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| Title | The temporality of violence: Destruction, dissolution and the construction of sense |
| Author(s) | Ó Murchadha, Felix |
| Publication Date | 2019-11-24 |
| Publication Information | Ó Murchadha, Felix. (2019). The Temporality of Violence: Destruction, Dissolution and the Construction of Sense. In Lode Lauwaert, Laura Katherine Smith, & Christian Sternad (Eds.), <i>Violence and Meaning</i> (pp. 41-58). Cham: Springer International Publishing. https://dx.doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-27173-2_3 |
| Publisher | Palgrave and McMillan |
| Link to publisher's version | https://dx.doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-27173-2_3 |
| Item record | http://hdl.handle.net/10379/16941 |
| DOI | http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-27173-2_3 |

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The Temporality of Violence: Destruction, Dissolution and the Construction of Sense

Felix Ó Murchadha

Violence tends to the destruction of meaningful entities and of that in 6
and through which such entities are meaningful. Not all violence is anni- 7
hilating in its effects, but violence aims towards a nothingness in which 8
is disclosed a certain fragility of meaning. The obliteration of the singu- 9
lar, the reduction of organic and structural unity to charred flesh and 10
rubble, is not simply an event within a world, but an event that threatens 11
worldly sense. The constitution of such worldly sense is dependent on 12
time, on the interweaving of temporal tendencies, or orientations, in 13
Husserlian terms: retention and protention. But this interweaving of 14
temporal orientations requires a minimal order of continuity whereby 15
retention, both near and far, and near and far protention allow for a sense 16
of temporal stretch which has a unity and a sense. This is true even 17
though every now may be new, temporal relations being of self-differen- 18
tiation. Annihilating violence—whether of the individual raped and tor- 19
tured or the community left bereft through war, colonization or natural 20

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21 disaster—has a traumatizing effect which that results in a disconnection
from
22 the past and derealization of that which profoundly modifies the reten-
23 tional and protentional orientations. The vulnerability of temporal con-
24 stitution, which violence discloses, reveals a fundamental absence at the
25 core of time itself and a nothingness threatening the stability of normal-
26 ized meaningful entities and spaces while revealing a groundless space of
27 the emergence of meaning.

28 Trauma, Accident, Catastrophe

29 That which happens suddenly has a certain violence and this is true even
30 when the event is subsequently welcomed and understood as beneficial.
31 The sudden takes us unawares, is that which comes upon us, for which we
32 were not prepared, happens secretly, stealthily. Yet, at a primitive level,
33 there is a preparedness for the sudden, one which is inscribed in animal-
34 ity, namely the preparedness to either fight or flight. The crudity of such
35 response, its generalizing gesture and its reduction of the meaning of the
36 event to that which threatens survival, nonetheless places the sudden
37 event within a meaningful context and one that can be passing and that
38 can be incorporated into an underlying trajectory. Extreme situations of
39 violence are ones in which even these primitive trajectories are either
40 inoperative or exhausted. In such situations, the very struggle for survival
41 itself is suspended and the self finds itself without resources, without the
42 possibility of a response which can be adequate to the situation in which
43 she finds herself. There is here an unknowing seeing, radically
44 different from the seeing which marks the passage of time (Caruth
1996, p. 37).

45 The sudden happening is an accident. This is not to say that this hap-
46 pening was not planned, perhaps meticulously so. But for the one to
47 whom it occurs it is an event into which they fall (*ad cadere*). In falling
48 into such a happening they find themselves where they had not planned
49 to be and where, in the moment of the happening itself, they cannot find
50 a reason or a cause. The reasons or causes of where someone is are inscribed
51 as the past in their present. Being in this room, sitting before this com-
52 puter screen, is what it is because of reasons and causes which, while not
53 fully known to me and while involving a plurality of temporal trajectories

of generation, of technological invention, of construction, are nonetheless
54 open for me, ideally articulable in an account which is transparent and 55
complete (or in Leibnizian terms, sufficient). Furthermore, these tempo- 56
ral trajectories can have a predictable, if necessarily presently obscure, 57
future: the paper I am writing may or may not end up being published, 58
the computer may or may not continue to function for a few more years,
59 the room I am in may or may not continue to be occupied by me and so
60 forth. Then, suddenly, a gust of wind blows down a tree which crashes
61 through the roof or a nearby gas cooker explodes or an earthquake
shakes 62 the building to its foundations. Suddenly, in a moment, the
temporal 63 trajectories are interrupted. While I can subsequently accept an
explana- 64 tion that makes the event intelligible in terms of the age of the
tree and 65 the strength of the wind or the frayed gas pipes or the movement
of 66 plates, such explanations do not so much negate the accidental nature
of 67 the event as universalize it: if this event has an explanation like any
other 68 then any event can be experienced as an accident. 69

