

# EXCOMMUNICATION

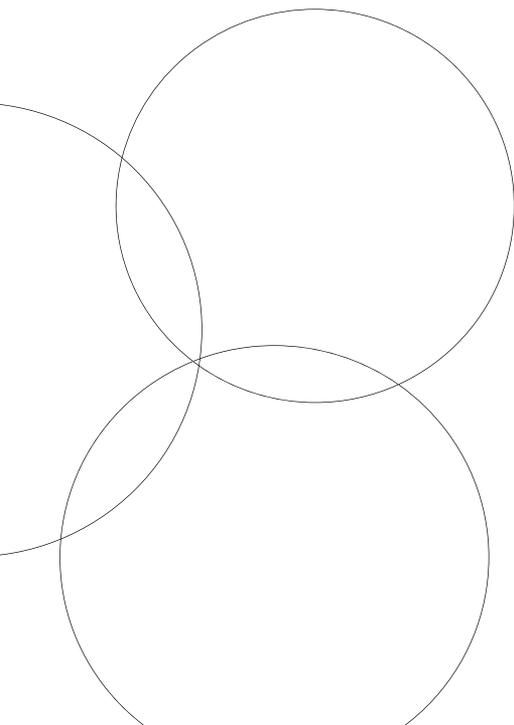
THREE INQUIRIES IN  
MEDIA AND MEDIATION

ALEXANDER R.  
*Galloway*

EUGENE  
*Thacker*

MCKENZIE  
*Wark*

*The University of Chicago Press*  
*Chicago and London*



# LOVE OF THE MIDDLE

Alexander R. Galloway

On July 7, 1688, Irish scientist William Molyneux sent a letter to his friend the philosopher John Locke in which he proposed the following hypothetical scenario. Consider a man, blind from birth, who knows the shapes of spheres, cubes, and other objects, but being blind only knows them via his sense of touch. If the blind man were suddenly given sight, would he be able to identify and distinguish between these same spheres and cubes by vision alone?

Known today as Molyneux's Problem, the thought experiment was one of the central philosophical problems of its time. Any number of thinkers proffered solutions to the problem, from G. W. Leibniz, Voltaire, and Denis Diderot, to Hermann von Helmholtz and William James. Molyneux's problem was so compelling at the time, and indeed still resonates today, because it addresses key questions in mediation, aesthetics, and the sciences of perception, and in what would become psychophysics and cognitive science.

While ostensibly a thought experiment about the cognitive relation between different modes of perception, in this case tactile and visual perception, Molyneux's Problem also speaks to

This chapter greatly benefited from research assistance by Carolyn Kane, Kavita Kulkarni, Sonaar Luthra, and Alice Marwick, and from conversations with Liv Hausken, Ben Kafka, Eivind Røssaak, Martin Scherzinger, as well as Eugene Thacker and McKenzie Wark.

greater issues within the Western tradition. Indeed Molyneux's Problem is so compelling because it is, at root, the great allegory of Greek philosophy. What role will vision play in the organization of the faculties? Can knowledge be gained simply by gaining sight? Is the path of philosophy the path that leads to enlightenment, and if so what role do light and vision play in such a revelation? In a certain sense, Molyneux's Problem is not unlike the cave of shadows and the path to light and knowledge described in Plato's *Republic*. Just as Plato's pupil must wrestle with the murkiness of false knowledge and the hope of higher cognition unified by the light, Molyneux's blind man must determine if and how his newfound sensory ability will aid the communicative interplay between self and world.

Author of the *Dioptrica Nova* (1692), Molyneux helped establish the modern science of optics, and in particular the seventeenth-century conception of visuality as translucence, as opposed to today's notion that visuality is largely a question of opaque surfaces like screens or images. Indeed the story of the blind man who learns to see, only to face the risk of being unable to assimilate his visions and thus being dazzled by that very light, shows the importance of dioptrics in particular (the division of optics concerned with light passing through materials) and of optics in general, both as a science but also as a metaphor for what enlightenment man might be.

A few years earlier, in the 1670s, Spinoza wrote his own allegorical tale of transformation. It comes near the end of the *Ethics*, and we might assign it a name, Spinoza's Poet.

Sometimes a man undergoes such changes that I should hardly have said he was the same man. I have heard stories, for example, of a Spanish Poet who suffered an illness; though he recovered, he was left so oblivious to his past life that he did not believe the tales and tragedies he had written were his own. He could surely have been taken for a grown-up infant if he had also forgotten his native language.<sup>1</sup>

Himself a master craftsman in the dioptric sciences, Spinoza uses his poet to illustrate a very different kind of illumination. His is a light lost in the shadows. It points not to the *Republic* but to the *Phaedrus*, the Platonic dialogue in which Socrates notes the inferiority of writing to pure thought. Writing is an image of speech, Socrates explains, and therefore an image of the self once removed. As a mediation of speech, writing is thus something of a problem for the Platonic tradition. Following Plato, Bernard Stiegler calls this the problem of *hypomnēsis*, that is, the problem of the translation of memory into physical media supports.<sup>2</sup> With a “grown-up infant” who can no longer speak because he has forgotten his language, Spinoza gives a play on words. The Latin *infans* means the non-speaking, from a negation of the deponent verb *fari*, to be speaking. In this sense, media threaten to render us speechless, turning us into grown-up infants. The poet’s light is a dark cloud within the self, pure opacity in a forgetting of media.

Each story deals with mediation, and each contains a metamorphosis of the communicative faculties. One is the story of reason acquired, the other of reason lost. Spinoza’s Poet experiences a collapse into oblivion (*lēthē*), while Molyneux’s Seer experiences a newfound revealing of the world through reason and sight (*logos*). The one is about the truth of one’s own Muse, one’s own memories. The other is about the journey out of chthonic knowledge (through tactile feeling) and coming to know reason. Ultimately they represent two competing assessments of seventeenth-century modernity.

The risk to Molyneux’s Seer is that he will be dazzled by vision, his sense of sight uncorrelated to his sense of touch; the risk to Spinoza’s Poet is that he will slip into the psychosis of amnesia, his own expressions effaced and banished from conscious memory.

If Molyneux’s Problem is a modern reinterpretation of Plato’s cave, which is to say an allegory about learning to recognize the world through a reorganization and cultivation of the

cognitive faculties, Spinoza's Poet is an anti-cave, a story about unlearning and forgetting what one already knows. Spinoza's Poet is the story of oblivion gained (*lēthē*) instead of oblivion lost (*alētheia*). Not quite "the death of the author," nevertheless the poet in Spinoza produces works that he can no longer recognize. It is the ultimate revenge of one's own literary production, the ultimate excommunication, the ultimate betrayal by media.

\*

\*\*

The goal of this chapter is to tell a story about mediation, to determine a few facts as anchor points along the way, then to make an argument about a very particular transformation in the historical arrangement of media.

Many will say that mediation is of a single kind, for example the single kind of mediation evident in Spinoza's Poet. To some this single mode of mediation appears sufficient, for it captures the basic paradox of media, that the more we extend our minds into the world the more we risk being alienated from it.

Others will ratify the single kind, but complement it with a second kind: Spinoza's Poet together with Molyneux's Seer. Again, the two appear sufficient. For every danger of alienation and obfuscation there exists the counterbalance of cultivation and clarity. Even if a person loses his or her communicative faculties, there is the hope that the person will gain them again. If the world falls dark, it will soon grow light.

But there is not simply one kind of mediation. Nor is the problem solved by adding an auxiliary mode to include experiences of cultivation or enlightenment. I hope to convince you that these two are engulfed within a third middle, a third mode of mediation that is both emblematically modern and as old as the Earth.

Three modes of mediation, three middles: the first is *communication in the most workaday sense*, mediation as extension, transit, representation, reflection, mimicry, and alienation. It includes both circulation and exchange and the dangers they

provoke such as disenchantment, fraud, and deception. The second is *pure and true communication*, or the kind of communication found in communion, immediacy, and immanence. The third is the *multiplicity of communication*, a complex affair in which the communicative infrastructure itself dilates and reduplicates to such a degree that it extinguishes any sort of middle whatsoever (and with it any sort of media).

Each middle has its own avatar. First is Hermes, the embodiment of communication in the most normal sense, for, as the god of the threshold, he governs the sending of messages and the journeying into foreign lands. From his name we derive the term *hermeneutics*, the art of textual interpretation understood as a kind of journeying into texts. Second is Iris, the other messenger of the gods, often overlooked and overshadowed by the more influential Hermes. As Greek goddess of the rainbow, Iris indicates how light can bridge sky and land. She presides over communication as luminous immediacy, and from her we gain the concept of *iridescent* communication. Third are the Furies, the most rhizomatic of the divine forms.<sup>3</sup> They stand in for complex systems like swarms, assemblages, and networks. The term *infuriation* captures well the way in which the Furies can upend a situation, thrusting it into a flux of activity and agitation.

What does this mean today? As a number of critics and theorists have observed in recent years, hermeneutics is in crisis.<sup>4</sup> Formerly a bedrock methodology for many disciplines across the humanities from phenomenology to literary criticism, many today consider hermeneutics to be in trouble, in decline, or otherwise inappropriate for the various intellectual pursuits of the age. Why plumb the recesses of the human mind, when the neurological sciences can determine what people really think? Why try to interpret a painting, when what really matters are the kinds of pre-interpretive affective responses it elicits—or, to be more crass, the price it demands at auction? Many have therefore spoken of a “post-hermeneutic” moment, in which stalwart interpretative techniques, holding sway since

medieval scholasticism if not since antiquity itself, have slowly slipped away. But what has replaced hermeneutics? Some find inspiration in a new kind of scientism (disguised as cognitivism in many disciplines), others return to a pre-critical immanence of experience, and still others are inspired by a newfound multiplicity of “flat” experience endlessly combining and recombining through rhizomatic networks.

The task here is thus multiform. First is to define mediation as hermeneutics, by way of the figure of Hermes himself. But Hermes does not have the last word on communication *tout court*. Although he is the traveler, there are certain journeys on which even Hermes is unwilling to embark. Thus two additional journeys will be of interest: after Hermes, a second journey back to Iris and immanence, and a third out to a kind of tessellated, fractal space inhabited by the Furies.

All three modes of mediation bear witness to the paradoxes of communication. Hermes’s hermeneutics acknowledges that even the clearest form of communication is beset by deception and withdrawal. Iris’s iridescence brings the communicants into an ecstasy of immediacy, producing a short circuit of hypercommunication. And the Furies’ infuriation destroys the primacy of sender and receiver, reduplicating communicative agents into endless multiplicity. The hermeneutic wayfarer, the ecstatic mystic, and the furious swarm are thus all excommunicants in some basic sense. They all venture beyond the human into the unknown. All three modes incorporate the logic of excommunication into themselves, since they each acknowledge the impossibility of communication, whether it be via deception, immediacy, or multiplicity.

Yet, at the same time, none of the three modes consummate excommunication entirely, for none forsake mediation altogether or attempt to communicate with the purely inaccessible. Excommunication is quite militant. Excommunication is the message that says there will be no more messages. As Thacker and Wark will demonstrate more fully in the chapters

to come, excommunication refers to the impossibility of communication that appears at the very moment in which communication takes place. While my three modes of mediation make certain overtures to that effect, they forgo the ultimate step. They remain firmly rooted in this world, the human world of the here and now. So, in laying a certain terrain, I aim simply to start the conversation rather than finish it. Only by venturing out into the realm of the purely nonhuman will we be able to take stock of excommunication proper. The subjects of the chapters to come, Thacker's dark communication and Wark's alien communication, give an indication of what this realm might be, not so much an image of our world, but a message from a world in which we are absent.

