

Retrieving the Tradition

“ONCE UPON A TIME”:
PRESERVING THE PAST IN A
PRESENCE OPEN TO THE FUTURE

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“Freedom is only free for the future by virtue of a fulfilled present that is grounded in the past.”



1. BREAKING THROUGH DATED TIME INTO THE
OPENING OF QUALITATIVE LIFE-TIME

When we listen carefully to the beginning of the fairy tale and linger with this beginning, then it draws us out of the present moment in which the narrative is being spoken into a distant past.¹ “*Once upon a time* in Switzerland there lived an old count.” No precise period of time has been specified. The time in which the story unfolds does not clearly date back, say, to fifty or one hundred years ago. As far as historical accuracy is concerned, it is remarkably shapeless and open-ended. It cannot be exactly situated and therefore easily tempts one to the opinion that it is quite

1. This text published in translation here is the beginning of a meditation on the Grimms’ fairy tale “The Three Languages,” which comes from a lecture course Ulrich gave on narrative meaning.

arbitrary and, in a negative sense, indeterminate. One thinks this time can be passed over without question, that it does not signify anything special for the narrative. What happened in the story occurred "back then," "once upon a time," "long ago." What quality of concealment belongs to such a sense of time?

The reader or hearer can be tempted to wander back into the past along the connecting thread of linear time in the way that letter follows letter in the reading of a word, or in the way the string of a sentence is tied consecutively into the chain of before and after on the course of a line. He can be tempted to take "literally" one step after another, in order finally to arrive at the time of the event. Surely at some point one would have to come across the "once" and be able to answer the question: "when was this really?" Is *such* a step back into the past perhaps a meaningless undertaking? Is it not denied to us simply because that which is recounted never actually happened, because it cannot be classified in space and time, because this concerns, after all, merely a fairy tale? Isn't this undetermined time, then, a function of the "unreality" of that which is imparted? If this were an actual occurrence, then it must be dateable! At the same time, however, the matter is questionable (in the positive sense of being worth inquiring into) in another direction. Is it not possible that the step over dated time makes a different experience of reality [*Wirklichkeit*] thematic, one that is not identical with that which we commonly and unthinkingly name "concrete reality [*Realität*]"? Does not a depth-dimension of existence, one which surpasses the sphere of the factual in its spatio-temporal objectivity, arise temporally [*zeitigt sich*] in the "back then," which at first glance appeared to be so formless? Does it not do so in such a way that a "concreteness" thereby comes to the surface that does not let itself be dispelled into a merely temporal past, since this concreteness speaks of what concerns and pertains to the human being in his essential presence (and, to this extent, in his essential "has-been" [*ge-"wesen"*])?

To be sure, any contemplative response to the beginning of the story is made impossible by such a grasp at objectively measurable time, which is determined here in the sense of a factual date (or datum). Instead, we sense here a kind of timeless past, which interrupts the one-dimensional, linear withdrawal from the present back into the original source. We hear some-

thing “from behind” without being able to place it at a particular point and fix it in an unambiguous way. The time of the narrative does not fill an empty, formally-measurable span [*Worin*] that contains the story. Rather, the time of the event flows forth out of the event itself. The plot takes its time [*zeitigt ihre Zeit*]; the events produce their time in a qualitative sense. Only he who has experienced the story in a co-active hearing is acquainted with its time and *speaks* in it. The lack of a precise specification of time that we initially observed, when contemplated more deeply, discloses itself to be the sign of a different determination of time, one which cannot be strictly recorded, but whose form is found rather in the performance of living and grows out of this performance. This time flows forth out of particular events and is produced through the specific modalities of freedom’s present moment: its risks and reservations, its hopes and doubts, its commitments and refusals, its weal and woe. It is not abstract and general, but always-unique [*je-weilig*, “particular”] time.

What, then, is meant by the saying “once upon a time . . .”? The narrator and the listener cannot go so far back in time that they would be able to arrive at the final destination, as it were, of a long track of time, at the punctual stopping point of a fixed “when” of events. For after the long path into the provenance out of which the story unfolds itself, remembrance once again opens up a dimension that traces the “before” and marks the pathlessness of the “immemorial.” One does not make contact with this time by following a linear movement backwards, but by making a leap in which one surrenders oneself so that this time can say and tell itself from itself. “Long, long ago” does not only mean that a “long time” lies before the present in which the story is told, at the beginning of which stands the event. Rather, it can also mean that the “long time” itself cannot at all be measured by counting backwards. The way back loses itself in indeterminacy and cannot be brought to a halt in any precise sector of the timeline. He who engages in this look toward the past has ruptured any continuity that would allow a movement from the past to the present or the present to the past. One who enters into the “once upon a time” of the fairy tale has the experience of getting lost on the timeline; he experiences the past entering into the present tense. The past is not registered any longer in a merely objective sense, but is perceived by being-*there* [*Da-sein*]. It “is” the actual

past; but this "is" does not recede from the present anymore. Rather, it breaks out of the present moment of freedom as the act of existence, in which it can be said (and done): "the past *is*" (now). In this case the now possesses a wholly different quality than the empty now-point on the linear track of time.

From this, however, there arises a decisive insight for the relationship of *this* past to the present: one cannot force one's way from this "once upon a time . . ." into the present through the space of what has been on the reified basis of irrevocable certainty in either the conditional sense (*if* A is, then B must follow) or the causal sense (because A, *therefore* B). With regards to the chronological sequence of the narrative (which is indeed enclosed as a whole in the "once upon a time . . .") this means that the particular pro-gress [*Fort-gang*] of events does not let itself be reconstructed in the sense of a deduction. There are of course many reasons that something "goes" one way and not another. However, the sequence of "first this, then that" ultimately eludes the conceptual univocity of known reasons and conditions. The "then" springs from the inner quality of the exercise of freedom (whether positive or negative) along the path which "comes to be," the path along which one walks. This "then" is not essentially accidental, or random, but it is "why-less," in the primordial sense of the necessity of freedom. In other words, it comes about "from itself," beyond a merely arbitrary power or a fatalistic reproduction of the law of the past. For this reason, the course of the narrative does not simply require the alertness of discursive rationality from the listener, but calls for his dedication, for a form of self-surrender, for the risk of accompaniment—that is, it provokes the act of speaking in the present tense.

Against this background, what it means to say "once upon a time . . ." stands out more sharply. The "before" (long ago) is neither determined as the extreme, final segment on the timeline that extends into the past nor secured in such a way that one stretches out the "long ago" endlessly and measurelessly further. As "before," it is the "long ago," on the one hand, in time, and, on the other hand, as relieved of time, as not wholly representable within time. It is primordial time, which in this respect counts in and for all time: a principal, essential "there once *was* . . .," whose uniqueness does not punctually coincide with the always-now [*Je-Jetzt*] of linear time, but manifests rather the

abiding presence of a “today.” It speaks of how it stands with man “always,” but precisely therefore in once-for-all concreteness.

2. THE RE-REVOLUTIONIZED PRESENT: NEARNESS VIA THE DISTANCE OF THE PAST

If we listen attentively to the phrase “*once* upon a time . . . ,” we notice that the question remains open: does the “ago” still stand in time or does it lie entirely outside of time? To be sure, it slips away from any imaginable movement backwards along the timeline and could never be fixed on such a path. The “once . . . ” thus intersects the horizontal timeline vertically. It is neither derivable from it nor can it be situated upon it in a way that is clear and distinct. “Once” emerged in the medium of time and is at the same time poised for what follows. It can happen at any time, even and precisely in the presence of those who tell and hear this story. This changes their relationship to the current now, their stance and way of life within it, and thus also changes their own self-understanding. The temporal now as it is linearly-represented and lived is often empty and fleeting. We are entangled and caught in preordained behaviors, forms of thought, and patterns of acting through which we take up residence in a time that passes away, so that we usually have time neither for others nor even for ourselves. The regularity of the progressive structure of existence in which we are established (in-stitutionalized), however, only fastens the flow of time, as it were, from outside. We “fill up” time as if it were a blank sheet and “spend it” in order to balance out (to cover) the “ought” of daily demands with the “is” of achievement. That is, we pay off our debts in the hopes that, finally, *once, when, if* all debt is repaid, the present will be free for living life for its own sake. Thus time is merely an empty means to this end, a path we follow without, however, being accompanied by the destination. The destination is absent from us because an uncomplicated existence that is not subject to necessities and exhaustion is something we first have to achieve. Hence we speak of ourselves so rarely in the present, and the current now is not generated out of freedom’s presence (to another and to oneself).

