedent stage beyond it, in which the sacred and profane spheres are not yet distinct. In this sense, Gernet, who was working on the most ancient Greek law, has given the name ‘pre-law’ (*pré-droit*) to an original stage in which law and religion were indistinguishable. Paolo Prodi, in his investigation about the political history of the oath, evokes in an analogous way a ‘primordial indistinction’ (Prodi 1992, p. 24) in which the separation process between religion and politics is said not to have yet started. It is essential, in situations of the sort, to have the shrewdness not simply to project onto the presupposed ‘primordial indistinction’ the characters which, later on, are going to define the religious and profane spheres. In the same way in which a chemical compound has specific qualities, which cannot be reduced to the sum of the

elements composing it, that which precedes a historical division is not necessarily the sum of the characters that define its fragments. The pre-law (if one were to admit that a hypothesis of the sort makes sense) cannot be only a more archaic law; in the same way, that which lies before religion as we know it historically is not only a more primitive religion; it would be a good idea here to avoid the terms ‘religion’ and ‘law’, trying instead to imagine an *x*, for the definition of which we need to take all possible precautions, indeed practicing some sort of archeological *epoché* which suspends—at least provisionally—the attribution to it of the predicates which we use habitually whenever we refer to religion and to law. In this sense, also, prehistory is not homogeneous with history, and the point at which it emerges is not identical to what comes into being through it.

## 6.

In 1973, in the introduction to *Mythe et épopée III*, Georges Dumézil tried, in the midst of a polemic with structuralism (which was establishing itself at the time), to define the method of his research, which he resolutely qualified as ‘historical’.

I am not a structuralist, I have no occasion either to be a structuralist or not to be one. Mine is not the effort of a philosopher; it intends to be that of a historian, a historian of the most ancient history and of the fringe of ultra-history (*de la plus vieille histoire et de la frange d'ultra-histoire*) which one can reasonably try to reach; it limits itself, therefore, to first observing the primary details of fields of which we know that they are genetically correlated, and then, by way of the comparison of such primary details, to trace back secondary details, which constitute their common prototypes’ (Dumézil 1968–1973, III, p. 14).

This method, as Dumézil has no difficulty to recognise, derives from the comparative grammar of the Indoeuropean languages:

What sometimes is called ‘Dumézilian theory’ consists in reminding that the Indoeuropeans have in fact existed at a certain point, and in holding, on the trails of linguists, that the comparison of the most ancient traditions of those people which are, at least in part, their heirs, should allow one to fathom the outline of their ideology (*ibid.*, p. 15).

The consistency of that ‘fringe of ultra-history’ which the historian here tries to enter is, thus, closely associated with the existence of Indoeuropean and of the people who spoke that language. That such a fringe exists is true in the same sense and in the same measure in which an Indoeuropean form exists (for instance *\*deiwos* or *\*med*, forms which linguists write preceded by an asterisk to distinguish them from the words established in the historical languages). But each of these forms is, rigorously speaking, only an algorithm that expresses a system of correspondences between the forms that exist in the historical languages and, in Meillet’s words, what we call Indoeuropean is nothing but ‘the set of those systems of correspondences... supposed by a language *x* spoken by people *x* in a place *x* in a



time x', where x means simply 'unknown' (Meillet 1921/1975, p. 324). Unless one wishes to legitimise the *monstrum* of a historical research that produces its own original documents, it will never be possible to extrapolate from the Indoeuropean any events supposed to have historically happened. This is why Dumézil's method registered a significant progress with respect to late nineteenth century comparative mythology when, around 1950, he recognised that the ideology of the three functions (priests, warriors, shepherds or, in modern terms: religion, war, economy) 'did not translate necessarily, within the life of a society, into a tripartite *real* division of this society, along the lines of the Indian model (of the three castes)', but represented, in fact, rather an 'ideology', something like 'an ideal, and at the same time, a way of analysing and interpreting the forces that regulate the course of the world, and the life of men' (Dumézil 1968–1973, I, p. 15).

