“My blood congeals and I can write no more.”

—Christopher Marlowe, Dr Faustus

Where is ethics in early modern studies? It’s not as easy as you might think to give a straightforward answer. For one thing, it bears noting that the turn to ethics in literary criticism of the past decade has not in general coped well with the territorial expansion of materialist practice. Studies of early modern culture in particular have tended to purchase one discourse at the price of the other. The appearance of a zero-sum game in this regard is all the more striking given the historicizing ethos that now prevails in critical practices generally. As one critic has put it, with Fredric Jameson’s well-known admonition in mind (always historicize!), “the question of the day is ‘Who doesn’t historicize?’” In view of this mandate, a dialogue or confrontation between the respective domains of ethics and materialism would seem almost inescapable, precisely as a means of ascertaining whether the disciplinary construction of studies of the early modern period has not in some measure depended on a blind spot, a moment of radical unthinking, in which the very question of the relation between ethics and materialism is broached, but remains unresolved. To pose the question in this way is to return, almost necessarily, to the early modern literary text that most rigorously interrogates the economic structuring of the relation between materiality, knowledge, and ethics: Christopher Marlowe’s Dr Faustus. In what follows, my primary concern is to consider how the staged appearance of Faustus’s blood supplies an intuition of the materiality of ethics which goes unacknowledged in the dramatic action. By no accident that failed encounter names the very condition of the play’s legibility in the history of Reformation drama. It also harbors, I argue, a second-order drama in which the central protagonist is the
blood itself. Its motions disclose the stakes of a materialist ethics of reading from the margins of literary and cultural history.

I begin with some preliminary observations: Faustus’s wager—the pivotal event in the play—would not exist without the instrumental use he makes of the materiality of the “blood that trickles” (F, 5.57). But the blood’s peculiar agency (more on this later) also frustrates Faustus’s intention, if only for a moment. I take the concurrence of the represented material heft of Faustus’s blood in Marlowe’s play-world—its capacity to produce a legible and binding document—and its performative waywardness as a critical instance of a persisting equivocal dimension of materiality and materialist criticism. Optimally, as Johanna Drucker has reminded us, a materialist hermeneutic is a “hybrid” enterprise, one that includes “two major intertwined strands: that of a relational, insubstantial, and nontranscendent difference and that of a phenomenological, apprehendable, immanent substance.”3 But this hybridity is difficult to sustain in practice, which may be why materialist criticism more than occasionally retreats into an unexamined empiricist cast. To this extent the materialist project becomes indifferent to the effects of bleeding—that is, to what exceeds or recedes from the protocols of disciplinary mastery over the imagined body of history. The motions of Faustus’s blood in the wager scene (scene five) constitute a paradigmatic figure of this dividedness. In this capacity, Faustus’s blood discloses the place where materialist interest in historical knowledge forgets what it cannot fully assimilate: its unpaid debt to the singular and autonomous aspects of matter. As we shall see, the manner in which the repeated disclosures take place constitutes the play’s ethical provocation.

I. ETHICS

But whose ethics? I refrain from anchoring my discussion to an early modern school of ethics, such as one would find, for example, in the humanist-reformist idiom commonly identified as the lingua franca of ethical thought in Marlowe’s era. I do so because the problem I infer from the peculiar career of Faustus’s blood is not a prima facie instance of an established ethical category. Faustus’s blood brings about an unsolicited intervention that troubles both the momentum of the plot and also, I would argue, the plot’s embeddedness in history, but for no discernible cause. By virtue of this trait the blood can be said to parse the so-called “question of
ethics” advanced in philosophical cultures of late modernity. The motions of the blood remind us that the question of ethics is also a provocation, generated by seemingly irreducible differences between competing calibrations of the relation between responsibility and responsiveness, between the local and the universal, between what is shared in a given community and what is other.

