Now, Hamacher.

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Abstract: Death is ironic; as the archi-semiotician and first historian, death fixes object and meaning in a semiotic complex, separates non-sensuous meaning from bare physical existence, but thereby exposes meaning to the capriciousness of interpretation and tradition. The pause, however, conserves that which does not happen in repose, yet does not interrupt history, and lets history emerge in a movement in which all determination of meaning is suspended. This essay is written in memory of Werner Hamacher, whose life in writing shaped language around its distance and delay from the fixity of sound and sense, which, as he argued, are the subliminal conditions to every communication, presentation, and form in general: formative limits that separate and conjoin that which is and the surplus of un-actuality and incompletion that accompanies each instant of our intentional lives.

Key words: Hamacher, Nancy, Heidegger, Benjamin, Giacometti, language, history, death, in memoriam

I.

It must have been late June 2017 when I visited the Giacometti retrospective at the Tate. About two rooms from the end, the curators had assembled a number of the portraits for which the artist is perhaps best known: the tall, skinny walking figures, the narrow and elongated busts of Diego and Annette, the seated, expressionless Caroline, their heavily worked features cast in bronze or rendered in ochre. It seemed, from their restitution as a corpus with a provenance, that we were expected to stroll from room to neatly divided room through the successive stages of development of an artist’s activity in order to then arrive at the life-defining work.

Yet things were not so simple. Giacometti returned to the same figures again and again, but at varying scales; one of the busts of Diego stands at little over 10 millimetres, as though the figure were not the compacted mass but a construction to be glimpsed only when the mass is on the verge of disappearance. For Giacometti construction depicted the truth not of what one sees, but how one sees, that is, only ever in relation, and tension, with our distance from the object, with the space in between, and with that which it is not. As soon as the work seems to arrive at its completed form, it therefore has to be abandoned in order for the work of depicting the truth of construction to begin, anew. Nowhere was this more apparent than in the footage of Giacometti at work on one of his painted portraits. His hand, holding a pencil, sketches the lines with assured familiarity; as the lines accumulate, the angles appear, the proportions emerge. Then Giacometti brushes on a stroke of ochre; in one startling moment, eyes appear. Suddenly the sketch has become a face, with eyes staring back from the canvas. But in this moment the work is no longer itself; in the moment that the work arrives at the bare minimum of what makes it a work, the work overreaches and fails the idea towards which it had been moving. It is well known that Giacometti repeatedly destroyed his models before recommencing the next day, but he seems not to have been motivated by dissatisfaction, at least not in the sense that he felt his technique or his medium to be lacking in proficiency or perfection. Rather, for him the artwork strives towards the idea that it is dependent on that which it is not, that every work must fail if it is to be a completed work, yet succeed in bringing to fruition this idea in the very process of failing. Only in being formed by what it is not, has not been and does not yet have to be might the work, exceeding and deferring the idea of completion, yield itself.

Something of this, I imagined, was what Werner Hamacher had in mind when he said that philosophers, as artists, start by reducing the world to absolute minima. Only when the existing world touches its limits, which is to say outlines in its figure the unlimited scope of all that it is not, might there be a chance for a thought, a future, existence *tout court*, to genuinely emerge.

II.

