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The Wildest, Freest, Most Irresponsible, Most Unteachable of All Things:
Words and Myth in Conceptual History and Historical Epistemology

Words, English words, are full of echoes, of memories, of associations — naturally. They have been out and about, on people’s lips, in their houses, in the streets, in the fields, for so many centuries... they are so stored with meanings, with memories, that they have contracted so many famous marriages.... They are the wildest, freest, most irresponsible, most unteachable of all things.... Words do not live in dictionaries; they live in the mind And how do they live in the mind? Various and strangely, much as human beings live, by ranging hither and thither, by falling in love, and mating together. It is true that they are much less bound by ceremony and convention than we are.... To lay down any laws for such irreclaimable vagabonds is worse than useless.... Nor do they like being lifted out on the point of a pen and examined separately. They hang together, in sentences, in paragraphs, sometimes for whole pages at a time. They hate being useful; they hate making money; they hate being lectured about in public. In short, they hate anything that stamps them with one meaning or confines them to one attitude, for it is their nature to change. Perhaps that is their most striking peculiarity — their need of change. It is because the truth they try to catch is many-sided, and they convey it by being themselves many-sided, flashing this way, then that. Thus they mean one thing to one person, another thing to another person; they are unintelligible to one generation, plain as a pikestaff to the next. And it is because of this complexity that they survive... when words are pinned down they fold their wings and die. —Virginia Woolf, “On Craftsmanship”

In this essay I discuss two problems in what I self-servingly consider the two most significant trends in intellectual history—conceptual history and historical epistemology. As opposed to the regular approaches in intellectual history that are often theoretically underdeveloped—for example history of political thought and author-centered intellectual history, which all too often merely report and contextualize with the intent of interpreting someone’s ideas—these two more recent trends have offered considerable promise in bridging the study of concepts, epistemologies, and philosophical (and other) arguments. To some degree, they enable work that can scale from an individual speaker’s engagement with particular concepts and formulations to the study of mindsets or worldviews. Satisfactory, nonetheless, they are not. I am interested in the congealment of specific, quite problematic figures in each: specifically, the recurrence of myth in historical epistemology and that of the foundational concept in conceptual history. These have a largely opposite value in their respective schemas, but as I will show they pose an analogous challenge: in each of them, the promise of a historical method and the express turn away from a conventional linearity in social history come hand-in-hand with a strangely concretizing effect, with hazy consequences for the entire endeavor. If they are to transform intellectual history, these

approaches have to begin to field tensions more effectively. It is no accident that the way I propose to deal with these problems (consecutively, for the purposes of this talk) is effectively the same. Nor is it as random as it seems at first that the idiosyncratic solution that I will propose begins with Jacques Lacan.

The first problem is conceptual history's longstanding obsession with keywords, master concepts, *Grundbegriffe*. By virtue of the monumental operation that was the *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe* in Bielefeld (henceforth *GG*); of the elegance of Raymond Williams's more materialist *Keywords*; and of the need for selection principles given the sheer difficulty of carrying out historical research on less central concepts, conceptual history tends to over-establish and even reify the concepts that it presents as historical and, well, foundational. The result, I will argue, is that we end up with a heavy-handed and antiquated concept of the concept, and with rather grandiose elaborations on "the state", "politics," and so on. I should like to argue that this distorts language; leads to a dictionary approach to meanings that comfortably parses them apart rather than showing their suspension from one another; throttles the excitement and texture and sheer surprise of concepts and metaphors and words and expressions; and ultimately renders the master concepts into coagulated wounds.

The second problem concerns historical epistemology's strange and recursive return to myth. For a definition of historical epistemology, I follow Hans-Jörg Rheinberger's: a study of "the historical conditions *under* which, and the means *with* which, things are made into objects of knowledge."¹ Ostensibly established in order to short-circuit the reliance on progressive theories of truth in history of science, historical epistemology has ever since the 1930s relied on mythological figures, just as it has demonstrated positivist myths to be just that. This somewhat surprising reliance all too often shifts from the heuristic to the philosophical or the positive. From Gaston Bachelard onward, the appeal of myth has played a double role: it has helped establish historical epistemology as a subdiscipline eager to examine

¹ Hans-Jörg Rheinberger, *On Historicizing Epistemology* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010), .

problems that are difficult to otherwise define, and has granted it the room necessary to articulate them.

At the same time, myth undercuts the very pretense of the field (or method) obsessed by not being swayed by, well, myths—of reason, of a transhistorical truth, of experimental self-sufficiency.

This problem in historical epistemology also has to do with concepts; as historical epistemologists have turned to concepts like error, truth, and sexuality to historicize and to define them, it seems to me that the two methods come actually quite close, authorizing particular kinds of mixed study. My point is that in each of these approaches, the very promise of the method doubles back into a failure. So, to the extent that I understand myself as practicing something between the two, I want to try out a historical-epistemological take on conceptual history; a conceptual-historical take on historical epistemology, perhaps even a double of the two. I will argue that the two problems are related.

1. On the Concepts of Conceptual History

Theorists of concepts have debated the self-sufficiency of concepts at some length, generally veering between one position for which concepts are quite discrete and another that is more comfortable loosening their individuality and letting them vanish, so to speak, into a discursive field. Concepts, we are supposed to know by now, are quite discrete. In his 1976 classic *Keywords*, Raymond Williams looked at “fields of meanings” and proposed it “possible to contribute certain kinds of awareness and certain more limited kinds of clarification by taking certain words at the level at which they are generally used,” elsewhere finding it that “useful to pick out certain words, of an especially problematical kind, and to consider, for the moment, their own internal developments and structures.”² In the *Dictionary of Untranslatables* (2004), Barbara Cassin started out from “the meaning of a word in one language” to explore “the networks to which the word belongs.”³ Both Williams’s and Cassin’s positions are ambivalent on the autarky of concepts—staging the network and links between terms while still retaining

² Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, 2nd, revised edition (1976; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), xxxv-xxxvi, xxxiv.