Let me be clear here. My argument does not dispute the fine-grained historicity of the different posthumous recensions of Marlowe’s play. But it does question, on ethical grounds, whether the notion of historicity can or should be identified principally with the mantra of local knowledge. To address what I take to be the formal principle of the question of ethics, one could say that the puzzling materiality of Faustus’s blood revisits the domain of the ethical indicated in the Heraclitean fragment *ethos anthropo daimon*, which Georgio Agamben translates: “Ethos, the habitual dwelling place of man, is that which lacerates and divides.” Heraclitus’s paradoxical locution places ethics in the penumbra of what typically counts as historical matter, insofar as the sense of ethics it entails concerns the mobilization of possibilities of thought and action arising out of encounters with singularities, before they have fallen into the orbit of general principles or customary knowledge. This is the sense of ethics animating Agamben’s recent claim, contra “well-meaning and dominant” versions of secular ethics, that the domain of ethics recedes from juridical habits of thought, despite the fact that the domain has been pervasively marked by juridical terminology. “To assume guilt and responsibility,” Agamben observes, “is to leave the territory of ethics and enter that of law. Whoever has made this difficult step cannot presume to return through the door he has just closed behind him.”

This essay does not take that step. Instead, it enters the margin where Agamben’s “territory of ethics” intersects with the thought of Alain Badiou. Badiou’s description of ethics is galvanized by the conviction that “there is no ethics in general . . . only ethics of processes by which we treat the possibilities of a situation.” For Badiou, tellingly, a materialist ethics arises from an “immanent break” within a given situation, which is to say that the truth of a situation, considered ethically, does not belong to the situation itself in a simple, unmediated way. It belongs to the time of a future anterior. Adopting the vantage point of what will have been does not mean denying the material reality of the present. Such a vantage point fully inhabits the present but does so in the subjunctive mood, recognizing the counterfactual or conjectural possibilities irrigating

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the presence of the present (and the imagined presence of the past). Because it inhabits this temporal and modal torque, a materialist ethics allows for the process (Badiou calls this the “material course”) of actualizing a possibility that would have “meant nothing according to the prevailing language and established knowledge of the situation” in question. For Badiou, the “material course” of an “ethic of truths” begins and ends not with a set of propositions, but with a single question: “How will I link the things I know, in a consistent fashion, via the effects of being seized by the not-known?”

II. THE CLOTTING FACTOR

Faustus’s blood inhabits this very question and introduces a specific curriculum for grasping its ethical consequences. Consider, for starters, the blood’s most conspicuous feature: its recalcitrance in the production of the deed of gift. This recalcitrance manifests itself in two ways. Accepting Mephistophilis’ terms, Faustus cuts his arm and with the trickling blood prepares to write the bill that will “assure [his] soul to be great Lucifer’s” (F, 5.55). But the blood does not cooperate. “My blood congeals and I can write no more” (F, 5.62), he cries. While Mephistophilis fetches fire to “dissolve” (F, 5.63) the congealed blood, Faustus ponders the mystery of his blood’s divisive agency. “Is it unwilling that I should write this bill? Why streams it not, that I may write afresh” (F, 5.65–66). Once the bill is written, blood intervenes a second time, not as an interruption of writing but instead as a counter-writing. Mysteriously, the words “Homo fuge” (“Fly, man!”) surface, a lapidary inscription on his cut arm. So unsettling is this spontaneous branding that Faustus thinks his “senses are deceived,” though he “see[s] it plain” (F, 5.79, 80).

From the perspective of theological allegory, of course, there is no mystery whatsoever about the miraculous agency directing the flow and scribal trait of the blood. The blood protests on behalf of the legacy of Christological messianism. Yet Faustus is stymied, despite the fact that a solution to the mystery is at hand. His study, after all, is an archival plenum, in which “heavenly matters of theology” are housed (F, Prologue.19). Faustus’s inexplicable wonder can be explained away as a characterological trait—a moral or intellectual flaw possessed by the protagonist. But it is also a provocation to acknowledge the dislocating ethical impact momentarily wrought by the division between Faustus and his blood, before judgments about an imputed flaw come into play. What I want to retain from the
strange encounter between Faustus and his blood is its stalling effect—the caesura it introduces between Faustus’s decision to write the deed and the irruptive counter-writing that both delays and disowns the writing of the deed.