Not long after learning of Werner Hamacher’s passing in July 2017 I tried to assemble together as many of his writings as possible, from the dissertation on Hegel and the well-known essays on Benjamin, Marx, Kafka and Derrida, to essays I had not heard of before and essays in the further reaches of the publishing ecosystem, from forewords and afterwords to short projects and dialogs on topics ranging from Jorie Graham, Bernard Minetti, Cervantes and Poe, to the idea of literary historiography and the state of the contemporary university. It seemed that because I had expected to see him again, I had to take stock of who he was in order to anticipate what he might have said in the conversation we should have had next. Perhaps it was reassuring to think that by retrospectively reconstituting a life’s work I would arrive at a complete picture of the interlocutor to whom I could then properly respond—and that by thereby keeping an author alive, nothing will have come to an end. What the exercise confirmed, rather, was that his writings upset the logic of completion, and not just because of the terrible arbitrariness with which some have now turned out to be posthumous or incomplete. Hamacher’s life in writing did not follow a trajectory reducible to a *curriculum vitae*, at an appropriately advanced stage of which a work could be expected to arrive bearing the fruits of its first conception. In fact, as his would-be editors well know, he actively resisted attempts to put together his essays into book form. This is not to say that Hamacher was against the academic book *per se*; he was, after all, the editor of the inimitable Meridian series, and he certainly spoke to me encouragingly about my own book project. But he was patently unconcerned with publishing in the “right” formats, or even in the original language, and at least one of his seminal essays on Benjamin, on “The Word *Wolke* – If It Is One,”[[1]](#endnote-1) has only ever been published in English translation. Another, a ground-breaking study of Benjamin’s interpretation of Cohen in regard to the concept of history, was until recently only available in a volume on “*Übersetzen*” in Benjamin.[[2]](#endnote-2) Moreover, not every translation is assuredly a faithful reproduction of an original, because not every translation is preceded by an original; sometimes a version published in German is a subsequent reworking of a translation that appeared a year or ten years earlier. Even within the same language multiple “versions” exist, to the extent that the similarity of a title is any indication, with each containing significant alterations or wholly different sections.

In his analyses of the assumptions that accompany modern philosophical expression and linguistic communication, Hamacher often returned to the notion that in every work, something is always held in reserve, and that nothing is entirely complete. Nothing, then, is also ever completely incomplete, since absolutely nothing excludes the possibility that there is an entirely other form that the work takes which displaces all familiar coordinates of space and time and arrives, not in summation of a linear series of successive moments, but in transformation of the relations by which anything arrives at all. That which arrives, arrives only with the capacity for a completely different sense from all that already is, yet touches itself at the point of its not being—and “is,” “there.” In his introduction to a series of conversations he curated for the Frankfurt Theatre in 2004-2005, Hamacher remarked that “art and technology—art as technology—operate on the basis of the experience that that which exists does not suffice for existence [*dass das, was da ist, zum Dasein nicht reicht*]. And like artists, philosophers, too, have for two and a half thousand years taken as their starting point the reduction of experience, of the world and of language to absolute minima.”[[3]](#endnote-3) Hamacher, too, took as the premise for communication the limit to non-being, which gives form to every being articulable in time and space, in history and in language, but insofar as the limit is strictly speaking a non-arrival, a delay, and therefore a non-limit. As he writes, paraphrasing Celan, *Es, das es nicht gibt, gibt*;[[4]](#endnote-4) giving form is the approach to what form does not have and therefore can be given, that is, non-form, non-limitation, where the limit touches itself at the point of its not being limited, but therefore opens up a space where limit, and form, might still come up against themselves. That is the subliminal condition of every communication, every presentation, and every form in general, and thus of perception, conception, and comprehension: distance and delay.

III.

For as Hamacher writes, there is nothing more banal—or more philosophical—than to commence here and now with the phrase *here and now*. The whole repertoire of classical philosophy can be understood to have pivoted on the insistence that one speaks, here and now, in a determinate place in a community and history, and thereby disavows one’s speaking in the mode of anything other than citation or paraphrase: one speaks, “here and now,” only ever in quotation of others and in continuation of tradition and convention. But there is also nothing more banal than to commence in the here and now, for by the time our eyes pass over it, the *now* is no longer now, yet also not the now that presumably succeeds that *now*; strictly speaking, *now* has neither extension nor a substantive meaning of its own, and should rather be understood as a limit that separates as well as conjoins that which is, here and now, with that which it is not.

