Ghosts, reading, and repetition

We have examined the *hybris* of Centaurs and the *hubris* of building labyrinths; the birth of organic beings and mechanical machines. The fleeing toys of Daedalus are part of the Neverlands of the classical world as our abstract social machines gain more technical mastery over organic beings. Machines and organisms proliferate, concatenate, coalesce. New alliances and coalitions of forces emerge and disappear. The world determines. Beings self-determine. Social formations, epochs and civilisations alter human beings, human beings self-alter, extend, create proxy forces of minions and robots. Machines create proxy forces of human beings in contestations of data, of capital, of war. But human beings themselves also create the grounds for their own institution and transformation, new peoples coalesce and proliferate in new forms of genesis and regard, new formations are born out of different ways of thinking and living together, the new monstrous forces of impurity.

The striation and strata that we found embodied in the human mind and human culture from which art, craft, design, creation come and from which magical beings are excavated, recomposed, made to walk again, is clearly a geological analogy. Critically, these analogies have newly emerged to help understand the civilisational, epochal and geological moment in which
we find ourselves. As an attempt to understand how to orient ourselves in this moment new theories of human design and intervention have recently emerged as new ways of theorising our worlds. There are contesting manners of measurement, of classification, and of periodization of the Anthropocene but it marks that historical and natural moment where human intervention in the world indelibly marks that world, changes its course, and stamps itself upon the geological strata of the earth.

Ionia is at least one of the moments where that indelible marking on the earth begins. The idea of the Anthropocene is situated in the emergence of the human as a being, a way that a species understands itself and its relation to inanimates and animates. The human itself becomes the animateur of non-sentient things, it manages, we might say, the ‘dissentience’ of its fleeing minions and machines. These are machines of extension, of domination, and subjection. Eventually they might come, as Marx says, to dominate their very makers but they are certainly interventions into nature. Devices to map cosmologies, like the Antikythera mechanism, were not there simply for curiosity and to display virtuosities of design but to aid the domination of nature through accumulation of knowledges and objects across seas. The idea of the power of these astrological repetitions have been admirably addressed by Keith Thomas, in his important work on religion and magic. It is particularly interesting in the sense that astrology is at the radical interface between a naturally occurring process (the movements of the planets) and its reception and impact on human processes and identity (believing that these planetary processes shape human history). The repetitions of the planetary processes are themselves repeated in the actions of all humanity, denoting a notion of the human being as compelled to repeat. Thomas notes that
a purely astrological conception of fate was problematic in its rigidity — although in the scientific revolutions new planets were being discovered the limitation on the number of planets available to shape our destinies were few. This led to the fixing of human beings into a limited and vulgar typological system where the capacity for any degree of autonomy from the astrological repetitions was extremely limited. This idea of the radical restriction of human potentiality is an extremely important signifier of the perceived limitation of myth, motifs and personalities in the self-comprehensions of our era.¹

The automata are engines of extension of the human social powers but they are also engines of extraction and accumulation — servile beings of warfare or household objects of their makers, doing their bidding. Like other human creations and gods these robots are like the *Lares* and *Penates* of the Roman household — household gods which protect, keep vigil and essentially serve still the people who live there.

One must not forget that the Centauromachy was a vision which elucidated the human relationship to other beings in the very hybridity of the human and the equine and as such was part of a process in which humans understood themselves qua other entities. But this was all the better to aid domination. The Centauromachy is not just a visual representation of different but entwined beings but one of war, genocide and destruction. The Lapiths and the Centaurs are locked in a deadly contest in Thessaly and one which will end with the banishment and eventual extinction of the Centaurs. The Centaurs were literally hunted out of the world, tracked down and destroyed, they are not

even visible in geological strata or excavation. Their fragments dispersed, their very material being extinguished. And why? Because they were barbaric, wilful, misbehaving, drunken, lascivious—they were not civilised. They were not part of the design of the new Anthropocene universe. The reversion to them in art and display would be a memorial not just to their absence but to their ethnic cleansing.

