Irresistible Dictations:
A Conversation with Eduardo Cadava
Featuring David Kelman and Ben Miller

October 21, 2001

'Tis fine for us to speculate and elect our course, if we must accept an irresistible dictation.
—Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Fate" (1860)

Emerson and Continental Philosophy

BM: My first question is a short one. How do you characterize Emerson's writing: as American transcendentalist, American renaissance, American romantic? How does Emerson relate to your reading of theoretical/critical texts?

EC: I perhaps can begin to answer your question by talking about how I started reading Emerson: as background to Nietzsche. As a graduate student, I had been working on Nietzsche, Hegel, and other philosophical figures. I knew that Nietzsche had been interested in Emerson, so I started reading him and fell in love with him. Very early on, I thought of Emerson less in relation to the American Renaissance or to transcendentalism and more in relation to the invention of contemporary French philosophy via Nietzsche. Emerson distances himself from things "American" when he says, "Pray do not read American. Thought is of no nation." This is not to say that Emerson was not interested in delineating the contours of America but rather that he understood that America could be understood only in relation to other places and histories.

At the same time, there was always a debate during Emerson's time about his relation to history: he was read as **someone** who stayed away from issues of history and politics in favor of an interest in spirit, nature, and philosophical/transcendental issues. The rhetoric that was used to berate him for this presumed withdrawal from history and politics is very close to the rhetoric that often has been used to criticize Derrida and other figures in the name of moral and ethical claims. Andrews Norton, for example, wrote a text in 1838 called "The Latest Form of Infidelity," in which—in the context of suggesting that Emerson's emphasis on the ambiguities of language prevents him from engaging the world around him—he suggests that Emerson wouldn't be happy just giving a few lectures; he would want followers. He goes on to offer a hallucinatory description of what it would mean to have an Emersonian tradition of readers and writers.

For me, then, the interest in Emerson began as part of a genealogy of contemporary continental philosophy but then quickly became a means for me to think about contemporary debates over the politics of deconstruction. Emerson thinks about history and politics in terms of questions of representation and language. The virtue of addressing these issues via Emerson is that neither Emerson nor anyone else will ever write anything more in the nineteenth century. The archive is there, and we can begin to measure what he was doing historically and politically by putting his language in relation to the language of his contemporaries.

DK: In a certain sense, then, it seems that what attracted you to Emerson in the first place was this opportunity to read the archive around Emerson.

EC: Yes, that's correct. Putting Emerson's language in relation to other language—in relation to the language of his literary ancestors and contemporaries but also to the language of his time—enabled me to think about what it might mean to read a text historically and therefore what it might mean to read

contemporary theory in relation to the historical and political contexts in which it also emerged. Part of this impulse had to do with being at Irvine in the early- to mid 1980s, when graduate students were being trained in theory. Derrida was visiting; Nancy was visiting; Lyotard was visiting. In that context, and at a certain moment, I felt the need to pay more attention to the historical and political context of texts. I went through a phase in which I started reading more Marx, more Foucault, more Lukács, and so on. Having made a detour through these texts—at first out of a sense that the writers I **had** been reading perhaps were not addressing issues of history and politics as directly as I wanted them to—I then was better able to go back to these earlier texts and see how they already were engaging these issues: their texts and language already bore the traces of the era in which and against which they were writing. There was something very instructive in this particular trajectory.

Language and History

DK: Your two books were published in the same year, 1997, one on Emerson (*Emerson and the Climates of History*) and the other on Walter Benjamin (*Words of Light: Theses on the Photography of History*). Do you think about the relation between Emerson and Benjamin?

EC: Yes, all the time. Although it can be said that the books cover two figures from different historical periods and different national literatures, they both reflect my ongoing interest in the relationship between language and history, language and politics, and memory and mourning. There are, in fact, several relays between Emerson's and Benjamin's writings. They both work at the level of sentences; their writing is entirely aphoristic. Emerson is very quotable; Benjamin is very quotable; and I think there is something about this quotability, something about the movement of their language, the movement from sentence to sentence, that reinforces the discontinuity that, for each of them, not only works to interrupt the flow of writing but also accents the unpredictability of language and history.

To put it another way, I have been interested in tracing and delineating the historical physiognomy **of** their language. For example, when I was writing on Emerson, I wanted to think about his recourse to climatic and meteorological metaphors when he talked about history. And, in regard to Benjamin, I was interested in his recourse to the language of photography when he talked about history. In both instances, I was convinced that the language that each writer used to talk about history said a great deal about what he thought history was. For Emerson, the emphasis on the weather allowed him to explore the sudden changes in direction, the unpredictable transitions that, for him, characterize the movement of history. In writing about him, I wanted to find a mode of writing or a series of figures within his writing that would allow me to remain faithful to what I thought he was trying to do. I wanted to do the same thing with Benjamin: to find a way to remain faithful to his own effort to enact, within his writing, the caesura of historical events, the interruption of the movement of history that, for him, enables the emergence of the historical event. In writing the book in theses, I wanted to replicate formally this force of interruption in the movement from one thesis to another but also in the effort to recreate the experience of looking at a sequence of photographs. In each instance, I wanted to perform, within my own writing, what I think these two writers wanted us to understand.

BM: It sounds as if Emerson's performance was more difficult. Not only did he want his writing to consist of aphorisms that are quotable and memorable but he also wanted to use climatic metaphors which are about continuity, force, and predictability.

EC: The weather is only partially predictable. We talk about the cyclical nature of the seasons and the weather, and there is an eternal return of the seasons. But at the same time, what marks the weather is its unpredictability. **This** is why, for me, the interest in the weather in Emerson is related to his effort to think through the relationship between the permanent and the transitory.

DK: You mention in your book on Emerson that perhaps part of what Emerson might like about these meteorological figures is actually the word *climate* and how it comes from a word meaning *slope*.

EC: Right, it is related to the word *clinamen*.

DK: Yes, and so maybe we can translate this sloping quality into what we could call a falling quality. Do you see a falling quality in Emerson's texts? Does his prose imitate this kind of falling?

EC: I think it would depend on what you mean by "falling." A certain notion of falling could be linked to the way he performs what he wants you to understand. Emerson's writings endlessly move from one figure to another, and no figure is ever allowed to stand very long before the next one appears. Because of this movement, he is viewed as one of the great thinkers of change, metamorphosis, and transition. It seems to me that this process of falling away that you wish to link to the weather—and, of course, the weather falls from the sky—could be related to the way in which his figures are asserted only in order to withdraw as another one appears. I would associate this withdrawal of his figures to a kind of falling away, which for me would have something to do with the way in which the movement of his language always encourages us to experience what is about to vanish—life, time, nature, spirit, history. Each of these terms refers to something to which we can never **fully be** present.