Versions of this thought open the way to re-readings of Nancy, Heidegger, Kierkegaard, Kant, Hegel, and Benjamin in a number of pieces that Hamacher published over a period of more than twenty years. Each, however, only ever presents itself as a piece of an enigmatic “longer text” of which other pieces have been published elsewhere. As though in warning to his readers, Hamacher was as meticulous about documenting the irreducibility of his essays to their publicly consumable forms as about composing his carefully wrought sentences. Technically, this documentation is part of the paratextual materials, but usually in the footnote to the title, or the note preceding the actual endnotes, and thus is not simply paratextual, but more accurately a paratext to the paratext, a scaffolding that supplements the negotiations between the text and the conditions of its readability and intelligibility, and enables them while being, in other authors, itself unreadable. Hamacher, by contrast, brings these supplementary conditions to light. Thus we read for instance that “[t]his article represents about a quarter of a much longer piece written for Jean-Luc Nancy. Another section will be published in *Paragraph* 17:2”;[[5]](#endnote-5) or that “[t]he first part was published in *Paragraph*, 16:2. Both parts are sections of a much longer text”;[[6]](#endnote-6) or that “[q]uelques autres fragments de ce texte en cours ont été publiés dans *Paragraph* … La première partie présente la version retravaillée de l’un des fragments qui y sont repris. Certains motifs explorés ici ont été en partie préparés et en partie développés dans ‘*Prämissen*’ et ‘*Der ausgesetzte Satz*’ …, ‘*Lingua Amissa*’ … et ‘*Jetzt—Benjamin zur historischen Zeit* …”;[[7]](#endnote-7) or, further, that “[t]he present translation is based on the revised version of the second part of a text that was translated into French by Francis Guibal and Guy Petitdeman under the title ‘Ou, séance, touche de Nancy, ici (3),’ presented in January 2002, at the Collège International de Philosophie and published two years later. …”[[8]](#endnote-8) Or this translator’s note, doubtless approved by Hamacher: “An earlier version of the first part of this piece ‘*Here. —*Or *here*. Now. Or now’ was translated by Marian Hobson and Ian Magedera and appeared in *Paragraph* 16,2 (July 1993), pp. 216-20.”[[9]](#endnote-9)

Thus the one here *or* the other, the one now *or* the other, are not merely two alternative versions of the same text—as Hamacher remarks in criticism of Heidegger’s reading of Kierkegaard, alternatives only appear in opposition if decision and decisiveness, the Either-Or, is taken as the structure of Being’s self-presentation in time and space, such that existence is only ever the function of the decision of what does or does not belong to Being.[[10]](#endnote-10) Rather, as he writes elsewhere on Heidegger’s remarks on Anaximander, “[t]he *epoché* of the happening of language … says that the opening *as* such is held back and, therefore, allows still *other* epochs to be announced and to arrive. It says that *still more* errors and errancies are possible, without the horizon of this *still* being able to set a limit and a measure for a truth other than that of the guarding of its un-truth.” And: “To think the epochality of the epochs of being means to think errancy as the *irre*ducibility of epochs to a truth that would not be un-truth, withdrawal, and forgetfulness.”[[11]](#endnote-11) But what might the idea of a “much longer text” mean for Hamacher except that, as a supplementary condition for each version of itself, it would have to be a historiography of the errancy and delirium preceding each of its “happenings” in language? Or, conversely, that each of his carefully wrought sentences is irreducible to its consumable self except as a form of overworking and overdetermination the instant it integrates sign and sense? Hamacher may well have been writing about himself when he said that for communicating to be possible, language has to take leave of itself—language has to be multiple, the word Being has to transfer itself into being, each word has to already say “or another”—because without the opening to another possibility there would be no relations of exchange whatsoever.[[12]](#endnote-12) Language, as he says, speaks “ormatively,”[[13]](#endnote-13) and every “here and now” is a “here *or* now,” “here *or* here,” the present tense a modality of being in which being here “is” here by citing its being here, is an “*icitation*” by virtue of an “*oucitation.*”[[14]](#endnote-14) What, in this regard, might the “much longer text” be except a metonymy for the interruption of every version, a non-progressivity spaced out as a not-here and otherwise that alone guarantees the promise of writing to come?

IV.