This falling into an event is neutral between the pleasant and the pain-70
ful. To fall in love is also to fall, is also to be overtaken. Indeed, it may be71
that this very idea can be traced back to the kidnapping of wives for the72
sake of exogamy (as Barthes suggests, Barthes 2002, p. 188) or to the73
arrow of Eros. In either case, the violence of the happening is real: the74
violent is that which takes its 'victim' from elsewhere, overwhelms and75
reduces that person to the vulnerability of their porous being. It is that76
which is suffered.77

If the event is accidental, if it is that which befalls me, it is by that78
token ~~that~~ what has already occurred. I am too late. Too late for what?
Strictly speaking not too late to respond, because response already implies
late- 80
ness: to respond there already must be that to which I respond. Referencing81
Barthes again, he speaks of the impossible reciprocity of love in which82
both parties would say at once 'I love you' (Barthes 2002, p. 151). But83
that simultaneity is precisely that which we cannot achieve. What we84
have instead is continuity. The one to whom I respond is the one to 85
whom I am present because she is the same one who was there a moment86
ago. The situation to which I respond is one which I have encountered87
many times before, such that through habituation I have it so mapped 88
out in advance that I hardly experience it. To experience it, is however, 1089

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90 recognize the gap between two moments, the moment of the event and
91 the moment of my response to the event. The unexpected by challenging
92 my mapped out anticipations allows this gap, this interval, to emerge.
93 The traumatic is locatable precisely in this interval, such that the moment
94 of the emergence of the overwhelming threat remains incommensurate
95 with my recognition of it (Caruth 1996, p. 64). But this, which trauma
96 discloses, is inherent to the responsive structure of experience itself, where
97 the knowing-seeing that marks the passage of time overlooks the very
98 intervals which constitute time and the temporal structure of experience
99 itself. The nature of experience is that it fails to experience, that it comes
100 too late to be ready for that which has already occurred. In this sense the
101 truest experience is the experience of that which remains absolutely other
102 to it (see Levinas 1969, p. 25). When Blanchot says of disaster, it is 'always
103 already past' (Blanchot 2015, p. 2), the disaster is disclosing something
104 essential to the phenomenon itself.

105 But if there is a violence in the unexpected, the annihilating tendency
106 of that violence is that which threatens the possibility of experience, by
107 destroying its conditions. What we have here is a fundamental ambiva-
108 lence with regard to experience itself: experience responds to that which
109 escapes from it and remains beyond the experiencing self, but such dis-
110 tance tends to negate that which can appear as formed within any par-
111 ticular locus of experience, thus tending towards the destruction of
112 the conditions of experience. Experience is temporal, is at once the
113 encounter

113 with the new and the incorporation of the new into the old, the already
114 having-been. The new is only in relation to what has been and that differ-
115 ence finds a unity in the manner of temporal gathering of past and into
116 the newly opened future. In that sense the new builds upon the old, can
117 synthesize like a melody with what went before. But the unexpectedly
118 new cannot only break with the content of the past, but can also under-
119 mine the viewpoint from which those events were perceived and sensed.
120 In doing this, the violently unexpected event tends towards the setting up
121 of a barrier to the past, and does so by undermining its reality. The tra-
122 umatic makes the past unreal, allows it to disappear (see Brison 2011,
123 p. 53; Amery 2009, pp. 58–9). This indicates something essential: for the
124 past to *seem* real, it must be commensurable with the present. If some-
125 thing occurs which radically changes the real, then there is no point of

coherence between past and present, making the remembered past seem more like an imagined world: the traumatized self may well admit that the past events really happened, but the world of those events, her familiarity with that world and her life within it, appears as a dream state, an imagined world, which cannot be imagined to be real. The irony is, however, that this splitting off from the past is itself a continual possibility of time itself, as the continual self-differentiation of past and present which is both the condition of experience and the abyss at its core.