His language enacts what he at one point calls "the art of perpetual retreat and reference." I think that part of the resistance to reading Emerson in this way can be attributed to the fact that his readers generally have not paid enough attention to the performative character of his writing. For example, his essay "Self-Reliance," which always has been read as Emerson's major statement on the importance of relying on oneself, is more than ninety percent quotation. In fact, it begins with an epigraph, "Do not seek outside yourself," but this epigraph is already a quote. If we pay attention to such details, we are forced to revise our entire reading of the essay. Emerson suggests that, if we want to think about what self-reliance is, then we need to begin from the point of departure that we are always, in advance, related to others and that our language is never, strictly speaking, just ours. It is only from this point of departure that we can begin to imagine what self-reliance can mean, what relying on a self that is always more than one self might mean. For Emerson, singularity can emerge only from what we inherit. This axiom is performed in the citationality of his essays.

DK: There are times, in "Fate," for instance, when his examples also take on this falling quality for me. Is it necessary to go with him through all these examples?

EC: Let me give an example from the opening pages of "Fate." There, Emerson offers a list of different conceptions of fate throughout history: Greek, Arabic, Calvinist, Turkish, Persian, Hindu, and so on. These examples very quickly serve to suggest that the concept of fate is a historical concept that has changed over time. This is important to him in his effort to go after the conception of fate that is operative during his historical moment: the concept of Manifest Destiny. Manifest Destiny is "fate" in the **midnineteenth** century. By giving us this list of examples, he lets us know that the notion of fate itself is a historical notion that shifts through time, something that enables him to unsettle the stability of the term *Manifest Destiny* **and thereby to ask us to withdraw--or fall away--from what is being done in the name of this term.**

BM: That sounds remarkably similar to why you turned to Emerson in the first place.

EC: Can you say more about that?

BM: As you said, you moved back to Emerson because the archive of deconstruction isn't complete; in the same way, Emerson turned back to this historical concept of fate in order to understand the current concept of Manifest Destiny and then to dismantle it.

EC: For Emerson, this is part of what it means to do politics. If we wish to address a contemporary political issue—a contemporary politico-historical issue—the first thing we need to acknowledge is that this issue didn't fall from the sky one troubled, cloudy day. It wasn't born in the desert. What is at stake is the possibility of reconstructing the history that has enabled a particular situation to manifest itself in this particular manner. This way of thinking about politics has many consequences for the way in which Emerson writes: he often recirculates passages that he's already written or that other people have written, sometimes with quotation marks, sometimes without them. Again, he's showing us, in the actual movement of his writing, how his language is never simply his. It bears the traces of a history that he does not control but which he nevertheless thinks he has to go through in order to protect himself from reinforcing or repeating what he wishes to criticize. This is always the danger for Emerson, and I think for Benjamin too. Because we use a language which is never just ours, this language bears the traces of everything that's been done in its name. Therefore, unless we make an effort to understand the history that's borne by this language, we run the risk of repeating, without knowing it, what we wish to overcome.

The Burden of History

BM: In your book on Emerson, you mention at one point in the chapter "Nature's Archives" that Emerson is trying not to be too burdened by history.

EC: I assume you're referring to the moment when I'm reading the opening of the essay "Nature," which begins: "Our age is retrospective. It builds the sepulchres of the fathers." Emerson here suggests that his age is too obsessed with the past, too indebted to it. This is why these opening sentences generally have been read as Emerson's plea that the American writer overcome the burden of history in order to begin to write a literature that's peculiarly American. Rather than simply shedding the burden of history, however—something that he believes is impossible—Emerson suggests that we should renegotiate our relation to this history in such a way that the past no longer determines our future **entirely**.

The confirmation of this strategy is legible in the citationality of his language, in what he calls, in "Fate," the "irresistible dictation" that moves us in this or that direction rather than another. This force of dictation suggests that we are fated, even before we think or speak, to cite someone else. In Emerson, even God quotes, something I try to demonstrate in my reading of his poem "Boston Hymn." There is a fabulous passage from Emerson's 1859 essay "Quotation and Originality" that confirms the inevitability of this structure of citationality. The essay is often neglected, and precisely because it goes against the canonized version of Emerson as Mr. Self-Reliance. The essay states explicitly that "all minds quote," that every moment is "the warp and woof" of the past and the present, and that there would be a history to the archangels if we but knew it. The originals are not original, he says. These passages suggest that Emerson does not really ask us to unburden ourselves of history. If history is a burden, it is one we must engage and pass through—not to erase it, but to mobilize it in another direction.

DK: Actually, when I was reading your chapter "Nature's Archives," I remember being confused at one point, and you're beginning to clear up that confusion. You state that there are various ways in which Emerson entangles his texts with other texts and that it's precisely this entanglement that allows Emerson to articulate the genealogy of the establishment of an institution. Or that his opening remarks in "Nature," for example, serve as a genealogical allegory of institutionalization. But then, how does that moment of entanglement also function as a critical force? How does it also have a critical force?

EC: In my reading of the opening of "Nature"—the moment when Emerson says, "Our age is retrospective. It builds the sepulchres of the fathers"—one of the things I suggest is that this opening alludes to a speech by [Daniel] Webster where Webster, addressing an audience at the groundbreaking ceremony of the Bunker Hill monument, proclaims: "We are among the sepulchres of our fathers." I try to show

that the transformation that Emerson effects on the citation from Webster becomes a means for us to measure Emerson's politics. When he transforms the "We are among the sepulchres of our fathers" to "Our age is retrospective. It builds the sepulchres of *the* fathers"—by changing "our fathers" to "*the* fathers"— he indicts Webster for a certain kind of cultural provincialism as well as for trying to establish a tradition of authority that is patriarchal. For Emerson, the Revolution was a revolution against patriarchy.

In altering Webster's language, Emerson seeks to alter much more than just language. He wishes to change the relations in which we live. In seeking to measure the political force of Emerson's passage—what you are calling its "critical force"—we need to track not just its evocation of Webster but also its evocation of Thomas Paine and the Bible. Only by putting his language in relation to other language—only by situating it in relation to the contexts in which it was produced—can we begin to approach what his writing seeks to accomplish.

It is important to register, however, that no matter how much Emerson may try to mobilize his language in a particular direction, he knows he can't entirely control or direct its effects. What he can do, though, is work to multiply the possibilities of his language in such a way that his language can never be fixed within a particular context. This is why the ambiguities of his language require, as he puts it in "The American Scholar," "creative reading as well as creative writing." This act of reading involves a labor of invention, but a labor of invention that asks us to situate the language we're reading in relation to the historical and material conditions in which it was produced. This doesn't mean that these conditions are restricted to a particular historical **period**. For Emerson, any given historical period opens onto all of history. If one really wants to know what he is trying to do in addressing the emergence of secondary institutions, factories, plantations, etc. in the 1830s, then one needs to have a sense of, among other things, the way in which Webster's language seeks to mobilize the rhetoric of the founding fathers against the revolutionary force of the Revolution itself and the way in which labor groups already were using the rhetoric of the Revolution to different effect.