The 'most ancient history', the 'fringe of ultra-history', which archaeology tries to reach, cannot be localised in the chronology, in a remote past, but neither beyond, in an a-temporal meta-historical structure (as for instance, in Dumézil's ironical example, within the neuronal system of a hominid). It represents, as do Indoeuropean words, a tendency present and operating in the historical languages, which conditions and makes intelligible their development in time. It is an *arché*: but it is an *arché* which, as with Nietzsche and Foucault, is not diachronically displaced into the past, but rather ensures the coherence and the synchronic comprehensibility of the system.

## 7.

The term 'archaeology' is closely linked to Michel Foucault's research. It makes its discreet, but decisive, appearance in the preface to *Les mots et les choses*. Here, different from history 'in the traditional sense of the term', archaeology presents itself as the research of a dimension both paradigmatic and transcendental, a 'historical a priori' in which learning and knowledge find their condition of possibility. This dimension is the *episteme*, the 'epistemological field, in which our knowledge, envisaged irrespective of all criteria that relate to its rational value or objective forms, grounds its positivity, and by so doing manifests a history which is less the history of its ever-growing perfection than that of its condition of possibility' (Foucault 1966, p. 13). This history, Foucault points out, is not so much a history of ideas or a history of sciences; it is rather a history of research, a research which, marching upstream against the current, the history of discursive formations, knowledge, and practices, attempts to discover on what basis

knowledge and theory become possible; within what space of order knowledge was constituted; on the basis of what historical a priori, and in the element of what positivity, ideas could appear, sciences being established, experience be reflected in philosophies, rationalities be formed, only, perhaps, to dissolve and vanish soon afterwards (ibid.).

Let us pause for a moment on the oxymoron 'historical a priori'. It intends to underline that we are not dealing here—any more than in the 1971 essay—with a

meta-historical origin, or a kind of original donation which founds and determines knowledge. As *L'archéologie du savoir* will clarify three years later, the episteme is itself a historical practice, an ensemble of relationships which 'for a given period, can be discovered between the sciences when one analyses them at level of discursive regularities' (Foucault 1969, p. 250). The a priori, which conditions the possibility of knowledge, is their history itself, seized at a particular level. This level is the ontological one, the level of their simple existence, the 'brute fact' of their presenting themselves at a given moment in time and in a certain way; or, to use the terminology of the essay on Nietzsche, that of their 'point of emergence' (in Overbeck's terms, of their 'prehistory'). But how can an 'a priori' present itself, how can it exist historically? In what way is it possible to gain access to it?

With all probability, the idea of an 'historical a priori' derives, not from the Kantian archaeology, but from Marcel Mauss, who, in expounding his notion of *mana*, writes in his *Esquisse d'une théorie générale de la magie* (1902/3) that the *mana* is 'the condition itself of the magical experimentation' and that

'it is given a priori, preliminarily to all experience'. *Mana* is not a matter of representing magic, in the literal sense, as is sympathy, as are the demons or the magic properties. *Mana* governs the magical representations, it is their condition, their necessary form. It works as a category, which makes magic ideas possible as categories make human ideas possible (Mauss 1950, p. 111).

Strikingly, Mauss defines this historical transcendental as 'an unconscious category of the intellect' (ibid.), thus, implicitly suggesting that the epistemological model required by such a knowledge cannot be in any way homogeneous to that of conscious historical knowledge. Nevertheless, as for Foucault, it is also clear for Mauss that the a priori, even if it conditions the historical experience, inscribes itself in a determined historical constellation. It makes true, therefore, the paradox of an a priori condition inscribed in a history which cannot be constituted other than a posteriori in respect to itself, a condition in which inquiry—in the case of Foucault, archaeology—must discover its object.

## 8.

Foucault did not question himself on the particular temporal structure that the notion of a historical a priori appears to imply. Nonetheless, the past, which is here at stake, is, like Overbeck's prehistory and Dumézil's 'fringe of ultra-history', a special kind of past, which does not precede chronologically the present as an origin, nor is it simply exterior to it (in this sense, it contains, in Overbeck's words, 'almost nothing of the past'). In the essay on the *déjà vu*, Bergson had put forward the thesis that memory, far from following perception, is contemporaneous to it and therefore able to generate, as soon as the attention of conscience abates, the 'false recognition' which, with an only apparently paradoxical expression, he defines as a 'memory of the present'. Such a memory, he writes, 'belongs to the past as to its form and to the present as to its matter' (Bergson 1919/1949, p. 137). Moreover, if the perception

corresponds to the actual and the image of the memory to the virtual, then also the virtual will be, according to Bergson, necessarily contemporaneous to the real.

