

MARK L. JACKSON

Where is the love?

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Where is the love?

Who can forget that Grammy-awarded duet performed by Roberta Flack and Donny Hathaway in 1972? Here love becomes a spatial question. Love can come and go. It travels somewhere. We can ask where has it gone. We might ask something similar concerning architecture. Where has it gone? Where is it going? In an average kind of way I think we all have some understanding of the notions of architecture and love. By ‘understanding’ I don’t mean a theoretical or philosophical grasp of either notion, but rather a comprehending primarily by way of examples. In this sense, they are our plural understandings, for I am sure each of us has had a multiplicity of experiences with both architecture and with love. These experiences are particular, empirical we might say. My understandings of architecture in their multiplicity infer that multiplicity of examples I can draw on, buildings I have visited, of course, but more so buildings I have read about, experienced as images, perhaps even buildings I have designed and documented. Architecture then becomes something nominal, a unifying or synthetic name I can give to a manifold of experiential encounters. Or as concepts, architecture and love may be thought of as ‘distributive.’ The concept distributes itself among a multiplicity of things. Perhaps what in the end I call architecture, others may not. That manifold, that multitude of experiences or multiplicity of things, for others need not at all coincide with mine. And could we not say something similar concerning love? If architecture comprises a category for understanding our cultural world, certainly not everyone is absorbed by it, even if it is often unavoidable in terms of whatever is available to see. I expect those who take an interest in the journal *Interstices* have architecture more foregrounded than most. We perhaps cannot say the same about love, even if we can say it too may be considered nominally as a synthetic unity to a manifold of particular experiences, or conceptually, as distributive among things. Certainly popular culture has more ubiquitous references to love than it does to architecture. There would be few of us, perhaps very few, who could say they have never experienced the *pathos* of love, that emotion or feeling, especially attaching itself to another human being. But that emotion or feeling may well attach itself to things, to anything we could say, architecture included. In that sense there is nothing particularly special about a co-joining of architecture and love, for those whose

experiences of architecture are particularly intense, even if for most of us there is something like a diffidence or indifference even, with respect to any sense of loving architecture.

All of this seems trivial, perhaps too trivial to even appear in a journal wherein I expect there are readers who in fact have something definite to say about architectures of love, something that is not simply experiential accounts, but perhaps something more theoretical, more philosophical. Though I do think that in this rather simplistic opening to this paper, I have probed a nagging question concerning architecture and love. From what we have already suggested, we arrive at the most common approach to understanding anything at all, that of asserting something about something. Architecture is nothing other than a subject that contains predicates, categories, intuited from out of our myriad experiences, predicates that are contingent on individual experience. And love, too, is an assertion, when we say, for example, after the psychoanalyst, Jacques Lacan, that love is that demand I make of the Other that the Other cannot fulfil.¹ Or we could just as easily offer something from popular culture, love is a many splendored thing. Architecture is...; love is.... What is that nagging question? How does this notion, this idea or ideal construe itself as synthetic unity of its manifold predicates? Must we not already have the idea of architecture in its pre-hending such that this notion is the gathering force of or for certain predicates and not others? But, then, how do the notions 'architecture' or 'love' emerge at all if not through experiential intuition? Do we take upon ourselves the totalising notion, the idea in order that analysis and synthesis become the co-joining modes of understanding, analysis as in what we privilege from empirical experience as the categorial in architecture, or in love. Equally, how do these categories become a synthetic unity comprising the idea or ideal of architecture or love? What, indeed, might happen if we do not proceed in this way? I suggest there is some difficulty in not proceeding according to the usual understanding of making assertions, predicative thinking, subject-object relations. With this paper, my simple aim is to point to a couple of approaches to an understanding of architecture and love, indeed, architectures of love, that seem to me to fundamentally question these doxas of idealism or realism or empiricism. One comes from some of the work of Jacques Derrida, invoking a deconstructing of our Western philosophical tradition, and hence the predominance, since Plato and Aristotle, of the assertion as the harbouring of truth. The other exemplar comes from the German philosopher, Walter Benjamin, whose writings have, at times, been engaged with closely by Derrida. What brings them together, in this paper, are their engagements with the ruin.