To measure the ethicopolitical stakes of Emerson's writings, then, we must take seriously his claim that, if we read a sentence properly, it can become as broad as the world. He repeatedly invites us to reconstruct the world that makes his sentences possible. If we seek to delineate that world, and we situate ourselves in relation to it, then we need to think about how situating ourselves in relation to this world furthers freedom or oppression. According to Emerson, these are things that we can never know in advance. Nevertheless, in order to minimize the chances that we may reproduce what we wish to criticize, we have to pursue this genealogical, historical work.

DK: Do you think that Emerson is taking on an active, critical role in rewriting what he inherits, or is this just something that happens to him because he has that library in his head? Maybe what you're suggesting now is that, on the one hand, in the "Self-Reliance" essay, where he cites something . . .

EC: . . . "Do not take yourself outside yourself" . . .

DK: . . . and uses that as . . .

EC: . . . the epigraph to an essay on self-reliance . . .

DK: Yes, on the one hand, consciously citing or referring but, on the other hand, using this activity as an invitation for us to keep reading, to continue to read his own rhetoric, to be able to read the world that makes that rhetoric possible.

EC: This has to do with Emerson's understanding of the historicopolitical stakes of reading: he believes that how people read texts, people, events, etc. has consequences in the world. He wants us to undergo a kind of training in reading. His language resists us, it provokes us, it challenges us, it insists on its mobility in order to keep us from being able to fix it. He wants us to experience the difficulty of reading. He wants us to understand our relation to the uncertainty of our existence, and to our finitude, and he does this for political, historical, and ethical reasons. If he can encourage us to be attentive to the complexity of our everyday life, to understand how much we do not yet know, he thinks we will be less

likely to impose ourselves and our convictions on other people. It is this force of imposition that is for him the inaugural moment of a certain kind of violence.

BM: Going back to what you said about Emerson's essay "Quotation and Originality," where you paraphrase Emerson as saying "if we but knew the history." I get stuck on this, because it suggests that these acts of quotation are unknowing, maybe unconscious.

EC: I remember being asked once by Bernard Bailyn about this. In response to my reading of the opening of "Nature," he asked, "Do you really think Emerson just sat down one day with these passages before him and came up with these sentences?" I think the best way to answer Bailyn was simply to say "yes and no," which suggests that Emerson was not in full control of his language when he wrote the initial sentences of his essay. When he says in his essay "Self-Reliance" that we should not speak of self-reliance, that self-reliance is a poor way of speaking, he makes a similar point. It's a poor way of describing what it means to rely on oneself because, for him, the self is composed of all its relations to history, to community, to others. As I've already suggested, the self is never simply itself. What would it mean, therefore, to rely on yourself if your self is never just *your* self?

The paradox around which much of Emerson's writing is organized is that, on the one hand, we are who we are because of our relations to others. But, on the other hand, it's because of our relations to others that we are never simply ourselves. It's in this tension, this oscillation between being ourselves and not being ourselves, that responsibilities form. This is why we must make an effort to reconstruct the history that has left its traces in our language, even as we know that any effort to reconstruct that history will never be able to cover that field entirely. Nevertheless, even if we know that any reconstruction is going to be marked politically, historically, economically, we are still obliged to reconstruct that history to the best of our ability. Reconstructing this history is no guarantee that we won't repeat it but, as I've already suggested, it is the only guard—the only possible guard— against simply repeating history without any differences.

Context and Responsibility

DK: In your essay that was published by *Assemblage* in 1993, "*Leseblitz*: On the Threshold of Violence," you discuss the possibility of thinking "about 'context' in general in a different way" ("**Leseblitz**," 22). At a certain point, in fact, you suggest that the reconstruction of a context will enact a certain violence and repression, but that it's precisely because of this repression that it leads to an essential nonviolence. How does the reconstruction of a context, if always violent, lead to an essential nonviolence?

EC: When we seek to reconstruct a context, a certain measure of violence always takes place: it is impossible for this violence not to take place. This means that the effort to reconstruct a context inevitably fails to reproduce that context; it reproduces a fragment of the context, neglecting certain elements and emphasizing others. If we cannot reproduce a context faithfully—if there is always some way in which we "miss" it—then, at some level, we can say that we never really touch it and therefore don't commit a violence upon it. If I remember the context of the passage you're citing, however, what interests me is precisely this tension between violence and nonviolence, since it is in relation to this tension that responsibilities form—responsibilities that have everything to do not only with how one reconstructs a context but also with how one responds to it.

BM: It seems like, on the other hand, it would question whether it was ever violent in the first place.

EC: Yes, but again, what seems most important is the tension or oscillation between these two possibilities. If these two possibilities exist at every moment then, strictly speaking, it is impossible to dissociate them from one another, which means that one could

never fall only on one side or the other. This means that there is always some measure of violence at play. In other words, it's not that there is only violence or never violence, but rather that we exist in the intersection of these two possibilities, and it is within this intersection that we have to decide how to act.

DK: So it's precisely when these two moments intersect, when you don't know whether or not an action is violent or nonviolent— it's precisely there that a true responsibility would begin?

EC: Exactly. It is at this moment of uncertainty, this moment in which we do not know what to do or how to proceed, that responsibilities emerge. This moment of indetermination is essential here. I often encourage students to imagine what a politics would look like if it were based on a model of tears. When we usually think about acting politically in the world, we look at a situation, we analyze it, we evaluate it; and then on the basis of that analysis and evaluation, we decide what we think is the best way to proceed. This means that acting politically in the world is generally based on a model of vision. But when we are crying, we cannot see things clearly. A politics based on the model of tears, therefore, would be a politics that takes its point of departure from the presupposition that we always act without seeing things clearly, that we always act with tears in our eyes.

It is also important to note that the tear that falls does so at the frontier between the public and the private. The tear signals a kind of dissolution or melting of the self at the moment when one is trying to make this or that decision. This scenario opens onto the questions that you are raising about what it means to act for Emerson—especially in the context of his being moved by forces larger than him, by forces that prevent him from acting entirely on his own. This is the issue at the heart of his essay "Fate." Emerson suggests that we always are moved by forces larger than us. Whether we **call** these forces "fate" or the prevailing ideas of our time—ideas that irresistibly point us in certain directions rather than others—Emerson's anxiety is **that**, during the period in which he is living and writing, these ideas are being mobilized in the direction of slavery, manifest destiny, racism, etc. In the face of this "irresistible dictation," as he says in the opening paragraph, we each are left with the question: how shall I conduct my life? How shall I act in the world? How can I decide? How can I think about what I'm doing at any given moment when I am never just "me," especially when I want to be answerable, responsible, ethical, etc.? To **suggest** that the self is never simply integral, punctual, self-identical to itself is simultaneously to ask us to reconceptualize what it means to be answerable for our actions.