III. THE QUESTION OF ETHICS AND THE MESSIANIC

The blood’s capacity to suspend the legal action invites comparison with Agamben’s and Badiou’s respective assertions of the interventionist character of the ethical. The comparison warrants mention because of the prospect it opens up. Between these philosophers’ critical vocabulary and Marlowe’s idiom lies Walter Benjamin’s powerfully evocative battery of metaphors for the presiding spirit of the historical materialist project in modernity—metaphors of detonation, petrification, crystallization, fragmentation, phosphorescence. The notorious allusiveness of Benjamin’s terminology should indicate that my turn to Benjamin must remain speculative, particularly because it does not pursue a historicized analysis of Benjamin’s idiosyncratic lexicon. In this case, however, I propose to treat Benjamin’s shifting compass not as a literary-historical problem to be solved but as a paradigmatic index of the ethical question interred in Faustus’s blood.

Internecine debates over the proper horizons of Benjamin’s idiom—the respective claims of Marxist orthodoxy, biblical messianism, and postmodernity’s linguistic idealism—have been amply documented, so much so that the question driving a good deal of Benjamin scholarship appears to be one without a satisfying answer: Will the real Benjamin stand up? This is arguably the kind of question Benjamin himself strove to critique, by gesturing toward a sense of the real that would include vistas produced by the imaginative extension of his thought outside established protocols of social, intellectual, or cultural history. It is no accident that an abiding problem in Benjamin scholarship should therefore concern the ethical status of the performative gesture which Benjamin attributes to materialist critical practice. What is the performative gesture faithful to? It is faithful, Benjamin suggests, to the truth of a transformative encounter with traces of the arrested presence of the past. Such an encounter gives witness to aspects of the past whose signifying potential has been foreclosed by prevailing protocols of historical knowledge.

But fidelity of this order is problematic, in part because its redemptive ambition does not adhere to a correspondence theory of
historical representation or to the sequential cadence of chronological time. It belongs to the time of a messianic promise. Such a promise troubles categorical thought because of its propensity to shear off from, even as it persists in conjuring, the determinate predications known to messianism. The appeal of messianism (understood in all its forms: philosophical and political as well as religious) lies precisely in its determinate aspect, its possession of transcendental principles or articles of belief and its observance of measurable stages of history. What Benjamin’s messianic adds to messianism is a stance of proactive commitment to the “unconditional urgency of a Now.”¹⁷ This stance reclaims the ethos, if not the specific theological vision, of St. Paul’s messianic kairos—the time it takes to grasp the occasion or opportunity to accomplish one’s evolving sense of what needs to be done, in the wake of an encounter that has radically changed one’s view of what it means to be situated in time.¹⁸ For Benjamin, fidelity to the truth of an encounter inhabits an urgent “now-time” (Jetztzeit—Benjamin’s version of Pauline kairos) through which the “time of history” itself is understood to be “infinite in every direction and unfulfilled in every instant.”¹⁹ The affirmations that arise from this convergence of committed engagement and restless interrogation—the fulcrum of Benjamin’s messianic—are not authorized by recourse to a recuperative ideal or imagined plenum, and consequently are not determined by doctrinal forms of any particular messianism.

The force of this point is perhaps more palpable if you consider that the recuperative ethos of messianism is harbored by any discourse that has become an “-ism,” including materialism. Benjamin’s messianic, on the other hand, complicates the recuperative gesture by calling attention to its destructive force: “In authentic history writing, the destructive impulse is just as strong as the saving impulse. From what can something be redeemed? Not so much from the disrepute or discredit in which it is held as from a determined mode of its transmission. The way in which it is valued as ‘heritage’ is more insidious than its disappearance could ever be.”²⁰ Agamben’s commentary on this passage clarifies the point:

[T]he radicality of [Benjamin’s] thought lies here—to redeem the past is not to restore its true dignity, to transmit it anew as an inheritance for future generations. . . . For Benjamin, what is at issue is an interruption of tradition in which the past is fulfilled and thereby brought to its end once and for all. . . . What cannot be saved
is what was, the past as such. But what is saved is what never was, something new.\textsuperscript{21}

In effect, the kind of affirmations advocated by Benjamin belong to the domain of a wager, the terms of which are structured around a radical contingency or vanishing point, which is why the ethical warranty of Benjamin's messianic remains a controversial topic in contemporary philosophical debates.\textsuperscript{22} The provocation comes down to this: insofar as it distinguishes itself from either routine or scrupulous performance of prescribed mandates, the ethical carries a messianic charge because, like the messianic, the ethical is at bottom a divided affair, a flash-point between a given culture's instituted codes of knowledge and practice and the field of contingency that resides not beyond them but within them, generated by their very performance. Envisioning ethics as a form of interrogative vigilance which troubles even as it observes the rhythms of historical time does not, then, mean indefinite postponement either of committed answers or decisive action. It means not giving up on the chance that the course taken up will remain ethical only on condition that one be prepared to veer from the designated path, in the “twinkling of an eye,” as Paul says.\textsuperscript{23} Faustus’s blood knows this, too.