Time, Habit and World

Every trauma implies an injury and as such a vulnerability. The traumatic subject is as such essentially embodied (see Staudigl 2015, p. 75). The traumatic can only occur as a wounding of a habituated body. Someone who lived without habit, without any anchorage into the world, could experience pain and terror, but not trauma. Such a being would not relate to the past as that which is already incorporated into the present, but rather a mere passage neutral to the present. Trauma is above all an offence against the habitual.

Habits are formed both actively and passively and also voluntarily and involuntarily. An athlete or musician must develop habits of movement, of touch, or posture which are actively and voluntarily aimed at, but which then become, as we say, second nature. Similarly in how we approach the world and others in the world, in aiming to act well or otherwise, certain characteristics—etymologically meaning marks on the soul or body—maintain a manner of being towards one another, incorporated into the self. Bodily gestures of one sort or another express the self even when they are not actively or voluntarily aimed at and which only becoming apparent to the gesturing self, when they are mirrored back to him.

All of this has a certain temporal structure, which mirrors the ambiguous structure of habit. In each case, past practice is sedimented, whether actively or passively pursued, this amounts to an incorporation of a past, which itself has other possible futures, but which were curtailed, cut short such that the body, movement, character and thought were pruned,

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159 trained to operate in a certain more confined, more directed manner.
160 Such curtailment, while closing off possible futures at the same time,
161 actualizes those futures that came to be and in doing so continue to make
162 possible new futures, but also continue to limit and constrain the present
163 in terms of a past that does not pass, but which remains settled in the
164 present. Through habit, the present takes on a depth, which is the past
165 incorporated in it. In that sense, Merleau-Ponty drawing on Hegel
166 states that the past is never absolutely past (Merleau-Ponty 1965, p.
188). What

167 allows for such a settling of the past in the present is the constancy, nor-
168 mality and consistency of the world.

169 A habitual action, practice or thought pattern, intends its object not
170 necessarily as the same object but as one which belongs in a world
171 that stands (the common root of consistent and constant—*sta*) in
172 place.

172 Without such a standing world, habit would be unreasonable: in a
173 world of radical difference, where each moment was new, body and
174 thought would need to adapt *ex nihilo*. But this is not the case. Each
175 now is new, has arisen out of change, but such change—even if thought
176 of in terms of a Heraclitean flux—is change within a pattern and one of
177 entities and situations that allow for recognition over time, indeed are
178 identifiable only through a standing relation to themselves and to all
179 around them. In this sense, habit implies harmony, not to be sure a pre-
180 established harmony, but a harmony nonetheless in which nothing is
181 that does not come to be within the horizon of an order which is re-
182 affirmed in each moment, while being incomplete, unended, pre-
183 cisely temporal.

184 Novelty is constitutive of temporality, but as already noted that nov-
185 elty is itself dependent on a sedimented past: the new is so only in respect
186 to what has been. The past depth in the present allows the new to stand
187 in a certain relief. The new is, however, always in some sense unexpected.
188 The relation to such novelty, to the unexpected, has a range of affective
189 modalities and intensities. At one limit is boredom, where the novelty is
190 so shallow that it is unapparent and this can apply, perhaps especially so,
191 when each new moment is determinedly ‘novel’ and ‘new’. At the other
192 affective end, as far as temporal constitution is concerned, are those affec-
193 tive modes of approaching the new, in which the new is disclosed in its
194 essential unexpectedness—the expected being optimally the completely

seen (*ex-spectare*)—is encountered with various degrees of intensity: 195
sur-prise, shock and horror. 196