In the right form of entering (= departing) into the “once upon a time . . . ,” however, we turn back to ourselves in

a different way, apart from the compulsion of the now that constantly eludes us. We engage with the realm that opens up what is fundamentally taking place in the here and now, that which is happening in the depths of our own actuality. This is what was concealed by the superficial arrangement of manipulated reality, through which it cannot and should not come to light. For in our search for self-possession we stretch ourselves out either backwards or forwards, without being-there, without loving in the present moment who and what we are and can be. The ordinary time of the "once upon a time," however, converts the empty now into itself and makes it porous to the presence of freedom. It liberates this empty now from punctual classification on the unidimensional timeline, expands it from within, and transforms it into the spaciousness of abiding. It delivers the acquisitive desire of "pre-emptive anticipation" into the foresight and serenity of loving care, into the cultivating (colere: culture) "waiting" of "being there for" in the fulfilled present.

Out of the space of the "once upon a time . . ." that *seems* to lie behind us, the present attains the peace of dwelling. It becomes newly intimate with itself, newly secure and authentic, and a more original orientation becomes accessible. The past (what has been) is no longer viewed as that which lies behind us according to a merely linear temporality. Rather, it is now experienced and interpreted in an ontological sense as the dimension of what freedom has been in itself, the dimension in which it was always already present [*anwesend*] and given in its own inner measure, and this in such a way that it can become what (and who) it is. This present goes beyond the rational viewpoint of an observational relation to another and to oneself, which only registers and has objectives in mind. To such a viewpoint everything is only a means and therefore merely a functional transition and passage to other things, for which reason each one bypasses every other, the personal vis-à-vis becomes impossible, and the now degenerates into an intersection of countless forms of absence, in which each has already passed away for the other. The presence of freedom, however, opens essential relationships that "have time." It is lived in a fulfilled way and is, therefore, in a positive sense emptier, poorer, and more spacious. It breathes out. One who is really able to tell stories and to listen has time. He who has time is "there," is "present." The "once" appears in the midst of that

person's today, in which he now dwells; and indeed it appears not in an empty time, but, through following the course of the story, in a serenely released, essential time. This overcomes the boring duration of empty time, and thereby qualitatively regenerates the time "there is" ["*es gibt*"] from within—that is, transforms it into "youthful time." The being-present of *this* time brings that which was absent (departed) back into the living nearness of relation. It inaugurates a reciprocal openness in which each one lets the other come forth out of himself in free self-emergence. It thematizes a *future* which displays itself in such a way that those who encounter one another can uniquely and incomparably *have been* themselves.

Within the horizon of this time, which has been re-revolutionized precisely through the movement back into the past, the "once" in question acquires a new status. For it intersects time *vertically* in its different phases and segments ("once *up-on* a time!"²) and can in this sense be spoken of as u-topia (no-place). It is *generally* ["*überhaupt*"] valid—that is, it is the primordial time of the beginning that abides. As abiding, this beginning is essentially past [*ge-wesenen*], but in the present tense: "*essentially enduring*" [*wesenden*].³ It does not bear the past's character of being "no more," but the features of a pure present, also and precisely there where it is experienced and conceived as a created, finite beginning. For it is as such the mediation between past and future: all that follows from it already essentially *has been* in it, and in this sense it is "being;" insofar, however, as all that comes from it only will-be (*futurally*), it is "nothing." In that both exchange themselves for one another as the beginning, this beginning is, *qua* mediation, the pure present.⁴

2. Written in English in the original.—Trans.

3. Ulrich is referring here to Heidegger's recovery of an archaic verb, which allows him to reread the usual term "essence" ["*wesen*"] in the verbal sense of "remaining present over time" ["*wesen*"]. Both meanings are intended in most instances of "*wesen*" from this point on, which will usually be rendered "to endure essentially."—Trans.

4. Ferdinand Ulrich, "Über die spekulative Natur des philosophischen Anfangs," in *Innerlichkeit und Erziehung. In Memoriam Gustav Siewerth—Zum Gespräch zwischen Pädagogik, Philosophie und Theologie*, ed. F. Pöggeler (Freiburg, 1964), 27–72; "Hegel und die Zeitgestalt der Freiheit," *Hegel-Jahrbuch* (1968/69): 233–50.

The "once upon a time" is the presence of the past in the locus of the beginning and is to be heard and read out of the verticality of its present tense. Therein lies its power to regenerate the now of linear time.

The descent into the "before" (long ago) through the event of the narrative re-revolutionizes (re-volvere: turns back) the current "now," in which the narrator and his listeners are gathered, into a *being*-past [*Vergangen-Sein*], which as such is the fundamental act of the present of freedom. This act does not therefore run away from itself by recollecting along linear time, but returns into the interiority of its original being-there and breaks out of its captivity in empty time. Through the descent into the "once upon a time," the now in which the story takes place becomes transparent from within in all its multidimensionality. This descent thus enables a deepened rethinking of the multi-dimensional "today," breaking its abstract link to a past that is recollected in a one-dimensional way. Such a past will often not let go, will not let pass away (and therefore as such will not be truly perceived).

The return into the "once upon a time" grants unfading originality and hope to today. It emboldens one to generate one's life forward. Precisely the seeming distance of "once upon a time" intensifies the nearness of today, opening it up qualitatively so that I can be more essentially present in the moment, so that I can more openly be-*there*.

The memory that is thereby enlivened as a capacity for the *presence* of the past in freedom's being itself transforms the act of recollection. It is released from the rigid tracks of its connection to the past and its unalterable factuality; it is free, mobile, more sensitive, more able to perceive. The path out of the region of provenance into the present is walked newly and differently. That which has passed must not be impotently reviewed through passive reflection, but can be creatively "repeated forward" (Kierkegaard). And this does not occur in such a way that the past is professed to be null and void, supplanted, and, in a bad sense, forgotten. Rather, out of the present of freedom, the past is accepted, affirmed, and remembered, by virtue of *being* myself, as my (our) past, and precisely thus is opened to its actual *being*-past. In other words, it is lived out of the truth that it "is" past (being as act!). Memory lets the past rest, lets it "be," releases it, lets it go,

affirms it as the past in the present moment of freedom. Memory raises the recollected past into the concrete life-world of the present. In that freedom re-collects and affirms itself, it is present to the extent that it releases itself—that is, lets itself go and lets itself be. Here “self”-recollection and self-less “self”-forgetting (letting oneself pass away) go inseparably together. Therefore one can say that freedom is only present to itself where it voluntarily lets itself “go,” lets itself “go by” [*ver-“gehen”*], lets itself be-past [*vergangen-sein*]¹—for in this one accepts oneself and *does* what one *has been*.

3. RETURN INTO THE PAST AS THE TEMPORAL FORM
OF DESCENT INTO FREEDOM’S “HAVING-ABIDED-NESS”
[*GEWESENDHEIT*]

If, then, we go back into the present past of the “once upon a time,” we move not only into the depths of the temporal past, but into our own “*essentially enduring*” actuality of freedom, into the abiding ground of our being. In this ground the act of existence is received, limited and determined essentially in itself, so that it is able to stand itself up, to maintain itself, and to generate and temporalize itself ek-sistently precisely as a supported (subsisting) sub-stance. “*In illo tempore*” (the primordial time) we also find ourselves in a certain sense in the ontological temporality that we *have been* in ourselves: not in the sense of an isolated, monadic substance, which has being like a dead possession, but in the fullness and determinacy of a freedom that is creatively “enduring in an essential way” (*essentia:natura*).

Originally, the word “essence” refers to the noun οὐσία (substance or essence), which is named from Aristotle’s “τὸ τί ἦν εἶναι”: “that which it *was* to-be.” What is meant here is no mere abstract concept of essence but being (substantiality) as act, fullness, life, in the entire richness of “is,” whose mystery we can scarcely still recognize, misled as we are by the “lightness” of the phrase. Actuality in *actualizing*: *esse est operari*; but abiding, enduring, lasting, *essentially coming to be*, contained and bound within an internal measure that precisely guarantees the fruitful “actuality” of the real presence of that which is thus limited.