The Labyrinths, built as they were by humans, were part of the extension of human governance over nature. But they remained mysterious. The multicursal labyrinth of Minos, perhaps based on the Gortyna caves, was a place in which one could become lost. It was the thread of the soon-to-be-betrayed Ariadne which would guide Theseus to the centre. In trying to end the supremacy of Minos over tributary Athens Theseus sets himself the task of rescuing the tribute Athenian victims from the labyrinth. In order to do so he must also murder the hybrid Minotaur. The killing of the Minotaur marks then both the emergence of singular human and specifically Athenian domination over the Aegean cultures. The ritual re-enactment of the path through the maze to the centre was only made possible by the emergence of multiple, repetitive mazes but ones marked by an absence—that we have only the repetitions and echoes and not the original maze structure. Much like the Centaur, the original ‘version’ has gone or has never existed. The copies refract memories time and time again of their earlier versions but the ‘Ur-motif’ has disappeared, only its proliferations remain.

The return of archaic motifs are not just about absence but about abstraction and compression, about both extension and limitation. Abstraction is the extraction of something from its origin to a wider totality of time and history. The archaic
structures and beings of classical Ionia are abstracted from their very specific origins in space and time, from a cave on Crete, or a valley in Thessaly, 3000 years ago into phantasms and Ur-motifs for global human cultures, becoming part of the imaginary capital of myth and matrices for their multiple versions and elaborations. The process of abstraction strips the entity of its locality, its vernacular, its mundanity, its provinciality whilst retaining, as clues, features that display its original existences and meanings at the same time as dispelling the idea of the ‘authentic’, which is itself inaccessible. The re-materialisation of the archaic entity time and time again in different historical and geographical conjunctures, often for wildly different reasons, is a re-production as much as it is a de-localisation. It’s summoning up elevates aspects of the original, preserving some properties, but banishing other qualities. It has been extracted from the concrete and the specific into the geological, epochal, civilisational. This process of extra-territorialisation is literally one in which the ‘dead seize the living’. Further, the use of these entities in those vastly different social, historical, geographical, geological locations hints again at the serendipitous and contingent emergence of their specific purpose in their moment of re-use. They are contingent not eternal identities depending on the specific social-historical imaginary which summons them again into being.

But these very processes of abstraction also display processes of compression, of time, of space, of the social world. These entities, structures, stories mean something to us not because they are distant but because of their ‘nearness’. They have a proximity to us. This was all the more understandable in the context of the literality of biblical history of the earth as created and only four thousand years old. Genesis and Noah are
in a sense proximal to us. They also have a proximity if those prophets, gods and angels are speaking in our ears in the here and now. If abstraction is about the relocation of specific entities and moments into the universal, civilisational, epochal, compression collapses those classifications and measurements making entities very close to us. In a sense that closeness becomes often a transmigration of souls as it were, as the beings and motifs of the ‘dead generations’ seize and inhabit our human frames as if they were refugees seeking for a place of safety, or to become active agents again having wandered around the world without corporeality.

The resurrections of the corporeal forms of classical Ionia are essentially, to use a term from classics, ‘epigonic’. The heroes of the Seven Against Thebes produced multiple replications, literally the epigones — copies of those gone before.\(^2\) Humans wanted to replicate stories of sacrifice and heroism, magnifying their own human frames and aspirations by compressing the distance between them and the ghosts they wanted to conjure up. This process of historical necromancy is at once recursive and repetitive, using the same old motifs that should have died with Athens but also profoundly creative as humans self-create, self-alter, self-elaborate, often with limited cultural means at their disposal. Why invent when we can repeat? But this might also be because of an ironic gesture inscribed in the heart of humanity — that the question about the instability of the human is actually part of the stability of a generalised and

\(^2\) It has its origins in the legend of The Seven Against Thebes — a fabled expedition by the seven Argive chiefs against the city of Thebes in Boeotia. All except one died. To avenge their deaths their seven sons undertook a new expedition, were successful and claimed the Theban crown. Epigoni literally means ‘descendants’ but is often used as a negative term to denote lesser descendants or followers.
continuing human nature that is born in our early civilisational moments. The reason that both abstraction and compression work for us is that they serve to answer the same questions, with the same motifs, stories and cultural resources, that were asked of and by humanity in its archaic birth as a self-defining and knowing species. It might literally be true that the reason we find the classical stories of incest and murder so compelling is that we struggle with the same problems as a human species.

The Centauromachy and its genocides, the murder of hybrid beings in labyrinths, the fall of the winged and engineered Icarus to his death display the victory of one type of anthropocentric, even Eurocentric, humanity. The relegation or destruction of the barbarians, the Persians, the monsters, the impure is part of a purification process in the heart of human beings. The pristine, exclusionary, solidification of one version of humanness will define future humanities. The fact that they summon up the monsters time and time again is a sublimation of their fears, horrors, dreams of others and themselves. It is almost as if they memorialise the beings and civilisations that they have exterminated and which only survive as fractured remnants into new epochs, cultures and locations.