In surprise the self is overtaken by an event, such that—if only 197
momen- tarily—the self finds itself unprepared for what has happened, 198
respon- ing too late beyond all expectation. Indeed, as Dastur puts it 199
(Dastur 2000, p. 182),¹ event in the strong sense of the word always 200
happens by surprise. Expectation can be understood actively or 201
passively; in either case the appearance of the situation in which we 202
find ourselves is in some sense misleading. We may speak ultimately 203
of being lulled into a false sense of security, a false sense namely that 204
the consistency and constancy of our world has slipped into a pattern 205
of predictability in which our habitual practices can become dominant. 206
This can be seen in the diffi- culty we have in remembering the events 207
of days on end that follow a similar habitual pattern, when the attention 208
on particular actions is not necessary. The surprising event interrupts 209
this constancy, becomes a dis- ruptive moment, one in which we 210
experience a feeling of disorientation, where precisely we do not know 211
how best to react. But surprise has an adjectival sense: a surprise party, 212
a surprise attack and a surprise appear- ance (of a musician on stage at 213
a concert). In each case something hap- pens suddenly, for which we 214
are unprepared, but for which we have ways of engaging, ways of 215
responding—ways of responding in a party, when under attack, as an 216
audience member at a concert. Surprise is a moment of disorientation 217
that allows us to reorient without too much delay. Indeed, we have 218
habits of surprise, ways of taking on the surprising and incorporating 219
it, because the surprising happens in the context of prior sense, a prior 220
trajectory of events which is already in place. 221

Shock is a more violent emotion, one which, unlike surprise, is 222
almost always a matter of displeasure. Surprise is itself partly 223
constitutive of shock—the shocking event is surprising—but while the 224
surprising is indeed unexpected, the shocking is a violent disruption, 225
which chal- lenges an individual's or a community's preparedness in a 226
radical way. While surprise remains within the parameters of the 227
horizon of a world, in shock we feel our world challenged. Experience 228
in the normal sense presupposes faith in the stability of the world and 229
a corresponding pre- sumption that experience will always have the 230
same basic rhythm and hue, which Merleau-Ponty is expressing when
he refers to 'style'

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231 (Merleau-Ponty 1968, pp. 110–1; see also Dastur 2000, p. 185). The
232 shocking event is one for which my past orientations give me no prepara-
233 tion because these past sedimented practices belong in a world from
234 which the shocking event is precluded—and my trust or faith in that
235 world precludes such possibilities from having any reality in the world of
236 my possible experience. What is characteristic of shock is that it discloses
237 the habitual in a kind of zombified manner: in shock I ‘go through the
238 motions’ as we say, but do so without any clear sense of the present. The
239 initial response to the death of a loved one is like this. The world in
240 which that person was a constitutive part is no more, and this event of
241 disruption within the world disrupts the world itself (Ratcliffe 2017,
242 pp. 162–3). My habits both sustain me and betray me: they sustain me
243 by allowing me to function despite my disorientation, but they betray
244 me too because they imprison me in a past that maintains possibilities
245 which are no longer those of my present. In that way the past of a lost
246 limb or a lost relative can remain within the horizon of the present (see
247 Merleau-Ponty 2013, p. 83).

248 In both surprise and shock, the self or community is exposed in its
249 vulnerability but is still able to help itself. The shocking event disrupts the
250 world, undoes many of its possibilities, but not all of them. This means
251 that the capacities inherent in that world and many of its habitual prac-
252 tices remain. Indeed, it is not by accident that in most cultures it is pre-
253 cisely at moments of shock that people respond in the most openly
254 habitual manner: particular phrases are used, certain ritualized actions are
255 engaged in, reaffirming the world in the face of its interruption. These
256 liminal moments, though shocking, do not undermine the capacity for
257 response of the experiencing self or community. When, however, an event
258 or an entity evokes horror, the response is one of repulsion, helplessness,
259 the inability to articulate in speech. The bodily shivering in horror
260 responds not to that in relation to which the self can act or respond, but
261 rather to that which has withdrawn from that self all capacity for response
262 or reaction (Cavarero 2009, pp. 4–5). This is the traumatic in horror. The
263 moment of horror is one in which the world no longer relates or corre-
264 sponds to the self’s capacities for action—either in actual or conceptual
265 terms—and its sedimented past is left without any relevance to the pres-
266 ent. In horror we are faced with that loss as that which negates all possible

responses and renders us helpless (Cavarero 2009, pp. 20–24). There is nothing to be done which is proper to the event; it robs the self of itself in the sense that it forecloses the world in terms of which that self can return to itself.

