

History, Improvised

A Short Dialogue between Jean-Luc Nancy and Marcia Sá Cavalcante Schuback

Translated by Peter Hanly

ABSTRACT: In this text, a dialogue about the difficult task of seizing the sense of history today is presented. The point of departure is the difficulty of the times to begin and the necessity to rethink the difference between historiography and historicity, and further between events, the event and the advent. The dialogue proposes to revisit the meaning of beginning from out of the experience of improvisation and to reflect upon the possibility of developing improvisation as a sense of history.

KEY WORDS: history, improvisation, beginning, end, event, advent

MC: We are attempting a dialogue about history. No shortage of difficulties becomes apparent, but above all the difficulty of beginning. How to begin such a dialogue? To go back over all that has been said about history, about the distinction between the ancient and the modern; about idealism and historical materialism; about the idea of history, about its materiality—or indeed its immateriality; about the difference between history and historicity, the difference between the broad narrative of ‘history’ and the minor narratives, the stories; about the difference between the discourses about the end of history—which have themselves become a grand narrative of the lack of grand narratives—and history as finite, as you yourself have suggested. We could indeed retrace all of this thinking, but this retracing would not in any way relieve the feeling that there is nothing more to be said about history, or even that the question of history has itself become a historical object. To think history today is to expose ourselves to a today that is estranged from this question, as if the time, the place of the question of history seemed to have become estranged from or even indifferent to itself. It seems to me that the only possibility of beginning this dialogue would be by remaining within this difficulty of beginning. The difficulty of beginning is set against the disillusionment about the possibility of

beginning. From whence does the question of history arise today? Does it arise from a disillusionment of beginning, from the feeling of no longer being able to begin, from a feeling that beginning has no power, that power has left all beginning bereft? The question of beginning is the dark shadow-line of the modern thinking of history—beginning understood as the event that interrupts the flow of events, beginning as re-birth, as reform—in other words as revolution. To have nothing more to say about history mirrors the no-longer-being-able-to-begin of history. To think history today, then: would this not mean thinking this ‘no-longer, today, being-able-to begin,’ or thinking today as a not-being-able-to-begin? And, following this same path, thinking the question of beginning beyond every idea of revolution, of novelty—in other words of a teleological or messianic relation to the past?

JLN: To be sure, we do not know where to begin: history as a thematic, or as an object of reflection seems finished, in the sense of a ‘termination,’ the sense of it having become very difficult—close to impossible—to relate oneself to a process or to a meaning with which we could be engaged and on behalf of which we might also engage ourselves. This means, in other words: a history which would be ours of which we would in certain respects be the subjects, or which indeed might be the genesis or production of a “we”-subject. History as ‘subjectivation,’ as people are fond of saying, following Foucault. But precisely this neologism, even used in an undisciplined manner, rests on the idea that there is no subject prior to its historical constitution. Neither ‘personal’ subject nor subject of history. Foucault forged this word in order to place emphasis on the discontinuities, ruptures, configurational changes in knowledge, power and relations throughout the length of a ‘history’ entirely separate from any continuous programmatic or teleological process. To such an extent, indeed, that my sense of it is that ‘subjectivation’ is only a somewhat feeble way of trying to conserve a minimum—and perhaps the illusion—of mastery and of autonomy, precisely there where everything tends toward the perception of practices that are not under control, toward a mutual heteronomy of process, of mechanisms and machinations that assume no project, and hence no subject.

In large part, indeed, it is from out of this transformation from the image of process or project into a cartography of indefinite interdependencies of power and knowledge that the profound transformation in the idea of history has come. To the point that it no longer has a form—unless it be that of an awareness, always increasingly unbounded, complex, diffracted and problematized, of the supposed facts of the past. In Heideggerian terms, the more historiography (*Historie*) achieves, the less power history (*Geschichte*) has.

A *Geschichte*, though—which is to say a sending, a mission—presupposes a beginning, which cannot take place unless a destination makes possible the launching. If we are incapable of beginning *on the subject of* history it is because we are no longer capable of beginning *in* history. Those who have thought to

begin—and who, in fact, have begun—those initiators of modern sciences and societies—have in point of fact discovered within their respective times the conditions for such projects (Galileo or Locke, Descartes or Spinoza). What they began has metamorphosed into a double consciousness: the project has unraveled, dispersed, as if dis-membered or broken apart, whilst at the same time its ends have become tenuous, uncertain or even frankly perilous. And this metamorphosis is itself an effect, a product or an event of history—of ‘our’ history, since despite everything ‘we’ have ‘made’ it, at least up to a certain point. This is why I suggested a while ago thinking history as “finite,” less in the sense of the “terminal” than in the sense of a relation to finitude, in other words somehow detached from the bad infinite of the project, disconnected from the endless indeterminacy of process, progress and projection. (I am entirely setting apart the fortunes of the “good” infinite. We will perhaps return to this later).