Why the ruin? How does the notion of ruin bear any relation to whatever we have broached in its simplicity above, concerning predication, assertion and synthesis? The notion of ruin is commonplace in Benjamin's writings and for Derrida it becomes pivotal in certain texts. When we hear the word ruin, we perhaps immediately think in examples. Are we to discuss buildings in decay rather than what is mostly the concerns of architecture, building in good shape, if not pristinely new? Are we to discuss heartache and love shattered rather than its securing bond? This is not where we are going. Rather, our concern is a simple one that continues to address that nagging question. What happens, for example, if we follow Derrida in deconstructing that fundamental binary of Western thought, analysis and synthesis? What if we, following Derrida, make undecidable whether

our understandings are analytic or synthetic? What if architecture (or ruin as a modality of architecture) never can be a synthetic notion, or idea, a subject that gathers its predicates about, within, or as it? What if, in short, the very concept of architecture is always incomplete, ruinous in its thinking? Derrida, in an early article on architecture, posed the notion that if the tower of Babel had ever been completed, then architecture would have been impossible.² Only because the tower remained incomplete, ruinous, and there was a polyphony of languages requiring translation, did architecture have any chance of appearing. Benjamin says something not altogether different at the conclusion to his book on German Mourning Plays of the Baroque era, *The Trauerspiel*.³ I now want to condense my discussion on architecture, love and ruin, distil it to two brief citations, one from Derrida, the other from Benjamin. Clearly, this is violent truncation, ruin even. But, then, there is no Derrida other than a ruinous one, nor Benjamin other than as his radical incompleteness. How else can we still have something to say, if not for this simple fact?

I do not see ruin as a negative thing. First of all it is clearly not a thing. And then I would love to write, maybe with or following Benjamin, maybe against Benjamin, a short treatise on love of ruins. What else is there to love, anyway? One cannot love a monument, a work of architecture, an institution as such except in an experience itself precarious in its fragility: it hasn't always been there, it will not always be there, it is finite. And for this reason I love it as mortal, through its birth and death, through the ghost or the silhouette of its ruin, of my own—which it already is or already prefigures. How can we love except in this finitude? Where else would the right to love, indeed the love of right, come from? Jacques Derrida⁴

For in happiness all that is earthly seeks its downfall, and only in good fortune is its downfall destined to find it. Whereas, admittedly, the immediate Messianic intensity of the heart, of the inner man in isolation, passes through misfortune as suffering. To the spiritual *restitutio in integrum*, which introduces immortality, corresponds a worldly restitution that leads to the eternity of downfall, and the rhythm of this eternally transient worldly existence, transient in its totality, in its spatial but also in its temporal totality, the rhythm of Messianic nature, is happiness. To strive after such passing, even for those stages of man that are nature, is the task of world politics, whose method must be called nihilism. Walter Benjamin⁵

Trembling the keystone

The citation from Derrida, is a brief extract from his conference presentations, titled “Force of Law: The ‘Mystical Foundation of Authority’” delivered in two parts and in two places, in October 1989 and April 1990.⁶ Let me briefly (perhaps ruinously) offer a synoptic context for what Derrida says both for and against Benjamin. He is discussing Benjamin’s “Critique of Violence,” in particular that part of Benjamin’s complicated essay where Benjamin discusses policing and police methods.⁷ Benjamin had earlier drawn a distinction between a violence that founds law and a violence that conserves law. Modern policing—and here Derrida is in agreement—*suspends* that difference between a violence in inaugurating legalities and a violence in preserving them. Derrida goes as far as to say: “The possibility, which is to say the ineluctable necessity of the modern police

