

# **In Siting an Author**

by

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## I

The English rendering of Heidegger's essay on the thing, "Das Ding," fails to translate, that is "carry across" one of the more curious expressions, which in this case is an entire sentence, that lies embedded within a mass of unordinary turns of phrase. But contrary to what one might suppose from the foresaid hint at "taking to task," I have not set it as my task merely to chastise the absent translator: his burden has already been delivered. "Omission," of course, signifies more than an "oversight," a "seeing-over," a careless "leaving-out"; instead, and particularly in this instance, in this "Heideggerian" instance, its meaning cleaves more closely to its unheard etymology – a "sending-away." In other words, the translator did not carry it across because its semantic burden was deemed too heavy, nor because it was over-looked, but rather because it was not seen as worthy of being transmitted. Yet the insignificant sentence, through the very discard that authorized its insignificance, gave rise to the signifying absence that alludes to the insignificant "something," the foreknown presence of which nevertheless endows the absence with significance. Perhaps, as appears to be the case, I have just re-presented the much derided concept of the sign which stands in for a substance that irredeemably holds claim to it. If so, one might begin to wonder why it is that I have not "filled in" this absence denominated here as omission, why I have not brought it forth and carried it across in a way that the lack will negate itself into fullness, that the omission will be "snatched back" from being sent away, "snatched in" to occupy its rightful place. Let me remark at this point that the grounds of my reticence to "give forth" the authoritative and soon-to-be-acknowledged source(s) which in turn ground this "attempt," this essay, will become manifest only as the essay itself unfolds.

I will not yet ask myself the question as to the consequences of this filling-in: "Wir nennen die Versammlung der Berge das Gebirge."<sup>1</sup> 'We name the forgathering of mountains the mountain-range.' I have now carried it across to supply a lack. And now that the emptiness has been filled, should not we decide upon the significance of its insignificance, supplement its filling-in with a justifying commentary? It appears in a passage that offers it little context in which it can signify - a passage about jugs, giving, out-pouring. But the passage also hovers about a gathering, or rather a forgathering, on which the German inclusion of the later English exclusion hinges. Is this gathering simply, as it would seem, a grouping of un-grouped singularities into a "whole," the in-grouped of

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<sup>1</sup> Martin Heidegger, "Das Ding," in *Vorträge und Aufsätze* (Tübingen: Verlag Günther Neske Pfullingen, 1954), p. 170.

which must display certain resemblances? In this case, the uncarried sentence would itself represent an insignificant taxonomic gesture. But unfortunately this answer would brush aside the more fundamental movement, which this filling-in inweaves, that grounds "taxonomy" and creates it as something to be given in the making. "Wir nennen": 'we name.' The relationship between the name and the named foregrounds an equivalence which expresses a process that cannot be halted merely at the point of subsumption of the contained by the container. Substitution, equivalence: a process of "naming" that institutes the boundaries of the same.

But once again, what is this gathering, this *Versammlung*? The English equivocation between forgathering and gathering, each or both of which can render *Versammlung*, hangs at the crux of the very problematic that the filling-in holds forth: forgathering as a "coming-together" expresses the "bringing-together" of gathering even as it withholds the subject. A "coming-together" is the movement itself, while the "bringing" derives from elsewhere. The *Versammlung* that is the mountain-range comes between these two modes of to-getherness: it is neither the one, nor the other, nor the both to-gether. But to return to the relation between the mountain-range and the gathering: the gathering-together of the mountains becomes denominated, and the mountain-range thereby takes the gathering's place, can stand in for it. The gathering is a grasping-together of mountains that are both like and unlike simultaneously. The mountain-range fills in for the gathering, contains mountains that are like in that they can be categorized to-gether under a single concept (*Begriff*, a grasping), but they are unlike in that the conceptualization of the totality of mountains exceeds the dimensions of any one.