DK: And so within a politics based on the model of tears, you're already emotionally moved by whatever you're supposed to be judging; you're already implicated in the object of judgment.

EC: When we encounter an event or another person, from the moment of that event or encounter, we are no longer the person we were prior to that encounter. Every encounter that we experience alters us. This is also what complicates the question of who is acting at any given moment, because at the very moment we are trying to respond to an event or a person, we are at the same time being altered by that event or person.

On the Love of Ruins

DK: Over the last ten years, you've continually returned in your writings to this photograph of the Holland House library left in ruins after the German air raids of 1940. You turn to it in "*Leseblitz*," in "*Lapsus Imaginus*: The Image in Ruins," and it appears in your book *Words of Light*. I'm wondering, first of all, why this constant return to the Holland House photo, and secondly, how is *this* photo exemplary for you in terms of photography in general or photography's relationship to history?

EC: The reason I've been obsessed with this photograph for so long would require some unfolding of my memoir. But certainly part of its attraction has to do with its staging of a scene of reading. Within the context of violence, ruins, and memory, this act

of reading—of looking at books—appears as an allegory of our profession, since it suggests the way in which we often turn our back to the disaster around us by looking at books. This little allegory has particular resonance for someone who loves books and yet for whom books have been over the years both a kind of haven and a kind of hell. This suggests, again, that there is something in this image of reading, ruins, memory, and mourning that has relays with my own experiences, neuroses, loves, etc.

If I were to think about the significance the image has for **me**, I might say something about how I sometimes approach an image or a text. When I'm working with a text, a sentence, or an image, I sometimes imagine that I'm on a desert island and that this text, sentence, or image is the only thing I have with **me**. In this instance, I'm on a desert island and I only have the image of the bombed-out Holland House library; **and**, on the basis of that image, I'm being asked to develop a theory of the image, a theory of memory, of mourning, of violence, of ruins, etc. What does this image allow me to say about these things?

This question has to do with the specificity of the image—what does this image allow me to say—at the same time that, in an Emersonian key, I try to use the image to say something general about all images. This particular image, for example, allows me to talk about how every image is a ruin and how every image presents the ruin of the image: the ruin of itself and of all images. In particular, the image of ruin ruins the principle of presentation. What I mean by this has everything to do with how one reads an image or, to be more precise, with the impossibility of reading an image. Even though I believe there is a difference between texts and images, in both instances, reading texts and images involves reading what is not visible. For example, when I'm reading the opening sentence of "Nature" by Emerson, I'm trying to put that sentence in relation to language that is not visible on the page but which nevertheless I imagine having a relation to it. When I look at an image, I have to try and read what's not visible in that image, which is to say, the historical context within which the image was taken—the histories, the several histories and memories that are *encrypted* within that image. At the same time—and maybe this has some relays to what we were talking about in relation to Emerson—it is important to understand that, in reading the image, the reconstruction of the context in which it was produced is never going to be enough, and this is because a photograph also severs the photographed from this context. The photograph offers itself to be read at the same time that it declares to you, "You will never read me." This is why the act of reading a photograph always requires two simultaneous gestures: to seek to reconstruct the context in which the photograph was produced and to pay attention to the way in which every photograph appears as a force of decontextualization. The photograph **demands that we** contextualize and decontextualize at the same time.

One thing that people often have asked me in relation to my use of the image is whether or not it would make any difference to my argument if I were considering another image. My first instinct is to say it would make *absolutely* no difference, because what I'm arguing has something to do with the structural features that make up an image and the structural conditions under which a reading of this or that image would be possible. In particular, I'm interested in the way in which the history that is sealed within an image interrupts the surface of that image. This interruption of the surface of the image is what ruins the image. If I were trying to analyze an image of a sunflower, for example, I might then talk about how this image of the sunflower tells us that every image is a sunflower. But what I would then try and argue, and I'm improvising here, is that it bears the history and the traces of all sunflowers, that it bears the traces of an archaeology of our desire, of our movement toward light, etc. In other words, I would try to reconstruct a history that was sealed but not visible within that image, but which, once evoked, interrupts the surface of that image and ruins the image—prevents it from being able to say something only about itself.

This doesn't mean that one can't romanticize ruins. Ruins often have been a means of idealizing a certain kind of totality. They can become a figure for a certain kind of fragmentation that approaches totality rather than interrupting it, as when the German Romantics wrote about fragments as a signal of totality. In thinking about what it would mean to think about an image as a ruin, I also am interested in ruining or questioning this process of

idealization.

DK: Actually, you remind me of a moment in [Jacques] Derrida's "Force of Law: The 'Mystical Foundation of Authority,' " when he says that he doesn't see the ruin as a negative thing. In fact, he says, one could write—perhaps with or according to Benjamin, perhaps against him—a short treatise on the love of ruins.

EC: Yes. I think he also makes a similar point in his *Memoirs of the Blind*.

DK: Since your work does return to the question of the ruin, I wonder, first of all, if you're at all responding to that kind of call that Derrida impersonalizes, "one could," but also about the specificity of writing about ruins now. How important is it to return to the ruin *now*, let's say when you were writing in the 1990s, but also on into the twenty-first century?

EC: I would say that a focus on ruins is particularly pertinent in the aftermath of September 11, when what we all did for several days was look again and again at the televisual images of the ruined twin towers. I might begin, however, by saying that, for me, a treatise on the love of ruins would be oriented around an acknowledgment of our finitude, of our mortality. I would even say that we can only love ruins because we can only love what is mortal. Love therefore *means* loving ruins, loving what we can lose at any moment, loving what is finite, mortal, transient. This is also related to my interest in photography. Even before you die, the photograph of you is fading; already before your death, it circulates in the world, and very often without you. The photograph anticipates a world in which you **would** no longer **be present**. Indeed, when we have a photograph in our hand, this is the best evidence we can have that what we *don't* have in our hand is the photographed. This is why the photograph is organized around motifs of absence and mourning: part of my attraction to the photograph no doubt has to do with my sense that what is required is a more generalized meditation on death and mourning. This kind of meditation is required for political reasons, for ethical reasons, for historical reasons. Again, I always have to differentiate what I'm doing with the ruin from the idealization of the ruin or from the romanticization of the ruin. My return to the ruin is a means of getting close to what I would say are the ruins that we are. We are ruins. We are mortal. We are finite. We're on the way to death. In other words, these meditations on ruins form part of my wish simply to describe our existence. But they are also a means of suggesting that everything begins in ruin, that everything begins in the falling away to which you referred very early on. Everything begins in transition, in change, in alteration: these things are a permanent feature of our existence. The ruin therefore names, among other things, my effort to remain faithful to this experience, to the experience of our loss of experience.