In the same sense, the condition of possibility at stake in the historical a priori that the archaeology tries to reach, is not only contemporaneous to the real and to the present, but is and remains immanent to it. With a singular gesture, the archeologist, who chases such an a priori, retreats back, so to speak, towards the present. It is as if, considered from the point of view of archaeology or from the point of view of its emergence, each historical phenomenon were split along the division which separates within it a 'before' and an 'after', a prehistory and a history, a history of sources and a historical tradition—which, as they coincide for an instant in the point of emergence, are contemporaneous indeed. And it is something similar that Benjamin might have had in mind, when, in Overbeck's footsteps, he wrote that in the monadological structure of the historical object are contained both 'prehistory' and 'post-history' (*Vor- und Nachgeschichte*), or when he suggested that the entire past must be immersed into the present in a 'historical *apocatastasis*' (Benjamin 1982, p. 573). (*Apocatastasis* is the restitution in the origin which, according to Origenes, takes place at the end of times; qualifying an eschatological reality as 'historical', Benjamin uses an image very similar to the foucaultian 'a priori'.)

## 9.

It is to Enzo Melandri's merit to have precociously grasped the philosophical relevance of Foucaultian archaeology and to have tried to develop and specify its structure. While usually, he observes, the explication of the basic codes and matrixes of a culture is done by having recourse to another, superior code, to which is attributed a kind of mysterious explicative power (this is the model of the 'origin'), with Foucault 'the archeological research tries to reverse the process, or better to make the explication of the phenomenon immanent to its description' (Melandri 1967, p. 78). This implies a firm refusal of a meta-language and the recourse to a 'paradigmatic matrix, together actual and transcendental, which has the function of giving shape, rule and norm to a content' (ibid., p. 96; it is the model of the 'historical a priori'). It is this immanent matrix that Melandri tries to analyse, situating it in comparison to the Freudian opposition of the conscious and the unconscious. Ricoeur, already, has spoken of an 'archaeology of the subject', with regard to the primacy that Freud's thought bestows upon the past and the archaic. The Freudian analysis shows that the secondary process of consciousness is always late in respect to the primary process of desire and of the unconscious. The realisation of desire, which the dream pursues, is necessarily regressive, because it is modelled on the 'indestructible desire' of a childhood scene, the place of which it occupies. For this reason, Ricoeur writes,

Regression, of which dreams are the witness and model, shows that man is unable to completely and definitively effect this replacement except in the inadequate form of repression; repression is the ordinary rule of working

condition of a psychism condemned to making a late appearance and to being ever prey to the infantile, the indestructible (Ricoeur 1965, p. 431).

Besides such an archaeology in the strict sense, there is, according to Ricoeur, in Freud's metapsychological writings, also a 'generalized archaeology', which concerns the psychoanalytical interpretation of culture:

the genius of Freudianism is to have unmasked the strategy of the pleasure principle, this archaic form of the human, under its rationalizations, its idealizations, its sublimations. Here the function of analysis is to reduce what is apparently new by showing that it is actually a revival of the old: substitute satisfaction, restoration of the lost archaic object, derivative from early phantasies—these are but various names to designate the restoration of the old in the features of the new (ibid., p. 432).

Entirely different is Melandri's conception of archaeology. As for Foucault, the starting point in Nietzsche is specifically the concept of 'critical history' expounded in the *Second Untimely*, that is to say in a history which criticises and destroys the past, in order to make life possible. Melandri generalises this concept, marrying it, by means of an extraordinary *tour de force*, with the Freudian notion of regression:

It (critical history) must take the route of the real genealogy of the events with which it is dealing, back in reverse direction. The established division that has crystallized between historiography (*historia rerum gestarum*) and real history (*res gestae*) is very similar to the one that has always existed between conscious and unconscious according to Freud. Therefore the critical history has the function of a therapy aiming at recuperating the unconscious understood as historical 'repression'. Ricoeur and Foucault, as we said, call this procedure 'archaeological'. It consists in going back to the genealogy until before the bifurcation of conscious and unconscious of the phenomenon in question. Only if that point is reached, the pathological syndrome reveals its real meaning. It is then a matter of *regression*: not, though, to the unconscious as such, but to what has made it unconscious—in the dynamic sense of repression (Melandri 2004, pp. 65–66).