#### HERMES AND HIS EPITHETS

The myths tell of Hermes that he was "born in the morning, by midday he was playing the lyre, and in the evening he stole the cattle of far-shooting Apollo."<sup>5</sup> He grows up rapidly and has no past, or so it appears. He is clever and inventive, but also cunning and deceitful. His brother Apollo calls him a "friend of dark night," and christens him "The Prince of Thieves."<sup>6</sup> To which Hermes, still a baby, retorts with a fart and a sneeze.

As mediator, he is perhaps best known as Hermes *diaktoros*, Hermes the messenger. A traveler from afar, he is often depicted, particularly in sculpture, in the act of binding his sandals in preparation to depart. He is that thing that is just about to leave. "Nothing in him is fixed, or stable, or permanent, or restricted, or solid," wrote Jean-Pierre Vernant. "In space and in the human world, he represents movement, passages, state changes, transitions, contacts between foreign elements. At home, his place is by the door, protecting the threshold, warding off thieves because he himself is the Thief."<sup>7</sup> In the Homeric Hymn to Hestia, Hermes is called *angelos*.<sup>8</sup> This word means messenger too, but it is also the word that gives us "angel," the

divine messenger, the one who mediates and chaperones travelers while they are on a journey. Thus Hermes is the guiding god. He accompanies travelers and merchants. The Greek poet Theocritus wrote: "I go in / Awe of the terrible vengeance of Hermes the god of the wayside, / For he is greatest in anger, they say, of the heavenly powers / If anybody refuses a traveller wanting directions."<sup>9</sup>

Because of this he is also known as Hermes of the turning hinge (Hermes *strophaios*) and is often present at the front door of houses, that is, by the hinges of doorways. "[T]he practice [of installing Hermes at the door] might also have arisen from his power over the ghostly world; for we know that the primitive Greek was troubled by the fear of ghosts entering his house, and used spell-words . . . and other magic devices to prevent it; and a statue of Hermes at the entrance would be a natural religious prophylactic."<sup>10</sup> The god of the threshold is, in this way, also the god of borderlands, market places (Hermes *agoraios*), and the protector of merchants (Hermes *empolaios*). Indeed merchants are those daring souls who must travel to foreign lands in order to circulate goods, and the two terms merchant and Mercury, Hermes's Roman appellation, share a common root. "While many other deities were also *agoraioi* [among them Zeus, Athena, and Artemis], Hermes was the market-god *par excellence*."<sup>11</sup> But why? "It is probable that the way-god is here again asserting his immemorial rights, acquired before the development of cities, when trade was conducted by traveling merchants, who needed the help of the deity of the road, and whose safest market was perhaps on the borderland between two communities, where a boundary-pillar of Hermes would preserve the neutrality and guard the sanctity of the spot."<sup>12</sup> Moving fluidly across borders, Hermes thus illustrates a high level of promiscuity. He is given, in the Homeric Hymns, the title of king of exchanges. We might therefore call him the god of circulation itself. Indeed, for this reason, Jacques Derrida called Hermes, with some brio, the "signifier-god."<sup>13</sup>

He is the signifier god for all of these reasons. But he is also the signifier god in a more literal sense, for Hermes is said to be the inventor of writing, the alphabet, and numbers. (That he is also the inventor of fire, before Prometheus procured it for humanity, is also rarely noted.) The Neoplatonist philosopher Plutarch recounts the following observation: “Hermes . . . was, we are told, the god who first invented writing in Egypt. Hence the Egyptians write the first of their letters with an ibis, the bird that belongs to Hermes, although in my opinion they err in giving precedence among the letters to one that is inarticulate and voiceless”—and here Spinoza’s Poet again looms large.<sup>14</sup> The mute ibis bird, inarticulate and voiceless, stands in for the alphabet and hence writing in general as that thing both externalized and opaque. As Plato writes in the *Phaedrus*, the individual using written language must, in varying degrees, come to terms with the fact that the written text kills all forms of dialogue, for it can never speak back, only parrot over and over its own fixed contents.<sup>15</sup> As with Spinoza’s Poet, the object of expression (the piece of writing) is that thing that is rendered foreign and unintelligible to the one person most likely to be able to commune with it, its author. The Latin writer Hyginus recounts the following on the invention of letters: “The [three Fates] Clotho, Lachesis, and Atropos invented seven Greek letters—A B H T I Y. Others say that Mercury invented them from the flight of cranes, which, when they fly, form letters.”<sup>16</sup> The cranes in flight are not mere wildlife in this example, but a totemic incorporation of Hermes himself, the one who flies on journeys. So when the cranes take a shape, and the shape is a letter, it is at the same time Hermes who forms (invents) the letter.

The two stories that perhaps best characterize Hermes are the story of the stolen cattle and the story of the slaying of Argus. I will recount them both in turn. The myth again: “born in the morning, by midday he was playing the lyre, and in the evening he stole the cattle of far-shooting Apollo.” After finding his cattle gone, Apollo, brother to Hermes, starts to investigate the

crime and interviews an old man, the only witness to Hermes's cattle rustling. The old man replies to Apollo:

My friend, it's hard to say all the things a fellow can see with his eyes. Many travelers use this road, and some come and go with very bad things in their mind, others with very good things. And it's awfully hard to know everyone. As for me, I was working all day long up until the sun set digging away in my very profitable, wine-producing vineyard. But it seems to me, my friend, I saw a child—but really, I don't know, I didn't see him clearly, I don't know who the child was that followed behind those beautifully horned cows, he was awfully young, though, a baby, and he carried a staff, and he walked along zigzag, he pushed them along backwards with their heads facing him!<sup>17</sup>

All of Hermes's themes are here: promiscuity, travel, backwardness and trickery, circumlocution, commerce and profitability, moral ambiguity—and of course snitching. Hermes herds the cattle so they trot backward, leaving a trail of hoof prints pointing in the wrong direction. Here he is Hermes *dolios*, the deceiver, “the patron god of thieves, liars, and defrauders.”<sup>18</sup> “Resourceful and cunning,” is Hermes. “A robber, a rustler of cattle, a bringer of dreams, a night watcher, a gate-lurker.”<sup>19</sup>

The messenger and god of borderlands is thus also a deceiver. But why should this be true? Consider those who must pass from place to place. The journeyer is also the promiscuous one, a non-native, an unknown, a potential thief or pirate. Not a benign chaperone, the wayfarer god is the one who can spout untruths in plain sight. After being apprehended for the cattle incident Zeus laughs at Hermes's lame excuses, for the lies are so transparent. Being a guide requires a certain amount of deception. But a hermetic lie is on the moral level of a white lie, for all parties involved know the truth even if they play along, propping up the lie for other reasons altogether (commerce, diplomacy, expediency, etc.). Hermes is not just a thief, he is the Prince of Thieves.

Duplicity in speech gives Hermes yet another epithet, this one explicitly linguistic and semiotic in nature: Hermes *logios*, or as one might say using current parlance the “discursive” Hermes. He governs over eloquence, persuasion, and the act of speaking. Flows of words are not unlike flows of goods and services across the borderlands, and so, as with merchants and economic commerce, Hermes too has a special connection to the dialogical and discursive economies of language that flow from the tongue of the rhetorician. And like Eros and Aphrodite, he is one of the “whisperer” or seducer gods, for he can intoxicate and seduce others either with promise of profit, or seduce simply through the sweet sounds of the lyre or the reed flute. The Hermes *logios* sculptural type depicts the god in the act of oration, for the herald is the one who, after arriving in far-off lands, must stand tall and speak clearly and convincingly. Thus travel and rhetoric—if not its more degraded form, sophistry—are connected in Hermes.<sup>20</sup>

From a second story Hermes derives another of his most common epithets, Hermes *argeiphontēs*, or Hermes the slayer of Argus. Siegfried Zielinski, in his book *Deep Time of the Media*, retells the story as it appears in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*:

The mythical hero with the gaze that controls is Argus, whose name derives from the Latin *arguere* (to prove, to illuminate). He is the all-seeing one with one hundred eyes, of which only a few ever rest; the others move continually, vigilantly watching and observing. The goddess Hera set Argus to guard her beautiful priestess Io, who was one of Zeus’ beloved. Supervision is the gaze that can contain envy, hate, and jealousy. Argus was killed by Hermes, son of Zeus, who made him the messenger of the gods.<sup>21</sup>

The epithet for Argus is crucial. He is Argus *panoptēs*, which could be roughly translated as the all-seer who illuminates—the term is of course etymologically similar to the word panopticon, made famous by Bentham and Foucault. “He had eyes in the whole of his body,” wrote Appollodorus of this creature.<sup>22</sup>

When he slept, Argus would close his eyes only in rotation. Even if several dozen eyes were sleeping, at any given moment there were enough vigilant eyes to keep watch.

How does Hermes kill him, this ever vigilant all-seer? Forever clever, Hermes's strategy is to talk. He begins to talk and talk, and continues speaking for hours on end, telling Argus the story of how the reed pipe was invented. During Hermes's tedious monologue, all of Argus's many eyes gradually close in sleepiness, and his fate is sealed. Argus, in essence, was bored to death by the most boring thing of all, tales about technology.

So the messenger kills the panopticon in the end. Apollodorus has Hermes slaying Argus with a stone; a famous Rubens painting in Madrid's Prado museum shows a decapitation by sword. A poetic finale to the story is given by Ovid, as dozens of Argus's now lifeless eyes are plucked from his body by Hera and pasted onto the tail feathers of the peacock, where they remain to this day.<sup>23</sup>

Since he has so many epithets and so many aspects, it is sometimes thought that Hermes is the result of several earlier gods combined into one. Indeed it makes sense for him to be a syncretic god, for he rules over syncretic behavior among men, that is, the amalgamation and exchange of foreign cultures and economies. In the end Hermes does not die out with the old Greek cults, but instead merges again with the Egyptian god Thoth into Hermes Trismegistus, the author of the *Hermetica*, a supposed bridge to Christianity, and thus the patron saint of alchemists, Gnostics, and mystics of the Middle Ages.

#### THE CRITICAL MIDDLE

Why does the word hermeneutics come from Hermes? The answer is that Hermes has a special relationship to discourse, exchange, and rhetoric. In hermeneutic mediation there is never simply a direct relationship to truth, there is always a *confrontation* with truth. In the hermeneutic tradition, texts are not

self-evident, they do not reveal truth in a clear and direct way. The hermeneutic interpreter of texts must coax meaning out of sometimes obfuscatory and contradictory signs existing in the material, whether it be biblical scripture, or the semiotic performances of human affect. The confrontation with truth is led by and released through various economies of meaning, be they social, political, or commercial. Always *about* the real, the hermeneutic tradition is also in some basic sense *against* the real.

The confrontation with truth may be mapped out more explicitly within the critical tradition. It consists of three steps:

① exegesis → ② hermeneutics → ③ symptomatics

Note the hierarchy of reading that lingers in the critical tradition. First comes *exegesis*, or the realm of practical explanation. This is *logos* in its most workaday sense: speakers exchange across and within discourse with the goal of elucidating and analyzing the subject at hand. Exegetical readings typically run “with the grain” of the work, they unfold in a stance that is considered sympathetic to the author’s intent, and indeed sympathetic to the existence of any author whatsoever. An exegetical claim comes in the form: “This is how artifact *a* works . . .,” or “This is what text *b* says . . .” To some the exegetical read is illuminating, to others it is evidence of mere complicity with latent meaning, with the status quo.