DK: In a footnote in your "*Lapsus Imaginis*," you note how the present essay is a version of many essays you had written and published in the past. In fact, you thank a number of people who encouraged you "to gather, recontextualize, and expand these ruins and fragments into the present essay" ("*Lapsus*" 35). In some sense, I would assume that everyone's work is going to be culled from ruins, that one always goes through a process of rough drafts, but now I'm wondering: what exactly is the relationship between how you think about ruins and the way you construct your writings? In what sense do you think about your own writings as ruins?

EC: As I said **earlier**, every time I write something, I think about the form of my text. I think about the way in which it might enact or make palpable what I wish to convey. I think a great deal about what it might mean to follow a method of composition that recontextualizes, cites, "**scratches**" on previous writings and texts in order to recontextualize them, to gather them, and to mobilize them in different directions for different purposes. It's a method of composition that I believe Emerson used. It's a method of composition that Benjamin used—the Benjamin who wanted to, as he said, practice "the art of citation without citation marks." In the opening of his essay "Nature," Emerson alludes to Webster, Paine, and

the Bible without saying, "as Daniel Webster said, as Thomas Paine said, as Christ said to the lawyers." Writing in a way that cites without making such citation explicit is a way to suggest the inevitable relation between the past and the present, and to enact a truth about the language we use: it is never simply ours. The practice of citation and of reproduction is a way of furthering what I'm trying to say about the nature of photography (which is itself a mode of citation and reproduction), about the reproducibility of the image, and about the nature of reproduction in general. Since quotations signal the survival of the past in the present, they also become a means of filling one's text with ghosts.

Filling one's work with ghosts: this could be the protocol of all reading and writing, and this is no doubt why the writers and artists in whom I am most interested are never very far from ghosts and specters, are never very far from a practice of composition that takes its point of departure from earlier texts and fragments. For example, in the "Music on Bones" project on which I'm working, I'm trying to think about what a book would look like if it came to us in the form of music and therefore in relation to mourning since, when we listen to music, we are listening to what is always about to vanish. This project originated in an attempt to understand various artworks by the Italian artist Salvatore Puglia. He uses a lot of archival materials in his work—old photographs, x-ray film, musical scores, torn bits of writing and texts and so **on**—and he puts them all together. Part collage, part montage, the work brings together several modes of reproduction in order to think about what reproduction is, especially when it begins in a process of reproduction that is already at work. Puglia describes his practice as a kind of sampling and scratching on previous texts. What I am trying to do as I write the book is to mime this practice, this scratching: writing on surfaces that are already there and recirculating them, playing on them again, sampling them again. By putting these fragments in new contexts, as Emerson does (he called the practice "noble borrowing"), these materials gain a new and fervent sense.

This way of working belongs to an ongoing meditation on the relation between the past and present, on the way in which the past survives in the present and facilitates a future. It also suggests that one has to go through what one inherits in order to produce something singular. I think I have felt quite emboldened and even authorized by the writers on which I work. What I admire about Emerson and Benjamin is their sense of the way in which their language never simply belongs to them. In the sequence of texts on which I've been working in different contexts now—all of which are related to the issue of mourning—I've also been trying to think about what a book would look like if it came to you in the form of mourning. What would a book look like if it continually lost itself, if it continually abandoned itself and tried to recover and incorporate what it had abandoned? What it would mean for language to leave itself? I would hope that this attention to the movement of my language, to its capacity to withdraw, might make evident the way in which our language is never just ours.

BM: These recontextualizations seem to be a way to channel the return that is going to happen anyway into a positive force.

EC: Yes, and in fact I wanted to say this earlier as a kind of parenthesis to what might have been perceived as a too sober reflection on death and mourning. I do believe that this process of mourning is affirmative. I think that having a sense of one's finitude and mortality is affirmative. I don't see it as something negtive. I see it as a means of affirming the only life we have—a life that is touched by death and loss, but also by survival.

Photography and Mourning

DK: The affirmative nature of mourning reminds me of a particular passage in [Roland] Barthes's *Camera Lucida*.

EC: You should talk to Elissa [Marder]; she's a fabulous reader of this text.

DK: There is a moment when Barthes sees a photo of himself and he seems to see on his face a mask of mourning—as he says, "the distress of a recent bereavement" (Barthes 15). But then he sees the photograph again at a later moment and that image

of mourning is now totally defaced. Now what he sees is more sinister, and it is something other than what he saw in the first place, **because** the photograph **had been** used in an article condemning his writing. Earlier he expresses this as the fear or anxiety of what society will make of his photograph as it gets circulated. So there is **first a mourning** that can be read in the face of the **photographed subject**, and then there is the feeling of mourning when he sees that he has become, as he says, "Total-Image, which is to say, Death in person" (Barthes 14). For Barthes, this second mourning seems quite negative.

EC: It is true that there are several modes of mourning—individual, collective, national, and so on. In regard to Barthes's text, the experience of mourning is related to the death of his mother and to the experience of mourning that structures the photograph in general. When he claims to become "Total-Image," he also becomes "Death in person" because, being entirely an image, his self withdraws, expires, dies. This relation between the image, death, and identity—something that Blanchot explores in his essay "Two Versions of the Imaginary"—is also linked to a concern in some of my more recent work: how certain acts of mourning enable the constitution of an identity, be it the identity of a person or a nation. For example, in the aftermath of September 11, we are witnessing a nation that is seeking to understand itself through its mourning, that is reconstructing and redefining itself **through** its relation to mourning. But there are certain acts of mourning that enable or help constitute a sense of identity—that can be mobilized in the direction of a more aggressive desire for identity—and there are others that expose the breaks in that identity. It is not at all clear to me that these different modes mourning—and these are just two of them—are ever separable from one another.