We have now arrived at the moment of transformation that the naming entails: while the gathering is an unsundered "some," the mountain-range constitutes itself as a "sum" that totals up to itself. For the "some" to be sundered and rendered an "assembling" of "sames," which, however, must "resemble" one another in order to be grouped in the "assembling," there must be a simultaneous twofold supercession of mere "gathering": 1) a perception of the unuttered between the simultaneously perceived multiple selfsame, and 2) the uttering (or naming) of the unuttered. In other words, the space separating the mountains, even though it be an absence, is an absence that must be perceived as present just in order to be ... absent. (It is not happenstance that some and same, which permeate similar, resemble, assemble, and even *Versammlung*, all share the same Proto-Indo-European reconstruction, *sem-*.) Gathering is a "some," but cannot become a "sum" until the "some" can be un-gathered in order to be re-gathered and named. The re-gathering is the filling-in of space with a present absence, that is with the unlikeness of the filler from that which it cleaves. In this sense the "wir nennen," the 'we name,' fills up as a filling "upward," to a stand, thereby recognizing the object, the *Gegenstand*, that is, that which stands against. Only in this way is there such a thing as substitution, only in this way can something fill in for, that is stand in for, something else.

## II

This essay was provided with the possibility of being voiced under the assumption that its "object" would somehow take the form of "authority"; it ostensibly intended to characterize and ultimately carry something away from an essay by Walter Benjamin, an essay entitled, in the English synopsis of the first French publication, "The Work of Art in the Age of Technical Reproducibility." As can be seen, the trustworthiness of one's intention stands as the doubtful relation between the posited approach and the resulting outcome: I was sidetracked by a mere omission, by a sentence that was not. But how does one approach, that is bring oneself nearer to Benjamin's essay, or any essay for that matter, even one unrecognized by an authorized author? To use a euphemism, Benjamin is no longer with us. How, then, does one re-present a work of someone no longer present, a work which has become separate from the hand that brought it together? I have "snatched back" and transmitted an omission; I filled in a sentence in Heidegger, a sentence from Heidegger, have sentenced Heidegger. A sentence, meaning "judgment," exemplifies the medieval mode of continuing, preserving, handing down the tradition. Ernst Robert Curtius, for example, to re-pronounce one of his sentences, writes that "Medicine is learned from Galen, as universal history is learned from Orosius."<sup>2</sup>

In other words, to acquire acceptable knowledge, one simply memorized sentences of/from the most authoritatively acclaimed practitioner: author and authority were one, and tradition held them together, even as they constituted the "giving-over," the "transdare" that is the tradition. A sentence judged in a twofold sense: it was simultaneously a judgment by and a judgment of, and it came to be known as the length of that which was periodized. A medieval sentence relates closely to the coexistent *exemplum*, the interpolation to buttress a discourse: Latin *exemplum* translated Greek *paradeigma*, the paradigm that today still fills in as the means to re-produce what has already been produced, to perpetuate the handing-down of what has already been handed down. Sentence and *exemplum* function as modes of carrying-away, and that which is carried off is already a judgment, already what has been borne off in the handing-down. Yet perhaps I should backtrack once again to the text that was to constitute my object. To interrogate the text (is it still Benjamin's, or was it ever?): not as *the* text, but as a text among other texts, as a text that, along with other texts, holds forth (or does it?) some-thing that can be plucked out and carried away. An aura enshrouds Benjamin's text, his remains. I filled in Heidegger to encounter a bottomless chasm,

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<sup>2</sup> Ernst Robert Curtius, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, trans. W. R. Trask (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1953), p. 57.

the chasm between the mountains that only revealed itself as such in that it stood "counter" to carry the name that calls it. Must I cite Benjamin as author-authority? If so, what sentence or sentences am I perhaps unknowingly predisposed to utter?

## III

The text is bound up with and by tradition even as the text writes tradition or is inwritten within it. And herein lies the importance of the text we call Benjamin's: it fragments tradition by totalizing it. Otherly said, it points to the unraveling of the web of tradition precisely because it appears as one of the tradition's most intricate weavers. I cite: 'The here and now of the original makes up the concept (*Begriff*) of its authenticity, which in turn serves as the ground for the representation (*Vorstellung*) of a tradition that has transmitted up to today this object (*Objekt*) as selfsame and identical (*als ein Selbes und Identisches*).'

