"Notre irrépressible désir du seuil": Theory at the Threshold, Now

HALL BJØRNSTAD

Indiana University Bloomington

Abstract: As Derrida points out in his famous polemic against Agamben in *The Beast and the Sovereign I*, the latter's conceptual frivolity and historical reductionism point to the essential claim to sovereignty inherent in theory itself, driven by "our irrepressible desire for the threshold." This essay responds to Derrida's call for a rethinking of the figure of the threshold as a way of conceptualizing our position vis-à-vis the past. The essay explores how a certain highly potent and reductive version of the concept ended up in the theory toolbox. At the same time, it suggests how other meanings in the term's history can lead us towards a humbler threshold, one that includes a sense of stumbling, failure, and creaturely entanglement. Mobilizing a popular folk etymology of the word, these two conceptual strands might be labeled "threshing" (referring to the utilitarian, outcome-oriented movement of the threshold as deployed within a muscular narrative of radical change), and "holding" (for a less muscular mode of inquiry predicated on slowing down and lingering at the threshold, which is no longer a foundation). In fact, the essay proposes, theory in the mode of "holding" is increasingly the "way we do theory now."

Keywords: Theory; threshold; sovereignty; methodology; Derrida; Agamben; Benjamin

> Ce que les textes que nous avons lus appellent, c'est au moins une plus grande vigilance à
>
> l'endroit de notre irrépressible désir du seuil. (Derrida)

Introduction: ways we do theory now

Already in its title, "The Way We Do Theory Now," this special issue of *Exemplaria* aligns itself

with another recent and particularly momentous special issue, of the journal *Representations*,

entitled "The Way We Read Now" (2009). In both, a pregnant *we* is constituted through a sharp

emphasis on the *now*, as opposed to an implicit outdated *then*. Their seemingly factual form, with its emphasis on the descriptive phrase "the way," barely hides a sharp polemical edge. However, in both instances, this sovereign deployment (if not policing) of the threshold—with its combined threat of exclusion from, and invitation into, an exclusive *we*—goes hand in hand with a call for a more humble critical practice. In the special issue of *Representations*, the insistence on the *now* of 2009 served to mark a still-recent, hegemonic critical practice, "symptomatic reading," as belonging to the past, and as *passé*. In Rita Felski's formulation, the project was "framed as a stock-taking and leave-taking" (2015, 54). But it is also a tacit call for increased hermeneutic humility: the new reader emerging here claims less agency, is less muscular, heroic and omniscient, relies to a lesser extent on a posture making him smarter than the past,[1] smarter than his *corpus*. A similar call for increased humility is present in the emphasis on the *doing* in the title of the present special issue. Theory, it implies, is not a thing, not really a tool or instrument ready to be *used*,[2] but rather itself an activity, a *doing*. The *doing* rather than the *deed*, process rather than output; the practice rather than the … theory, as it were. Or better still: theory is both, with the theorist being torn between, on the one hand, the urge to exert a sovereign agency that somehow *is* theory and, on the other, a humbler *doing* that leaves more of the initiative to the materials. Such at least is the intuition upon which the present essay is conceived and which it will attempt to explore.

This initial observation has three immediate corollaries, which I will flesh out in greater detail at different stages of the essay: first, importantly, that this tension can be formulated in terms of theory's own relation to thresholds; indeed, what follows is based on the premise that the exploration of a duality in the notion of the threshold is central to a discussion of what theory itself is, now. Second, that these were the real stakes of the polemics between Jacques Derrida

2

and Giorgio Agamben, which led to Derrida's famous rants against Agamben's *Homo Sacer* in the spring of 2002, in his first seminar on *The Beast and the Sovereign*.[3] A closer look at these will provide the exemplary formulation of my task here. Third, that this discussion is all the more critical for theoretically informed work on historical materials, which are always already separated from us by temporal thresholds of one form or another.

This third point accentuates the urgency of the task for a reflection on the "Way We Do Theory Now," in a journal whose full title is *Exemplaria: Medieval / Early Modern / Theory*, while also suggesting why this "temporal" perspective is largely absent from the special issue of *Representations*, mentioned above. This is a more particular *we* than the title of the issue may admit: a *we* that looks back with a certain gaze toward the past, with a certain stake in how the *then* matters *now*, as different both from that of other theory folks (who may very well not look back at all) and from that of other historians (who do not "do theory"). By engaging in a collective reflection on the "Way We Do Theory Now," we (but which "we"?) will inevitably also ponder the kind of separation or threshold between each term of the journal title and make judgment calls on the direction in which they slash. Indeed, in so doing, we may be ideally situated to assess how the way in which we do theory now necessarily implies thinking about theorizations of the past.

