Toward a Politics of Compassion

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Toward a Politics of Compassion

"走向同情的政治"：特邀编辑介绍与概述

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Title: Guest Editor's Introduction and Overview

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2023 年 1 月，塞缪尔·韦伯应我和上海大学之邀，在线上作了三场系列讲座。讲座是 2022 年 10 月在巴黎初步构思的，当时的想法是讲座内容可以在某种程度上继续他在 2022 年刚出版的新书《先存条件：重述瘟疫》(*Preexisting Conditions：Recounting the Plague*，区域图书出版社) 中对新冠疫情经历的思考，同时考虑到近两年国内文学和批评理论界的部分同行对他在 2021 年出版的著作《独异性：政治和诗学》(*Singularity：Politics and Poetics*，明尼苏达大学出版社) 中的"独异性"概念也甚为关注，因此我们商定讲座的内容将综合这两部近作中的一些重要概念和文献，同时保持其开放性，自然地融入韦伯目前正在思考和撰写的新的主题。

韦伯为该系列讲座提供了一个总标题："同情的阅读"(Reading as Compassion)。这个题目立刻就吸引了我，因为我觉得这正是我们在经历了近三年的疫情之后亟须交流的一种感情。到 2023 年 1 月讲座正式开始的时候，从大城市到农村，中国各地都陆续达到了感染高峰。于是，讲座的题目变得更加应景了：讲座中的一些内容和现实中正在经历的事件不谋而合，似乎一方面在呼吁对受疫情影响的人们赋予更多的同情，另一方面也在对全人类的生存境遇进行整体的反思。

什么是"同情的阅读"？这个标题的含义，随着三场讲座在两周内的展开慢慢清晰起来。"阅读"首先指的当然是阅读行为，其对象包括但不限于书籍、政治话语、媒体或社交网络所提供的信息，但它的定义与其说由阅读的对象所决定，还不如说由一种态度来界定。这种态度是对语言本身的关注，德国文学评论家维尔纳·哈马赫(Werner Hamacher)称之为"语言的不断增殖"现象。阅读是一种享受，但也是一项任务，即把语言当作一种缓慢指向意义的过程来感受和理解，无论它所处的语境是文学、政治还是社会或文化。至于"同情"，我们首先可以从德里达晚期为动物权利辩护的意义上去理解：它呼吁恻隐之心，呼吁站到动物以及沦落到人-动物极限状态的赤贫生命这一边去感受世界的权利和立场。在《十日谈》里，薄伽丘则赋予了"同情"另一层含义。作者将一种自传式的经验，即他依靠友人的安慰及与他们愉快的对话才得以从爱情的痛苦中幸存下来这一经历，转化为对文学共同体的建构。薄伽丘决定写

《十日谈》不仅是为了回报他从朋友那里得到的帮助,同时还希望将同情心置于他与听众和读者关系的核心位置。《十日谈》里集体轮流叙事的方式,旨在安抚 1349 年致命的大瘟疫给佛罗伦萨人民带来的悲伤和痛苦。

韦伯用英语作了三场讲座。因为现场没有翻译,也因为他讲座所涉及的文献广博而错综,我在每场讲座结束之后都用中文作了一个"概述"。这些概述意在总结讲座内容,并为他详细分析的、一些不一定人尽皆知的西方文学和哲学作品提供背景信息。同时,它们还试图将他讲座中不同部分之间暗藏着的关系进一步明朗化。当然不可避免地,我代入了我自己的视角和阐释。我希望我的解读能够突出每场讲座的一些要点,而不削弱其原有的敏锐性和丰富性。

讲座一:"走向同情的政治"

韦伯在第一讲中首先描述了新冠疫情的背景及 2020 年以来我们在生活中经历的一些不确定性。他注意到,在世界上许多地方,人们都可以感受到民众对其政府的不满情绪越来越强烈。但最引人注目的现象,也许是社会各方面的财富更加集中在一小部分人手里:"至少在最近的记忆中,所谓'发达的西方'社会比以往任何时候都更成为或已经成为'富豪统治的国家',对大众的福利越来越漠不关心。"虽然这不是什么新鲜事,但它在当前采取的方式已使社会最基本的生存和运作受到了威胁。随后,韦伯介绍了他讲座的主要内容,即对待瘟疫的两套理想和价值观之间的斗争:"一方面是独立自主的个人,另一方面是集体的相互依存。"他通过重访两个关于瘟疫的经典叙述来阐述这一观点:第一个是公元前 430 年左右在雅典爆发的瘟疫,适逢伯罗奔尼撒战争开战的第二年,雅典人被斯巴达人围困着,修昔底德在他的《伯罗奔尼撒战争史》中见证并讨论了当时的情景;第二个是在 14 世纪中叶(1349 年)肆虐佛罗伦萨的黑死病,它造就了欧洲文学历史上一部伟大的叙事作品——薄伽丘的《十日谈》。

讲座的第二部分专门讨论了修昔底德对瘟疫和战争的叙述。我们知道,第一次伯罗奔尼撒战争(公元前 431—421 年)以雅典人的失败告终。在雅典暴发的瘟疫夺去了雅典领导人伯里克利,以及其他大约十万名雅典人的生命。但在某种程度上,伯里克利应该为此负责,因为是他下令在瘟疫期间继续军事行动,将雅典文化的"勇气"和"美德"置于了个人的生命安全之上。伯里克利在阵亡将士的葬礼演说中,称赞雅典人具有"自愿迎接危险"和"敢于冒险并预估风险"的独特能力。然而,事实证明,瘟疫的危险性超乎了他们的想象。伯里克利的敌人——伯罗奔尼撒人,在他们的国王阿基达摩斯二世的领导下,采取了不同的行动。因为害怕感染,他们比原计划提前离开了阿提卡。换句话说,伯罗奔尼撒人比雅典人更加灵活,他们毫不犹豫地改变了计划,也敢于承认自己对瘟疫的恐惧。在这里形成对比的是雅典人的傲慢(hubris)和伯罗奔尼撒人的谨慎(prudence),前者忽略了思考需要的时间和空间,仓促地作出判断和行动,而后者恰恰保留了语言、思考和行动之间时间和空间所起到的作用。

在第三部分,韦伯分析了另一种叙述瘟疫的经典模式:薄伽丘的《十日谈》。他首先指出,《十日谈》的叙述框架很重要,这个写于 14 世纪中叶(1349—1353 年)的文本收集了一百个短小的故事,这些故事由七个女人和三个男人讲述了十天十夜。他们从佛罗伦萨撤离到了郊外的山上,以躲避城市里将夺走一半人生命的黑死病。这群人在离开佛罗伦萨之前和从乡村别墅回来之后选择的聚集地,叫作新圣母玛利亚教堂(Chunch of Santa Maria Novella)。Novella 这个词在这里既指新事物,也指短篇小说的形式。也许,我们可以把新圣母玛利亚教堂看作混乱城市和田园乡村之间的一个中间地带,或者把它象征性地视为城市中正在发生的瘟疫和短篇故事里叙述的超出"当前"时空的事件之间的纽带。

韦伯感兴趣的是在佛罗伦萨发生的瘟疫与《十日谈》中叙事之间的间接关系。《十日谈》所讲的一百个小故事没有叙述瘟疫本身,并且每个人选讲的故事也都是根据当天给出的主题即兴发挥的内容:有些是关于人类的恶习的,另一些是关于悲剧性的爱情的,还有一些关于诡计、欺骗,等等。佛罗伦萨的黑死病和这些故事之间究竟有什么关系呢? 换个问法:为什么薄伽丘觉得有必要用瘟疫作为这些故事的框架? 韦伯认为,薄伽丘在序言对女性读者的致辞中流露出来的"同情心"指明了一种可能的态度。但