³ Barbara Cassin, ed., *Dictionary of Untranslatables: A Philosophical Lexicon*, edited in English by Emily Apter, Jacques Lezra, and Michael Wood (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014), xvii. Originally published as *Vocabulaire européen des philosophies: Dictionnaire des intraduisibles* (Paris: Seuil, 2004).

considerable leeway and importance for the “concept itself.” Famously, and far more pointedly, Reinhart Koselleck prioritized the ostensible stability of important concepts—*Leitbegriffe*, *Schlüsselwörter*, *Schlagwörter*, *Grundbegriffe*.⁴ The ambiguity hinges on the meaning of “major,” key, fundamental concepts—certainly in Koselleck’s early career when he led the study of major concepts and established a pathway into modernity, but perhaps even more so in the period around 1990 when he was tired of the *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe* framework and sought to break out of it. Again and again, Koselleck argued that these were not just any concepts, but the concepts necessary in a given period for someone to enter into political discussion, at which point they became *de rigueur* and effectively inescapable. In his 1989 essay “Linguistic Change and the History of Events,” he wrote that “the arsenal of terms utilized within any synchronously employed language contained givens that were diachronically stratified in different ways and that served both to develop and to limit the stock of arguments. The terms employed had a diachronic thrust that could not be fully or freely controlled by the speakers. Consequently, concepts have an internal temporal structure that differs from that of the events that they help to bring about and that they are supposed to comprehend.”⁵

This position is effective for someone seeking to demonstrate that *some* concepts have a measure of agency—and that they are useful but not, as the danger rang at the time, merely collateral for social history. (To a considerable degree, more recent attempts have retained this schema.) Nevertheless, Koselleck’s third sentence in this passage (“Consequently...”) does not necessarily follow from the other two if “internal temporal structure” is meant to articulate this point of “diachronically stratified... diachronic thrust.” Put another way, all three formulations have a reinforcing effect, but the “internal temporal structure” cannot be conceived as merely diachronic, for this puts as once again in the position of seeing words as only mildly mutable. Koselleck goes on to argue exactly this—that “central concepts”

⁴ Reinhart Koselleck, “Introduction and Prefaces to the *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe*,” translated and with an introduction by Michaela Richter, in English in *Contributions to the History of Concepts* 6, no.1 (Summer 2011), 1–37.

⁵ Koselleck, “Linguistic Change and the History of Events,” in *The Journal of Modern History* 61, no. 4 (1989), 659.

have a “stabilizing effect” and that for *this* reason they are shared, that they “produce a linguistic unity.”

Koselleck offers a particular claim on conceptual stability by linking a series of concepts of movement to a congealing set of coextensive temporalities he congeals into almost a single forward movement.

This result is also true of our modern concepts of movement that, since the eighteenth century, have attuned our entire linguistic inventory to the idea of the necessity of change, to alteration, and to intentional transformation. The central concepts are improvement, development, progress, history itself, reform, crisis, evolution, and even revolution. Now it is precisely these concepts that, purely semantically, exercise a particularly stabilizing effect. They produce a certain linguistic unity in all political camps, even while there is argument about particulars. Since the French Revolution, and even more against the background of the industrial revolution, it has become increasingly difficult to defend the status quo as such. And even the reactionaries have never dared to assert that they were reactionary. A certain minimum thrust toward change has been accepted by all political camps. Semantically, the concepts of movement allowed no choice. It was only the question of whether to resist, accept, or anticipate the impulse toward change that separated the positions.⁶

I’ll leave largely aside the temporal construction of 17th-19th-century temporal unity and transformation as Koselleck proposed it, mostly in the early and middle periods of his career—a point whose problems Dan Edelstein, Natasha Wheatley, and I discussed in our edited volume *Power and Time*.⁷ I also leave aside my complete disagreement with this unitary assignation, insofar as these concepts were frequently interlinked to the point of often being opposed and offering quite competing models of time, many of which did not suggest such a straightforwardly progressive movement. What matters to me here is this “stabilizing effect,” this “linguistic unity,” that designs concepts as discrete fellow-travelers that mutually reinforce into separate if somewhat linked entities. Koselleck is very good, rather too good, in distinguishing key concepts and setting them apart from the rest. I am not so good at knowing where a concept begins and ends, nor am I convinced about the premise of his description that I noted earlier: that “the arsenal of terms utilized within any synchronously employed language *contained givens that were diachronically stratified in different ways and that served both to develop and to limit the stock of arguments*.” Yes for “diachronically stratified in different ways” but what does this even mean if we are speaking of “givens?” In what containers do these givens lie? To what extent are there actually core concepts, and are these concepts so given that

⁶ Koselleck, “Linguistic Change and the History of Events,” in *Journal of Modern History* 61, No. 4 (1989), 659.

⁷ Dan Edelstein, Stefanos Geroulanos, and Natasha Wheatley, “Chronocenos: An Introduction to Power and Time,” in *Power and Time: Temporalities in Conflict and the Making of History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2020), 12-15.

Consider, for example, Koselleck's classic essay on "Crisis" in the *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe*.⁸ (The concept is especially significant for the structural value it holds for Koselleck's system across his work, his claim that the concepts that determine the *Sattelzeit* enforce a stratification or "stacking" of temporal regimes that organizes the experience of acceleration but also forces a profusion of economic-social-political crises by marginalizing and even damaging other temporal regimes.) Koselleck establishes crisis from the beginning as follows: "Because of its metaphorical flexibility, the concept gains in importance; it enters into everyday language; it becomes a central catchword (*Schlagwort*). In our century, there is virtually no area of life that has not been examined and interpreted through this concept with its inherent demand for decisions and choices."⁹ And in his conclusion he adds: "From the nineteenth century on, there has been an enormous quantitative expansion in the variety of meanings attached to the concept of crisis, but few corresponding gains in either clarity or precision. 'Crisis' remains a catchword, used rigorously in only a few scholarly or scientific contexts."¹⁰ What intervenes between these two formulations—and what follows on the second—is a proliferation of instantiations of "crisis" which remains at once a concept and a *Schlagwort*: it lacks full rigor or clarity, yet the essential ambiguity that permeates it (and others) does not challenge its conceptual stability or concreteness. In this approach, a concept is *de jure* this kind of container whose meaning is clear but relatively mobile, transferable. This is all the more so for *Grundbegriffe*, foundational or basic concepts that are "indispensable,"¹¹ whose meaning is well known but somewhat ambiguous, at once multivalent and open yet also formal and hard.

Four objections. First, it remains unclear, to me at least, why certain concepts (ultimately 115 in the *GG*) belong within the category of *Grundbegriffe* whereas others do not. By what rigorous standard could such a schema be articulated? What other than a contented presentism could legitimize these decisions over others? *Staat* (state) may well be a concept that began to require a heightened political literacy in the 18th

⁸ Koselleck, "Crisis," translated by Michaela Richter, in *Journal of the History of Ideas* 67, no.2 (April 2006), 357-400.

⁹ Koselleck, "Crisis," 358.

¹⁰ Koselleck, "Crisis," 397.

