

Introduction

Making and Breaking the News

There is nothing new under the sun.

—Ecclesiastes

Make it new.

—Ezra Pound

What is “new” to speak of? What does any talk of novelty—be it prophetic or trivial, revolutionary or commercial—promise to unsettle, or unsettle with its promise? The difficulties evoked by these questions increase rather than diminish with the apparent familiarity of novel announcements, which obscures the obscurity of the “new,” whatever it may mean. Even when news items are called into question or simply said to be “fake,” for instance, the newness of the purported “news” is supposed to remain beyond a shadow of a doubt, nor does “faking” it seem to lessen its appeal. Whether a purported *novum* is announced or denounced, however, word of the “new” keeps escaping, from antiquity through to current affairs—and in ways that keep escaping examination of the word.

It was because the new could still be called a “new” question that Ernst Bloch would write in 1953—after Francis Bacon’s *Novum Organum Scientiarum*, after the emphatically “new” art of high modernism, and after the flood of *nouveautés* on the global market of high capitalism: “[T]he Not-Yet-Conscious, Not-Yet-Become [. . .] has not even broken through as a word, let alone as a concept. [. . .] Hope [. . .] does not therefore occur in the history of the sciences, either as a psychological or as a cosmic entity,

and least of all as a functionary of what has never been, of the possible New.”¹ Yet even with his large-scale exposition of the dynamics of “real possibility”—which should open all possible matters to novel futures, from the conditions of the present to the latent potentials of the most distant past²—the prospect of “blueprint[s] for *planned or outlined* utopias” that Bloch advances presupposes that one might attain conscious clarity with regard to novel alternatives and work to “overtak[e] the natural course of events.”³ At such moments, Bloch’s extensively rigorous and expansively erudite elaboration of “the New” runs the risk of understating the possibility that addressing “what has never been” may turn the thought of a radical *novum* into a known, rather than letting it be the unprecedented arrival that the “new” otherwise seems to signify in his text. In another context, Jacques Derrida pointed to this risk, which arises whenever it is a question of the status of novel inventions. “If at first we might think that invention calls all status back into question,” he writes at one point in the inaugural essay of *Psyche: Inventions of the Other*, “we also see that there could be no invention without status. To invent is to produce iterability and the machine for reproduction and simulation.”⁴ This is why “a programmed invention,” however great its potential, could hardly turn out to be “an event through which the future [*l’avenir*] comes to us.”⁵ Instead, any programmed or programmable future (*futur*) would foreclose the arrival of another time to come (*à venir*) and prevent the arrival of another whose otherness could not be timed or described according to temporal categories.⁶

No newscast and no technique for drafting blueprints, in other words, allows for an other or a *novum*; hence Derrida’s call to reinvent invention, as well as his suggestion to call “the only possible invention [. . .] an invention [that] has to declare itself to be the invention of that which did not appear to be possible.”⁷ But because this declaration too would fall into self-contradiction if it were to be made, Derrida also does not deliver said declaration; suspending its assertion, he turns to another way of formulating the problem: “It is in this paradox that a deconstruction gets under way.”⁸ Whereas the constructive rhetoric of Bloch risks building a closed view of the future, Derrida’s writing advocates for what may be “called deconstruction,” which is said to operate “in opening, in uncloseting, in destabilizing foreclosure structures so as to allow for the passage toward the other.”⁹ The fact of recognizable phenomena, institutions, and statements notwithstanding, “the new of an event” may even emerge from out of a writing that “bend[s] these rules with respect for the rules themselves in order to allow the other to come or to announce its coming in the opening

of this dehiscence.”¹⁰ Derrida thus gives word of the “new” by declining it, by giving it another bent that allows for the new of the word. Only in such an oblique and wayward way might there be a chance to speak for an invention or innovation that differs from “a program of possibilities within the economy of the same.”¹¹ Yet because this chance would also be none, if it were guaranteed, already the plurality of participles in Derrida’s remarks (“opening,” “uncloseting,” “destabilizing”) indicates that no single word for such a wager could be definitive—neither “deconstruction” nor “the other” nor the “new”—leaving the “novelty of newness” and the otherness of an other radically open issues.¹²

What does become clearer through Derrida’s analysis is the way in which language lets inventive possibilities and impossibilities, statements and destabilizations, come to pass and come undone. Insubordinate to the rules and statutes that it renders speakable, language permits novel occurrences that part from an “economy of the same,” in withdrawing from any transcendental structure or theoretical model that may be formulated to account for it. In one essay from his oeuvre—which interrogates language like none other—Werner Hamacher arrives upon a similar observation with regard to the language of history in Paul Valéry’s *La Jeune Parque*:

History, the self-withdrawing reference to the other in its finitude, is—and is therefore barely—still the withdrawal of history that is formulated in cognitively graspable and phenomenally representable relations to the other. It is finite history only as a parting from itself as phenomenology and morphology, from itself as the aesthetics and logic of historical relations. Only where it itself—as, for example, in Valéry’s text—is relinquished to the dephenomenalizing, deaestheticizing, anamorphizing, or amorphizing withdrawal of its relation to the other; only where it is exposed to the other in its alteration and virtual unreadability, and where it is exposed to its own relation as a dwindling one, does it begin to free itself from the ontological primacy of form and from the epistemological primacy of a presenting cognition, and thus to enter the field of its finitude. The reference to the other is then no longer to be thought of as a communicative exchange in the medium of a common share in a formative principle, no longer as a securing of the self against the loss of the other and no longer as a preservation of the other in the refuge of its presentation; rather it is to be carried out as a

parting from the other as its own and appropriable, as an interruption of the circle of communication and as an imparting of that division which separates the other not only from the self but even from itself.¹³

Novelty has yet to be addressed as this radically other and othering occurrence of language, which, as Hamacher writes elsewhere, is an “eminently historical form” whose transformability precedes and exposes each formulation to transformation in turn.¹⁴ Bloch’s three-volume aesthetic, philosophical, and political project remains one of the most sustained meditations on novelty to date, but one in which “the concept of the *Novum*” figures as “the goal-determination of the human will” and therefore limits the very “open possibilities of the future” toward which it should be oriented.¹⁵ By contrast, other recent investigations of the new tend to address it in terms of relatively constant structures or rules. Scholars of aesthetics and literature, such as Harold Rosenberg and Hans Robert Jauss, characterize the appeals to novelty that were made by modernist poets and artists as expressions of a consistent desire to break with tradition,¹⁶ while scholars of cultural studies such as Boris Groys consider the production of novelties in and beyond the literary marketplace under the auspices of a more general cultural economy that demands what he calls, in Nietzschean fashion, a perpetual “revaluation of values”: “One does not [. . .] break with the old by a free decision that presupposes human autonomy, gives it expression, or offers it social guarantees. One does so, rather, only by complying with the rules that determine the way our culture works.”¹⁷ Turning to various discussions of novelty in the “sciences, the social sciences, and the arts” from classical antiquity to the twentieth century, Michael North has elaborated a broad historical account of what he finds to be relatively stable “conceptual models” for the new, which he articulates in terms of “recurrence” and “recombination.”¹⁸ However, the specific language for various novel announcements tends to remain unaddressed, even when scholars such as Nicolas Dierks turn to language in order to come to terms with the new.¹⁹ Drawing on Ludwig Wittgenstein’s theory of language games, he aims to establish a basic, albeit variable grammar of novelty.²⁰ Yet the form of a grammar would not speak to that which escapes “communicative exchange in the medium of a common share in a formative principle;” nor would a language game, however flexible its rules may be, “free [. . .] itself from the ontological primacy of form and from the epistemological primacy of a presenting consciousness.”²¹ Only

a philology that inclines toward “the dephenomenalizing, deaestheticizing, anamorphizing, or amorphizing withdrawal of its relation to the other” could begin to expose what the specificity of singular utterances may otherwise have to say of the new.

Even the most commonplace announcements on novelty escape the theoretical frameworks that have shaped many of its discussions to date and give anything but a straightforward indication of what is called “new” or what the “new” calls for. The often-cited verse of Ecclesiastes, “There is nothing new under the sun” (Ecc. 1.9),²² for example, presents more than merely the denial that an unprecedented phenomenon may arrive within a divinely created cosmos, where god “has made everything suitable for its time” (Ecc. 3.11), and where solely oblivion obscures the fact that each apparent novelty “has already been, in the ages before us” (Ecc. 1.10). For if men can only say, “See, this is new,” because they lack insight into “the ages before us” (Ecc. 1.10)—and these ages are “obscure” (עֹלָם, *olam*) to the same extent that they are “before” (עֹלָם, *olam*)—what can be said is also shown through this very utterance to exceed what can be seen, what can be known, and what can be. The distinction that is drawn between word of the “new” (שִׁדְרָה, *chadash*) and the unseen things of the past—in a language where the word for “word” is at once the word for “thing” (דְּבַר, *dabar*)—therefore fundamentally unsettles any assurance that speech will have corresponded to the things of which it speaks, including all that may be said of divine plans, and including this very saying on the “new.”²³ The impossibility or possibility of any particular novelty cannot be judged on these terms, or any others, for that matter; rather, even the Ecclesiast’s authoritative word on things undermines any supposable foundation for a decision over the issue. At the same time, however, *the* “new”—as a matter of words, if nothing else—emerges in the Ecclesiast’s speech as that which is other than any known or unknown thing in the world, and perhaps the very thing that troubles any evident or speakable world order. The question as to how the new may be addressed, and what may take place in addressing it, thus opens rather than closes with the Ecclesiast’s famous pronunciation.