This is also expressed by the Greek ἦν (was): a past which reaches into the present. This past is not, as before, a sheer punc-

tually-dated time, but an “essentially enduring” [*Wesen*] (heard and interpreted as a verbal noun) that always already is-*there*, which does lie behind me like an object, but presences [*an-west*]. The ñv does not permit itself to be dated as on a calendar. It does not fall off into the past as a closed “perfect tense” that is separated from the present, but expresses *what is: now*. Of course, it also cannot be confused with what was posited as factual reality according to the empty, spatially-represented now. The ñv signifies: the essential past [*Gewesenheit*] of being in the present-tense. Therefore “long ago” also means that the narrated event does not get swallowed up by the time that passes, but that it is ever-present *throughout* time in its being handed down: told, heard, re-told. The “long ago” means: time is transcended in time, but not merely by means of time. The “long ago” consequently suggests here a power that surmounts time, precisely as the depths of the “perduring essence” come to expression in the image of a “long time”—i.e., in such a way that its original ontological quality does not step directly into the light.

That is to say: the story possesses dignity, permanence, authority. It has maintained itself through time’s coming to be and passing away. That which abides comes to expression in it, which never only “has been” in a negative sense. It is always experienced and lived as now. It belongs to human weal and woe, to the “mode” (melody)⁵ of human existence—its living, essential structure—without this “always-already” of its permanence declining into the indifference of an abstract regularity. Such neutral equivalence surely contradicts the form of the “first this, then that” through which the narrative unfolds and develops itself out of itself, always outpacing the particular phases of the way, breaking through to new beginnings that were indeed prepared in what already happened, but could never be deduced therefrom.

The essentiality that remains and perdures in the sense of being present possesses self-maintaining continuity *and* original principality *at once*—that is, surprising actuality, which, as we

5. Ulrich is playing here on the German word “*Weise*” (way, mode), which can also serve as a synonym for the German “*Melodie*” (melody). Significantly, the musical analogy illustrates the very kind of ordered freedom and free order to which he is pointing in this discussion of essence.—Trans.

already saw, owes itself to the whylessness of loving freedom and its unnecessary deed.

Through the descent into the “once upon a time,” in the sense of the now breaking through linear time into the present-tense “having-abided-ness” [“*Gewesendheit*”] of freedom, we are not bound to a dead past, handed-over to a bad necessity of a life already lived, but are free for the super-essential ontological possibilities of existence in the midst of the necessity of essential having-abided [*Ge-wesenden*] (= the subsistence of freedom). In other words, we are open for transformation and transcendence: emboldened for ontological fruitfulness.

According to this perspective, the “once upon a time” manifests *one* aspect of the transcendence of time in time, since it springs from the “essence that perdures” (understood as a verbal noun), in which patience is rooted and time given. The present of having-been therefore makes it clear that the meaning of life does not consist in casting time into the past as quickly as possible through the hunt to catch the future, in driving time into the past through an empty now-point that is unable to last, in order to *have* a life that is solidified into the perfect tense. Rather, the meaning of life lies in living out being as act precisely in virtue of freedom’s perduring, essential grounding-in-itself. It is to *do* being today, not to possess it barrenly as a finished substance (a dead essence) and in this sense to let it pass away. Dwelling in the present past (having-been) does not condemn us therefore to “spinning our wheels,” but liberates us for going on the way, for movement forward. It reveals that the risk of self-less surrender is the fundamental mode of a freedom that “interiorizes” itself, that re-collects itself in its descending return to its origin.

4. DWELLING IN THE “ONCE UPON A TIME”: CREATIVELY IMAGINING THE FUTURE FROM BEHIND

By beginning with “once upon a time . . . ,” the riches of the living present are recounted in the mode of the past, whose temporality does not emerge here as a grave of the dead, but as the province of freedom’s *having-abided-ness*, whose originality springs from the non-derivable venture of the path and its course. Freedom does not walk the path of its self-becoming in such a

way that it moves on from the essential place of its selfhood (the essential having-been of its own existence), taking flight into a bad super-essentiality of prospects that have been dreamed up (and which could never be realized). Rather, in abiding, serene sameness with itself, freedom becomes who it is (and has been) *without* generatively temporalizing its future as a mere reflection of this past. This kind of impotent symmetry between having-been and coming-to-be would arise directly if freedom were to depart from itself by negating its essential past and inflating its essence into a bad freedom-of-choice in order to produce thereby ever-new arbitrary forms of self-creation. But to the extent that it denies the bond into which it is ordered, its obedience to its past essence—thus dispersing itself through pseudo-creativity into the illusion of insubstantial prospects of being—freedom loses the power for actualizing its potencies. It cannot become actual—that is, it remains, in a bad sense, what it has been, and turns into a slave of its dead past. It becomes incapable of surpassing itself from within, of transforming itself.

Freedom then compensates for its lack of self-realization through a perverse form of wayfaring, through which it adds to a dead, self-equivalent Ego-point ever further spheres of peripheral "history" as the life that it seems (but never truly manages) to live. This withering self augments itself merely in appearance through the sheer number of things it does, in which, however, freedom is no longer expressed. Its path degenerates into a serial linking of feats along the timeline of given, dateable facts, whose lifeless connection plays out and elapses like a film. The ego that is identical to itself punishes itself by atomization, and, at the same time, by the tense synthesizing of its temporality.

The path freedom takes in the power of the perduring having-been (its own ontological past) unfolds, however, in a wholly different manner. The self's coming-to-be and having-been are not constellated here in symmetrical relation to one another, but are entrusted to freedom's responsibility in its present moment, in a mediation whose heart is the (loving or straying) enactment of freedom. In this enactment, the *passions* of being-affected by what is to come, by what has been sent, and by the always-specific way that this is received, are all transformed and answered by the non-deducible, *creative* temporalization, the *risk* of freedom, through which they come to be inseparably inter-

woven with one another. This lived unity of suffering and doing does not fade back behind the present. It is realized as the enactment of *being-free* in the present tense, an enactment that is abiding and, in this sense, *continuously having-been* [gewesender]. It is the inner structure of becoming a self, the mystery of its path.

What does this mean for our discussion of the temporal *topos* of the narrative? The “once upon a time” does not only stand at the beginning of the fairy tale, but is, as such, the dimension of time in which the whole event comes to pass. This can easily tempt us to the view that, in spite of the logic of the whyless “first this, then that” according to which the story progresses, and in spite of the present tense of its past, the event has played out precisely thus and in no other way, having acquired thereby an immutable determinacy. The text therefore regresses to a mere “has-been.”

However, if we perceive and interpret the “once upon a time” in the realm of the present having-been of freedom (of both the storyteller and the listener), then it never seals itself against the present in a past that has been rounded off. Rather, it remains open to what is ahead, since it is precisely the character of having-been, as we shall see, that guarantees freedom’s breaking forth into its future. By virtue of the “once upon a time,” freedom imagines creative possibilities of the can-be [*Seinskönnens*], *not* beside but out of itself, out of the depth of its essential having-been.

How thoughtless it therefore is when one says: yes, it *was* once and is *no more*. The living, present having-been of freedom speaks otherwise. *That* the story played out this way and no other does not finalize it as a definite path into the past that has already been traversed and can now be taken in at a single glance. It doesn’t reduce the story to a dead content in the reservoir of immutable things-of-the-past [*Gewesenen*], but, to the contrary, reveals it to be the inner possibility and promised future of a freedom that exists *here and now* [*da-seiender Freiheit*]. Hence, the “once up a time” opens up “in advance” the never-suspected, unprethinkable [*unvordenkliche*] possibilities of existence, which emerge precisely as a surprise. It does not bind freedom to that which is long gone, or condemn it to a self-reproduction that is regulated by an in-different “perfect tense.” No, it un-binds freedom beyond itself; freedom becomes newly aware of its abil-

ity-to-be from out of its own essence (αὐτ-εξ-ούσιον). Out of the depths of its own actuality, freedom creatively remembers *what* is possible for it *in itself*. Only the one who has experienced his limits and lived his ordination into the necessity of his own essential measure—that is, has lived obedient self-acceptance as the source and birthplace of freedom’s super-essential ontological possibility, is able to hear the “once upon a time” in the right way.

