

At the Discretion of the (A-) Thing: Derrida and German thought

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In this presentation, I examine the doubleness of the thing that is usually masked by the appropriative tendencies of life. Once the enigma of thingliness is given its place, the influence of its own non-intentional inherencies can be recognized. Derrida is particularly interested in the virtual or spectral manifestations of things and the affective power they possess. In the background of each thing, das Ding resides, and with it, the force to call forth the real.

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There is a thing about coming in front of a group of strangers who are each prepared to listen to an exposition on the topos of this conference, on thinghood or thingliness. If I may say so, discussion usually follows the need for an appropriate introduction, taken to mean: setting the audience at ease with an anecdote. That I came prepared with one strangely echoes the place where I started talking, the thing of beginning to speak on the subject to which I was invited and of finding myself deferring what I came to do—address the theme—‘What is a thing?’—and instead commencing at a place that is no longer the beginning. There are two estrangements to note: first, the non-arrival at a beginning is internal to speaking about the thing (that is, not about fussing with preliminaries), and second, the ineffectiveness of nearing or de-distancing [*Ent-fernung*] the thing is immanent to the failure to begin at the beginning (and not simply another incompetence of the speaker). Both can serve to define the event of the thing. But first, to come to the story: the thought that I am going to develop came one day when, rushing along a busy New York City street while chewing a Hershey bar, I heard a passerby shout into her phone, ‘That’s the *thing!*’ It was instantaneously clear that what had

burst into her mind didn't have to do with an animate or inanimate object—rock, book, dog, boyfriend—but something's taking place or about to take place which had not yet been draped with words. It was the key to whatever code motivated the conversation. It is there, at the enigma of an origin, an *Ursprung*, where we need to look for the thing.

Here is another strangeness. As soon as we want to know the thing in its certainty—its what, its identity—we are on the verge of an important discovery. The certainty is impossible because the thing lacks 'clarity and distinctness.' It is neither a Cartesian *res extensa*, nor, as we will soon see, a *res cogitans*. It escapes that opposition. The thing lacks both the definitiveness of an ideal object (an eidetic essence, for Husserl's phenomenology of the *Ideen*)—the program of idealism—and the site specificity of an abiding object's many occurrences (susceptible to scientific observation)—the program of materialist realism. Again, it escapes both. It lives in the difference between the empirical and the transcendental because a thing is virtually real—it has spectrality. It isn't ever itself, plain and simple (as idealism and realism have it), but itself and something else, a supplement, a ghost of itself. It is always double, comes branded with a double, and is therefore duplicitous. The scientist who handles an everyday coffee mug and hypothesizes a materiality composed of impalpable atomic and subatomic entities knows the fact. The thing you know like the back of your hand may enjoy an entirely different life of its own when you're not looking.

To let myself begin again, the thing of coming here is an event that is under way in the time that I speak of it, with all of the power of the *Weg* word. To say that it will likely have happened by the time that I finish would seem irrefutable, as irrefutable as the claim that it might not. When Derrida's thinking is in play—that the event is the impossible arrival of something that cannot be recognized as the *arrivant*—then the ubiquitous machinery of identification and recognition is called into question. With the fact of repetition, it already is the case since the first beginning that seemed a possibility, has, by the second beginning, become impossible, impassible. The rendering of the thing's event has everything to do with uncertainty of time, place, and eventuality of arrival. We can glimpse here the

canonical positions with regard to thingliness. Idealism holds that the thing arrives at the place and time the subject intends it to. This is most forcefully evoked in Husserl's famous watchword, 'To the things themselves', bolstered by the subject's intentionality. Intentionality provides a focus, well-aimed consciousness that has an excellent chance of hitting the targeted thing. Without intentionality, no arrival; no arrival without intentionality. Realism maintains that the thing is the time-lapse of the several non-subjective occurrences of which science can collect data. To suspend empirical and transcendental certitude here is to open the way to the spectralization or virtualization of res. Derrida puts it thus: 'One can think sense or non-sense only by ceasing to be sure that the thing ever occurs, or—even if there is such a thing—that it would ever be accessible to theoretical knowledge or determinant judgement.'¹ This will plot a course for an all-too-brief discussion of the availability of things.

The thing that is going on is without unity or synchrony, and lacks a serviceable handle by which to grasp it, a fact mourned by Marx and Heidegger alike. When (if) it occurs, the event lacks objective presence [*Vorhandenheit*], to which would attach a use-value. It is non-actual, enigmatic, mystifying. Marx comes to this position with the notion of generalized fetishism. A commodity's fetish is its otherwise than 'mere' thinghood that exercises a fascination or force of attraction in excess of the article's humdrum appearance. Think of the urges that produced your last trip to Walmart. The fetishized version of the vase promises to replace the otherwise shoddily manufactured piece on your kitchen table; this substitution has to do with the very event [*Ereignis*] of the thing. You don't buy the plastic molded to a metal frame for any reason other than the shimmer of its allure that lets you picture its glamour in your home; all of which takes place, in Derrida's words, 'according to the law of the double, the substitution of the unique for the unique, which aims for its own specter and for itself.'² A purchase gets two for the price of one. This is noteworthy: by getting two, you lose the thing conceived as a single. As long as substitution is enchained (one fetish breeds another), the thing will not be 'itself' or arrive at being 'in itself' or at itself, *an sich*. It won't be solid

and just what it is but in process of slipping away or slipping on or onto its non-arrival.

