On March 23, 2007, I spoke at an event sponsored by New York University, Columbia University, and the Slought Foundation commemorating Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe. Since, I believed, I had been invited to contribute “intellectual-autobiographical” remarks, I did not write out a text. There were a thousand ways in which I could have begun my speech; so, like the narrator in E. T. A. Hoffmann’s “Der Sandman,” I decided not to begin at all. As I listened to the ten eminent and articulate speakers before me read carefully composed texts, I began to wonder how I could have permitted myself to stand up before them with only a piece of paper with some notes. I realized, though, that I had not written a text in part because I was faced with a genre I did not understand: I did not know how to mourn Lacoue-Labarthe. Gathering together my remarks and subsequent thoughts here, I am faced with the same uncertainty about genre. Is this a eulogy? A personal memoir? An intellectual tribute?

Both Novalis’s Heinrich and Hoffmann’s narrator contend with the wrenching moment of articulation—the awesome and awful breaking into language that tears apart any image or delusion of a safe and secure origin. Hoffmann writes: “Have you ever experienced anything that completely took possession of your heart and mind and thoughts to the utter exclusion of everything else—All was seething and boiling within you; your blood, heated to a fever pitch, leaped through your veins and inflamed your cheeks. . . . Yet every word and everything that partook of the nature of communication by intelligible sounds seemed to be colorless, cold, and dead. Then you try and try again, and stutter and stammer.”

* Special thanks to Susan White and Paige Sarlin.
1. “Hast du, Geneigtester! wohl jemals etwas erlebt, das deine Brust, Sinn und Gedanken ganz und gar erfüllte, alles andere daraus verdrängend? Es gärte und kochte in dir, zur siedenden Glut entzündet sprang das Blut durch die Adern und färbte höher deine Wangen. . . . Doch jedes Wort, alles was Rede vermag, schien dir farblos und frostig und tot. Du suchst und suchst, und stotterst und stammelst.”
After outlining several tentative beginnings, the narrator continues to explain, “I could not find any words which seemed fitted to reflect in even the feeblest degree the brightness of the colors of my mental vision. I determined not to begin at all.” This interruptive reflection in Hoffmann’s text, many will recall, constitutes the disjointed narrative frame that Freud could not contend with, and flatly ignored, in his treatment of “The Sandman” in his essay on the uncanny. It points to the constitutive disruption of subjectivity in writing that was such a constant interest to Lacoue-Labarthe—the caesura, the rhythm, the syncopation of the experience of finitude. In all of Lacoue-Labarthe’s work, I have probably been most fascinated by his treatments of the problems of subjectivity: of its nonoriginality, of its becoming aware of itself through the experience of others, of the echoing and resonance constitutive of intellectual identity—of our debt and discovery of ourselves elsewhere, of our absence to ourselves and ultimate impotence. The ways in which we emerge through writing—in a tradition, in quotation, in repetition and rewriting—name the very conditions of finitude that the narrative problem of “The Sandman” makes manifest.

* 

In 1983 Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Michel Foucault were both visiting professors at University of California, Berkeley. It was Philippe’s first semester there and Foucault’s last. They had never met. (They did finally meet when they were on the same plane back to Paris at the end of that semester.) Somehow I ended up in both of those seminars. You can imagine how important it made me feel as a young graduate student to be the secret informant between Lacoue-Labarthe and Foucault, who both asked what was going on in the other’s seminar. At the time I was myself very off track, lost in a mire of draconian course requirements in the Comparative Literature program at Berkeley, according to which neither of those seminars “counted.” I had forgotten—mostly what I had forgotten was philosophy—and Philippe appeared just in time to remind me about thinking and about caring about thinking. So it was something of a thunderbolt, a Hölderlinian moment.

In thinking over the many themes, terms, and topics that are important to all of us in Lacoue-Labarthe’s writing, I am reminded of a Schlegel fragment that says, “In true prose everything must be underlined.” Really everything would have to be underlined, but when I...
happened to meet him—a semester we once referred to as “l’âge héroïque”—I was intensely swept up in the deep adventures of the vertigo of subjectivity with which he was so concerned.