For Hamacher, the project of critiquing what he regarded as “social conformism”[[15]](#endnote-15) was indissociable from the critique of “*continuisme*.”[[16]](#endnote-16) For this he found a special resource in Benjamin, who knew, in Hamacher’s words, that the ideology of progress was “*un conformisme radicalement anti-messianique, parce qu’il se conforme à la forme transcendentale de l’intuition du temps mécanique*.”[[17]](#endnote-17) It was Benjamin, after all, who represented the antipode to “1933,” a year that demanded that contemporary experience become impossible unless it was an experience of the loss of experience, of *Erfahrungsarmut*, whose transcendental condition would have to be a form of intuition radically different from that of mechanical, “continuist” time. For the dissolution of time’s transcendental form, and with it every form, Hamacher plumbed the resources of messianicity, which, as he pointed out, extend far beyond the realm of Judeo-Christian civilizations; the *idea* of the messianic constitutes coming (or not coming) as such, not who comes, and is constitutive of any possible structure of time, which includes but is therefore not reducible to the order of succession, repetition and reversal that is schematized in the narrative arc of the Messiah figure’s doubling in death and survival. And since the idea of the messianic has to include the thought that the Messiah is not one (but at least two—one who perishes so that the other triumphs, or one who is false and is superseded by the genuine), and yet can only be one, the messianic, when it comes, simply denotes the arrival of the not not-one: a futurity that upsets the existing temporal order and inaugurates time.

There is therefore nothing simple about the “automatism of progress” or “time continuum” underpinning the “structural conformity of all forms of experience,”[[18]](#endnote-18) not even its presumed directionality. As Benjamin reminds us in the *Theological-Political Fragment*, if the force of messianicity is denotable by one arrow of time pointing, as it were, at us, counter to this points another arrow that denotes the secular dynamic of the human pursuit of happiness, which can in fact promote the coming of the messianic realm insofar as happiness seeks the downfall of all that is earthly and hastens, in its very teleology, the arrival of an end. In regard to Benjamin’s recovery of “the concept of a radically finite history,”[[19]](#endnote-19) Hamacher was to my knowledge the first to insist on the importance of logical counter-structures to the transcendental forms of intuition that have been complicit with the “radically anti-messianic” image of time as a simple and ineluctable forward flow; his essay “Intensive Languages” tracked Benjamin’s debt to neo-Kantianism for the outline of a new, “historical” because extra-logical concept of origination that hinged on a “leap” in the heart of the idea of historical continuity.[[20]](#endnote-20) But Hamacher was also inconclusive about the exact nature of any other transcendental structure of time, perhaps because the problem that generated a demand for them also demanded inconclusiveness; thus, whereas in “Intensive Languages” Hamacher argues that Benjamin adopts, via Cohen, a theory of constitutive discontinuity derived from Leibniz’s differential calculus (which in itself leaves the concept of the *continuum* untouched), in the section of “Ou, séance, touche de Nancy, ici (3)” reworked recently as “Messianic Not,” Hamacher seems to refer to the idea of a divergent series (which does leave open the question of summation, and limit, as a matter of method) when he describes extra-dimensional structures of time as “attempts to think time not as a linear order of homogeneous not-points but out of a + ( - n) *beyond* them.”[[21]](#endnote-21)

In his earliest writings on Benjamin, Hamacher emphasized the capacity for the relation of likeness between word and world to destabilize, or indeed exert limitless “magical violence” on everything that could be said about the world, such that the world itself might be put into question. The “linguistic projects from 1933” in which Benjamin lays out this theory of likeness propose, according to Hamacher, that “the history of the word’s capacity for mimesis is at the same time the history of the forgetting of its likenesses, of their becoming incomprehensible and, in the end, the liquidation of its magical part, whose effect is greatest when the child, like the Chinese painter with a moist cloud, disappears into his image.”[[22]](#endnote-22) For Hamacher unlike Benjamin, however, the notion that communication functions only insofar as it can possibly fail is not “nihilistic” but still minimally more positive than its outright failure as mimetic reproduction. Stored in the un-reality of historical objects, images of history are therefore never one, or several, but uncountably many and, to the very extent that we are intentional beings, crowded in each instant as the force of surplus un-actuality and incompletion. Every such image of history thus presents a “danger” to the subject, and “time” is accordingly the claim of the unactualized and the incomplete on “us,” a “we” who is constituted merely as the “intentional complement” to the fulfilment of the postulate that these missed possibilities may be discharged as reality. “We”—the historical subject, the reader, the writer, Hamacher as expected, impossibly, by Benjamin—do not “have” the messianic power to correct or undo, but are “endowed” with the “messianic” “power” to comply with the unfulfilled demands of past generations. “We” are only the function of the “implicit hypothesis of the missed possible,” and only therefore not always already burying the dead.[[23]](#endnote-23)