So, to ‘begin,’ then—if indeed we are obliging ourselves to speak of ‘history’ or within actual history, within what is happening and where we ourselves are happening—it appears that we are impelled towards a kind of *improvisation*. Might we gain support from this word?

MC: We perhaps might gain support from improvisation in order to think ‘finite history’ in the sense that you suggest: finite history as history ‘disconnected’ from the bad infinite of the project, from the endless indeterminacy of process, progress and projection. But what does ‘improvisation’ mean? ‘Perhaps’ and ‘disconnected’ are terms already encountered in the field of experience that we call improvisation. Normally, one means by improvisation beginning something without preparation, and thus without envisaging where the beginning might lead us. This is the usual sense that comes to us from the Latin *improvisus*. When you spoke in Stockholm about improvisation, before improvising with musicians, you sketched out a thought about philosophical improvisation. You recalled that, in the dialogue *Phaedrus*, Phaedrus asks Socrates to ‘improvise’ a response to Lysias’ discourse, a discourse that he had encountered only via Phaedrus. The word that Plato uses is ἀὐτοσχεδιάζω. The Socratic improvisation in this dialogue is usually understood as ‘without preparation,’ without project. You also proposed a reading of Hegel’s *Logic*, from a beginning empty of presuppositions, like an ‘improvisation.’ To understand Hegel’s *Logic* in relation to improvisation is really something that gives us a great deal to think about. After our conversation in Stockholm about improvisation, I realized that improvisation presents a sense of beginning entirely other than that which we most commonly understand as ἀρχή. For the improviser, I think, the beginning might be better described as an arc—the arc of beginning, to introduce another register of meaning. It is another sense of connection. This arc of connection made me think of the use that Aristotle makes of this same verb that Plato uses. Aristotle makes use of it when he describes the beginning of the form achieved by tragedy at the moment when the protagonist

disconnects himself from the dithyrambs, which Aristotle describes as improvisation, αὐτοσχεδιαστική. According to him, the finished form of the tragedy erupts from the kind of distancing from improvisatory practice. The dithyrambs, the Bacchantes, the Dionysiac dancers are thus ‘improvisers.’ But in what sense? Not in the sense that they do not have a text that is written or prepared, not in the sense that they do not have a project, a goal, but in the more literal sense of the Greek word αὐτοσχεδιαστική, derived from the verb σχεδιάζω and from the word σχεδόν, meaning most near or close. The Dionysiac dancers are those that are the most present, the closest, those without separation from the “the happening of being,” from its “whiling,” as one might say. This is not so much in relation to a project or projection of meaning, but rather in relation to a presence, a proximity to the happening in its whiling, that improvisation takes place. What is said in this Greek word is above all a certain intensity of presence, a particular mode of performance, of being-in-play. It seems to me that it is in this sense that one can better understand how improvisation is so bound up with music. I think that improvisation can help us to think finite history, in its ‘perhaps’ and its ‘disconnectives,’ above all if one pays attention to this sense of presence and intense proximity, in the sense of being attentive to the whiling of being, which is to say to being in the gerundive sense, not to be confused with a presentist sense of history. In a certain way this sense of improvisation as deep proximity, a presence to the happening, is close to what Benjamin envisaged when he contrasted a sense of history that searches for the causal connection between events and the property of history (which manifests itself in historical comprehension as cultural patrimony) and a sense of “expressive connection,” of the expressions and expressivity of history. Benjamin insisted on the “perceptual now” and on the necessity of developing a way of seeing capable of seizing hold not merely of the past as it passes, but of the way in which the in-the-process-of-happening fixes itself in an image; whence his thoughts on “dialectical image,” which is nothing other than an “after-image.” It seems to me that this “perceptual now,” which is other than a perception of the now, touches on the question of the improvisation of history in the sense of a form coming to form, a form as it is becoming fixed. But would it not be necessary here to introduce a distinction between musical improvisation, philosophical improvisation and (let’s call it) ‘historical improvisation’? Would it be in *this* sense, the sense of attention to the happening in its whiling, that the expressive links expose themselves like after-images, that you are proposing an improvisation of history?