 The temptation of the threshold

I will start with what future historians may think of as a crucial moment—even a threshold— in the recent history of theory, paving the way, as it were, for the special issues of *Representations* and *Exemplaria* and their respective *now*s. What is at stake in the polemic pitting Derrida against Agamben is ultimately the way *they* did theory in 2002 (and even further back, in 1995, when

Homo Sacer was first published in Italian), which crystallized in a distinction that remains pertinent for *us* in 2019.

The first and shorter of Derrida's two diatribes, from January 2002, seemingly limits itself to a teasing critique of a rhetorical tic in Agamben's writing: "[H]is most irrepressible gesture consists regularly in recognizing … *first times*, inaugural initiatives, instituting events … so that each time the author of *Homo Sacer* is, apparently, the first to say who *will have been* first" (2009, 134). Such self-aggrandizement is obviously far from innocent in a text whose subtitle is "The Sovereign Power and Bare Life"; indeed, as Derrida remarks "with a smile," this gesture is itself "the very definition, vocation, or essential claim to sovereignty" (134). The subsequent insistence on each manifestation of the tic—four instances, spelled out, not without glee, over four pages—suggests more is still to come.

It does, nine weeks later, when Derrida adds a fifth case to the list, in the context of his contestation of Agamben's crucial distinction between *bios* and *zōē* in the opening pages of *Homo Sacer*. As Derrida points out in painstaking detail, the same sovereign imposition occurs here when Agamben resituates Michel Foucault's claims about the threshold of biological modernity in *The History of Sexuality*, after which "Foucault will have been *almost* the first, as Agamben, for his part, will have been the first to say [what] Foucault was almost the first to say" (2009, 421).The affective energy of this rant is surprising, as is its sheer length (more than twenty pages in the French edition). The wider point Derrida is making, however, connects his earlier observation about the "essential claim to sovereignty" inherent in Agamben's "irrepressible gesture," with the way in which *we* think about the past through thresholds. This is in fact where the lecture closes. After stressing that the confusing messiness of history so blatantly ignored by Agamben "requires us to rethink the very figure of the *threshold*" (442), and

enumerating in parentheses some elements of this rethinking ("(ground, foundational solidity, limit between inside and outside, inclusion and exclusion, etc.)"; 442), Derrida concludes, in a passage from which my epigraph is drawn:

> What the texts we have read call for is at least a greater vigilance as to our irrepressible desire for the threshold, a threshold that *is* a threshold, a single and solid threshold. Perhaps there never is a threshold, any such threshold. Which is perhaps why we remain on it and risk staying on the threshold for ever. (442–43)

The emphasis on *our* "irrepressible desire for the threshold" points back to the essential claim to sovereignty, which, importantly, is not only exerted by this or that theorist, but at a phantasmatic level is constitutive of theory itself. There is an urge and urgency in theory as such that exposes it (and us) to the temptation of the threshold. Hence the urgency of Derrida's double injunction —warning against conceptual frivolity and calling for reconceptualization—not exactly for the theoretical "usefulness" of the notion of the threshold, but rather for the way we do theory *tout court*.

First of all, it is worth dwelling for a moment on the exact temptation exerted by the magisterial threshold mobilized by a Foucault or an Agamben, or even the "epochal threshold" of a Reinhart Koselleck or a Hans Blumenberg. The methodological allure of the concept is obvious enough. Through its architectural rendition of a temporal passage marked as a beginning (if not origin), it describes a movement directed toward the future figured as a self-sufficient inside. Consequently, the successful—and always *a posteriori*—construction of the threshold is predicated on the erasure of the traces of that threshold's own arbitrariness. It is a figure for

leaving the outside out and closing the door, which here stands for leaving the past behind. As a a methodological powertool it serves to reduce historical complexity. It posits a clean break, according to a model of radical discontinuity, that enables the composition of a heroic linear history structured by foundational events. It is, in other words, the *mode* of the modern.

This preliminary reflection already suggests a few important directions for my inquiry here. First, by recalling the paradigmatic position of the *threshold of the modern*, not only as an *arche*-threshold, but even for the definition or constitution of this or that modernity. Second, and in a very different (yet not entirely unrelated) sense, by making us aware that this "modern" use of the concept in fact diverges from the original architectural metaphor, since theorizing in the mode of "identifying decisive firsts" is so much oriented towards the future that it risks reducing the threshold to a mere point on a timeline. Indeed, in a certain sense, Derrida's challenge may ultimately be a call for a respatialization of the figure. How did the threshold end up as a conceptual powertool in the toolbox of theory, a temptation for any theorist to give in to our irrepressible desire to exert sovereign agency? What happens once the figure of the threshold is liberated from an approach which sees nothing in its past and present except the seeds of the future? Indeed, what would a different—and less trenchantly telic— notion of the threshold look like, and what work might it allow us to do? What resources are there in the concept itself? What paths not taken in the conceptual history? The larger part of the essay will attend to these questions while exploring a duality within the modern concept itself, moving quickly from etymology through a few crucial stages of a multilayered (and necessarily multilingual) conceptual history that can be mapped onto the two different approaches to the theorization of the past hinted at by Derrida.

