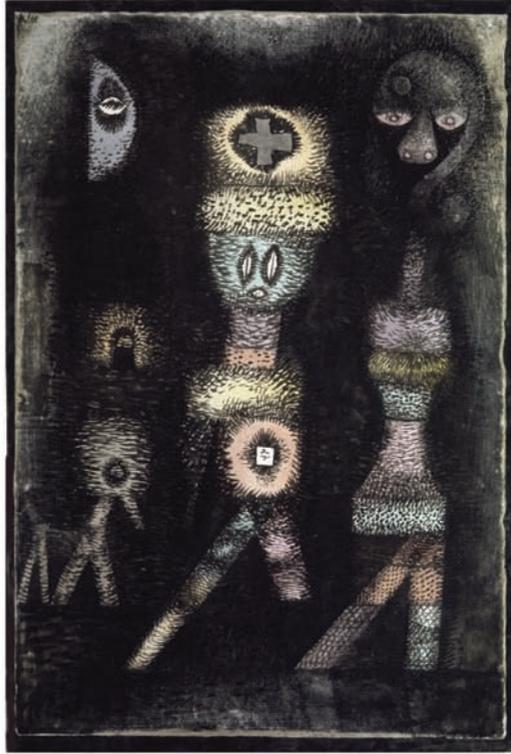


afterness



figures of following
in modern thought
and aesthetics

gerhard richter

A F T E R N E S S

Afterness

FIGURES OF FOLLOWING IN MODERN THOUGHT
AND AESTHETICS

GERHARD RICHTER

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After philosophy comes philosophy. But it is altered by the after.

—Jean-François Lyotard

Even the death of Christ was only his beginning.

—Ernst Bloch

Only the How is repeatable. The past—experienced as actual historicity—is anything but the Over [*das Vorbei*].

—Martin Heidegger

Modernity exists in the form of a desire to wipe out whatever came earlier, in the hope of reaching at last a point that could be called a true present, a point of origin that marks a new departure.

—Paul de Man

Contents

- Introduction: The Logic of Afterness 1
1. Afterness and Modernity: A Genealogical Note 27
 2. Afterness and Critique: A Paradigmatic Case 39
 3. Afterness and Aesthetics: End Without End 54
 4. Afterness and *Rettung*: Can Anything Be Rescued by Defending It? 72
 5. Afterness and Translation: The Politics of Carrying Across 88
 6. Afterness and the Image (I): Unsettling Photography 118
 7. Afterness and the Image (II): Image Withdrawal 139
 8. Afterness and Experience (I): Can Hope Be Disappointed? 154
 9. Afterness and Experience (II): Crude Thinking Rethought 169
 10. Afterness and Experience (III): Mourning, Memory, and the Fictions of Anteriority 186
 11. Afterness and Empty Space: No Longer and Not Yet 199
- Afterwards: After-Words 206

Acknowledgments 211

Notes 213

Index 247

A F T E R N E S S

Introduction

The Logic of Afterness

As a recent doctoral student discussed with me how best to structure his dissertation, the contours of which were only beginning to take shape, he suggested writing an introduction followed by the individual chapters. Almost without hesitation, I replied by articulating a largely unspoken writerly strategy. To the great bafflement of my student—who up to that point had never written a book-length text—I advised against his plan, explaining that introductions almost always are written *after* the fact, in other words, *last*. What experienced writers know—that introductions come first but almost always are composed as an afterthought to what already has been written—bespeaks an irreducible belatedness in language and thought. That which introduces, points forward to, explains, and situates something that is not yet present always already will have been preceded by what it itself claims to precede. Hovering between proceeding and preceding, introductions are retroactively invented by what they tacitly claim to call into presence, an *after* in the guise of another temporality, another allegiance, another direction.

It is no different with the present introduction, whose pages will have been written after the chapters that follow it had long since been completed.

Why start the book with this basic reflection on the relationship between the before and the after, between preceding and following? By commenting on the situatedness of the introduction in the wake of an *after* that actually is a *before*, and a *before* that is actually an *after*, we have already entered the terrain that this study wishes to delimit, interrogate, engage in, and contextualize in ever-shifting modulations, media, frames of reference, and conceptual registers.

