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Focillon's Bergsonian Rhetoric and the Possibility of Deconstruction^[1]

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In *The Life of Forms in Art*, the 1935 volume in which he summed up his theory of art, Henri Focillon argued against any art-historical explanation that tries to account for the evolution of artistic form through exclusively contextual, extrinsic factors. The art historian phrased his view in memorably epigrammatic form: "The most attentive study of the most homogenous milieu, of the most closely woven concatenation of circumstances, will not serve to give us the design of the towers of Laon."^[2] From one who has entered our disciplinary shorthand under the rubric of "formalist," such a statement can come as no surprise: Focillon, in this passage, could easily be interpreted as trying to eschew engagement with the concerns of what later came to be called "the social history of art," as attempting to safeguard an idealized realm of pure form untainted by messy social realities.

Interestingly enough, more recently, Focillon's views have found a close echo in the work of a thinker who can not be so

quickly relegated to the backwaters of our discipline. In an important interview from 1990, Jacques Derrida outlined his notion of "the structure of expectation"--the totality of the "historical, ideological, and technical conditions that make possible" a work of art. He pointed out the shortcomings of any historical analysis that limits itself to the interpretation of these conditions, and that believes that it has thereby solved the riddle of the artwork. "If we could do this in an exhaustive fashion," Derrida writes, "it would mean that nothing had happened." He continues: "If there is a work, it is because, even when all the conditions that could become the object of analysis have been met, something still happens... If there is a work, it means that the analysis of all the conditions only served to, how shall I say, make room, in an absolutely undetermined place, for something that is at once useless, supplementary, and finally irreducible to those conditions." [3]

We can easily translate Focillon's insight into Derrida's terms: the design of the towers of Laon exceeds, is supplementary to, its structure of expectation. The deconstructive philosopher and the formalist art historian are in complete agreement on this point. They both urge engagement with the specific phenomenon of the artwork itself, and not only with the various conditions--social or other--that helped bring it into being. This is the only way, they both suggest, that the importance of the work as a singular event, bringing absolute newness into the world, can be respected.

I think that the counterintuitiveness of the parallel I am drawing, at least when seen from the perspective of the received wisdom of our discipline, is clear. The works of Derrida have only tentatively entered, over the last decade and a half, the field of art history, long after their influence had peaked in other fields of the humanities. They were taken up in the context of what was called the New Art History, which, whatever other attribute may have characterized it--post-

Marxist? poststructuralist?--definitely saw itself as anti-formalist.

Today, I would like to tease out the implications of this surprising similarity; specifically, I would like to sound out the common philosophical grounding shared by Derrida and Focillon. In doing so, I want to stress that Derridean deconstruction is a philosophical practice, and that a true integration of its methods into our discipline requires a close examination of art history's philosophical foundations; I will briefly do so today by looking at the roots of Focillon's theory of art in the philosophy of Henri Bergson. Secondly, I hope that establishing such a point of nearly indistinguishable closeness between a seemingly old-fashioned art historian and a state-of-the-art theorist will help challenge the common notion that formalism and deconstructive theory are incompatible.[4] Not only can a space be opened where the two meet; but, as I will argue, the close attention to the object that formalism affords us is indispensable for a full understanding of the promise of deconstruction.

Focillon's and Derrida's positions, in the statements I quoted, can be summed up in one word: anti-determinist. Philosophically, determinism is defined as the belief in the inevitability of causality: on this view, the thorough analysis of conditions in any system, at any moment, can not fail to predict their further effects, and as such all the future states of that system. Belief in a wholly determinist universe denies any possibility of free will, of human freedom. In a more restricted sense, historical determinism in the social sciences is best exemplified by much of Marxist theory: from the traditional base/superstructure model to theories of ideology in which most individual acts are seen as resulting not from free choice but from, say, class interests, no matter how obscured to the individual consciousness.