Second is hermeneutics proper, what is often simply called critique. The origins of hermeneutics are in textual and scriptural interpretation. Hermeneutics tries to, as it were, unmask the status quo, focusing on a development or reform of the work. As in Hermes’s voyages abroad, hermeneutics assumes that the work is itself a foreign land that must be visited. Thus any hermeneutic reading will tend to run “against the grain” of literal or latent truth visible in the work. Stuart Hall’s essay “Encoding/decoding” is an excellent source to consult on this point, as

he shows how readings do not necessarily follow the literal fact of the text.<sup>24</sup> Finding value in the counterintuitive fact, hermeneutical critique accepts that the exegetical framework exists, but nevertheless insists that it is somehow wrongly crafted or that it is covering up some deeper more significant truth. Thus, critique will tend to contextualize or historicize the work, but likewise it will also collide the work with new arguments and counterarguments. The discovery of flaws or gaps in the work only helps in the process of hermeneutic interpretation, for, like Hermes *dolios* (the deceiver), the work itself is considered to be, at a certain manifest level, obviously false. Alternate levels of meaning are opened up, be they hidden or repressed or erased.

For this reason Marx and Freud are important entries in the history of hermeneutic methodology. Marx's reading of the commodity is textbook hermeneutics in that it discounts the latent read, the deceptive form-of-appearance, in subordination to a more daring voyage across the borderlands and into the very heart of the matter (how value is created). Freud's model of the psyche follows a similar logic, as the unconscious resides in a latent reality behind the manifest layer of the conscious mind. For this reason both Marxism and Freudianism are sometimes called "depth" models of interpretation because they obey Hermes's basic principles: mediation involves obscurity and deception; mediation requires a "deep" voyage to or from some far-away land.

Thus, instead of asking "How does artifact *a* work?," critical hermeneutics asks "Do artifacts have politics?" (as Langdon Winner once put it).<sup>25</sup> The artifact may be read on its own terms, but the truth of the artifact is exposed *using external rubrics*—i.e., a critique of a novel using the external rubric of historical materialism. Paul Ricœur has famously called this a "hermeneutics of suspicion," a libidinal-political suspicion rooted in Marx and Freud, to be sure, but also in Nietzsche and his suspicion toward classical models of aesthetic judgment.

The third moment of the critical narrative is the moment of the symptom. If the previous phase can be associated with

structuralism, this phase is associated with post-structuralism in general and deconstruction in particular. Unlike the hermeneutic phase, the symptomatic reading does not accept the exegetical framework at all. It suggests that the framework is in some sense a decoy, an expedient explanation that must be effaced entirely, not in an attempt to probe the depth of the work, but in a topological parsing of signs on the surface of the work. If hermeneutics proper runs orthogonal to the text, the symptomatic reading runs back and forth across the face of it, skeptical toward any attempt to return to the origin of the work, or to appeal to some essential truth lying within it. Instead stress is given to the reading of “clues” (symptoms) in the work to reveal structured absences, contradictions, misunderstandings, the work’s “epistemological other,” or what is “not said” in it.

An example of the symptomatic mode is given elegantly in the epigraph to Donna Haraway’s book *How Like a Leaf*. “Both chimpanzees and artifacts have politics, so why shouldn’t we?”<sup>26</sup> What is Haraway saying here? Recall that the hermeneutic position would try to argue something different, that artifacts have politics. Haraway’s claim however is “symptomatic” because it throws out the exegetical and hermeneutic frameworks entirely, accepting the counterintuitive claim not as provocation but as fact (that chimpanzees and artifacts have politics), and then nominates a new claim (that “we” should have politics). The new claim is in a certain sense beyond provocation because it is almost tautologically true—since the Greeks, mankind has been defined as the political animal. So to dare to assert the claim as something worth arguing about is to insinuate that the whole framework of knowledge must be, at some basic level, obsolete.

These three modes—exegetical, hermeneutic, and symptomatic—have thus far been described as a “narrative” or a “hierarchy” because in the critical tradition these three modes tend to be arranged, if not strictly chronologically, then in terms of a normative sequence with a beginning, middle, and end: mere exegesis is that stuffy old technique that must be denuded, in the hermeneutic tradition, as so much ideological

cant; while later the hermeneutic tradition itself is undercut by its own eventual blindness toward the unconscious of the text, an absence that can only be approached by the newfound techniques of the symptomatic reading. Thus, (1) exegesis is solved by (2) hermeneutics, which is solved again by (3) symptomatics. Or to narrate it using some terms and names commonly heard, the (1) ghosts of bourgeois social theory are *denaturalized* by (2) Marx, who himself is *complicated* by (3) Fredric Jameson or Jacques Derrida. The first explains, the second denaturalizes, and the third complicates. These three moments are all contained within the many aspects of Hermes.

The tale of Spinoza's Poet retold at the outset is important because it describes the basic dilemma of the critical tradition. The relationship to oblivion—the fate of the poet—is precisely the same relationship that people have with media. Cast off from the self, media are forever those things foreign to us. They must be picked apart, tamed, but still kept at bay, so that the process of signification can take place. Again, always *about* the real, critique is also forever *against* it.

Many accounts of the critical tradition would end here. And to the informed reader the story thus far will have been quite familiar territory. Beyond exegesis, hermeneutics, or symptomatics, what else does critique have to offer? Have we said all that needs to be said about the essential modes of mediation? Not hardly, for in order to understand theories of mediation in any broad sense, the journey has only begun. Other things await us: a secondary world parallel to that of the critical tradition, and a third waiting to annihilate it. (A fourth will be conserved for the end as a kind of synthesizing postscript, before handing the reins over to Thacker and Wark.)

#### MEDIATION AS IRIDESCENCE

Ants bring their eggs above ground, the crane takes to flight, the heifer snorts, and the great bow drinks (*bibit ingens arcus*). In Virgil's great pastoral *Georgics* all these things happen when a storm

comes; by sure indicators (*certis signis*) we know of its arrival.<sup>27</sup> The great bow, when it drinks, is one of the unfailing signs.<sup>28</sup> The bow appears in the clouds, opposite the sun, creating a perfect arc of color that connects the heavens to the earth. The sign imparts meaning immediately. It is no omen, no mysterious sign that must be deciphered. It says what it is. The great bow is as certain as it is sudden. The sign and what it conveys are one and the same: a storm is nearby.

The great bow, Iris, provides an alternative mode of mediation, incompatible with Hermes and hermeneutics. Iris's characteristics include an *immediacy* in time and space, a physical *immanence* with itself, and absolute *certainty* as regards what is to be known.

Iris has no story of her own, no mythology. She is the rainbow and, with Hermes, one of the two messengers of the gods.<sup>29</sup> While Hermes has a long list of epithets, Iris has only a short list. Indeed there are fewer iterations of her, fewer diverging aspects that must be reconciled into a single form. Unlike Hermes who withdraws and deceives, Iris is fully present at all times.

She is Hera's maiden. With ears alert and head slanted, Iris is like a totemic animal, the eager companion and assistant to the queen of the gods:

And by [Hera's] golden throne [Iris] sat like Artemis's  
hound, who when the day's hunting is done,  
crouches beside the Huntress's feet, her ears cocked,  
always ready to welcome the Goddess's shout;  
in the same way, the daughter of Thaumas crouches  
by the throne, her head slanting a little,  
she sleeps. She never ungirds her robe  
or swift boots, lest her mistress speak some  
sudden word.<sup>30</sup>

In Homer, Iris is "humanized, but not earthy; thoroughly practical, but most ethereal," to borrow a description from William Gladstone.<sup>31</sup> The epithets given in Homer will paint a fit-

ting picture of the goddess of mediation. At various times she is called (A) *angelos*, the messenger; *metangelos*, the intermessenger; (B) *chrysopteros*, golden-winged, saffron-winged; (C) *kraipnōs memauia*, keenly eager; (D) *okea*, swift, or *podas okea*, the swift of foot; *tacheia*, nimble; and (E) *aellopos*, the storm-footed, or *podēnemos*, the wind-footed.<sup>32</sup> These epithets have all been culled from Gladstone's analysis, but I shall add two additional ones: (F) *thaumantos*, daughter of Wonder (Thaumas); and (G) *dea clara*, the bright goddess.

Like Hermes, Iris is a messenger. She is a middle. She operates in the zone of intermediate action between two individuals. She moves quickly. Her movement is spatial and decisive; she is neither a straight line, nor a tortuously complicated one, but an arc, a bow. Her duties are to Zeus and Hera, and whereas Hermes is often a chaperone for a person or a conduit for something, Iris is a pure relay, carrying and repeating messages that she carries within her own physicality.

The textual record on Iris often contains a two-part echo structure: first she receives a message from someone (often Hera), and second she travels to the receiver and verbalizes the original message. Her retelling is often slightly different from the original message, as would be expected when something is repeated from memory. Her commands are usually unidirectional, for example from god to man—a feedback loop is not necessary in the iridescent mode of mediation. Sometimes the original message is told to Iris, but the repetition of the message is only indicated in passing, giving us an example of mimetic repetition *without* difference. Consider for example the following, in which Hera gives a multipart command to Iris which she relays to three separate receivers, Thetis, Hephaistos, and Aiolos:

So [Hera] spoke, and Iris promptly launched herself from  
 Olympos,  
 light wings outspread, knifed through the air, and plunged  
 into Aigaian waters, where Nereus has his domain.

First she visited Thetis, and passed on the whole message that Hera had given her, commanding Thetis's presence; next she sought out Hephaistos, made him silence his iron hammers that instant, choke off the breath from the smoky fire blasts. Then, thirdly, Iris called upon Aiolos, far-famed son of Hippótas.<sup>33</sup>

Sometimes the reverse is true, that the original message is merely referred to, then verbalized in the retelling. In either case the logic is one of doubling or rote repetition. Hermes is the interpreter, *ermēneus*, but Iris gains her name from the word *eirein* meaning to tell.<sup>34</sup>

Can there be a tele-telling, a telling at a distance? Hermes's hermeneutic mediation will always answer in the affirmative, claiming that all telling happens at a distance, from the closest conversation, to the most far-flung mediations of space and time. Iris's iridescent mediation will always answer in the negative, claiming that no telling happens at a distance. One cannot yell from the mountains. The past does not speak to us. Or rather in the yelling and in the speaking both space and time are instantly transcended. To tell is to touch, no matter how far away, and thus for Iris any mediation is mediation in the here and now.

With all this in mind, it is possible to expand what it means for a mode of mediation to follow the model of iridescent immanence by way of a series of qualities.

(1) *Nearness*. The critical narrative, with hermeneutics as its central gesture, claims that meaning is found in remote locations. But Iris claims something else, that meaning is found in what is close at hand. Or to be more precise Iris claims that *the nearby has an experience*—a claim that Hermes could never hope to utter. To be sure, whether or not the nearby has a *meaning* is of marginal importance; handwriting over meaning is a neurosis of the hermeneutic variant alone. For Iris whatever appears appears as near, never far or foreign. Thus the trick of the rainbow's pot of gold is not simply that it never gets nearer, but that,

in the chase, it never gets further away either! This is why Iris is a model of immanence. The immanent communion of two things produces a mediative relation of nearness in which both parties remain within themselves such as they are.

With its attention to nearness, the Iris mode is profoundly uninterested in questions of circulation and exchange, and hence could never be affiliated with the production of value or meaning through such systems of exchange (as is the prevailing view of many decades' worth of freudian-marxian theory). Iris exists at the person-to-person level. She is neither systemic, nor structural. If hermeneutics is a tortuous epistemology, iridescence is merely a bowed or curvilinear one.

(2) *Ecstatic surpluses*. In the most technical sense, meaning as such does not exist in iridescence, for meaning is the domain of hermeneutics. Instead iridescence overflows with an immense surplus of expression. This is what we might call the baroque quality of iridescence, or following Erwin Panofsky, the "lordly racket" of it all. Granted, "surplus" is a term borrowed from the hermeneutic mode. So some imagination will be required here: the "surplus" of the iridescent mode comes in the form of unmotivated—which is to say meaningless and sourceless—aesthetic output. For example, the rainbow in the sky emits an immense surfeit of expression in order to say something that is already quite obvious, that *it rained*. Or consider the examples of the iris of the eye or the iris flower. With their pure unmotivated beauty, both say "too much" in order to say very little, that *there is splendor in the world*.