If the connection between archaeology and regression was already there in Ricoeur, Melandri, in this very dense passage, drastically inverts its sign. The pessimistic vision of regression, with its inability to overcome the infantile original scene, leaves way here to an almost soteriological vision of an archaeology capable of moving regressively beyond the scission between conscious and unconscious. But how should we understand this singular 'archaeological regression' which does not try to reach into the past the unconscious and the forgotten, but to go back to the point in which was created the dichotomy between conscious and unconscious, historiography and history (and more generally, between all binary oppositions which define the logic of our culture)? What we are dealing with is not simply a matter of bringing to consciousness what had been repressed and keeps re-surfacing as a symptom, as a certain vulgate of the analytical model would have it. Neither is it a matter of writing a history of the excluded and of the defeated, as a mawkish

paradigm of history of the subaltern classes would have it—and which in fact is bound to turn out as perfectly homogeneous to the history of the victorious. On the contrary, Melandri specifies again and again that archaeology is to be intended exactly as a regression, and that, as such, it is the opposite of a rationalisation:

For archaeology, what is essential is the concept of regression; in addition, the regressive operation must be the exact reciprocal of a rationalisation. Rationalisation and regression are inverse operations, as well as integral and differential... To draw an expression from Nietzsche—one that is extremely famous, yet largely still misunderstood (if it is true what we are saying here, it is also true that, unfortunately, it will never be understood entirely)—we can say that archaeology supposes a ‘dionysiac’ regression. As Valéry had noted, *nous entrons dans l’avenir à reculons ...* equally, in order to understand the past, we have to move backwards into it, *à reculons* as well (Melandri 2004, p. 67).

## 10.

The image of a procession in time, which turns its back to the destination, can be found, as is well known, also in Benjamin, to whom the quote from Valéry must have been familiar. In thesis IX, the angel of history, with his wings caught in the tempest of progress, advances towards the future *à reculons*. Melandri’s dionysiac regression is the opposite and complementary image of the Benjaminian angel. If he advances towards the future while keeping his gaze fixed onto the past, Melandri’s angel regresses into the past while looking into the future. Both proceed toward something that they cannot see or know. This invisible destination of the two images of the historical process is the present. It appears at the point in which their gazes meet, when a future which we have attained in the past and a past which we reach in the future for an instant coincide.

What, then, happens in fact when the archaeological regression reaches the point at which the conscious and the unconscious, historiography and history, part ways—the point, that is to say, which defines the condition which we are in? As should be obvious by now, it is the split itself which dictates our way of representing the time ‘before’ the split. To imagine such a ‘before’ means in fact to continue the logic embedded in the split, and to presuppose an original condition which, at some point, has divided itself. This is expressed in the tendency to represent either the before or the after of the dichotomy as some sort of a golden age, a happy state free from repressions, of perfect self-consciousness and self-mastery. Or in other words, like in Freud and Ricoeur, like the infinite repetition of the infantile scene, the indestructible apparition of the ghost of desire. On the contrary, there is, on this or on that side of the split, in the very lack of the categories which had governed its representation, nothing but the sudden, blinding opening-up of the point of emergence, the self-revelation of the present as that which we had neither been able to live nor to think.

## 11.

The idea that the present presents itself in the form of a constitutive impossibility-of-experience is linked to a Freudian conception of trauma and repression. According to this conception, an actual experience—a rail crash, a scene from childhood (usually concerning sexuality), a pulsion—is removed into the unconscious owing to its traumatic character, or because it is unacceptable on the conscious level. The experience thus enters a phase of latency, during which in some way it appears not to have happened, yet in the course of which neurotic symptoms or some oneiric contents start appearing in the subject, heralding the return of what was repressed. In this way, if it is true that events

a two year old child has seen without understanding can remain perfectly unremembered otherwise than in its dreams... those same events will yet, later, resurface in the subject's life at a specific moment, dictating his actions, likes and dislikes, and often also his love choices (Freud 1938, p. 443).

Only analysis can allow one to revert to the repressed events, beyond symptoms and compulsive actions.