V.

For several consecutive days in October 2015, Hamacher sent me versions of the lecture-in-progress he was to deliver at Goldsmiths and which I was going to help translate into English.[[24]](#endnote-24) For a talk declaratively entitled “Now: History,” the text certainly provided many candidates for the title of “now.” In all, including the final version that I have on my hard drive, which I imagine a future archivist will call the *Reinschrift*, Hamacher had inserted, in significantly smaller but bright red and underlined typeface, the exact date, month, year and time of day at which he presumably stopped writing. Sometimes the time stamp follows an entire section of the text, sometimes just a single sentence. At certain points of the text one time stamp is immediately followed by another. All are exact to the minute. I imagine that this is as close as one might get to reconstituting the life of a mind at work as it pauses over a sentence, goes over an argument twice, wonders whether the words chosen will be precise enough to exactly capture the “irrelation”[[25]](#endnote-25) of sound and meaning that the word will always only capture in its failure to capture it, then re-sculpts and re-forms the sentence to the limit of its capacity to convey the same approximation of sense, watching, feeling, and listening as the words break apart into prefixes and syllables and syllables into the errant placement of a single letter, until, startlingly, it happens: the word stares back in a form never seen before. A *Ver*a*nderung*.

If the time of writing is a metonymy for the “now” time, the image of “the now” emerges as a plastic time, sculpted by the ebb and tide of continuation and return, rhythm and tone, and by *language* taking leave of itself and pushing the argument forward from the direction of all that is imageless, soundless, perception-less, and consciousness-less, from the direction of the “much longer text” whose whole complexity gives form to the now rather than now, now rather than never. For what it’s worth I was told that “Now: History” was to have become a “longer text”; Hamacher said he had about fifteen pages more to write before he considered it complete. But death is ironic; as Hamacher says in his lecture in regard to Benjamin’s remarks on tragedy, death is the archi-semiotician and the first historian, because death brings about the death of an object in its meaning, fixes object and meaning in a semiotic complex, and so separates non-sensuous meaning from bare physical existence, exposes meaning to the capriciousness of interpreters and accidents of tradition, and lets it decay. Death refuses to let life live. The pause, however, in which nothing happens, yet which does not interrupt (*unterbricht*) history, lets history as such emerge (*aufbricht*) and persist in the movement of its emergence, where, in emerging, the determination of meaning is suspended. As Benjamin writes in his “Small Speech on Proust, held on my 40th Birthday,” history flashes up in images of “that which we never saw, before we remembered them.”[[26]](#endnote-26) In this *never*, the now finds a nothing from which to emerge, each time for the first time as a singular instance; the now never finds a complementary symbol by which it completes itself into a whole, and in the not-and-never-now, the never-was and never-will-be, the no-longer and therefore yet-to-come, an opening can be found for historical experience to come about undefinably and impredicably. But all that can happen in language and time rests in the aporia of this unheard and unremembered period of repose; in repose, all that never was and never will be, “is,” “there,” in a form that cannot be captured in lived experience. But here, precisely, is where time once again exposes itself to the inexorable demand to live, and to live on, in history and in writing.