force ruins, in sum, one could say deconstructs, the distinction between the two kinds of violence that nevertheless structure the discourse that Benjamin calls a new critique of violence.⁸ This ruin—deconstruction—of a decisive difference suggests for Derrida the deconstructive movement of the *iter*, of an origin that repeats itself in such a way that it preserves or conserves itself as origin: “This iterability inscribes conservation in the essential structure of foundation.”⁹ It is at this moment that Derrida offers his comment on the ruin, it not being a negative thing. It is a curious moment. Though we would need to backtrack to the earlier half of the presentation to, in a sense, get the full force of this curious moment. For it is here that Derrida discusses what he calls “the ghost of the undecidable.”¹⁰ For the ruin is not an oscillation between (for example) two encounters with violence that we cannot decide upon, that we cannot fully calculate. Derrida here elucidates on what is essential to his presentation: the relation of justice to deconstruction. Law, the rule of law is calculation, calculability, decision and decidability. What then of the suspension of decision, of the ruin of calculation, of the undecidable?: “A decision that didn’t go through the ordeal of the undecidable would not be a free decision, it would be the programmable application or unfolding of a calculable process. It might be legal; it would not be just.”¹¹ Justice, then, is the *impossible*: decision concerning what is undecidable, ‘made’ without recourse to rule or calculability. What, though, of ‘force’? Does Derrida suggest here that justice *is* the force of law, or that justice haunts the institutional and calculable violence of law? We would now have to shuttle back to where we earlier left off on Derrida’s love of ruins, for in the next paragraph he begins: “Let us return to the thing itself, to the ghost, for this text is a ghost story.”¹²

Are we losing our way, here, in a text on love, architecture and fallenness? Or are we honing our concerns? Where does violence, in its founding and conserving, find its relevance in love or architecture? How does justice, its impossibility, its undecidability-demanding-decision, or the question of the *iter*, of *archē* as conserving *technē*, destructing any assurance of the singular authority of origins, say anything at all concerning love and architecture? We need to reference a much earlier essay by Derrida that may assist us here, an essay from 1963, also concerned with deconstruction and the question of force: “Force and Signification,” initially published in the French journal, *Critique*, and then, in 1967, in the collection of essays titled, *L’écriture et la différence (Writing and Difference)*.¹³ The reference to architecture is here explicit, as is the reference to the calculable and the incalculable, rule and formal composition, in a text that in many ways is resonant with Derrida’s essay on force and law written some twenty-six years later. We may retroactively read some of the key motifs of the latter essay via that earlier iteration. Again, we will aim to somewhat ruinously summarise. Derrida’s address is to structuralism, and its attention, in structuralist criticism, to questions of *form*, concealing the relevancy of questions of force: “Form fascinates when one no longer has the force to understand force from within itself ... Criticism henceforth knows itself separated from force, occasionally avenging itself on force by gravely and profoundly proving that separation is the condition of the work, and not only of the discourse on the work.”¹⁴ Derrida recasts that neutrality of a concentration on form, to invoke a structuralist “catastrophic consciousness simultaneously destroyed and destructive, *destructuring*.”¹⁵ We offer a longer citation, resonant with what we earlier read from Derrida’s later essay on fragility and the ruin:

Structure is perceived through the incidence of menace, at the moment when imminent danger concentrates our vision on the keystone of an institution, the stone which encapsulates both the possibility and fragility of its existence. Structure can then be *methodically* threatened in order to comprehend more clearly and to reveal not only its supports but also that secret place in which it is neither construction nor ruin but lability.¹⁶

Methodical threat, as with the formal calculability of architectural forces or the mathematical certitude of architectural forms, offers what Derrida suggests as the “illusion of technical liberty” that would equally be the illusion of the right of law, *legal but not just*. If there is justice *in* architecture, it will not take place in the methodical trembling of that institution’s keystone. The enigma plays out in both essays, the enigma of the impossibility of *saying* ‘force’, inasmuch as the moment of its articulation constitutes the methodical return to form: “Force is the other of language without which language would not be what it is.”¹⁷ How, then, does ‘force’ become concept, *eidōs*, idea, what is visible and articulable?: “How can force or weakness be understood in terms of light and dark?”¹⁸ Perhaps Derrida says, in his aside on his love of ruins, that there is a peculiar and unsayable relation, a lability, that cannot be reckoned or calculated, that cannot be methodical, yet that nonetheless differentiates structure and passion, is the *dif-férance* (we could say) of love and architecture, an *impossible* that would be the gift of justice in its incalculability. Derrida gives the name ‘writing’ to this moment of depth-as-decay.¹⁹

