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### HOW [IF AT ALL] CAN WE ENCOUNTER WHAT REMAINS LATENT IN TEXTS?

This will not be about what we normally like to associate with “eye-witnessing.” It will not be about those apparently crisp and well-shaped memories whose gestalt persuades us that we know what is on our mind [whatever “knowing that which is on our mind” might exactly mean], making us believe, for example, that we can easily transmit what we saw to those who did not see it [or, to be at least verbally correct: making us believe that we can easily transmit to them what only we heard, touched, tasted or smelled]. It will remain open whether such assumptions of subjective or communicative certainty have any merit once they come under the pressure of insistent epistemological scrutiny.

What interests me, by contrast, are texts [and although I will only write with texts in mind, texts are by no means the exclusive medium to which my questions apply], more precisely texts that seem to “know” more, metonymically speaking, than those who read them, recite them, quote them, and in some cases even than those who write them. How that which appears to be in a text without being graspable, first got there, is yet another possible inquiry that I will not pursue. It could be due to something that those who saw and remembered it, wanted to preserve in a text but never cared enough to clearly articulate. Or it could be as something that those who “left” it in the text were never fully aware of. By not pursuing such hypotheses any further, we will also leave open the more fascinating [in a strictly historical sense probably even: the “romantic”] question of whether everything that texts may “contain” has to be something that was

first registered [on varying levels of awareness] by a human consciousness – or whether there might be exceptions from this rule. For starters, I am calling “latent” whatever we believe is in a text without being unproblematically graspable. To unfold my argument I will deal, briefly each time and as if of from a distance, with eight questions and concerns: I will define more clearly what I understand by “latent” and “latency” [1]; I will then [2] indicate which possible approaches I want to exclude in thinking about that which remains latent in texts, and I will explain why I do not use those approaches; after that, I will try to explain [and this is a crucial point] how we can be certain of the presence of something that remains latent [3]; from there I will proceed to different ways in which the latent can make itself noticed [4]; in addition, I will ask whether the latent has a specific procedure and a specific temporality in coming to the fore [5]; I will subsequently proceed to illustrate, through a specific historical case, what by then I will have developed on a mainly conceptual and therefore abstract level [6]; after that, I will get to the inevitable point of asking what we can and should do if we want to tease out the latent [7]; one answer to this question will consist in a possible description of the act of judgment [8].

The “if at all” in my title question wants to highlight that there cannot be any absolute guarantee for us readers to find what we have reason to believe is latent in a text. I speak of “encountering” [instead of “finding”] the latent because, right from the start, I want to make clear that a systematic search may not always be the most promising approach to this problem. For in some cases the latent may not just be what remains hidden, it may also show a somehow “active” tendency to hide.

[1]

When we say that something is “latent” we normally make four implications: a) we express certainty about something being there [in [3] I will speak about where such certainty may come from]; b) we imply that what is “there” must be in the same spatial dimension [sometimes even in a clearly confined spatial dimension], not too far from us; c) we do not know, however, where exactly the latent is; d) nor do we know what it is [we do not know its identity] so that there is no certainty that we would ever notice the latent if we were confronted with it. My friend, the historian Eelco Runia likes to illustrate the concept of the latent [for which he often uses the word “present”] with the figure of the stowaway. This makes it also clear that the field of the latent may intersect, but is certainly not coextensive, with certain problems of eye-witnessing. For eye-witnessing, I believe, always presupposes at least a brief moment [not necessarily an initial moment] in which the identity of the object witnessed was clear. Martin Heidegger’s famous metaphor of “language as the house of Being” can be interpreted as another illustration of latency.<sup>1</sup> Not so much if we follow the mainstream idea of language as always “expressing” something – for according to this conception language would simply and necessarily make Being accessible. The more interesting reading is to assume that, on the one hand, language suggests a principle closeness of Being and that, on the other hand, language is a medium that allows Being to withdraw. Now, if we assume that the assumption of such “closeness” of Being is real in the sense of being spatial, then Being, in Heidegger’s understanding, has to be something substantial, something tangible, something that occupies space. Therefore, as soon as we associate the “latent” with “Being” [without postulating that Being is always latent], the latent approaches the ontology of the flesh. To say, for example, that something from a remote past is latent in the Alexandrin, in that complex