After all, this book is concerned with a particular figure of modernity, that of following, coming after, having survived, outlived, or succeeded something or someone: what in broad terms I wish to call *afterness*. But what does it really mean for something to “follow” something else, either in language or as a concept? Can the “after” ever fully emancipate itself from its predecessor, or does it in fact remain in the latter’s ghostly and largely unacknowledged debt? The after is not merely a temporal dimension. A sustained reading of afterness has far-reaching implications for how we view the thought, aesthetic production, and ethico-political concerns of modernity—from the afterness of Kant’s Copernican revolution in speculative thought (yielding, in his view, a genuinely *critical* philosophy after the phases of its *dogmatic* allegiances) to a postlapsarian Western culture famously said to come “after Auschwitz.” But our understanding of the after itself first must be understood. Interrogating this understanding without explaining away its irreducible difficulties and its resistances to understanding by pretending to know what the after is in advance of this or that particular manifestation is the task of this study.

Not a history of afterness in which one after is assumed simply to follow a previous after in a teleo-chronological succession of afters, this study instead is concerned with certain *structural* and *conceptual* features of afterness that traverse the spectral reverberations of any act of following. A useful way of conceptualizing the problem to which my investigation of afterness attempts to respond is to recall Walter Benjamin’s preoccupation with the concept of *Nachleben* (living on, living after, surviving, afterlife, or following) in modernity. Drawing on art historian Aby Warburg’s coinage of the term *Nachleben* in the field of iconography and in the context of a revolutionary theory of the history of art and aesthetics, Benjamin was attracted to the idea that works, lives, languages, and media possess a historicity that cannot be reduced to the continuum of temporal unfolding preferred by the nineteenth-century German historicism associated with such proper names

as Leopold von Ranke. As the French art historian Georges Didi-Huberman reminds us, in “Warburg’s work, the term *Nachleben* refers to the survival (the continuity or afterlife and metamorphosis) of images and motifs—as opposed to their renaissance after extinction or, conversely, their replacement by innovations in image and motif.” He continues: “Almost every section of Warburg’s *Kulturwissenschaftliche Bibliothek* opens with a collection of documents related to artistic survivals,” yielding a conception of *Nachleben* that “must profoundly alter, if taken seriously, our understanding of what a historical phenomenon or fact is.”¹

Although Warburg’s introduction of concepts such as *das Nachleben der Antike*, or “the afterlife of antiquity,” as an art historical category would serve as a touchstone for art historians and theorists as heterogeneous as Ernst Gombrich, Erwin Panofsky, and Fritz Saxl, Benjamin’s later mobilization of *Nachleben* would effect an even more radical, enigmatic, and encompassing transformation of the philosophy of history and modernity. From Benjamin’s perspective, the concept of *Nachleben* inflects the fates of art, media, history, philosophy, and the ethico-political dimensions of modernity. He articulates these concerns in their most advanced formulations in the notes that comprise *The Arcades Project*. There, in the section on the theory of knowledge, Benjamin explains his conception:

Geschichtliches “Verstehen” ist grundsätzlich als ein Nachleben des Verstandnen zu fassen und daher ist dasjenige was in der Analyse des “Nachlebens der Werke,” des “Ruhmes” erkannt wurde, als die Grundlage der Geschichte überhaupt zu betrachten.

[Historical “understanding” is to be grasped, fundamentally, as an afterlife of that which is understood; and what has been recognized in the analysis of the “afterlife of works,” in the analysis of “fame,” is therefore to be considered the foundation of history in general.]²

If the task of historical understanding first of all is to understand what understanding means—that is, to presuppose a theory of interpretation or even a radical hermeneutics—then, for Benjamin, the *Verstehen* that is to be grasped (*zu fassen*) must be sought in the *Nachleben* in which a work or an idea first becomes recognizable as the challenge and provocation that it is. This understanding of understanding unfolds in the spectral mode of its afterlife, when its putative moment of cognition has long passed. The

foundational moment of historical understanding, what Benjamin terms the *Grundlage der Geschichte überhaupt*, would therefore not be a moment of presence, lucidity, and transparent awareness of an object that is available and identical to itself, but rather would call for a rigorous engagement with that which, within a work or text, bespeaks a radical nonsynchronicity of understanding.

What *Nachleben* evokes is not merely a reconsideration of the historical but a repetition of understanding that gives what was presumed to have been understood over to historical understanding in ever-new and unpredictable ways. *Nachleben* therefore is the figure of a repetition that does not repeat, a living on and after that both remains attached to what came before and, precisely through an analysis of that abiding yet often invisible attachment, departs from it in ever-new directions.