While the graduate seminar that fall, dealing with much of what appeared as La Fiction du Politique, was well populated by the graduate students of the French Department, I had the unusual experience of taking his undergraduate seminar at the same time—a course on Baudelaire and Wagner attended by me, an undergraduate, and Barbara Freeman, a sometime-visitor from Santa Cruz, and her tape recorder. I mention this particularly because no one really knew this seminar was going on; it was the place where I first got on the track of what was to become my dissertation and my first book, which allowed me to continue in the institution. I am very grateful for what I learned in that seminar and was moved to hear that Philippe had quoted Baudelaire in this late text that Claire Nancy shared with us this evening.

The seminar was virtually a series of private lessons presenting Philippe’s reading of a certain history of aesthetics, theory of history, and emergence of écriture from Plato through Denis Diderot and Friedrich Hölderlin to the strange agôn he developed between Charles Baudelaire and Richard Wagner. In his work on Baudelaire and Wagner, Lacoue-Labarthe articulates the competition among the arts for the dominant position and origin of the power of figuration and embodiment as the very power of art itself. In the drama of recognition, self-loss, and appropriation, Baudelaire attributes the prize to music insofar as it delivers the sensation of space itself. “What it offers first of all,” Lacoue-Labarthe writes, “is the pure form a priori of sensual intuition—space, here depth—which is in effect neither material nor spiritual. Music, in other words, carries aesthesis to its limit: It gives the sensation, infinitely paradoxical, of the very condition of all sensation . . . that is to say, the pure possibility of presentation itself in general.”

While Lacoue-Labarthe analyzes the struggle over the power and position of origination, my work focuses on Franz Liszt as the musical translator par excellence, a figure not of origin but of transmission. Appearing as a translator of Wagner in Baudelaire’s essay on Wagner, Liszt is a disseminating and disfiguring figure—that is, a figure with no proper identity or interiority. Baudelaire invokes him to detail the theory of the leitmotif and to prefigure Baudelaire’s “own” theory of correspondence in the following way: “Here I will hand over the word to Liszt, whose book (Lohengrin et Tannhäuser) I recommend to all those who love profound and redefined art, and who, despite the somewhat bizarre language he affects—a species of idiom composed of extracts of several languages—knows how to translate with infinite

charm the full range of the master’s rhetoric.” Liszt is presented not as a “master” of ideas, but as a performer, a translator, an agent not of logos but of lexis.

Liszt holds open the difference across time and space between subject positions and their favored art forms, between composition and realization, between self and other. In the prose poem “Le Thyrse,” dedicated to Liszt, the positions of Baudelaire and Liszt are both held together and separated through the extension of the form of address, a rhetorical gesture spanning the materiality of writing and the process of translation. (The “and” of Baudelaire and Liszt is of course strongly reiterated in the conjunction of Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy, whose *L’Absolu Littéraire* remains foundational for me—what Werner Hamacher has called “the best book on German Romanticism.”) Despite his claim to join Liszt in immortality, Baudelaire underscores the finitude of differences—of different media, different individuals, and the different languages requiring translation: “Dear Liszt, through the mists, beyond the rivers, above the distant cities where the pianos sing your glory, where the printing press translates your wisdom. . . . I salute you in immortality!” Liszt thus stresses what Lacoue-Labarthe has identified as the “hantise” of music, the “affûtement” it threatens, as the experience of “deappropriation”: “But for Baudelaire it is as if the effect of music were necessarily abyssal—‘vertiginous,’ he says. . . . Listening is an ordeal of dispossession or deappropriation.” The musical experience—or music “as” experience—points to the impossibility of self-conception: the self cannot create itself, nor fully conceive of itself. This “vertigo” was of course one of Philippe’s obsessions; its articulation ranges from the critique of German Idealism and Romanticism (the foundering of philosophical exposition in its literary exposure), through the early essays, “Typographie” and “L’Echo du sujet,” for example, to the later writings on the caesura. It would be hard to find any of his texts that would be free of this concern.

I think of Philippe as a very important translator, bringing German literature and philosophy across the border into Strasbourg, itself a place neither exactly French nor German, and into the French and Comparative Literature departments of the United States. We all know Philippe was a significant translator, from Hölderlin’s German-Greek and from Walter Benjamin’s German. I recall this line from Benjamin’s essay on translation: “Translation does not find itself in the center of the language forest but on the outside facing the wooded ridge. It calls into it
without entering, aiming at that single spot where the echo is able to give in its own language the reverberation of the work in the alien one.”