IV. COVENANTAL MEMORIES

The caesura introduced by the blood’s preemptive clotting marks a breach in time, which is to say that it exposes the contingency of the very medium through which meaning adheres to events or, if you will, through which history is made—and converted into the vehicle of messianisms. The specific event in question, of course, is the wager. Now is perhaps a good time to acknowledge that the word “wager” is not Marlowe’s. I have introduced it to emphasize the conjectural range of Marlowe’s names for the act in question. Prescribed by Mephistophilis to be written “in the manner of a deed of gift” (\textit{F}, 5.60), and identified less technically elsewhere in the play as a “bill” (\textit{F}, 5.65), the act combines elements of different legal bonds—notably, the unilateral transfer of property, which would normally constitute a so-called “deed of gift,” and bilateral concessions, which would be more typical of a contract. Strikingly, the central terms of the deed of gift—Faustus’s “body” and “soul” (\textit{F}, 5.90)—push the bounds of what could be said to count as property into regions that appear to have less to do with a putative ethos of legal verisimilitude.
than with an impulse directed toward uncanny, refractory elements in the verisimilar. Faustus’s *sui generis* deed of gift is an unmoored event, one that shuttles between letter and spirit, between the particularities of historical reference and the normalizing field of allegorical signification. Calling such an event a wager, in view of the associative scope of the word (“wager” referred to a pledge, pact, contract, or conjectural risk), reflects the unsettled character of the “deed” that binds Faustus and Mephistophilis.

Marlowe’s archival source, the so-called *English Faust Book*, invokes an ethically resonant species of wager: covenant. In Marlowe’s text, “deed of gift” takes the place of “covenant.” The substitution is not total, however, for a certain covenantal ethos inheres in the troubling agency of Faustus’s blood. The blood bears the imprint of two different, though related, biblical blood covenants: Hebraic circumcision and Pauline stigmata. Ritual circumcision, as Daniel Boyarin and others have argued, installs a commitment to the material grounds of history, it solicits an ethos of personal exposure and responsibility to the Other (encountered in transcendent divinity in the first instance, but also cultivated as a practice of respect for difference within the order of the human), and it marks a symbolic exception to what has come to be considered the totalizing project promoted by its cultural successor, the Pauline notion of “spiritual circumcision” (Rom 2:29). Paul’s allegorization of Hebraic circumcision rewrites the physical rite as a miraculous, spiritual intervention, witnessed by fidelity to the saving operation of grace brought about through the Christ-event. Here advent entails adventure, a passage that post-Enlightenment thought has typically held to be fraught with a particular hazard: eliding the material significance and situation of bodies and communities by converting difference into a spectral manifestation of sameness.

Stigmata, however, are not so easily pressed into service as emblems of this subreption. Paul’s sole use of the word is ambiguous: “From now on, let no one make trouble for me, for I carry the marks [stigmata] of Jesus branded on my body” (Gal 6:17). Both physical and psychic (or spiritual) senses of the word are admissible, for reasons that have to do with the wide associative range of bodily experience in Paul’s idiom. Moreover, in the sporadic occurrences of stigmatization in subsequent devotional and mystical cultures, the marks (or wounds) constitute more of an ideological limit-case than a stabilizing practice. No one would be likely to question, I think, whether a circumcision might be faked—botched, possibly, but
faked, no—whereas the history of stigmatization (unlike penal branding, its state-authorized cousin) entails polemical remapping of received boundaries between natural, unnatural, and supernatural phenomena. In sum, the history of stigmatization occupies the shifting border between immanence and transcendence, and in this regard it repeatedly reframes the question of what can be said to belong properly to history, and to historical knowledge.29