In *Der Mann Moses und die monotheistische Religion*, Freud applies this scheme to the history of the Jews. After the imposition of the law by Moses we enter a long period in which Mosaic religion undergoes a latency phase, to reappear later in the form, familiar to us, of Judaic monotheism. Freud recommends, in this perspective, a parallelism between 'that special state of memory' which we call 'unconscious' and the historical tradition: 'We expect to find here an analogy'—he writes—'with the state of things which, in the effective life of a people, we attribute to tradition' (Freud 1938, p. 443). Tradition works, thus, in respect to its *traditum*, as a period of latency, in which the traumatic event is conserved and at the same time repressed (in accordance with the etymology which connects betraying and translating).

Cathy Caruth, in her book *Unclaimed Experience*, suggests that latency is in a way constitutive of the historical experience and exactly and only through its oblivion, the traumatic event is conserved and experienced.

The experience of trauma, the fact of latency, would thus seem to consist, not in forgetting a reality, that can hence never be fully known, but in a latency inherent within the experience itself. The historical power of trauma is not just that experience is repeated after its forgetting, but that it is only in and through its inherent forgetting... That history to be the history of a trauma, means that it is referential precisely to the extent that it is not fully perceived as it occurs; or to put it somewhat differently, that a history can be grasped only in the very inaccessibility of its occurrence (Caruth 1966, pp. 17–18).

Let us try and unfold these ideas, which the author leaves unexplained, in reference to archaeology. To start with, it implies with Bergson that memory is contemporaneous with perception and with the present—but so is forgetting. While we perceive something, we also remember it and, at the same time, we forget it. Every present contains, in this sense, an aspect of the un-lived; it is, thus, at the limit, that which is not lived in every life (that which, for its traumatic character or

for its excessive proximity, remains unexperienced in each experience, or perhaps, in terms of the Heideggerian history of being, that which, in the form of oblivion, is destined to a tradition and a history). This means that what gives shape and consistency to the scheme of the psychic personality and of the historical tradition, to guarantee their continuity and consistency, is not only the lived, but also, and most of all, the un-lived. It does so in the form of the phantasies, desires, obsessive pulsions, which incessantly press on the threshold of conscience (individual and collective). Paraphrasing Nietzsche's saying, we could say that he who has not lived something (be it an individual or a people), always makes the same experience.

## 12.

The analogy between archaeological repression and psychoanalysis becomes now clearer. In both cases it is a matter of accessing a past which has not been lived—and which thus cannot be defined, technically, as 'past'—but which has, on the contrary, remained present in some way. In the Freudian scheme, this non-past proves its having-been through neurotic symptoms, which psycho-analysis utilises as its Arianna thread to revert to the original event. In the genealogical inquest, access to the past, which has been covered and repressed by tradition, is made possible only by the patient work which substitutes the attention to the point of the emergence with the research for the origin. But how is it possible to re-live a not-lived, to return to an event which for the subject has, in a way, not yet happened? Archaeological regression, going back to this side of the divide between the conscious and the unconscious, reaches also the fault line in which memory and oblivion, lived and un-lived, both communicate and divide.

What we are dealing with, here, is not, however, an encouragement to realise, as we do in dreaming, the 'indestructible desire' of a scene from childhood, or that we have to endlessly repeat an original trauma, as in the pessimistic vision of *Jenseits des Lustprinzips*. Nor is it about bringing to consciousness contents that previously had been removed into the unconscious, as in the successful analytical therapy. It is rather a matter of evoking the phantasy through the meticulous attentions of the genealogical inquiry, a matter of reworking it, of deconstructing it, of detailing it to the point of progressively eroding it and of making it lose its original rank. The archaeological regression is thus elusive: rather than restoring a precedent state, as in Freud, it tends to decompose, move, and finally bypass it in order to revert not to its content, but to the split—to the split which, while taking their place, is constituted as their origin—and to the moments, modalities, and circumstances of its taking place. In this sense, it is the exact opposite of the eternal return: it does not want to repeat the past consenting to what it has been, transforming the 'so it was' into a 'so I wanted it to be'. It wants, on the contrary, to let it go, to rid itself of it, in order to gain access, whether before or after it, to that which never has been, to that which never has wanted.