If hermeneutics is cognitive and verbal, iridescence is affective and thus profoundly dumb—although in a non-pejorative sense of the word, as in the expression "I was dumbstruck." After all, Iris is called *thaumantos*, the "daughter of Wonder." (And in this sense the ultimate villain for immediacy is pornography, for it forever reveals too much, and in doing so commits violence toward that thing that is most intimate to it, the real, while the ultimate villain for hermeneutics is fetishism, for it forever sets up two absolutely unconnected things, turning the first into a

hidden source and the second into an obscure device for veiling and unveiling the first.) So even though Iris gains her name etymologically from *eirein*, to tell, she is also the one who, as Roland Barthes writes, “has nothing to say.” She is contentless. She tells, but does nothing more. It is simply a question of being present at hand to tell. Once relayed, the telling is already consummated.

(3) *Certainty*. Certainty goes hand in hand with the two previous points, that the iridescent mode is experienced in nearness and that it is felt through unmotivated aesthetic abundance. Consider certainty in both a quotidian and technical sense. First, Iris’s rejection of deception (leaving deception to the kingdom of Hermes) means that inconstancy and caprice fade away and one is left with a world in which things happen rightly, clearly, and in a known manner. All the de Manian rhetoric about blindness versus insight must be thrown out in the iridescent mode. That drama finds no inroads here. If Iris appears in the sky, one does not have to wonder if the sun is out and whether there are water droplets in the air. One can claim this with certainty.

But there is also a more technical aspect to certainty. This refers to the ability for the rainbow to be turned into something of a technical science. Take this in the most prosaic way: there is a bona fide “hard science” of iridescence, the science found in the analytical geometry of Descartes’s or Spinoza’s writings on refraction and reflection within water droplets, or in François d’Aguilon’s color arc or Newton’s color wheel, or in any number of scientific approaches to dioptric and iridescent phenomena. This is not unimportant, for it is not possible to say the same thing about hermeneutics, bracketing of course the lofty scientific aspirations of structuralism or semiotics.

In other words, the hermeneutic mode can never truly be articulated as a strict *matheme* or logic. Whereas it is quite normal for the iridescent mode to be articulated in this way. Iris *can and will be mathematized*. Yet at the same time, since immanent iridescence, as a mode of mediation, is also closely associated with a kind of pathos or romantico-poetic affect vis-à-vis one’s existence, the following might be a slightly more appropriate for-

mulation: Iris is “objectively” a *matheme*, but “subjectively” a *patheme* (i.e., an expression of pathos, a poem).

At this point in the discussion it is possible to synthesize what has been said so far about Hermes and Iris and extrapolate a bit from it. I have been referring to these two avatars as modes of mediation, but it is also possible to assign specific media formats to each. In the most general sense, the privileged format for the critical middle is *text*, and the privileged format for the iridescent middle is *image*. (In a moment, for the Furies, it will be *system*.) Given the convoluted twists and turns of Hermes’s travels, the text is best understood as a *problem*. Likewise, given the aesthetic gravity of immediate presence in Iris’s bow, the image is best understood as a *poem*. Thus, whereas hermeneutics engages with the problem of texts, iridescence engages with the poetry of images be they visual or otherwise. Hermeneutics views media (of whatever kind, be it text, image, sound, etc.) as if they were textual problems needing to be solved. Yet iridescence views these same media as if they were poetic images waiting to be experienced.

By assigning these modes their own privileged formats I do not wish to indicate that a specific mode of mediation will operate exclusively within a single media format, but rather that there exists a hegemonic relationship, which is to say a relationship of negotiated dominance, between a certain modality of aesthetic mediation and a certain format. In fact, in many actually existing media artifacts, textual, visual, and systemic elements will operate in concert. Certain elements may very well require other elements and, further, may actively seek to break down the distinctions made among them.

In shifting between modes, the challenge is to replace the primary format and the primary method. In other words, to shift from Hermes to Iris one must swap text for image and criticism for illumination. Then, once we have described the Furies in greater detail, the final challenge will be to swap image for system and illumination for infuriation.

## AGAINST HERMES

Recall the great mantra of phenomenology, *to the things themselves!* Over the years many philosophers and critics have tried to understand what this might mean. Does the mantra proclaim an allegiance to Hermes or to Iris? Does the stress fall on the *to*, highlighting the journey that must be taken, the distance that must be traveled to transit from perceiver to thing? Or does the stress fall on the *themselves*, hinting that this kingdom of things might be easily reachable after all, because, in a certain sense, the perceiver is already in residence there?

Such is the great divide straddled by Martin Heidegger and the special kind of phenomenology espoused by him. From one perspective Heidegger is devoted to the cult of Hermes. Truth is an ambling *Weg* that must be followed. Nothing is immediate about being; it appears only in a relationship to those who seek it. Yet from another perspective Heidegger is devoted to the cult of Iris, for his version of phenomenology does not entirely accept the perpetual deferral of exchange and circulation associated with Hermes. Being is mysterious in Heidegger. But it is also illuminated. It is far away, like Hermes, but it is also clear, transparent, and immediate like Iris. "Being is farther than all beings and is yet nearer to man than every being, be it a rock, a beast, a work of art, a machine, be it an angel or God. Being is the nearest. Yet the near remains farthest from man."<sup>35</sup>

Those lines were written by Heidegger shortly after World War II. Several years later, in 1964, a young Susan Sontag penned one of the great indictments levied against Hermes and his style of mediation. "Transparency is the highest, most liberating value in art—and in criticism—today," she wrote. "Transparency means experiencing the luminousness of the thing in itself, of things being what they are."<sup>36</sup> "Against Interpretation" was the title of her manifesto, but the identical titles "Against Hermes" or "Against Hermeneutics" would have served just as well.

Experience things as what they are, she cried. *To the things themselves!* These things are transparent; they illuminate and are luminous. They share little with Hermes's mode of mediation, but instead evoke Iris's iridescence, an illumination borne from immediacy, even the intimacy of the erotic. Recall the most famous line of the essay: "Instead of a hermeneutics we need an erotics of art."<sup>37</sup>

Sontag found such luminousness in Alain Robbe-Grillet and the *nouveau roman*. She found it in Pop Art, Symbolist poetry, and certain kinds of abstraction. The key was to throw out all systems of art founded on the age-old hermeneutic tropes and techniques—hiding and showing, repressing and revealing, nativizing and othering—and likewise any intellectual endeavor that must chaperone the reader or viewer away from danger, be it allegory over utterance, or criticism over craft. In the postwar intellectual climate, Sontag's suggestions represented a fearless and fresh wind blowing through the dusty old hermeneutic disciplines. Yet they were not uncontroversial, for they required new blood sacrifices, including a renunciation of Freud, an abandonment of cultural marxism, and a skepticism toward other methods rooted in interpretation.

Today Sontag's fight against Hermes has been taken up by many others. Opportunists leverage the fight as a way to shoot holes in what they see as the many Potemkin villages fabricated by the likes of Derrida, Lacan, or other undesirables. Hermes has essentially become synonymous with "theory" as a whole, and thus to rail against the shortcomings of theory requires a certain antipathy toward Hermes.

Yet others, even those who remain friendly to theory, while not wishing to scuttle the critical project entirely, admit that something has gotten off track. Hence in recent years there has been a profusion of writings that reflect inwardly on the status of theory (particularly theory understood as criticism or hermeneutics) and its relevance for the future, from Bruno Latour's more skeptical reassessment of how knowledge is produced

("Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam?"), to D. N. Rodowick's and Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht's eulogies to Hermes ("An Elegy for Theory" and "A Farewell to Interpretation," respectively), to the more recuperative and reinvigorating tone of Michael Hardt ("The Militancy of Theory").<sup>38</sup> Gumbrecht in particular has been keen to pursue the argument all the way to the end. In the book *Production of Presence: What Meaning Cannot Convey*, he argues that humanities disciplines should not be understood primarily as disciplines devoted to the quest for meaning, as they have been known for generations. Rather, Gumbrecht proposes that intellectual work oscillate between the kingdoms of both Hermes and Iris, which is to say, between both the old "meaning effects" of hermeneutic mediation, and the alternate, parallel "presence effects" of iridescent mediation.<sup>39</sup>

Gumbrecht, Sontag, and others in the post-hermeneutic turn gesture toward one possible exit from interpretation, but there are still others that should be identified. One is the new cognitivism that is infecting a number of branches of the humanities including cinema studies and literary analysis.<sup>40</sup> But another is the so-called speculative realist school (inspired in various ways by an unlikely polyglot of Gilles Deleuze, Bruno Latour, François Laruelle, and Alain Badiou), which has leveled a stinging indictment against what it terms "correlationism," a cousin of the hermeneutic position. This new turn is exciting in that it represents the first real development in continental philosophy in quite some time. Yet the result is, at least in Quentin Meillassoux's book *After Finitude*, only partially appetizing. Meillassoux seems to paint himself into a new corner immediately after breaking out of the old trap of correlationism, by setting up a sort of gnostic, mystical absolute that goes by the name "Chaos," the most elemental of the Greek divine aspects.<sup>41</sup> Laruelle's approach is more appealing, as Thacker and Wark will explain in their chapters, for it shows more definitively what kind of mediation might possibly exist once the constraints of this world are removed.

The question is not so much if Hermes and Iris should be superseded, but how. For it should be reiterated, if it is not already clear, that the post-hermeneutic turn is fueled in no small measure by something of a nostalgic if not altogether reactionary political bent. In tossing out correlationism—which encompasses disciplines like post-structuralism (rooted firmly in the hermeneutic tradition, no matter how much it complicates that tradition) and phenomenology (fueled by its unique fusion of hermeneutics and iridescence)—one is thus obligated, just as Sontag said several years ago, to discard Marx and Freud and all the others. This may be fine, a spring cleaning before the invention of something new. But are we not at risk of discarding the good with the bad? Is the post-hermeneutic turn a positive development, or a regression back to some kind of “pre social” or “pre political” moment?

So where are we now? And where should we go? At the risk of cultivating a host of new enemies, I will revisit two sources of inspiration from the recent past and two from the present. From the recent past we would be wise to return to Heidegger and Deleuze. For, in a general sense, one of Badiou’s recent observations holds, that Heidegger is the last universally recognized philosopher. Methodologically speaking, Heidegger became central in the post-structuralism of the late 1960s to the extent that he provided a way to locate a foundational instability within the ontological apparatus itself. Indeed phenomenology exists as one of the great anti-Enlightenment philosophical movements born out of the nineteenth century. Yet Heidegger is at the same time an extension of the grand German tradition of romanticism, and it is for this reason that he cleaves so closely to the poetic-iridescent arc. Yet perhaps Heidegger did not go far enough. Perhaps it is not so much a question of the end of metaphysics, but the end of ontology. Or to put it in more detailed terms: perhaps it is a question of the end of a hermeneutic ontology, an ontology centered around having an interpretive relationship to the world. Heidegger wished to do away with

a certain breed of ontological thought, and in phenomenology he achieved his wish. But the real challenge may be to do away with ontological thought altogether, or at least to do away with its claims to primacy.