The emergence of the human and the ‘Achaean’ is at the same time the birth of the idea of ‘Europa’ — the moment in which the Greeks triumph over the non-Greeks or barbarians. Whatever the ultimate origins of the Achaeans the birth of the idea of Europe is born in the struggles against the Persians and Greek expeditions into the hinterlands of Asia Minor. At the same time the exact location of ‘Barbary’ is opaque. In many ways it is ‘Barbary’ which maintains and sustains the fractured remnants of classical civilisation. The very idea of classical civilisation comes to be bound up with the ‘Ionian spaces’ of the
temple, the demos, of law, justice and rationality and ultimately with technique. In this it stands not just against the Persians but also against the emergent monotheistic desert cults of Judaism, Christianity and Islam each of which in their own ways would become enmeshed with the classical.

The perpetual repetition of classical motifs would particularly come to fruition in the ideas of the English as Athenian or Trojan. Mythological histories tracing the early British kings from the Trojan diaspora would be formulated in the early medieval period. We also have the emergence, as we have seen, of the English towns of Troy and its labyrinths. Pseudo-historians have developed the idea of an English or Atlantic ‘classical’ world which displaces the Ionian locations of Odysseus with provincial English resorts, creating new maps of wanderings in different seas from those we had thought were the locations of the island of Circe. All of this is often a consequence of unauthorised and unmitigated reading in which we place Antigone into our own Never lands and locations and beings. This is reading in and against the classics. Rather than reading a text to know the world of its origin, or reading that world in order to know the text we come to read both text and world as the matrices of our own locations and imaginaries. We summon up the dead into our worlds rather than a reading which returns us into theirs. These dead suffer not one but many deaths, like the two deaths of Odysseus as he enters Hades and returns to the living to presumably return one day again to the underworld.

The Never lands do not just offer us Centaurs, labyrinths, automata—they offer us magic islands and underworlds, witches and gods, myths of genesis and metamorphosis. Later versions of antiquity would ultimately offer us political forms,
science and philosophical practice. They would offer us slavery, incest and genocide and ways of challenging each. The dead remain with us as do the initial definitions of the human offered to us by the archaic classical world. The maps of that world display its instability and permeability — Scythians, Hyperboreans, Celts and beyond — the Argippaei, Issedones, Massagetae and the multiple lands of the Persian empire. Those peoples and empires have dissipated. Their ghosts remain — revenants who return into the present as corporeal or intangible beings. It is almost as if they are fleeing ghosts, shadows that have lost their bodies seeking refuge in new human frames. The materiality of their bodies have been extinguished but this does not mean finitude — they are recomposed and re-elaborated into new physical and emotional ensembles within human beings, incorporated. For many, as Castoriadis has noted, these were real, actual empirical beings that take possession of a child, or the divine manifestation once again in human form. These refuges hold real, transmigrated souls — the body becomes the new incarnation of a previous entity. Even trees or stones become the inhabitations of revenants. But there also the conjuring of pretense, of ghosts who are amalgams and exemplars of something else. Rather than a direct and empirical habitation of a human being the pretense and artifice of repetition acts as a form of coding, of speaking of something when it is difficult to do so in the terms of the present.

Margaret Rose, in her perceptive analysis of Marx’s juvenilia, has examined the relationship between the ancients and the moderns in Marx, perceiving this relationship to be, at least partly, a response to coding and self-censorship in its widest possible sense:
In Marx’s poetry, this balance was often between the exoteric and the esoteric imagery of the text — where the ancient image (as Prometheus or Icarus in Marx’s 1837 poems) would serve to express the essence of the modern situation which could not — for aesthetic or political reasons — be spoken of directly. Marx’s use of the figures of Prometheus and Icarus as personae in his poems of 1836–7 both distances himself from the words of the text and points to this ambivalence in his work, in which contemporary and personal messages are masked by fictions borrowed from ancient or classical authors. The frequent use of parenthesis in Marx’s poetry is an indication of the fear of direct expression and a means of saying things which otherwise — for personal or broader social reasons — had to be kept silent.  