To the extent that *Nachleben* requires us to think in a nonsynchronist, nonpresentist manner, every encounter with an object or a thought also must be read in terms of what it is no longer and what it is not yet—that is to say, in terms of the object's or thought's fore- and after-history. This fore- and after-history calls upon us, in the elusive critical act, both to read what is no longer and to read what was never written. As Benjamin argues, it “is the present that polarizes the event into fore- and after-history [*die Gegenwart, die das Geschehen in Vor- und Nachgeschichte polarisiert*].”³³ He expands on this conception when he writes that the “present determines where, in the object from the past, that object's fore-history and after-history diverge in order to circumscribe its nucleus.”³⁴ If *Nachleben* teaches us to think in terms of *Vorgeschichte* and *Nachgeschichte*, it thereby also teaches us that the experience of historical time is never that of presence alone. The after upon which *Nachleben* and *Nachgeschichte* pivot is the site where temporal experience (and there can be no other) is beckoned, even fundamentally determined, by an elsewhere, an intuition that the object or thought under scrutiny cannot yet (or no longer) be fully understood, because the moment of its actuality is never lodged in the *Gegenwart* of its presence or present tense. In this way, there can be no *Nachleben*, and no engagement with a fore-history and an after-history, that does not require us to learn to engage with absolute absence—either in the guise of the “no longer” or in the form of a nonanticipatable “not yet.” Thought here becomes a form of living on, a mode of survival in a world in which nothing ever is what it seems.

One of the lessons to be drawn from this analysis is that the most fruitful historical inquiry is one whose primary interests are invested *elsewhere*. As Benjamin suggests:

Für den materialistischen Historiker ist jede Epoche, mit der er sich beschäftigt, nur Vorgeschichte derer, um die es ihm selber geht. Und eben darum gibt es für ihn in der Geschichte den Schein der Wiederholung nicht, weil eben die ihm am meisten angelegenen Momente des Geschichtsverlaufs durch ihren Index als “Vorgeschichte” Momente dieser Gegenwart selber werden und je nach dieser katastrophaler oder siegreicher Bestimmung ihren eignen Character ändern.

[For the materialist historian, every epoch with which he occupies himself is only fore-history with respect to the one that really matters to him. And this is why, for him, there can be no semblance of repetition in history, because precisely those moments in the course of history that matter most to him, by virtue of their index as “fore-history,” become moments of this present itself and change their specific character according to whether this determination is catastrophic or triumphant.]⁵

If the time with which the historian is concerned is always only the *Vorgeschichte* to something else—perhaps not unlike Benjamin’s own nonsynchronous engagement with the German baroque mourning play as an index of modernity as such, or his later obsession with Baudelaire’s Paris of the nineteenth century as a fore-history to the issues that preoccupied him throughout the late 1920s and the 1930s—then that which is at hand, even in the moment of its “present” analysis, deserves to be conceptualized also as an after, an after-history or afterthought to something that in the moment of reflection still remains to be written.

Benjamin himself furnishes us throughout his work with reverberations and direct as well as indirect echoes of the figure of *Nachleben* that, taken together, conspire to yield something akin to the task of the critic. Among these variously modulated mobilizations are his conception of a *Nachleben* of works through quotation, whereby a work lives on precisely when parts of it have been isolated and more or less violently extracted from their so-called original context in such a way as to signify in completely foreign, always un-anticipatable contexts (a fate to which all language—as a system of iteration and iterability—is subject). Forms of *Nachleben* also are at work in, among other areas, Benjamin’s analyses of technical reproducibility in visual media such as film and photography, in his engagements with Bertolt Brecht’s epic theater and its tendency to make gestures “citable” and thus repeatable in works to come, and in the tenacious survival of theological motifs and figures of

thought even after the undoing of theology as a category of insight. In “The Task of the Translator,” *Nachleben* is enriched by such semantic neighbors as *Nachreifen*, or “after-ripening,” a gradual ripening of language after the fact; *Überleben*, or “surviving”; and *Fortleben*, or “living on,” to designate the structural fate of language when seen from the perspective of its translation and translatability with respect to the demands of *reine Sprache*, “pure language.”⁶ The particular *Nachleben* that is the *Überleben* of a text translates and cites language as language, indeed, makes us see what language is when it carries language across into another language, or into another con-text, where a cited or translated text may survive, but no longer simply as itself.