The dispute between the proponents of freedom and those of

determinism has been one of the most venerable debates in the philosophical tradition. One of the principal arguments of determinism's opponents has been to demonstrate that unforeseeable novelty does indeed exist in the world; and it is in the realm of the arts that many philosophers have found the best examples of such novelty. This is both Derrida's and Focillon's position when they argue that, given a specific structure of expectation, no single outcome--no single shape of the work of art, design of the towers of Laon--is necessary, is inevitable.

Let me return later to the anti-determinism of Derridean deconstruction, and to the implications of such a position for our discipline. I want to look first at the intellectual sources of Focillon's anti-determinism. They lie, I would argue, in the influence exerted upon the art historian by the work of Henri Bergson, the foremost philosopher of pre-WW I France.

Henri Focillon (1881-1943) belonged to the right generation to absorb fully the insights of Bergson (1859-1941). He pursued his higher education in Paris between the late 1890's and into the first decade of the twentieth century, at the very moment of Bergson's highest popularity. A true Bergsonian craze swept the Paris intelligentsia during the Belle Epoque, a craze similar to the earlier onslaught of Wagnerism, which to some extent it continued. A list of auditors to Bergson's lectures at the Collège de France between the years 1901 and 1914 would include Focillon's name along with those of writers T.S. Eliot and Nikos Kazantzakis, and of philosophers Jean Wahl and Gabriel Marcel, as well as of many society ladies.[5]

Bergson's popularity is perhaps best explained by the anti-rationalist, anti-academic bent of his thinking.[6] At a time of general dissatisfaction with academic philosophy, he was a leading figure among the so-called "life philosophers" (a category which at times was seen to include not only thinkers

who willingly accepted this label, such as Wilhelm Dilthey, but also precursors such as Nietzsche, or allied thinkers like the pragmatist William James). The life philosophers were suspicious of the grand, all-explanatory systems that defined traditional metaphysics; they wished to bring philosophical inquiry closer to, as Bergson put it, "the immediate givens" of day-to-day existence. In doing this, they paved the way for the next generation's even stronger critiques of metaphysics, such as in Husserl's and Heidegger's phenomenology, or in existentialism.

Even a superficial acquaintance with the oeuvres of Focillon and Bergson suggests the connections between the two. A principal example would be the vitalism the two thinkers share: as suggested in the very title of *The Life of Forms in Art*, Focillon saw artistic forms as living entities, evolving and metamorphosing over time. This sense of unstoppable, continuous, living transformation over time is equally typical of the work of Henri Bergson, as outlined in the philosopher's first and most important book, *Time and Free Will* of 1889, and as elaborated in essays written over the next forty-odd years. Already Focillon's first important monograph, his 1915 book on Hokusai, can be shown to have used Bergsonian, vitalist arguments as evaluative criteria to underline Hokusai's artistic achievement, and to support Focillon's anti-academic stance.^[7] By 1935, the time of *The Life of Forms in Art*, Bergsonian arguments will come, as we shall see, to ground the entirety of Focillon's philosophy of history.

Bergson criticized all-encompassing metaphysical systems that claimed for themselves an unshakable basis in reason--for example the cartesian system which had defined French philosophy for the previous two centuries--for their lack of "precision"; this was the quality Bergson felt "philosophy had lacked most."^[8] A good, though simple, example of rational system, as provided by Bergson, is the system of standardized measurements. Based upon a few simple units, any object in

the physical world can be reduced to a few numbers which quantify all of its perceivable physical qualities. Such an operation seems more or less correct when dealing with spatial quantities; yet the system completely breaks down when dealing with the much less objectivizable quantity which is time.