Returning to Barthes, but without going through the passage carefully with you, I would say that my first instinct is to say that Barthes reads bereavement in the photograph before him and then, through a process of displacement and identification, he registers that mourning in relation to himself and comes to mourn himself. Experiencing death in the photograph—what he calls "flat death"—he acknowledges that, like all photographic subjects, he has become an object. The moment he becomes an object, he registers his death and therefore mourns himself. Now, this may seem to have a negative tonality. But remember that the whole book is organized around the mourning of his mother; and, in fact, the most striking, weird, and strange sequence occurs as he is looking at a photograph of his mother when she was four years old. Everyone has talked about this moment, and especially because this photograph of his mother is precisely the photograph that he doesn't reproduce. The whole book is organized around its absence. He says that the photograph represents the *essence* of his mother, which is a bizarre thing to say, if it's a photograph of his mother when she was four—that is to say, before she was his mother. It is almost as if she is most his mother when she is not his mother. That the essence of his mother is legible in the photograph of this four-year-old girl means that her essence is legible at the very moment when she is not herself. This logic works for Barthes as well. He too is perhaps most himself when he is not himself—when he discovers himself as a photograph or object. This is actually crucial in terms of the logic of the book. One of the strange things about the book—and Elissa [Marder] has talked about this debate—is that, on the one hand, it can be read as an autobiography that is interested in photography; and, on the other hand, it can be read as a theory of photography that has autobiographical elements. These two perspectives should be brought together. But what would it mean for Barthes to develop a theory of photography beginning from himself? How can he accomplish this? I would say that he can do this only if he already belongs to the process of photography, if he is already at some level a *photograph*.

BM: A side question: what self is it of the mother that he sees in her photograph prior to her being his mother?

EC: If I remember the passage properly, what he says is something close to what I just said: he registers his mother's essence in a photograph of her as a young girl. What I wish to stress **again is** just the oddity of saying that this image evokes the essence of his mother when in fact she is not yet his mother. The self that is being imaged—and perhaps this is what

you're asking—is a self that is never itself. Barthes tells us that the self is never self-identical to itself. Barthes presents Rimbaud's pronouncement, "I am an other," as the truth of the photograph. Benjamin makes a similar point—and I recall it in one of my footnotes in *Words of Light*—when he suggests that, when we smile at another person, we are signing a kind of secret contract that says we want to become like him or her. When we are asked to smile just before our photograph is taken, then , we are being asked to prepare ourselves for becoming somebody else. This is what happens in a photograph: we become an other.

BM: It seems that the theory of the photograph you're developing is one where the photograph which most represents what we're looking for in the photograph is the photograph that doesn't actually represent in an iconic way.

EC: Absolutely. This is exactly why I think Benjamin is so fantastic on photography. He asks us to rethink the photograph's relation to representation, to fidelity. When he talks about the decline of photography—something that seems to imply a temporal narrative that moves from a moment when photography was able to reproduce its subjects faithfully to a moment when it no longer can do so, when it "declines"—he associates this decline, this fall, with technical advances in the photographic apparatus. For Benjamin, the more the camera is able to reproduce "faithfully"what is before it, the more photography declines. Technological advances encourage us to believe that we can have the world that is before the camera. But this belief is the danger. This is why he favors earlier photographs: the ones that are ghostly and atmospheric and, as he says, erratic in some way because they already let you know that we cannot see things clearly. He begins with this incapacity to see and identifies the critical strength of photography in relation to how faithful it remains to this incapacity.

BM: It seems very tied into Benjamin's theory of representation.

EC: Yes, Benjaminian representation works best—is most "successful"—when it interrupts the principle of representation, when it fails to represent. This is why, for Benjamin, the most faithful photograph is the most unfaithful one, the best translation is the most violent one, and so on. This paradoxical understanding of representation forms part of Benjamin's signature.

DK: Now one slippery thing with Benjamin is the fact that many of his figures seem to figure each other, that allegory becomes a figure for photography or vice versa. I'm wondering about the relation between allegory and photography, especially in relation to mourning and what he calls the object of allegory, "fallen nature."

EC: I might begin here with a passage from Benjamin's "Central Park," where he states that whatever is struck by the allegorical intention is severed from the context of life and is simultaneously shattered and conserved. Allegory holds fast to the ruin and it offers a sign of petrified unrest. To say that whatever is struck by allegory is severed from the context of life is already to describe the photographic event. The photographic event severs and tears a person, an event, an object, etc. from the living moment in which each exists. In Benjamin's terms, photography comes with the force of allegory, and allegory appears photographically.

Indeed, each sentence of this passage from "Central Park" has some bearing on the photograph: like allegory, the photograph severs a person or object from a context; it both destroys and conserves the object; and it enables us to say something about photography in general. The association of photography and violence, destruction, ruin, and unrest signals a kind of anxiety in the way photography is discussed. Photography has the capacity to turn us into objects: it petrifies us, gorgonizes us, and therefore takes our life away—it destroys us, even as it preserves and conserves us (even if only as objects or ruins). Like the allegory that holds fast to ruins, a photograph holds fast to the ruins it photographs and produces. Like the ruin, it tells us that something has been destroyed at the same time that it preserves the traces and memory of what has been

destroyed.

The figure of petrified unrest, which Benjamin draws from his reading of Baudelaire, is also very nice as a figure for photography, since—among so many other things—the medium seeks to fix movement. Photography asks us to think about what it means to represent what cannot be represented, what it means to represent what is always moving and changing. How can we fix movement? [Henri] Bergson's version of the question would be: how is it possible to perceive change ? What Bergson, Benjamin, and Proust are interested in is the possibility of photographing movement faithfully, and this is why their writings are often very cinematic. Nevertheless, the relationship between photography and film is a complicated and, to this day, very neglected relation. When people talk about the relation between film and photography, they usually say that photography is on the side of stillness and death, and film is on the side of movement and life. And yet it is impossible to describe what film is without giving an account of its photographic basis. What makes film film are the twenty-four still images that move through a projector each second. This photogrammatic basis of film—this relation between petrification and movement—complicates any effort to establish a divide between photography and film.

Similarly, as I think your question already **implies**, photography and allegory—at least in my reading of Benjamin—become figures for one another and precisely because, in Benjamin's words, both photography and allegory represent the nonbeing of what is being presented. And perhaps this will be a way of returning to your opening remarks about the relation between the issue of mourning and fallen nature, since the issue of fallen nature in Benjamin is linked to his interest in the possibility of decline in general—the decline of photography but also the decline of aura. In *The Origin of the German Mourning Play*, Benjamin says that there are no periods of decline. As I argue in *Words of Light*, if there are no periods of decline, this is because there are *only* periods of decline. There has never been a state from which one is falling away: one is always falling away. To describe nature as fallen nature is to say that what is most natural is this process of falling, this process of withdrawing that is linked to the process of mourning. Experience originates in withdrawal and mourning, but to say this is to evoke the understanding of "origin" that Benjamin delineates in *The Origin of the German Mourning Play*: the springing forth from a process of coming and going that ensures that whatever emerges will be unable to establish itself with any security. This uncertainty—which itself appears in relation to loss—belongs to the experience of mourning.

In weaving together the motifs of mourning, falling, allegory, and photography, I have wanted to understand the way in which every photograph falls away from the photographed. This withdrawal is a structural feature of every photograph, since every photograph begins in the withdrawal of its subject.

DK: Does this mean that every photograph is an image of mourning? Or an expression of mourning?