These ghosts, like the body and the motif of Icarus, are literally fabricated and fictive beings re-assembled from the detritus of the past. They are also often pathological repetitions. The world is not conjured up out of nothing but out of the resources to hand, literally an index in which one can look up the ghosts which one would like to use. Embodiment itself then becomes a coding process in which the repetition of faces, forms, appearances — the surface — displays the haunting, but without the haunting and the ghost within. As Bhabha has said — ‘It is the problem of how, in signifying the present, something comes to be repeated, relocated and translated in the name of tradition, in the guise of a pastness that is not necessarily a faithful sign of

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historical memory but a strategy of representing authority in terms of the artifice of the archaic’. The artifice of the archaic is relocation, re-embodiment, but one which is still part of the extension and the re-elaboration of human possibilities and the incorporation of ghostly powers of authority in human form.

We can see the force of the processes of natural and social repetition and some initial clues to the supersession of this repetitive process in the work of Freud and his notion of the compulsion to repeat as both an instinctual and a learned, social process. The ubiquity of repetition is explained by Freud as a clear, if distorted, consequence of natural behaviours. In the New introductory lectures on Psychoanalysis Freud develops a key notion of repetition where the process of repetition inherent within nature degenerates into the fatalistic acceptance within the human psyche of repetitive (and overwhelmingly destructive behaviour).

Firstly, Freud attaches great importance to a notion of instinctual force which constantly wishes to restore a previous state of being. Much like a conception of a return to Eden, the instincts govern all mental and biological life, and they constantly try to return the mind or the organism as a whole to a previous ‘state of things’ — an earlier moment which can only be resurrected if the instinctual force succeeds. Because each state has to be temporary in the flux of both evolution and history each of these states is condemned to be surpassed. The instinct then arises in order to compel the organism to return to that state. This ‘compulsion to repeat’ manifests itself in all organisms.

4 Homi K. Bhabha, The Location of Culture (London: Routledge, 1994), 35.
Freud uses the example of embryology to illustrate the ways in which the instincts attempt to generate this repetitive process of the genesis of organisms. The capacity for the regeneration of lost organs is still present within some organisms in an attempt to restore the lost status of a full being. Freud himself notes the role of therapy as an attempt to recover a lost balance or state of being—an attempt at the repetition of innocence. The migrations of fishes and birds and the repetitive process observable within nature generally all testify to the power of attempts to return or resurrect the previous state of being. Crucially, for Freud, this compulsion is part and parcel of a reactionary or conservative instinctual process. The return, repetition or resurrection is an attempt not at liberation from the past evolutionary chain or historical process but an attempt to submerge the life of the present organism within the mass of the past.

Secondly, for Freud, it is clear that this compulsion is present within all human mental endeavours. It manifests itself particularly in the pathological and detrimental situation of those whose mental state condemns them to the perpetual repetition of various kinds of actions, behaviours, motifs. The compulsion to repeat destructive patterns here, not only reflects a conservative rather than liberative process but expresses to those repeating the actions the pressure of a ‘relentless fate’ brought upon them not by themselves but by other powers such as the instincts ruling the natural world, religious conceptions of destiny and so on. Freud’s psychoanalytic investigations—the empirical observation and description of these processes—reveals to him, and the patient with the pathological disorder, that liberation of oneself from such compulsions entails the
liberation from conceptions of an overwhelming fate. In other words the recognition that one’s fate lies in one’s own hands means the achievement of that very self-determining fate.6

One of the most important aspects of the recurrence of these residual and anachronistic forms that are not benign is that of the replication in different, yet perhaps similar, historical moments of an originary, archetypal historical figure, commonly an Alexander or a Caesar. This process had been recognised at the beginning of the modern period and conceptualized as a form of prosopopoeia; the conceptual form of personification (literally to make faces) which denotes the idea of a representation of an imaginary, absent or dead person speaking and acting. It is an absence which is made to be present, conjured up from the past and recomposed in the here and now. An interesting elaboration of these themes can be found in Foucault and his fellow researchers’ recovery of the case of Pierre Rivière, where the crimes perpetrated by a young man upon his mother, his sister and his brother found their sanction in his conception of himself as the personal repetition of his dead heroes. The murderer’s memoirs provide an insight into the nature of repetition and the recomposition of characters of example and instruction. They exemplify the ways in which the will of an individual incorporates and uses elements from wider structural lineages.