Two points need to be addressed right away. First of all, such an inquiry into the conceptual history of the notion can obviously not be exhaustive. It could certainly be the topic of a book,[4] and what follows here can only be a partial and selective survey, delving into a few crucial moments in a fuller history still to be written. Second, it is important to stress what exactly my own contribution is here. Although the alternative, "rethought" notion of the threshold that Derrida is gesturing toward above may not yet have been formulated as such, not yet properly theorized or conceptualized (at least not to my knowledge), I contend that it is nonetheless part of the critical practice in much of the most interesting recent scholarship (at least in the fields I follow most closely). My claim here is thus not revolutionary. What I attempt to do, however, is to provide a reflection on the conceptual work, the theory, that our best practices already perform. This essay seeks to realign an already existing practice with the theory of a central concept, in a way that will allow the two to nourish each other.

First thresholds

The inquiry into the etymology and historical trajectory of the modern concept of the threshold is itself at risk of succumbing to the temptation of assigning "firsts" and identifying origins. However, even a quick scrutiny of the history of the terms *threshold* and *seuil* serves to slow down the slide into easy reductionism. It reveals not only the obscurity of several key elements of the etymology, but also the uncertain status of the occurrences actually given as "firsts," which are not only problematic as such, but also tell stories about different thresholds when the extracted passages are put back into context.

The etymology of the term *threshold* is unclear. The *Oxford English Dictionary* reminds us that "the first element [of the word] is generally identified with THRESH v. (? in its original sense

'to tread, trample'),'" while "the second [element] is doubtful" (s.v. "threshold"). One recent critical assessment by a leading etymologist divides the word into root and suffix, tracing the root element *thresh* back to a time when "the threshold was not part of a doorway," but rather "a place where corn was threshed (a threshing floor)." The suffix *-(h)old*, in turn, is deemed the result of a process in which it has "undergone numerous changes, for people tried to identify it with some word that could make sense to them" (Liberman 2015). One example of such an attempt to make sense of the word can be found in the work of earlier etymologists, who surmised that *threshold* was indeed the combination of the words "thresh" and "hold"; although this explanation has since been relegated to the realm of folk etymologies, folk etymology itself is an important part of the sense-making and will have left a residue in its semantic layering.[5]

Whereas the modern English word "threshold" shares its origin with those of the corresponding terms in the Scandinavian languages (e.g., *terskel*, *tröskel*) and Dutch (*drempel*, *dorpel*), both the German *Schwelle* and the French *seuil* bring us back from the "threshing floor" to the floor-as-foundation. The German word, a cognate of the English *sill* (as in *doorsill*), has a root meaning of "structural support" or "foundation beam," while the French term points back to the Latin *solea* (*sandal* but also *floor*) and, yet further, to *solum* (*base*, *foundation*).[6] Etymologists have not been able to establish an etymological connection between the German and French terms. The most important reflections on these etymologies for the purpose of my discussion can in fact be found in brief discussions by theorists motivated by a similar interest in the work the concepts do in modern languages.

Thus Walter Benjamin, who, in a reflection on the *rite de passage* in *The Arcade Project* (a work whose focus on passages is of course announced in its German title, *Passagenwerk*), anchors an assertion about the importance of distinguishing the threshold from the mere

boundary (*Grenze*) in the following etymological observation: "A *Schwelle* <threshold> is a zone. Transformation, passage, wave action are in the word *schwellen*, swell, and etymology ought not to overlook these senses" (1999, 494; cf. 991n4). Even though genealogical proximity between *Schwelle* and *schwellen* has since been relegated to the realm of folk etymology, Benjamin's invitation to rethink the threshold as a zone rather than a line (or a point on a line) should be crucial for anyone attempting to pursue an alternative conception of it.