Each of these affective responses exposes a fundamental vulnerability. Only a dependent being is vulnerable because only the capacity to be injured depends on the dependence of the self on its own exteriority. In cases of extreme violence, this exteriority is exposed so fundamentally as to render individuals or whole communities helpless (Cavarero 2009, pp. 20–24). Yet, here again, ambivalence arises at the heart of violence. Vulnerability, dependence, utter exteriority and helplessness characterize the human being in its birth and infancy. There is, for the human, a primordial helplessness. That helplessness is a setting of the future into the hands of another, the nurturing of capacity out of a relation to others. This is a primordial having of help, of care, through which a self becomes itself in its habits of response to care given to it. Such a vulnerable being can be in the world only through its trust in the world, a trust that grows with its habituation to the world: a trust firstly that the world appears as it is, secondly that the possibilities of being towards things in the world give way to the capacities of the self's embodied being in the world and thirdly that the patterns of behaving towards things set up in this way have consistency and constancy. That trust relates to the world as promising; promising a certain set of meanings, certain manners of practice and forms of action (see Ó Murchadha 2017, pp. 101–106). Such promise relates not only to people within the world but also to the things that make up the world. There is a certain way in which things have been and the promise is that they will remain in that way. Only in response to such promise is there habit. When this promise is radically broken, there is a disruption, a breakdown of world, which happens suddenly, that is, accidentally. The sudden event interrupts habitual trajectories, makes them inoperative, possibly making the temporal orientation impossible. The reincorporation of my past into that present can occur instantaneously in surprise, after an extended period in shock, and possibly never be fully realized in horror. In such cases, the very explanation of the causes or reasons make the event more, not less, difficult to integrate. Indeed, such explanations may not so much negate the accidental nature of the event

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303 as universalize it. What occurs here is not a loss of past and future, but
304 rather a modification of both. What is striking about this is that the loss
305 of trust in the world manifests itself as attempting precisely to live through
306 the loss of world, such a living through we know as trauma. In this,
307 trauma shares with habit the characteristic of not letting the past pass, of
308 sedimenting the past in the present, but this time in a manner in which
309 such sedimented past does not allow new possibilities.

310 The suffering of the sudden event, the attempted but failed living
311 through that event, is a suffering of a past that remains present. Such a
312 suffering bears the same structure as habit, which suffers a past that does
313 not pass. The self suffers both in the sense that it is acted upon by a past
314 in the present, but also in the sense that it is held to a past that has not
315 passed but remains inscribed in the present, marked in the flesh of the
316 present. There is here a certain constitutive violence, manifest in surprise,
317 shock and horror. This violence undermines the world of those caught
318 within it and does so through an inversion of the incremental mode of
319 temporal experience, namely through the temporality of ruination.
320 Already in the *Physics*, Aristotle tells us that time is the origin of decay
321 (Aristotle 1984, 221b1) and in doing so ties time to ageing and, I would
322 add, to ruination. Ruination is a natural occurrence which infects all
323 human enterprises. We repair our buildings, bring our cars to the
324 mechanic, work on our bodies to the point of plastic surgery in some
325 cases, in order to offset the process of ruin which Simmel calls the 'ven-
326 geance of nature' (Simmel 1996, p. 287; see also Ó Murchadha 2002)
327 but in Ravaisson's terms could be called rather the vengeance of destiny
328 (Ravaisson 2009, p. 31). The inorganic (the 'empire of destiny' as
329 Ravaisson puts it) as such cannot suffer ruination. Ruin is possible only
330 for something that has a singular nature, a unity which is either that of
331 life or the result of living seeking after expression: making. What this sug-
332 gests is that every corporeal being, and that which such beings make as
333 expressions of their being are vulnerable to both their own materiality
334 and to forces outside of themselves. To be in the world as an embodied
335 being is to incorporate oneself to the world, while all the time being vul-
336 nerable to loss, to dissolution, to collapse. Habit in not letting the past
337 pass is in this sense defending the self against the ruination all around it.
338 It is a working of the self on itself, whether actively or passively, to main-

tain a way of being in the world into the future. The violence in question, however, is not that of ruination itself, but rather the suffering of that ruination endured or witnessed in selves subject to ruin. The violence that threatens to unleash ruination is that which disrupts temporal continuity, forces an interruption of time, whereby the very condition that habit both assumes and aims to maintain are undermined. In this sudden happening, in this *exaiphnes*, is revealed an *apeiron*, a loss or breakdown of boundaries or borders, a loss of form, the release of brute materiality.