The mythical “always-already” (and “at all times”) is therefore not merely a neutral figure of time—the abstract epitome, so to speak, of the narrative’s validity for all possible (empty) time—but the inner determinacy of the concrete present of freedom itself. It does not anticipate, but, to the contrary, expresses the event as an abiding giving-over [*Auf-gabe*] of self-given existence. It has not yet been decided *how* this task [*Aufgabe*] will be experienced, taken up, and fulfilled. It is only crucial that the “always-already” not be merely represented in the modality of the past, but that it be heard and thought out of *being-present* [*Gegenwärtig-Sein*]. In this way the “always-already” qualifies as action on the basis of being as act, and doesn’t shift onto the plain of an empty concept of being that comprehends all things.

We said that the “once” *can* happen at any time, but that it doesn’t thereby transform into an abstract randomness, provided that one doesn’t deprive it of its verticality and suddenness—“*upon* a time” —which can never be anticipated in the form of a general concept. Time itself (*a* time) remains indeterminate. This indeterminacy should not be interpreted negatively; it is the positive inner possibility of time for its qualitative fulfillment, through which it is generated and temporalized.

Through the “once” that, in time, intersects time at a right angle, the spatiality of the event is also broken open in a qualitative sense. What happened there (“in Switzerland”) can take place “anywhere.” Primordial time liquefies and expands the limits of the spatial fixing of the narrative, which cannot be punctually enclosed in any one place. This does not signify a standardization or indeed an idealization of space, which would (u-topically) despoil the concrete location and definite region, and would be superimposed on the real spatio-temporality of being-in-the-world. The opposite is the case! Even as the vertical “once . . .” bursts open abstract, linear time and qualitatively transforms it into fulfilled time (by virtue of its breakthrough

into the present *having-abided-ness* of freedom), this “once . . .” is historically and corporeally concretized. Thus the positive “anywhere,” which is not arbitrary, concentrates abstract spatiality into a concrete, qualitatively fulfilled locus: “here.” This directly overturns what we commonly assume. Merely dated times and fixed places are far emptier and, for all their apparent clarity, far less concrete than the *fulfilled spatio-temporality* of freedom, which is opened up by the “once upon a time . . .” that speaks at the site of the “*praesens de praeteritis*” and “*praesens de futuris*.”⁶

An experience that Kierkegaard had is extremely revealing in connection with this.⁷ This experience thematizes the descent into the essentially-past ground of the “once upon a time” as growing readiness for setting-off and going-forth into the future. It discloses to us the possibility of creatively imagining the approaching future, so to speak, “from behind,”⁸ out of

6. At this point in our discussion it is necessary to make a brief allusion to a crucial distinction, which pertains to the concreteness of the “once upon a time” and the “always and everywhere.” Despite the verticality of the “once,” and despite the qualitative time that breaks open therein, this “once” still remains in a certain sense abstract. For it does not have the power to enter so radically into determined historical spatio-temporality, to so empty itself in an extreme crossing into time, that the historical limitations that are lived, opened up, and temporalized from within can thereby prove and authenticate its concrete universality. These limitations are the form of time that is fulfilled as such (backwards and forwards)—that is, precisely the *temporal* past into which the event actually *has passed away* (departed, died). Such self-emptying is only possible if departing (death) is the essential language of imperishable life, and if the temporal “no-more” is the epiphany of the having-been of the absolute present of freedom in its voluntary self-disclosure. Even though, as has been shown, the mythical “once upon a time” attains its own place in the present having-been of freedom, it is still not identical with this. It remains a pre-cursor, a fore-runner, to the absolute, perfect “Once” (ἄπαξ, cf. Heb. 9:26) of the “fullness of time” in the midst of the flesh of history, a trace of his promise.

7. This can be found in his diary entry for September 10, 1839. Cf. Søren Kierkegaard, *Die Tagebücher. Erster Band* (WW Edit. Diederichs) (Düsseldorfer-Köln, 1975 [first ed. 1962]), 217 (= II A 558).

8. Augustine deeply understood the breakthrough of God’s future, which besets and strikes man at his *unprotected* back—hence, out of the depth of that which *apparently* lies behind him as finished, circumscribed by the horizon of the past. The love of God seizes man “a tergo” (from behind).

In order to really take the past seriously, one must let it be passed away, must renounce the direct confrontation with it according to the measure of a grasping survey, must turn oneself around and direct one’s face forward. But

the realm of the past which seems to be no more and therefore *seems* to bear no power and no responsibility for the formation of the future. For the most part, the past counts for us only as the sphere of finished tasks, of certainties without potential, irrevocable facts—a sphere out of which no free space of play can unfold for the future that has not yet existed. To the contrary! The renunciation of predictions that presumptuously survey the future is grounded in a specific manner of looking-away toward the past. When we turn properly to the past, the future is able to approach our defenseless back. This is the gesture through which the future is liberated to itself. It is in relation to the past that the divination of the future arises; the step back into that which lies behind enables such presentiment.

“Presentiment does not lie in the direction, the path, of the eye’s gravitation toward existence and its future, but in the reflex of the eye’s orientation toward the past. By beholding what lies behind (which, in another sense, lies ahead), the eye develops a readiness to see what lies ahead (which, in another sense, lies behind).



If A stands for the present time, the time in which we live, and B is its future, then I do not see B if, standing at A, I turn my face toward B. For if I turn myself that way, I don’t see anything at all. However, if C is the past, then by turning to C I can look on B. In the same way, the divining eyes possessed by the Mandrake in Achim von Arnim’s novella were set *in the back of his head*, while the two other eyes, which looked ahead like ordinary, simple, and straightforward eyes, were, as with other people, set in his brow, or that part of the head that is turned towards the *future*.⁹

in this case, the back, which is turned toward it, and so no longer surveys the past, is precisely the place that is vulnerable, the place wherein we can be surprised by the unanticipated, the event that refuses to be situated inside the ordered grasp of forward-looking vision. It is thus only by letting it go (= forgetting) that we can recollect it.

9. The glance backwards does not mean staring tensely into the past, as though the origin could be excavated along the timeline through a possessive,

If the presentiment of that which is forthcoming lay in the univocal orientation to existence (the present) and its future, then the eye would be blind to the future precisely by virtue of its unmediated gaze. It would be cut-off from the depth-dimension of the past,

acquisitive archeology and in this way posited. In this case, the descent into having-been would be characterized by a recollection that, on the basis of its failure to will itself in the present of freedom, is incapable of a forgetting that lets go, incapable of letting have-been [*Gewesen-sein-lassen*] (= of letting the past be gone, in such a way that the affirmation and acceptance of this past is already fulfilled). In this form of archeology, moreover, a peculiar relation to the future manifests itself. Were the past grasped as a possession, prospected like a "thing in itself," and *thus* seen as an empty domain for the future that has passed into it through the present, then it would not be believed that the advent arrives as bestowed, that it is, ultimately, given without presuppositions. Were the *latter* trusted instead, then one would not have to fix himself in the past, and could let go of this past as gone by, as having existed. The past would not be the pledge of having in the future, and the look backwards would not have to fix itself in the constant reserves of what has been. The substantialization of the arriving future in the space of the past therefore easily leads to a symmetrical construction of what is coming "out of" what has been. Here the ad-vent is the solidified aggregate of things past. The more intensively the certitude of the arriving future is worked out through turning backwards, all the more empty will the present be between the no-more and the not-yet. Both sides reinforce the solidification of one another in the dialectic of the already-possessed (in which one cannot repose, and in which one has not serenely *been*, since one only *has* it), and the consummate acquisition (which withdraws into a future that stands beyond as a foreign hereafter, since one relates to it obsessively). Past and future become dissociated from one another through the unfulfilled present, which unravels itself through turning backwards, without being able to loosen itself free from the past by entrustment into the future that is given for nothing (*gratis*). This lack will then be balanced by the flight forward, which continually leaps over the present. Kierkegaard portrays these temptations impressively (despite the one-sided, distorted presentation): "The Jews retreated increasingly into the past. They wrote from right to left not only in the physical, but also in the spiritual sense. However, the more powerfully it presses on backward in this way, all the more necessarily will the soul seek a future which would be, so to speak, an effect of the sparks of light which the eye absorbed through staring at the past, and which now glow all the more strongly in the empty and dark present in which the soul feels itself bound. They thus lacked the peaceful security of true progress." (Cf. a.a.O.S. 186 [= II A 372: 21. February 1839]). What is overlooked in this case is that the past is a place of the received, believed promise, as well as of the readiness of "Here am I." Additionally, according to Jewish tradition, writing from right to left means: beginning the message in the original, the essential, the interior ("right" as symbol of the "masculine side") and letting it be emptied into the plurality of appearances and the exterior ("left" as symbol of the feminine side"). Thus the scroll of the Torah that is read from right to left will also be rolled up on the right and rolled out to the left in the process of reading: the concealment of the depths of the origin is the unveiling descent of the word into corporeal appearance.