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<sup>1</sup>See my essay: Presence in Language or Presence Achieved Against Language? In: Ruediger Bubner / Gunnar Hinrichs [eds.]: Von der Sprache zur Logik. Stuttgarter Hegel-Kongress 2005. Stuttgart 2007, pp. 684-692. – For the subsequent commentaries on Heidegger’s concept of “Being,” see the third chapter in my: Production of Presence. What Meaning Cannot Convey. Stanford 2004, pp. 51-90.

and strange prosodic form with which the city of Paris must have resonated during most of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, suggests that the Alexandrin makes present again for us some physical rhythm, some recurrent noise, some material condition of the past of the flesh in that world.

[2]

The one intellectual tradition that of course comes to mind when we deal with something that we describe as being “in” a text without being “easily available,” is the realm of Freudian psychology, both as a primary association and as an ensemble of concepts that has long been successful in its application to [literary] texts. If I do not go back to this paradigm here, the reason lies in my impression that it does not allow for anything to be “latent” in our psyche or on our mind that had not been, at some previous point, successfully assimilated and then subsequently diminished or transformed. This exactly is the shared implication of concepts like “repression,” “forgetting,” or “displacement.” Obviously, there is nothing wrong with these concepts, but I am primarily interested in cases where that which is latent would neither be a representation nor a purely spiritual entity as the Freudian paradigm necessarily implies. Likewise, I will not revert to the concept of “collective memory” which, coming from the intellectual world the late 1920s, has enjoyed increasing popularity among historians during the past decades. In this case, the reason for my hesitation is more straightforward. Of course it is possible to define the concept of “collective memory” in a way that makes it refer to the different types of communication in which individual memories are shared or to fields of individual memories that overlap. I do not believe, however, that something like a “collective memory” can exist as a homogeneous entity and even less so as a place that could house and hide something substantial and / or embodied.

[3]

But how can we be certain, as our concept of “latency” implies, about the closeness of something or of somebody whose identity we do not know? My answer points to a condition that the German language calls “Stimmung,” with its closest equivalent in English being “mood” [like “in the mood”].<sup>2</sup> Heidegger, in Being and Time, describes “Stimmung” as an aspect of the human condition as “thrownness.” At each given moment of life, we find ourselves in a specific “Stimmung,” we seem to be thrown into it, and it is not for us to decide [or even to have any influence on] what specific “Stimmung” this might be.<sup>3</sup> Now, I would like to highlight the root of this noun, i.e. “Stimme” [German: “voice”], because the etymological move demonstrates how the concept and the range of phenomena to which it refers have a material implication. The – by far – most frequently used metaphors through which “Stimmungen” are described in everyday language and in literature [and of course not only in German language and literature] are those of weather and of music. A “Stimmung,” like weather or music, is something that wraps our bodies and that affects them with a physical touch so light that we are tempted to overlook its material character. Nevertheless, enjoying, resenting or merely noticing a “Stimmung” is always and inevitably a psychic move that gives us a sharpened awareness of otherwise often bracketed layers of our physical existence. One of the most famous literary texts that explore the relation between latency and “Stimmung” is Thomas Mann’s novella “Death in Venice.” From its early pages on, the detailed descriptions of the ever changing weather of Venice and the “Stimmungen” that it produces give the reader a quasi-physical certainty of being in presence of something

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<sup>2</sup>See my essay: Reading for “Stimmung,” Forthcoming in: *Boundary 2* [2009].