是,要解释什么是"同情心",他必须先介绍他的"摩擦性叙述"(frictional narration)的概念①。

在讲座中,韦伯将摩擦性叙述定义为对社会和文化"既存状态"的移位性影射。具体地说,它指的是这样一个事实:在《十日谈》里,词语的传统意义,尤其是基督教的救赎希望,仍以潜在的方式活跃着,但它将会以一种扭曲的、"新颖的"(novel)方式重新出现。韦伯举的例子是《十日谈》里由潘菲洛(Panfilo)叙述的第一个故事。这是一个关于塞帕雷洛爵士(Ser Cepparello)的故事,这个人被描述为"有史以来最糟糕的人",但他足够聪明,在临终前成功地欺骗了前来接受他忏悔的修士。在他死后,他被奉为圣人,连名字也被改成了带有宗教意味的圣-塞帕雷托(Saint Ciappelletto)。我们可以说,这个小故事是一个"回到上帝身边"的故事,它在上帝的恩典、仁慈和宽容中找到圆满的结局。但韦伯指出,故事并没有就此结束,它是在潘菲洛的一句奇怪的话中终结的,这句话敦促他的听众"赞美他(上帝)的名字,(因为)它是我们的原初,并敬畏他(上帝),在我们需要的时候向他推许自己,因为我们确信我们会被听到"。韦伯进一步指出,这句话也并不是文本的最后话语。因为潘菲洛在以"在我们需要的时候……我们会被听到"这个安慰性断言结束他的故事后,又在叙述中增加了一个短句,而这个短句在整个《十日谈》中完全是单独存在的:"*Et qui si tacque*",这句拉丁语可以翻译为"到这里他就不说话了",或者更字面的翻译为"到这里讲述停止了"。叙述中的这一中断,使我们对最确定的期待产生了疑问,即上面提到的,对被(上帝)听到和被拯救的期待。值得注意的是,潘菲洛并没有揭示这句话的含义。他"咬住舌头不说",就像本雅明定义的"高度政治化的写作风格"一样:"通向那被拒绝的词"(Hinzuführen auf das dem Wort versagte)。潘菲洛阻止自己说出言不可达的东西,让他的听众自己去判断人类是否真的能被(在上者)"听到"。而根据韦伯对薄伽丘的解释,正是这个"被拒绝"的词或这种言不可达的领会为可能的"同情"提供了基础,因为在这种令人不安的缄默中,人类可以将这个故事与他们自己所需要的"被倾听"的欲望联系起来,尤其在他们身处瘟疫,经历各种灾难和个人隐痛的时候。

在讲座的最后部分,韦伯借助本雅明和德里达的著作来进一步思考同情的概念。他首先讨论了本雅明对当时被认为是"有效政治话语"的拒绝,这种话语将单个单词串联成短句(Wort-an-Wort-Reihen),从而产生一种"扩张性倾向",并排除一切不可被言说的东西。本雅明把这类语言称为"澄澈"的语言,因为它创造了一种"绝对意义",使语言和行动都成为工具。本雅明倡导的是一个相反的模式,在他的《讲故事的人》一文中进行了阐述。这是一种不消除单词和单词之间的空间,即"差异性关系"的叙述艺术。它通常是"纯粹描述性"的,即保留词语的复杂性和模糊性,唤起了一些联想和意义,却不一定给出答案。如果说伪有效的政治话语旨在揭示"绝对"的意义,那么本雅明所说的"讲故事"是一个制造意义的工作,它是一个持续不断且永远无法完成的过程。

这个否认词语可以达到全权意义的过程与韦伯所说的"同情的政治"(Politics of Compassion)有何关联呢?或许,德里达的遗作《我之所以就是个动物》(*L'animal que donc je suis*,也可以译成《我之所以就追随这个动物》)可以在两者间搭建一座桥梁。韦伯指出,德里达对动物的"感觉"或"感情"的强调,可以在90年代末他对"同情的政治"的反思这一更大的背景下去理解。和年轻的本雅明一样,德里达也认为战争涉及语言。在他看来,过去的两个世纪不仅是战争的世纪,也是西方通过资本和技术,通过"扩张""军国主义"倾向,将其意识形态确立为一种普遍的"绝对正当",从而对其他文化进行急速普遍化(或"人类学化")的历史时期。从这个意义上说,德里达在《我之所以就是个动物》这个标题中玩的文字游戏力争解构一种政治上具有侵略性的"绝对正当",从而重新引入了"存在于文字中心地位的异质性差异"②。它同时也强调了可以被无限分割的、脆弱的、终有一死的普通生命的独异性,这些生命一直在被以人类美好前景为名义的战争否定着。将微小的独异性联系起来的,不是一个具有普遍性的专有名词(韦伯在别处称之为"一神认同范式"),而是不同性质的、多样化的情感体验,从焦虑和具有攻击性,到快乐和满怀希望,当然最重要的还是同情(compassion),因为compassion一词的前缀"com-"最好地表述了一种"感受自己犹如他人"的情感。

注释[Notes]

① 《先存条件：重述瘟疫》中的第四章（关于薄伽丘的章节）详细讨论了"摩擦性叙述"。*Preexisting Conditions：Recounting the Plague*，New York：Zone books，2022，pp. 71 - 92.

② 我们将在第三个讲座中具体讨论德里达的一些新造词和文字游戏，比如 animot（动物词、动物）和 je suis（我是、我跟随）。

Guest Editor's Introduction

In January 2023, Professor Samuel Weber delivered a series of three lectures online at my invitation on behalf of Shanghai University. When we first conceived these lectures in Paris, the idea was to continue, somewhat peripherally, his reflections on the experience of the Covid - 19 pandemic assembled in a newly published book entitled *Preexisiting Conditions: Recounting the Plague* (New York: Zone Books, 2022). In parallel to this thought was the keen interest that the notion of singularity, developed in his previous book, *Singularity: Politics and Poetics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2021), has recently generated in certain academic circles of literary and critical theory in China. We therefore agreed that the themes of the lectures would combine a number of important issues in these two recent works while remaining open-ended, allowing current as well as future projects to settle in as they develop.

Professor Weber proposed an overarching title, "Reading as Compassion," for the lecture series. The title immediately appealed to me as I felt it was exactly what we needed after having lived with the pandemic for almost three years. By the time the lectures were delivered, China was swept by a violent outbreak of Omicron, spreading from big cities to rural areas. The title became thus all the more pertinent, as the reality coincided with some of the content in the lectures, calling for more sympathy toward the vulnerable population affected by the pandemic and more reflection on the survival of the human species in general.