out of which alone (drawing strength from that which lies behind) it can direct itself forward with a divining sensitivity. The eye would thereby want to reach the future in such a way that it extended the present along the continuous line of the past that preceded it. The present as such, however, would remain empty, without means for the past, which has consequently fallen and slipped away into the region of the dead. According to *these* presuppositions, the link to the past reveals itself as the declaration of freedom from all ties. Precisely as a moment of a prolonged past, into which the present appears to be wholly withdrawn, the "today" has no past. An openness to the future can of course be immediately constructed out of this situation. He who is "without" a beforehand, must surely become free hereafter. In truth the opposite is the case! For freedom is only free for the future by virtue of a fulfilled present that is grounded in the past. It is lovingly capable [*ver-mag*] for this in the measure that it has been this future in itself—that is, in the measure that it approaches the future by virtue of the future itself, and thus consents to its coming without having anticipated it. This happens only if one believes that the future *has been* freely bestowed.

The present would not be free for the future if it were not able to let the past *be* gone—that is, if it did not consummate this past as *its own* by virtue of freedom's *being*-there.

Now, Kierkegaard says that presentiment consists "in the reflex of the eye's orientation toward the past," toward that which lies behind, which precisely thereby opens up *before* one's eyes as that which lies ahead, disclosing itself as ad-vent [*Zu-kunft*]. The readiness for a divining look at what is coming to the fore grows according to this conversion (metanoia) of the line of sight into the anteriority of one's beginnings. The practice of perceiving the past that has arrived enables one to creatively imagine the future in advance, out of the "ahead" that lies at one's back. This is not as if the eye in bending itself back to the past could figure out the future as a finished thing-of-the-past, or else think both at once through some method of deduction: "because it was this way, it will be thus." In this case the past would be separated from the present in a lifeless reserve and would no longer be my (our) past. The present would not be free with respect to such a past.

In the reflex of orienting the eyes toward the past, in the midst of its limits and the finality of its shape, presentiment breaks forth, an unstructured sensitivity for the future "of" the

past. Such presentiment does not regard the past as a dead, objective domain, but as the depth-realm of the original manifestation of the not-yet in its unavailability. In not holding onto itself, this past has expressed and communicated itself completely and irreversibly as having-been, and precisely thereby has disclosed itself as the future of *abiding* willingness.

The eye does not recover what has been as though it were a closed, terminated thing (in the sense of being a substance), but as the locus of the promise of what is coming. It divines from behind. The domain that seemed like it could be surveyed in its conclusiveness and studied as a fixed, unchangeable ground, now arises as the space of freedom's potential, as the source of its groundless, or spontaneous, movement forward. The eye, therefore, neither merely looks ahead in openness to a future yet to appear, nor merely registers the known past behind it. Rather, it gazes into a having-been of a future that has already arrived and, in this sense, "gone by," a future which, as given (having-been-abidingly-present), *is* the lasting future. Its condition of having-been-abidingly-present gives protection to its unmanipulability. Only on this basis can "the advance as return into the ground" (and vice-versa) be understood rightly, without the presence of freedom being reduced to a mere point of intersection in the dialectic between past and future.

Hence, he who only looks towards B sees nothing. Only *having-already-looked*, the reflexive turn towards the past, empowers me for the perception of that which approaches and shows itself to me. Divining eyes look behind. Whoever has listened to the "once upon a time . . ." looks backwards with these eyes and precisely thereby breaks forth out of the present to the creative imagination for the future, letting it come and letting it be given.

5. STORYTELLING AND THE DRAMATIC STRUCTURE OF FREEDOM'S ONTOLOGICAL TEMPORALITY

5.1. *The dialogue between the future of being as gift and the essential having-abided of its givenness*

Presentiment is grounded in active readiness for the future, which can only be ventured in the measure that one is natively endowed

for this readiness. To enter into this more deeply on the course of our path, we now leave aside discussion of the temporal past in its transience to freedom’s having-abided, and direct ourselves more decisively to ontological temporality as such. The point, then, is to transcend the context of one-dimensional time into the qualitative, ontological time of human self-realization, which generates and temporalizes itself through the self-reception that occurs by virtue of the ad-vent of the given Yes of being. Only if time is experienced as the form of the event of being’s donation, only if the “now-is” [*Jetzt-ist*] is deepened in the present-tense of being as gift, does the dimension of the past disclose itself in view of what precedes as the essential having-abided of freedom, as the living birthplace of the divining turn forward. Then the future will not be envisioned as the merely extended outgrowth of a recollected past—that is, it will not emerge merely as a future that has already been, one which makes freedom’s deed of emptying itself into the present redundant.

The act of being’s donation displays itself as the ad-vent of the gift, through which freedom is handed over to itself (in the interior dialogical relation “I:Thou” = *I am given to myself*). It is delivered without prerequisites, and *comes-toward* itself out of the for-nothing (gratis) of the unconditional spontaneity of its absolute Source. Indeed, it is delivered so completely that freedom’s ability to receive what is given (= freedom itself) owes itself to the ad-vent of the gift and to the Giver’s presence within it.

The word of being calls freedom into existence through the poverty of its kenosis—the gift lives in being given-away! Freedom awakens to itself by being fulfilled through its unmanipulable future. The space, the measure, the form in which it matures and raises itself up is its being-borne by that which is bestowed—that which, in obedience to the will of the giver, has “passed away” [*vergangen*] without remainder into the recipient. The sup-port (sub-sistence) on the basis of which it breaks forth is the givenness of the gift, the anteriority [*Vorweg*] of being carried from below [*Unterfangenseins*] by that which is gratuitously arriving and has-been-abidingly-present. This generates and temporalizes itself in the essential having-abided of freedom.

In this sense one can say that having-abided “comes to be” through the future, through the “passing” of the gift of self-emptying being into the recipient. There is no receptive dimen-

sion, whether formal (*essentia*) or material (*materia prima*), that is external to this future! The *ability* to perceive (hear) what is forthcoming presents itself out of the givenness of the gift, which, on the very path of its coming (the time of which flows from the will of the Giver), clears the space wherein it comes to be received and, through its finitization, founds this space. Perceptive hearing opens through the donation of the word of being, and the ability to accept springs from the gift's own future, which the gift releases and generates out of itself through its kenosis.

Of course, this could tempt us to think of the having-abided merely in the sense of a moment that is internal to the future, which would unfold itself continuously along the path of the coming gift and finally harden itself as the most extreme development thereof, thus acquiring definition. On this premise, reception would be merely a function of giving, hearing a function of speaking. The otherness of the recipient with respect to giver and gift would be merely a feeble projection of the act of donation, which would only presuppose the receiving other *for the sake* of its own self-transcendence, without taking him seriously as a freedom that is *essentially* [*von Wesen her*] grounded *in itself*. This would mean, in turn, that the gift in its giving and its coming-forth—that is, its ad-vent—remains, as it were, monologically imprisoned in itself. Crossing over to the side of the other (dialogical difference) would be impossible, and the gift would thereby remain bound to the giver. It would not come loose from him, so that the giver would be fruitlessly trapped in himself. In other words, the future of being as gift would, so to speak, roll itself up into a past that is substantially over and hence futureless, thereby losing all power for the possibility of arrival. From this it follows that the emptying of having-abided into a mere moment of the future epitomizes a future that, in a bad sense, presupposes nothing. He who receives in this way *seems* to owe everything to the future, but, by forfeiting his self-grounding individuality through his lack of essence, only makes it clear that such a future is impotent and sterile. In ceding all his capacity, he proclaims this future powerless.