JLN: Yes, I can pick up from what you have just said: an attention to the ‘in-the-process-of-being,’ or to the gerundive as you put it earlier. And let’s specify that we are at one and the same time, almost without distinction, talking of both *Historie* and *Geschichte*. I would like to say of the historian and the historical actor that the one, just as the other, improvises in a double sense: firstly, they do not see ahead,

they neither project nor program—at least not in the sense of executing a plan; and secondly, they are attentive to the happening (thus to *Geschehen*).

Let's specify that these two types are bound together in two ways:

- (a) In writing history, the historian is also concerned with, and is within, what is happening; his narrative is also something that is happening. Thus, the “French Revolution” is the name for a long series of histories of what happened between 1789 and 1793, a series itself bound to the shifts and transformations of consciousness, of knowing, of interests and of modes of thinking history over the course of two centuries. And this is true of all histories: for instance, today, so many things about the Paleolithic and the Neolithic ages are being revised, re-formulated and re-established. It is not entirely the same events that one would formerly have recounted that take place there. . . . *Historie* is always ‘in the gerundive,’ as indeed are all sciences worthy of the name.
- (b) In being a historical actor—which in a sense we all are, more or less—we are already writing or relating what has happened (and, for sure, we do not write in order that what we write will be re-written), for example, we are (“we,” the supposed “Westerners”) in the process of writing a history of the derivation, dissolution or metamorphosis of the “West,” of which the idea itself is displaced, distorted or erased. However, history as we understand it—in its two interlinked values, as narrative of what has happened and the advent of ways of recounting—is itself one of the remarkable products of the West. It will have been the civilization (or barbarism) of the historical.

But to come back to improvisation. Σχεδόν implies closeness, in point of fact, in the sense—quite useful here—of the French ‘approximatif,’ ‘approximate’ in English: close but not exactly “that.” It is the “roughly,” the “almost”—in other words something some distance from . . . but only a slight distance. In Aristotle, beyond that which you brought to mind on the subject of tragedy, there is also a consideration about poetic improvisation as that which would be between nature and art, between a spontaneous talent and an elaborated reflection. But if this intermediary remains aesthetically in a state of incompleteness it is nonetheless a sort of condition of fully-fledged poetry. It approaches movement, comes close to a being ‘induced’ in the sense that one is drawn to, carried away, pushed towards something. There is pulse and impulse in improvisation. This pulse comes from a sensitivity to what is happening, to the fact that *something is happening*. And that this occurs, that it happens, comes necessarily from a place other than that of knowledge, of all pre-established arrangement, of all foresight and all will (I am taking will in its most classic sense and not as Nietzsche’s ‘will to power,’ which is an affirmative impulse.)

I can take up again an example that seems to me very pertinent here: the birth of Christianity forms a turning point in Western history. From whence does

it arise? From a gathering of changes, mutations, displacements of the ancient world—the extending of a world detaching from local affiliations, the correlative extension of military, commercial and cultural enterprises, attrition in the self assurance and confidence of Rome, the bubbling-up of anxieties and philosophical and religious uncertainties—in short, it is a moment of upheaval—unfelt at first, then alarming—from whence erupts a dimension of universality and of infinity which had, no doubt, been buried for a long time and found its figuring. This figuring is improvised, it follows tendencies, senses possibilities. . . . This takes several centuries, as one might expect, and it will take several more to engender what we call ‘renaissance,’ and ‘capitalism,’ which is in effect another mutation improvised out of deep pressures, imperceptible at first, etc.

It is the inherited collectivity of these successive ‘passages’ that subsequently re-transforms and which is today *in the process of improvising* something else. We feel the proximities . . . other forms of knowledge, power, desire . . . nothing that lets itself be put into a form, but the pressure. And most remarkably a pressure that suspends or disturbs the idea of history as we have generated, modeled, interrogated it. . . . In fact it is in the *almost*, the *something-like* of a kind of suspension, of a hesitation, a troubled ‘wait-and-see,’ that we draw near to that which comes to us. . . . To be sure, this changes as it comes and as we approach it. But this ‘we’ is not just one, or even two or three generations. . . . It has been felt already for more or less two generations. It will require at least two more before it takes on barely visible contours. . . .

And for sure we cannot avoid dreaming of a complete art, of a scenario—tragic, comic, dramatic—of ‘human history’: but we are learning that it always improvises itself and that it is precisely in this improvising that it happens, that it occurs, *geschieht*. We had thought of history as the engendering, maturation and production of truth: we are learning that truth *itself* is approximate. . . .