Apeiron

The relation here of habit and form is crucial and has ontological significance. The habitual is that which allows the contingent, whether in physical motion, conceptual thought or mode of behaviour, to take on a concrete reality through repetition such that the taking on of a gesture towards things in the world becomes a mode of being of that self. It is this that gives form to the self in the manner of its expressing of itself in the world. But this taking on of form, this unifying of present and past in the concrete reality of the self, requires that past gestures now habitual are confirmed by things in the world as being relevant to them. When that confirmation is not forthcoming, the habitual gesture, far from affirming that trust in the promise of things, becomes empty, like a ghost of a lost world, seeming both unreal in the present and the provenance of a past without reality. The violence of suffering such a loss is traumatic in the sense of its dissolving effect, which incapacitates the synthesizing function of the self also at the level of habit: the traumatic event divides the present from the past, it does so as a lacuna, an interval that is precisely not remembered, but is re-enacted, repeated, but unlike habit such repetitions cannot synthesize or integrate into life because they do not reach confirmation in a world which allows that self to dwell, but rather the opposite. The helplessness of the traumatic, rupturing moment is precisely that which cannot be given form, rather that which threatens with formlessness, the loss of boundaries and limits and the disclosure of limitlessness, what Richir calls the ‘phenomenological *apeiron*’ (quoted in Tengelyi 2004, pp. 80–81).

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372 While the violent events of trauma are disruptive of temporal continu-
373 ity, they are so only through the collaboration, so to speak, of time. It is
374 the temporal difference between the event and its recognition which is
375 crucial, but such a difference depends both on the temporal constitution
376 of the object and the recognition of a temporal delay. That recognition is
377 itself unique: it is the recognition of having not perceived, the recogni-
378 tion that something has happened and that time has elapsed while the self
379 has been closed off from the time of the event. This recognition is not
380 simply of a past event, but of a past futural tendency. As Husserl saw,
381 retention and protention are intertwined (*Ineinander*). Retentional con-
382 sciousness is of that which itself contains a protention, an intentional
383 directedness towards fulfilment (Husserl 2001, p. 25). Husserl speaks
384 here of a forked branch—*Doppelzweig*—of retention and protention,
385 where protention is retained and a retained consciousness is of a past
386 protention on the way to fulfilment. The paradigm case here is clearly
387 continuity and indeed Husserl states in a footnote that ‘a beginning as
388 intrusion of a fully unexpected event? There is no such thing’ (Husserl
389 2001, p. 28).² Yet, if the retained consciousness is that of a future direct-
390 edness that future directedness is not simply a function of consciousness:
391 as a perceiving conscious being I perceive what was as what it is going to
392 become. The primal impression in Husserl’s terms is that continual incit-
393 ing of temporal movement in the twin senses of retention and proten-
394 tion. But the latter are not simply functions of consciousness, but rather
395 are perceivable in the phenomenon itself. I perceive a sound which, in
396 fading away, also indicates a future sound. This protentional sense is one
397 that is perceived in the object itself, in the virtual causal or motivational
398 structure of the object as appearing. The now is the now of the phenom-
399 enon which appears to me as a secondary manifestation of itself. In
400 appearing to me it expresses itself before me. It expresses itself as a par-
401 ticular futural tendency which comes to me from elsewhere.

402 It is precisely this having-been futural tendency as expressive of a phe-
403 nomenon that the violent, traumatic event brings to the surface and in
404 doing so shows time in a primordial sense. In other words, the violent,
405 traumatic event is not simply a disruption of time, not simply an event
406 that can be recovered from and reintegrated into temporal continuity.
407 Rather, it indicates fundamental aspects of temporal existence, namely

that the temporal is constituted through the new, that the temporal relation is one of belatedness and that the self as a temporal being is in a continual process of catching up with an future that has already been in the phenomenon to which it responds. Understood in this way, the temporal structure of consciousness or indeed the narrative structure of temporal constitution (see Ricoeur 1994, pp. 52–90) does not so much give a temporal unity to the world as it belatedly responds to protentional tendencies already manifest in those phenomena to which the self must belatedly respond.