Das Hier und Jetzt des Originals macht den Begriff seiner Echtheit aus, und auf deren Grund ihrerseits liegt die Vorstellung einer Tradition, welche dieses Objekt bis auf den heutigen Tag als ein Selbes und Identisches weitergeleitet hat.<sup>3</sup>

In this passage tradition is itself described as residing in the tranquility of its giving-over; its holding(s) and its giving have not yet been sundered. The ground and the edifice constructed upon it have not yet become differentiated. The here and now never passes, never emerges to constitute a there and then; what I have rendered as representation (*Vorstellung*) is not a "*Vorstellung*" in the sense of a "fore-placing," an ideational placing in front of, but is rather a "fore-placing" in which the unfolding is identical to that which is being unfolded, a placing forth of the selfsame out of what is ever selfsame. The object is therefore an *Objekt*, a "throwing-against," rather than a *Gegenstand*, a stationary "standing-against," because the object re-presents itself in a repetitive movement which always brings itself forth again as the representation that is not separate from itself. I cite: 'The authenticity of a matter (*Sache*) is the aggregate (*Inbegriff*) of everything that is from the origin (*von Ursprung*) transmissible (*Tradierbaren*) in it, from its material duration to its historical testimony (*Zeugenschaft*).'

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<sup>3</sup>Walter Benjamin, "Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit," Erste Fassung, in vol. 1:2 of *Gesammelte Schriften*, eds. Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1980), p. 437.

Die Echtheit einer Sache ist der Inbegriff alles von Ursprung her an ihr Tradierbaren, von ihrer materiellen Dauer bis zu ihrer geschichtlichen Zeugenschaft.<sup>4</sup>

Concept (*Begriff*) becomes transformed into aggregate (*Inbegriff*). In the latter citing, the aggregate conceptualization (*Inbegriff*) is not a grasping of that which stands against, of that which stands in a relation of otherness: it is a grasping "in" the same that in effect derives its seeming steadfastness from the grasping itself. This suggests the appropriateness of aggregate as a translation for *Inbegriff*; the Latin *aggregare* related 'to add to the flock.' With a supplementation of more of the same, the flock does not lose its identity but augments itself, if indeed such an "addition" can be so described, it grows solely if what is added is not unlike what was already there. The concept (*Begriff*) of authenticity as authenticity can only come about when the concept no longer partakes of the being of what is conceived, just as a "here and now" only receives its denomination after the perception of a "there and then," perception of an other that is not actualized here at this moment, as this moment.

The German makes manifest the close relation between "tradition" and what in the translation is expressed by "transmissible," that is between "Tradition" and *tradierbar*, just as "testimony" translates *Zeugenschaft*, that is the engendering of offspring. In this sense *Inbegriff* is a conception "in." But what forced the conceptualization "of" in place of conceptualization "in," what allowed conception of conception in? In grasping the selfsameness of the commentary and what is commented upon, the role of technical reproducibility in permitting this "grasping" becomes apparent. The availability of the reproduction undermines authenticity by making the inauthentic accessible in its place; the "authentic" object emerges to stand forth in separation from its commentary, becoming perceived as a commodity by virtue of the commodification of its simulacra. Yet this is an old story. Still, I cite: '... that which in this manner comes into the process of tottering on the brink (*ins Wanken gerät*), is the authority of the matter (*Sache*).'

... was aber dergestalt ins Wanken gerät, das ist die Autorität der Sache.<sup>5</sup>

I have now mentioned authority.

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<sup>4</sup> Benjamin, Zweite Fassung, p. 477.

<sup>5</sup> Benjamin, ZF, p. 477.