Pierre Rivière found his glory in being the epigone of preceding exemplary characters. The executor of the will of providence Rivière had, since childhood, fantasized about his heroes, imagining some form of identity with them, conjuring them

6 Freud, Lectures, 139–40.
up in his actions. His enemies were the cabbages in his garden arrayed as armies which, as a great general, he would destroy. This vivid imagination was largely the consequence of his idiosyncratic reading and his religious passion—torturing and sacrificing small animals to reproduce the scenes of Christ’s passion. Consumed by a conception of himself as one of the great men he admired, he would achieve the dignity denied to him in his life: ‘I made up stories in which I imagined myself playing a role, I was forever filling my head with personages I imagined’. This begins to take a more sinister turn as the relationship between his mother and his father deteriorates. This section of his confession is worth examining in more depth.

Rivière had read in his history books about ancient Rome that the laws of the period gave the man of the household the right of life and death over wife and family. Conceiving of himself, at this moment, as the bastion of Roman law against the French legal code, he conjures up this past to sustain himself in his sacrifice to uphold the rights of the father and the patriarchy against the mother and his siblings. The defiance of the contemporary laws and his immortalization in the eyes of the past then lead him to the identification of himself with those students who took up arms at the taking of Paris in 1814 giving their lives for a leader who they did not know and who did not know them. If they were willing to die for an abstraction indifferent to their fate then how fitting it would be for Rivière to sacrifice himself for the empirical, knowable father whom he loved and

10 Foucault, *Rivière*, 102–03.
who loved him in return. A series of exemplars pass through his consciousness — Chatillon dying in the streets to save his king, Eleazar the Maccabbee slaying an elephant knowing he would die beneath its weight, a Roman general whose name Rivière forgets dying in the war against the Latins — ‘All these things passed through my mind and invited me to do my deed’. The example of Henri de la Roquejacquelin becomes particularly appropriate. Dying to uphold the cause of the King, ‘I pondered his harangue to his soldiers as the battle began: if I advance, he said, follow me, if I retreat kill me, if I die avenge me’. Even a book of shipwrecks and the sacrifices made by the sailors inspires him to seek the death of his mother. Finally we come to the example of Christ upon the cross. Redeeming humanity and forgiving them he could have punished the sinners and could have pardoned them without suffering crucifixion, ‘but as for me, I can deliver my father only by dying for him’.11 Rivière’s is a master and slave dialectic, the downtrodden father deprived of the rights given to him by the past will have the current order overturned by his son who will reclaim what is his. It is interesting then that he uses female slaves to overturn order, power and dictatorship, perhaps because he considers these masters to be those who held power in the present social formation — a power which had been delegated to a mother rather than to the rightful upholder of the traditions of the past — ‘Jaels against Siseras, Judiths against Holofernes, Charlotte Cordays against Marats’.12 and perhaps most fittingly, in the aftermath of all the overturnings of the revolution, empire and restoration, he conjures up that ghost who seems to be everywhere at once, Napoleon Bonaparte.

11 Foucault, Rivière, 106.
12 Foucault, Rivière, 107–08.
The judicial commentaries on the case refer tellingly to Rivière as ‘an unfinished being,’¹³ the books he read providing the template and justification for the murder of his sister and mother. His memoir is full of contradictions and delusions but it also hints at the notion of completeness which could be conferred by the combination of his own consciousness with those of the past. Foucault and his fellow researchers, almost as an afterthought and without pursuing it to any depth, begin to think about this aspect of the memoirs by examining this copying of the ‘illustrious models’ he had collected from his idiosyncratic historical and theological reading. As a half-conscious repetition of exemplars such as Julian Sorel, Saint-Just and Don Quixote they note his resurrection and re-enactment of the obligations of ancient codes.¹⁴ But the central part of this is the index of his reading:

I had ideas of glory, I took great pleasure in reading. At school they read the Royaumont Bible, I read in Numbers and Deuteronomy, in the Gospel and the rest of the New Testament, I read in Almanacs and geography, I read in the Family Museum and a clergy calendar, some histories, that of Bonaparte, Roman history, a history of shipwrecks, the Practical Morals and several other things.¹⁵

And in the commentaries it is noted that the historical reading was the condition which made murder and morbidity possible as almost a form of memoir. Accumulating and having

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¹³ Foucault, *Rivière*, 152.
¹⁴ Foucault, *Rivière*, 185.
knowledge becomes the index of both elaboration and murder.\textsuperscript{16} For Rivière himself he becomes the exemplar and embodiment of the human possibilities of incorporating ghosts within one’s person. The artifice of the archaic is extracted by reading from the sum of historical knowledge to date:

I thought it would be a great glory to me to have thoughts opposed to all my judges, to dispute against the whole world, I conjured up Bonaparte in 1815. I also said to myself: that man sent thousands to their death to satisfy mere caprices, it is not right therefore that I should let a woman live who is disturbing my father’s peace and happiness, I thought that an opportunity had come for me to raise myself, that my name would make some noise in the world, that by my death I should cover myself with glory, and that in time to come my ideas would be adopted and I would be vindicated.\textsuperscript{17}

George Kubler was one of the first theorists to really delineate the impact of repetition in culture and art and the power of repetitious forms. Kubler makes an obvious key distinction between the primary invention and the series of replications of that invention. An original work of art becomes the template for an inexhaustible series of secondary imitations or mutations within a, particularly aesthetic, genre. This leads Kubler to meditate on the method of the structural limitation of the motif:

\textsuperscript{16} Foucault, \textit{Rivière}, 209.
\textsuperscript{17} Foucault, \textit{Rivière}, 108.
Human desires in every present instant are torn between the replica and the invention, between the desire to return to the known pattern, and the desire to escape it by a new variation. Generally the wish to repeat the past has prevailed over the impulses to depart from it. No act ever is completely novel, and no act can ever be quite accomplished without variation. In every act, fidelity to the model and departure from it are inextricably mingled, in proportions that ensure recognisable repetition, together with such minor variations as the moment and the circumstances allow.¹⁸

For Kubler these repetitions are not the product of will or human choice but are the highly-determined products of the object or phenomena’s structural lineage. Abandoning any conception of human penetration into the binding system of what he calls ‘replica-mass’ Kubler ‘over-structuralizes’ the whole idea of instauration and repetition. For Kubler the situation of any ‘creator’ is rigidly determined by the lineages within which their work is situated. The previous sequences of events determine the replications which will ensue. At the same time this system is invisible to the creator and, unperceived, becomes a retarding force on their own creativity — limiting in its very invisibility. This invisible force structures certain kinds of circumstances within which the actions are predetermined. The consequence of this is the rigid acceptance of the structure or a rebellion against that structure to replace the original piece of art with something which is not a replication. What Kubler calls the ‘congenital peculiarities of temperament’ can react

against the replica-mass but can only create an anti-order. This is not the negative of other parts of the replica-mass but a chaotic phenomenon without form, because it is without history.\footnote{Kubler, \textit{Shape of Time}, 50.}

Each new form is imprisoned by previous forms and in turn acts as a constraint upon the development of subsequent forms.\footnote{Kubler, \textit{Shape of Time}, 54.} The dialectic here is between a repetition in the human world which is exact and ‘onerous’ and a new variation which is ‘unfettered’ and chaotic. Neither of these, for Kubler, is a real possibility.\footnote{Kubler, \textit{Shape of Time}, 63.} As Kubler makes clear in his limitation of his own argument, there is no true identity between objects, motifs, people — there can only be an imagined repetition and identity. Every event or phenomena does differ from what has come before it — identity is a fiction, each act an invention of sorts.

But, in a practical way we all seek the consolations and consolidations of accepted form. Unable to accept the infinitude of motifs we structure finite systems of motifs which come to bind us to certain courses of action in our art and our politics. If events are, in reality, non-repeatable we still understand history with a secondhand historical consciousness which can only make sense by constructing identities and analogies.\footnote{Kubler, \textit{Shape of Time}, 67.} This is why we are constantly tuned to this ‘epigonal tenor’ — recursiveness is part of our ways of understanding the flux of history.

For Kubler the originary archetype of the object provides the template for a series of divergences accumulated in the dialectic between pure repetition or replication and invention. Backwards to what is known or forwards to pure invention or the instauration of new forms. In reality each action is a curious
tension between these compulsions—recognisable recurrences continue, minute variations adapt as the force of circumstance, the past might allow.\(^{23}\) When Kubler begins to study the kinds of meanings which are attributed to or extracted from forms which are repeated we can see the overwhelming power of these amalgams. Individuals and communities recognise in cultural form shared symbolic notations. They can come to perceive meaning in something purely by dint of its repetition in current circumstances. It provides a kind of habitation for these shared meaning to express themselves.\(^{24}\) This leads us then to a consideration not only of Kubler’s structural determinants of repetition but the active shaping of meaning inherent in the inheritance and use of the anachronistic forms. The imagined power takes hold.