¹¹ Michaela Richter, introduction to Koselleck, "Introduction and Prefaces to the *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe*," 3.

century as it still does today, but it could not be approached without a series of qualifiers, adjectives, derivatives, political imperatives, a legal and humanistic *Bildung*, and so on, which constitute this literacy. Nor was *Staat* monolithic enough to function in generally the same way across different registers—as the “Skinnerian” objection raised in the 1980s noted. While it is possible to make the claim that the *Grundbegriffe* brought together serve the heuristic purpose of efficiently telling a version of this story (if you consider efficient seven 1000-page volumes efficient), it remains to me unclear why *Grundbegriffe* are indeed more foundational than other concepts involved in their orbit. Second, the system has a habit of glitching when it hits the twentieth century. Anson Rabinbach argued as much in “Rise and Fall of the *Sattelzeit*,” when he objected that the *GG* is not at all a helpful schema for thinking about twentieth-century concepts like genocide, fascism, and totalitarianism.¹² Be that as it may, my sense is a bit different. Just as the concept of crisis becomes a slogan or catchword, one that is hollowed out the more it is used, so too sovereignty enters the twentieth century with a profoundly Schmittian complaint: “The current situation is characterized by a process of devaluation and elimination of the concept of sovereignty, which began in the 19th century and which forced efforts to retain it.”¹³ A thousand objections could be raised to this idea, not least that it fails completely, and in heavily conservative fashion, to understand the transformation of both state and sovereignty in the twentieth century.¹⁴ Third, the very definition of *Grundbegriff* is elastic to the point of convenience. *Grundbegriffe* clearly have a certain core, which sometimes reaches back to antiquity, yet they are ambiguous and moldable enough to change across history. They are porous containers, or bell-curves—when anyone with the least bit of structuralist training would note that meaning is constituted by a field of relations and not because some

¹² Anson Rabinbach, “Rise and Fall of the *Sattelzeit*: The *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe* and the Temporality of Totalitarianism and Genocide” in Dan Edelstein, Stefanos Geroulanos, and Natasha Wheatley, eds., *Power and Time: Temporalities in Conflict and the Making of History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2020), 103-122.

¹³ Hans Boldt, “Staat und Souveränität” in *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe* vol.6 (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1990), 152.

¹⁴ And let’s not even begin to discuss more problematic entries like *Repräsentation*/representation or *Rasse*/race (Werner Conze and Antje Sommer, “Rasse,” in *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe* vol.5 [Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1984], 135-178), which bordered on farcical even at the time of publication. Some of its problems have been repeatedly noted by commentators, but it deserves a much closer analysis (than I have seen, at any rate) insofar as a concept like race was not simply be restricted to academic/scientific conversations (even in 18th-19th-century Germany) that then endured a Nazi political perversion, but has to be understood as a concept in “everyday” usage as well. See, for one set of objections: Wulf D. Hund, Stefanie Affeldt, “‘Racism’ Down Under: The Prehistory of a Concept in Australia,” in *Australian Studies Journal / Zeitschrift für Australienstudien* 33-34 (2019-20), 9-30.

(and only some) concepts can consistently “contain” meaning. I find this porous-container image to pose a far greater problem than the earlier two objections. Thanks to it, a concept can be alternately described as clear-cut, concrete, obvious, deserving its own history, indeed foundational—and *at the same time* as pliable enough to be social-historically gauged and moderated without being determined by concepts from outside of the club of its peers. Koselleck’s concept of the concept in the *GG* becomes especially forceful for his argument of the advent of modernity and the transformation of horizons of expectation as these were re-determined by political concepts, all the while becoming a heavy-handed expediency regarding the study of concepts themselves. Finally, it is important to note the hostility of this approach to more complex linguistic formulations (metaphors, for example) and its difficulty in handling images, something that Koselleck acknowledged. These too it submits to a theoretical apparatus that re-asserts the concept’s (and especially the foundational concept’s) overarching significance.

Without doubting the grandeur of the *GG* achievement, it is worth asking whether this way of working, so essential to it, is at all workable. In Barbara Cassin’s aim (to cite one counter-example) “to understand how a network functions in one language by relating it to the networks of other languages,” a reader finds themselves interpellated by a recognition that the concept itself cannot be examined well without careful attention to the network surrounding it.¹⁵ The stabilization and relative stability of terms, to close on this argument, and their ostensible power in political languages, are what is supposed to guarantee this history, according to conceptual historians, but in fact what should be doing that is the relative stability and transformation of the network, not that of individual terms. Still, even today, conceptual historians articulate this stability as fundamental, even when they also articulate some limits to this model. Willibald Steinmetz, Michael Freeden, and Javier Fernández-Sebastián articulate the matter as follows (note the emphasis, which I place on the argument I disagree with):

Our modern national languages, but also the ‘classical’ ancient languages, only emerged out of the various standardizing and purifying movements driven in turn by sixteenth century humanists, seventeenth- and eighteenth-

¹⁵Barbara Cassin, ed., *Dictionary of Untranslatables: A Philosophical Lexicon*, edited in English by Emily Apter, Jacques Lezra, and Michael Wood (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014), xvii. Originally published as *Vocabulaire européen des philosophies: Dictionnaire des intraduisibles* (Paris: Seuil, 2004).

century state-builders, lexicographers and poets, and nineteenth-century romantic nationalists. *It is only by means of their language-political activities that the meanings of terms and the semantic relations between them became more stable and 'national' languages on the whole more homogenous and more clearly separated from each other.* In many European countries this process stretched over several centuries, in others it was condensed in shorter periods, but in general it started somewhere in the sixteenth century and came to a close towards the late nineteenth century. Conceptual historians working on one language have so far preferred to concentrate on the periods that followed the linguistic homogenization processes, and we may assume that this is no accident since conceptual histories in the form of lexicons like the German *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe* or the Spanish *Diccionario* require a certain degree of (at least temporarily) stable, and hence recognizable, relations between terms and concepts.¹⁶

2. The Stakes of Historical Epistemology

Part of the attraction of historical epistemology as an approach—one should not declare it to be a method exactly—is its austerity. Those studying the historical conditions for the possibility of knowledge emphasize that a quasi-structural explanation of the sources of a particular rationality or the behaviors underlying observation cannot rely solely on the premises and terms offered explicitly and actively by that rationality or that observation. Nor can it rely on chronology, nor yet on a linear “historical” unfolding of these conditions of possibility: in a sense one has to work backwards from a formulation. Instead, any explanation we might give has to seek the traces and shapes of this rationality in assumptions that exceed it without, for all that, being in any sense contextual in the sense of “external” to it. In the history and philosophy of science, at stake is above all the threshold of scientificity, and with it the ostensibly fundamental claims that in different historical occasions (for lack of a better term) allow for that scientificity.¹⁷ Historical epistemology thus does not take evidence within the history of science to be self-explanatory, but instead focuses, to quote Lorraine Daston, on “the history of the categories that structure our thought, pattern our arguments and proofs, and certify our standards for explanation.”¹⁸ She goes on:

Historical epistemology can be (indeed, must be) instantiated by the history of ideas, but it poses a different kind of question: not the history of this or that particular use of, say, infinitesimals in the mathematical demonstrations of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, but the history of the changing forms and standards of mathematical demonstration during this period; not the history of the establishment of this or that empirical fact in, say, the physiology of the mid-nineteenth century, but rather the history of the competing forms of facticity—statistical, experimental, and other—in the physiological institutes and laboratories circa 1870; not the historical judgment as to whether this or that discipline has attained objectivity, and if so, when and how, but rather a historical investigation into the multiple meanings and scientific manifestations of objectivity.¹⁹

¹⁶ Willibald Steinmetz, Michael Freeden, and Javier Fernández-Sebastián, eds., *Conceptual History in the European Space* (New York: Berghahn, 2017), 14, emphasis added.