Deleuze represents the first real movement out of the shadow of Heidegger. What this means is that Deleuze is the first to elaborate an alternate philosophical project that can not be reduced in some capacity to the various schools existing at the time, such as semiotics, structuralism, dialectics, phenomenology, psychoanalysis, or positivism. Instead Deleuze choose to reinvent a tradition of materialist philosophy drawing on Spinoza and others. Like hermeneutics, dialectical thinking, with its cycle of negation and ascetic self-denial, was retrograde if not outright fascistic in Deleuze's view. Yes Deleuze was Marxist in an intimate, fully internalized sense. He confessed as much in a late interview. But while Marx appears often in *Anti-Oedipus* and again in some other works, and while he was apparently writing a book on Marx before his death in 1995, Deleuze gave much less attention to Marx than his peers. Likewise Deleuze's desire to bury Freudian psychoanalysis, or at least the repressive models of subjectivity that Freud came to represent, was formidable, and it is considered a key pillar of his overall project.

After Heidegger and Deleuze, the third figure is Badiou, whom I call "present" simply because in the Anglo-American context he was only addressed in any substantive way after the turn of the millennium, despite being only a few years younger than Deleuze. Why Badiou? Because after Heidegger and Deleuze, Badiou's intervention represents the third significant philosophical project of the twentieth century.<sup>42</sup> Badiou is engaged in the core pursuit of philosophy, which since the Greeks—or some might say since Heidegger's reading of the Greeks—has been engaged with the problem of ontology. Deleuze and Badiou are so close in political spirit it is often a surprise to learn how entirely incompatible they are philosophically. Badiou is part of a trend today that Deleuze would intractably oppose, a metaphysical, even ide-

alist, revival that has no qualms about evoking the name of someone like Hegel, Deleuze's nemesis. Badiou, Slavoj Žižek, and even figures like Derrida and Jean Baudrillard, all contribute to this revival. That Badiou is also a self-described Platonist is a sign of the times. Marx or no Marx, it is acceptable to be an idealist again. Further, Badiou's ability to express his project using concepts that are readily adaptable to other areas—the generic, fidelity, infinity, militancy, the universal, truth, subtraction—makes his ontological project particularly amenable to methodological coöptation and migration. So while Badiou indicts Deleuze's project, as he did before with Heidegger, by labeling it a "poetic" ontology, Badiou ends up being touched by the muse himself, if not in form—shocking the reader by confirming in no uncertain terms that the void is the proper name of being—then certainly in pep and spirit, for what could be more poetic than an ontology that obligates us to meditate on love, fidelity, and truth?

The fourth figure is Laruelle, ultimately the most important author today for any theory of excommunication. If I do not say much about Laruelle here, it is not for lack of interest. (On the contrary, because he deserves so much attention only a future monograph will suffice.) Indeed Laruelle's theory of mediation, if it can be called that, is so absolutely incompatible with the things being discussed in this chapter as to be practically unrecognizable. In short, Laruelle defines the world directly in terms of the mediative relation. There can be no world that is not already a world of mediation. As he writes, the real is what is communicated and the communicated is what is real. Thus to dwell on excommunication as the impossibility of communication will require the wholesale elimination of the world as we know it. In other words, Laruelle's theory of mediation requires a non-world. It requires what he calls a non-standard reality in which there is no reciprocity, no correlation, and no mediation in the normal sense. My task here is to deal with the excommunicative thresholds of this world, the standard world. For the world beyond, I cede to Thacker and Wark who both devote some attention to Laruelle in their respective chapters.

AN ORGANIZATION OF MEDIATION, OR WHY ALĒTHEIA  
PRECEDES LOGOS

Even after their passage from ancient Greek religion to modern Western secularism, both the Iris and Hermes modes of mediation remain profoundly theological. In the most literal sense hermeneutics is theological because it derives from the deciphering of scripture. But the issue is more complicated than that. To explore the text, *one must first know*. With hermeneutics one knows only too well what the text says beneath the skin, or at least what it should say. It is simply a matter of lining up the signifiers in such a way as to unlock the pattern. In scriptural exegesis, for example, the textual question is never, say, whether or not God is love—this is known to be true definitively in advance—the question is simply how one can read a particular passage in such a way as to bring it in accord with the divine fact. One knows what the *Bible* says; the real work of hermeneutics is allowing the text to say the same thing. Thus the proper method of hermeneutics is a mystico-theological method: to explicate, one must first know. And yet the miracle remains, that once meaning is revealed, the truth of the text hits the reader like a lightning bolt, like some sort of mystical revelation.

But iridescence is a theological mode too. Here the spiritual aspect is less a question of untangling a terrestrial work in response to some divine commandment (“always historicize!” “denaturalize ideology!”), but is instead a unified experience of balance, self-identity, and the communion of essences. If iridescence has a divine law it would be “to see things as they really are.” Consciousness acts spontaneously; there are no human-bound commandments, only the physical incontestability of fate. Iris’s is not a theology based on discipline and faith, but one based on a destiny or “way” of the world. The world shines, but the truth of the world is found in the human heart.

History is not simply that thing that converts the Hermes type into the hermeneutic narrative and the Iris type into the iridescent arc, it is also, as Marcel Detienne tells us, the imposi-

tion of a structured relation between the two mediators, between iridescence and hermeneutics. In this way history may be understood as the *organization of mediation*. But it is an organization of mediation that, at the same time, invents mediation. “*Alētheia* precedes *logos*” is one way of rendering the relation. The overall result of this organizing of mediation is twofold: the hermeneutic mode is placed chronologically after the iridescent mode and hence gains something of a trump card when it comes to matters of thinking and reflecting, yet in being placed at the origin the iridescent mode gains primacy in all matters of being, for with Iris there is nothing more pure, nothing more rarified, nothing more holy. Hermeneutics is privileged epistemologically; iridescence is privileged metaphysically. Presence comes first and reflection second.

Paul de Man has written on the great themes of blindness and insight in literature and literary theory. It is true that in de Man the Hermes and Iris arcs are somewhat collapsed into one history, where literary immanence is the notion that a text exists in and for itself and literary interpretation is a kind of mediation that, like literature itself, contains a necessary blindness. Yet it is also possible to separate the two in such a way that Hermes stands in for blindness and Iris for insight. On the one hand, the hermeneutic tradition suggests that meaning is ultimately not native to representation. The trick is not that meaning is somehow special, or parasitic, or beyond expression, but that *representation is not native to itself*. Thus, since representation is always alienated from itself, meaning is too by virtue of association. For de Man, criticism is a kind of literature, just as literature itself contains a kind of criticism within it. And hence blindness is something at the very heart of how hermeneutic interpretation works. On the other hand, the iridescent tradition suggests that meaning is indeed native to representation. Presence itself means something regardless of interpretation. Being in the world is an undivided act within which the self and the lifeworld are produced hand in hand. Thus insight is the natural

state of the iridescent mode, for the world always already reveals itself.

In this way, blindness and opacity are Hermes's keywords, while illumination and insight belong to Iris. The shining of Iris becomes, in Hermes, the loss of the self into shadow. What is expression and radiance in Iris becomes accumulation and circulation in Hermes. The iridescent mode aspires to something like a scientific law in the world, as things transpire with a beautiful sheen of natural necessity. The rainbow is a phenomenon of the optical sciences, after all. Iridescence says that the world shines; one must simply let it reveal itself. Hermeneutics, by contrast, comes in the form of a commandment, not a material law: "always historicize!" or "denaturalize ideology!" The hermeneutic commandment is a response to blindness; while the iridescent law is a mere recognition of insight. The first happens in the domain of naming and discourse, the second in the domain of presence, experience, or feeling. The culminating moment of hermeneutics is always a type of mystical revelation, a lightning strike. Yet the culminating moment of iridescence is an aurora, a blooming, the glow of a sacred presence. And finally, to return to the opening themes, the Hermes type is found in the eerie disorientation of Spinoza's Poet, while the Iris type is found in the illumination of Molyneux's Seer.

There is an assumption, in de Man and elsewhere, that, in the twentieth century and certainly by the 1960s, hermeneutics is brought back as a way to work through the problems of hitherto existing crises in reading. "Well-established rules and conventions that governed the discipline of criticism have been so badly tampered with that the entire edifice threatens to collapse," wrote de Man in 1967. "One is tempted to speak of recent developments in Continental criticism in terms of *crisis*."<sup>43</sup> Twentieth-century critical theory tended to say that insight was itself naive, and that any sort of iridescence, coming in the form of an immediate insight into the object at hand, was a fool's errand. But of course the final step of the critical tradi-

tion (labeled “symptomatics” above, but deconstruction would have worked just as well) was really just a new hermeneutics in disguise. There is nothing in the symptomatic reading that was not already there in the hermeneutic reading. The very fact that the symptomatic reading requires that the text be something of a “crisis” or a “trick” means that it is still firmly in the land of Hermes *dolios*. So if de Man predicted the crisis, he did not predict what would happen next.

#### FURY AND INFURIATION

Figures like Gumbrecht and Sontag were responding to an event, and, I would argue, responding in a misguided way by trotting out the familiar humanist comforts of nostalgia, transcendence, or gauzy metaphysics, as with Gumbrecht’s zen-like spin on the old phenomenological themes. What is this event? The event is the event of the modern, to be sure, but it is more specific than that. Daniel Bell called the event the end of ideology. Francis Fukuyama rather smugly called it the end of history. Economists call it postfordism, while those in industry refer to the rise of information technologies. In 1964 Paul Baran described the event in terms of “distributed” communications. In 1980 Deleuze and Guattari described the same event via the propagatory structure of the rhizome.

After Hermes and Iris, instead of a return to hermeneutics (the critical narrative) or a return to phenomenology (the iridescent arc), there is a third mode that combines and annihilates the other two. For after Hermes and Iris there is another divine form of pure mediation, the distributed network, which finds incarnation in the incontinent body of what the Greeks called first the Erinyes and later the Eumenides, and the Romans called the Furies. So instead of a problem or a poem, today we must confront a system. A third divinity must join the group: not a man, not a woman, but a pack of animals.

“Effaced. With faces sagging. Ruined. Decomposed. Collapsed. Shredded. Bit by bit. Pulverized. Particle by particle. *Par-*

*tes extra partes*. Dispersed. Split. Deconstructed. Fragmented. Disseminated. Scattered. Emulsified. Blunted. Unfolded. Folded up. Incomplete. Becalmed. Calmly. Carefully. Continuously. Obstinate<sup>44</sup>. The Furies signal noncompliance with both immanence and hermeneutics, an abdication of both presence and difference. They signal the triumph of multiplicity, heterogeneity, parallelity, rhizomatics, horizontal topology, complexity, and nonlinear systems. But what exactly are we dealing with?

The Furies are prehistoric. They move through contagion. They are called a “bloody ravening pack” by Aeschylus, and often described as animals or swarms. The Furies are essentially indeterminate in number; in the literary record their numbers change depending on the source. If Hermes is the god of the signifier, and Iris is the goddess of immanence, the Furies are the gods of the incontinence of form. As Vernant wrote, the Furies are a kind of evil spirit representing the unindividuated self,

a sinister *numen* that manifests itself in many guises. . . . It is a power of misfortune that encompasses not only the criminal but the crime itself, its most distant antecedents, its psychological motivations, its consequences, the defilement it brings in its wake and the punishment that it lays in store for the guilty one and all his descendents. In Greek there is a word for this type of divine power. . . . It is *daimōn* . . . an evil spirit.<sup>45</sup>

“The Erinyes are the huntresses but they are huntresses that are purely animal,” notes Pierre Vidal-Naquet, referring to the raw animality of the Furies. “They are serpents and they are also bitches. Their purely animal nature is very strongly emphasized, by Apollo . . . : ‘You should make your dwelling in the cave of some blood-gorged lion instead of coming to defile others by inflicting your foulness in this temple of prophecy.’”<sup>46</sup>

If Hermes always responds with “maybe,” and Iris with “yes, of course,” the Furies are forever “never.” They bring punishment, but not the kind of retribution wrought by the “modern” juridical power of Athena. They bring only the punishment of the ages.