EC: I think I would say that every photograph is in mourning. This means, among other things, that every photograph exists in relation to the absence of the photographed. This is why so many discourses and treatises on photography have recourse to the figures of ghosts and hallucinations: the photograph reminds us of what is no longer here. It is structured by its relation **to the** experience of mourning. I would say this not only about photographs but about all the technical media. The phonograph, for example—of which I will say a few words in Tuesday's lecture ("Music on Bones")—exists in a relation of mourning to the live performance that was recorded on vinyl, and the telephone also requires the absence of the speakers to one another. The technological media are organized around distance, separation, and death.

BM: . . . and the means of overcoming these separations.

EC: Exactly.

Representation and Quotation

BM: I have a very broad question. I'm wondering if you could trace the theory of representation that

comes from Emerson, which seems very uncomplicated in a lot of respects.

EC: In Emerson?

BM: In Emerson, and through to Benjamin, and then on to you. In other words, what is your theory of representation as it emerges from Emerson and Benjamin?

EC: First, I would say that Emerson's theory of representation is not at all an obvious one. Emerson draws his theory of representation from his analysis of political representation. He's writing at a time when, as he claims, the representatives do not represent.

BM: The promise of representation.

EC: Yes, he's writing at a time, not unlike ours, when representation exists only as a promise. He wants to reconceive representation since, for him, this is exactly what America did when it founded itself. America was begun in a reconception of representation—political representation but also, for him, aesthetic and literary representation. His engagement with the question and concept of representation has everything to do with his effort to reconceptualize democracy, America, rights, etc. But what does Emerson mean by representation? Representation in Emerson always involves quotation, always involves citation, always implies that the language we use is never only ours and that it simultaneously always refers to, and retreats from, what it seeks to represent. He describes this process, in his essay "Experience," when he refers to the "art of perpetual retreat and reference." I think this double movement best describes the movement of his language and of his effort to *figure* more than represent what is taking place.

His theory of representation, then, begins in an acknowledgment of the relationship between the past and the present. But it also implies a theory of history that is not continuous or linear, which is why the weather becomes a nice lever for me in my effort to trace the movement of his language, since the weather is itself neither linear nor continuous.

For Emerson, then, whether he wishes to represent life or a person, what is at stake is the possibility of representing what cannot be represented. How do you represent, how do you fix, how do you seize what is always moving when the very moment you grasp it, it's already becoming something else, it's already something else?

This seems to me very close to what Benjamin is after: how do you represent across the discrepancy between an original and a translation? Or between the photographed and the photograph? How do you negotiate that distance? If he says that the most faithful photograph is the most unfaithful one, then he's asking us to rethink what language is, to reconceptualize what reference is. We are always referring but, if we refer to death, for example, death never becomes a referent. When we refer to Benjamin's death, we may have the monument **or** gravestone, but this representation of his death, this marker, this memorial does not capture his death. Benjamin wants us to think about representation in terms of the distance within which representation begins.

I'm working in another context with Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*; the context is a reading of Frederick Douglass's 1845 slave narrative, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*. There is a very famous moment in this text when Douglass is describing how he came to acquire language. What, to my knowledge, no one ever has pointed out is that this entire section is straight out of *Frankenstein*. It evokes the moment when the monster is describing to Victor how he gained language. It is extraordinary. Douglass lifts passages from *Frankenstein* and puts them in his narrative: the chronology of his description of events coincides exactly with the chronology the monster gives Victor. He finds these books; he's self-taught; he's not sure who his father is, when he was born. In the same way, Douglass the slave doesn't have answers to these questions either. The books that he reads, the self-education he undergoes, gives him a language that then enables him to describe, as he puts it, his "wretched condition." This is the same phrase the monster uses to describe his own condi-

tion in *Frankenstein*. He goes on to say that, now that he can articulate his condition, he experiences great despair, and the only thing he thinks can save him and help him overcome this despair is death. Again, this is exactly what the monster tells Victor. In appropriating the monster's language, Douglass figures himself as a monster, and what interests me here is that, at the very moment when he's describing his acquisition of language—his **acquisition of** the right to representation—he surrenders his language to the language of another. And not just to any other, but to Mary Shelley. Who speaks these lines, then? Is it a man or a woman? An African American? A British subject? At some level, it is impossible to know who speaks them.

This problem is also the problem of *Frankenstein*, and it is linked to what you're asking me about the question of reference. In *Frankenstein*, part of the monstrosity of language—and, in the novel, monstrosity is always associated with language—is that anytime anyone in the book tries to describe who they are, how they got to be where they are, their language is borrowed from elsewhere, and most often from a previous narrator. The novel is structured like a China box. The monster tells his story to Victor; Victor tells his story to Walton; Walton tells his story to his sister: at each step of the way, each character **borrows** the language of the previous narrator. *Frankenstein* suggests that every time you try to refer to yourself to tell the story of who you are, you can only refer elsewhere. For Mary Shelley this difficulty is something quite monstrous.

The same problem gets staged in both Emerson and Benjamin in the citationality of their language. That our language is never simply ours has profound consequences for how we imagine ourselves being able to act ethically and politically in the world. In the context of politics, for example, the issue would be one of how we can address or how we can respond to this or that political situation without replicating or reinforcing what we wish to criticize— especially since the language we are using, which is not simply ours and therefore not entirely in our control, may have relays with the language that very often may be supporting what we wish to overcome.

I see you have my essay "Toward an Ethics of Decision," which includes a reading of Paul Celan's "*Mit Brief und Uhr*," parts of which had earlier appeared in *Alphabet City*. There's a recirculation of language that takes place within these different contexts and that then gets mobilized in the reading of [Avital] Ronell I offer there but, structurally, it has to do with Celan's own anxiety throughout his career about what it meant for him to write in German—a language that had been mobilized to murder millions. This is why, at every moment, he tries to warp and distort and displace that language. In the context of the reading that I offer in the essay, Celan tries to awaken us to the danger of the rhetoric of awakening—a rhetoric that was mobilized by the fascist regime (in its declaration of the awakening of the German nation, for example)—but without using the rhetoric of awakening. I think the problem is the same as Emerson's and Benjamin's: how, in the face of the inevitability that we use a language that does not simply belong to us, in the face of these irresistible dictations, can we make a difference? How can we mobilize things in a direction that will help and benefit us rather than reinforce the worst?

BM: The difference between the original and the reproduction, as it comes out in your work on Benjamin, is for me a profound moment of difficulty. Because there are times when it seems like the eternal return is mapping out the original, even when this original is already a reproduction that contains all of the possible iterations . . .

EC: . . . in the reading of [Louis Auguste] Blanqui.