¹⁷ Hans-Jörg Rheinberger, *On Historicizing Epistemology* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010), 72.

¹⁸ Lorraine Daston, “Historical Epistemology,” in James Chandler et al, *Questions of Evidence* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 282.

¹⁹ Daston, “Historical Epistemology,” 282-83.

Other definitions and formulations have been no less stern. Arnold I. Davidson explains his purpose in *The Emergence of Sexuality* by arguing that “this three-stage structural partition does not precisely coincide with historical chronology; the three forms of explanation were often mixed together, sometimes even in the same article.”²⁰ At stake is a parsing out. I quite like Hans-Jörg Rheinberger’s elegant dream that “it is up to historical epistemology, insofar as it takes seriously its own actualistic claim of seeking to rise to the level of its age in relation to the most recent scientific developments, that it transcends itself and understands its own knowledge production as a process of historical change.”²¹ And Uljana Feest and Thomas Sturm propose three versions of historical epistemology, namely (1) “as a study of the history of higher-order epistemic concepts such as objectivity, observation, experimentation, or probability; (2) [historical epistemology] as a study of the historical trajectories of the objects of research, such as the electron, DNA, or phlogiston; (3) [historical epistemology] as the long-term study of scientific developments.”²²

It is this last issue, “the long-term study of scientific developments,” that leaves me unsure. *In theory*, long-term should not be possible in historical epistemology. Rather than follow the usual habit of historians and move in linear date-A to later-date-B fashion covering some medium or longue durée, historical epistemology has generally fused temporality by staring at periodization through the lenses offered by specific epistemic objects or categories of thought. Hans-Jörg Rheinberger’s *Toward a History of Epistemic Things* concentrates on a very short period in the postwar when mRNA was discovered, or put together; Georges Canguilhem routinely concentrated on texts and insisted on their exemplariness, as if one did not need to offer a fully detailed historical account; Peter Galison has articulated positions with unusual rigor when working in a highly synchronic fashion, for example in his essays on Freud and Wiener; even Lorraine Daston and Katharine Park’s *Wonders and the Order of Nature*, which ostensibly

²⁰ Davidson, *The Emergence of Sexuality*, 3.

²¹ Rheinberger, *On Historicizing Epistemology*, 27.

²² Uljana Feest and Thomas Sturm, “What (Good) Is Historical Epistemology? Editors’ Introduction,” *Erkenntnis* 75, no. 3 (2011): 285–302, 285.

covers six centuries, burrows into specific moments or cases. This is one of the key benefits (and practical difficulties) of historical epistemology—that, to again quote Daston, historical epistemology

drastically curtails the chronological scope of the history of ideas as traditionally conceived, for it radically challenges the assumption of resemblance between ideas advanced by thinkers working within different conceptual categories. The vast arcs traced from classical antiquity to the present through various instantiations of the "same" idea lose much of their continuity if the trajectories must span contrasting conceptual categories of argument, explanation, and rationality. In any given case such continuity may be possible, but as a general premise it loses much of its a priori plausibility.²³

By extension, that we ought to be content with the recognition that there is no real “long term,” that an instantiation of a particular conceptual or epistemic logic is not simply dependent on a slow change, but rather on the conditions of possibility at different moments, whose shift (however abrupt) amounts to historical development. What is more, one, when studying the historically specific conditions of possibility for a certain kind of knowledge, we look not at how moment A led to moment B and in turn to their emergence by moment C: instead, we move *backwards* to see how it is that certain kinds of knowledge were not possible when you take away details; we move backwards to see what our authors cite, not forwards from source to subsequent influence. Anything but this—any forward movement—would border on myth.

This is not to quibble with Feest and Sturm’s definition in particular—it’s to emphasize that a certain trust in the longer term cannot be simply recovered in an argument that insists that an entire set of argumentative modes and intellectual presuppositions be reconstructed before correlations be even considered. Either that set is very discretely and conveniently adjusted over time, or else this long-termism is somewhat arbitrary. In light of this formulation, Daston’s definition too begins to look looser than we might want. Be that as it may, the problem becomes acute when epistemologists, fearful of the picture of history this develops, make themselves easy prey for the *longue durée*.

2a. Historical Epistemology Devolves into Myth

²³ Daston, "Historical Epistemology," 283.

Two figures are regularly credited with the key intellectual shifts that facilitated the emergence of the field: the French philosopher of science Gaston Bachelard and the Polish immunologist Ludwik Fleck.²⁴ Bachelard's pathway is especially interesting because the further he pressed into a conceptually austere frame for his scientific epistemology, the more he also moved toward poetics, toward a literature of the earth, toward theories of duration. The pressure-cooker moment for these directions is most likely 1938, the year when Bachelard published *The Formation of the Scientific Mind* and alongside it *The Psychoanalysis of Fire*. One has to resist the temptation to think these as distinct directions—not least because the style of the works on scientific epistemology is replicated in the poetic works, not least because the poetics arises in images and myths in the works on scientific epistemology. In *Formation* Bachelard explicitly “refer[red] to instincts in order to underline the real resistance put up by some epistemological obstacles” and proposed that “it is by revealing epistemological obstacles that we can help to establish the rudiments of a psychoanalysis of reason.”²⁵ Then, in *Psychoanalysis of Fire*, Bachelard further committed his “psychoanalysis” to Jungian complexes and archetypes:

What psychoanalysis has not yet completely systematized—although the works of C. G. Jung have cast a bright light upon this point—is the study of scientific explanations, of objective explanations, which purport to account for the discoveries of prehistoric man. In this chapter we shall bring together and complete the observations of C. G. Jung by calling attention to the weakness of rational explanations.²⁶

If this were not enough, Bachelard made a point to actually complete the book by seeing it as confirmation of Jung's theory: “What better proof can there be that fire, in the very precise sense of C. G. Jung, is the point of departure ‘for a fertile archaic complex,’ and that a special psychoanalysis must destroy its painful ambiguities the better to set free the lively dialectics which bestow on reverie its true liberty and its true function as a creative mental process?”²⁷

²⁴ Fleck tends to distinguish science from myth rather more straightforwardly, though he too,

²⁵ Gaston Bachelard, *The Formation of the Scientific Mind: A Contribution to a Psychoanalysis of Objective Knowledge*, introduced, translated and annotated by Mary McAllester Jones (Clinamen Press, 2002), 25, 29.