Their weapon is a strand, a link, a rope. If Hermes is a self, and Iris is a life, the Furies are an ecosystem, a swarm, a cloud.<sup>47</sup>

Deleuze is something of a patron saint for the Fury mode. In one of Deleuze's summaries of some of the main characters in Nietzsche's work, he inserts an entry for "spider" that reveals much about the nature of the Furies:

*Spider (or Tarantula)*: It is the spirit of revenge or resentment. Its power of contagion is its venom. Its will is a will to punish and to judge. Its weapon is the thread, the thread of morality. It preaches equality (that everyone become like it!).<sup>48</sup>

Yet the difficulty with assimilating Deleuze fully into the present schema is that he was interested in both immanence and multiplicity. (Whereas he resolutely hated Hermes in all his many guises.) Thus Deleuze has a special relationship to both iridescence and infuriation. For every reference to assemblages and rhizomes in Deleuze, he also expresses a commitment to pure immanence. This is why Deleuze can mix the two terms, as he did in a text on Hume and the "real empiricist world." Such a world is "a harlequin world of multicolored patterns and non-totalizable fragments where communication takes place through external relations."<sup>49</sup> The radiance of iridescence and the fragmentation of infuriation thus coexist in Deleuze. The reason for this is that Deleuze was primarily interested in overturning the hermeneutic tradition—what he viewed as the same claptrap of depth and division, of dialectical subterfuge coming to a head in the great mistakes of Descartes, Kant, or Hegel, the progenitors of the modern subject. Pure multiplicity undoes all that tat, but so does pure immanence. Hence both options were philosophically appetizing to Deleuze. Thus pure multiplicity and pure immanence coexist in Deleuze with equal measure: the univocity of being consists of pure multiplicity.<sup>50</sup>

In the classical account, the Furies were born from the bloody testicles of Ouranos. The part of the severed members that fell on the land as drops of blood became the Furies and the Giants,

while the part that fell on the sea washed out into the ocean and flowed back to shore again atop the sea foam, giving life to Aphrodite. Aphrodite is the goddess of the sexual media, that is the genitals (in Greek, the *mēdea* [μήδεα]), yet we may ascribe a very different kind of role to the Furies who, in stalking the gap between individuals and their fate, seem bent on tearing up any sort of media whatsoever. In short, if Aphrodite or Hermes or Iris are media, the Furies are quite literally anti-media.

So the bilateral model of mediation discussed thus far—whether as Spinoza’s Poet and Molyneux’s Seer, or Hermes and Iris, or hermeneutics and iridescence—must be amended with a third term that is quite resistive of the model itself. If the Hermes middle is a narrative and the Iris middle is an arc, it is only possible to say, in very limited terms, that the Furies middle is a *system*. The reason for this is that, while iridescent immanence is also elemental and prehistoric, the Fury middle neuters any attempt to establish a grand arc of history. The Furies run next to the real, but they are never *about* it. They reflect nothing, they reveal nothing, and they most certainly do not let something “shine forth in what it is” as Iris’s phenomenology teaches us. They demonstrate that truth is not inside or even outside the real, but simply alongside it, nipping at its heels. (For this reason the Furies follow Laruelle’s logic, that non-philosophy is “alongside” philosophy but never “of” or “about” it.<sup>51</sup>) The Furies can put the world in flight but, beyond that, they can neither interpret it nor immanently “remain within” it.

To project these ideas across the many centuries, one might say provisionally that the ancient world, the hermeneutic world, is cryptographic, as in the famous saying *physis kryptesthai philei*. The modern baroque or iridescent world is prismatic, separating the white light of the sky into its component rainbow spectrum. But by the middle twentieth century the world became systematic, synthesizing all diverse colors into a global machine. If Hermes is dark metaphysics, and Iris is light metaphysics, then the Furies are nothing at all related, merely a microphysics of links and vectors.

## THE HERESY OF THE SWARM

If both Hermes and Iris remain profoundly theological, the Furies type allows us to conceive of a truly secular, and hence nihilistic, mode of mediation. As a being, the Furies do not exist in any durable sense, like a material object. Instead they exist in a general state of agitation and sensuous energy. As they hound their prey, the Furies exhibit an energy of antagonism, an agitation *against* some target of persecution. Because of this the most useful branches of philosophy are not ontology or aesthetics, neither Iris's immanent being nor Hermes's interpretive journeys. In order to understand the third type of mediation, we must turn to *politics*, that branch of philosophy that deals most directly with force and physical transformation.

Military and social theory have long examined the pure energy of antagonism known as the asymmetrical threat. Its names are many: insurgent, partisan, irregular, riot, crowd, popular rebellion, or guerrilla—these are some of the many synonyms for the Furies and their mode of mediation. The asymmetrical threat carries great force. It encounters the power center not as an equal, but as an unholy monster, seemingly formless and ungovernable.

There are many great thinkers who have explored this mode, from Sun Tzu and Carl von Clausewitz's writing on military theory, to the extension of these ideas in the writings on guerrilla warfare by V. I. Lenin and Mao Tse-tung. Yet I will not catalog and interpret these many writings, nor will I try to commune with them. There will be no dark hermeneutics or luminous ecstasy in the case of the swarm. In deference to the third mode of mediation, I will merely constitute a kind of assemblage and cite a few passages from the very crucial late-modern phase, crucial because of the special relationship that has arisen historically between the Fury mode and the middle to late twentieth century.<sup>52</sup>

- *Robert Taber*—Author of *War of the Flea* on guerrilla insurgencies and their relationship to state power. "The guerrilla fights the

war of the flea, and his military enemy suffers the dog's disadvantages: too much to defend; too small, ubiquitous, and agile an enemy to come to grips with. If the war continues long enough — this is the theory — the dog succumbs to exhaustion and anemia without ever having found anything on which to close his jaws or to rake with his claws."<sup>53</sup>

- *Elias Canetti* — The celebrated novelist who wrote on the animalistic qualities of the infuriated pack (the “crowd”). “The first thing which strikes one about the pack is its unswerving direction; equality is expressed in the fact that all are obsessed by the same goal, the sight of an animal perhaps, which they want to kill.”<sup>54</sup>
- *Guy Brossollet* — The French soldier and military theorist who described a system of “non-battle” arising from within the logic of Cold War nuclear deterrence. A fighting force made up of “pin-pricks,” not “fists,” deployed across a “mesh” of “presence modules” and supported by communication networks that can produce a “series of minor but statistically consistent actions.”<sup>55</sup> The new flexible, network-centric warfare is, in his estimation, “[m]ultiform, maneuverable, [and] omnipresent.”<sup>56</sup>

Any number of additional books and articles exist today that try to describe contemporary media as infuriated, contagious, or antagonistic.<sup>57</sup> Like the web itself, they constitute nodes in a network. Without the methodologies of deep reading or aesthetic appreciation borrowed from hermeneutics and iridescence, we may simply enumerate, scan, or possibly reorganize them. Following Franco Moretti's method of distant reading, the infuriated media become a vast database, and the scholar becomes a counter of entities, a diagrammer of data, or a visualizer of information.<sup>58</sup>

These writings help explain what the Fury mode of meditation looks like today, whether it be rhizomatics, distributed networks, swarming clouds, or impersonal agents. Yet they also help support a much more important claim. Not simply a description of the Furies, such writing demonstrates that, at this moment in history, we are living through a new hegemony in

which one of the three forms has achieved a new negotiated dominance over the other two. The network form has eclipsed all others as the new master signifier. Today it explains all manner of things, from social networks, to neural nets, to network-centric warfare. Indeed it is no coincidence that Deleuze's growing popularity at the end of the twentieth century paralleled the ascension of the new postfordist and networked epistemes such as game theory, cybernetics, ecology, graph theory, etc. These are some of the many fields that have contributed to the dominance of furious media.

Thus for media theory, the following normative claim begins to emerge: hermeneutic interpretation and immanent iridescence are, at the turn of the millennium, gradually withering away; ascending in their place is the infuriation of distributed systems. In other words, and in more concrete terms, we can expect a tendential fall in the efficiency of both images and texts, in both poems and problems, and a marked increase in the efficiency of an entirely different mode of mediation, the system, the machine, the network.

\*

\*\*

The conversation on media and modes of mediation has only barely gotten underway. It is not exhausted by the three middles discussed thus far, not nearly. All three of the avatars discussed here deal with the complexities of excommunication. Hermeneutics deals with the first and most fundamental paradox of communication, for it addresses the way in which media always betray us when they pass beyond our grasp. Like the problem described by Spinoza's Poet, media objects are excommunicated from our own consciousness, and in so doing carry the human mind into foreign and otherwise unknown lands. In the next chapter Thacker will describe this process in terms of a darkness or blind spot that always exists in any instance of communication. Iris's iridescent media deal with a different aspect of excommunication. The problem with Iris is not so much the alien

or the outside, but the immanent relation to the self. As Wark will say later, the problem with Iris is a kind of ecstasy of hypercommunication in which communication becomes impossible precisely at the moment of its own self-consummation. Finally, the Furies interface directly with the paradox of excommunication, for they embody the nonhuman form most completely. Swarms and systems threaten the sanctity of the human more than animals or things or ghosts. They violently reduce mind to matter, disseminating consciousness and causality into a frenzy of discrete, autonomous agents, each with their own micro functions. Where Iris achieves a kind of immanence of the self, the Furies achieve what Deleuze called the material univocity of immanence, that is, a purely material immanence that “speaks in one voice” across the many different multiplicities of being.

Yet even as these three modes of mediation, these three middles, gesture toward the paradoxes of excommunication, none of them reside entirely within the great beyond. If I have opened the door it will be for Thacker and Wark to walk through. Thacker will venture first into the realm of the unseen, recasting media in terms of their own horrible absence. With his dark media, Thacker addresses anti-humanism proper and tries to describe what it would mean to communicate directly with the inaccessible. This will take him to the most remote corners of the communicative utterance, to the haunted, the weird, the horrible, the fantastical, and the mystical. Wark begins and ends his chapter with the swarm. If I have only gestured here at the fundamentally heretical nature of the infuriated swarm, Wark describes a pantheist universe of passions in which heresy emerges as the key constituting force. The excommunicant is not banished in Wark but celebrated as the very antihero of a new kind of society.

But before passing the baton, I will outline one final kind of mediation that has not been adequately addressed thus far. Sontag used the heading “erotics” to label her media of transparency and luminousness. And, as she knew, erotics means love or in-

timacy, not sexual desire per se, as is typically assumed in puritan society.<sup>59</sup> So consider one last, salutatory mode, one that borrows a little bit from all the others.

Aphrodite, whose name means “rising up out of the foam,” is a mixture of desire, lust, and sex. Aphrodite spans two different poles, two different aspects, often typified by Aphrodite *ourania* and Aphrodite *pandēmos*, the one sprung from her father Ouranos and the other disseminated into the pandemonium of the common people:

In the fourth century we find Aphrodite separated into two aspects: higher, celestial love, Aphrodite *Ourania*, and the love of the whole people, Aphrodite *Pandemos*, who is responsible for lower sexual life and in particular for prostitution. Both names of Aphrodite are old and widespread cult epithets, but the original meanings are quite different. The Heavenly One is the Phoenician Queen of Heaven, and *Pandemos* is literally the one who embraces the whole people as the common bond and fellow-feeling necessary for the existence of any state.<sup>60</sup>

*Desire*: from Hermes she gains the mediatory promiscuity of mixing, inseminating and cross-fertilizing; from Iris she gains a somatic immediacy, appearing as surging waves and surging bodies; from the Furies she gains a generic commonality, resulting in non-reproductive sexual desires, a non or pure desire. Aphrodite might be best understood, then, as a kind of pure mediation. She is the mediation of the middle as such—never lost in foreign lands like Hermes, or so ethereal and light like Iris, or horrifyingly chthonic and nonhuman like the Furies. Aphrodite is in the middle of the middle, the governor of the middle.