Passagenwerk

Has Benjamin ever written on ruins, on a love of ruins, a ‘treatise,’ perhaps, on architecture in ruins? We might well ask if Benjamin has ever written anything at all that is not a ruin concerning ruins.²⁰ Would Derrida be wanting to follow Benjamin into his *passagenwerk*, into his arcades?²¹ Or would Derrida trace an errant path, more errant, more erratic than even Benjamin could manage? We commence with the brief citation from the “Theologico-Political Fragment,” suggesting it to be a vestibule to the *Passages*, to the arcades, and to a peculiar passion—a love of ruins—that Benjamin invests there, a happiness-in-downfall, whose temporality—rhythm (or is it iterability)—folds into and out of that *time* allotted to humans in (or for) living-and-dying. We earlier cited Derrida, from his “Force of Law” presentation on the “ordeal” inscribed in the (im)possibility of justice, a “decision” going through the “ordeal” of “undecidability,” an “ordeal” that in a peculiar sense secured freedom or, at least, “free decision.” I would want this strange and brief essay by Benjamin to be an elucidation not so much on the culmination of Messianic history announced in its opening sentence, but on that “ordeal” inferred or implied by Derrida, the ordeal of a “world politics” founded in or upon the transience of all worldly life, a passing-through, a *passage*, that is happiness—*restitution*—in downfall, in ruin.²² Benjaminian fulfilment is a this-worldly profane existence. Yet *something* corresponds, a rhythm—a spatio-temporal play—a rhythm at once the transience of all worldly existence *that is* the rhythm of Messianic *nature*. To that correspondence, Benjamin gives the name “happiness.” We do not seek the permanence of existence, its grounding ground, its *archē*. Rather, Benjamin explains, we strive for happiness, we strive after its—our world’s—passing. To such a love of ruin, Benjamin gives the name ‘politics’ whose method is ‘nihilism.’ Would Derrida’s deconstructing of the

possibility of justice, of the force of law, not also be resonant with this? We enter the arcade, its crypt.²³

Our angle of entry strikes *Convolut X*, the one Benjamin labels “Marx”:

Marx had the idea that labour would be accomplished voluntarily (as *travail passionné*) if the commodity character of its production were abolished.

The reason, according to Marx, that labour is not accomplished voluntarily would therefore be its abstract character.²⁴

We cannot overestimate the importance of this notion of *travail passionné*, of the love of labouring, as one’s ownmost voluntarily decision. That happiness would be entirely in keeping with Benjamin’s understanding of the rise and fall of existence, its rhythm at once Messianic and profane. Labour is a *passage*, a transiency of something or someone existing, a spatio-temporal play in that Benjaminian sense. And here is the ‘world politics,’ not so much in Marx’s phantasmatic *travail passionné*, but in the alert Marx was given to this utopic thought by Fourier, the Fourier of *phalanstery*, the Fourier who saw in Parisian arcades what Benjamin calls “the architectural canon of the phalanstery.”²⁵ In both the 1935 and 1939 *Exposés* of the *Passagenwerk*, Benjamin commences his outline with brief commentary on Fourier, under a heading, “Fourier, or the Arcades.”²⁶ Fourier’s utopic phalanstery too had its *travail passionné*. He conceived of it as a machine, a technology of passionate existence. Benjamin notes: “One of the most remarkable features of the Fourierist utopia is that it never advocated the exploitation of nature by man, an idea that became widespread in the following period. Instead, in Fourier, technology appears as the spark that ignites the powder of nature.”²⁷ That ‘technology,’ for Benjamin, is the architectonics of the arcades, while that passion is the *passage*, the rhythm of a transiency, of an eternal rising-and-falling of life, whose pursuit is the nature of happiness.