²⁶ Bachelard, *La psychanalyse du feu* (Paris: Gallimard, 1938), translated by A.C.M. Ross as *The Psychoanalysis of Fire* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1964), 21. Subsequent references are to the English edition.

²⁷ Bachelard, *Psychoanalysis of Fire*, 112.

Bachelard's commitment was double: to show a persistent pre-conceptual foundation, quite literally a psychological complex, and sometimes also to cure it. He spoke specifically of the objects of his analysis as "complexes that a psychoanalysis of objective knowledge will be obliged to eliminate in order to rediscover a true freedom of experiment."²⁸ Let's close our eyes to this fantasy of cure, and concentrate on what is more peculiar: his endorsement of an explicitly antimodernist language of sempiternity and "deep" or even foundational complexes. Perhaps not as deep as instincts (so he claims²⁹), they are nonetheless a kind of prehistoric ground.

Jung, of course, had established the psychological rationale for a deep archetypal history when he proposed that a "collective unconscious" filled with "archetypes" permeated the Unconscious—and that these amounted to a symbolic, mythical substratum that underwrites everyday life. This became essential for his analysis of individuality and collectivities. Jung claimed in 1912 that "psychoanalytic research into the nature of subliminal processes will be enormously enriched and deepened by a study of mythology," by which he meant "Indo-European" myth.³⁰ For Jung, the symbols and complexes that ostensibly structure the unconscious do so because it is porous to the outside world, to the collective. As a result, the myths that are retold either are partly inscribed or else reflect the complexes that design the unconscious. As opposed to Wilhelm Wundt's focus on "laws" of ethnopsychological development from the age of heroes for a rational modernity, Jung argued explicitly against rationalizing the collective unconscious expanded ethnopsychology by translating into a vast symbolic and mythological reservoir that encompassed archetypes and iterable symbols.³¹

²⁸ Bachelard, *Psychoanalysis of Fire*, 83.

²⁹ Bachelard, *Psychoanalysis of Fire*, 12.

³⁰ Carl G. Jung, "Therapeutic Principles of Psychoanalysis," in *Jung Contra Freud* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), 121. On Jung's role in the multiplication of symbols in the rewriting of *The Interpretation of Dreams*, see Lydia Marinelli and Andreas Mayer, *Dreaming by the Book* (New York: Other Press, 2003).

³¹ Jung cites Wundt's *Grundriss der Psychologie* in "The Psychology of the Unconscious" (1917), in *Collected Works*, vol. 7 (New York: Pantheon, 1953), 17.

As solutions go, this is fairly scandalous, not so much because of Jung's own politics, but because of the astonishing essentialism to which it submits. Bachelard had spent the turn into the 1930s arguing against *both* classical realism and idealism as workable operational models of science.³² In *The New Scientific Spirit* (1934), Bachelard had emphasized scientific experimentation and work as "the realization of the rational," a somewhat vague concept he defined by arguing that "science conjures up a world, by means not of magic immanent in reality but of rational impulse immanent in mind.... Scientific work makes rational entities real, in the full sense of the word."³³ This position was intended to ensure a new variety of realism,³⁴ and to question theories of truth and proof that had preceded Einsteinian relativity, non-Euclidean geometry, and the Copenhagen interpretation of quantum physics, it certainly explained why scientists would rely on pre-conceived and ultimately nonscientific ideas. But it did not, of its own, mean that archetypes and deep-seated complexes ruled the day. Which is all to say that the dive into Jungian myth made a certain sense within Bachelard's schema, given his search to demonstrate that no research could be carried out on fire that wasn't already defined by the mythological meanings of fire. But it was only one possible solution, the one that overcommitted to a variety of myth while battling a (dominant) progressivist standard.

Bachelard was not alone in a commitment to myth. His colleague and successor at the Sorbonne Georges Canguilhem, who understood his work as at once epistemological and historical, held a quite different, oddly recurrent habit of invoking myths as haunting certain epistemic problems. "Bachelard teaches us [that] the imagination incessantly deforms or reforms old images to form new ones," Canguilhem noted of his predecessor, noting that "some" think of the imagination in terms of archetypes but accentuating a more dynamic version of Bachelard's approach.³⁵ In that same passage, and in somewhat classic liberal

³² Gaston Bachelard, *Le Nouvel esprit scientifique* (Paris: PUF, 1934); translated by Arthur Goldhammer as *The New Scientific Spirit* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1984).

³³ Bachelard, *Le Nouvel esprit scientifique*, 13.

³⁴ In *An Atheism that is not Humanist Emerges in French Thought* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), ch.1, I called this an "antifoundational realism."

³⁵ Georges Canguilhem, "Monstrosity and the Monstrous," in *Knowledge of Life*, trans. S. Geroulanos and D. Ginsburg (Fordham University Press, 2008), 145-46.

language, Canguilhem prioritized “the imagination”³⁶ as unbound, uncontrolled, capable of populating a world in which life and science find only a limited number of forms. Yet the same Canguilhem who opposed thinking of the history of science in terms of anticipators of great discoveries also had little trouble occasionally reverting to ostensibly ancient myths that he see redeployed, as if by the imagination, in new settings.³⁷ Discussing the longstanding debate in cell theory regarding the relation of cells and protoplasm, for example, Canguilhem suddenly pivoted to revert to the myth of Aphrodite’s birth.

Ultimately, is this protoplasm anything other than the logical avatar of the mythological fluid, the generator of all life, the foaming wave from which Venus emerged? Charles Naudin, the French biologist who almost beat Mendel to the discovery of the mathematical laws of heredity, used to say that the primal blastema was the clay of the Bible. This is why we have proposed that theories are not born from the facts they coordinate, which are supposed to have given rise to them. Or, more exactly: facts give rise to theories, but they engender neither the concepts that unite them internally nor the intellectual intentions they develop. These intentions come from far away, and these concepts are few in number; this is why theoretical themes survive the apparent destruction that polemics and refutations pride themselves in having wrought.³⁸

In this case, Canguilhem went on to instruct his readers *not* to conclude that he found “more theoretical value in the myth of Venus or in the narrative of Genesis than in cell theory. We have simply wanted to show that the obstacles and limits of this theory did not escape many scientists and philosophers at the time of its birth.”³⁹ But it is difficult not to wonder whether the epistemologist here just throws up his hands—and in fact seems to argue that there is no possible way to exclude a long-standing structure *known to be mythological* from serving as a sort of hidden architecture, a hidden obsession, a foundation for the unbounded imagination, in what seems a well-articulated scientific problem. And yes, one could object that I’m overreading a heuristic, into Canguilhem’s cute way of closing an article, which operates like the obsessive way in which historians today open essays with anecdotes. Indeed, Canguilhem used such images at the end of articles, often to articulate an intellectual habit that persisted, often to suggest

³⁶ “We have said that life is poor in monsters, while the fantastic is a world. We can now understand why life is relatively poor in monsters: organisms are incapable of structural eccentricities except during a short moment at the beginning of their development. But why say of the fantastic that it is a world, if it is true that a world, a cosmos, is an order? Is it because there are types (some would even say archetypes) of the fantastic? What we mean is that the fantastic is capable of populating a world. The power of imagination is inexhaustible, indefatigable. How could it not be? The imagination is a function without an organ. It is not one of those functions that cease functioning to recuperate their functional power. It feeds only on its own activity.” (Canguilhem, “Monstrosity and the Monstrous,” 145.) I read Canguilhem as answering “no” to his own second question.