AU5

Violence, though destructive in its inner tendency, through that destruction discloses a temporal structuring of sense. For sense to appear is for it to appear as already having-been, but as such in relation to an already incorporated having-been. In other words, the appearing of sense refers in a doubled manner to the past: the past that has just been and to which we respond too late and the already incorporated past which is more present than the past moment which has just occurred. This past, which is not represented but lived, habituated (see Bergson 1991, pp. 80–1), is the past as present foreign to the unexpected past future. The unexpectedness of that new moment with its own protended future is hidden to various degrees in the normality of the everyday where it is more or less covered over by the incorporated past through the habituation of the body, that anonymous body that retains the past into the present (Merleau-Ponty 2013, p. 86) to which the perceiving self remains subject. That hiddenness of the newly encountered past is normally itself hidden. But the violent event through its disclosure of the traumatic interval between present and past and the failure to incorporate that interval into the already present past threatens to render the latter unreal and in so doing undermine the futures already contained within the incorporated past. In so doing, it breaks asunder the surface of past appearance and discloses therein the vulnerability of past form, of all form, showing therefore the *apeiron*.

AU6

The setting of meaning is a setting of form and as such a production of boundaries, of limits, of surfaces between and amongst the phenomenal things and their eventual unities in a world of sense. That setting of boundaries is forever endangered, however, by the wiping out of form, the collapse into formlessness. In thinking this collapse, two texts and

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3 The Temporality of Violence: Destruction, Dissolution...

444 two thinkers who may seem very far apart can perhaps help us, namely
445 the *Parmenides* of Plato and the ‘On the Critique of Violence’ of Benjamin.
446 Both of these texts are concerned with the manner in which meaning is
447 formed and making intelligible that formation in the light of the poten-
448 tial fragility of all unity. The contexts of these discussions differ and can-
449 not be brought together without some violence. Nevertheless, this
450 violence is a kind of ‘tiger leap into the past’ (Benjamin 1968, p. 261) to
451 rekindle a particular problematic of how meaning can be produced in the
452 face of the traumatic.

453 Through the mouth of Parmenides Plato is posing the hypothesis, if
454 ‘the one’ *is* (Plato 1961a, 137c3). The question here is whether there is
455 anything that is the same as itself, that is, has identity, and if so what the
456 consequences are with respect to the same, the identical, the one. His
457 discussion ends in *aporia* where the one is both one and many and nei-
458 ther one nor many, and furthermore the one comes into and goes out of
459 being (Plato 1961a, 155e). The concern here is with transition, indeed
460 transformation between oppositions—one and many, being and non-
461 being, stationary and in motion. To explain how such transitions and
462 transformations occur, Plato approaches the theme a third way, by
463 recourse to the traumatic—the sudden instant (*exaiphnes*), this ‘queer
464 thing’ as he puts it (Plato 1961a, 156d1), which allows for an identifi-
465 able thing to emerge or for a multitude of identifiable things to emerge.
466 This time beyond chronology is between motion and rest, is that which
467 interrupts the thing and changes its ontological nature. What makes the
468 one susceptible to this transformation is the fragility of its own form,
469 which Plato expresses as ‘*apeiron*’ without limits or boundaries. If iden-
470 tity is to be understood as without parts, as a oneness without any mul-
471 tiplicity, then it would be without beginning or end, without shape, not
472 taking up space in the sense of delimiting its own identical space (Plato
473 1961a, 137d). Yet, it is oneness that gives limits, such that the many are
474 limited only by partaking in the one, by being a multiplicity of identical
475 things, a multiplicity of ones (Plato 1961a, 158e). As such the multi-
476 tude is unlimited, such that whenever it seems to have a limit, to be
477 one, ‘in an instant (*exaiphnes*), just as in a dream, instead of seeming to
478 be one, it appears to be many’ (Plato 1961a, 164d). The setting of form,
479 the limiting of something to this thing, encounters the trauma of the

sudden dissolution of meaning, the identity that disappears dreamlike when we try to touch it.