What can be inferred from Paul’s idiosyncratic use of the word is that the probative charge of the marks of stigmatization derives principally from their peculiar status as eschatological signs—that is, as testimonials to the subject’s embrace of the “new creation” (kainos ktisis, Gal 6:15) promised by grace.30 They submit themselves to scrutiny as embodied memories of the singular event of Christ’s redemptive suffering, but they serve at the same time as uncanny harbingers of the transfiguring effects of that event’s dispersal in history. Put somewhat differently, they disrupt received protocols of temporal succession, by staging the irruption of a christic End-time that has already happened, but whose typological fulfillment is perpetually at hand.31 Because of this feature, the signifying freight of stigmata retains a non-sublatable quotient, one that leaves its imprint on the interpretive communities that would claim to have established the source and meaning of the marks. This imprint, this signifying remainder, can ever only be taken up in the future. In this regard, the event of stigmatization dwells in the synapse—the space of division as well as juncture—between concrete, historical messianism and what Jacques Derrida, following Benjamin’s Pauline intuition, has called the “universal structure” of the “messianic,” which describes a way of holding fast to the promise of a future that is always already impinging on the present, yet always to-come, its claims never yet fully materialized.32

V. BLOOD ARCHIVE

Faustus’s blood presents an unusual compound of these biblical and devotional blood covenants. The blood’s absenting motions, in particular, hold interest for the manner in which they suggest what the core impulse in Benjamin’s messianic—the unsolicited break with assimilated forms of perception and knowledge—might actually look like in Marlowe’s treatment of the Faust legend.33 For all the éclat of the blood’s stalling action, however, the ethical stakes of the intervention take time to be disclosed. In fact, what is disclosed is nothing
other than the ethical materiality of time. To see how this is so, we will need to consider the insinuations of blood in the last two scenes of the play, as choreographed in the A Text: the repeated spectacles of Helen and the Old Man in scene twelve and Faustus’s desperate race against clock time in scene thirteen; but I anticipate. The specifically messianic cast to the play’s final disclosures derives from three related associations of blood in the wager scene: its appearance as quintessential archive, its enlistment as ink, and its humoral property as vehicle and sign of melancholy.

The first of these is generated by Faustus’s perplexity at the strangely “unwilling” character of his blood. What puzzles Faustus is the evidence that the physical substance of his blood is not consistent with the simple, instrumental function he intends. The blood appears charged with an incipient meaningfulness that arrives in advance of the text he is poised to write. In other words, the very matter used to produce the document is already text, of a sort. It is tempting to align such a detail with Derrida’s notorious remark “il n’y a pas de hors-texte” ("there is no outside-the-text") rather than with Benjamin’s messianic. What needs to be emphasized, however, is that Marlowe’s text grasps the ethical import of the phrase better than many of Derrida’s dissenting critics do. The textuality of the blood does not present itself as a flight from materiality or history into Mandarin abstraction (the charge commonly leveled against Derridean readings of textuality and the messianic alike). Rather, it is precisely the textuality of the blood—manifested by its strange articulacy—that urges Faustus to consider more carefully how the material conditions of meaning come to be perceived as such. More to the point, the blood presents palpable, if nonverbal, evidence of the inherently covenantal character of the very act that makes possible the proposed deed of gift’s entrance into history: the archival gesture.

What is an archive? The blood suggests an answer to this question which bears, again, a Derridean cast, insofar as it enacts Derrida’s proposition, in Archive Fever, that the fundamental drive of all archival inscriptions is to carry “literal singularity into figurality.” But the figural does not simply come after the singular. It refigures the singular as the most radical instance of the codeterminacy of matter and form. Faustus’s blood holds this thought, too, by virtue of the untimely coagulation that discloses an empty yet strangely animate time and space in the material resource—blood—from which the legible, binding text is finally produced. The blood’s singular motion thus gives witness to the universal trait of the archive.