A similar gesture toward a more capacious conceptualization of the threshold can be found in the same seminar session by Derrida as cited above. Commenting on an earlier assertion that in his seminar "we are still on the threshold" (2009, 412), Derrida observes that this is true only to the extent that we liberate the concept from the muscular work it sometimes too easily performs, meaning "*either* an indivisible frontier line *or* the solidity of a foundational ground" (413, emphasis in original). The argument is not easy to follow, but it is clear that the latter of these two elements is linked to the etymology Derrida himself has just rehearsed: "The word 'threshold' [*seuil*, sill, sole] itself signifies this solidity of the ground" (413). It is equally interesting for our context that the former element is closer to the etymology of the English term (not commented on by Derrida). This other threshold, which is neither boundary nor foundation, may indeed become a place where one can linger (*s'attarder*), but only, Derrida stresses, if one is ready to "endure the ordeal of feeling the earthquake always under way, threatening the existence of every threshold, threatening both its indivisibility and its foundational solidity" (413). I will return briefly to this important work on the semantic potential of the German and French terms toward the end of the essay, but only after first pursuing the trajectory of the English term, from the literal doorsill via early figurative uses toward the modern theory toolbox.

The literal meaning of the word "threshold," as referring to "[t]he piece of timber or stone which lies below the bottom of a door, and has to be crossed in entering a house; the sill of a doorway; hence, the entrance to a house or building" (*OED*, s.v. "threshold" n. 1), has long been transferred to other semantic fields. The use of the threshold as a spatial metaphor to denote the border or limit of a region, and sometimes in a more precise manner as "the line which one crosses in entering," is attested already in the ninth century, while its deployment as a temporal metaphor indicating "the beginning of a state or action, outset, opening" is attested as far back as the late sixteenth century (*OED*, s.v. "threshold" n. 2a, 2b.). Here the first example cited by the *OED*, "The thressholl of thy felicitie" (from Queen Elizabeth I's 1593 translation of Boethius's *De Consolatione Philosophiæ*), contrasts nicely with what is given in the *Trésor de la langue Française* as the first attested occurrence of such a figurative use of the French word *seuil* (by Agrippa d'Aubigné, at the same historical moment as Elizabeth's translation): "le sueil de la mort" (the threshold of death; *TLF*, s.v. "seuil").[7] However, while the threshold certainly has a temporal meaning in both of these very brief quotations, it also seems to possess a further density or thickness. The threshold evoked here seems to be more than a "threshold value" separating felicity (or death) from its other in a purely empirical sense.

The status of these two quotations as actual "firsts" is obviously shaky.[8] Nevertheless, a brief observation about the work these two thresholds do within these contexts, and plucked out of any specific context in their dictionary definitions, will add new layers of meaning to this sketch of the conceptual history of the term. In the case of Elizabeth's use of it, the term emerges as the result of a very free translation of its source text. In the hard-hitting "I will shew thè shortly the thressholl of thy felicitie," the word *thressholl* is a translation of the Latin *cardo*, which, as indicated in the translation's modern critical edition, means: "literally, the hinge on

which a door swings at the threshold, and, figuratively, the crucial factor" (Mueller and Scodel 2009, 140n112). This precise parsing greatly clarifies the surprising coloring of this threshold when read in the context of Elizabeth's translation. The example given by the *OED* as the first occurrence of the term *threshold* used to denote the "beginning of a state" seems rather to point to a transformation of the self: the threshold as a place for taking stock, for seeing differently, for reevaluating felicity itself (*OED*, s.v. "threshold" n. 2b.). If the threshold in Elizabeth's translation marks inception, it is by slowing down the beginning of this new state by insisting on an underlying hinge factor.

A similar nuance is present in d'Aubigné's use of the French term, *seuil*. In his meditation on Psalm 73 (the example cited by the *TLF*), he evokes the "threshold of death" as something that will occur as *doux* (sweet), given that "l'ombre du sepulchre est l'entree d'une indicible clarté" (the shadow of the grave is the entry to an unsayable clarity; 1877, 167). The threshold is again imagined less as a limit marking the passage from one state to another than for what happens in the passing itself, in a movement which is slowed down, as if suspended in its teleological orientation. Rather than the actual becoming-dead implied by death, the threshold here helps accentuate what this death does to the outlook of the dying. This change of perspective can be qualified in analogy with the linguistic distinction between perfective and imperfective grammatical aspect. Instead of helping us envision a completed action as a discrete unit on a timeline as perceived from an external point of view (perfective aspect), the threshold here seems to invite us to consider the transition in its unfolding as perceived from within (imperfective aspect): not dead but dying. The change of perspective changes the texture of time, as expressed at the level of the micro-unit of discourse: the expression is now less concerned with the *when* than with the *how* of the event, and also less with where the process is headed (its