The *Parmenides* ends with the statement ‘if one is not, nothing is’ (Plato 1961a, 166c1), which sets the stakes in ontological and semantic terms. If the identifiable is not, cannot be discerned, cannot be given a word or term and has no being of its own, then there is nothing. But the instant is such a nothing: it is neither being nor non-being, neither rest nor motion, yet we cannot speak of intelligibility and indeed the being of the one without reference to it. In negative terms, we can call this nothing *apeiron*, as that lack of boundaries which threatens both the one and the many, yet is that which in some sense is between them, is that limitless space and time in which and through which identities are formed and dissolve.³ It is precisely such an *exaiphnes* that in a very different register can be discerned in Benjamin’s ‘divine violence’ (Benjamin 1986, p. 297), that violence which destroys boundaries, destroys the limits set up as identities, as the multitude of ones. The now time (*Jetztzeit*), which is implicit here is a traumatic now, a now in which the ghosts of the suppressed past return and the force of legally established power, the force which sets up boundaries through a mythical appeal to destiny (*Schicksal*), is undone. In this sudden instant, the formless threatens all established forms, the meaning structure is broken up.

Divine violence in Benjamin’s terms is the opposite of mythical violence, but this is not to be understood as a dialectical opposition. Rather, divine violence breaks the dialectic of law-making and law-preserving violence rooted in the manifestation of force whereby mythical violence sets down lines to which those subjected to that legal force are already guilty through transgression (Benjamin 1986, pp. 295–6; see Derrida 1992, pp. 51–53). It is a divine violence manifesting just ends (Benjamin 1986, p. 294), which is beyond the rational and the mythical. As such, it manifests an interruptive moment, a moment that can escape history, escape the ruination of time. But above all, such divine violence demonstrates the contingency of that constancy and continuity, that established passage of time, which is all the mythical sight sees. In other words, the divine violence arises out of that interval of time where both individuals and communities are left helpless and find themselves dependent. Again, there is an inherent ambiguity here

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516 where helplessness is both in the face of a horrible violence and at the
517 origin of any human expression and human life.

518 Conclusion

519 Violence in its very destructiveness opens up that groundless space in
520 which meaning first becomes possible. As Arendt makes clear, however,
521 violence alone cannot be creative of sense (Arendt 1970, p. 51). What we
522 find in violence is the *apeiron*, the contingency of boundaries and hence
523 all identities, and in that contingency is the limitless domain of possible
524 futures liberated in the traumatic moment from the habituated past.
525 Such a 'liberation' may give space for no possible meaning, leave the self
526 without selfhood, a being without world, at the very margins of human
527 existence. Yet, the *exaiphnes*, the sudden, shocking perhaps horrific
528 moment, that lacuna which remains inaccessible to the self who attempts
529 to respond to it, discloses that hinge of time, for the most part hidden,
530 without which nothing new, no expression of sense is at all possible.
531 Without it the human would be like Plato's heavenly bodies 'ever abiding
532 and revolving after the same manner and on the same spot' (Plato 1961b,
533 40b7). The violent disrupts such tranquillity in revealing the relation of
534 dependence, vulnerability and helplessness of the human in relation to
535 the world. In so doing, it demonstrates the contingent origins of sense for
536 both the individual and the community in 'thrownness' (Heidegger). The
537 'recovery' from such violence is never a regaining of a past world, a past
538 world which in the case of extreme violence—in the case of the annihilat-
539 ing force which threatens any worldly sense—has been shattered. The
540 lacuna, the interval, is not without sense, however. It demonstrates a fun-
541 damental contingency of meaning rooted in the manner in which tempo-
542 ral constitution of sense always leaves a gap, an interval, that which in the
543 rhythm of time remains unheard until it is violently brought to the fore
544 in the unexpected. Falling into the unexpected, the catastrophic, the
545 individual ~~and~~ or the community finds itself responding to an
already-
546 suddenly unleashed future and a temporal initiation before all delibera-
547 tion and projection of meaning.

Notes

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1. Dastur (2000) gives a powerful phenomenology of the surprising, but understands the surprising as a general term for what I am here distinguishing as the surprising, shocking and horrific. But the shocking and the horrific are themselves partly constituted by the surprising.
2. Husserl notes himself that continuity is a paradigm here. See Husserl (2001, p. 48).
3. The relation between this discussion and the later account of the chora in the *Timaeus* cannot be pursued here.

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