I am recalling a lovely text of Koyré: “From the World of Approximation to the Universe of Precision.”¹ The precision of which our instruments are capable today is already so far from that which Koyré had in mind. But at the same time nothing is less precise, nothing more uncertain than all our supposed ‘human sciences’; and it is historical knowledge, including the knowledge of itself, which shows the way to an ‘approximately’ that would no longer be a failure of exactitude or truth.

MC: I would like to come back to what you termed the ‘poetic improvisation,’ which transpires ‘between’ nature and art, taking art in the Greek sense of τέχνη. It seems to me that this ‘between’ finds itself at the core of a thought of finite history and improvisation. If I have understood correctly, you suggest a reformulation of the historical difference proposed by Heidegger in *Being and Time*, under the barely explicit influence of Nietzsche and the explicitly avowed one of Paul Yorck von Wartenburg. This historical difference between *Historie* and *Geschichte* can be considered a first formulation of the ontological difference between Being and

beings. If one understands this difference as the separation of the protagonist from the chorus [*chœur*], thus as the separation of the understanding from the core [*cœur*] of 'history,' that is to say the process of something happening over against "the fact that something is happening," then thoughts begin to open up. In the first place, the thought that the 'subject' of history is history itself, clearly evident when one has the experience that nothing happens, that nothing can be begun, that history is without beginning. Whilst history presents itself as an 'approximately,' in the mode of hesitation, suspension, imprecision, it is the discourses surrounding the 'no longer' of beginning that show themselves suspended. This hesitant 'approximately' opens up between historiography (*Historie*) and history (*Geschichte*), a between that must not be understood as a measurable space between a before and an after, between a place of provenance and one of destination, but rather as in-the-process-of-happening, and thus as a play of approximation and distancing, a kind of de-distancing as the French word *éloignement* (or *é-loignement*—*loin* meaning 'far') and the German *Entfernung* already say. Perhaps it is precisely this play of de-distancing that constitutes tragic improvisation. It would be, then, in the between of the writing of history and the actors of histories, between historiography and histories, that one might find, so to speak, that which cannot be the object of any history, with or without capitals, because it is only the fact of the happening, the fact that something happens to us. This between cannot be described as 'another' history, nor as contra-history or a-history, it seems to me. The image that comes to me is that of the estuary, its meanderings constantly re-fashioned at the whim of currents, burdened by matter suspended, carried by the river, and as much under the influence of geological context, climate, winds, as human intervention. Perhaps history is only an estuary. . . . In this sense history is truly that which cannot be transmitted, because it is the transmitting itself as such. And improvisation teaches us not only about approximation, but also about passages, steps (*pas*). However, when the troubled, 'wait-and-see' feeling of which you spoke unleashes an impatience and a haste to fix the in-the-process-of-happening into a form that is already formed and past, a demand for attentive presence—which is to say for responsibility—with regard to the passage from one to another, itself in-transmissible, imposes itself. How should we speak of this attentive presence, of this responsibility with regard to the estuary of history? Is it that, in this sense, we should pose the question of how "the fact that something happens" makes *use of us* rather than of how we make use of history for life? What to do when history makes use of us?

JLN: I like your image of the estuary, burdened with sediment, with things carried along by the river. Estuaries need often to be cleared and cleaned in order to be navigable. And in fact at this very moment—in the year 2016 of the once Christian era, which has become more an erring than an era—it seems we find ourselves in an estuary that is congested, silted. We do not know what to do with our past. We try

to conserve it, to protect its monuments, but it teaches us nothing. The education built on the study of the examples of the past does not shape us much. Or else it shapes us in the direction of mistrusting ourselves—mistrusting, for instance, ‘revolutions.’ Next year will be the centenary of the ‘October Revolution’: one can imagine how this centenary will be celebrated, with what mixture of recognition and stigmatization, of nostalgia and condemnation. . . . How many times have we already re-written the stories of 1917, just as we have those of 1789, 1848, 1871, to say nothing of the revolutions and transformations of multiple decolonizations?

Your image expresses well the fact that the past burdens us as much as it carries and pushes us further. And this ‘further’ means the ocean, the great expanse, the unknown of which one glimpses not the slightest outline on the horizon. Or rather, what we see are only technical projections, themselves perforce uncertain. But why should it be otherwise? There has been only one, brief enough moment in the past when it was possible to represent to oneself a somewhat assured trajectory towards a foreseeable future. Between Descartes and Lenin, no more.