<sup>3</sup>*Sein und Zeit* [1927]. 15<sup>th</sup> edition. Tuebingen 1979, pp. 339-346 [paragraph 68b].

latent that will show itself – and that finally appears to be a longing for death permeating the homoerotic desire that has overcome Aschenbach, the main character. There is no single element or device through which texts produce “Stimmungen.” Thomas Mann’s masterful descriptions of the weather that wraps his protagonists play exclusively on the semantic level. For a contemporary author like Louis-Ferdinand Céline, by contrast, the prose rhythm of his novels seems to be much more powerful in this sense than his narrative or descriptive configurations.<sup>4</sup> And there is no doubt that James Joyce, in Ulysses, makes prosody and semantics converge for the same type of effects. Above all, however, I want to insist that there is no inductive or deductive pathway that could lead us from a specific “Stimmung” [pointing to the presence of something latent] to the identity of that which is present and latent in it.

[4]

And how does that which is present [but latent] make itself perceived, if only indirectly? This is yet a different aspect of the relation between latency and “Stimmung.” Now it is not about “Stimmungen” producing the certainty of something being there but, in the opposite direction, it is about how that which is there [but hidden] triggers “Stimmungen” to present themselves. To come close to an answer, I will continue to develop the concept of the “latent” based on my understanding of Heidegger’s concept of “Being” – and leaving open the possibility that situations of latency are [or can at least be associated with] situations where Being comes close to unconcealing itself, without being able to ultimately fulfill this “event of truth.” There are two major ways of explaining what Heidegger might have meant by “Being.” If we want to inscribe ourselves into the phenomenological tradition, we can postulate that “Being” are all those

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<sup>4</sup>See my essay: Louis-Ferdinand Céline und die Frage, ob literarische Prosa gewaltsam sein kann. In: Rolf Grimmiger [ed.]: Kunst Macht Gewalt. Muenchen 2000, pp. 127-142.

elements of our material world in relation to which we feel physically right. In this sense, we can feel right about how we are riding our bike on a specific day, and the early Zionist settlers must have felt right about the landscape of Israel being their new physical environment. The other, more provocative [or: more ontological] option lies in understanding “Being” as the return of what Hegel called “the immediate undetermined,” as that which the philosophers of Enlightenment had eliminated from the range of the epistemologically possible by calling it “das Ding an sich” [“the thing in and by itself”]. For whichever conception of “Being” we opt, the implication is unavoidable that movements of individual objects in space are the dimension through which Being shows itself, i.e. movements and space are the dimension of its “unconcealment.” This is one reason that makes it so crucial to highlight the material nature of “Stimmungen” – for only under the condition that they are material can “Stimmungen” be understood as triggered, physically, by Being that moves to show itself. These physical movements of Being [which always imply a tension, a “fight,” or a “polemos,” as Heidegger said,<sup>5</sup> between “Being” and “beings,” [i.e. between “Being” and “entities”]] articulate themselves in different directions: as vertical movements [Heidegger’s “Walten,” i.e., “sway”]; as horizontal movements [associated by Heidegger with the spatial particle in the word “ob-jective,” as indicating that which comes towards you]; or as a back-and-forth movement of Being that approaches the border towards historically specific everyday worlds and simultaneously withdraws from them, a pattern that Heidegger associated with the German word “Entzuecken” [i.e. “delight”], whose etymology points to an intense movement without clear direction. These very movements of Being by no means require the movement or the initiative of a human observer to get going. On the contrary, movements of Being may trigger “Stimmungen” which may then affect humans as world-observers. All that remains for

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<sup>5</sup>See his interpretations of Parmenides and Sophocles [“Antigone”] in: *Einfuehrung in die Metaphysik* [1953, going back to a class of 1935]. 6<sup>th</sup> edition. Tuebingen 1987, pp, 104ff..