The meaning of the title, "Reading as Compassion," would only gradually unfold as the lectures were delivered at an intermittent pace, in the space of two weeks. "Reading" here refers first, of course, to the act of reading — of books, political discourses, information made visible by media outlets or social networks, but it is perhaps defined less by the object of the act of reading than by an attitude of attention paid to the language itself, to what the German literary critic and philosopher Werner Hamacher calls the "perpetual multiplication of languages." Reading is an enjoyment but also a task to feel and understand language as a slow signifying process, whether the context is literary, political, or social. As for "compassion," it can first be understood in the Derridean sense of appeal for pity, for the right and duty to stand *alongside* animals as well as the human beings reduced to a limit human-animal condition. Boccaccio's *Decameron* gives another dimension to the word "compassion." It transforms an autobiographical experience (Boccaccio survived his suffering of love affairs thanks to the pleasant conversation and consolation he received from his friends) into the building of a literary community. Not only is his decision to write the *Decameron* an attempt to repay this debt he received from his friends, but he also places compassion at the heart of his relationship to his listeners and readers. His stories, in the form of collective narrations, were aimed at appeasing the sadness and suffering that the deadly plague had brought to Florence in 1349.

Because Professor Weber's lectures were given in English without translation, and because his references were ample, erudite and interwoven, I deemed it necessary to give an "overview" in Chinese at the end of each lecture. These overviews meant to summarize the lectures and provide extra background information on some of the works he analyzed in details. They also attempted to make hidden links of different parts of his

lectures more explicit. Inevitably, I brought in my own perspective and interpretations. I hope that my readings can contribute to highlight some of the main points of each lecture without reducing any of its original richness.

Overview of Lecture 1: *Toward a Politics of Compassion*

Professor Weber starts the first lecture by giving a description of the Covid－19 pandemic and some uncertainty in our experience in living it. He contends that in many parts of the world, a growing disaffection of the population with regard to their government can be felt. Perhaps the most noticeable phenomenon linked to this pandemic is the growing control of wealth in a small group of people in all aspects of society: "More than ever in recent memory at least, 'developed Western' societies are becoming or have become 'plutocracies,' with increasing indifference to the general welfare." Although this is nothing new, it is taking forms that call into question the very conditions that enable societies to survive and function. Professor Weber then introduces the main content of his lecture, which is the struggle between two sets of ideals and values that deal with the plague: "that of the autonomous individual on the one hand, and that of collective interdependence on the other." He does so by examining two classical accounts of the plague: the first is the one that struck Athens in 430 BC, while the city was under siege by Sparta during the second year of the Peloponnesian War, and which is witnessed and recounted by Thucydides in his *History of the Peloponnesian War*; the second is the Black Death that ravaged Florence in the middle of the 14th century (1349) and that gave rise to one of the masterpieces of narrative literature, Boccaccio's *Decameron*.

The second part of the lecture is devoted to Thucydides' description and discussion of the plague. We know that the first Peloponnesian War (431－421BC) ended with the defeat of the Athenians. The plague that broke out in Athens was bad enough to take the life of Pericles, the leader of Athens, along with some 100,000 other Athenians. But in a way Pericles "asked" for it because it was him who ordered to continue military operations during the plague, putting the "courage" and "virtue" of the Athenian culture above the safety of individual lives. Pericles lauded the Athenians for their unique ability to "meet danger voluntarily" and to "take risks and estimate them beforehand;" however, the danger of the plague turned out to be incalculable for the human mind. The Peloponnesians, under the leadership of their King Archidamus, on the other hand, acted differently. They left Attica earlier than they had intended because they were afraid of the infection. In other words, the Peloponnesians proved to be more flexible; they did not hesitate to change their plans and they also acknowledged that they were fearful of the plague. What is put into contrast here is the Athenian hubris and the spartan *prudence*: the former eliminated the time and space for reflection, and rushed to judgement and action, whereas the latter tried precisely not to reduce the temporal and spatial gap between language, thought and action.

In the third part, Professor Weber analyzes another classical model of recounting the plague: Boccaccio's *Decameron*. He first points out that the frame of the story is important: written in the middle of the 14th century (1349－1353), the text presents a hundred little stories told over ten days and nights by seven women and three men, who have retreated in the hills outside Florence to flee the plague that will kill almost half of its population. The place that the group chose to gather before they left Florence and after they returned from the rural villa is called the Church of Santa Maria Novella. The word "Novella" here signifies both something new and the short story form, *novella*. The Church of Santa Maria Novella can therefore be conceived as an intermediate place between the chaotic city and the idyllic countryside, as well as a symbolic link between the plague happening in the city and events narrated in the short stories, which are outside the "present" time and

space.

Professor Weber is interested in the oblique relation between the plague that was occurring in Florence and the storytelling in the *Decameron*, which does not recount the plague as such, but short stories each person chooses to tell based on the themes given on the day: some on human vices, others on tragic love, yet others on trickery, deceit, etc. What is the relation between the Black Death and these stories, or, to ask it differently, why does Boccaccio feel the necessity to use the plague as the frame for these "novellas"? Professor Weber suggests that "compassion" in Boccaccio's address to his female readers in the beginning of the *Decameron* might indicate a possible response. But, in order to explain what he means by compassion, Professor Weber first needs to introduce what he calls the "frictional" narration[1]. Here in the lecture, frictional narration is defined as a *displaced* allusion to the social and cultural "pre-conditions"; more precisely, it refers to the fact that the conventional meaning of words prior to their use in the *Decameron*, especially the Christian hope of salvation, remains active, but that its re-inscription in the *Decameron* is somewhat twisted, displaced, recounted in a "novel" manner. The example he gives is the first story, which was recounted by Panfilo. It is the story of "Ser Cepparello," who is described as probably the "worst man who had ever been born," but who is smart enough to sufficiently deceive a friar who has come to take his confession on his deathbed, so that after his death he is considered to be a saintly character and was indeed known then as "Saint Ciappelletto." We can say that the story ends on a happy note of "returning to God," to his Grace, his kindness, his tolerance. But Professor Weber points out the story does not end here; it ends on a strange sentence of Panfilo urging his listeners "to praise His name, which is what we began with, and venerate Him, commending ourselves to Him in our need, *in the certain knowledge that we will be heard.*" Furthermore, these last words of the first story of the *Decameron* are not the last words of the meta-narrative that frames the text. For after Panfilo has finished his tale with the comforting assertion that "in our need (...) we will be heard," the narrative adds one short sentence, which stands entirely alone in the entire *Decameron*: "*Et qui si tacque,*" which can be translated as "And here he stopped speaking," or even more literally, "And here speaking stopped." This interruption of the narrative calls into question the most sure expectation, which is *being heard* and *being saved*, but Panfilo does not reveal the meaning of this sentence. He "bit his tongue," in the same fashion as what Benjamin defines as the "highly political style of writing": "To lead up to that which is denied the word" (*Hinzuführen auf das dem Wort versagte*). Panfilo stops himself "from speaking what could not be spoken," leaving his listeners to decide if humans can indeed be "heard." It is however this word "denied," according to Professor Weber interpretating Boccaccio, that provides the basis for a possible "compassion," for it is in this disturbing silence that human beings can relate the story to their own need for "being heard," especially in the times of natural catastrophes such as the plague.

In the last part of this lecture, Professor Weber resorts to Benjamin's and Derrida's writings to further reflect on the idea of compassion. He first discusses Benjamin's rejection of what was then considered a dominant notion of politically effective discourse, which is based on a "*Wort-an-Wort-Reihen*" (chain of individual words in sentence) that produces "expansive tendency" and eliminates the unsayable. Benjamin calls this type of language "crystalline" because it creates an "absolute meaning" that instrumentalizes both the language and action. The opposite model, the one that he advocates, is discussed in his article "The Storyteller." It is an art of recounting that does not eliminate the space in between words, the space of "differential relationality.' Often "purely descriptive," it leaves room for complexity and ambiguity of words, evoking something without necessarily giving an answer. If the pseudo effective political discourse imposes "absolute" meaning, the modest storytelling in the Benjaminian sense is the work of significance, which is an ongoing and never completable process.