³⁷ I hope I may be allowed to indulge in a slight (and not entirely uncalled for) anachronism in this case, as “Monstrosity and the Monstrous” dates to 1965 and “Cell Theory” to 1945. I note “not uncalled for” because while I know of no explicit formulation of the imagination in these terms from Canguilhem’s mid-1940s work, his near-Nietzschean treatment of norms is consistent with such a position.

³⁸ Canguilhem, “Cell Theory,” in *Knowledge of Life*, 55-56.

³⁹ Canguilhem, “Cell Theory,” 56.

that a scientific problem needed to be perceived from another perspective, a perspective one could *not* inhabit.

In Jean Giraudoux's *Electra*, the beggar, the vagabond who stumbles across squashed hedgehogs on the road, meditates on the hedgehog's original sin that drives him to cross roads. If this question has philosophical meaning, because it poses the problem of destiny and death, it has much less biological meaning. A road is a product of human technology, one of the elements of the human milieu—but it has no biological value for the hedgehog. Hedgehogs as such do not cross roads: they explore, in their own way, their own hedgehog milieu, on the basis of their alimentary and sexual impulses. On the contrary, it is man-made roads that cross the hedgehog's milieu, his hunting ground and the theater of his loves, just as they cross the milieus of the rabbit, the lion, or the dragonfly.⁴⁰

Here the argument is aimed at illustration, and yet the force of the image is exemplary rather than merely illustrative—a myth for the plurality of species and milieus. Canguilhem's use of images in a fashion that bordered on the mythological did not end with him. Michel Foucault—the latter-day king of a certain stylized austerity—made himself a partisan of the forceful articulated image: the execution of Damians the attempted regicide in *Discipline and Punish*; the bloated Panopticon, at once essential to that book and quite at odds with the movement and even the chronology of the argument; and my favorite, the star-studded-sky ceiling in Septimius Severus's Hall of Justice, with which Foucault opens *On the Government of the Living* (1979-80) which he then leaves aside:

For Septimius Severus the purpose was, of course, that of inscribing his particular and conjunctural judgments within the system of the world and of showing how the logos that presided over this order of the world, and over his birth, was the same logos that organized, founded, and justified his judgments. What he said in a particular circumstance in the world, in a particular *kairos*, as the Stoics would say, belonged precisely to the same order of things as that fixed once and for all on high. He also wanted to show how his reign was founded by the stars, that it was not an error that he, the roughneck from Leptis Magna, had seized power by force and violence, that it was not by chance or as the result of any human plot that he had seized power, but that he had been called to the position he occupied by the very necessity of the world. His reign, his seizure of power, which could not be founded by the law, was justified once and for all by the stars.⁴¹

In this kind of frame, the suggestive image carries a lot of weight—not simply rhetorically and not simply as a reference-point. I wonder further whether this practice resonates with Foucault's reliance on a somewhat vague or negatively-defined concept of power.

In more recent writings in the field, a different set of motifs has emerged. I am thinking in particular of Lorraine Daston's turn in recent years toward a history of moral orders and values—problems which she

⁴⁰ Canguilhem, *Knowledge of Life*, 22.

⁴¹ Foucault, *On the Government of the Living*, trans. Graham Burchell (Hampshire, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 1-3.

explicitly treats as diachronic and near-universal.⁴² Both *Rules: A Short History of What We Live By* (2022) and *Against Nature* (2019) offer a striking commitment to diachronic examination. In *Against Nature*, she proposes a philosophical anthropology that ostensibly examines what kind of rational beings we are and what our relation to nature is:

The question I would like to address can be simply posed: Why do human beings, in many different cultures and epochs, pervasively and persistently, look to nature as a source of norms for human conduct? Why should nature be made to serve as a gigantic echo chamber for the moral orders that humans make?⁴³

Daston's examination explicitly engages the comparison between nature and human reason ("a very human form of rationality"—5), and specifically the reliance of human reason on mythologized natural orders and categories. She declares that humans articulate three types of natures: specific natures, local natures and universal natural laws, which she richly catalogues through a rhetorical strategy could be termed a parataxis of the pithy spectacular. She eventually concludes that naturalization (modeling moral on natural orders) as a strategy for establishing moral orders is regular yet also weak;⁴⁴ and she proposes a disenchantment narrative by arguing that the limitations of specifically human reason need to constitute the object of our study.

And if *Against Nature* is startling in the blithe way it unfurls examples of models copied from nature (and used to imitate it) as a way of justifying its three-kinds-of-nature argument, *Rules* is no less startling already in its declaration that "We are, all of us, everywhere, always, enmeshed in a web of rules" and that "since Greco-Roman antiquity" there have been precisely three kinds of these rules, namely "tools of measurement and calculation [or algorithms]; models or paradigms; and laws."⁴⁵ [.....]

⁴² "In ancient India and in ancient Greece, in medieval France and Enlightenment America, in the latest controversy over homosexual marriage or genetically modified organisms, people have linked the natural and moral orders—and disorders. The stately rounds of the stars modeled the good life for Stoic sages; the rights of man were underwritten by the laws of nature in revolutionary France and in the newborn United States; recent avalanches in the Swiss Alps or hurricanes in the United States prompt headlines about 'The Revenge of Nature.'" Daston, *Against Nature* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2019), 3. Originally published as *Gegen die Nature* (Berlin: Matthes & Seitz, 2018).

⁴³ Daston, *Against Nature*, 3.

⁴⁴ Daston, *Against Nature*, 68.

⁴⁵ Daston, *Rules: A Short History of What We Live By* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2022), 1-2.