Now, the bestowed Yes of being is no fact that is concluded in itself. It is not a fortune that holds onto itself like an object, but, as the fullness of pure poverty, it is life that is given-away, “the likeness of God’s self-diffusive goodness,” as Aquin-

nas says (*De Veritate*, 22.2.2). It is gift as the epiphany of the groundless and unoriginate, overflowing self-communication of absolute freedom, and, therefore, an un-conditional Yes, in which freedom "comes-toward" itself "purposelessly"—that is, as an end in itself. Talk of coming-toward oneself through the word of being (as call) is therefore only meaningful if the one who is called (out of nothing, without any presuppositions) can hear this call in freedom—if, that is, he is presupposed as capable of having this future as his own, of taking on the gift (himself) as freedom in a perceptive having-been-there [*Da-gewesen-Sein*]. Otherwise the recipient would be in-formed by that which is communicated to him as if he were a passive material (it); he would be outwardly stamped in such a way that he could also not incorporate the gift *into himself*. In this case, the gift of freedom to freedom could not have a free effect, could not appear in its free givenness (gratuity), could not so "open up" [*ein-räumen*] in the receiver that it could "clear space" [*aus-räumen*] in him. That is, it could not transfer over to him its real poverty, which, precisely in the wealth of its fulfillment, belongs to itself *in* the empowerment of freedom.

Sheer passivity toward the ad-vent of the future conceals the truth that everything is owed *from the ground up* because it is given. For such openness still grasps onto itself and fixes itself as an empty "field" for the gift, in which case it disassociates the gift from itself. It is not truly poor, not truly open to the future of the gift on the basis of having received. Freedom that has-been-there only achieves the deepest obedience (poverty) towards the perfect givenness of the ad-vent in its yes to having-received. This is freedom in fulfilled having-abided.

On this background perception can no longer be thought as an empty moment of giving. The gift does indeed bring the recipient forth through its future; it lets him arise groundlessly as one who perceives, but in such a way that the gift, in real dialogical difference, presupposes the recipient as freedom that is *being-there* (*being* = participial essentially abiding, perduring). As that which approaches, the gift is always already the freedom that has-been-abidingly-present; in coming it has always already arrived and been made finite. As the gift of freedom, the gift awaits itself, from the other side, as freedom (beyond all symmetry between the future and the essential past).

The proper receptive dimension of the future, as the emptiness (poverty) of perception, does not consist, therefore, in the presupposition of an unactualized possibility; it does not consist in the false selflessness of a silence that cannot speak, nor in the impotent hollowness of a hearing that is not of itself apt for the word of being. Such receiving would have no means for the un-conditional coming-forth of self-giveness. It could not freely take hold of the gift of freedom, nor accept it and appropriate it. That is, it could not, in receiving itself, be *itself*, could not break through into selfhood. The future would not concern the recipient and be determinative for him at the very heart of his being. Instead, it would be an essenceless field to be objectively filled up *without* the future arriving in such a way that it can be drawn forth from the interiority of a freedom that has been abidingly present and, therefore, be enacted forward from that which lies behind. Only in this way would the unmanipulability of the future be preserved. In the self-enactment of freedom it would prove to be truly the future of freedom's present moment. Precisely the unfulfilled emptiness of perception, however, condemns the giver and the future of the gift to feebly reiterate themselves outside of the perceiver, despite the passive porosity of the recipient, who indeed does not *appear* to present any essential limits to this future. What looked at first glance like the patience of selfless availability exposes itself as presumptuous infidelity, as the refusal to be given oneself. One discards essential having-abided-ness that is grounded in itself, condemns it as egoistic subsistence, vilifies it as a self-refusal that holds onto itself in opposition to the total reception of *sola gratia*. One accordingly dissolves the allegedly "substantialized" pattern of nature (*essentia*), in order to let it surrender itself out of the future of the act of being. In this way, one makes oneself "little" before the event of being—and thereby betrays all that one has professed and sought to glorify through perverse self-humiliation. For only by virtue of the gift's having-abided in the recipient, by virtue of the gift's subsistence, is its future, as *presuppositionless*, authoritative for human existence. The future of being, as the gift of freedom, presupposes its voluntary acceptance, which can only be realized by virtue of *the state of having-been-free* [*Freigewesenseins*].

The unconditionality of the future of the Yes of being, which cannot be anticipated, manifests itself, the fullness

of its gratuity, the gift of freedom in its whylessness, in this way: namely, that the gift is just as whylessly, groundlessly, and voluntarily accepted and embraced. This is only possible out of the state of having-been-free, which already *has* received, is fulfilled in itself, and therefore has the means for the groundlessness of the given. True poverty towards the future of being does not consist in the nothingness of an unselfing receptivity, but in the emptiness of the fullness, in the poverty of the wealth of being oneself, in being-supported through the power of subsistence. This is not the embodiment of being as a piece of property that is objectively possessed, but the essential form of the fidelity of the irrevocably-given "to be": being as *act* that is lived, affirmed, and *done* out of the state of having-received! The future that has always already "departed" into the essential having-abided of the self that has received is, in truth, the poverty of freedom in which space has been cleared through the gift's *being-given*. It is the positive emptiness of one who is fulfilled out of the abiding act of coming-toward-oneself. The essential past of having-received does not therefore make the future superfluous, but is instead the creative capacity for this future's surplus as gift. Having-been does not mean that the future slips away from that which has elapsed or that it develops itself out of this past through a one-dimensional, evolutionary ascent. No, the openness of that which has been is a rich poverty for the future precisely in the memory of *having-received*, of *having-been-fulfilled*. Out of this state it opens up the future through which it *will be* given, without being able to determine and direct this future in advance in the mode (*modus: essentia*) of having-already-been-there.

With a view to the idea of Kierkegaard discussed above, this means: the eye does not encounter the future by being separated from the past—since, detached from having-been, peering into an isolated not-yet, it sees nothing. On the other hand, the eye does not catch sight of the future by approaching the having-been in a one-dimensionally recollective observation, by turning itself to it as if to a future that has merely passed away in an objective sense, as factually over and done with. In these ways, the temporal structure of the finitization of being falls short both in the sphere of futural distance as in that of the past, since freedom is not in itself awakened to the ontological present. It can only do so by virtue of the unmanipulable *future* of the gift of being and

its character of having passed away into the *essential having-abided* of the recipient.

Only if the having-received¹⁰ that is presupposed in the act of being's donation does not slough off the path of its genesis—that is, being's movement of finitization as its kenosis into givenness—or swallow this path into the bowels of a concluded past, can the teleological resilience for the future blossom forth in the midst of archeological descent into what has been. Only then is one able, out of the memory of the bestowed future of being, to realize the productive “meaning-formation” [*“Sinnbildung”*] of what is coming. Only then can he bring forth in freedom that which approaches and fatefully [*schicksalhaft*] encounters him through his own self-enactment—that is, transform determinacy into the inner form of self-determined freedom. “The skillful [*geschickt*] man is one who can actively let what is sent [*Geschicktes*] be carried out in the right (= free, loving) way” (cf. Paracelsus). The fruitful, destiny-forming [*schicksal-bildende*] power of freedom is rooted in the depths of having-been and is not a function of egoistic, autonomous handling of oneself and the world.¹¹

5.2. *Recounting what is known in the unity between remembering and forgetting*

Having-abided-ness means both more and something other than the content of what is already-known, familiar, and mastered. It is not material for the acquisition of insights, which have “passed away” into the knower in such a way that they are only possessed in the form of finished concepts, without being open to the abiding future of that which shows itself from itself as known. In this way the past would be the receptacle of what is known, which

10. Not in the sense of being substantially curved-back-on-itself in self-possession, but in the released serenity of *having-been-free* (which is the archetype of the traditional language of “substance”).

