Interpretation, Dialogue, and Friendship: On the Remainder of Community

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The concept of tradition has a long and overdetermined history in the descent of Western thought, articulated first in classical thought from Socrates to Lucretius as a sacred past with which philosophy must rupture in order to gain access to its truth—an account framed, that is, in the "ancient quarrel" between λόγος and μυθος itself. The medievals' refiguration of philosophy perhaps only apparently broke with these contraints, albeit by attempting, beginning with Irenaeus and Tertullian, to revalorize the notion of traditio, of the παράδοσις, by rational warrant. The result was a formalized notion of the ordo traditio itself, safeguarding what must be remembered as true and handed down from generation to generation: preserving it, that is, from false interpretations or heresy.

It would be naive however to think that either the concept of tradition or the sacred past it articulates simply disappear from philosophical modernism—any more than, as Claude Lefort has decisively shown, the religious simply disappears from modern conceptions of the political.¹ Notwithstanding modernist outcries against what Hobbes, for example, already criticized as "vain" or "fabulous tradition" and "uncertain history," both the sacred and tradition became obscurely refigured not
only in such obvious tropes as Newton's account of space as the divine *sensorium*, but portentously in other more surprising places, for example, in Hobbes' own admonition that, lest we fall into muddled linguistic nonsense, we must remember what the original meanings named—as if all, and only, those meanings lexically completed the rational and linguistic universe. Nor of course would it simply overdetermine philosophy's narratives of the rational. As Michel Serres has aptly noted, the figure of the divine *sensorium* would be as appropriate for the classical novel as it would be for Newton's physics. "The classical novel has the same history as the physics of this age"—both, that is, determinist and determined, a system with a hierarchy, a closed narrative, homogeneous, open to evaluation on all points, regulated as much locally as it is globally. Indeed, Kant's transcendental aesthetic would epistemically re instituted this unity, now as a field of experiential determination—one which reduced not only the domain of the sacred, but both the "experienced" and the true, under the constraints of the certainty by which it equally figured re-presentation. Moreover, as is now all too fully evident, the narratives of the political would be similarly invested. The transcendence and indeterminacy of the sacred would now simply be invested in such (figured) concepts as the "nation" and its "people". Nor, finally, should we neglect the complexity of the cross-fertilization here. We should not in this regard forget the mythic investments of the inductive method itself as a political figure in the tropes of philosophical modernism, as writers from Burke to Popper attested. The problem of traditions is doubtless inseparable from such forgetfulness before the past. Science itself, as Popper did realize, was not only inseparable from both myth and tradition, but was in fact part of a critical tradition to be traced from Socrates himself (and onwards to Derrida), and similarly was inseparable from attempts to grapple with (and to circumscribe) the sacred. Pointedly, even Bakhtin's attempts to elevate the revolutionary potential of the novel's articulation of the everyday had been similarly invested: while the epic would be linked by him to tradition, the novel, seemingly beyond all traditional forms, became linked explicitly to prediction—albeit only by means of a "quite specific problematicalness: characteristic for it is an eternal re-thinking and re-evaluating." 

In simply raising such matters, we consequently invoke the problem of historical distance and a certain re-move from origins which accompanies the descent of the concept of tradition and the splitting of the rational in the wake of such ruins. And Kant was perhaps the first to theoretically recognize it, in his Transcendental Dialectic. There, in summarizing what he termed the status of "the ruins of the ancient