The residues of prior social formations are often vernacular, mundane resistances to dominant cultures.\(^{25}\) An interesting example of such a residual form is Carlo Ginzburg’s important research on the complex case of Menocchio and his peculiar theology gleaned from his idiosyncratic reading of past texts. This was transformed into something quite profound in a fascinating dialectic between the literate culture to which he partly had access to and the oral culture from which he had emerged:

Thus a mass of composite elements, ancient and not so ancient, came together in a new construction. An almost unrecognisable fragment of a capital, or the half-obliterated outline of a pointed arch, might jut out from

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\(^{24}\) Kubler, *Shape of Time*, 74.

a wall: but the design of the edifice was his, Menocchio’s. With an unselfconscious and open mind he made use of remnants of the thinking of others as he might stones or bricks. But the linguistic and conceptual tools that he tried to acquire were neither neutral nor innocent. This is the explanation for most of the contradictions, uncertainties, and incongruities of his speeches. Using terms infused with Christianity, neo-Platonism, and scholastic philosophy, Menocchio tried to express the elemental, instinctive materialism of generation after generation of peasants.26

Again, idiosyncratic reading does not just summon up isolated fragments but recomposes them into a new cosmological assemblage profoundly at odds with the cultures and social imaginaries of the ascending and dominant social forces.

To conceive of a different and more positive sense of repetition we can read, with Gillian Rose, Kierkegaard’s point about nostalgia — that repetition and recollection are the same movement but in opposite directions.27 John D. Caputo argues, in his own commentary on Kierkegaard, for this distinction between repetition and recollection — ‘Repetition thus is not the repetition of the same, Greek re-production, but a creative production which pushes ahead, which produces as it repeats, which produces what it repeats, which makes a life for itself in the midst of the difficulties of the flux’.28 Repetition is not

copying but using mimicry to orient ourselves in our world, as mysterious to us as the classical world was to the Achaeans.

Similarly, in his analysis of fictional resemblance Joseph Hillis Miller notes that resemblances can be perceived in a similar way as we perceive a metaphor — a displacement of meaning away from the place where it had its origin. This transportation ensures the construction of analogies, perceived repetitions and similar forms but cannot be understand as ‘pure’ repetitions or identities in any way. Hillis Miller’s points are useful in our discussion here because they not only help us to understand the ubiquity of repetition in fiction but also because of the similarity between fictional and historical techniques of writing. The recomposition of real people, ideas and so on within historical writing relies on the same techniques of metaphor and analogy — even if the processes and people which inhabit history are objects of real, empirically definable existence whilst fictional ones rest within a very different epistemological territory. We can achieve some sense of this ubiquity of repetition in history by looking at some of the devices of repetition that Hillis Miller examines in fiction.

Hillis Miller argues that fictional characters can repeat processes visible in their ancestors or conjure up within themselves historical and mythological personalities. These lock into wider processes of repetition observable in the fiction — all repetitious processes observable inside the text. This can be achieved in the consciously chosen repetitious behaviour freely chosen (within structural constraints) by the protagonists or an objectively imposed understanding on behalf of the author — a perceived repetition of which the protagonist is unaware. The

dialectic between the original and the repetition is a complex one and one where the subjective and the objective and the individual and the historical interpenetrate. But the fiction can also repeat things external to the text — the author’s mind or biography, the wider historical process and the motifs it creates, works by other writers and even events occurring (in the fictional world) before the book begins.  

Even the most abstract, fantastic, work of fiction betrays its affinity to the world external to the text — it would make no sense to the reader if there weren’t shared vocabularies, motifs and so on. A work of history is even more immersed in the world it is trying to represent. In obvious ways the historical work does make reference to the partisan who is writing the work but if there were no reference or congruence between the world and the text then it would not purport to be even a historical representation. Examples of the process by which historical writing in representing the real uses devices from fiction and mythology does not mean that such tools of telling stories lead to fictional renditions.

Following Deleuze, Hillis Miller also makes the distinction between two broad forms of repetition — what Deleuze calls ‘Platonic’ repetition and ‘Nietzschean’ repetition. The first is that repetition which tries to conform, to correspond to a ‘solid archetypal model’. The second form rests upon an idea of difference — that the world is not based upon copying but of the proliferation of ‘phantasms’ ungrounded in archetypal figures which urge forms of copying. These phantasms are not anchored in any meaningful way to that originary object, motif, or personality. It is a free-floating world of ghosts and resemblances rather than a vulgar reality of original and copy.