Indeed, for Bergson, the perfect example of rational reduction and falsification is the measurement of time through standardized, equal units--a method of measurement which, according to him, is wholly based on the measurement of space. Time, he argued, is felt by the individual not as a homogenous continuum that is easily decomposable in discrete units, but as the much more flexible concept of *durée*, duration. While humans can to some extent distance themselves from physical expanse, and consider it "objectively", their existence is inseparable from their own feeling of time's flow, and of their lasting as living beings. It is only from one's intimate knowledge of one's own living body and existence in time that one can begin reasoning about the world, rather than from the inorganicity of the physical world of objects, to which corresponds the impersonality of philosophical systems that do not take into account the reasoner's own subjectivity and life. This method, according to Bergson, had never before had its place in philosophy, since concentrating attention upon minute actions and perceptions goes against the common functioning of our consciousness, which attempts to simplify and generalize its perceptions for the sake of the economy of energy.

Yet, if no philosopher before Bergson had been aware of the true position of the living being in its environment and time, were Bergson's insights completely original? Not at all, he assured us. What had been neglected for centuries by philosophers--limited as they were by their rational, systematized language--had, for as long a period of time, constituted the primary intuition of artists: "For hundreds of

years, in fact, there have been men whose function has been precisely to see and to make us see what we do not naturally perceive. They are the artists." [9] Artists, as opposed to abstract thinkers, construct representations of the world that both take into account the inexhaustible complexity of phenomena, and give a meaning to the brute facts of reality; they are, if you wish, the original phenomenologists.

In, *Time and Free Will*, Bergson enrolled his philosophy of *durée* in what he saw as the most important philosophical debate of the time, specifically that of freedom versus determinism. As Bergson argued, thinking in terms of lived time leads to the affirmation of the radical novelty of each event: it is only within the false framework of homogenized time--where, inasmuch as duration is recast as space, and thus the past, present and future appear somehow to be equivalent and coexisting--that determinism can be conceived at all. [10]

As Bergson argued in his most popular book, *Creative Evolution* of 1907, in which he continued the same vein of thought, the greatest proof of the possibility of novelty--and, as such, the best counterproof to determinism--came, once again, from the artistic realm. The wealth of works available to us as we survey the histories of the various arts is a living testimony to the existence of absolute creativity in the universe. Though works of art come into being at a specific historical moment, within specific historical conditions, their specific form, their phenomenal uniqueness, is utterly unpredictable prior to the time of their creation. The example that Bergson gives--the painting of a portrait--sounds like a direct source for Focillon's statement about the towers of Laon (remember that it was around the time of the publication of *Creative Evolution* that Focillon audited Bergson's lectures). The philosopher writes: "The finished portrait is explained by the features of the model, by the nature of the artist, by the colors spread out on the palette; but, even with the knowledge

of what explains it, no one, not even the artist, could have foreseen exactly what the portrait would be... the portrait will surely resemble the model and will surely resemble also the artist; but the concrete solution brings with it that unforeseeable nothing which is everything in a work of art."^[11]

For Bergson (as for Derrida and Focillon), the work of art can not be simply deduced from its structure of expectation. It has to be created, and it is in the process of creation that the clearest instance of human freedom available to philosophy can be found. Indeed, for all the other differences between their philosophical systems,^[12] Derrida's notion of that "something that is at once useless, supplementary, and finally irreducible to" its historical, ideological and technical conditions virtually rephrases Bergson's "unforeseeable nothing which is everything".

Focillon clearly felt a particular affinity with a manner of thinking such as Bergson's whose principal pieces of evidence came from the realm of the arts. He found in it a philosophical defence of the close attention he paid to the form of the artwork. For Focillon, formalism is the method that allows us to outline the work's singularity; as such, formal description and analysis are, for him, the most theoretically complex of interpretative acts. I do not have time for examples here, but I would refer you to almost any page of, say, *The Art of the Romanesque Sculptors*: analysis of form there records nothing less than a powerful phenomenological encounter with the work of art.^[13] Focillon's kind of formalism is also not a matter of pure, immaterial forms. A true student of Bergson, the art historian grounds his thinking in the living body's--whether it is the viewer's or the artist's--confrontation with the artwork in all its physicality.

