

Response to Daniel Libeskind

JACQUES DERRIDA

École des Hautes-Études en Sciences Sociales

You know that someone—I think it was a philosopher—says “Language is the house of being.” He meant, in some way, one’s *own* language. You feel at home when you speak your own language. And one of the things I have to face now is to speak English, to improvise in English, and I do not feel at home at all. That is my first experience of *das Unheimliche*: improvising, after Daniel Libeskind, in English.

I have to cross, to intersect, some of the questions I had prepared and those that came to my mind while listening today. My remarks will look like a sort of wandering, an erring, and a zigzagging. And speaking of zigzag, it has just occurred to me that I have a very good friend in France, someone I much admire, who has written a wonderful book entitled *Zigzag*. I highly recommend it. It is a book written by Jean-Claude Lebensztein, who is an historian of art, a writer interested in music, art, and so on. As a young Polish Jew, Lebensztein lost his family in the War. He was brought up in France, in the country. I dedicated some texts to him and played with the initials of his first name—J. C.—and it works. That is my first association.

Now, how can one respond to such a presentation? It was breathtaking. The thing I discovered that surprised me was the reference to the sealed part, to the part you could not experience, which was the most expensive part to build. I have a question about the relationship between this inaccessible part of the building—sealed, silent, and most precious, filled with real secrets like tabernacles—and the question of the void. I will try to articulate a question about this, but before arriving at the question—zigzagging, wandering—let me elaborate something about this “response.”

I have to “respond” to you. How does one “respond” to an architect? I think yours is an architecture of response in the sense that all the writing—everything of yours I have read—and your presentation this evening indicate that you want to have an architecture that invites participation. The visitor, better, the addressee, must respond by answering and by experiencing the building, even if, and especially if, he or she is a nonarchitect. Somewhere you say, “I do not make any distinction between architectural theory and the built project,” and somewhere else you mention a text that has no architectural equivalent. One of my questions will be this—it will have to do with the nonbuildings in the project and in competitions.

The structure, the experience of competitions, in which you along with many other architects are involved, is the moment when the projects as such may not give place to a building. This opens the space for all the experiments with nonarchitectural possibilities—having to do with literature, with music, with paper. I would like, if you would be willing to follow me in this direction, to ask a question about the relationship between this open field of experiments for competitions—when you do not know whether the project will be built—and the discourse with which you describe or try to convince the other. Not only us here, but the ones who make the decision, the ones who pay for the buildings. This a naive and trivial question, but I am always wondering about the addressee—the people *to whom* you present. I do not mean the jury, which I suppose is composed of architects who understand your discourse, but the ones, like politicians or the powerful, who make a decision: what can they understand in such a discourse—which is already so difficult for us? That is a question I will leave suspended.

I had prepared some quotations for you, but I do not want to speak long, so I will just skip them. I have instead some living memories having to do first with Celan and then the Wall.

First remark. This afternoon we heard something about the city—philosophy, architecture, and the city—not only about these but also about politics—the polis. Once we reach an epoch in history where the polis is not the ultimate unit of social space—there is a book about the post-city age or something like that—well, now, in this post-city age, the social space in which we live may no longer be organized in the form of a polis. This has a number of consequences. The very *concept* of Graeco-Western politics, which was structured by the Greek polis, is not adequate any longer to all the interconnected concepts, to everything we are discussing here. Perhaps “politics” is not a good name for it all. Which does not mean that we are becoming apolitical. Perhaps whatever we are discussing here in terms of politics is already beyond the city, beyond polis, beyond politics. I will come back to this after speaking of Berlin and Celan.

But before that, another zigzag, if you do not mind. Some weeks ago I was

in Prague. I was invited—as usual, as an incompetent outsider—to discuss the problem of the city. What are they going to do with Prague now? They want to restore and preserve the old city, which is already a layered complex of many styles and epochs. They also want to do something else: they want to escape all the hegemonies, all the investments, heading their way from Germany and the United States. They want to end this age. But how?

I gave a small speech, referring to Kafka and speaking of memory. Kafka, in Prague, spoke neither Czech nor Hebrew. Somewhere he says that language is the way we breathe and that since he speaks neither Czech nor Hebrew, he is doubly asthmatic in that city. Nevertheless, Kafka complains about the fact that for a number of complex reasons, the ghetto in Prague had been destroyed. He mentions the memory of this destroyed ghetto, and the fact that ghosts are still haunting it, even though he had not known the ghetto or had the memory of all those Jewish people in it. We were thinking in this direction, about the way one could keep the memory of the city intact and yet build something in this post-city age. Now back to Berlin and Celan.