30 Miller, Fiction and Repetition, 2–3.
31 Miller, Fiction and Repetition, 6.
In other words, whilst one works with realities and the identities between them which can be examined and explained by recourse to a resolving of the phantom into the material historical process the other is much more opaque and mystificatory.

The fact that, as we have seen, the young Marx conjures up Prometheus and Icarus in his juvenilia is not itself a source of surprise. Reading the classics was by default part of a classical education—particularly in a period in which multiple moments of the classical past were resurrected in architecture, philosophy and politics. What perhaps is surprising is Marx’s lifetime obsession with the camera obscura that witnesses ghosts. Marx is obsessed with a specific sense of social haunting as Derrida has noted in his own obsessive reading of the ghosts in Marx and specifically the *18 Brumaire*, itself a classical motif. As Derrida says—‘The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte deploys once again, on the same frequency, something like a spectropolitics and a genealogy of ghosts . . . Marx never stops conjuring and exorcising there’.  

In recent years there has been a resurgence of interest in Marx’s *Eigh
ten Brumaire* in traditions often noted for their hostility to any notion of historical materialism. Jacques Derrida speaks of the work, as we have already noted, as ‘a genealogy of ghosts’33 where the presence of the spectre in human form provides the basis for a new reading of a Marx obsessed with the notion of hauntings and reversion. Derrida’s reading and explication of Marx reforms Marx’s notion of the *remplacants* as forms of ‘revenants’—spectres who find their expression in real human form—spirits which become corporeal through taking over

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the bodies of human beings.\textsuperscript{34} This conception of phantoms, inheritance and repetition becomes a way of consolidating a strategic, revolutionary perspective based upon the ‘politics of memory’.\textsuperscript{35} This concept of visitation is an important and complex one in Derrida’s analysis. It signifies the sense that a spirit appears and begins to inhabit the present. It can be an apparition which is positive and can be welcomed but at the same time, for Derrida, ‘it can signify strict inspection or violent search, consequent persecution, implacable concatenation. The social mode of haunting, its original style it could also be called, taking into account this repetition, frequentation’.\textsuperscript{36} The visitation demands that it be able to enquire and inspect, bringing together the past and the future, actuality and imagination — the ‘social mode’ of the return implying a constancy of visitation, a frequentation of the inspecting ghost.

Yet, unable to and not wanting to negate Marx’s constant adherence to a materialist form of explaining such phenomena, Derrida recognises that for Marx there was a very real distinction between the world of ghosts and that of materiality. Yet in reaffirming this Derrida then makes the claim that these supposedly weightless phenomena — spectres — could only weigh on the minds of the living and particularly on revolutionaries if they had some kind of ‘spectral density’.\textsuperscript{37} How, then, can these phenomena, having no existence external to the mind of the one comprehending their frequentation have such a material presence? For Derrida these ‘implacable anachronies’\textsuperscript{38} become

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{34} Derrida, \textit{Specters of Marx}, 4.
\item \textsuperscript{35} Derrida, \textit{Specters of Marx}, xix.
\item \textsuperscript{36} Derrida, \textit{Specters of Marx}, 101.
\item \textsuperscript{37} Derrida, \textit{Specters of Marx}, 109.
\item \textsuperscript{38} Derrida, \textit{Specters of Marx}, 116.
\end{itemize}
weighted by becoming present in human form and human structures instituting forms of spirit which have real material consequences. Again we see the ways in which the conjuring up of the spirits of the dead become forces which can transform political and historical moments. Instituting the reign of death within life they cannot however propel us backwards to Neverlands and lost paradises.

When Gillian Rose came to think about the presence of ancient societies, classical social forms, and Ionian thinking in the midst of our society she noted that the persistence of repetition marked a confusion about who we are and where we are going as a human species. It marked for her the absence and abandonment of the ‘historical telos’, the foregrounding of the body and corporeality, and the elision not just of thought and being, but also of metaphors about who we were. Repetition and the necromancy of the dead beings and forms of the classical world mark not just questions of the stability or instability of the human as an entity but also something else. Reading, abstraction, the capacity to ‘look up’ in an index provides the forms and essence of who we are or want to become. The dead become refugees in our own human forms because of this very instability between on the one hand the ‘entity that is’, our being in the world, our corporeality and materiality in the world of life and on the other the capacity of our thought and imaginaries to be structured by and full of the detritus of the past. Our very cosmologies are new assemblages of the archaic and the novel, living and dead. We build our new Troys and wooden horses with Ionia and the Achaeans looking on as visitors within us.