Yet if the most categorical denial of novelty suspends any decision over its possibility, then no affirmation of novelty could be upheld either upon the same grounds. Nor does the new become a more promising prospect when the modus of speech shifts from the register of constative utterances to poetic imperatives, as in the oeuvre of Ezra Pound, whose phrase, “make it new,” would become one of the most widespread clichés on novelty, beside

the Ecclesiast's verse. Rather, in its iterations—at least in Pound's poetry—this seemingly simple appeal to the “new” is made over from a complex of motifs drawn from other texts, which render it more and other than the announcement of a directive that could be directly understood, let alone followed. In “Canto LIII” from the *Cantos*, where “make it new” repeats twice in a passage devoted to the reign of the ancient Chinese Emperor Tching Tang, nothing could be less certain than the force of this imperative, as the demand for novelty emerges in the midst of a sequence of verses devoted to dried up resources and prayers for replenishment, futile technological inventions and natural renewal, ancient inscriptions and modern turns of phrase. According to Pound's main source, Joseph-Anne-Marie de Moyriac de Mailla's *Histoire générale de la Chine*, Tching Tang had opened a copper mine and organized the minting of coins, which he “furnished to the poor” in order to remedy the problems of destitution and scarcity that had arisen during an extended drought.²⁴ But it is not to this innovation that Pound refers when he delivers his famous sentence on novelty, most likely because Tching Tang's new coinage does nothing to compensate for the lack of rain and grain. Instead, the copper turns out to quicken the depletion of resources according to de Mailla: “the granaries were depleted without the earth reproducing the harvests to replenish them.”²⁵ “After seven years of frightful sterility,” however, the Emperor utters prayers on a mountaintop, calling upon the sky to strike him and spare the people—at which point rain miraculously begins to fall, and the renewed source of water rejuvenates the land.²⁶ In thanks, the Emperor proceeds to engrave “the following words on the basin that he used every morning to wash his face: *Remember to renew yourself each day, and many times a day* [*Souviens-toi de te renouveler chaque jour, & plusieurs fois le jour*],”²⁷ aligning regular cleansing with the latest precipitation, whose regularity cannot be taken for granted, at the latest, since the recent drought. The Emperor's ineffectual political and technological innovation thus gives way to an otherwise unspecified call for renewal, which itself corresponds to no natural cycle, and no memorable model of achievement. If the reminder to renew recalls anything, then, it would be the possibility that renewal may be foreclosed or forgotten, rendering the Emperor's imperative one that does not so much urge one to follow than to give an example for the course of nature. Everyday existence becomes an urgent issue of novelty and renewal because the everyday also can *not* exist.

Taking up the motif of Tching Tang's prayer and inscription—and eliminating the divine intervention or natural event that came between—Pound writes:

Tching prayed on the mountain and
 wrote MAKE IT NEW
 on his bath tub
 Day by day make it new
 cut underbrush,
 pile the logs,
 keep it growing.²⁸

Memory goes lost between the lines, leaving the “new” alone as a matter of indefinite, if not absolute importance, irrespective of any outcome and without any record of the miraculous reprieve that, in de Mailla’s history, had replenished the resources of the community and motivated the Emperor’s inscription. Far from figuring within a historical sequence, the “new” breaks from the history that Pound will have related up to this point: no event so much as seems to answer or interrupt the Emperor’s prayer, whose words are indistinguishable here from those he is said to write. The phrase, “Day by day make it new,” not only appears to be the complement of both verbs for speech (“prayed,” “wrote”); it also literally falls between the mountain and the basin in place of the water that had washed away Tching Tang’s concerns before filling his bathtub, and thus drowns out both crisis and resolution. “Make it new” makes—transitively—nothing of all that had been said to intervene in de Mailla’s account. Hence, by the time “make it new” repeats, it no longer pertains to Tching Tang in particular, but emerges instead as an impersonal and immemorial renewal of the imperative to “make it new” that thereby undercuts its novelty in the language of the poem, which itself renews the call to “make it new.”