Faustus’s Blood
Despite the gravitas of its custodial function and its cachet as repository of authentic historicality, the archive secures neither knowledge nor memory of the past. What it secures is time and space for a covenantal encounter, through which the shaping significance of history is produced as much as retrieved, and its staying power wagered.36

VI. BLOOD ARCHIVE II: INK

In a word, Faustus’s consternation turns on the sheer impression-ability of blood. Through this feature the blood archives further traces—a “shifting figure”—of blood covenants, which complicate the seemingly straightforward economic exchange promised by the deed of gift.37 The most striking of these bear on the mechanics of archival inscription—thus the association, which Marlowe’s text makes literal, between blood and ink. The semiotics of ink production includes a covenantal dimension, because the evolving technology harbors an implicit ethical question, with resonances of blood covenants. What is required for commitment, for a lasting, if not permanent, bond to take? The question is parsed in one of the decisive phases in the history of ink in antiquity: the shift from the application of paints to the penetrating action of dyes. The double etymology of the word “ink” preserves this shift, in the Latin tinctum (staining or coloring), and encaustrum (burning in or corroding). Consider, too, the sacrificial overtones to the production of a common black ink, printers’ lampblack, which remained in general use through early modernity at least until the mid-eighteenth century. Pitch resin was placed in an iron vessel, “enclosed by a frame over which sheepskins were hung. The pitch was ignited, and when it had been consumed . . . the skins were then beaten with a stick and the black which had collected on the sides fell down on to the floor . . . [and] was swept up.”38 The purely instrumental character of printers’ ink—its capacity to hold signifying marks—arises from its prior association with a sacrificial gesture. Ink is what remains after formed matter has been consumed (de-formed) by flame.

Of course, Faustus’s blood is presumably red, not black. Yet here, too, there are resonances of a covenantal economy of giving and taking, which crystallize, or congeal, in Faustus’s deed of gift. Consider Pliny’s suggestive description, in the Natural History, of sinopis, a pigment used in red ink. An excretion from the earth (red oxide from iron), sinopis was prized for its therapeutic, coagulating
properties in the control of bodily effluvia: “[U]sed in an enema it arrests diarrhoea,” Pliny notes, “and taken through the mouth in doses of one denarius weight it checks menstruation.” Figuratively, the ingestion of sinopis stops the flow of time. A cousin of sinopis, the fabled red ochre of Lemnos, possessed similar properties. So prized was Lemnos red that it was sold only in sealed packages, from which it got the name of “seal red-ochre,” along with the cachet of signifying a seal—a cachet made literal in red sealing wax. Lemnos red also testifies to an archival fascination with the prospect of arrested time: the application of sealing wax authenticates a written document by figuratively neutralizing the passage of time between writing and reading. These telluric memories belong to the covenantal history of ink, a history marked by pharmaceutical, humoral, ethical, and chemical variations on the theme of binding, fixing, and taking hold. Faustus’s blood, too, belongs to this history.

The circumstance of coagulation presents a further index of this kinship, vis-à-vis the history of printing ink. Faustus’s deed of gift is of course a handwritten document, not printed mechanically. Even so, Faustus’s concern over the untimely coagulation of his blood-ink addresses a range of problems associated with printing technology in the post-Gutenberg era. Gutenberg himself faced a Faustian challenge, in the sense that the central innovation he introduced—the shift from wood-block impressions to moveable metal types—required the preparation of an ink capable of adhering to the new surface, metal. Gutenberg’s solution was a kind of wager: he took elements from painterly practice in making pigments, to produce an oleo-resinous vehicle that proved successful in the new technology. The ink “took”—in fact it produced one of the notable features of incunables: the clarity and integrity of the lettering. By Marlowe’s time, printing quality had already entered a period of decline, in which ink was susceptible to staining, or bleeding, both through the paper and around the letters (halation). One of the principal reasons for this problem had to do with something that concerns Faustus as well: difficulties in the management of time. In the initial period of printing, the superior quality of the favored oils—nut and linseed—was partly due to the fact that they were aged slowly, and that the process of bonding oil, resin, and pigment to produce ink was painstaking and time-consuming. And dangerous, because of the risk of fire. The main point to observe here is that the first generation of ink production in the new printing technology was part of an integrated artisanal practice, in which multiple hands (or agencies)
were mutually involved, in an embodied rhythm of giving and taking (of time, as well as attention, risk, and skill), the imprint of which could be discerned in the quality, the durable legibility, of the product.41