Perhaps this is why Lucretius evoked *alma Venus* the *Aeneadum genetrix* as his muse to launch *De Rerum Natura*. She is one of the governors of things, and through her “things make their primordial entrance.”<sup>61</sup> She is thus a mediator, as in the Greek *medō* [μέδω], meaning to take care of, protect, rule over, or guard.

“[T]he root *med-* is very important,” recounts Pierre Chantraine, for the root and its derivatives “express the notion of a thought that rules, commands, moderates . . . ‘he who utters the law.’”<sup>62</sup> This is why, in the two homeric hymns devoted to him, Hermes is called *Κυλλήνης μεδέοντα*, meaning the “lord” or “ruler” of Kyllene, his birthplace. And why the gorgon bears the name Medusa, for she is the protectress or guardian. And why “medicine” comes to mean the-one-who-rules, in this case who rules over disease. The rulers are the mediators. They arbitrate and exercise dominion in the middle of a kingdom of relations. The mediator is the one who takes care, who directs or leads with attention to the entities at play.

But Lucretius’s poem is about the atoms of things, the *primordia*, the seeds, the semen of things (*semina rerum*). Is there not, then, some still more primordial linkage between *medō* and *mēdea*? Both Boisacq and Chantraine list two entries for *mēdea*: they are the genitals, but they also refer to one’s thoughts, concerns, and designs.<sup>63</sup> The seeds are the governors and progenitors of the world, but they also engender cares and desires. Here, then, Aphrodite unites both lust and seed, as someone who is solicitous and seductive, who froths up the foam of the waters in successive surges of birth and rebirth. “The foamy surface is birth itself, it is the goddess who is born and who is divine only in being born in this way, on the crest and rim of each wave, and in each of the hollows into which the foam spills and spreads,” writes Jean-Luc Nancy. Aphrodite stands for “the pitching, rolling, and swelling of the waves, movement upon movement, the incessant backwash, the lapping, the wake. . . . Aphrodite is not born: she is birth, emergence into the world, existence.”<sup>64</sup> But why choose between these sources? Desire is both mediator, ruler, and sex. The body and mind, when under the seductive lusts of Aphrodite, are oriented, preoccupied, infatuated, and impassioned.

Part of the Aphrodite story includes an oscillation between the determination and indetermination of sexual mediation.

The masculine and the feminine are born when she, born-from-sea-foam, “rises up” from the waves (Aphrodite *anadyomenē*), inaugurating the bilateral synthesis of sexual reproduction. “It is only after the castration of Ouranos by Kronos and the distance that this creates between the masculine and the feminine, that the sexual act assumed a new character and became truly fertile in producing, from two beings, a third, different from its progenitors.”<sup>65</sup> But “how could Aphrodite divide the sexes?” asks Nancy in his encomium to Aphrodite. “She is merely their apportioning, between one and the other. Aphrodite is one in two, not two in one. Not ‘bisexual’ but one in two sexes, and in such a way that there cannot be one without two (ultimately, there cannot be one at all). No sex is one, unique. Nor is Aphrodite one.”<sup>66</sup> And just as Aphrodite *pandēmos* represents a kind of sexuality common to all—a generic, disseminating sexuality associated across “all people” (*pandēmos*), but also the promiscuities of prostitution and the brothels—she will also eventually recombine and procreate with that other promiscuous mediator, Hermes, into the indeterminate intersex of Hermaphroditus.<sup>67</sup>

Aphrodite is often called *genial*. She is the amiable goddess, good-natured and convivial. But why this word, why *genial*? To be genial is to smile, and Aphrodite is the gay one, the one who likes to smile. But the word genial, like genius and genitals, comes from the root meaning to beget or procreate, to spring from an origin, a sexual origin.<sup>68</sup> So, in being *genial*, is Aphrodite “the smiling one,” or “the one who springs from the sex”?

There is some discussion around a certain passage in Hesiod in which the poet describes Aphrodite as *philommeidea*.

White foam surrounded the immortal flesh [of Ouranos],  
 And in it grew a girl. . . .  
 Her name is Aphrodite among men  
 And gods, because she grew up in the foam [*aphros*],  
 . . .  
 [And she is called] Philommeidea from  
 The genitals, by which she was conceived.

...

From the beginning, both among gods and men,  
 She had this honour and received this power:  
 Fond murmuring of girls, and smiles, and tricks,  
 And sweet delight, and friendliness, and charm.<sup>69</sup>

Hesiod appears to be playing with words here, as Aphrodite's common epithet, *philommeidēs* (lover of smiles, or more colloquially the smiling one), is defined as if it ended with *mēdea* (genitals). Chantraine and others chalk this up to a play on words by Hesiod. However he admits too that there is disagreement over the interpretation of the epithet, and cites, among others, a "bold hypothesis" by A. Heubeck, that "φιλομηδής [*philomēdēs*] was an older form, which in Homer was secondarily altered to be φιλομμειδής [*philommeidēs*]."<sup>70</sup> And therefore the pun in Hesiod may be due to the similarity, and fungibility, between these two meanings, old and new. (In Homer, Aphrodite is not borne from Ouranos's members, but is the offspring of Zeus and Dione; thus for him there is no need to wordsmith *mēdea* into the poem.)

The two words are often collapsed into one by later authors. The epithets are translated differently depending on one's proclivities, from she-who-loves-genitalia (Hesiodic, anatomically explicit), to she-who-loves-smiles (Homeric, useful for more polite company), to she-who-loves-laughter (euphemistic, etymologically imprecise).

But perhaps the two words are neither pun nor bowdlerization. Perhaps they represent a simple equation. For the smile and the sex are, in Aphrodite, very often the same thing. A lover's smile brings arousal, just as lovemaking invokes smiles of pleasure. Somatic bonds join the smile and the sex into a singular, body-wide organ. The smile of sexual desire links back to sexual arousal in the body. So Aphrodite is indeed a kind of genial mediation. Such an observation would not have surprised Plato who structured the *Phaedrus* around a twin theme: not just love and the soul but writing and mediation too, not just Eros but the *hypomnēmata* too.

Neither mouth nor groin reside at the top of the psyche. Nor at the bottom. They reside in the *middle*. The faculty of vision is certainly sidelined during lovemaking (discounting the spectacular or fetishistic variants), as is that of one's active, quotidian consciousness; instead there are skin, mouth, torso, breast, vagina, hand, penis, anus. All these reside in the body, *in the middle* of the body. Perhaps this is the ultimate answer to why the smile and the sex are unified in Aphrodite. As a mediator she is the "lover of smiles" just as she is the "lover of the sex." Indeed it would be difficult to have one without the other. To combine these two—the genitals and the affability of the smile—one might say, simply, the *genial* Aphrodite, or the genial middle. So sex is a middle too, irreducible to the endless elusive promiscuities of Hermes, or the translucent immanence of Iris, or even the propagatory tessellations of the Furies. And in this sense, Aphrodite is, like us, *philomēdēs*, fond of smiles, fondler of media, and lover of the middle.

## NOTES

1. Baruch Spinoza, *Ethics*, scholium to part 4, proposition 39, in *The Collected Works of Spinoza*, vol. 1, trans. Edwin Curley (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1985), 569. Curley notes that the poet was probably Luis de Góngora.

2. "*Hypomnémata* include all artificial memory supports: from prehistoric engraved bone or the Australian *churinga*, to Personal Digital Assistants (PDAs) and MP3 players, by way of biblical writing, the dialogues of Plato, the printing press, photography, etc." Bernard Stiegler and Ars Industrialis, *Réenchanter le monde: La valeur esprit contre le populisme industriel* (Paris: Flammarion, 2006), 37n3.

3. The canonical Greek names are either the Erinyes or the Eumenides. But given the appeal of the Roman name Furies, I have chosen to mix the Roman and Greek nomenclature.

4. See for example Bruno Latour, "Why Has Critique Run Out

of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern,” *Critical Inquiry* 30, no. 2 (Winter 2004): 225–48.

5. “To Hermes” (lines 17–18), *Homeric Hymns*, trans. Martin West (London: Harvard University Press, 2003), 115. One of the more delightful refrains from Hermes is a phrase he repeats: I was born yesterday, I was born yesterday . . .

6. “To Hermes” (lines 290–91), *Homeric Hymns*, trans. West, 137.

7. Jean-Pierre Vernant, *Mythe et pensée chez les Grecs*, vol. 1 (Paris: François Maspero, 1982), 126.

8. “To Hestia” (line 8), *Homeric Hymns*, trans. West, 212.

9. Theocritus, *Idylls and Epigrams*, trans. Daryl Hine (New York: Atheneum, 1982), 88.

10. Lewis Farnell, *The Cults of the Greek States*, vol. 5 (Oxford: Clarendon, 1909), 19–20.

11. *Ibid.*, 26.

12. *Ibid.*

13. Stiegler gives a similar description: “Hermes and Mercury arrive at the point when . . . mnemotechnics allow the writing of the superego. They are the two messengers of interpretation, writing, and telecommunications, that is to say, of telecracy.” Bernard Stiegler, *La télécratie contre la démocratie* (Paris: Flammarion, 2006), 185.

14. Plutarch, *Table-Talk*, IX, question 3, trans. Edwin Minar et al. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1961), 235.

15. Plato, *Phaedrus* (line 275d), trans. R. Hackforth, in *The Collected Dialogues of Plato*, ed. Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1961), 521.

16. Hyginus, “Fabulae 277: First Inventors,” *The Myths of Hyginus*, trans. Mary Grant (Lawrence: University of Kansas, 1960), 178. For related interest see also Plato, *Phaedrus* (line 274d), 520, and Derrida on Thoth and Hermes in Jacques Derrida, *Dissemination*, trans. Barbara Johnson (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1981), 84–94.

17. *The Homeric Hymns*, trans. Charles Boer (Dallas, TX: Spring Publications, 1970), 32.

18. Lewis Farnell, *The Cults of the Greek States*, vol. 5 (Oxford: Clarendon, 1909), 23.

19. “To Hermes” (lines 14–15), *Homeric Hymns*, trans. West, 115.

20. One additional epithet is worth mentioning in this context: *hēgemonios* (the leader, the supreme, the imperial), particularly when paired with the aforementioned *empolaios* (the merchant-protector). Empire, public opinion, and commerce share a special relation, for the mobilization of empire across borders, through diplomacy or commerce, typically relies on a skillful orchestration of public opinion. The three are joined in Hermes. Yet Hermes bears many epithets, and there are still others, including *psychopompos*, the conveyor of souls, and *enagōnios*, the patron of the gymnastic games.

21. Siegfried Zielinski, *Deep Time of the Media*, trans. Gloria Custance (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006), 38.

22. Apollodorus, *The Library*, vol. 1 (book 2, i, 2), trans. James George Frazer (New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1921), 131.

23. “Juno took the eyes and set them in the feathers / Of her own bird, filling the tail of the peacock / With starlike jewels”: Ovid, *Metamorphoses* (book 1, lines 775–77), trans. Stanley Lombardo (New York: Hackett, 2010), 27. The Prado’s “Mercury and Argus” (Peter Paul Rubens, c. 1636–1638) is the most exciting, the most baroque, of Rubens’s several depictions of Argus’s slaying and its aftermath. But more sophisticated and enigmatic is Rubens’s “Juno and Argus” (c. 1609–1611) hanging at the Wallraf-Richartz Museum in Cologne. Here the perpetrator of the crime, Hermes, is not depicted, or at least not directly. Instead Iris appears, with her signature bows and billows in color and cloth. I have tried to make some sense of these two paintings, along with a few others relating to Hermes and Iris, in the essay “The Painted Peacock,” in *And They Were Two in One and One in Two*, ed. Nicola Masciandaro and Eugene Thacker (New York: MagCloud print on demand, 2011), 36–44.