BM: Exactly. And I don't know how to match that up with an original that has an aura, in Benjamin's "Work of Art in the Age of Its Technical Reproducibility." What seems to distinguish the original from the reproduction is only the loss of an aura.

EC: I think one of the things that I remain happy about with the Benjamin book—a small moment in one of my footnotes, but a moment which has consequences for your question—is my demonstration that one of the passages in which Benjamin describes his concept of aura (which is supposed to be the passage in which he talks about the unique appearance of a distance in proximity, the fall away from the

original that takes place with technical reproduction, and so on) is taken from [Marcel] Proust. This means that the very passage that has been used to define aura as the mark of the singularity or originality of a work of art—a singularity that is destroyed with the advent of technological reproducibility— is already a citation, is already a reproduction. For me, this is another moment in which Benjamin performs what he wants us to understand. But he wants us to work. He's not going to just say it. He wants us to engage in a labor of reading. And what he wants us to do is to learn to read passages syntactically in relation to one another. We should read what he says in one place in relation to what he says in another place—and, in this instance, in relation to what Proust says. And remember: Benjamin translated Proust; he knew Proust extremely well. He even stops translating Proust when he comes to feel too influenced by him.

For me, all these things suggest that aura is already the name of the tension or the oscillation between singularity and reproduction. Instead of saying that Benjamin is simply contradicting himself here, which is what many often do with Benjamin and Emerson, what we should ask is why he is asking us to think these two things together. Why is he saying that we *need* to think these two things together? Why is he suggesting that meaning takes time? After all, meaning is unfolded through *reading* as we put one passage in relation to another one, which means that the meaning of a passage doesn't inhere in the passage alone. These seemingly contradictory moments are the ones that always seem most pressing, most urgent, to me.

BM: It's difficult to negotiate, then, what the status of the aura would be as regards citation.

EC: Part of it has to do with what we were saying in relation to Emerson: for something singular to emerge, it can only emerge by passing through what one inherits. Benjamin too says that his language is embedded in tradition: Proust is part of the tradition in which his work is embedded. There's no contradiction here. He can say that his language is embedded in tradition at the same time that it remains singular in the sense that even though his language is touched by Proust—a figure who belongs to his tradition—his recontextualization of that passage makes it singular.

If we believe that the language we use is never just ours, we also have to believe that every instance of our use of that language can enable something new. That's what enabled the Black Panthers to transform the word *black* into a word of empowerment. That's what enabled Frederick Douglass to appropriate the language of his master and mobilize it against him. It's a strategy for doing political work, and I believe it is what Emerson does: he evokes and transforms the language he inherits and uses. I think Benjamin does exactly the same thing. In fact, if we were really to read his 1931 essay, "A Short History of Photography," we would discover that the essay is almost entirely citational. His footnotes to the essay refer to many of the books that he reviewed and whose arguments and language he circulates **within** his essay, including the work of Gisele Freund. If we were to read these primary texts, we would see that a lot of what he says comes straight from them: sometimes the sentences are just lifted; at other times, they are altered slightly. I think that this citationality has something to do with his wish to suggest that photography itself is a mode of citation—one that simultaneously reproduces and alters what it cites. This is what Benjamin does in his writing as well.

BM: This helps explain the presence of the Holland House photograph in your work.

EC: Yes, I think so. I also circulate and recirculate passages in my work. Not just photographs, images, but also sentences, sometimes paragraphs. The "Lapsus Imaginus" essay is very linked to some of the work I've been doing on [Salvatore] Puglia. In fact, about two to three pages from the talk on Tuesday will be touching on portions of the essay—in particular, the section on the images of ruin. This is also the case because these particular passages from "*Lapsus Imaginus*" were first written in relation to Puglia.

DK: . . . which is then citing itself in the form of a lecture . . .

EC: Yes. I also am interested in a certain warping of temporality: the way in which what seems to come before actually happens after. This interest is legible in Puglia as well. Puglia not only reads what we read—Derrida, Nancy, Lacoue-Labarthe —but he also encrypts references to them in his work. In a very real sense, he's the artist of deconstruction. Derrida has written on him; Lacoue-Labarthe has written on him; Christopher Fynsk has written on him; Pierre Alfieri has written on him.

In this context, I am interested in what it means for art to become philosophical. What is it that makes Puglia's work philosophical? And how does it remain art? For me, the most difficult thing about working on him has to do with engaging the materiality of his work. The fact that some of the works are made from iron and include lead, old photographs, or x-ray film. Just the materiality of it. The tendency is immediately to read it as art that tells us about inscriptions, writing, language—which I think one can. But there is something that resists in these objects—something that demands that we think about what it means to see what remains hidden, to see what is not directly visible, something that requires an act of reading. This is the question that compels me: what does it mean to read ; what does it mean to read a sentence; what does it mean to read an image; what does it mean to read an artwork?

In general, I think of myself as someone with **only a** few ideas, so I often continue to explore these ideas and questions in different contexts in the hope that, in doing so, I will learn something. I try to engage a writer or artist by tracing the threads that seem to repeat themselves in different ways and contexts and, in the process, I try to measure how his or her work enacts and performs what he or she wishes to convey to us. Puglia recently completed a short film organized around the videotaping of a kind of shadowed figure in a room where images of monuments that were covered during the war in Italy are being projected onto the walls of the room. The figure is actually sampling and scratching on two turntables , and he soon becomes a kind of figure or allegory of the artist, or at least the artist that I think Puglia imagines himself to be. To return to your question, I think that what I've been trying to do is imagine myself as a kind of sampler, mobilizing older materials in order to scratch them, to mark them in my own handwriting, in my own style—producing something in the very act of trying to reproduce them. This strategy is described explicitly in [László] Moholy-Nagy's work on the relation between music and film and, in particular, in his essay "Reproduction-Production." He talks explicitly about this scratch-writing, which for him is a means of putting one's fingerprint on a record, having it then go through the needle and having that fingerprint be heard. Without recording, one still can produce sounds on the record —although, of course, what one is recording is the imprint of one's finger. What is at stake, however, is the possibility of marking something as yours even as you're confronting, engaging, mobilizing, and moving previous writings in other directions. I think this gesture and possibility are at the heart of the practice of Emerson and Benjamin. That's why we have Benjamin's famous sentences about his desire that *The Arcades Project* be composed entirely of quotations. This is an extraordinary thing to say. But this is also why a writer like Borges exists and also why Marx—someone who was obsessed with production and reproduction, with the circulation of words and commodities—is constantly citing, quoting, both himself and others. [Ezra] Pound actually identifies this activity with American identity. I think he said at one point, "Let me indulge in the American habit of quotation." The great thing about this line is that it also suggests that America is never self-identical to itself, a notion that seems especially timely today. What all these examples suggest is that, in a very real sense, we live our lives in quotation marks.