It is with a view to such gestures of erasure that Paul de Man writes in his essay on “Literary History and Literary Modernity”: “Modernity exists in the form of a desire to wipe out whatever came earlier, in the hope of reaching at last a point that could be called a true present, a point of origin that marks a new departure. This combined interplay of deliberate forgetting with an action that is also a new origin reaches the full power of the idea of modernity.”²⁹ Whereas de Mailla’s history suggests that the new should preserve and protect against the occurrence of natural failure, Pound’s modern version of the story seems to make that failure history, by seeking to surpass or suppress ordinary and historical occurrences at all costs. But if the absolute imperative to “make it new” demands nothing but absolution from all that had been before, then its “present” could only be bereft of all determinations, including “originality.” In this case, the modern

pursuit of obliteration would be an acceleration of the fall into the oblivion that obscures “the ages before us,” and that the Ecclesiast remembers just enough in order to conclude: “There is nothing new under the sun” (Ecc. 1.9–10). The imperative to “make it new” would be another instance of empty coinage that speeds depletion, rather than a prayer that might allow for everyday survival despite the exceptional capacity of natural occurrences to default. In other words, were this demand or desire to “make it new” to be realized at any point, there would also be no “now” and no “age;” nothing “new” and nothing at all that could remain to be said or seen, which would not at the same time have to obliterate itself, and make any explicit or implicit demand for erasure forgotten as well. Yet insofar as such demands as Pound’s could only be made in being said, they would also always speak before or beyond oblivion, and they would give testimony *nolens volens* to the fact that language—immemorial—cannot be reduced or restricted to the cognition or volition of subject. For the same reason, whatever news language may give of itself could not be made according to the poetic intention to “make it new.”

There is therefore no telling exactly what “it” is that occurs in Pound’s poem, besides the suspension of narrative and the reduction of history to an indeterminate “it” in “Day by day make it new.” But whatever “it” may have been, activities of clearing rather than cultivation are enjoined next—“cut underbrush”—which process should still, paradoxically, “keep it growing.”³⁰ This time, “it” may refer to the “pile of logs” that arises through an accumulation of cut timber or to the cutting itself, or to something else that as yet eludes naming and knowing. Precisely because the status of “it” remains undecided, however, “its” growth becomes drawn in proximity not only to chopped wood, but also to chopped words, as the “logs” to which “it” could refer become correspondingly indeterminate: instances of lumber (“logs”) or records (“logs”), or instances of a *logos* cut short. It is perhaps in this way that each element of the poem can be said to grow in being cut: severed from any single signification, from all certain identification with any single lexical item, and from etymological rooting in any one language, every one becomes at once several and therefore none in particular.³¹ Novelty would arise in this context, not through an effective response to Pound’s imperative, but through the haphazard piling of possibilities in language that undercuts the discernibility of their relations to one another and to themselves, and that therefore culminates in neither synthesis nor erasure. This process would entail that the new cannot be *made* and cannot *be*—not

even by negation—but could nonetheless chance to open through a brush with words and the alterations to which their every compilation is exposed.

In different ways, both the Ecclesiast's and Pound's announcements on novelty indicate that its possible occurrence could not but be beyond the bounds of experience and the confines of conceptual schemata, if the "new" were to correspond to its concept and exceed the given. In light of this brief passage from Pound's poem—cut from its context, to be sure—the famous phrase of the Ecclesiast could be altered and abbreviated to read: the new *is* not, and not only because the "new" does not denote the stable attribute of a being or an event, but also because its singularity cannot be singled out as a phenomenon to be defined, in turn, according to familiar categories or in contrast to historical precedents. This claim may seem to be paradoxical, as Audrey Wasser has recently argued, writing: "if, on the one hand, the truly new work must break with its existing context, then, on the other hand, it must still be recognizable in some fashion, and be recognizable as art."³² Yet the movement in Pound's language that may have allowed a novel event in speech does not depend upon a cogito or a paradigm of cognition; rather, it may be traced beside and despite the more recognizable logic of erasure that the poem expressly promotes and performs, and it would have to escape all certain affirmations, if it were to be at all.