telos). Therefore, the difference between perfective and imperfective aspects seems to be inherently linked to what some linguists would call the *telicity* of the expression. But what would an atelic, imperfective perspective even mean when the "event" in question is death? Importantly, in actual language use, the proximity of paradox (the impossibility of saying "I died") serves to express another nuance, add another layer of meaning, as is obvious when considering the phrase "I was dying of thirst" (imperfective perspective), which means something very different from "he died of thirst" (perfective perspective). An atelic, imperfective mobilization of death means to remain within the perspective of the living, not-yet-dead. The "threshold of death" is here a place for lingering. The lingering as a site for new understanding is, in the end, not very far from the "thressholl of thy felicitie" as evoked by Elizabeth I, the atelic threshold serving as a hinge within a narrative still in its unfolding. And not so far, perhaps, from a peculiar early modern meaning of the word, now obsolete, according to which the threshold was "[a]n obstacle, stumbling-block," as in the following example from the early eighteenth century: "Let us set the Church Doors Wide open, and not please our s[el]ves, by laying great Thresholds, Scandals, or Stumbling-blocks at the Church Door" (*OED*, s.v. "threshold" n. 2d.).[9]

These different layers of meaning in the concept of the "threshold," themselves active at what we now might call the threshold of modernity, or quite simply the early modern period, were later to be purged from the version of the concept that entered the theory toolbox. Before turning to this stage of the trajectory, I want to return for a moment to the folk etymology mentioned above and label the duality in the concept with reference to the components of the word itself. The two conceptual strands, or impulses, could be labeled, respectively, "threshing" and "holding." The former expresses the utilitarian, tool-like, outcome-oriented movement of the

threshold as deployed within a narrative of radical change (as when sovereignly separating wheat from chaff); the latter expresses a slowing down, the lingering at the threshold that is no longer a foundation, and possibly even a stumbling block, looking both back and forth in a less muscular and immediately productive mode of inquiry.

The scientific reduction of the threshold

The main stage in the transformation of the concept of the threshold on its way from the doorsill to the toolbox of theory takes place through a detour across the fields of science and technology. From the mid-nineteenth century on, the scientific community increasingly speaks of "the threshold of consciousness," first in German and French, and subsequently also in English. The new usage quickly permeates the culture, at least the bookish part, as confirmed by the Google Books Ngram Viewer: by the late 1870s there are more occurrences of the expression "threshold of consciousness" than of "threshold of death" in the vast archive of Google Books, and by the late 1890s more than of "threshold of the door." This is also the period when the new adjective *subliminal* is formed in English, as a translation of the German *unterschwellig* ("under-threshold-y"), itself formed from the earlier "unter der Schwelle des Bewusstseins" (below the threshold of consciousness).[10]

Then, in the twentieth century, an intriguing double expansion seems to take place. On the one hand, a disciplinary expansion from the field of psychology and physiology to a much wider use; on the other hand, the term is now mobilized to denote not only the emergence and the becoming perceptible of a phenomenon, but also the function of the phenomenon itself: the threshold above which a phenomenon occurs in the world. In other words, after first being limited to the language of epistemology, the framework seems to shift to that of ontology. The

epistemological perspective recedes; the model is now mechanistic: the threshold denotes a feature of the machine or the system itself. No surprise, therefore, to observe from a new Ngram search that from around 1930 the number of occurrences of "threshold of consciousness" in Google Books is surpassed by that of "threshold value" in the by now current meaning of the level beyond which a stimulus will produce a certain output in the system.

Finally, from 1960 onwards, this mechanistic, scientist application of the "threshold" advances further when the term is picked up in fields as electronics and cybernetics, where compound notions based on an integrated use of threshold values, such as "threshold function" and "threshold logic," become central for describing the manipulation and combination of binary signals into larger systems. Essentially, the output of a threshold function will be 1 or 0, depending on whether or not the sum of other binary signals is over a certain threshold value. The number of occurrences of "threshold function" in the Google Books archive surpasses that of "threshold of the door" in the mid-1960s and that of "threshold of consciousness" in the mid-1980s. Today, we can observe a further stage of this development by looking at a seeming hesitation in the way the word is translated. While Google Translate will retain the architectural metaphor when translating the word *threshold* into most European languages, in some cases the algorithm intriguingly chooses a translation corresponding to "limit value" (most prominently with the Spanish *límite*, but also with the Danish *grænseværdi*), even when an option exists that includes that meaning while retaining the metaphor (in Spanish *umbral*, in Danish *tærskel*).[11] This variation in algorithm-based translation practice may point to an imminent shift, if not in meaning at least in the semantic fields in which the word is most frequently and most forcefully applied. The world where the word is put to use is increasingly one responding to (and

constructed by) the one-dimensional, rather than the architecturally-based, "threshold." Or, with the distinction proposed above, a world of "threshing" rather than of "holding."