Starting from such a notion of form as singularity, Focillon embraced Bergson's anti-determinism; in the process he reduced it from its original, universal scope to a critique of

contextual determinism as an explanatory structure in art history. This philosophical position was explicitly stated already in Focillon's earliest publications. In his 1915 monograph on Hokusai, for example, the art historian criticized those writers who, in judging an artist's achievement, refuse "to rise above the contingent appreciation of a master by his contemporaries;" Focillon saw such points of view as "the extremes of Tainian determinism in the history of art." [14] (The reference is of course to the doctrines of Hyppolite Taine, the nineteenth-century literary historian considered the founder of the modern French sociology of art.)

Twenty years on, the last chapter of *The Life of Forms in Art*, entitled "Forms in the Realm of Time"--the chapter in which can be found the sentence I quoted about the towers of Laon--reads like a faithful translation of Bergson's line of argument in *Time and Free Will* into the language of art history. Like Bergson, Focillon begins with a critique of a homogenized, spatialized notion of time. He criticizes the "grave confusions often made between chronology and life," using as an example art history's infatuation with the concept--the unit of measurement--of "century." "We are exceedingly reluctant to give up an isochronal conception of time, for we confer on these equal measures not only a metrical value that is beyond dispute, but also a kind of organic authority. These measures presently become frames, and the frames then become bodies. We personify them." [15] And so an arbitrary unit of measurement--one hundred years, becomes an organism that is born, lives and dies; and so museums regiment their collections; and so we all see ourselves as seventeenth, or eighteenth, or maybe twentieth-century specialists.

From this critique of the spatialization of historical time, Focillon moves on to a critique of the notion of context meant to combat the belief in a one-sided causal action by surrounding conditions onto the process of artistic creation. At this point, Focillon chooses to focus particularly on the field

of architecture. Architecture, he tells us, "gives birth to new conditions for historical, social, and moral life. It creates unforeseeable environments. It satisfies old needs and begets new ones. It invents a world." [16] Not only, then, is artistic creation an example of novelty, as it was for Bergson, but it acts directly upon other realms of society, breaking the determinist logic of their own development. It is this line of argument that includes the statement about the towers of Laon.

The chapter ends with an affirmation of freedom over determinism that could have come directly from Bergson. Discussing the infinite number of conditions that can influence the creation of a work of art, Focillon writes: "It is this multiplicity of factors that is opposed to the rigors of determinism... In those imaginary worlds [of art] in which the artist plays the role of geometer and mechanic, of physicist and chemist, of psychologist and historian at once, form, through the play of its metamorphoses, perpetually goes forward, by its own necessity, toward its freedom." [17] In a nice conceit, Focillon sees art as only condemned, deterministically, to the necessity of its utterly unpredictable freedom.

Now, what about Derrida's own anti-determinism? Deconstruction from the beginning has seen as its primary task to reveal the ultimate openness of any conceptual system that claims closure. To do so is already to open that system to the indeterminacy of the outside. A more explicitly anti-determinist stance informs many of Derrida's recent writings: not only his discussions of the arts but also his discussions of ethics and politics. As this theme has grown in importance over the last decade, echoes of Bergson's work--and especially, in this case, of Bergson's late writings on ethics--have grown more insistent in Derrida's writings, perhaps transmitted through the thought of Emmanuel Levinas. Let me offer you just two examples.

In *Specters of Marx*, of 1993, Derrida defined deconstruction as "an experience open to the absolute future of what is coming, that is to say, a necessarily indeterminate, abstract, desert-like experience that is confided, exposed, given up to its waiting for the other and the event."^[18] (By the way, this particularly French, etymologically correct usage of the term "event" to denote that which is coming, in all of its unforeseeable novelty, is not only applied by Derrida, in the interview with which we started, to the work of art, but was also used in the same sense by Focillon in *The Life of Forms in Art*.) In another text of the same year, *Aporias*, Derrida referred to the figure of the immigrant, of the outsider, as the "absolute arrivant;" this word, arrivant, for him implies "the singularity of who arrives, he or she who comes, coming to be where s/he was not expected, where one was awaiting him or her without waiting for him or her, without expecting it, without knowing what or whom to expect, what or whom I am waiting for--and such is hospitality itself, hospitality toward the event."^[19]