Taking my point of departure from, while at the same time reaching beyond, Benjamin’s own preoccupations, I wish to suggest that the manifold implications of a wrestling with the ghostly *Nach* may be put to work under the auspices of a general and expanded concept of afterness in which what has superseded or outlived remains intricately indebted to the very thing it has outlived or overcome. There can be no after without a debt, an unsettled relation, a haunting. It is to this constellation of the after that the present book returns again and again—from ever-shifting perspectives and in ever-changing specific contexts and exemplarities, in different media, in response to different historical exigencies, and in relation to specific texts by a variety of heterogeneous writers, thinkers, and artists of modernity, from eighteenth-century authors such as Kant and Schiller all the way to twentieth-century proper names such as Franz Kafka, Ernst Bloch, Martin Heidegger, Theodor W. Adorno, and Jacques Derrida. While every instance of afterness retains a singularity that resists assimilation by any conceptual “system,” each instance *also* enacts a specific figure of thought—of following or coming after—that will allow us to illuminate a more general concept of afterness.

In “Too Late,” one of the autobiographically inflected miniatures that Benjamin’s *Berlin Childhood around 1900* situates in a lyrical constellation, the subjective narrative voice finds itself suddenly seized by a memory that enacts the fundamental experience of belatedness and afterness: “The clock in the schoolyard looked damaged because of me. It read ‘too late.’ And, in the hall, through the classroom doors I brushed by, murmurs of secret deliberations reached my ears. . . . Or else all was silent, as though someone were expected. Inaudibly, I touched the door handle. Sunshine flooded the spot where I stood.” Benjamin continues: “No one seemed to know me, or even to see me. Just as the devil takes the shadow of Peter Schlemihl, the

teacher had taken my name at the beginning of the hour. I could no longer get my turn. I worked noiselessly with the others until the bell sounded. But there was no blessedness in it.³⁷ Questions of temporal experience and its relation to the measuring of time, discourses of guilt and the other, the thematics of the name, the subject, and the continual deferral of redemption are all condensed here into a scene of having-missed, of a certain dis-appointment. Writing from the perspective of a child playing on the threshold to the twentieth century, Benjamin allegorizes a fundamental mood of the discourse of modernity, one in which the unsettling feeling of always already having arrived too late gives rise to the experience of a certain after that consciousness is now forced to inhabit. Whether existing among the ruins and traces of what has long since outlived its usefulness, experiencing modernity as a process of increasing secularization, or feeling no longer entirely at home in this or that systematic world order: the after conditions whatever it is still possible to think and experience in modernity. That no blessedness lies in the awareness of this after, as Benjamin's poetic image apodictically claims, raises a number of questions that are inscribed in the heart of modernity.

"We must get accustomed to the fact that the concept is not something that simply goes without saying," we read in one of the philosopher Hans Blumenberg's posthumously published papers. As he reminds us, "to say, 'This is an elephant' presupposes the question, 'What is this?' The question is rooted in the fact that to have seen what it is and what it means, this thing that is encountered, presumed, or expected at a given time, is by no means self-evident. What can be perceived, and how it might affect our behavior, is not regulated in advance. The situation of the question, and hence that of the answer in which the concept is implied, is one of indeterminacy."³⁸ In this study, the after of afterness will prove to be just such a situation. At first sight, however, the question of the after seems to bear no relation to the purported self-evidence and everydayness of this temporal preposition. One thing follows another in a temporal sequence that appears always to have been conceptually regulated and epistemologically determined in advance. Yet: the inferiority felt by the Romans toward their own culture in comparison with Greek culture that went before it; Schelling's epoch-defining philosophy of nature, which understood itself, in a fundamental sense, as coming after Fichte's philosophy of consciousness; the long shadow of Goethe, from which later nineteenth-century German-language writers such as Keller, Stifter, Raabe, and Platen struggled to liberate themselves, since this shadow seemed to condemn them to a kind of epigonal literary existence; the "anxiety of

influence,” to evoke literary critic Harold Bloom’s once-famous phrase, felt by British Romantic poets when, in the wake of such previous canonical poetry as Milton’s, they strove desperately to devise a nonderivative, supposedly “original” poetic voice; the lyric poetry of Hölderlin, written after, and in view of, the flight of the Greek gods in modernity; the political philosophy that crystallized in the aftermath of the French Revolution; or so-called media aesthetics, which advertises itself today as an existential form coming after humanism and after the ascension of the computer to worldwide supremacy—what all these and many other variegated forms of experienced afterness have in common is that they entail far more than a simple sequential progression in time. They call upon us to view the after in a new light, one that brings its often unperceived ways of subtly channeling our habits of thought and behavior into sharper relief and demonstrates that its spectral indeterminacy can never entirely be dispelled by its apparent self-evidence.