Only at this point the un-lived past reveals itself for what it really was, namely contemporaneous to the present, and becomes for the first time accessible as a 'source'. For this reason, contemporaneity, the co-presence to one's present, is rare

and difficult, as it implies the experience of an un-lived and the memory of an oblivion; for this reason, archaeology, by going back before the split between memory and forgetting, is the only way of accessing the present that exists.

### 13.

The text in which Michel Foucault has most precisely described, or fathomed, the strategies and gestures of archaeology, is to be found in his first publication, the long preface of 1954 to *Dream and Existence* by Ludwig Binswanger. Even if the term itself is obviously absent, the ‘freedom movement’, which is here attributed to dream and imagination, shares meanings and aims with archaeology. Since the beginning, the Freudian theory of dream as vicarious realisations of an original desire is resolutely contradicted. If dream is dream and not satisfied desire, that is so because it ‘realises also all the counter-desires’, the desires opposed to desire itself. ‘The oneiric fire is the burning satisfaction of sexual desire, but what allows this desire to take shape in the fine substance of fire, is all that refuses this desire and tries incessantly to extinguish it’ (Foucault 1994, vol. I, p. 97). The insufficiency of the Freudian analysis has its roots here: it reduces the language of dream to its ‘semantic function’ alone, disregarding its ‘morphological and syntactical structure’, that is, its being articulated in images. This is why, as an analysis of the strictly imaginary dimension of the expression is entirely lacking, ‘psychoanalysis has never succeeded in making images speak’ (ibid., p. 101).

If the movement of the dream cannot ever be exhausted by re-living a scene or an original trauma, this is because it goes backward well beyond them to the ‘prime movements of freedom’, and coincides with the ‘trajectory of existence itself’. To follow this trajectory in the dream means for the subject to put itself radically into question, to risk itself first of all in its ‘irrealisation’:

To imagine Pierre after a year of absence does not mean to announce him to myself on the level of irreality...it means first of all to irrealise myself, to leave this world where it is not possible for me to meet Pierre. This does not mean that I ‘escape into another world’, nor that I walk along the possible borders of the real world. It means that I take backwards the ways of the world of my presence; and then the lines of the necessity from which Pierre is excluded fade, and my presence, as a presence to this world, is erased (ibid., p. 139).

Far from reinstating a preceding archaic state, a phantasy and a family history, the dream starts to destroy, to smash into pieces each real world, dragging in this destruction first of all itself; if it goes back in time, this is to step over the subjective universe as over the objective one which corresponds to it, heading towards ‘the world at the dawn of its first explosion, when it still coincides with its own existence’ (Foucault 1994, vol. I, p. 128). And, as in the book from 1969, archaeology defines itself through the fact that it seizes the phenomena at the level of their emergence and of their pure being, so in the dream ‘the passage from anthropology to ontology is realised’, where ‘existence itself, in the fundamental



direction of the imaginary, indicates its own ontological fundament' (ibid., p. 137). While in Freud the phantasy represents the indestructible goal which directs the movement of regression, dream and imagination revoke continuously in question each crystallising of their impulse into an image or a phantasy. A phantasy is in fact produced 'when the subject finds the free movement of his own existence annulled by the presence of a quasi-perception which wraps him up and immobilises him' (ibid., p. 145). On the contrary, 'the value of a poetic imagination measures itself by its power of internal destruction of the image' (ibid., p. 143);

every imagination, if it wishes to be authentic, must learn to dream; and poetic art makes sense only if it teaches to break the fascination with images, and to reopen for imagination its clear path to dream, which in turn provides it, as with its absolute truth, with its 'unbreakable kernel of night' (ibid., p. 146).

This dimension beyond images and phantasies towards which the movement of imagination is directed is not the obsessive repetition of a trauma or of a primal scene, but that prime moment of existence 'where the original constitution of the world is fulfilled' (ibid., p. 145).

#### 14.

Let us try to think the particular temporal structure implicit in a philosophical archaeology. It is not properly a past that is in question in it, but a point of emergence; on the other hand, it can open an access to this only by going back to the point in which it has been covered and neutralised by tradition (in Melandri's terms, to the point in which the split between conscious and unconscious, historiography and history, has occurred). The point of emergence, the *arche* of archaeology, is that which will happen, that which will become accessible and present only when the archeological inquest will have fulfilled its operation. It has therefore the form of a futural past, that is of a future perfect.