11. See also the illuminating etymology of the German word “*ahnen*” (to divine, sense, suspect), which developed from the preposition “*an*” (to, on) into “*ez anet mir*”: it comes to me [*“mich kommt an”*], it comes over me (like a dream, a vision), but in such a way that I myself actively “sense” [*“ahne”*] that which unprethinkably comes over me, and therefore experience the deepest shock *in that* the vision is unfolded out of the adumbrations of my own divinizing sight, without merely being formed or conceived by me.

cannot be recounted but only be put forward and presented in the mode of a thing.

In truth, however, the essential past is the domain of freedom's possibility for the future,¹² not the archive of what is known or the quintessence of an unalterably substantial core of existence, which "has" its I as if it were a thing (an it). To the contrary! Since having-abided-ness is the domain of the givenness of the gift, of having-received (inseparably from having-been-oneself), it is also the radical foundation of the capacity for the future. It therefore guarantees the present moment of cognition in the unity between having-already-known something and allowing the known thing newly to arrive, as presenting and expressing itself from itself. The known past is inseparable from listening openness toward all that is ahead. In the same way, reflection that grasps and conceives does not cut off the known from its source, but in grasping already consents to the approach of that which is grasped, thus affirming the future of the known in the act of having-known. In this sense taking-hold and releasing are one and the same fundamental act of the present moment of freedom.

Kierkegaard says: "if C is the past, then by turning to C I can look on B (the future)" with the divining eyes that are set in the back of the head. The "once upon a time" in which storytelling arises, without thereby reproducing the known, is an essential horizon for divining eyes. For such recounting only begins by virtue of the original actuality of having-abided. It springs from the essential source of the fulfilled past, the groundless and indeed wholly secure depths of being-supported. It lives out of the trust that can wholly hand on the matters it relates.

Hence, in the "once upon a time," the beginning also possesses a power to deliver the future. It enlivens the imagina-

12. Or: the *condition* [Bedingung] of the possibility of the future—not, however, in an objective, but in a personal sense. This becomes clear if we do not hear and interpret the German word for condition, *Be-"dingung,"* in the horizon of the common word "*Ding*" ["thing"]. For then it would remain too much within the sphere of "reality" (*res*: thing, object) that arrests the "*es gibt*" ("there is," literally: "*it gives*"). Understood out of its origin the word "*Ding*" comes from "Thing" (German): "place of assembly." In our context the condition of the possibility of the future therefore means: the collected, essential ontological power of freedom (in its grounding-in-itself) for the future. It is loving capacity for the future by virtue of having-been.

tion for the actuality of being, which does not exhaust itself in the constant presence of a falsified past, but manifests its own surprising future through fidelity to the ground of having-abided. Acting from within “once upon a time” grants one the presentiment of hidden possibilities in the midst of the solidity of having-been-*thus* and the factual “now-is.” Thereby a deep metamorphosis of the present is carried out: the ventured descent into the principle [*Grund*] empowers a transformed progress, a regenerated temporalizing of existence. The turn toward the oldest, toward what has-already-been-abidingly-present, liberates for the new (the youngest, the latest).¹³ For the essential having-abided of what has already been received is the poverty of a lived future—a poverty which accepts itself through having-been-granted, is expropriated in the positive sense (because it is *fulfilled*), and does not willfully dispose of itself. In this sense one can say that the “once upon a time” vouchsafes to the present its youthfulness and freshness.

If one considers this, then it is evident indeed that, though it also instructs and informs, recounting is not identical with information (in which the present of that which is familiar has *passed away* by means of the known). Recounting opens up and liquefies the standing reserves [*Bestand*] of understanding into ec-static becoming [*Ent-stehen*], into the simplicity of that which has *surrendered* itself from itself to its *fulfillment* in the open-ended im-perfect tense. Only through entrustment to the given future of the known, into the gift of perceived reality (whose nearness is its givenness and which therefore cannot be “over and done with”), is it possible to recount what is known. However, entrustment to the given future means: faithful self-abandonment into its having-been-abidingly-present. It means self-surrender into the supporting having-been of the coming-to-be, a having-been which did not originally “come to pass” through the labor of reflection, but “spontaneously,” gratis, freely.¹⁴ Faith-

13. Or: the last day [*Der jüngste Tag*], on which all of time will have run out (= will have been), is the oldest day (of the beginning). Conversely, the oldest, earliest-existing day, in which existence awoke out of the gratuitous having-received of the bestowed ontological future, is the youngest! This is the present of the fullness of time.

14. The “concept” of being is originally *con-ceptio* (reception) and the reflexive hold of the recipient (which *also* expresses itself conceptually as a form

fulness to having-abided (subsistence) is a yes to the future, not a refusal of it.

Schelling asks: “Why can what is known in the highest science,” by which he means philosophy, “not be related with the directness and simplicity of all other *knowledge*? What holds back that intimated golden age when truth will turn again into fable and fable into truth?”¹⁵ One may answer: for this reason, namely, that thought has not yet broken through the objectively-conceived temporal past to the ontological time of the present having-been of freedom. It reflexively holds onto the known, that which is already familiar (has-been-thought), like property, a possession. It does not trust that the past of what is known rests in the essential having-abided of an original having-received, an (a priori) having-understood. This is what confers on what is known the serene availability of being able to be told, the very freedom that can selflessly relinquish itself because it lives its having-received-itself. Reflection does not yet experience itself as gratitude by accomplishing the complete having-received of the essential past as abiding poverty in view of the unmanipulable future of the given. It does not believe that reality must not be taken by force, seized into the ego, represented to the mind [*vergegenwärtigt*] as the pending future and made a thing of the past [*vergangen-gemacht*]. This is precisely what makes relating what is known impossible. Only when knowledge does *not* need to securely protect its contents against their possible withdrawal by clinging desperately to the past can this knowledge be serenely conveyed. That is, only then can it be “spontaneously” surrendered out of the depths of a having-been that is groundlessly fulfilled. Only then can it unfold itself into a “first this, then that” whose source is the essential having-been of having-received unconditionally.

In the presentiment of the future through descent into having-abided-ness, recounting is carried out in the present mo-

of embracing acceptance) is the yes to the recipient’s own givenness. The comprehension [*Be-greifen*] of being is thus not merely an acquisitive act of making things be past or letting things depart, but the consent to the future of that which shows itself and be-falls [*zu-fällt*] (beyond all accidental randomness, with which the groundlessness of the gift may not be confused).

15. F. W. J. Schelling, *Die Weltalter* [*The Ages of the World*]. In the original versions from 1811 and 1813, ed. Manfred Schröter (München 1966), 4.

ment of freedom. We said that the essential having-abided, for which memory is endowed,¹⁶ testifies to its poverty towards the future in that it has the means for this future given and present in itself—it “can.” That this faculty is *anterior* to the future does not mean that it does not need to be received, since, after all, “everything has already been there.” Just as free giving lives from free receiving, so *having*-received, as the transformation of the gift into the free-space of receiving, always remains faithful to the free will of the Giver, to his epiphany in the gift’s structure of freedom. That is, it remains available for the future through which the self-communication of the Giver opens and unfolds itself.

16. Memory therefore first gives to the act of remembering the power to do more than merely hold onto things past in the mode of an objective possession, to do more than merely fix the present as an empty moment “in” the past and precisely thereby lose it, since the self-relation of freedom in its present sinks thereby into the constellation. Rather, memory grants the power to repeat the past forward in the present, to consummate it in the letting-go (forgetting) of *being*-there, and thus to be one with the past—that is, to remember it in a living way. The act of recollecting that has been separated from the faculty for *praesens de praeteritis*, however, replaces the productive forgetting of memory, on the one hand, with “obliviousness.” This emerges since the present doesn’t have the means for freedom in the past, since it has fallen short of the past as the concrete life-world of freedom that is-there (shifting the depths of its freedom into a negative absence behind the things-of-the-past that it has wholly reified). In this way one can no longer “retain” anything in the present tense. On the other hand, one compensates for the incapacity for unity with the past in the present by seeking, through archeological obsession, “to possess” the past in the present like a thing. Plato has portrayed this matter in an unsurpassable way in the dialogue between the god Theuth (the inventor of letters) and the king Thamus. Thamus wants to learn from Theuth what use each of his arts (geometry, astronomy, etc.) may bring, and does not hold back his criticisms. “When he came to letters, Theuth said: ‘This knowledge, O king, will make the Egyptians wiser and strengthen their memory; it is devised as a medicine both for the memory and for wisdom!’ Thamus replied: ‘O most ingenious Theuth, some are capable of fabricating what belongs to art, and others of judging what use or harm will come of the invention. And you who are the father of letters, have been led from paternal love to claim for them the opposite effect than that which they actually produce. For forgetfulness will be generated in the souls of those who learn writing, since they will not remember but will create memories *outside of themselves (!)* by means of the written characters, rather than *from within themselves (!)*. You have therefore not discovered a medicine for memory. Instead, you proffer to your disciples not truth, but only the semblance of wisdom. Through your invention they will come into possession of much information without needing to learn. They will appear to be very clever, although they will mostly know nothing. They will be dangerous company, since they will be conceited rather than wise’” (Plato, *Phaedrus*, 274a-275b).