The purpose of this quick and speculative detour into the conceptual history of the term is twofold. First, I want to suggest that exactly through its provenance from systems theory and structural thinking, the concept of the "threshold" is part of a vast, conquering scientistic development. The shift of framework, from epistemology to ontology, described above is essential here. The threshold is not only a tool for suppressing nuance when observing the world, translating—or reducing—it to either one or zero (in what would still be an epistemological framework); rather, it does away with nuance altogether, locating the threshold not in the observer but in the world (at the level of ontology). It is an empowering, potent tool for anyone looking for overarching structures, a powertool right there in the theory toolbox, promising and providing—nay, projecting and producing— an extreme hermeneutic clarity. However (and this is my second point), this clarity comes at a price, in the form of an inherently reductive double teleology. A doubly reductive transfer takes place, first when applying a tool of mechanistic reduction from the sciences to the humanities, and, second, when this conceptual tool is then applied to a historical process which itself is thereby given meaning and direction from that which comes later (for example, by studying the early modern as a mere threshold for a more complete modernity yet to come, while the even earlier is safely ignored).

Although the brevity of this analysis risks reproducing the lack of nuance that it seeks to diagnose, at the very least it traces the long trajectory, the many steps that separate the threshold of the threshing floor—and even that of the doorway—from that of the theory toolbox. Indeed, it is unclear whether the threshold in the latter sense remains a spatial metaphor at all, or whether the three dimensions of the original architectural space have in fact been reduced to a one-

dimensional limit point on a linear timeline of emergence, where the threshold serves only to separate before and after, black and white, zero and one.

In lieu of a conclusion: always already at the threshold

It is time to take a step back and consider the long trajectory of the concept of the threshold in relation to its place in the contemporary theory toolbox and "the way we do theory now." The purpose of the present essay has been to contribute to the rethinking of the figure of the threshold as a way of conceptualizing our position vis-à-vis the past. On the one hand this is an ambitious project, and the analyses above have offered a glimpse of important resources within the concept, both in its etymology and in the early modern bifurcations of its meanings. This could be explored further, in dialogue with the work by Derrida and Benjamin referenced above. On the other hand, the contribution may be more modest than it seems at first, since it only claims to be theory *after* practice, theory catching up with practice. Although this alternative, respatialized notion of the threshold may not yet have been fully theorized, in an important sense it is *the way we do theory now*. True to the wording of the title of this special issue, the theory implied here is itself a practice, a doing, focused on the process and not the outcome, an imperfective "holding" always already lingering at the threshold rather than perfective "threshing" only too ready to subsume the threshold under a distant telos.

Practically speaking, what would—what *could*—such a "doing" look like? What kind of work might the respatialized notion of the threshold allow us to do? And what extant work is it that I suggest is already an expression of a practice reflecting such a notion? In closing, I will turn to one recent example of the diversity of shapes such a "doing" can take, taken from my own field of early modern French studies. A recent collective project, on "Walter Benjamin's

Hypothetical French *Trauerspiel*," took a little-known, aborted project by Benjamin as an invitation to think differently about the corpus of neoclassical tragedies from what in France is often still called *le Grand Siècle*.[12] The absence of any further leads, even on what exactly Benjamin might have meant by the expression "French *Trauerspiel*" (literally, French mourning play), forced the participants to enter into a speculative, hypothetical mode, drawing on—but also venturing beyond—their specialist familiarity with early modern France and with the Benjamin of the Arcades project and the infamous book on German *Trauerspiel*. The rich and varied findings of the project participants, as published in yet another special issue, of *Yale French Studies* (2013),[13] shed new light on aspects of French early modern drama, while attending to an unwritten history of French early modernity in relation to the late modern. Rather than enacting what I have called the mode of "threshing" (seeking singular points of origin for our world), the inquiry attended to three instances of the *now* simultaneously: that of the early modern period, of Benjamin's time, and of today. This approach was shaped by an acute awareness that the historiographic effort everywhere is driven by "the hope of a better past" (Newman 2013, 156). Yet it seems that Benjamin's own project already has an estranged relation to origin. A late diary entry suggests that his interest in the German *Trauerspiel* resulted from having watched French classical drama, "the Geneva performance of *The Cid*, where the sight of the king's crooked crown first made me think of what I wrote in my book on the *Trauerspiel*, nine years later" (Benjamin 2002, 336). This image of the glimpsed crooked crown is pursued by several of the contributors in the special issue and points to a different figure of the threshold. Through Benjamin's epiphany in Geneva, an alienating gap opens up between the actor on stage and the role he plays, in a way that points to a similar gap at a very different level, between sovereign and creature, between crown and king. Indeed, to Benjamin, the *Trauerspiele* stage