It is not simply a matter here, as has been suggested, of a 'motion of appeal for alternative developments that had been condemned at the first instance' (Virno 1991, p. 74), nor of conjecturing possible alternatives to the real state of things. Benjamin has written once that 'in remembering we make an experience that prevents us from conceiving history in a fundamentally a-theological way', because the recollection modifies the past in some way, transforming the unfinished into a finished and the finished into an unfinished (Benjamin 1982, p. 589). If the recollection is in this sense the power that restitutes the possibility to what has been (confirming it as past even so), oblivion is that which incessantly takes it away (and nevertheless preserves in some way its presence). In archaeology, instead, what we are dealing with—beyond recollection and oblivion or, rather, in their threshold of indifference—is to access the present for the first time.

It is just for this reason that the passage that opens towards the past is projected into the future. Already in the introduction to *Dream and Existence*, Foucault registers against Freud this intimate tension of the dream towards the future:

the essential point of the dream is not so much what it resuscitates from the past, but what it announces of the future. It foresees and announces the moment in which the patient will reveal finally to her analyst that secret that she does not yet know and that is nevertheless the heaviest load of her present...the dream anticipates the moment of liberation. It is the omen of history, even before being the obligatory repetition of the traumatic past (Foucault 1994, vol. I, p. 127).

Beyond the accent put, here, perhaps all-too ingenuously, on the future as the ‘first moment of a freedom freeing itself’ (ibid.), it is necessary to underline that the future which is in question in archaeology is a future with a past added on to it, a future perfect: it is that *past which will have been*, once the gesture of the archaeologist (or the power of the imaginary) *will have cleared* the field from phantasies and from the tight fabric of tradition that impede the access to history. Only in the form of this ‘will have been’ historical knowledge becomes effectively possible.

## 15.

Archaeology travels the course of history backwards against the nap, just as imagination travels backwards the individual biography. Both represent a power of regression which yet does not retreat, as does traumatic neurosis, toward an origin that remains indestructible, but moves, on the contrary, towards the point in which, according to the temporality of the future perfect, the history (individual or collective), becomes for the first time accessible.

The relation between archaeology and history becomes thus transparent. It corresponds to what, in Islamic theology (but also, even if in a different way, in the Christian and Judaic theology), distinguishes and, at the same time, joins together, redemption and creation, ‘imperative’ (*amr*) and ‘creation’ (*khalq*), prophets and angels. According to this doctrine, there are in God two works or *praxis*: the work of redemption and that of creation. To the first correspond the prophets, who act as mediators to affirm the work of salvation; to the second, the angels, mediators for the work of creation. The work of salvation precedes in rank that of creation: from here derives the superiority of the prophets over the angels. (In Christian theology, the two works, united in God, are assigned in the Trinity to two separate persons, the Father and the Son, the omnipotent creator and the redeemer, in whom God emptied his own power.)

What is decisive, in this conception, is that redemption precedes in rank creation, and that which seems to be second, is really first. It is not a remedy for the fall of creatures, but what solely makes the creation comprehensible, gives it its sense. For this reason in Islam, the light of the prophet is the first of the beings (as well as, in the Judaic tradition, the name of the Messiah has been created before the creation of the world; and in Christianity, the Son, even if he was generated by him, is consubstantial and contemporary with the Father). What is instructive is that the work of salvation—even if it precedes in rank the work of creation—is entrusted,

both in Islam and in Judaism, to a creature. This confirms the paradox, which should by now be familiar to us, according to which the two works are not simply separate, but stand in one place, in which the work of salvation acts as a sort of immanent a priori in the work of creation and makes the latter possible.

To hark back upwards against the course of history, as the archeologist does, is then to revert to the work of creation in order to restore it to the salvation from which it derives. In the same sense, Benjamin made of redemption a fully historical category, in every sense opposite to the apology that animates the work of bad historians. Not only is archaeology, in this sense, the immanent a priori of historiography, but the gesture of the archaeologist is the paradigm of each true human action. It is not simply the work of life which defines the rank of an author, and of each man, but the way in which he has succeeded in bringing it back to the work of redemption, to impress on it the mark of salvation. Only for the one who will have been able to save it, will creation be possible.