## IV

I cite again: 'One can fasten together (*zusammenfassen*) in the concept (*Begriff*) of aura that which here falls out (*ausfällt*) and say: that which shrivels in the age of the technical reproducibility of the work of art is the artwork's aura.'

Man kann, was hier ausfällt, im Begriff der Aura zusammenfassen und sagen: was im Zeitalter der technischen Reproduzierbarkeit des Kunstwerks verkümmert, das ist seine Aura.<sup>6</sup>

Aura, here designated as a concept (*Begriff*), names the assemblage of what falls out, the fastening-together into a some that is "*zu-sam-men*." The "in" of *Begriff* falls out, not to be retrieved; only in the falling-out of the "in" is the *Begriff* made possible. The falling-out doubles: a falling-out into both omission and perception. Remembrance, that is perception as recognition, draws its possibility only at the cost of forgetfulness. What is forgotten can only maintain itself ontologically by being remembered as forgetfulness. The fastening-together and the saying are bound to one another in the instance of naming. But what is the substance of this grasping, this concept (*Begriff*), this naming? I cite: 'What virtually is aura? A peculiar weaving out of space and time: the onetime appearing (*Erscheinung*) of a farness, however near it may be.'

Was ist eigentlich Aura? Ein sonderbares Gespinst aus Raum und Zeit: einmalige Erscheinung einer Ferne, so nah sie sein mag.<sup>7</sup>

Aura, as a flash of light, appears only as it disappears, is recognized for what it is only at the moment in which it no longer is, much as a shooting star glows into the foreground solely in consuming itself. The appearing of a farness in the form of unapproachability or awe finds itself subsumed under the nearness and approachability of the reproduction, but while the farness disappeared from perception, it was merely concealed in the very nearness that apparently negated it: the *Objekt* becomes a *Gegenstand*. No matter how near one approaches, the object as "*Gegenstand*" stands against in an essential farness that cannot be diminished. I cite: 'The peeling-

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<sup>6</sup> Benjamin, ZF, p. 477.

<sup>7</sup> Benjamin, EF, p. 440.

out (*Entschälung*) of the object (*Gegenstandes*) from its shell, the shattering (*Zertrümmerung*) of the aura, is the mark (*Signatur*) of a perception . . .'

Die Entschälung des Gegenstandes aus seiner Hülle, die Zertrümmerung der Aura, ist die Signatur einer Wahrnehmung ...<sup>8</sup>

The emergence of the aura coincides with its own fragmentation, which is perceived at the same time that it renders the perception realizable. The sundering of the object from that which harbored it, from the veil that concealed it as undifferentiated from the sameness that held it from view, brought it to light as something brought to a stand. While the peeling-out sets aside the sameness by differentiating it, it also provides for the reassembling of that which is unlike; nevertheless, this gathering into a some cannot recuperate the beforehand sameness: it always carries the mark of the dispersal's perception.

V

But what really is aura? Aura is the opening-up of a space between the object (*Gegenstand*) and its covering, between the work of art and its unfolding commentary. It also opens up the space between the here and now of the aura, which is now no longer here, and the perception of its here and now, which, because it no longer remains actual, takes the form of a there and then. How, then, can one carry across the very aura that makes the breach perceptible? To rephrase the question, how does one cite, that is carry away the "substance" rendering the text citable? Carrying-away is itself a multivalent notion. To carry away or across in language relies no less upon the vehicle than transporting relies on the contemporary car or relied upon the Roman chariot. But in language, the vehicle, the "car" of carrying, neither advances nor retreats: the movement does not take place in the carrying. Once the load is sighted, it needs only to be grasped for the vehicle to be filled. Gathering differentiates, for only what is separate permits an assemblage. Like gathering, the aura eludes one's grasp, for it can only be alluded to by means of the grasping. One loads by grasping, one carries by filling in; one sights through recognition, and in the vehicle one carries away. The filling-in presupposes the vehicle, just as the latter always prefigures the former. (And the vehicle always stands with its door open.)

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<sup>8</sup> Benjamin, ZF, pp. 479-80.