

## Introduction:

### *Hoc nihil ad rem*

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The thing is eventful, the event happens in the thing itself: such will have been the dual provocation of this book. If we are to learn how to hear the pro-vocative challenge, how to attune ourselves to the calling forth that proceeds from and summons us to the eventfulness of the thing and the thinghood of the event, we ought to learn, in the first place, not to precomprehend the source of the call in terms of a fixed ontological entity vaguely synonymous with the object. The refusal to accept this traditional meaning uncritically implies that, perhaps, in spite of the long and overdetermined philosophical genealogy of *onta* and *pragmata*, *res* and *causa*, *Ding* and *Sache*, what we know of and about the thing has nothing to do with the thing, *hoc nihil ad rem*, because we no longer or still do not know whether the thing has anything to do with knowledge. Such 'meta-not-knowing,' which touches not only this or that particular thing but also the relation or the non-relation of knowledge and thinghood, precipitates the event that shirks the mechanisms of recognition and conceptual identification. The futural coming of the unrecognizable event retraces the past of the thing that precedes subjective memory and repeatedly escapes from every stage of the philosophical genealogy that names it. In other words, the event reiterates the fugal iteration inherent in the thing and expresses itself as the event *of* the thing, whose escape is not wholly negative but generative and abundant.

The rejection of preconceived, unexamined notions is a hallmark of post-Kantian philosophy, with its methodological emphasis on critique, negation, and reduction, which informs all quests for the true objectivity. This emphasis goes hand in hand with the necessary detour through the true (transcendental, intersubjective, bracketed, purified) subject on which the success of such quests hinges. Yet no amount of

critique will be sufficient if the value of truth itself comes into question and becomes irrelevant to the thing itself. In Kant's system, where the critical impulse delimits the absolute claims of knowledge, while the 'thing in itself' circumscribes the epistemological purview of critique and the ontology of objectivity alike, there is a dawning awareness of this insufficiency. Kantian awareness, however, fades as early as Hegel's dialectical philosophy, which prompts, *inter alia*, a gradual determination of the thing in itself for us. Even Husserlian phenomenology, with its anti-psychologist agenda, exempts the immanent structures of pure consciousness – but not the 'transcendence' of the thing – from the relentlessness of reduction.

Without rehabilitating the pre-Kantian innocent illusion of objectivity indifferent to subjective organization and arrangement, the deconstructive retrieval of the question of the thing in Derrida dethrones the 'primacy' of consciousness and overturns the claims it lays on the actual, present, real being. This retrieval suggests that, in contrast to the irreducibility of the thing, Husserl's pure consciousness is thoroughly reducible (chapter 2); that the interiority of the Hegelian subject turns inside out, consumes itself, and thus defers to the movement of the thing (chapter 3); and that, prior to and below the lines of demarcation between the subject and the object, this movement constitutes the differential of forces before and below its Kantian determination and ontologization (chapter 4). A crucial aspect of Derrida's tendency to think 'prior to and below' Kant is the tacit acknowledgment that any attempt to disentangle the thing from the object is *necessarily* preliminary and provisional, since it threatens to restore the absolute divide between the empirical and the transcendental, by stabilizing, objectivizing, and therefore incorporating into the object the distinction thus outlined. Still, the yardstick (if there is one) for distinguishing the object from the thing is the specific kind of difference each of them entails: whereas the former emerges in opposition to the subject, the latter signifies non-oppositional otherness and non-identity (chapter 1).

Deposited within the Heideggerian discourse on the epochal donation and withdrawal of being and substituting 'being under erasure,' the deconstructive thing appears only in retreating or withdrawing. That is to say, it subtracts itself from what it gives, makes appear, and at the same time expropriates, including space, time, the phenomenological world, and the process of signification that, in vain, strives to remark the thing's own self-remaking routine. Unlike Heidegger's being, however, the Derridian thing is both disseminated and disseminating, such

that it evades the strictly conceptual grasp and any efforts of gathering into a totality. Its self-dissemination derives from its originary doubling or splitting – between the ‘who’ and the ‘what,’ the animate and the inanimate, the living and the dead, the phenomenological and the abstractly scientific – which precludes the possibility of synthesis, prevents the thing from assuming an objectively oppositional stance (against the subject *or* against the non-thing in general), and welcomes *différance* as well as the event in the virtual interiority opened by the split. While the thing is that which happens when the event happens, the poetics of the event analyse and re-synthesize language and discourse in the thing itself, which remains impervious to analysis, synthesis, and hence the order of knowledge. In acknowledging this imperviousness, one accepts the unbinding of the thing from the subject. This is the argumentative thread of chapter 1.