## 16.

The history of the human sciences, before they entered a phase of recession, has known a decisive acceleration in the first half of the nineteenth century, when linguistics and comparative grammar have taken over the function of 'pilot disciplines'. The idea that it was possible to go back, through a purely linguistic analysis, towards more archaic (or ultra-historical, to utilise Dumézil's expression) stages of the history of humanity had been ventured at the end of the nineteenth century by Usener in his inquiry in *Götternamen* (1896). Asking himself, at the outset of his work, how the creation of the divine name might have occurred, Usener observed that to try and answer such a question—fundamental in the history of religions—we do not have any other testimony (*Urkunde*) than the one that derives from an analysis of language (Usener 1896/2000, p. 5). Indeed, already earlier, though surely with less rigour, comparative grammar had inspired the research of those scholars who, from Max Müller to Adalbert Kuhn and to Émile Burnouf, had tried to found, in the last 30 years of the nineteenth century, comparative mythology and the science of religions. Just at the moment in which comparative grammar has reached, with the *Vocabulaire* Benveniste, the pinnacle of its attempt to reconstruct, through the examination of exclusively linguistic data, not only and not so much 'divine names', but rather the general lines of 'Indoeuropean institutions', we are witnessing a generalised recession of this type of project, and a related turn of linguistics toward a formalised model of the Chomskyan type, in whose epistemological horizon such a research appears difficult to sustain.

This is not the place to enquire about the function and the future of human sciences today. Instead, we are interested in asking ourselves at this point, once again, how to understand the *arkhé* at stake in archaeology. As a matter of fact, if it is true that research had gone through a significant progress when, in the field of linguistics as well as that of the history of cultures, it had abandoned its anchoring in a truly accessible language and in a people who spoke it ('the academic Indoeuropean, as one thinks it has been spoken at the time of its dispersion', Dumézil 1968–1973, vol. I, p. 9), and if

scholars had understood that the importance was not so much of reconstructing an unverifiable prototype, but of comparatively explaining the known elements, it was nonetheless impossible, in that perspective, to sever completely the link to the ontological support implicit in such a hypothesis. Thus, when Benveniste published his masterpiece in 1969, the question of how one should understand the epistemological *locus* and the historical consistency of the thing called an ‘Indoeuropean institution’ was everything but clear, and it is probable that the author would not have been capable of suggesting a response, even if he had not been hit, that same year, by an incurable and total aphasia. From the perspective of the philosophical archaeology proposed here, the problem of the ontological anchoring stands in need of re-examination. The *arkhé* towards which archaeology regresses must not be understood in any way as an element that can be situated in chronology (not even one with a large grid, of the sort used in pre-history); it is, rather, a force that operates in history—much in the same way in which Indoeuropean words express a system of connections among historically accessible languages; in which the child in psychoanalysis expresses an active force in the psychic life of the adult; in which the *big bang*, which is supposed to have originated the universe, continues to send towards us its fossil radiation. But the *arkhé* is not a *datum* or a substance—different from the *big bang*, to which the astrophysicists try to assign a date, even if it is in terms of millions of years. It is much rather a field of bipolar historical currents within the tension of anthropogenesis and history, between the point of emergence and becoming, between arch-past and present. And as such—that is to say, to the extent to which it is, as anthropogenesis itself, something that is necessarily supposed to have factually happened, and which yet cannot be hypostatized in any chronologically identifiable event—it is solely capable of guaranteeing the intelligibility of historical phenomena, of ‘saving’ them archeologically within a future perfect, yet not grasping its (in any case unverifiable) origin, but rather its history, at once finite and untotalisable.

At this point it is also possible to understand what is at stake in the displacement of the paradigm of the human sciences from comparative grammar (an essentially historical discipline) to generative grammar (an ultimately biological discipline). The problem is, here as there, that of an ultimate ontological anchoring. For comparative grammar (and for the disciplines which are founded on it), this is an originarily historical event, while for generative grammar (and for the cognitivist disciplines linked to it) it is the neuronal system and the genetic code of the *homo sapiens*. The predominance today, in the field of the human sciences, of models originating from cognitive sciences, witnesses this shift of the epistemological paradigm. The human sciences will reach their decisive epistemological threshold only when they have re-thought that same idea of an ontological anchoring, and think of being itself as a field of essentially historical tensions.

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