A few years ago I was invited to give a lecture on Celan in Berlin. As you know, there are several poems—although I spoke on only one of them—that have a cryptic memory of a certain experience he had in Berlin. It is said that only if we had been witnesses to these experiences of Celan could we understand what is encrypted in these poems. At all events, I was invited to give this lecture in a hotel that had been closed in the 1920s, located just in front of the Wall. The hotel was opened on this occasion. There was an old man who was keeping up the hotel. It was such an extraordinary experience—to give a lecture on Celan in this hotel just in front of the Wall. This led me to question the Wall and the city.

Now, you, Daniel Libeskind, build a Jewish museum in what remains a city, not merely any city, but the City of Berlin. During the process of the elaboration of plans of your project, as everybody knows, the Wall came down. My question would be to what extent this event affected your project. Then there is the matter of reunification. What, according to you, has motivated the acceptance of your project, acceptance by whom, and under what conditions?

The other association I had has to do with what you said at the beginning of your presentation regarding the German-Jewish connection. When you explained why “Between the Lines” refers to a discontinuous void, the first reason you gave was the history which associated Germans and Jews. I have worked on this question for some years in seminars and have tried to understand what I would call the German-Jewish *psyche*, meaning here the soul but also the French sense of “mirror.” I tried to read in many texts from the eighteenth century until now—mainly texts by people you have mentioned, Benjamin and others—the terrible history of this specularity. I re-

member that there is a Berliner you did not mention, a friend of Benjamin's—Scholem. He thought that the German-Jewish tradition was a myth, a legend. When at some point Buber and Rosenzweig had translated the Bible into German, a project Buber did not finish until after the War, because Rosenzweig died in 1929, there was a celebration in Jerusalem of this translation of the Bible into German. Scholem gave a speech in the presence of Buber. He of course congratulated Buber, and then said that it was a gift the Jews as guests (*Gastgeschenk*) wanted to give back to the Germans—but that it was too late, there had never been anything like a German Jewishness or a Jewish Germanness. This is a myth, a legend, said Scholem; and now nobody in Germany will ever read such a Bible. So, the truth is that this couple (German-Jewish) never existed—now less than ever. I was thinking about what Scholem would have thought about this “gift” you offer to Germany, to West Germany, to Free Berlin, and now to Germany as a whole. What do you think of this return of the museum as a gift, the gift of a ghost, a ghostly gift to this country?

I have a hypothesis about what links everything you said about Jews and Germans, about the city of Berlin, and the question of the void. If we had time, and if I were not embarrassed by my English, I would have tried to elaborate the links. First, Berlin as a city is not simply one among others—it is an exemplary city, and because of this you can articulate both the singularity of everything you have done and the universality of the meaning of your project. Why is Berlin exemplary? It is a city, has been a city, because of its split, which symbolizes all the division of the world, all the divided cities of the world—think of Jerusalem, for instance—and because the inner difference and the void precisely follow the line or the cut of this difference. Berlin could be considered a noncity city, a city whose identity or unity is split along an interrupted line. To the extent that it is so divided and so nonidentical, Berlin could claim to be exemplary. It is precisely the way every nation, every people, when they affirm their own singularity try to justify their avant-garde structure: they say, “We are the avant-garde, because in our singularity we are witnessing universality, and we bear the responsibility for the universal, for humanity as such.” National affirmation always goes through this exemplary logic, and Germans and Jews have thought of themselves as having been responsible—for universality, for mankind, in the avant-garde. I am thinking of a terrible text by another Jewish German, Hermann Cohen, who, during the First World War, wrote a frightening text on Germanness and Jewishness. In this text he claimed that there was a privileged alliance or symbiosis between Germans and Jews. By the time of the War he was addressing American Jews, trying to convince them to prevent America from entering the war against Germany. It is a very crazy and a very elaborate text. He was a great philosopher, a neo-Kantian, a

socialist, and a German Nationalist. Some say he was even a German militarist. He died before the end of World War I, but his wife died in the camps in the late 1930s. He thought that the alliance between Germans and Jews—and he went back to the Hellenistic period of Greek history to prove it—had an absolute privilege, that Germany was the motherland for Jews all over the world.