This, to me, very much describes the effect of working with Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe. Most important for me was Lacoue-Labarthe’s presentation of Martin Heidegger. (Here I am echoing the remarks of Eckart Goebel, who articulated beautifully Lacoue-Labarthe’s contributions in this area.) I had been trained primarily in German literature and philosophy, partly in Germany; I was utterly unable to read Heidegger until I encountered him through Lacoue-Labarthe. I have him to thank for breaking up the hypersaturation of Heidegger’s German, creating an interruption or hiatus that opened up possibilities I had not seen before. His careful teaching of Heidegger was punctuated by German and Greek words written on the board; his exposition led us—a class of philosophical novices—painstakingly through the forest of fundamental ontology that, refracted through Lacoue-Labarthe’s French, no longer felt like hopeless tautology. I have him to thank for articulating a philosophical framework for exploring what I knew could not possibly be only my own deep ambivalence about the German tradition, and opening up for us so openly and directly the questions of Nazism and Heidegger’s guilt, at the same time appreciating and continuing Heidegger’s work in the destruction of metaphysics, the thinking of finitude, of being, of language. This is something I had never experienced before, and which made it possible for me and I know for many others to read Heidegger. Lacoue-Labarthe’s powerful theorization of Heidegger’s philosophy and its relation to Western art and politics makes it impossible to delimit the “evil” to a single nation or to identify a perpetrator who can be seen to be wholly “other” to the metaphysical tradition in general. He communicated to us, his students, an intense ethical concern with our recent past and our philosophical heritage.

According to Benjamin, translation is a secondary activity of supplementation parallel to that of the virtuoso epitomized by Liszt. In its survival in translation, the original changes, yet nothing quite new is created. Translation signals a continued unfolding of the original. The generation of a position or identity through the translation of a tradition thus creates a nondialectical relation which might open a possibility of change. Lacoue-Labarthe has traced this itinerary especially through Hölderlin, who might stand in the spot in which the axes of translation, of musical transmission, and interpretation or handing down most poignantly intersect. He suggests a relation to Hölderlin analogous to Hölderlin’s relation to the Greeks articulated through the figures of repetition,

echo, and resonance. The distorting and deconstructive effects of these terms culminate precisely in the “enterprise of translation.” Lacoue-Labarthe underscores that translation is essentially a rewriting—that is, a process always pointing to its own secondariness, supplementarity, historical dispersion, and extension: “For it was a matter of making Greek art say what it had not said—not in the manner of a kind of hermeneutics attempting to find the implicit in its discourse, but in quite a different manner, one for which I doubt very much that we as yet have a category. It was a matter of making it say by this means, quite simply, that which was said (but) as that which was not said: the same thing, then, in its difference [en différence]. En diapheron heauto.”

Philippe constantly presented his working-through of these relationships, and perhaps his secret lies most painfully in his identification with Hölderlin, exercised most strongly in his translation of Hölderlin’s translation of Sophocles, which Benjamin offers us as an example of what is strictly untranslatable. In undertaking such a project, Lacoue-Labarthe opens himself to the danger of the caesura itself—the “event” that opens and closes history—or, as Benjamin writes, the silences of translation; for Hölderlin’s translations, Benjamin writes, “are subject to the enormous danger inherent in all translations: The gates of a language thus expanded and modified may slam shut and enclose the translator with silence. . . . In them, meaning plunges from abyss to abyss until it threatens to become lost in the bottomless depths of language. There is, however, a stop [Halten].” Perhaps this Halten, this stopping and holding, can begin to help us understand this strange commemorative genre.

*  

Finally, I want to appreciate and thank Philippe for his carefulness, his attention, his generosity, his humor, his seriousness, his sobriety, his drunkenness. All of these traits are concatenated in what Philippe has called the enrhythming of the self, its dislocation and agitations, “laughter and tears . . . all those emotions . . . in which consciousness disappears and the body is in spasms, where is produced a suspension or a fundamental and rending


'caesura,' all of them are perhaps of the order of l’émoi.”¹² This motion and emotion punctuate the dissemination and unfolding of translation, transmission, and the work of identification and differentiation. “But it is perhaps simply a rhythm in which ‘I’ seek desperately to recognize ‘myself.’”¹³ Thanks.


¹³ “Mais c’est peut-être un rythme simplement où ‘je’ cherche désespérément à me reconnaître.” Lacoue-Labarthe, Le sujet de la philosophie, p. 293; trans. in Lacoue-Labarthe, Typography, p. 203.