“Dasein” [i.e. human existence] to do within this scenario is to be there in order to “embrace” Being as it shows itself.<sup>6</sup>

[5]

When Being comes to the fore and is embraced by “Dasein,” it produces “events of truth.” The likelihood for events of truth to happen seems to grow to the extent that Dasein leaves to Being the initiative of the movement that becomes its own unconcealment – which also implies that those events of truth are not necessarily events that direct themselves to “Dasein” in general and to individual humans in specific. In this sense, “unconcealment of truth” may be structurally different from events of “revelation” in which God is supposed to speak to humans. At the same time, the very likelihood of “events of truth” to happen is a variable within historical time: it is supposed to have been particularly high in Ancient Greece and to have become high again in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, as a possibility inherent to technology. This is what Heidegger calls “history of Being” [“Seinsgeschichte”]. But for some reason, it seems to be particularly difficult for our culture [or was it already the culture of our past?] to find its place and its role in making the unconcealment of Being happen. Heidegger blamed our always instrumental and goal-oriented relationship with technology for this failure. Nobody, however, knows whom or what he was exactly referring to when, in his famous “Posthumous Interview” [and in a number of previously published texts], he made reference to “Gods” whose intervention and support might be humankind’s only possibility to fulfill its destiny within the “history of Being.” All that I would venture to comment on this behalf is that Heidegger does not use this word in an unequivocally metaphorical way.

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<sup>6</sup>Heidegger: Was heisst Denken? [1954, going back to a class from 1952]. 4<sup>th</sup> edition 1984, pp. 138-149.

But we are getting derailed as we are trying to follow, too closely perhaps, Heidegger's footsteps in an essay that is not about his philosophy. What can we then learn from his conception of "history of Being" for our concern "to encounter what is latent in a text"? In the first place, he draws our attention to the unfamiliar thought and possibility that some of our typical efforts to identify what is latent in a text may be counterproductive. Taking a passive stance and an attitude of composure ["Gelassenheit"] may be more successful than our most strenuous hermeneutic attempts. For if our sheer presence can well be a catalyst for events of unconcealment to happen, this does not lead to the conclusion that we can do anything more about it. Sometimes, however, the impression emerges that what has been latent – and continues to be latent – begins to "crystallize." By that I mean a process in which our intuition suggests that something hidden is beginning to take shape, that hat we are closer to grasping what has been latent, without the latent having appeared yet. This process, too, like the unconcealment of Being, does not seem to depend on our initiative or on our effort.

[6]

Western culture may indeed find itself in such a moment of incipient crystallization today, in a specific situation that affects many of our historical readings.<sup>7</sup> The origins of this process may lie in the years following the end of World War II. Different in that from the years after the ending of World War I which, quite literally, seemed to turn the political and intellectual world upside down, post-World War II is generally remembered as a time of quietude, as a time when something unknown

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<sup>7</sup>Paragraph [7] draws on a book project on "latency" in the decade after the end of World War II that I am currently pursuing.

“was kept under the lid” – it is remembered as a time of latency indeed, although the destructive and transformative effects of the later World War were incomparably more powerful than those of the first. As Samuel Beckett’s dramas show us, those were years permeated by the expectation that something unknown would show itself; years obsessed with the threat of bad faith, as we can see in contemporary Existentialism and in the design of some now famous empirical investigations, such as the Kinsey report; those were, finally, years often dominated by the nostalgic wish to return to a world and a lifestyle with clear and narrow borders. Several times, during the decades that have elapsed since 1945, a generation briefly believed that it had been successful in making visible and approachable what had been latent. This certainly was the case with the so-called “Students’ Revolution” of 1968 and the subsequent years, and this happened again when the collapse of Eastern European Socialism occurred after 1989. In the end, however, the assessment seems to prevail that what had been latent since 1945 has never really unconcealed itself. And yet, certain points of reference among the infinity of memories from those war years that our archives have preserved and the older generations’ minds have kept, seem to have become more salient. Paradoxically somehow, the Holocaust or the Gulag are more central today than they used to be fifty years ago. This can of course not mean that the Holocaust or the Gulag were latent and have finally unconcealed themselves – for they were never latent. Rather than revealing a specific “referent” or a particular “meaning”, this process may point to a pain or to a fear, for example, that continues to be present, physically present in part, without having become graspable. It is a presence nevertheless to which we tend to feel closer today than our parents and grandparents did when its origin was much more recent.