Thingness in the first case (i.e. the thing as singleton) challenges the canonical or onto-theological vision of the everyday world, *Alltäglichkeit*. In the second case (the thing as a double), when the challenge is to grasp the taking place of the non-happening—the thing that my presentation speaks of—it eludes the distinction between categorial and existential (ontic and ontological, existential and existentiell) that Heidegger proposes, ‘this thing without a thing.’³ The first challenge we saw in trying to distinguish between virtual and real, where realism can be either idealist or empiricist. There, if a thing is twosome, itself and its spectral other (the ghost of the thing that is haunting this introduction), then it is both real and virtual. The third challenge concerns the distinction between the animate and inanimate, which bears on distinguishing the animal thing from the human thing. Aristotle began by separating rest from movement and defining ‘soul’ as a self-moving entity; life concerns *anima*, the animate. Contrariwise, by a short jump, the thing overlaps the categories of the living and the dead, spirit and matter. It is its own thing (even when the thing is borrowed, as in recitation, remark, and review.) The spectral, animate-inanimate thing can be thought of as the living dead or undying life, that part of the thing you can’t get rid of. Even as you toss the cheap vase in the trash, its image is remarked in memory, its theme in conversation. What is important to see is that attachment—the old Stoic bugaboo—is built into thingdom. As soon as the thing is there, so is attachment to the thing.

The same point can be made by saying that there is no line to draw between the thing and its absence—call it the a-thing—since the thing is the double of itself, the thing plus the absence of it.⁴ The thing is there at the aporia. It waits for its own arrival that is never forthcoming. This has grave implications for a presentation on thinghood. Apparently there isn’t a way to determine whether the thing to be presented is happening or whether it isn’t. It is caught in uncertainty. It’s uncertain whether all this blather about the thing brings it to light, to presence,

or whether it tells stories, making something up, faking it: dissimulation. That there is no way of knowing for sure is a fact that might make us recast our nets for truth.

The trouble in trying to constitute the nature of a thing is that a thing that will have arrived despite its failure to arrive will have happened in the virtual sphere, the *khora*, a term that Heidegger and Derrida both extract from Plato's *Timaeus*. It is the place of no thing actual and all things virtual, a convenient storehouse of spectrality. Prior to distinguishing the 'what' from the 'who', its invocation allows us to see the coming equally as of an entity or a person, or of the shuttle that moves between the two. There is a temptation in certain schools of thought to place a primacy on recognition. This reduces to the claim that the *khora*, the nowhere that contains all virtual somewheres, is identical with the symbolic order or semiotics. The preference for recognition above all overlooks the fact that the thing's identity is a convenient fiction ('canonical abbreviation', in Blanchot, p. 13) for the concatenation of fetishes that inhabits its interior. Concatenation or infinite deferral of the thing itself, *an sich*, the gift of which is rejected by the violence of the recognition apparatus.

There is more to be said about the thing's deconstruction of the animate-inanimate line. One important power that we traditionally reserve for animals, and the animate in general, is perception. I am able to look across the room and see the wall, in as much detail as I wish. In the line of thinking from Kant to Husserl, the object of an intention makes itself available to the analyses which a program of understanding can run on it. The object itself, however, cannot, according to tradition, look back and see the one looking. But once the thing is founded to predate the attribution of intention to 'life', its counter-intention must be taken more seriously. This means that before I gaze out at the wall, the thing already has me in its gaze. The fact is that it has had us in its gaze for some time, constituting an unavowed community of individuals who are capable of being seen by it. In the inversion of intentionality, the inverted intentionality, the thing concerns [*Sorge*, in Heidegger] and unsettles us as its awareness takes us in. The two gazes never intersect. Its looking fascinates us and we don't know how to take it—as a friend, a belligerent, a pervert, a nothing. The virtual look is on the road to the uncanny,

the *Unheimlichkeit*, that begins in Freud and works its way through Heidegger, where the thing's perceptual response is excessive, overwhelms our categorial understanding, and (as *das Nichts*) threatens us with terror. At the same time, the thingly existential self-animation can provide a route by which to see our own blindness.