Again, this ‘foreseeability,’ itself relative, manifests itself today as at once appropriate—because there had been progress in the mastery of natural forces, and then the invention of other forces—and as having sheltered beneath its appropriateness something other than foresight, namely a desire: a desire to create a new humanity in a renewed nature. In 1833 the first number of the Saint-Simonian review appeared: *The New Man and the Messenger of Happiness* (it didn’t last very long). The opening of the introduction declares that societies develop, like individuals, through progressive changes, and that major transformations are always preceded by periods of malaise and disturbance. Today we might take up this discourse again, noting however that the “increase in happiness” of which the 1833 text speaks is scarcely verified, and that even the term ‘happiness’ has today become much more problematic than it used to seem. Nonetheless it is certainly possible that the disturbances—as much objective as subjective—are the precursors of profound transformations, which, moreover, have become in some measure permanent since the beginning of the nineteenth century.

In effect, we forged for ourselves a representation of a trajectory towards happiness while the most violent processes of industrialization, of nationalisms and colonialisms were unfolding, and then the global shocks in which these processes ended up—in estuary—inaugurating from 1914 onwards a new series of processes, no less violent, and less and less the bearers of signs of ‘improvement,’ be they of age, wisdom, well-being, mastery or satisfaction.

So I share in your formulation, according to which history makes use of us (at the instigation of being, Heidegger says). But what does this ‘making use’ mean? If history is no more a subject or an agent than being, if it is really nothing other than the “it occurs” (which is also being itself—we would have to pause here to render this more precise, but this is not our aim), thus it occurs that we are used

in this occurring. Used in what sense? Placed in service? But in service, then, to nothing other than that: to the 'it occurs.' We are the servants of the 'it occurs': but a servant is one who knows how to serve, who knows how to fulfill an office and still further knows how to recognize the legitimate authority of the master. We must know what fits the 'it occurs,' and so must be familiar with it, which means, equally, being familiar with that part of it which is unknowable. We must allow the authority of its irruption, always on the lookout for its preparatory signals. Perhaps it is a question of making oneself attentive to what François Jullien calls "the propensity of things" in order to translate a Chinese expression regarding history as continuous non-teleological transformation.²

In the 'it occurs,' the 'it' is secondary to the occurring and to the 'that it occurs.' It is in the movement of occurring and passing-by that a 'that' configures itself (for example, 'the revolution of October 1917') before being re-configured, re-interpreted, swept away in the re-shapings of all successive occurrences. . . .

MC: Thinking the using *by* history seems to me quite difficult. Especially now, when history is itself used by everyone, in the name of whatever one wants. History is politics, just as politics has become history. It is difficult to hear a sense of service to the 'it occurs' that would go beyond all sense of the usage and the usage of sense that regulates the world of global capitalism. To be in service to the 'it occurs,' to follow it, to accompany it, supposes a listening, I think, capable of hearing what Celan himself heard in a very short poem which forms part of the volume *Schneepart (Snowpart)* of 1971 and bears the title *Für Eric (For Eric)*. This short poem goes:

Für Eric

In der Flüstertüte
buddelt Geschichte,
in der Vororten raupen die Tanks,
unser Glas
füllt sich mit Seide
wir stehn.

In English:

For Eric

In the loudhailer
history burrows,
in the suburbs the tanks crawl,
our glass
is filled with silk
we stand.

This poem, which forms part of a posthumous collection—part, one might say, of the snow of the posthumous—is written for Eric, which was the name of his son. One reads here that history—and Celan does not use the definite article ‘die’³—makes holes, burrows at the moment that loudhailers cry out the name history. There is no causality between the holes made by history and the writing of the lines. They are written neither because of history, nor for it. The word *Geschichte*, history, is not a word of poetry, and thus not a word of Celan’s. He says this word in his discourse *Meridian*. He mentions the word in two senses. In the sense of ‘History’ [*l’Histoire*] this word is that over against which the poetic word can only be a counter-word (*Gegenwort*). He says it again in passing, in the sense of a story [*histoire*], when he says that he wrote down a little story on paper, referencing in this way his *Conversation on the Mountain*, a reference that is subsequently dated to the 20th of January—that date, so historic, so fateful, of the Wannsee Conference.⁴ In this short poem from *Snowpart* he says it once again, and in this saying a transformation of history presents itself, because the sounding of its name through a loudhailer makes holes.⁵ In his commentary on this poem in the French edition, Lefebvre (whose translation of the second line reads: *L’histoire fait des trous*, literally, ‘history makes holes’) takes note of the playful sense of history in these lines, especially in the use of the verb *buddeln*, which has a connotation of children playing in the sandpit. Furthermore, the dedicatory title of the poem: *For Eric*, to his son, speaks of an entirely other kind of resistance, a poetic resistance, a line that is filled with silk [*soie*], perhaps too with himself [*soi*], with the poet and his ‘counter-words,’ these words of sounding [*sondage*] (of his age [*son d’âge*]). Wouldn’t this sonorous image of history be a way of indicating how history forms itself as estuary? Might we say that it is this estuary that makes use of us? And thus is that which leaves us standing?