How does this complex process, which denies the full meaning of words, relate to what Professor Weber calls the "politics of compassion"? Perhaps Derrida's posthumous book, *The Animal That Therefore I Am* (*Follow*) (*L'animal que donc je suis*) can provide a bridge between the two. Professor Weber points out that Derrida's emphasis on the "feeling" for or empathy with animals can be viewed in the larger context of the philosopher's reflections on the "politics of compassion" at the end the 1990s. Like the young Benjamin, Derrida also sees war as involving language, and the past two centuries are not only centuries of war, but also a historical period in which the West inflicts a precipitous universalization (or "anthropologization") onto other cultures, via the capital and technology, but also via an "expansive," "militaristic" tendency to establish its ideology as a generalized "absolute proper." In this sense, Derrida's wordplay in the title *The Animal That Therefore I Am* (*Follow*)[2] deconstructs the aggressive political "absolute proper" and reintroduces a "heterogeneous divergence at the heart of words." It also puts an emphasis on the differential singularity of the "dividual," vulnerable, mortal lives that have constantly been denied by the war in the name of species. What links the differential singularity, however, is not a generalizing proper name (what Professor Weber has called elsewhere the "Mono-theological paradigm"), but heterogenous affective experience ranging from anxiety and aggressivity to joy and hope, and above all, compassion.

[**Notes**]

① The concept of "frictional narration" is discussed in detail in the chapter four (the chapter on Boccaccio) of *Preexisting Conditions: Recounting the Plague* (New York: Zone Books, 2022).

② We will come back to discuss some of Derrida's neologisms and wordplay, such as "animot" and "je suis" (meaning both "I am" and "I follow") in the third lecture.

（责任编辑：冯 伟）

Toward a Politics of Compassion^①

Samuel Weber

Abstract: The feelings of isolation and uncertainty experienced during the Covid－19 pandemic may refer us back to two historical accounts of the plague: the ancient one in Athens described and discussed by Thucydides in his *History of the Peloponnesian War*; and the Black Death that ravaged Florence in 1349, giving rise to Boccaccio's masterpiece, *The Decameron*. In them, a political model of hasty decision and discourse (in terms of judgement and action) is contrasted with a literary model that valorizes the working of time and space in the reflection of events. Benjamin's critique of the "expansive tendency" in pseudo effective political discourse and Derrida's emphasis on the "feeling" *for* and *with* the animals provide a double theoretical ground for further understanding Boccaccio's "frictional" storytelling, setting the affective and the singular experience at the heart of what can be called a "politics of compassion."

Keywords: plague, frictionality, compassion, *dem Wort Versagte*

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标　题:走向同情的政治

摘　要:在新冠疫情期间所经历的孤单感和不确定性使我们回想起两个关于瘟疫的历史叙述:修昔底德在他的《伯罗奔尼撒战争史》中关于古代雅典瘟疫的描绘,以及薄伽丘在他的杰作《十日谈》中提到的引发此书写作的背景,即 1349 年席卷佛罗伦萨的黑死病。在这两种叙说中,一种由仓促的决定和自信的话语构成的政治模式与一种文学模式形成了对比,这种文学模式重视时间和空间在对事件的判断中所起的作用。本雅明对伪有效政治话语中的"扩张性倾向"的批判,以及德里达对动物的"感觉"的强调,为进一步理解薄伽丘的"摩擦"叙事提供了双重理论基础,并将情感和独异体验置于"同情的政治"的核心地位。

关键词:瘟疫; 摩擦性; 同情; 言不可达

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My idea of a matter-of-fact and yet highly political style of writing is: To lead up to that which is denied the word.

(Mein Begriff sachlichen und zugleich hoch politischen Stils und Schreibens ist: Hinzuführen auf das dem Wort versagte)

Walter Benjamin, "Letter to Martin Buber," 1917

It is a banality and a truism, and yet perhaps still necessary to recall that to reflect on the time to come requires reflection on the time that has passed and that continues to impact the time we are living through today. This is particularly true concerning the experiences most of us have had with Covid－19. Historically considered, these experiences, however varied, are very different from the ones that characterize previous encounters with pestilences, particularly on a worldwide scale. But it is precisely such differences that can help us to bring what is new in our recent experience of the current plague better into focus, and thus in helping us anticipate how to prepare for the future.

The first and most obvious difference has to do with the intensity of the affliction. Previous plagues tended to be much more quickly lethal than has been the case with Covid－19. I use the word "tended" here advisedly, because I will not be able to consider all previous plagues but in fact only one or two at most, which have given rise to remarkable written accounts. I am thinking first of the plague that visited Athens around 430 BCE, and which is described and discussed by Thucydides in his *History of the Peloponnesian War*; and second, of the plague that ravaged Florence in the middle of the 14ᵗʰ century (1349) and that gave rise to one of the great works of narrative literature, Boccaccio's *Decameron*. In both of these instances, the plague killed its victims rapidly and there was little anyone could do about it.

In the case of Covid－19, the working of the virus was more subtle: it did not kill immediately, nor did it kill everyone who suffered from it. There was a latency period, during which time the person afflicted could infect others without necessarily developing any symptoms. This, together with contemporary means of transportation in a globally networked world, guaranteed that the epidemic would quickly become a pandemic, something that did not happen with the same rapidity in the case of previous plagues. Also, the total lack of knowledge that Thucydides describes as rendering helpless the efforts of physicians to control or heal the illness did not obtain in the case of Covid－19. Although the specific SARS virus that causes Covid－19 was previously unknown, the "family" to which it belongs was not, and this, together with modern technologies such as genetic sequencing, allowed vaccines to be developed within less than a year, with a speed and efficacity that had hitherto been undreamed of. Nevertheless, by this time the virus had spread worldwide, and this has allowed for mutations to occur that may or may not question the effectiveness of existing vaccines to prevent or control the illness. The delayed-action aspect of Covid－19 is also manifest in what is now known as "long Covid" — the long and still largely unknown after-effects of this infection, the intensity or gravity of which may or may not be related to the severity of the symptoms previously manifest. Finally, the long-term effects of the pandemic on economic and social activity add to the uncertainty. The "recovery" much vaunted at the time of this writing can hardly obscure the ravages that the two previous years have produced on the economy: shuttered storefronts give mute testimony to what may be a long-lasting economic contraction of retailing, which, even before the onset of the pandemic, saw the internet mammoth Amazon supplanting large and small department stores. Attempts to control the circulation of the virus accentuate the already substantial loss of confidence in established governmental institutions that has accompanied the development of finance capitalism over the past decades, producing economic inequality of the likes not seen since the early 1930s. In the public health sector, Government spending so far has largely gone to short-term solutions rather than toward addressing long-term structural deficiencies that have been exposed by the effects of the pandemic (Baker and Ivory). The direct effects produced by Covid－19 thus have to be considered against the background of the growing disaffection of ever larger segments of the population with regard to constituted authorities, democratic or other. Increasing political polarization accompanied by a growing tendency to tolerate or practice violence is, in the United States at least, raised to new heights by the winner-take-all mentality that is inscribed in the two-party electoral system and that is reinforced by the prestige accorded professional sports. But perhaps the

most powerful factor in the spread of this mentality is the growing control of wealth over all aspects of society, from the electoral system to university education and research. More than ever in recent memory at least, "developed Western" societies are becoming or have become "plutocracies," with increasing indifference to the general welfare. This is nothing new, but it is taking forms that call into question the very conditions that enable societies to survive and function. It is nothing new because what is ultimately at stake is the struggle between two classical ideals and values: that of the autonomous individual on the one hand, and that of collective interdependence on the other, with the weight shifting radically in favor of the former. This shift is not just compatible with populism and critique of "elites" — it thrives on it. If we are called upon today in this conference to reflect not just on "living with Covid" but on what this implies for the future, we must, I submit, reflect on the long tradition that privileges private interest over public welfare, even while proclaiming a convergence of the two. I propose therefore to review very briefly two classical accounts of the experience of plagues, in the hope that they might help us to envisage a future that might provide contract some of the self-destructive tendencies that increasingly dominate the world today.