These meditations on ethics and politics are of a piece with Derrida's meditation on art and the structure of expectation, with which we started. Allow me to quote again part of that statement: "If there is a work, it means the analysis of all the conditions only served to, how shall I say, make room, in an absolutely undetermined place, for something that is at once useless, supplementary, and finally irreducible to those conditions." I hope that word, "undetermined," has a different ring now.

What, then, of the question of how to adopt Derridean insights into our own discipline? As deconstruction has been appropriated into the New Art History, it has been its first, critical moment that has largely been foregrounded. The negativity of such a position has allowed deconstruction to be understood as a form of demystification or ideology critique-- notions derived from the determinist milieu of a late Marxist

paradigm.[20] It is only within such a paradigm, with its specific institutional and political allegiances, that the view of an incompatibility between deconstructive theory and formalism can be maintained.

If, on the other hand, we are to appropriate deconstruction's further, affirmative and, in my opinion, more profound insights, it may be that the kind of attention devoted to works of art by formalists such as Focillon--attention that is able to emancipate the work from its structure of expectation, to respect its singularity--may offer the more fertile ground for the adoption of Derrida's work.[21] As it did for Bergson and, indeed, as it does for Derrida himself, such a revelation of singularity may--and should--translate itself into other realms, of ethics, for example, and ground an entire philosophy. In such a philosophy, however, "formalism" would be not a superceded, politically dubious methodology, but the first step that would necessarily precede any further intuition, any further event.

Notes

1. This article reproduces the text of my talk of the same title delivered in New York City on February 25, 2000, at the annual meeting of the College Art Association, as part of the panel "Reading and Writing Art History." I am grateful to the panel's chair, Michael Ann Holly, for selecting my paper as well as for her comments on earlier versions. The arguments expounded here are drawn from a larger project on Derrida, aesthetics, and art history, where I will treat them in greater detail. I have expanded several of my points in footnotes. ↑

2. Henri Focillon, *Vie des formes* (Paris: Quadrige/Presses Universitaires de France, 1988), 94. Translated by C.B. Hogan and George Kubler as *The Life of Forms in Art* (New York: Zone Books, 1989), 149. ↑

3. Peter Brunette and David Wills, "The Spatial Arts: An Interview with Jacques Derrida," in Brunette and Wills, eds., *Deconstruction and the Visual Arts: Art Media, Architecture* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 28. ↑

4. In the accepted usage of the word in contemporary art history, "formalism" does not distinguish between Focillon's way of paying attention to form, to the object, and that of the post-Wöllflinian Germanic tradition. For strategic purposes, perhaps--specifically, to reverse the hint of opprobrium that has often tinted our discipline's use of the term--I provisionally accept here the more general definition; however, it should become clear that I advocate the Focillonian variety. Indeed, I hope that my conclusions can contribute to clarifying the distinction between the two; it corresponds, roughly, to the distinction between a phenomenology and a dialectics. I will address this point at much greater length in the final version of this project. ↑

5. R.C. Grogin, *The Bergsonian Controversy in France, 1900-1914* (Calgary: The University of Calgary Press, 1988), 123 and n.94. Grogin provides a good interpretation of the phenomenon of Bergsonism in its social context. His reference for the sighting of Focillon at Bergson's lectures is Jérôme and Jean Tharaud, *Notre cher Péguy* (Paris: Plon, 1926), vol.1, 263-264. ↑