Chapter 2 brings together Derrida’s modification of the Husserlian intentionality thesis and his deconstruction of the categorial/existential divide in Heidegger. Although, for Husserl, intentionality is unthinkable without its ‘real’ elements (*noema* and *hylē*), the fragments of subjective intentions are inevitably lost in the opaqueness of the intended thing. The return of these lost fragments defines the thing’s own spectral intentionality, which aims at and obsesses us well in excess of the circumspective concern accompanying our being-in-the-world. Despite its inherent self-dissemination, the thing directs itself to us, investing ‘our’ collective subjectivity. Inscribed onto the body *proper* or, more specifically, onto the senses of seeing, hearing, and touching, the inversion of intentionality both enables and defies the functionality of sense as such. Finally, in the act of reading, the text reads us before and while we face it. Its intentionality anticipates and pre-empts the activity of consciousness and, in so doing, deflates all claims of primacy.

In chapter 3, I consider the role of the thing in Derrida’s account of psychoanalytic and commodity-economic fetishisms. As an extended-psychic thing, as a juncture between *res extensa* and *res cogitans*, the unconscious is internally divisible and analysable: that is the sine qua non of psychoanalysis. On the side of the thing, psychoanalysis resists both the metaphysical belief in psychic undifferentiation and its corollary, the disavowal – registration and repudiation – of difference that leaves no space for analytic activity. But, on the horizon of negativity, the thing itself both invites and resists analysis as its impossible condition of possibility. One version of this resistance is the subsumption, in the thing itself, of the distinction between the fetish (what replaces the

absent thing) and the thing, which, in its 'proper' non-oppositional otherness and non-identity, is the very figure of substitution and supplementation ('generalized fetishism'). Consequently, to love the thing is to leave enough room for its resistance and to allow the chain of substitutions that makes up generalized fetishism to continue indefinitely in the thing itself.

The dynamism of this chain reflects the way in which the thing sets itself to work, but capitalist valorization harnesses the work of the thing for the purposes of profit-making when it abstracts its social dimension and confines it to the law of value. As a result, economic fetishism utilizes the commodity as a 'sensuous non-sensuous' object-thing and objectifies the qualities of the thing as such, presencing and capitalizing on its virtuality. It is, then, possible to graft the features of the thing (self-supplementation, giving and demanding time, etc.) onto the bodiless body of the commodity, keeping in mind that the latter represents the process of the becoming-thing of the thing, which, in a phenomenological perversion, sustains what Derrida calls *mondialisation*, the becoming-world of the world, or the idealized projection of reified sociality writ large in the form of value.

The hypothesis of chapter 4 is that Derrida's writings on aesthetics charge art with the task of setting free the alterity of things that, in turn, deconstruct the work of art. For instance, the aesthetic style is a kind of signature that releases the work from the author/artist, by absorbing and identifying the residue of its bearer's idiosyncrasy (that which is 'proper') and thereby signalling his or her death. The first idiomatic signature lodged within the art-work is doubled by the counter-signature of the art-thing that materially supports and resists – confirms and betrays – the work, both offering and denying the possibility of hypostasis. The release of the thing also transpires thanks to the aesthetics of the 'subjectile' which is Derrida's name for the subterranean movement of the post-Heideggerian hurling and falling underneath the congealed objective and subjective forms. The unknown, unpredictable destination of the subjectilian trajectory sweeps away the artist, the art-work, and the art-thing in a certain purposeless purposelessness, which radicalizes Kantian aesthetics. Finally, the *parergon* undoes or, at least, complicates the dualisms of the thing and the work, the inside and the outside, the necessary and the incidental, and so on. It designates the mutual fall of the thing into the work and of the work into the thing, which, in this alteration or alterization, regains its non-oppositional otherness and non-identity.

If the 'thing' is one of the most inconspicuous terms in Derridian philosophy, then its inconspicuousness should be taken literally as the muteness at the bottom or at the heart of speech, as the muteness, also, of the written word, of materiality without materialism, the muteness that, finally and paradoxically, permits the conceptual equipment overlaying deconstruction to instrumentalize, idealize, and transfigure it either into textual analysis and criticism, or into a purely formal and secretly idealist exercise. But (and here is the brink of an aporia) to make the thing speak directly, programmatically, conceptually of itself and for itself, in its self-identity as 'the thing itself,' is to lose it all the more surely, given that neither the thing nor the written word operates in the medium of the voice, in which they would coincide with themselves. It is in the double bind of the approach to the thing that deconstruction risks arriving at what has nothing to do with the thing – *hoc nihil ad rem* – when it lets what or whom it approaches speak and, simultaneously, respects the irreducible muteness to which we shall now attune our ears.