At the point where the lecture breaks off, Hamacher writes, in reference to the alarm clock at the end of Benjamin’s “Surrealism” essay: “This alarm, if it could be constructed, would *never* sound. (15.10.2015 — 23:00h).” Yet he also closes another recent text with the exhortation, or plea: “Do not forget the no one.”[[27]](#endnote-27) I imagine—I hope—that in the two, three hour intervals or sometimes overnight pauses that space out the text of the lecture, Hamacher was not writing for us, but took the time to give time back to himself.

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1. Werner Hamacher, “The Word *Wolke* – If It Is One,” trans. Peter Fenves, in *Studies in Twentieth Century Literature* 11(1) (1986): 133-62. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Werner Hamacher, “Intensive Sprachen,” in *Übersetzen: Walter Benjamin*, ed. Christiaan L. Hart Nibbrig (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp 2001), 174-235. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Werner Hamacher, *Philosophische Salons. Frankfurter Dialoge IV: Gesprochene Beziehungen*, ed. Schweeger (München: belleville Verlag and schauspielfrankfurt, 2007), 10. (My translation, J.N.) [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Werner Hamacher, “Ou, séance, touche de Nancy, ici (3),” in *Sens en tous sens – Autour des travaux de Jean- Luc Nancy*, ed. Francis Guibal and Jean-Clet Martin (Paris: Galilée, 2004), 141. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Werner Hamacher, “Ou, séance, touche de Nancy, ici (I),” trans. Marian Hobson and Ian Magedera, in *Paragraph* 16(2) (July 1993): 231. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Werner Hamacher, “Ou, séance, touche de Nancy, ici (II)” trans. Marian Hobson and Ian Magedera, in *Paragraph* 17(2) (July 1994): 118. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Hamacher, “Ou, séance, touche de Nancy, ici (3),” 119. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Werner Hamacher, “Messianic Not,” trans. Catharine Diehl, in *Messianic Thought Outside Theology*, ed. Anna Glazova and Paul North (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014), 280. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Werner Hamacher, “Ou, séance, touche de Nancy, ici,” in *The Sense of Philosophy – On Jean-Luc Nancy*, ed. Darren Sheppard, Simon Sparks and Colin Thomas (London, New York: Routledge, 1997), 61. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Hamacher, “Ou, séance, touche de Nancy, ici,” 49. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Werner Hamacher, “The Relation,” trans. Roland Végsö, in *CR: The New Centennial Review* 8(3) (2008): 62-63. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Cf. Hamacher, “Ou, séance, touche de Nancy, ici (I).” [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Hamacher, “Ou, séance, touche de Nancy, ici (II),” 107. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Hamacher, “Ou, séance, touche de Nancy, ici (3),” 125. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Werner Hamacher, “‘Now’: Walter Benjamin on Historical Time,” trans. N. Rosenthal,in *Walter Benjamin and History*, ed. Andrew Benjamin (London, New York: Continuum, 2005 [2001]), 47. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. Hamacher, “Ou, séance, touche de Nancy, ici (3),” 131. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. Hamacher, “‘Now,’” 47. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. Hamacher, “‘Now,”’ 46. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. Werner Hamacher, “Intensive Languages,” trans. Ira Allen and Steven Tester, in *Modern Language Notes* 127(3) (German Issue: *Walter Benjamin, Gershom Scholem and the Marburg School*), ed. Julia Ng and Rochelle Tobias (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, April 2012): 485-541. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. Hamacher, “Messianic Not,” 234. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. Hamacher, “The Word *Wolke*—If It Is One,” 153. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. Hamacher, “‘Now,’” 42. [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. Werner Hamacher, “Now: History.” Translation of “Jetzt: Geschichte” by Markus Hardtmann and Julia Ng. Lecture delivered in inauguration of the Walter Benjamin London Research Network at the Centre for Philosophy and Critical Thought, Goldsmiths, University of London, 22 October 2015. [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. Hamacher, “The Relation,” 42. [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann und Hermann Schweppenhäuser, 7 vols. (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1991), II, 3: 1064. [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
27. Hamacher, “Messianic Not,” 234. [↑](#endnote-ref-27)