Let's recall the standard set by Daston in her earlier definition that historical epistemology

radically challenges the assumption of resemblance between ideas advanced by thinkers working within different conceptual categories. The vast arcs traced from classical antiquity to the present through various instantiations of the "same" idea lose much of their continuity if the trajectories must span contrasting conceptual categories of argument, explanation, and rationality. In any given case such continuity may be possible, but as a general premise it loses much of its a priori plausibility.⁴⁶

Either Daston's recent work has developed a truly astonishing capacity to resolve the problems she identified in the *longue-durée* and indeed to resolve them into three distinct categories per book, or else by the same standard we should admit that "it loses much of its a priori plausibility." And if it is implausible for these convenient triads to operate so neatly, then the epistemologist has certainly devolved into a mythologist, ordering the varieties of human reasoning, rulemaking, order, and so on, in ways that have no justification except their judgment. Daston time and again uses the exact same language as she did in her earlier work—**"---**". Yet we always fall back on these assertions. The number three, and the entire categorization it establishes, amounts to a diachronic myth. Time and again, for a historical epistemology to make sense, certain persistent concerns, modes of argument, beliefs have to congeal, to function as premises, and to a degree as counterpoints for the objects that historical epistemology wrests from progressivist theories of science and knowledge: rationality, truth, complete knowledge.

Last but not least, the problem is not that such and such an author, even one of Daston's stature, originality, and force, has decided to throw caution to the winds and committed to an implausible schema that they themselves should know better than admit. Rather it is that in this manner, the categories of human reason and the presumed orders of knowledge are at once mythologized and hyperstabilized. As in conceptual history, here too an order of the author's choice organizes modes of knowledge into groups or sets, rather than allowing for an incomplete, broad, somewhat anarchic system where priority and origin and diachrony cannot be neatly and fully articulated.

3. Starting Anew

⁴⁶ Daston, "Historical Epistemology," 283.

“Who is to say what meaning there is in anything? Who is to foretell the flight of a word?” Virginia Woolf, *The Waves*

The two problems are linked, and burdensome to the project of reconstructing meaning out of historical configurations. If historical epistemology, in its critique of the mythologization of particular scientific forms (truth, reason, etc), proves recursively beholden to myths of a more traditional variety, this is for much the same reasons that conceptual history relies too much on *certain* concepts that serve as givens and become overdetermined and overbearing upon all others. To pursue a semiotic history is to admit that roughly the same problem plagues the two cases: how do we admit that forms, words, images, concepts, metaphors play a determining role *without* privileging particular ones and without treating them as somewhat permanent, de-historical if not ahistorical? Can we not, in other words, pursue a history of concepts without privileging the already privileged concepts, the state, the political, empire, the nation, and so on? And conversely, can we not rely on historical epistemology without looking only at the grand structures and falling over into the mythical ones? Mythical regression and hardened conceptuality are here two sides of the same coin, if not simply the same debt.

As I have indicated already, my interest in the two approaches derives from the sense that to articulate a system of thought—not so much any overall structure as the way in which elements within it press on individual terms, and press on them differently across time—we need at once an approach to the conditions of its possibility and one that clearly understands the lushness of its semantic imaginary. Without these, the philosophical, social, political, and anthropological thought of individual thinkers is impossible to adequately study, whether conceptually or historically. Without these, the context remarks vague, the motivations behind citation strategies fade away, the intellectual and sociological competitions lose their internal language and coherence, and the sites of innovation and change become misunderstood. Just as the sociology of ideas and intellectuals helps to better understand the position-taking and competition within given fields and enables far greater precision than the conventional social history of ideas ever did, so too can a conceptual history help if it concentrates not on the grand few concepts but on

an entire economy of meaning (whether possible or actual), while recognizing that concepts cannot be cleaved off cleanly from metaphors, expressions, and even multiple coexisting and interlaced systems of thought. As Virginia Woolf writes, words “have been out and about, on people’s lips, in their houses, in the streets, in the fields, for so many centuries... they are so stored with meanings, with memories, that they have contracted so many famous marriages.... They are the wildest, freest, most irresponsible, most unteachable of all things.” That would be the hope here.

Put another way, what I would articulate is a position that recognizes that

- (a) concepts do not have inherent or stable signifieds, that they depend on the uses of words and also on the constant reconstruction of the memories hidden in them; on imaginaries filled with metaphors, expressions and images; on subjective interpretations and conscious or unconscious reformulations; on sociological settings of articulation; on argumentative and rhetorical organizations.
- (b) the promise of an historical epistemology is that of a history of the production of knowledge: it is a line of questioning that interpellates concepts and often-contrasting scientific approaches as these develop systems of knowledge and truth; this production of knowledge is examined as synchronic, with special attention to its ways of constructing for itself a past and a way of channeling that past into its own aims.

These two premises are effectively the same: conceptual history is the history of words and concepts used to generate a certain kind of knowledge and a certain kind of claim; historical epistemology becomes the systematic approach thanks to which one can establish the competitions and hierarchical relations ongoing between concepts. Through it we can get to an economy of the operations of concepts and practices.

What is worse is that we have at present *no* decent account of the relationship between concepts and metaphors for historical use; nor even of the metaphorical value of words; the glint and oddity of

expressions; the repetition of easy en-passant phrases. Yes, Hans Blumenberg emphasized the way that concepts tend toward the erasure of metaphor and rejected, already in *Paradigms for a Metaphorology*, the cleaned-up theory of language to which concepts point.⁴⁷ Some of Blumenberg's approach is helpful as a complement to *Begriffsgeschichte*, but that is both a problematic proposition on its own merits (given their conceptual differences) and also rather unhelpful if we admit that the border between concept and metaphor is porous and hard to identify. Blumenberg too moved explicitly toward myth, or rather toward the constant reworking of myth as the necessary premise of any thinking about mythology and nonconceptuality.⁴⁸

So, somewhat to my own astonishment, and in full knowledge of the longstanding boring debates about psychoanalysis and historicism, I propose to adapt certain arguments proposed by Jacques Lacan, who, in a series of seminar lectures in the later 1950s (especially the seminar on the *Formations of the Unconscious*), and in his essay "The Instance of the Letter in the Unconscious, or Reason Since Freud," articulated a position on the way that language functioned in the unconscious.⁴⁹ I've certainly not relied on Lacan in earlier schemata I have used to describe what I do, the *web of concepts*, moving across time like a *cat's cradle* does in space, or more recently an *economy* or a *matrix of conceptual algorithms*. Nor would a fully Lacanian solution really work—what follows is necessarily selective. The relationship of language, institutions, and subjectivity as described by Lacan—and as simplified here—is epistemologically efficient for dealing with both the problems identified in this essay. Regardless of the particular organization of the unconscious in Lacan's work, some of his assertions work exceedingly well at the conceptual-historical level. His fundamental assumption that "language, with its structure, exists

⁴⁷ In a later work (*Begriffe in Geschichten*), Blumenberg celebrated the process of dark-room photograph development, particularly the early stages when the details have not yet

⁴⁸ And yes, *Metaphors We Live By* granted a way for discussing philosophically and perhaps historically the function of metaphor. But neither offered a precise, non-mythologizing account of these nuggets of language that have their own histories; that come to mind; that mean more than they denote; that play and get played.