When it comes to the new, this "maybe" may be its only chance, as not only the wisdom of the Ecclesiast and the poetry of Pound suggest, but also that of the prophets who give word of the new as the word of god. Turning to another watershed announcement on novelty—when Isaiah declares, in verses echoed by Pound and the Ecclesiast: "For I am about to create new heavens and a new earth; the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind" (Is. 65.17)—it turns out that even announcements which suppose a transcendent foundation for being and truth do not make it or cut it. Before all else, prophets defer as they speak the news that they go about delivering—that is, their news is not the "new" itself—such that with or without a claim to divine authority, their words promise the non-attainment of novelty for the time being. Nor do these circumstances change when the author of Revelation leaps to the result of what Isaiah once foretold and claims to see the trajectory of world history culminate in a Last Judgment and in a subsequent renewal of all things. Far from surpassing his predecessor in the end, the prophet reveals not only that his vision does not coincide with its realization, but also that the prophecy itself is to culminate in reiteration rather than renewal. Just after he reports

seeing “a new heaven and a new earth,” he repeats hearing the words: “See, I am making all things new,” followed by the imperative: “Write this, for these words are trustworthy and true” (Rev. 21.1, 21.5). This last remark may appear to legitimate the testimony that conveys it and to render the prophecy more complete by including its inscription among the things to come. But it also decisively recasts the prophecy of renewal as a repetition and memorialization of nothing other than its own inscription. The last prophet of the New Testament thus gives no last word and no new word, but remakes the announcement, “I am making all things new,” and in a way that makes the proclamation of novel ends an end in itself. In this respect, the biblical text structurally and literally resembles the inscription that repeats verbatim in Pound’s poem, which ultimately calls for the repetition of the call to “make it new.” These similarities indicate, moreover, that the default on novel promises to provide guarantees is independent of any decision over the secularization debate that arose when Karl Löwith and Jacob Taubes argued for the messianic implications of historical time, as understood to be “directed toward something which has not yet been but will be,” or “moving towards a ‘new heaven and a new earth’” that “exceeds the cycle of origin.”³³ Neither a biblical authority nor a poetic author could be taken at his word, should he proclaim the new, which would have to take place in other words and otherwise than in the words of a recognizable declaration or demand, if at all. Hence, Theodor Adorno does not, like Wasser, insist that recognizability is a “must,” when it comes to the arrival of a *novum*, but writes in *Aesthetic Theory*: “The category of the new has been central, though admittedly in conjunction with the question of whether anything new had ever existed.”³⁴

It is the main argument of this book that the paradox Adorno succinctly describes not only crucially inflects evocations of novelty, but also that the fundamental uncertainty of novel announcements is precisely what troubles the status quo, including any standards or standard words for affirming or dismissing what may be called “new.” Through analyses of texts in which the question of novelty becomes emphatically pronounced, this book thus elucidates how language holds open the possibility for a *novum* that is irreducible to those gestures of judgment that would deliver authoritative sentences upon it. In so doing, it marks an attempt to expose those aspects of novelty that may emerge when the accent falls less upon what does or does not take place in positing or promising something new, than upon the difference between word of the new and the new of the word, or the *logos*—or “the logs.” Even the most familiar announcements on novelty from the biblical books of prophecy through to modernist poetry indicate how

the question of novelty reopens through such a shift in emphasis. However, the selection of texts that will be addressed in the following chapters does not reflect a survey of such broad historical scope, but cuts to a moment in which novelty came to mark the language of many spheres to a hitherto unprecedented extent, recurring throughout the rhetoric of commerce and politics, philosophy and history, poetry and art. As writers such as Theodor Adorno, Walter Benjamin, and Martin Heidegger have emphasized in otherwise very different contexts, it was arguably in the nineteenth century that novelty emerged as an explicitly pervasive project or problem while, at the same time, the denial of novelty kept pace with its promotion, from the series of failed revolutions in Europe between 1848 and 1871, to the theories of eternal recurrence that were articulated in the later half of the nineteenth century. Writings from this period thus offer a “novel” language that especially solicits commentary—apart from any decision as to whether its emergence may be traced largely to the logic of capitalism, as Adorno and Benjamin suggested, or whether the modern “addiction to novelty [*Neuerungssucht*]”³⁵ is merely the latest symptom, as Heidegger argues, of an initial decision to interpret being as the question of beings, rather than inquiring into the truth of being itself. The subsequent chapters of this book will therefore trace the unsettling senses and stakes of announcements on novelty through the texts of several of those nineteenth-century writers who registered the extreme ambivalence and coincidence of extremes that novel claims may entail: namely, Friedrich Nietzsche, Charles Baudelaire, Louis-Auguste Blanqui, and Karl Marx.