JLN: “A listening capable of hearing,” as you put it, is a listening which discerns, which recognizes the *flüstern* (whispering) in the *Flüstertüte* (loudhailer)—which Lefebvre translates as “*la chuchotteuse*” (‘the whisperer’), choosing to hear precisely the word that is hidden beneath the familiar and ironic appellation ‘loudhailer,’ for which German also has other words. History ‘makes holes’ (“*fait des trous*” as Lefebvre says) in the sense that it burrows like an animal burrowing noisily in the ground (because *buddeln* has an onomatopoeic quality in its origin). Celan speaks to his son of the events of ’68, of which one might say that they brandished a signal of refusal and of the breakdown of history. That which thought to pursue a certain kind of world domination (in Vietnam, in the United States) and a certain socio-economic satisfaction (in France, in Europe), found itself for the first time brought to a standstill by a blow: *wir stehen*, we stand, and we are staying there.

Yes, you are right to cite this poem. Celan here condenses with staggering authority an image which one might think addressed, among others, to Heidegger:

that of a *Geschichte* that cries out, in which we hear the iron caterpillar-tracks of tanks, whilst murmuring a few words such as this: ‘silk,’ to designate the extreme smoothness of a wine.

Your own image is that of an estuary, and I concur willingly. History is in the process of opening onto a new ocean, into a sea as unknown as that from which the conquistadors left, “drunk with a heroic and brutal dream,” as Heredia wrote in 1893, which is to say at a moment when, already, the saga of the West was experiencing a doubt about itself. Heredia’s conquerors left from the estuary of the Rio Tinto (where Christopher Columbus preached a sermon to the Catholic Kings)—which is, today, contaminated by vast radioactive pollution.

We will no longer leave, “*nous sommes là debout*,” as Lefebvre translates Celan’s *wir stehen*. Not standing upright [*debout*] in a posture of decisive confrontation, but one attentive to the now, to that which our hands are holding: the uncertain outflow of a history which gets away however we stand watch beyond it, in a kind of eternity which is the other of time, or time as the other of itself.

One last poet, Rimbaud:

Elle est retrouvée
 Quoi? l'éternité
 C'est la mer allée
 Avec le soleil.

It is found once more
 What? Eternity
 It is the sea gone away
 With the sun.

Jean-Luc Nancy, *Professor Emeritus, Strasbourg University*
 Marcia Sá Cavalcante Schuback, *Södertörn University, Sweden*

NOTES

1. Alexandre Koyré, “Du monde de l’à peu près à l’univers de précision,” in *Etudes d’histoire de la pensée philosophique*, 3rd ed. (Paris: Armand Colin, 1961), 341–62.
2. François Jullien, *La propulsion des choses: Pour une histoire d’efficacité en Chine* (Paris: Seuil, 1992); *The Propensity of Things: Towards a History of Efficacy in China*, trans. Janet Lloyd (New York: Zone Books, 1995).
3. Translator’s note: the definite article is more ubiquitous in German, and indeed in French, than it is in English; hence the significance of its elision.

4. “Der Meridian,” in Paul Celan, *Der Meridian und andere Prosa* (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 1988). “Meridian,” in *Selected Poems and Prose of Paul Celan*, trans. John Felstiner (New York: Norton, 2001), 412.
5. In the French translation of *Schneepart*, Jean-Pierre Lefebvre, the translator, adds a note to the effect that this poem makes allusion to the events in Paris in 1968. Celan, reading of the events in the German press, learnt of the expulsion from France of Daniel Cohn-Bendit, and, in reaction to this expulsion from the student movement, came up with the slogan: “We are all German Jews” (Paul Celan, *Partie de Neige*, trans. Jean-Pierre Lefebvre [Paris: Seuil, 2007], 134).