⁴⁹ Jacques Lacan, "L'instance de la lettre dans l'inconscient ou la raison depuis Freud," in *Écrits* (Paris: Seuil, 1966), translated by Bruce Fink as "The Instance of the Letter in the Unconscious, or Reason Since Freud," in *Écrits: The First Complete Edition in English*, trans. Bruce Fink (London: Norton, 2006). Subsequent references are to first the French then the English editions.

prior to each subject's entry into it"⁵⁰ is helpful as a minimum for positioning agents within a language that exceeds and situates them. As significant is Lacan's sense that signifiers (words in our case, though the phonemes he attends to need not be discounted) cannot be simply tied to a nominalist handling of reality, but that they generate meaning through their constant and shifting interrelations.⁵¹ Lacan was dismissive toward the Jungian formulation of archetypes and complexes, for the reason that symbols become overdetermined and overburdened to the point of extensively warping language and the subject's place in it:

There is the serpent, the dragon, tongues, the flaming eye, the green plant, the pot of flowers, the concierge. They are all fundamental images, incontestably stuffed with signification. It is just that we can do strictly nothing with them, and if you move about at this level, you will only succeed in losing yourself, along with your little lamp, in the vegetating forest of primitive archetypes.⁵²

In contrast to this model of archaic symbolisms, Lacan proposed the signifying chain ("links by which a necklace firmly hooks onto a link of another necklace made of links"⁵³) as a schema for understanding the meaning of particular speech (e.g., a sentence), in which each link, each signifier, is easily flipped in the unconscious with other terms by way of processes of metaphor or metonymy.⁵⁴ With metaphor, a word takes the place of another in the signifying chain; with metonymy, the meaning of a term extends to those around it: "Metaphor's creative spark does not spring forth from the juxtaposition of two images, that is, of two equally actualized signifiers. It flashes between two signifiers, one of which has replaced the other by taking the other's place in the signifying chain, the occulted signifier remaining present by virtue of its (metonymic) connection to the rest of the chain."⁵⁵ In the unconscious signifying chain that is Other to the speaker, processes of metaphor and metonymy flip and align terms constantly. They refuse the false orderliness of discourse, the pretense of concepts to exist or operate in an objective fashion that does not

⁵⁰ Lacan, *Écrits*, 495/413.

⁵¹ Lacan, *Écrits*, 500/417.

⁵² Jacques Lacan, on Jung and his school, in *Formations of the Unconscious*, edited by Jacques-Alain Miller, translated by Russell Grigg (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2017), 143.

⁵³ Lacan, *Écrits*, 502/418.

⁵⁴ Lacan, *Écrits*, 504-506/421-22.

⁵⁵ Lacan, *Écrits*, 507/422.

cross paths with the unconscious, the belief that we experience words and concepts in some way that is not partly determined by the course of our lives.⁵⁶

Whatever their role in psychoanalysis, these elements allow the historian of concepts several moves. First, a sense that concepts are not simply external: they are reworked by each of us slightly differently, with references to many of the same metaphors and expressions, with the elasticity necessary for them to apply to different fields. Put another way, each speaker reworks a concept in repeating it. Concepts get mixed with the other concepts, expressions, images, and metaphors that this speaker, and through her other speakers, align with them. (“Sovereignty,” for example, is by no means a concept standing on its own: an entire arsenal of aesthetic, political, and moral imaginaries subtends it so that its invocation recalls at least some of them.⁵⁷) These other concepts, expressions, metaphors, and images have linked histories but are not somehow entirely independent: they all belong together in this “signifying chain” or web of concepts. “Foundational” concepts do not exist: there is no concept of “the state” that simply escapes all the other concepts linked to it, and those linked to them in turn, to say nothing of all the metaphors and images associated with them. As individuals attach and reattach all of these figures to one another, as institutions and fields develop to use some of these words in a more gelled fashion, as others work against that, words do not simply shed their past, their “echoes... memories... associations” as Woolf would have it, but it does become possible to examine them carefully through these relations. Similarly, it becomes impossible to simply refer to overarching quasi-mythical schemas, whether asserted by Jung or by an author who decides on triadic divisions. Instead, to examine them epistemologically is to reconstruct meticulously their relations with other concepts and metaphors, their changing referents, the ways in which in groups (and never alone) they come to impact a system of thought.

⁵⁶ This insofar as the father for Lacan operates as a key metaphor in the Oedipus complex more than as an actual person: “The father is a signifier substituted for another signifier. That is the mainspring, the essential and unique mainspring, of the father's intervention in the Oedipus complex.” Lacan, *Formations of the Unconscious*, 158.

⁵⁷ Zvi Ben-Dor Benite, Stefanos Geroulanos, and Nicole Jerr, eds., *The Scaffolding of Sovereignty: Global and Aesthetic Perspectives on the History of a Concept* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017).

Second, as just indicated, what matters is polysemy—a certain plurality of meanings thanks to the stretchiness of both a word’s reference-frames and the complex world of metaphors that get to flip into and out of the place of that word in Lacan’s signifying chain. Concepts do not have to be understood as containers, ever fuller or ever emptier. They are instead attached at once to rhetorical structures and to the imagery they evoke. They play a role that is usually clear—but with a network of inferences that is not. With this in mind, it should be impossible to simply tell a *longue-durée* story, whether for conceptual or epistemological history. Instead, any non-synchronic story one would tell is by definition and by necessity partial, with scattered elements fused together at different times, with the past reconstructed and in many respects fabulous. The promise of a clear stability can be abandoned, and the life of concepts engaged.

Incidentally, I note two further gains. First, this kind of continuity between signifiers allows us to see authors as both responding to their conceptual worlds *and* reworking them through a certain ever-unclear interiority. The subjectivity specific to this interiority does not cancel out the status of discourse as basically external to each speaker. At the same time, it demands that the historian *not* generate a story of influence, but a reverse temporality grounded on citation. And third, we can take a step back from a biographical and social context as it is usually seen to determine an author’s argument and rely more on a sense of an author’s or speaker’s particular claims; sociological competition (for example as it derives from Bourdieu’s notions of *habitus* and *field*⁵⁸) does not determine speech, but enables particular domains of intellectual engagement and often sets in place particular formulations and associations.

This too is because concepts are always tied to one another. They dance together—certainly on a signifying chain. Their movement draws up theories and threads a world. Sometimes such concepts overlap or pile on top of one another, so we read a text full of them and they seem to work together. Sometimes they confront one another, and one seems more sustainable, at least for a while. Once we

⁵⁸ Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977); *Habitus and Field: General Sociology, Volume 2* (1982-1983) (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2020).

recognize that metaphors and images also fit in this giant web, their meanings, biographies, economies, and roles in a system become far more interesting than those of humans.