I. Thucydides

In his *History of the Peloponnesian War*, Thucydides describes the havoc wreaked by the plague that broke out in Athens around 430 BCE and of which himself was a victim, although he survived. As terrible as it was, this plague was not as lethal as the Bubonic Plague of the European middle-ages: the consensus today is that it was probably typhus ("The Plague of Athens"). It was however bad enough to take the life of the leader of Athens, Pericles, along with some 100,000 other Athenians. In part it was Pericles' preparation for the war with the Spartans that contributed to the destructive force of the epidemic: he had ordered the rural population to relocate within the city walls in order to better protect them. The resulting population density however promoted the spread of the epidemic. In view of the urbanization of populations that has taken place over the past few centuries, similar conditions prevail today, except now on a worldwide scale. Here there is surely one important lesson for the future, although as always, the learning of such lessons will mean little if the existing predominance of private, short-range interest over shared longer-term welfare is not radically altered.

To return to Thucydides: another less tangible factor was perhaps no less devastating in the effects caused by the plague. It was overconfidence, or what the Greeks called *hubris*. The state of mind of the Athenians made it difficult for them to respond effectively to the pandemic. At first, Thucydides recounts, the Athenians believed that "the Peloponnesians had poisoned the wells" (2:48) as part of their war effort. In short, then as now, the first response to danger was and is to seek a scapegoat, a culprit. It is also the response of King Oedipus to the plague in Sophocles' play, where it turns out to be deeply destructive. But it is also deeply *instructive*: Oedipus fails to imagine "internal" causes of and remedies for the epidemic ravaging Thebes. He seeks to find the cause in others, rather than in himself. The Athenians start out by doing the same. Gradually however they come to realize that in this particular situation it was not the enemy who was to blame. But this discovery in no way leads them to critically examine their own attitudes and traditions. In his first funeral oration, Pericles lauds the Athenians for their unique ability to "meet danger voluntarily" and to "take risks and estimate them beforehand" (2: 39 − 40). Following military setbacks and the devastation wrought by the plague, Pericles is subsequently forced to acknowledge how little prepared the Athenians were to meet a danger that revealed itself to be "something quite different from ordinary diseases." Such singularity of the plague is especially terrifying to the Athenians, since it calls into question precisely what they thought they could do: namely, to "take risks and estimate them beforehand." The Athenians are all the more disarmed by the

plague, which is "quite different" from anything they had known, for their having believed that they could deal with anything the future might bring. They find themselves unable "to reflect on the time to come" precisely to the extent that they had previously believed themselves fully capable of doing just that.

Thucydides, who was not just a historian but also a writer, was sensitive to the way in which language participated in this dilemma. "To fit in with the change of events, words too had to change their usual meanings" (3:82). The nature of this change is anything but arbitrary:

> What used to be described as a thoughtless act of aggression was now regarded as the courage . . . to think of the future and wait was merely another way of saying one was a coward. . . . Ability to understand a question from all sides meant that one was totally unfitted for action. Fanatical enthusiasm was the mark of a real man. . . . To plot successfully was a sign of intelligence, but it was still cleverer to see that a plot was hatching. (3:82)

What Thucydides' various examples all suggest is that under the pressure of anxiety before the unknown or the unfamiliar — the plague — the general response is often to try to reduce or eliminate the gap separating words from meanings, speech from action. It is as if time, having suddenly become a dangerous medium of the unforeseeable, had to be reduced or eliminated entirely: to think is to act, to think of the future as different from the present and therefore as requiring one to wait and reconsider, the sign of a coward. Above all "to understand a question from all sides" was to exclude one from acting altogether.

All of this presupposes that one is fully in control of a present and a past that one then seeks desperately to project onto the future. And yet, far from accommodating the "change of events," words fail: "Words indeed fail when one tries to give a general picture of the disease" (2:153). The disease defies generalities, and therefore a certain comprehension. Very different from war, with a clearly discernible enemy, the plague kills and disables without rhyme or reason, and above all without permitting any effective defense. The visitation of the plague is not like a battle or siege in a war: it is a slaughter that demonstrates the limitations of human planning and foresight. But it also demonstrates the superiority of those who can react flexibly without remaining blocked by their previous plans. Thus, "the Peloponnesians left Attica earlier than they had intended because they were afraid of the infection" (2:57). They were thus spared the brunt of the plague, precisely because they did was Pericles scorned them for doing: "When they (the Peloponnesians) stop to think, they begin to fear" (2:147). They acknowledge their fear and act on it, not by rushing forward as does Pericles, in seeking to continue military operations during the plague, with disastrous results (2:58), but rather by withdrawing and thus preserving their armies for future struggles. The Spartan King, Archidamus, "a man who had a reputation for both intelligence and moderation" (1:82), describes the Spartan relation to others in a way almost diametrically opposed to that of Pericles' describing the Athenians:

> We are taught that there is not a great deal of difference between the way we think and the way others think, and that it is impossible to calculate accurately events that are determined by chance. The practical measures we take are always based on the assumption that our enemies are not unintelligent. (1:84)

Although Archidamus does not succeed in his effort to convince the Spartans not to go to war with Athens immediately, but rather to wait until they are better prepared, his words nevertheless testify to a different state of mind in Sparta from that displayed by Pericles in his speeches. Taking into account what might constitute

the most propitious preconditions and most effective preparation for a military conflict — and more generally, for unpredictable events such as plagues — means precisely not trying to reduce the temporal and spatial gap between language, thought and action, even if such reduction can bring a temporary relief from the anxiety before the unknown.

It is thus one thing to take time, to allow time and space for reflection, for allowing that consideration "of an action from all sides" might be the necessary condition of effective "action" rather than an obstacle to it; and it is quite another to rush precipitously into a course of action without having considered all the variables involved.

Such precipitation, the rush to judgment, is what valorizes the attitude that Thucydides, as we have seen, condemns: "To plot successfully was a sign of intelligence, but it was still cleverer to see that a plot was hatching" (3:82). To plot successively is once again to neutralize the discontinuities and interruptions that time, as the medium of unpredictability, brings with it. But to recognize plotting is even better, since it seems to confirm a world in which human reason and intention can effectively reduce its separation from action and impose its own reality on the world. To recognize plotting in this sense, and as Thucydides describes it, is to assert the power of self-consciousness to control the future, and with it the world. And it is precisely this attitude that renders the Athenians all the more vulnerable to the ravages of the plague.