6. The best introduction to Bergson's thought can probably be found in Bergson's books themselves, particularly *Creative Evolution*, authorized trans. Arthur Mitchell, 1911 (reprinted New York: Random House/Modern Library, 1944) and *The Creative Mind: An Introduction to Metaphysics*, trans. N.L. Anderson, 1947 (reprinted Totowa, NJ: Littlefield, Adams, 1975), my main sources for the following discussion. For more on Bergson and art see also Mark Antliff, "Bergson and Cubism: a Reassessment," *Art Journal* 47:4 (Winter 1988), 341-

49, as well as his *Inventing Bergson: Cultural Politics and the Parisian Avant-Garde* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993). ↑

7. See Henri Focillon, *Hokusai* (Paris: Librairie Felix Alcan, 1914), especially 113-116; I will analyze in detail these passages, together with their relationship to Bergson (particularly to passages from *Creative Evolution*), in a future article on Focillon's style. ↑

8. *The Creative Mind*, 11. ↑

9. *The Creative Mind*, 135. ↑

10. Henri Bergson, *Time and Free Will*, authorized trans. F.L. Pogson (New York: Macmillan, 1919), especially chapter III. ↑

11. *Creative Evolution*, 9, 370. The importance of the example of the portrait painting is underlined by the fact that Bergson uses it both in the introduction and the conclusion of his argument. ↑

12. For an example of such a difference, see below, note 18. ↑

13. Henri Focillon, *L'Art des sculpteurs romans* (Paris: Ernest Leroux, 1931, reprinted Quadrige/P.U.F., 1964). ↑

14. *Hokusai*, 42. My translation. ↑

15. *Vie des Formes*, 84 (English translation p. 138; translation modified). ↑

16. *Vie des Formes*, 94 (English translation p. 149; translation modified). ↑

17. *Vie des Formes*, 100 (English translation p. 156;

translation modified; my italics). ↑

18. Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (New York & London: Routledge, 1994), 90. The attributes "abstract, desert-like" mark the difference between Derrida's view of the indeterminate experience and Bergson's, for whom such experience rather denotes an overabundant fullness. However, a more critical reading of Bergson's text (which cannot be undertaken in this space) will take us a long way toward reconciling the two views. ↑

19. Jacques Derrida, *Aporias*, trans. Thomas Dutoit (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993), 33. ↑

20. This situation was quite accurately diagnosed by Stephen Melville, in his review of Craig Owens's collected writings. "Owens never quite got Derrida and company right," Melville writes. He supports his point by drawing a distinction between deconstruction's critique of presence, and the critique of representation that was elaborated by Owens among others and that has proved so influential in the New Art History and in the visual applications of Cultural Studies: "the two critiques pull, finally, in very different directions: where the critique of presence forces an acknowledgment of the inevitable concomitance of presentation and representation, the critique of representation aims precisely at their separation, at the freeing of forms of presence and identity not subjugated to representation and recognition. It is symptomatic that Derrida's sentences regularly run to 'both... and' constructions, and Owens's, particularly in his later work, to 'not...but.' Melville, review of Owens, "Beyond Recognition: Representation, Power and Culture", in *Art in America*, July 1993, 30-32, at 31. The determinism of the New Art History was also pointed out by Norman Bryson, Michael Ann Holly and Keith Moxey in the introduction to the influential volume they edited, *Visual Theory* (New York: Harper Collins, 1991). Identifying two different approaches

among the essays in the book, they oppose an "Aristotelian," essentialist position to one that "argues that representation is always a matter of convention, not of essence... According to such a view, the work of art is wholly defined by its historical conditions of origin and reception." (p.1; my italics.) ↑

21. Indeed, Focillon's formalism is similar to what Stephen Melville, in an essay also concerned with the issue of bringing art history and deconstruction together, has advocated as "objectivity" in art history: an "aim at objects and [a] willingness to assume the demand to think or write them as such." As Melville writes: "deconstruction is objective. It is committed to things and does not take place apart from their taking place." Melville, "Color Has Not Yet Been Named: Objectivity in Deconstruction," in Brunette and Wills, *Deconstruction and the Visual Arts*, 33-48, at 43. ↑



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