This constellation of writers is motivated in particular by Walter Benjamin’s frequent references to these names in the *Arcades Project*, as he addresses novelty—largely through citation—at various critical points in his manuscripts on nineteenth-century Paris. The incisive observations that Benjamin makes over the course of this work mark a point of departure for a further elaboration of the texts that he draws upon, with an eye to what may have escaped the repetitive—and therefore contradictory—character of innovation that he exposes through quotation and commentary. In the exposés and many of the convolutes that he prepared, Benjamin underscores how appeals to the “new” propelled production and consumption in the age of high capitalism, marking the moving horizon for distinctions between the new and the old, the latest craze and the outmoded, the modern and the obsolete. Despite and because of the frequent changes in fashion, however, the character of new commodities, insofar as they are “new,” seemed determined to be ever the same within the sphere of the everyday, anticipating

the very imperative that Pound had sought to set apart from the logic of money and commerce: “Day by day make it new.”³⁶

The theories of eternal recurrence in Nietzsche’s *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* and Blanqui’s *Eternity by the Stars* may thus be seen, as Benjamin suggests, to reflect and respond to these large-scale developments—though not without distortion and disruption—beginning with the way in which they advertise the monotony of “novelty” that otherwise goes without saying in commercial ventures. What may have seemed new is exposed through these theories to be what Benjamin would call a modus of “historical semblance”: a simulation of what has never been before that perpetuates the circulation of trade, among other things.³⁷ In at least this respect, Nietzsche’s and Blanqui’s texts break the cycle in breaking news of it, raising the question as to what occurs when repetition reaches the breaking point. And although Benjamin says little on this point in his commentaries on Nietzsche and Blanqui, he does indicate the difficulties of addressing the question by demonstrating how the historical phenomenon of historical semblance will have altered the basic structure of experience, rendering whatever would differ from recycled news a radical unknown, if anything at all. In valorizing “that perishable part of things in which their novelty consists,”³⁸ the promotion of “new” values turns modernity into a history not of perishable *things*—which would still preserve the value of those things, for however limited a time—but of *perishing*, which sustains itself through the indifferent repetition of production and consumption.³⁹ On these terms, objects of experience expire upon arrival, having always already been time-stamped, disqualified, and dispatched, as Benjamin vouches with the following example: “the post-marked stamp is [. . .] probably the first sort of voucher whose validity is inseparable from its character of newness. (The registration of value goes together here with its cancellation.)”⁴⁰ And what is the case for objects goes for subjects of experience as well, whose “fall in value” Benjamin registers through the information delivered by modern news, which does not pass on experience, but simply passes: no story “survive[s] the moment in which it was new.”⁴¹

Yet even if certain announcements *on* novelty expose nothing but the way announcements *of* novelty tend to summon more of the same, they will have made a difference with their exorbitant claims about the sphere of empty promises and voided values. Furthermore, even should the new turn out, again and again, to be indifferent, its very lack of stable significance also renders it incommensurable with the logic of equivalence that organizes commercial exchange. Precisely when that which *is* would count for nothing in itself, that which is *not*—that which parts from all that could be said or

made to be—may be the only chance that could matter. This unpredictable and unaccountable chance remains when particular novel investments and claims are shown to default in theories of eternal recurrence, because the measures and standards for such claims would have had to be known *quanta*, and therefore never could have been the new, let alone the decisive factors for determining whether a *novum* may yet come. What Derrida writes of deconstruction could also be said of the profoundly uncertain prospects that open through those texts that expose the semblance character of novelty: “deconstruction loses nothing from admitting that it is impossible [. . .]. For a deconstructive operation, *possibility* is rather the danger, the danger of becoming an available set of rule-governed procedures, methods, accessible approaches. The interest of deconstruction [. . .] is a certain experience of the impossible [. . .] the experience of the other as the invention of the impossible.”⁴² Nor did an interest in a certain experience of the impossible escape Benjamin, who discovers in his examination of nineteenth-century texts not only a certain correlation between the demand for the new and the reproduction of the same, but also the way in which the coincidence of these extremes in the oeuvres of disparate writers comes to trouble the foundational assumptions that underlie distinctions between the old and the new, possibility and impotence, making room for something akin to what Derrida calls “a space of unrest or turbulence for every status assignable to it when it suddenly arrives.”⁴³