II.　Boccaccio's *Decameron*

The desperate attempt of Athenian self-consciousness to assert itself in the face of the utterly singular and uncontrollable plague leads them to weave plots and even better to discern them at work everywhere. How comforting it would be to identify the plague as the result of a "plot" or a conspiracy, as the Athenians at first tried to do. Comforting, because its ravages could then be "understood" as the work of an intelligence, like our own self-consciousness, seeking to accomplish its ends and thus to control its future. The randomness of the plague, by contrast, is disconcerting to the extent that it questions the ability of human intelligence ultimately to protect against mortality. In other words, to "save" living beings from their fate.

A very different response from that of the Athenians is to be found in Boccaccio's *Decameron*. Written in the middle of the 14th century (1349 – 1353), the text presents a series of stories told over ten days and night by persons who have left Florence in the throes of a plague that will kill almost half of its population. The group has escaped to the countryside in order to share a common life and to tell each other stories in an agreeable, indeed idyllic setting. The gap between reality and fiction, between intention and accomplishment, thus seems to have been bridged by the success of their exit from a city being ravaged by the plague. But this bridging takes place in a very different way from that described by Thucydides. Florence is not Athens, there is no war and also no political decision-makers. There is just a city — a very important one although not the seat of an empire — that is being decimated by the plague.

This raises the question of just why Boccaccio should have chosen this setting in order to present his stories, which do not relate directly to the disease. The author acknowledges this question in his first address to his prospective readers, considered to be mostly women:

> Most gracious ladies, whenever I contemplate how compassionate you all are by nature, I recognize that, in your judgment, the present work will seem both somber and painful, for its opening contains the sad record of the recent, deadly plague. ... But ... without recalling these events, I could not explain the origins of the things you will read about later on, I have been forced by necessity to write it all down. (Boccaccio　5)

What is the necessity that compels Boccaccio to use the plague as the frame for his stories? The word "compassionate" in his address to his female readers seems to indicate a possible response. For Boccaccio goes on to recount how his own life was "saved" by the compassion of his friends:

> It is a matter of humanity to show compassion for those who suffer, and although it is fitting for everyone to do so, it is especially desirable in those who, having had need of comfort, have received it from others — and if anyone ever needed it or appreciated it or derived any pleasure from it, I am one of them. . . . While I was suffering, the pleasant conversation and invaluable consolation certain friends provided gave me such relief that I am absolutely convinced they are the reason I did not die. . . . I have not forgotten the benefits I once received from those who . . . shared my heavy burden nor will this memory ever fade in me, I truly believe, until I myself am dead. (3)

The only problem with this "explanation" is that the stories that are recounted in *The Decameron* generally seem as remote from compassion as from the plague. The question thus remains unanswered, at least explicitly. But perhaps not implicitly. [2]

In recounting stories that bear no direct relationship to plague-ridden Florence, which according to most estimates would lose up to 80% of its population to the disease, *The Decameron* at the same time recounts the formation of a community that is clearly fictional, since it is far removed from the actual reality of the times. Nevertheless, without denying this distance from reality, I would prefer to designate its status as "frictional" rather than as "fictional." To be sure the men and women represented in the text probably never existed as such — they are products of the stories they tell and of the situations in which they recount them. But these circumstances are not purely "fictional," especially if by that word is meant something is defined by opposition to "reality." For what is called "fiction" has its own "reality," and here that reality is inseparable from the textual narrative that joins and separates readers from that about which they read. For this reason, I prefer to call this text, as many others, not fictional but *frictional*. It takes names that designate objects that existed before and after the text, such as the Church of Santa-Maria Novella; but by inscribing them in what is clearly a narrative of things that as such never existed, it endows them with a significance that exceeds the simple reality of a name that refers to an existing Church. Rather, it gives this word a significance that exceeds its referential content. The Church of Santa Maria Novella signifies something *new and novel,* and which moreover refers to the very literary form that will be paraded through *The Decameron*: that of the *novella.*

I understand frictional signifiers as functioning somewhat along the same lines as those described by Freud with respect to dreams. The dream takes elements from one's waking experience — "*Tagesreste,*" he calls them in German, literally: "remains of the day" — and invests them with a significance, usually "overdetermined," very different from the one that is familiar to us from our daily waking lives. The frictional dimension here however suggests that the conventional meaning of words prior to their reinscription in *The Decameron* remains active as it were, demarcating more precisely just what is "novel" in the novellas by relating it to what preexisted it — here the Christian hope of salvation. In short, the institutional basis of the Christian community has now not simply been eliminated but rather *displaced*; out of this displacement emerges the frictional literary community that the ten storytellers agree to establish and as part of which they tell their stories.

Restrictions of time and space compel me to limit my discussion of such "frictionality" to a single story. But it is not any story, since it is the first one told in *The Decameron*, by Panfilo (literally: lover of all). It is the story of one "Ser Cepparello," who is described as probably the "worst man who had ever been born" (Boccaccio 20). This "Ser Cepparello" is able to sufficiently deceive a friar who has come to take his

confession on his deathbed, so that after his death he is considered to be a saintly character and indeed known then as "Saint Ciappelletto." You may have noticed that already in the brief summary of the story that precedes its actual recounting in the text, the name of the protagonist as changed from "Ser Cepparello" to "Saint Ciappelletto." The reason for this is twofold. First, it has to do with the difference of languages, between the Italian and the French:

> Because the man was small of stature and dressed like a dandy, the French, not knowing what "Cepparello" signified and thinking it meant "hat," that is "garland," in their language, called him, because he was small as we have said, not Ciappello, but Ciappelletto. And so, he was called Ciappelletto everywhere, while only a select few knew he was really Ser Cepparello. (Boccaccio 19 – 20)

Thus, as the translator and editor, Wayne Rebhorn, notes,

> The French-speaking Burgundians mistake his name, thinking it sounds like their word for "hat" or "garland," *chapelet*, and transform it into the half-French, half-Italian Ciappelletto, or Little Garland. In the course of the 14th century, *chapelet* also acquired the meaning of "rosary," so his name could also mean Little Rosary (20, note 4).

Without going into the many fascinating details of this story, I have to jump to its conclusion, where the narrator, Panfilo, ponders the fact that such a sinful person could have acquired the reputation of a saint and thus could serve as an intermediary between the Christian faithful and their God. Panfilo would like to see in this bizarre fact a sign of "God's loving kindness toward us" so that "even though we make our intercessor one of His enemies, God still grants our prayers as if we were asking a true saint to obtain His grace for us" (Boccaccio 27). And he concludes his speech by urging his listeners "to praise His name, which is what we began with, and venerate Him, commending ourselves to Him in our need, *in the certain knowledge that we will be heard*" (27).

These are the last words of the first story of *The Decameron*, but they are not the last words of the meta-narrative that frames the text. For after Panfilo has finished his tale with the comforting assertion that "in our need . . . we will be heard," the narrative adds one short sentence, which stands entirely alone in the entire *Decameron*: "*Et qui si tacque.*" — "*And here he stopped speaking.*" Or even more literally perhaps, if less colloquially: "And here speaking stopped." I have permitted myself to modify Rebhorn's published translation here, which reads "And here he fell silent" (Boccaccio 27). I believe that the verb, *si tacere*, implies more and less than just the *falling silent of a subject*. If the phrase were there just to designate the subjective cessation of speech, it would be entirely redundant; it would be sufficient for the story to end with the words, "sicurissimi d'essere uditi." — most sure to be heard. Instead, however, it is almost as if the meta-narrative calls into question that most sure expectation of "being heard" — which also means, being *saved* by the One whose name "we praise." For the story that traces the metamorphosis of Ser Cepparello into Ciappelletto and then finally into *Saint* Ciappelletto, indicates just how far humans, in their "need" — a need that the plague does not create but only brings out into the open as a shared dimension of life — are ready to go to convince themselves that "we will be heard." But if words, and names are as untrustworthy as this story suggests, how certain can the hope to be heard really be? Is this the reason that the text suggests that Panfilo may not so much have ended his story as interrupted the interpretation he seeks to give it — that he bit his tongue, as it

were, in order to stop himself from speaking what could not be spoken. Or, as Benjamin puts it, what "is denied — *versagt* — the word." Panfilo's story leads us to this limit but does not transcend it. That step is left to the reader, or the listener.