precisely those moments where the king's crown slips and the sovereign is overcome by his own creatureliness. The insight that Benjamin (and, after him, Derrida and others) has urgently drawn our attention to is that, "in the ruler, the supreme creature, the beast can re-emerge with unsuspected power" (Benjamin 1998, 86). This glimpse of the crooked crown thus functions as a stumbling block and scandal threatening *any* sovereign logic, including the sovereign imposition of thresholds. The *Grand Siècle* acquires its grandeur not as origin of modern France (where it could finally leave behind its sense of belatedness vis-à-vis Rome), but as the *siècle* of contradictions, a site of unresolved tensions between tradition and innovation, hierarchy and autonomy, authority and experience, feeling and reason, sacred and profane. Gesturing to the presence in the early material of many of our own theoretical concerns, the collective project's pursuit of Benjamin's hypothetical French *Trauerspiel* contributes to a shift in focus, away from the sovereign "threshing" of the theorist to the "holding" predicated by the material itself: always already at the threshold, but a threshold which is now also a stumbling block. Importantly, the irrepressible desire for the threshold motivating the theorist is here not given free rein, not let loose through the reduction of the threshold of the past to one of pure anticipation, influence or origin, which would hide, as it were, the crookedness of theory's own crown, in a free rein that would also be a free reign. Rather, the collective reflection from the vantage point of late modernity emerges as part a larger discourse, as *always already at the threshold*. This larger discourse includes the sense of stumbling, failure, and creaturely entanglement in a way that compels us to continue the rethinking of the threshold as a central concept for the way we do theory now.

Notes

[1] Or occasionally "her"; although this is—was?—often a high-testosterone enterprise.

[2] This is despite *Exemplaria*'s reader report form, which asks peer reviewers to assess whether the essay under consideration "advance[s] the *use* of theory with its primary materials" (my italics). As will become clear, I am not convinced that this utilitarian vision of theory as a tool to be applied to primary materials is necessarily reflective of "the way we do theory now."

[3] The two rants occur at the end of the third and the twelfth lecture in the first of two year-long seminars on *The Beast and the Sovereign*, delivered, respectively, on January 16, 2002 and on March 20, 2002. All quotations are from Geoffrey Bennington's translation (2009) and I give page reference to the French original, which is included in this edition.

[4] I have not been able to identify such a book. For two edited collections that explore various aspects of the word and concept of the threshold, within two different linguistic traditions (but with little overlap with my argument here), see Saul et al. (1999), and Bergeron and Cheymol (2017). For a rigorous assessment of the threshold as a tool for historical periodization, see Cave (1999 and 2001); Cave, however, takes the scientistic framework of the present concept as a given.

[5] The last supposition is mine and will be developed in what follows. Here is Liberman's (2015) blunt formulation about the attempt at tracing the *thresh + hold* back to the origin of the term itself: "Some of our earlier etymologists (among them Junius, 1743, in a posthumous edition of his dictionary, and Mahn, the 1864 editor of etymologies in Webster) thought that threshold was indeed *thresh + hold*. They were wrong." It should be added that Liberman assigns an important agency to folk etymologies in the later development of the word, stressing how "folk etymology gets its nourishment from outward similarity and ignores logic."

---

[6] See also *Digitales Wörterbuch der deutschen Sprache*, s.v. "Schwelle," and the *Dictionnaire historique de la langue française*, s.v. "seuil."

[7] The *OED* citation is taken from: Caroline Pemberton (ed.), *Queen Elizabeth's Englishings of Boethius, Plutarch, and Horace* (London: K. Paul, Trench, Trübner & Co, 1899), 28. All further references to Elizabeth's translation are from the edition by Mueller and Scodel (2009). The Agrippa d'Aubigné quotation in the *TLF* is from *Méditation sur les Psaumes*, Vol. 2, *Œuvres complètes de Théodore Agrippa d'Aubigné*, ed. by Eug. Réaumé et de Caussade (Paris: Alphonse Lemerre, 1877), 167. The *Méditation* was first published in 1630, but the specific meditation on Psalm 73 from which the quotation above is drawn, was written "towards 1595"; see Ferrer (2001, 119).

[8] Even a quick consultation of scholarly databases, or even the archive of Google Books, suggests that there may be prior occurrences of this use of the word years, maybe decades, earlier.

[9] The example (quoted here from the *OED*, with correction of one typo in square brackets) is from: Edmund Hickeringill, *Priest-craft: its character and consequences* (London, 1706), Part II. viii. 906.

[10] See *OED*, s.v. "subliminal." The discussion in this section of the essay relies on searches in the archive of Google Books via the Ngram Viewer for most of its specific claims, but is in a wider sense also informed by the entries on *threshold*, *seuil*, and *Schwelle* in the dictionaries referenced above.