The capacity of having-been for the future does not make this future into a function of a past that has solidified into itself; it does not reduce it to a result of recollection. No, memory (in the ontological sense) is a pure yes and an entrustment to that which approaches, commitment to its unmanipulability, obedience to the gift that, for its part, obeys the groundlessness of the Giver, who desires that his fullness will be fruitful in its being-given—that is, in the receiver's having-received. Thus, the future's *having-been-abidingly-present* in the memory of the essential past is always already free consent to the spontaneity of what is coming, through which receptivity is handed-over to itself and is realized.

The present moment of freedom is the center out of which the sameness of both movements is *carried out*. In this present the having-been (of being that has gone by) is capable of the future because it comes to be through the future's arrival, and comes to be through the future because it has-been-abidingly-present. In the living present freedom returns recollectively back into its ground in such a way that it releases it and lets it rest, forgets it and so sets off forward into the deed of the future. However, this forgetfulness of embarking onward is itself the recollective return into the pre-giveness of the future gift. In the present deed of the future, the past *comes to be* in that freedom's having-been-there remains entrusted to the "today" out of which it transpires. It does so without the future's being-past [*Vergangen-sein*]*—that is, the freedom's having-abided-ness—being voided as a relative moment of a future that is indeterminate in itself.*

And conversely: the man who is free for the future is one who confidently hands morning over to morning, who can "forget" in assenting to what comes. Such a person risks looking backwards with divining eyes today, since the pledge of free, patient acceptance of what comes rests in the present of having-been and its capacity for the future. Courage for the possibility of the future has its roots here. Only through this abandonment that forgets in its entrustment to the future is freedom free for the future and interior to it. Confidence in having-received liberates for the creative enactment of what is coming, whose gratuity testifies to the unsurpassable support that freedom has in the abyss of its having-been. Faith

in having-received both preserves and releases movement forward. Only out of the depths of having-received groundlessly in advance does the “then . . .” of what follows disclose itself as a continual surprise.

The present of freedom does not peer passively into the past, but retains that which *is* no more by attentively *being*-there, without recollectively drawing it into today. To the contrary! Freedom lives out of believing that it has-received; it need not secure itself through the compulsion of acquisitive recollection. Since it lives groundlessly out of this belief, it can forget that it has-received—and this forgetting is a deeper act of entrustment. The Yes to having-received is carried out in the selflessness of releasing oneself, in creatively letting-go to the point of letting oneself pass away in voluntary surrender to death, which testifies to the lived confidence that one has been given to oneself. Therefore, the freedom of letting oneself pass away in action is entrustment into the future of the gift that is granted without remainder, the epiphany of a hope that will not disappoint. Understood in this way, death (being-past) is the innermost language of the life of freedom, which forgets and, at the same time, recollects itself in the unity between life and death.¹⁷ Freedom is present to itself through forgetting, and therein displays the truth that every remembrance of the past blossoms by virtue of letting the past *be* past.

The present consummation of the past in *being*-there opens the uncloseable difference between the “is-no-more” and the “now-is.” The passive gaze at what has been does not take it seriously in the objectivity that is proper to it. Only actively releasing the “is-no-more,” letting it be, opens this “is” as the essential having-abided-ness of freedom in the *present*: my past, our past. And this directly implies that much can and *must* be forgotten. Letting much go *can* be a mode of freedom’s fidelity to the past. This is not to confuse forgetting with the powerless memory that loses its hold, pushes away, and faithlessly lets by-gones be by-gones because it lacks the means for the selflessness of a freedom that delivers itself into its having-been. It is not the unselfing relationship of the present to the past that affirms what

17. Cf. Ferdinand Ulrich, *Leben in der Einheit von Leben und Tod* (Freiburg: Johannes Verlag Einsiedeln, 1999).

has-been; rather, the "is-no-more" is preserved by the present that consummates the past.¹⁸

This applies analogously to the relation of the present to the future. It is not the passively empty present that is free for the future, but rather the present tense in its *having-been-free*. It is the wealthy poverty of freedom that is "detached" (Eckhart) in the depths of its having-been. Death is a positive inner dimension of this freedom in its being-*there*; it "is already dead" because it truly, essentially, lives. That is, it loves, and does not merely "run ahead" towards death as the end-point of its totally-arriving (or totally-outstripped) future. Hence, it does not forget the future *to the end* of an undivided surrender to the present, but forgets in confidence, aimlessly, and thus takes the future seriously as a gift gratuitously bestowed today. It enacts the end as the way. The end is nowhere more authoritative, more unconditionally decisive, than here and in this way: at every point of time the "final hour" is present. Only thus can there be, throughout all time,

18. Only he who can let the past have-been [*Vergangenheit gewesen-sein-lassen*]*—*that is, can actively consummate it out of the present (= affirm it by virtue of memoria)—has broken through to the state of *having-been-free* in the present. Only thus is he in a position to sketch the horizon of the future freely and not use the future to escape the past. *Oneness* [Eins-sein] with what has-been through *letting* the past *have-been* out of the present of freedom is, however, carried out in the unity between remembering and forgetting. In the same way, knowing oneself (knowing what and who I am in the ontological depths of having-been) means trustful self-forgetting. Again, freedom is itself the same as itself [*selber mit sich selbst selbig*] only through releasing itself in the yes of enacting its own concrete identity and self-lessly letting "itself" be surrendered from itself, thus acknowledging its own innermost heart [*Herzmitte*]: the spontaneity of love.

From this it follows that freedom in its present is, precisely through the distance of forgetting (and thus, of remembering), *nearer* to even the historical past than when it exhausts itself in repeating this past—i.e., reduces itself to a moment of a past whose difference is closed to the present, losing thereby the having-been of the past, which it can no longer remember at all. In this regard, forgetting, as letting the past be, does not mean taking one's distance to the point of a bad indifference to what has been, feebly putting things to rest, but the capacity for what has been in the form of affirming, releasing serenity. Insofar as freedom self-lessly sets itself free it accomplishes *what* (who) it is (has been). Only through this is it possible to descend into the past, which no longer runs out according to the compulsion of a one-dimensional facticity of having-been-thus-and-not-otherwise. Freedom can repeat *itself forward* out of the creative depths of having-been precisely in its passage through the particular course of historical things past. That is, it can begin in the present tense and thus wholly accept its past.

an internal dialogue among times. The concrete “always” of the “once upon a time” is one *prefiguration* of this.

Storytelling “has time,” and must not come to an end through aggressive acquisition of the future. It does not need to be thrust behind itself. Telling can wait, for it speaks out of the realm of the future that is given and due, out of the locus of having-been. Precisely thus is the narrative, through its productive imagination, and in the perpetual creativity of letting possibilities arise, a deep power for the future, which it delivers in the “today.”

To take the future seriously as future means: to accomplish it in the “today” and thereby to obey its unmanipulability. The potential for the future that comes from the present past (the essential having-been) is the patience of hope, of *dwelling* in the not-yet that is possible and will be actualized only in the measure that freedom trusts the depth of its “spontaneity”—that is, in the measure that it accepts and affirms itself.

Time is the rhythm of the free resolution of being’s donation, the melody of the act of creation, the “mode” of the present moment of freedom. This also resounds in every original recounting, which neither recollects mechanically nor forgets so it can fabulate.—*Translated by Erik van Versendaal*.* □

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