24. Stuart Hall, “Encoding/decoding” in *Culture, Media, Language: Working Papers in Cultural Studies, 1972–79*, ed. Stuart Hall et al. (New York: Routledge, 1992), 128–38.

25. See Langdon Winner, *The Whale and the Reactor* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986).

26. Donna Haraway and Thyrza Nichols Goodeve, *How Like a Leaf: An Interview with Donna Haraway* (New York: Routledge, 1999).

27. See Virgil, *Georgics* (book 1, lines 380–81), trans. H. Rushton Fairclough (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 124.

28. In Genesis, chapter 9, the great arc is a sign of a similar but slightly different sort, for it is the *signum foederis*, the contractual sign, that is, the sign of the covenant between God and Noah, the inaugural covenant signaling the beginning of the second age.

29. It is also important to reference Morpheus, one of the *oneiroi*, who is also strictly speaking a messenger of sorts. He is associated with divination and the bringing of messages through dreams. Morpheus shares a relationship with Iris, and is connected to her in Ovid.

30. Callimachus, “Hymn IV: To Delos” (lines 251–62), *Hymns*, trans. Stanley Lombardo and Diane Rayor (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988), 28.

31. William Gladstone, “The Iris of Homer: And Her Relation to Genesis IX.11–17,” *Contemporary Review* 32 (1878):140–52, p. 140.

32. Adapted from Gladstone, “The Iris of Homer,” 141–42. Gladstone points out that with the Homeric Iris there is a general absence of color epithets, and thus that Iris should be understood as a messenger first and an optical phenomenon second. But this argument is unconvincing given the color-rich way she is described in other texts, and given the fact that the Greek mind did not consider divine forms to be personifications as we like to think of them today—neatly cleaving corporeal body to divine concept—but rather unified, singular presences.

33. Apollonios Rhodios, *The Argonautika* (book 4, lines 770–78), trans. Peter Green (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 171.

34. See Plato, *Cratylus* (line 408b), trans. B. Jowett, in *The Collected Dialogues of Plato*, 444.

35. Martin Heidegger, “Letter on Humanism,” in *Basic Writings*, trans. Frank Capuzzi (New York: Harper Collins, 1977), 234.

36. Susan Sontag, *Against Interpretation, and Other Essays* (New York: Picador, 1966), 13.

37. *Ibid.*, 14.

38. See Bruno Latour, “Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam?”; D. N. Rodowick, “An Elegy for Theory,” *October* 122 (Fall 2007): 91–109; Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, “A Farewell to Interpretation,” in *Materialities of Communication*, ed. Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht and K. Ludwig Pfeiffer (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1994): 389–402; and Michael Hardt, “The Militancy of Theory,” *South Atlantic Quarterly* 110, no. 1 (Winter 2011): 19–35.

39. Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, *Production of Presence: What Meaning Cannot Convey* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004), 2.

40. John Rajchman, evoking the late Deleuze, clarifies this cognitivist trap: “Written in a strange interval before his own death, ‘Immanence . . . a life’ has been regarded as a kind of testament. What is clear is that Deleuze took its ‘last message’ to occur at a time of renewed difficulty and possibility for philosophy. As with Bergson, one needed to again introduce movement into thought rather than trying to find universals of information or communication—in particular into the very image of the brain and contemporary neuroscience. In the place of artificial intelligence, one needed to construct a new picture of the brain as a ‘relatively undifferentiated matter’ into which thinking and art might introduce new connections that don’t preexist them—as it were, the brain as materiality of ‘a life’ yet to be invented, prior and irreducible to consciousness as well as machines.” John Rajchman, “Introduction,” in Gilles Deleuze, *Pure Immanence: Essays on a Life*, trans. Anne Boyman (New York: Zone, 2001), 20.

41. “Our absolute, in effect, is nothing other than an extreme form of chaos, a *hyper-Chaos*, for which nothing is or would seem to be impossible, not even the unthinkable,” writes Meillassoux. “We have succeeded in identifying a primary absolute (Chaos), but contrary to the veracious God, the former would seem to be incapable of guaranteeing the absoluteness of scientific discourse, since, far from guaranteeing order, it guarantees only the possible destruction of every order.” Quentin Meillassoux, *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency*, trans. Ray Brassier (New York: Continuum, 2008), 64.

42. In the opening to *Being and Event*, Badiou himself maps the current methodological landscape slightly differently. He includes another tradition as significant, the logical positivism of the Vienna circle, while omitting Deleuze (in *Being and Event* at least). In addition to positivism, Badiou cites the other two key traditions as first phenomenology, for which Heidegger is the stand-in, and second what Badiou calls a post-Cartesian theory of the subject, essentially a catchall for Marx, Lenin, Freud, Lacan, and all of what is known today as critical theory and post-structuralism. See Alain Badiou, *Being and Event*, trans. Oliver Feltham (London: Continuum, 2005), 1.

43. Paul de Man, *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), 3.

44. Jean-Luc Nancy, "Les Iris" (trans. Leslie Hill), in *Multiple Arts: The Muses II* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2006), 65–66.

45. Jean-Pierre Vernant, "Tensions and Ambiguities in Greek Tragedy," in Jean-Pierre Vernant and Pierre Vidal-Naquet, *Myth and Tragedy in Ancient Greece*, trans. Janet Lloyd (New York: Zone, 1988), 35–36.

46. Pierre Vidal-Naquet, "Hunting and Sacrifice in Aeschylus' Oresteia," in Vernant and Vidal-Naquet, *Myth and Tragedy in Ancient Greece*, 157.

47. For more on what might be called the "web of ruin" see my chapter titled "Networks," in *Critical Terms for Media Studies*, ed. W. J. T. Mitchell and Mark Hansen (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010).

48. Gilles Deleuze, *Pure Immanence: Essays on A Life*, trans. Anne Boyman (New York: Zone, 2001), 94.

49. *Ibid.*, 38.

50. For more on the concept of univocity in Deleuze, see in particular Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, trans. Paul Patton (New York: Athlone, 1994), 39–41, and Gilles Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, trans. Mark Lester (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), 179–80. Alain Badiou's book *Deleuze: The Clamor of Being*, trans. Louise Burchill (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press,

2000), is also an instructive overview and critique of Deleuze's theory of univocity.

51. Laruelle spends a lot of time parsing prepositions like these, determining which words help the non-philosophical project and which inhibit it. See, inter alia, François Laruelle, *Principes de la non-philosophie* (Paris: PUF, 1996).

52. For a deeper exploration of the special relationship between networks and the late-twentieth century, see my own *Protocol: How Control Exists after Decentralization* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2004), and the book co-written by Thacker and me, *The Exploit: A Theory of Networks* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007).

53. Robert Taber, *War of the Flea* (Washington, DC: Potomac Books, 2002), 20.

54. Elias Canetti, *Crowds and Power*, trans. Carol Stewart (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1962), 93.

55. Guy Brossollet, *Essai sur la non-bataille* (Paris: Belin, 1975), 67–78, emphasis removed from original.

56. *Ibid.*, 15.

57. See for example Jussi Parikka, *Digital Contagions: A Media Archaeology of Computer Viruses* (New York: Peter Lang, 2007); Tony D. Sampson, *Virality: Contagion Theory in the Age of Networks* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012); and Michel Serres, *The Parasite*, trans. Lawrence R. Schehr (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007).

58. See Franco Moretti, *Graphs, Maps, Trees: Abstract Models for Literary History* (London: Verso, 2007).

59. Nietzsche has quite pointedly attacked what he viewed as the dubious Christian moral presuppositions maligning all things desirable or erotic. "Christianity has succeeded in transforming Eros and Aphrodite—great powers capable of idealisation—into diabolical kobolds and phantoms by means of the torments it introduces into the consciences of believers whenever they are excited sexually. . . . Must everything that one has to combat, that one has to keep within bounds or on occasion banish totally from one's

mind, always have to be called *evil*! Is it not the way of *common* souls always to think an *enemy* must be *evil*! And ought one to call Eros an enemy? The sexual sensations have this in common with the sensations of sympathy and worship, that one person, by doing what pleases him, gives pleasure to another person—such benevolent arrangements are not to be found so very often in nature! And to calumniate such an arrangement and to ruin it through associating it with a bad conscience!” Friedrich Nietzsche, *Daybreak: Thoughts on the Prejudices of Morality*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 45.

60. Walter Burkert, *Greek Religion*, trans. John Raffan (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985), 155.

61. Jean-Luc Nancy, “Paeon for Aphrodite” (trans. Jonathan Derbyshire), in *Multiple Arts*, 54.

62. Pierre Chantraine, *Dictionnaire étymologique de la langue grecque* (Paris: Éditions Klincksieck, 1974), s.v. μέδω, 675.

63. See Émile Boisacq, *Dictionnaire étymologique de la langue grecque* (Paris: Librairie C. Klincksieck, 1938), and Chantraine, *Dictionnaire étymologique de la langue grecque*.

64. Nancy, “Paeon for Aphrodite,” 52, 53, 59.

65. Jean-Pierre Vernant, “Preface,” in Jean Rudhardt, *Le Rôle d’Éros et d’Aphrodite dans les cosmogonies grecques* (Paris: PUF, 1986), 6. Later in the book, Rudhardt explains in greater detail: “The mutilation of Ouranos most certainly limited the spontaneity and permanence of desire, but the myth tells us also that it did not weaken the powers of love: what desire lost finds itself again in another form, in the goddess that came out of the mutilated genitals. . . . The castration of Ouranos does not abolish sexuality, it defines the conditions of how it is exercised” (17).

66. Nancy, “Paeon for Aphrodite,” 54. Nancy’s language here echos Irigaray’s mediations on a sex *qui n’en est pas un*. See Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One*, trans. Catherine Porter (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985).

67. Deleuze, in his “Three Women of Masoch,” describes Aphrodite as a courtesan who dissolves into pansexuality: “Her life, in her

own words, is dedicated to love or beauty; she lives for the moment. She is sensual; she loves whoever attracts her and gives herself accordingly. She believes in the independence of woman and in the fleeting nature of love; for her the sexes are equal: she is hermaphrodite.” Gilles Deleuze and Leopold von Sacher-Masoch, *Masochism: Coldness and Cruelty & Venus in Furs*, trans. Jean McNeil (New York: Zone, 1989), 48.

68. Genial may refer to the chin or jawline, from the Greek *genus*, the part of the face animated by the smile (if not also the animation of a physiognomic “kind”), but it also refers to the nuptial bed and hence to fertility and marriage. Derrida has written on what he calls “the line of words belonging to the same family in *g*,” words like generation, genitalia, genesis, genealogy, genre, gender, genial, or genius. For a particular emphasis on genre theory in literature including a discussion of Maurice Blanchot, see Jacques Derrida, “The Law of Genre,” trans. Avital Ronell, *Critical Inquiry* 7, no. 1 (Autumn, 1980): 55–81. For the question of genius (on the occasion of Hélène Cixous’s archive being acquired by the Bibliothèque Nationale de France), see Jacques Derrida, *Geneses, Genealogies, Genres, and Genius: The Secrets of the Archive*, trans. Beverley Bie Brahic (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006). See also the chapter on “Genius” in Giorgio Agamben, *Profanations*, trans. Jeff Fort (New York: Zone, 2007). For a rather different perspective see Michel Serres’s discussion of multiplicity in *Genesis*, trans. Genevieve James and James Nielson (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997).

69. Hesiod, *Theogony* (lines 197–206), trans. Dorothea Wender (New York: Penguin, 1973), 29, translation altered.

70. Chantraine, *Dictionnaire étymologique de la langue grecque*, s.v. μειδιάω, 677.