The observation is connected to the thing of the present presentation, which seems possible only when there are no more assurances that it might be possible, when the certitude of its arrival has been surrendered. This exposes a curious facet of thingdom that Heidegger notes, that something 'un-conditioned [un-bedingtes] . . . conditions the thing as thing.'⁵ That is, the thing is absolutely free from worldly (or even supra-worldly) influence, cause, or constraint. Perhaps even free from itself, since it will have happened in the singular instant, both in and out of time. All the same, the thing's gift of acceptance of, or in Kant's term, receptivity to the one who stands before it is what eventually constitutes experience. From which Derrida concludes, 'The event is another name for that which, in the thing that happens, we can neither reduce nor deny (or simply deny). It is another name for experience itself, which is always experience of the other.'⁶ The 'experience of the other' is predominantly one of time. When it appears in the instant of its appearance, the thing is simultaneously detached and bound to temporal flux. The spectrality both partakes and is absolved of our time, the unfolding of this very discussion of its time.

The thing's virtuality becomes more apparent (if that's the right word) even as it bumps against expectations. The fact that I'm not getting nearer (de-distancing) to presenting you with the thing—signed, sealed, and delivered—has to do with the thing's counter-signature. Or, so to say, bumping against the thing in its heterogeneity, and bumping into the sense of uncertainty about its identity, the thing of this very presentation. In other words, bumping into the binary character of the thing, the alliance with an otherwise than thing, a virtual unworking of the thing itself that remarks it as the a-thing. You could say that one effect of the operation of the a-thing makes it so that we never arrive at the thing which constitutes the response to the question of the conference, never have and never

will. Because the weaving of the thing is undone by the other of the thing, the a-thing that undoes the event of the thing, its coming to be as the achievement of its existential status.

It is right to reflect briefly on the motivating question, the *ti esti*, the 'what is . . .' question. To raise it in a search for good sense, however, lacks warrant. Where the thing comes from, the non-place of *khora*, its own interior, is anterior to the distinction between 'what' and 'who', the categorial and the existential. The thing (that we want to behold) is different from a person, a 'who', but a person shares a similar difference between an interior and a phenomenally visible exterior. We've been through enough material to grasp how the thingly thing *might* be a somebody, a 'who': it perceives, it is as animate as a living being, it remarks itself as spectral (like Hamlet's father, the dead king). Most importantly, things and persons share in a secret unappropriable interiority. Derrida writes of this in his salient essay on Levinas, 'Violence and Metaphysics,' when he says that what 'the things share here with others, is that something within them too is always hidden, and is indicated only by anticipation, analogy, and appresentation.'⁷ A portion of an object like a table is blocked from view although our vision has learned to fill it in by 'anticipation, analogy, and appresentation.' Likewise, your interior life, your private sphere, is accessible only to you. In this way, the virtual interiority of the thing (which is interchangeability with the a-thing, the spectral double) excludes us. It is in flight from thinking, as Heidegger puts it, fleeing as we near it. This quick glance at the 'what is . . .' question then shows us how the thing troubles the entire taxonomy of philosophy.

Let me begin to gather the incomplete and wildly disseminative series of remarks on the thing. We have been unable to get a handle on the thing of this very presentation, the event that makes it uniquely its own instance, but we should not be forlorn. The event that is inappropriable has been making felt its (non-)appearance as its virtual reality. The reality is in contrast to traditional realism in that the thing comes to pass only by virtue of what Derrida calls the 'effect of language' in its confabulations of what is there. Through the textual and literary devices employed, we have been able to follow—to some degree—the self-

remarking (auto-affective) way of the thing. Though the thing escapes experience within the horizon of worldly lighting, it is reckoned *in language* as if it enjoyed full presence. We have also glimpsed how the thing splits, remarks itself as other (without ipseity), and avoids gathering the twosomeness into a present. Its coming to pass eludes the present moment—even now as the fact is emphasized—and belongs instead to an older time whose segments have never presented themselves to a now. It is not a unity and not other than a unity. It flees from itself, withdrawing from its sameness and self-identity. In that movement, it destabilizes the foundation of canonical metaphysics, the difference between same and other. As it escapes our grasp, what we stumble upon is not a void, but rather, the after-effect of an event, the *après-coup* of the thing's passage, as if it is perceived only in its disappearance.

Much more needs to be said about the relation of language and its telephonics to the thing and the telling of the event of this presentation, but I must bow to the conditions of the conference and defer my remarks to another occasion.

¹ *Politics of Friendship*, p. 39.

² *H.C. for Life, That is to Say . . .*, p. 63.

³ *On Touching—Jean-Luc Nancy*, p. 103.

⁴ It is the line, the limit, that is problematic. Compare Blanchot: "After a fashion and from the outset, we have always known death to be only a metaphor, designed to help us achieve some crude representation of the idea of a limit, when in fact the limit excludes all representation, all 'idea' of a limit." *The Step Not Beyond*. p. 52.

⁵ *What Is A Thing?* p. 9.

⁶ *Ecographies of Television: Filmed Interviews*, p. 11.

⁷ *Writing and Difference*, p. 124.

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