[11] *Google Translate* consulted on September 27, 2017. See online at:

[12] The term refers to the seventeenth century.

[13] See Bjørnstad and Ibbett (2013) and (2013b).

Notes on contributor

Hall Bjørnstad, Associate Professor of French and Director of the Renaissance Studies Program at Indiana University, Bloomington, is the author of *Créature sans créateur: Pour une anthropologie baroque dans les "Pensées" de Pascal* (Presses de l'Université Laval, 2010; Hermann Éditeurs, 2013); translator of Pascal's *Pensées* into Norwegian (2007); co-editor, with Helge Jordheim and Anne Régent-Susini, of *Universal History and the Making of the Global* (Routledge, 2018); co-editor, with Katherine Ibbett, of an issue of *Yale French Studies* titled "Walter Benjamin's Hypothetical French Trauerspiel" (vol. 124, 2013); the editor of *Borrowed Feathers: Plagiarism and the Limits of Imitation in Early Modern Europe* (Oslo, 2008). His current book project explores the crisis of royal exemplarity in early modern France.

Contact: Hall Bjørnstad

Email: hallbjor@indiana.edu

References

Benjamin, Walter. 1998. *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*. Translated by John Osborne. London: Verso.

Benjamin, Walter. 1999. *The Arcades Project*. Translated by Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press.

Benjamin, Walter. 2002. "Diary Entries, 1938." Translated by Gerhard Richter and Michael W. Jennings. In *Selected Writings*, Vol. 3, edited by Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Bergeron, Jacqueline, and Marc Cheymol, eds. 2017. *D'un Seuil à l'autre: Approches plurielles, rencontres, témoignages*. Paris: Archives Contemporaines.

Bjørnstad, Hall, and Katherine Ibbett. 2013. "Editors Preface: Calling on the *Grand Siècle* with Walter Benjamin." In "Walter Benjamin's Hypothetical French *Trauerspiel*," edited by Bjørnstad and Ibbett, special issue, *Yale French Studies* 124: 1–9.

Bjørnstad, Hall, and Katherine Ibbett, eds. 2013b. "Walter Benjamin's Hypothetical French *Trauerspiel*." Special issue, *Yale French Studies* 124.

Cave, Terence. 1999. *Pré-histoires: textes troublés au seuil de la modernité*. Geneva: Droz.

Cave, Terence. 2001. *Pré-histoires II: langues étrangères et troubles économiques au XVIᵉ siècle*. Geneva: Droz.

d'Aubigné, Agrippa. 1877. *Méditation sur les Psaumes*. Vol. 2 of *Œuvres complètes de Théodore Agrippa d'Aubigné*, edited by Eug. Réaumé et de Caussade. Paris: Alphonse Lemerre.

Derrida, Jacques. 2009. *The Beast and the Sovereign, Volume I*. Translated by Geoffrey Bennington. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Dictionnaire historique de la langue française. 1992. Paris: Le Robert.

Digitales Wörterbuch der deutschen Sprache. Consulted online at:

<www.dwds.de/wb/Schwelle>

Felski, Rita. 2015. *The Limits of Critique*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Ferrer, Véronique. 2001. "Derniers feux d'un genre: les *Méditations sur les Pseaumes* d'Agrippa

d'Aubigné." In "L'œuvre en prose d'Agrippa d'Aubigné," edited by Eliane Kotler and

Gilbert Schrenck, special issue, *Albineana, Cahiers d'Aubigné* 13: 119–131.

Google Books. Online at: <books.google.com/ngrams>

Google Translate. Online at:

Liberman, Anatoly. 2015. "Our Habitat: Threshold." *The Oxford Etymologist,* OUPblog.

February 11, 2015. Online at: <blog.oup.com/2015/02/threshold-word-origin-etymology/>

Marcus, Sharon, and Stephen Best, eds. 2009. "The Way We Read Now." Special Issue,

Representations 108 (1).

Newman, Jane O. 2013. "Afterword: Re-Animating the *Gegenstück*, or the Survival of the

French *Trauerspiel* in the German Baroque." In "Walter Benjamin's Hypothetical French

Trauerspiel," edited by Bjørnstad and Ibbett, special issue, *Yale French Studies* 124: 152–

170.

OED [Oxford English Dictionary]. Consulted online at <www.oed.com>

Mueller, Janel, and Joshua Scodel, eds. 2009. *Elizabeth I: Translations, 1592–1598*. Chicago:

University of Chicago Press.

Saul, Nicholas, Daniel Steuer, and Frank Möbus, eds. 1999. *Schwellen: Germanistische*

Erkundungen einer Metapher. Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann.

Trésor de la langue Française informatisé [*TLF*]. Consulted online at: <www.atilf.fr/tlfi>