[7]

What can we do about such presence, not only about that which is present in the prolonged latency that dates from 1945, what can we do about the impression that it is not enough to just be there, with composure, as Heidegger recommends? Clearly, the endless accumulation of textual and other materials that document what had actually happened in a historical moment of reference will not help. Nor will, as I already mentioned, the renewed and ever more profound [textual] analysis of similar sources. It is such insistence and repetition that produces the impression of a tautology typical of the so-called “Memoria Kultur” in which many German intellectuals and academics are indulging today. Perhaps we need less philological moves. Perhaps a more “cathartic” approach could be more efficient, perhaps exposing ourselves, deliberately, to what is crystallizing from the past, perhaps seeking the physical and emotional closeness and impact of what remains, has a better promise for an encounter with the latent than our typical, more active and brainier efforts. To let happen and feel what the horror of certain pictures and the spell of certain places does to us, individually and sometimes surprisingly, may be what we need. Such cathartic exposure tends to unfold and project a secular logic of redemption;<sup>8</sup> as a self-imposed punishment for acts whose agents we never were, cathartic exposure can produce the promise that, one day, the world may be “back in joint” – although there is no way to predict when exactly this will be the case; there is not even a right to claim that it will happen at all.

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<sup>8</sup>See my text: On the Decent Uses of History. In: History and Theory. Studies in the Philosophy of History 40 [2001], pp. 117-127.

I think it is possible, however, to imagine a historical process where redemption reaches the final point of its logic, without that which may have remained latent ever came to unconceal itself. In other words: the unconcealment of something latent is not a necessary condition for redemption to happen. This brings us back, once again, to the question of what we can do about the latent whenever it resists, over years and even over decades, our serious efforts of identification and our patient attitude of composure. In those situations, we still dispose of our judgment as a tool,<sup>9</sup> and I am not necessarily or primarily referring here to what our philosophical tradition describes as the specific case of the “aesthetic judgment.” Whenever we judge, we cannot rely on the well-shaped sequences of inductive or deductive arguments, nor can we claim that “years of experience” regarding “similar cases” will guarantee a qualitatively superior quality of judging. We dare to dare and make a pledge for justness [“Richtigkeit”] although we know that we have to rely, largely, on our subjective views; we will take into account whatever indicators we have, the different flavors of “Stimmung,” for example, although we know that they are far from being conclusive; we want to identify something, something concrete and individual indeed, although we only have abstract concepts to do so. This, that there is always something lacking in situations of judgment, may be the basis for the intuition that judgments always imply moments of “power” [“Urteils-Kraft”] that work to overcome our inner resistance against claiming what is still uncertain because it cannot yet be sufficiently grounded. With “guessing,” the judgment shares the lack of a necessary, inevitable result and yet, different in that from guessing, it accepts the responsibility for an act whose basis is neither ideal nor non-existent.

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<sup>9</sup>Much of this concluding paragraph was written in reaction to conversations with Florian Klinger who works on a [philosophical] book on “Judging” [“Urteilen”].

If I had to judge what has remained latent for our culture since the end of World War II, I would say that it might be the shock, the horrifying disappointment about the collectively self-destructive potential that humankind had shown, a shock and a disappointment which, could we fully translate them into concepts, would imply the obligation of rethinking and of restructuring that which we have in mind when we say that we are "human." Perhaps we are insulted, deeply and irreversibly insulted, by ourselves as a species, through the remaining acuteness of a pain inflicted to human beings, which suggests that our human instincts are no "better" than animal instincts. Of course we have no way of proving that it was this insulting evidence and its inevitable consequences that have been latent for so many years. But if our judgment was right or just, then the moment of this judgment might well become the beginning of a new "Stimmung" that will surround us. It is not necessarily be a "better Stimmung," and certainly not one that would ever make us feel any good about ourselves.