A rigorous thinking of the after, even of an expansive, encompassing state of afterness, should not return us to the language of various “post-isms,” the “end” of this or that paradigm, or the alleged “no-longer-possibles” that have proved so irresistible to intellectuals and scholars in the course of the past few decades. Rather, something else, something more fundamental, is at stake. In reflecting upon the logic and figure of afterness in modern discourse, we are prompted to reconceive a thinking of the after as a kind of after-thought or thinking-after, a *Nach-denken*. Our interrogation of the hyphen that both separates and connects *nach* and *denken* provokes a series of questions: What is meant when one thing is said to “follow” another? Does what follows mark a clear break with what comes before, or does it paradoxically perpetuate its predecessor by remaining bound to the concepts and conditions of that from which it was thought to have taken its leave? Is not the very act of breaking with, and then following upon, a way of retroactively constructing and consolidating that which, in the instance of being farewelled, has set into motion the very movement of following? For example, by declaring their independence from the English motherland, the American colonists laid claim to an afterness that was predicated on a break with colonial authority. However, in the very act of declaring their independence, the colonists also unwittingly reaffirmed colonial authority.⁹ One breaks with something or someone—declaring and explaining one’s decision to that something or someone—only insofar as one also recognizes that something or someone as possessing the authority that would dictate the necessity of such a declaration in the first

place. A truly independent subject would have no need to justify its independence to another if that subject did not also, in the very act of asserting independence, aspire to usurp the right to make such declarations. Seen from this perspective, a break with something that gives way to a following upon it is not only itself but also its opposite—that is, both a negation of what is broken away from and at the same time an affirmation, even if through negation, of the very same thing. It is at once a negation of what is being rejected and a confirmation of the same. The question of supersession and of the after is itself contaminated by a kind of afterness, a central, if previously only peripherally articulated thought-figure in the discourse of speculative thought and modern aesthetics. Matters of following are properly matters of an afterness that holds us in its grip.

My neologism *afterness* (*Nachheit* in German) denotes a rhetorical, intellectual, and experiential phenomenon that emerges from our understanding of lateness, supersession, and posteriority. The term seems necessary insofar as related notions, such as the psychoanalytic concept of retroactivity or deferred action (*Nachträglichkeit*), for all their undisputed relevance to a thinking of afterness, cannot do justice to the full scope of the afterness phenomenon. Furthermore, the concept of afterness represents an attempt to acknowledge—in an unconventional way, to be sure—the theoretical consequences of a semantic element that is central to the German language. The extent to which the centrality of the word *nach*, or “after,” in German may or may not be replicated in other languages is a matter of secondary importance, for it may well be the case that a subterranean connection of thought-figures and possibilities is brought to light in German that in other languages—“post-” or *après*—has not been retained in this form or even may be obscured by them.

The German *nach* can be found in such variegated semiotic fields and compound nouns as *nachahmen* (to imitate), *Nachfolger* (successor), and *Nachfabre* (descendent) and in words like *nachher* (afterward), *nachgerade* (positively), *nachhaltig* (lasting), *nachträglich* (retroactive, belated), *nacheinander* (sequentially), *Nachname* (last name), *Nachfrage* (demand, follow-up), *Nachkomme* (offspring), *nachäffen* (aping), *Nachricht* (news), *Nachruf* (obituary), *Nachtsch* (dessert), *Nachdruck* (emphasis, reprint), *Nachtrag* (supplement), *Nachwort* (afterword), *Nachrede* (hearsay, defamation), *nachprüfen* (to check), *nachlässig* (careless), *Nachschlag* (second helping), *nachschlagen* (to look something up), *Nachschub* (additional supply), *nachschicken* (to forward), *Nachhall* (echo), *nacheifern* (to emulate), *nachdenken* (to contemplate, to reflect on something),