Lifedeath

Have we not simply pulled a sleight-of-hand here? After labouring (passionately or not) on that nagging question of predicates, assertions and subjects, on empirical intuition and ideas, have we not now presented two ideal figures, Derrida and Benjamin, precisely as examples of the notion of the ruin as binding logic of architecture and love? If, indeed, this is how it appears then things have not gone well. Has there been enough said about architectures of love? No architects, no architectural theorists, and not one building or part of a building seem to have been mentioned. The ‘examples’ seem to be interlopers into the field. Would either one of them know the first thing concerning design principles, building codes, or construction methods? Could they love these things as much as they seem to love ruins? No mention of the genuine crises facing all of us: climate emergency, political sway to the right or far right, staggering inequity in wealth distribution, in access to food, access to health care. Are these to be understood as concerns with architectures of love, now expressed as ruinous fragility, precarity, lifedeath?²⁸ What I would want to have been implied in all of this is that architectures of love are obliged, are obligated to lifedeath, to its planetary scale, obligated to addressing nothing other than this.

consummates all history, in the sense that he alone redeems, completes, creates its relation to the Messianic." See Benjamin, "Theologico-Political Fragment," 312. There is considerable consternation with Benjamin translators over how to render that German word '*vollendet*' that Jephcott translated by 'consummates'. The question here is not so much 'academic' as central to just what this fragment is doing to time as the 'medium' of existence. For elaboration, see Peter Fenves's philological exactitude on the rendering of this, and the legacy it shows in Benjamin's early encounter with the German philosopher, Heinrich Rickert. See Fenves, "Completion Instead of Revelation: Toward the 'Theological-Political Fragment,'" in *Walter Benjamin and Theology*, ed. Colby Dickinson and Stephen Symonds (New York, NY: Fordham University Press, 1916), 56–74.

23. Our allusion here is to yet another Derrida essay, "*Fors*," a brief 'Preface' to a book by Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok on the 'cryptonymy' of Freud's celebrated Wolfman. Derrida's essay, *Fors*—a French word meaning, at once, both inside and outside, hence a cryptic topology—concerns a reading of the psychoanalytic notions of 'incorporation' and 'introjection', the ways whereby 'something' enters 'me', such that I am able to establish an *oikos*, a household economy of sorts, for managing 'it'. Derrida's coinage is that of the crypt, of the architectonic of an inside/outside structure, that is inside-the-inside, so to speak, a *topos* into which something can be put, within myself, in order to keep it safe from me, a love (or hate) 'object', perhaps. This may well be the *oikos* of Benjamin's architectonics of both the *Trauerspiel* and the *Passagenwerk*. In both instances the crypt corresponds with a love of ruin. See Jacques Derrida, "Foreword: *Fors*: The English Words of Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok," trans. Barbara Johnson. In Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok, *The Wolf Man's Magic Word: A Cryptonymy*, trans. Nicholas Rand (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1979), xi–xlviii.

24. Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, "Convolut X: 'Marx.'" See [X4.2] 657.

25. Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, "Exposé of 1935," 5. Fourier invented the word '*phalanstery*' by bringing together two heterogeneous notions: *Phalanx*, a military unit that moves in a highly protective and close formation; and *Monastery*, the housing for a religious order.

26. While the two Exposés have a good deal of consistency between them, they bear little resemblance to the massive volume Benjamin left with Georges Bataille when he fled Paris. The Exposés suggest a contained structure of five or six major sections that deal with Fourier (Arcades), Daguerre (Panoramas), Grandville (World Exhibitions), Louis Philippe (Interiors), Baudelaire (Streets of Paris), and Haussmann (Barricades).

27. Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, "Exposé of 1939," 17.

28. LifeDeath? This is the title to a seminar presented by Derrida at the École Normale Supérieure in 1975–76, published in English in 2020.