“Blanqui’s [*Eternity by the Stars*] presents the idea of eternal return ten years before *Zarathustra*—in a manner scarcely less moving [*pathétique*] than that of Nietzsche, and with an extraordinary hallucinatory power,” writes Benjamin toward the conclusion of his exposé from 1939.⁴⁴ Yet if this remark initially speaks to the denial of novelty that Blanqui and Nietzsche both impart, in accenting the “manner” in which this “idea” is conveyed, Benjamin also indicates already here that Blanqui’s particular formulation for a static state of affairs would be more and other than a matter of merely affirming or recycling it. If the “moving” pathos and passion of Blanqui’s rhetoric allows him to present the governing idea of the cosmos with “hallucinatory power,” then he also exposes the illusory nature of that idea and the picture of nature that would correspond to it. Thus, even if Blanqui’s cosmological hypothesis of eternal return might appear to be “an unconditional surrender” to the world that this professional revolutionary had resisted all his life, Benjamin adds that it is “simultaneously the most terrible indictment [*furchtbarste Anklage*] of a society that projects this image of the cosmos—understood as an image of itself—across the heavens.”⁴⁵

And in a second, more fleeting observation of the same, Benjamin writes elsewhere in *The Arcades Project*: “Blanqui yields to bourgeois society. But it is a knee-fall of such force that the throne comes to totter [*ins Wanken kommt*],”⁴⁶ with the implication that Blanqui’s announcement of eternal recurrence also sends a tremor through nature and society, and in so doing may break the ground, if not the path, for a society that would differ from the established one, as well as from any new items or news items that the present establishment could produce.

Nor is Blanqui the sole writer whose case against society would profoundly shake it. As Benjamin says, it would be taken up again by Nietzsche ten years later, and before this, the tremendous force of Blanqui’s fall also echoes the tremor that should have been produced through “Le Voyage,” Baudelaire’s closing poem to *Les Fleurs du mal*, which, as Benjamin points out, likewise revolves around a craving for novelty that turns into a cyclical repetition of identical pursuits. For when Baudelaire writes of his poem to Charles Asselineau—“I have *made [fait]* a long poem dedicated to Max Du Camp, which is *to make [à faire]* nature, and above all, the lovers of progress, shudder [*frémir*],”⁴⁷—he sends the message that this presentation of the dead ends of novel searches should trouble nature and civilization in a new way. With respect to these writers, the premise of the Ecclesiast may still hold that “there is nothing new under the sun” (Ecc. 1.9)—that is, there is no new *thing*—but only because their texts suggest that it is in breaking with the reification of the new and in thoroughly perturbing the orders it presupposes that something unforeseen may occur. Such turbulence, whenever and wherever it may take place, allows for an other that would not be merely defined by contrast to the same, nor assigned a place within a program for the future, but would be past all reckoning and recognition. Blanqui’s and Baudelaire’s writings on novelty, among others, thus deliver presentations of a seemingly “deterministic cosmology”⁴⁸ that, at the same time, upset the news of the present as well as any interpretation of historical progress that would relate it to a determinate and determining past. In so doing, they open all that their language touches upon to an unheard of future, without repeating the alternatives of surpassment and repetition into which thetic, prophetic, or prescriptive declarations of novelty more overtly appear to issue, from the Bible to Pound’s modernist project.

This also means, however, that the staggering movements that Benjamin registers in certain nineteenth-century writings cannot be verified according to conventional standards of facticity and effects. The throne-shaking aftershocks of Blanqui’s capitulation to capital and the shudder that Baudelaire’s

“Le Voyage” sent through nature could never occur, if either could be taken for a historical given or a news item, made to order within a chronological continuum. According to such a scheme of things, the revolutionary efforts of the proletariat had been crushed with the fall of the Paris Commune by the time Blanqui’s book was published. Nor did the poem that Baudelaire had composed in 1859 for the second edition of *Les Fleurs du mal* incite anything like an immediate natural or social disturbance, or even the scandal that his first edition of *Les Fleurs du mal* had provoked in 1857. If something takes place in these texts on modern novelty, it is not at the level of direct effectiveness, nor is it measurable according to the form of empirical facts, nor is it deferred and reiterated as a promise for the future. As Adorno has said, in words that bear repeating: “The category of the new has been central, though admittedly in conjunction with the question of whether anything new had ever existed.”⁴⁹ Yet taking the questionability of novelty seriously does not foreclose attempts to address how *nouveautés* and news—and therefore the *status quo*—may be troubled by the catastrophic view that Blanqui’s and Baudelaire’s announcements open, in and despite their manifest impotence. For what occurs in language, as the passages discussed above suggest, escapes whatever may be assured through imperatives or conceptual frames, including that of the possible. The troubling dimension of their language may even reside in its apparent impotence, if it is the case, as Derrida has insisted with reference to deconstruction, that “*possibility* is rather the danger.”⁵⁰