Here the logic of exemplarity was at work. He was saying, “We Germans and Jews, in our privileged relationship, are precisely the avant-garde, the best example of what mankind should be.” Sometimes, therefore, I am a little anxious about the language of exemplarity. When you said that Jewish culture was the avant-garde, you immediately afterward said that, of course, you were speaking metaphorically or metonymically, for it is not as an empirical group that we can use Jewish culture as an example. My anxiety has something to do with this exemplarist logic, and this could well lead me to the question of the void.

I had prepared some notes while reading some of your texts on the void, but I need not read them here: you have said more or less the same this evening. This void which has to be made visible is not simply any void. It is a void that is historically determined or circumscribed; and it is not, for example, the indeterminate place in which everything takes place. It is a void that corresponds to an experience which somewhere else you have called the end of history—the Holocaust as the end of history. You have said, again somewhere else, that architecture should start at the “end” of architecture. The “end” would mean a number of things exemplified here. The end could be a limit, but also the origin. Architecture starting from the end means that it has to understand itself and its practice by coming back to precisely what is its own limit; it must go to its limit in order to start from it. The end is but the edge. The end might also be death. The void you are determining here is the void as determined by an event—the Holocaust—which is also the end of history. Everything is organized starting from this end of history and from this void—this is what makes it meaningful. It is not simply a place giving place to everything we build or enter into or experience.

I am thinking of a discussion that developed between myself and Peter Eisenman about the void and the *chora*. Each time Peter Eisenman mentioned absence in the void, it was a determined ontological void. I referred to the Platonic *chora*—in Greek this means “place”—and in Plato’s *Timaeus* there is a place that is neither divine nor human, neither intelligible nor sensible, a place that precedes history and the inscription of Forms; and it challenges every dialectic between what is and what is not, between what is sensible and what is becoming. Yet this place, which receives all the Forms and which gives place to everything that is inscribed in the Forms, is not a void. Plato insists on that. Nor is it something that gives or receives. It has no

meaning, in terms of giving or receiving from or to a subject, be it human or divine. My question—and I say this in admiration and gratitude, for having been so moved by what you have had to say—my *anxious* question would have to do with the relation between this determined void of yours, totally invested with history, meaningfulness, and experience, and place itself, place as a nonanthropological, nontheological possibility for this void to take place. The logic of the *chora*, then, is a challenge to the logic of exemplarity, the human, theological space in which the void is determined—not to speak of the many possibilities for philosophy and dialectics to recuperate and to reinscribe the logic of the void, the logic of the absence of presence, and to reconstitute a discourse that is not proportionate precisely to the events of which your museum is keeping the archive.

What is absolutely fascinating in your project is not simply its memory. For philosophy could always reconstitute the discourse your project tries to challenge, the discourse from which it tries to free itself. Generally speaking, and perhaps in a very formal way, I would like you to tell us, very pedagogically, as though to instruct us, how you experience your own language—the discourse and language of your own project, the languages of your own projects at the intersection of architecture, literature, music, history, and so on. How you experience your own language with relation to the literal Judaic references and to nonliteral references as well. What is the difference between *this* museum and some analogous museum, say, in Jerusalem? Yours is irreplaceable—absolutely singular and literal—so what is the relation between what in your discourse refers to this literality and the universality of meaning in this museum? Here the concept of the *avant-garde* is the point of reference for my question.

I could link this question with an earlier one by again going back to the part of your museum that is sealed and inaccessible, and also to the fact that there is no synopsis, no possibility for a panoptical view of the museum. I would like to ask you a question on this structure and the general structures you mention. These questions are of course addressed to you, and I am sure they are difficult enough. But they are in fact questions that can be diverted into the questions of Judaism or of the destiny of Judaism in general, the Holocaust or the whole series of interpretations of what the Holocaust has been taken to be. I could certainly understand your having to postpone an answer to this question.

A last association with Benjamin. He knew the two Scholem brothers—those two Berliners. One of them became Gershom Scholem, the Zionist who tried unsuccessfully to attract Benjamin to Israel, to Palestine. The other, a Communist, went with Benjamin to Moscow when Benjamin was asking himself whether or not he should become a member of the Communist party. Benjamin was emblematically always divided between the Scholem

brothers—between Zionism and Marxism. I do not know what Benjamin—divided as he was between these Marxist-Russian and Jewish-Messianic poles—I do not know, but I wonder, what he would have thought about your project, remembering that he died during the War, on a border, committing suicide in a very strange situation on a border. Now, please, excuse me; I have been talking for too long.