At the end of *The Decameron*, Boccaccio insists that his stories leave this final but never definitive step up to the reader, not out of willfulness, but because this is the way language works:

> Like everything else, these stories, such as they are, may be harmful or helpful, depending upon the listener. ... No single word has ever been wholesomely construed by a corrupt mind. And just as proper language can do nothing for such a mind, that which is improper cannot contaminate one that is well disposed. ... Still, whoever reads through these stories can skip over those that give offense and read only those that promise delight, for lest anyone should be deceived, each story bears a sign on its brow of that which it keeps hidden within its bosom. (342 – 44)

In reflecting upon Covid, and the language it gives rise to, we would do well to be attentive to "the signs on its brow," mindful of the possibility that what they signify may be "kept hidden within its bosom." It is this respect for and acceptance of that which must remain unsaid — *dem Wort versagt* as Benjamin writes — that perhaps is the secret of that "highly political style of writing" to which he aspired and of which Panfilo provides such a striking instance. Perhaps this strange "silence" points toward what might be called a "politics of compassion," in which the prefix com-both joins and separates the passion it precedes, as the sign of a sharing that does not deny its irreducible singularity.

III. Walter Benjamin: Political Discourse Should Mean More Than It Can Say

Walter Benjamin's remarks on how a certain refusal to speak can become an essential part of a politically significant discourse, are contained in a famous letter he wrote in July of 1916 — in the midst of the First World War — to Martin Buber. Buber had invited Benjamin to contribute to a newly founded journal that he had established — *Der Jude* (*The Jew*). After reading the first issue of this periodical, Benjamin decided that he could not participate in it, and for reasons that involved his idea of political discourse. Benjamin refused what he felt was the way the dominant notion of politically effective discourse tended to instrumentalize both language and action itself. The latter he asserted was construed as the result of "motives" or intentions that in turn were assumed to be capable of being expressed directly and univocally. More specifically, Benjamin argued that a concatenation of individual words into a phrase — *Wort-an-Wort-Reihen* as he puts it in German — produced a mechanism for expressing what could not and should not be expressed directly, namely "the correct Absolute" — in German, a "*Mechanismus zur Verwirklichung des richtigen Absoluten*" — which increasingly had come to dominate the political discourse of the time. Through this mechanism, Benjamin argued, political discourse resulted in what he called the "elimination of the unsayable" (*Elimination des Unsagbaren*). The German word "Elimination" used by Benjamin provides an excellent example of precisely what he is writing about: by driving the word "out" (e-) of its constitutive limits the word can take the appearance of having a purely internal, "absolute" meaning, which in turn would allow it to claim value as an expression of an Absolute truth (*des richtigen Absolute*) in "crystalline purity." What is thus eliminated is the space in between, the space of differential relationality, which is replaced by what Benjamin calls the "expansive tendency" that supposes a continuum underlying the alignment of word-on-word. It is the differential space between and within words, the space of signifying as distinct from meaning. Such an

elimination is not just problematic for Benjamin — it is destructive insofar as such "expansive" tendencies eliminate what Benjamin, in another essay written at roughly the same period, calls the "overdetermination" of language — a term that Freud also uses in *The Interpretation of Dreams* to describe the ambivalent and ambiguous language of the Unconscious. This implies a very different concept of how words work — Freud therefore can designate words as the ideal medium for dreams precisely because they can signify much more and other than what they are usually taken to designate (324).

In a much later essay on "The Storyteller," Benjamin gives a less theologically tainted account of how what is denied to explicit language — *dem Wort Versagte* — functions in a narrative discourse. Benjamin quotes an episode recounted by "the first storyteller of the Greeks . . . Herodotus". It is the story of how the Egyptian king, Psammenitus, reacts following his defeat by the Persian king, Cambyses:

> Cambyses was bent on humbling his prisoner. . . . [H]e . . . arranged that his prisoner should see his daughter pass by as a maid going to the well with her pitcher. While all the Egyptians were lamenting and bewailing this spectacle, Psammenitus stood alone, mute and motionless, his eyes fixed on the ground; and when presently he saw his son, who was being taken along in the procession to be executed, he likewise remained unmoved. But when he subsequently recognized one of his servants, an old impoverished man, in the rank of the prisoners, he beat his fists against his head and gave all the signs of deepest mourning. (Benjamin　148)

And after retelling the story, Benjamin argues that it is exemplary:

> This tale shows what true storytelling is. . . . Herodotus offers no explanations. His report is utterly dry. That is why, after thousands of years, this story from ancient Egypt is still capable of provoking astonishment and reflection. (148)

In his letter to Buber, Benjamin had contrasted his notion of a politically effective political style, which he describes as "prosaic" and descriptive, with the expansive and expressive accumulation of what claims to be "crystalline," meaning through a word-on-word sequencing. In regard to "true storytelling" a similar process is described, that of a purely (but selectively) descriptive account that does not exhaust itself in an explicit meaning, as distinct from the tendency of what Benjamin designates as "information" — today we would call it the media — to supply explanations and suggest full and "crystalline" transparency. What is involved is the distinction between what I try to designate as "meaning" — an intention assumed to be fully embodied in its object, words and things — and significance, which is an ongoing and never completable process (that is also a regress and, as Sterne might have said, *digressive* as well).

But how then can such a complex process, that interdicts — *versagt* — full meaning to anything sayable (*Sagbare*), relate to what I have called a "politics of compassion"? To try to respond to this question — if not to answer it — let me conclude with a fairly brief digression to a text of Derrida. One does not usually associate his deconstructive writing style with the notion of compassion. And yet at a certain time in his life, towards the end of the 1990s, the word appears to assume a certain importance in his writing. The context for its emergence is Derrida's questioning of how the relation of humans to animals has developed, above all over the past few centuries, and above all in what is still called "the West" — not to privilege it but to distinguish from other regions and cultures and thus to avoid a precipitous universalization or "anthropologization". And given the wartime context of Benjamin's remarks, it is perhaps significant that Derrida situates the question of

compassion, or lack of it, in a wartime setting:

> For about two centuries, ..., we who call ourselves men or humans, ..., have been involved in an unprecedented transformation. This mutation affects the experience of what we continue to call, imperturbably, ..., the animal and/or animals. ... It is all too evident that in the course of the last two centuries these traditional forms of treatment of the animal have been turned upside down by the joint development of zoological, ethological, biological, and genetic forms of *knowledge*, which remain inseparable from *techniques* of intervention *into* their object, ..., the living animal. ... and all of that in the service of a certain being and the putative human well-being of man. ... No one can deny seriously any more, or for very long, that men do all they can in order to dissimulate this cruelty or to hide it from themselves.... If these images are "pathetic," if they evoke sympathy, it is also because they "pathetically" open the immense question of pathos ... that is, of suffering, pity and compassion; and the place that has to be accorded to the interpretation of this compassion, to the sharing of suffering among the living, to the law, ethics and politics that must be brought to bear upon this experience of compassion. What has been happening for two centuries now involves a new experience of this compassion. ... The two centuries I have been referring to somewhat casually in order to situate the present ... have been those of an unequal struggle, a war ... being waged between, on the one hand, those who violate not only animal life but even and also this sentiment of compassion, and, on the other hand, those who appeal for an irrefutable testimony to this pity.
>
> War is waged over the matter of pity. ... To think the war we find ourselves waging is not only a duty, a responsibility, an obligation, it is also a necessity, ... that, like it or not, directly or indirectly, no one can escape. (*The Animal* 24 – 29)

Like the young Benjamin, Derrida sees war as involving language, and in particular words and their arrangement. And like Benjamin, Derrida implicitly at least distinguishes the notion of words having unitary meanings from their intrinsic and significant ambiguity, which is no less internal than external. Unlike Benjamin, however, he is even willing to create neologisms if this can help expose the singular and plurality of words and their resulting significance. For instance, the neologism "animot," which echoes the plural, "animaux," that is all too often sacrificed, subsumed and rendered invisible by the use of what Derrida calls "the generalized singular," "animal," with or without the definite article.

But in the essay being discussed, it is another word that provides us with the wherewithal, the means, of critically or deconstructively analyzing and exposing an alternative to the "expansive" — and shall we add, "militaristic" tendency to use words in series to articulate what can never be exhaustively articulated as such, namely, the "Absolute proper" (*richtiges Absolut*) as the origin and end of all speech and writing. This move of Derrida is based on an entirely fortuitous convergence between two French verbs, namely *être*, to be, and *suivre*, to follow — a convergence that resonates phonically only when the two verbs are used in the first person singular, namely *suis*, meaning both "am" and "follow."

In the Old Testament Book of Exodus, when Moses asks God to give him His Name so that Moses can transmit it to the people of Israel, God replies, "Tell them that I am who I am" (sometimes rendered as "I am who I will be") (*Exodus* I. 8) . This is perhaps one of the most striking instances of that pseudo-political rhetoric criticized by Benjamin, which I have elsewhere associated with what I call "the monotheological identity paradigm." Words are aligned one after the other in what strives to present an "expansive tendency" — one that expands and expresses an initial identity that is self-contained: whose being is at once singular,

universal and absolute, ab-solved from all relation to and dependence on any other.

What by contrast the fortuitous and singular convergence of the French verb "to be" with the verb "to follow" brings to the fore, especially when used in the singular, is to provide a perspective for reconsidering "the war" against non-human animals and perhaps wars more generally. In both cases the war involves an attempt to distract and detract from a situation of shared vulnerability, suffering and in the final analysis mortality, common to all living beings, human and nonhuman, insofar as they are both determined by life in the singular. The perspective emphasized here is not the generalized singular of the species, but the differential singularity of the living qua individuals, which despite their name are irreducibly and constitutively *dividual*.

The war in the name of species is thus a war that seeks to deny this dividual and mortal singularity of the living by ascribing it to one species as opposed to another, as its mortal enemy. It is supported by a tradition of knowledge and technology that is the conceptual and practical correlative of that word-on-word serialization criticized by Benjamin. Which is why the convergence of "I am" with "I follow" can help Derrida to unpack and expose the heterogeneous divergence at the heart of words, things and above all singular living beings. For "to follow" as Derrida argues, is to come after no less than to pursue: it moves backward and forward at one and the same time, splitting the sameness of that time regressively, progressively and digressively.

But such a divergence cannot simply be recognized by means of a generalizing proper name much less a concept. It can only do justice to the singular plurality involved through an experience that is irreducibly affective. It involves that which both exceeds and falls short of conceptual generality — insofar as it is *felt*. As anxiety, joy, hope, aggressivity — but perhaps above all as the affective experience of compassion, whereby the prefix, "com-" defines a relationship in which the self "feels" itself as (though it were) another. ③

Notes

① On January 15, 18 and 27, 2023, at the invitation of Professor Yue Zhuo from Shanghai University, Professor Samuel Weber gave a tripartite lecture series entitled "Reading as Compassion" online. "Toward a Politics of Compassion" is the first lecture. Edited by Yue Zhuo, this text is published here for the first time.

② Recent studies of compassion in *The Decameron* and more generally in Boccaccio tend to emphasize the complexity and ambiguity of its portrayal: see the articles by Olivia Holmes, F. Regina Psaki and Gur Zak in the Spring 2019 issue of *I Tatti Studies in the Italian Renaissance*, volume 22, number 1, pp. 5 – 58.

③ At the very end of the second year of lecture-seminars devoted to the question of Hospitality (recently published in French and forthcoming in English), Derrida risks the following formulation to differentiate the unique from the singular living being more precisely in regard to the process of substitution: "It does not suffice for the subject of substitution . . . to be unique, irreplaceable, elected to offer its place to the other; what is irreplaceable must also feel *itself* to be irreplaceable, [insofar as] it feels and feels *itself*, and therefore must [feel itself to] be a self having a relation to itself, which is not the case for every living being that is unique and irreplaceable in its existence. This self, this ipseity, is the condition of ethical substitution qua compassion sacrifice expiation, etc." (*Hospitalité* II 353 – 354). To which I would only add that this self-feeling defines a relation to and of the self that is conditioned not just by and as *ipseity*, but above all by *illeity*. This is why perhaps the "experience" of compassion cannot and should not be aligned, as Derrida does in the passage just quoted, with "sacrifice, expiation, etc." Compassion can have no simple return on investment, which is why it is perhaps uncannily, more literary — as Boccaccio has shown — than ethical.

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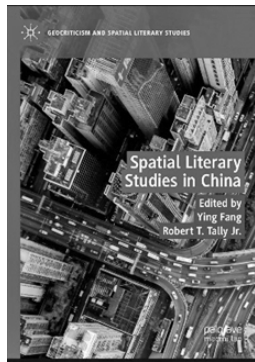
Spatial Literary Studies in China

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　　本书着眼于向国际学术界展示中国"文学空间研究"的大致现状、前沿探索和重要成果，突出了中国学者在这个领域的理论、话语建构和批评模式探索，彰显了中国立场与自信；兼顾中外、古今理论资源和文学分析，形成了中、西文学研究的对话与互补，具有一定程度的历史纵深和地理广度；包括理论研究、概念梳理、文本分析、文学史重构、数字地图、人文地理等多种角度，基本上勾勒出中国文学空间研究的主要轮廓。

　　还有三点值得一提。其一，在"Notes on Contributors"和每篇文章的脚注中保留了作者和译者的中文姓名，文章和注释中保留了中国人名、地名、书名等专有名词以及古诗词、空间概念、参考文献的中文，有些甚至加注了拼音；文章和注释中出现的中国人名的英文表达采用了"姓前名后"的模式。其二，作者除了大陆学者，还有台湾著名学者梁一萍（Iping Liang）、在四川大学工作的美国学者Sophia Kidd（康书雅）；Sophia Kidd 研究的是郭璞的《江赋》。其三，作者中既有权威学者，也有青年新锐，体现了学术传承以及塔利对年轻学者的关爱与期望。