Benjamin addresses the structural indeterminacy of novel announcements perhaps most clearly when he reprises one main thrust from Blanqui’s and Baudelaire’s writings in his commentary on Paul Klee’s “Angelus Novus” or “New Angel.” In his theses *On the Concept of History*, Benjamin depicts Klee’s angel as one who sees what appears to us as “a chain of given events” as a piling of “wreckage upon wreckage”⁵¹: “*Wo eine Kette von Begebenheiten vor uns erscheint, da sieht er eine einzige Katastrophe, die unablässig Trümmer auf Trümmer häuft und sie ihm vor die Füße schleudert.*”⁵² This double vision of historical phenomena has been read as the synthesis of “the paranoid fear of the past’s otherness and oblivion (in their reciprocity), and the negation of that fear by hope.”⁵³ It has been elucidated as a reminder of the original fall that precipitated man from paradise, from which man recedes further with every step of historical progress.⁵⁴ And it has been interpreted as a prospective indication that should guide the gaze of the historical materialist: “The angel is not yet the historical materialist,” writes Ian Balfour, “but its precarious position and its singular insight are necessary to the revisionary materialist Benjamin delineates. If the angel’s gaze is held out, for a moment,

as exemplary, then the reader is enjoined through the rhetoric of the thesis to execute an about-face.”⁵⁵ But the view of this “angel” or “messenger” (ἄγγελος) may also be aligned with that of the writers whom Benjamin sees to depict the catastrophic pile up of historical novelties—including Baudelaire and Blanqui, but also Nietzsche and Marx—and who thus invert the upward thrust of Pound’s verses before the fact: “Day by day make it new / cut underbrush, / pile the logs, / keep it growing.”⁵⁶ As with the gaze of Benjamin’s “new angel”—who is likewise impotent to resist or to reverse the movements that he observes—the alternatives their texts offer would lie in the perspectives that their language discloses, as they turn the horizon of concatenated events into a single catastrophic case, and thereby open a margin of distance from that catastrophe as well, however slight it may be. As the focused commentaries in this book should bring more sharply into view, Baudelaire, Blanqui, Marx, and Nietzsche give a slant to the news of the world with announcements on novelty that shatter the entire picture. In this respect, they can be seen as angels of an angle on the new that disturbs its logic and impetus, not via a revolutionary program, but with an abrupt shift in inclination that may also give the field of history a start or jolt and thereby unsettle, however briefly, all that was trained or chained to occupy a certain place along the horizon of historical progress. They break the news by turning it down, and in revealing it to be the *same*, they show the “new” to be *other* than it appears, while speaking for the possibility of an other that could no longer be named “new” on familiar terms. Theirs may have been interventions without an event and therefore without any addition to the total and totaling sum of progress—interventions that may have at once altered and left, in all senses of the word, everything as it was. Yet because their language remains to be read anew, such ultra-revolutionary writers may also introduce a novelty *in* innovation that remains to come.

How this introduction may take place and what it may unsettle cannot be glimpsed in general terms or exhausted by any single commentary, but may only emerge through analyses of the specific terms, overdeterminations, and indeterminations of each text. The writers of the century that itself happened to give word of the new—*le dix-neuvième siècle*, or *das neunzehnte Jahrhundert*—do not address its status in ways that have become outdated. Before all, they give announcements that can at no time have ultimately arrived, so long as their discussions—in the etymological sense of disturbance and turbulence—remain to be discussed and analyzed further.⁵⁷ Especially when it is a question of a *novum* that would bring established or novel orders to totter, it is also a matter of a tottering language whose sense and status

cannot be settled once and for all. As Nietzsche would write on *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*: “It is a ‘poetic work,’ or a fifth ‘Evangelium’ or something else for which there is yet no name [. . .].”⁵⁸ The readings offered in this book thus reflect the attempt to register the contingencies, displacements, and openings that occur in those texts it addresses without aiming to give a definitive word on them. Rather than establishing a new theory of novelty, each chapter discusses an instance of novel announcement so as to expose a different angle from which certain assumptions on novelty, history, and the present might be troubled and subject to change—beginning with the “evangelical” book that most emphatically speaks of eternal recurrence and new values: Friedrich Nietzsche’s *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*.