The subsequent decline in quality, already discernible in the printed texts of Marlowe’s play, was directly related to two inadvertent consequences of Gutenberg’s innovations. By the end of the sixteenth century, the rapid proliferation of the printing industry meant that printers were now in fierce competition with each other, not with scribes and so were more likely to take short cuts in the preparation of ink; and by the late seventeenth century, independent ink-makers were en route to establishing a separate industry from printers.42 These evolving features suggest how technological innovations in printing helped transform the temporality of the wager—the giving and taking of time and hands—in early modernity, through the acceleration of production time and compartmentalization of labor. These features—symptoms of a proto-capitalist ethos of competition and an emergent logic of mass production—are somatized, so to speak, in Faustus’s blood-ink, with its untimely rhythm of flowing and congealing. Faustus’s blood recognizes in the wager the encroachment of a law of exchange in which multiple yet integrated agencies (or wills), which could still be found in Gutenberg’s studio, would be traded for the peculiarly modern modes of fragmented and alienated agency.

This is not to flatten Gutenberg’s world into a nostalgic allegory of an Eden lost. Instead, we might simply concede that Gutenberg’s cultural abode and the modern capitalist one it helped promote are profoundly, if differently, invested in one of the entrenched Western metaphors for time, what George Lakoff and Mark Johnson have called the “Time Is A Resource” metaphor.43 The “resource” itself harbors a wager mentality—a relation of giving and taking predicated on a covenantal economy. By inhabiting this metaphor, Gutenberg’s culture (and Marlowe’s) could still imagine a viable, even if imperfectly realized, collectivity, one in which residual, dominant, and emergent phases of the culture could claim a degree of mutual intelligibility. In Dr Faustus the liens written into the deed of gift honor this economic principle of time. As the dramatic action makes clear, Lucifer himself subscribes to it, and Faustus’s chances of salvation, no less than the alternative prospect, depend on it. But the blood-ink’s preemptive clotting suspends the economic principle. Through this action, the blood gestures toward what will have
become of the wager mentality in modernity’s assumption of the “Time Is A Resource” metaphor. The wager will have been recalibrated to include thinking and living in time as a sacrifice of economy itself—an ethos in which the very notion of covenantal giving and taking recedes from any unitary or collectively-held sense of what is worth holding onto or giving up. In essence, such a wager describes the ethical obligation of late modern (and postmodern) reflection: an obligation derived not from law but from the consciousness of law’s absence or radical limit.

No wonder Faustus is perplexed. He cannot tell whether his blood recoils from the same future he anticipates (the projected career of the deed of gift, with all the risks and pleasures it implies) or whether the blood’s untimely motion arrives from a future radically other than he imagines. This ambiguity turns on the fact that the blood congeals too soon. More precisely, its future aspect materializes too soon. Through this precipitous action, the prospect of an unwarranted and nameless futurity interrupts the unfolding time-scheme of the play-world. In other words, the untimely coagulation short-circuits the dramatic action by announcing an end to the play in which the play’s plot—and ensuing critical history—will not have happened. Or at least will have happened otherwise. At this instant, the play’s topicality and historicality are suspended. In effect, Faustus discovers that his blood is radically asynchronous, in the sense that its materiality, its thingness, manifests itself as an event that has, for a moment, fallen outside the constituted order of temporal measurement—outside chronos. This event expresses the essential structure of the messianic “now” (kairos, Jetztzeit), in the sense that it both marks the difference and maintains the possibility of communication between “already” and “not yet”—between the determinate forms of messianism and the posture of vigilance which inhabits all these forms without being reducible to any one of them.

If Faustus is unable to make sense of the blood’s preemptive clotting, this is so because the thought of the messianic has already been given form by the core constituents of the Faust legend: Christological messianism and the necromantic fantasy promised by the deed of gift. From where Faustus stands, there is nothing to see beyond these domains. Nothing, that is, except what the clotting blood shows, and what it shows is the structural proximity of the two domains, whose opposition defines the ethical parameters of Faustus’s world. Both are legislated economies of debt, reward, and punishment, in which the thought of redemption is bound to a juridical
ethos. By receding from both domains, Faustus’s blood embodies the ethical crux of the messianic. It does so not because it offers Faustus a comprehensible way out of his dilemma—it doesn’t—but because it urges Faustus to risk, rather than seek redemption, by letting go of his attachment to the familiar contours of the real. And what is most familiar to Faustus (this goes unsaid in the play) is not the difference between the perceived benefits of Christ’s redemptive sacrifice and the deed of gift, but the shared indebtedness of these two alternatives to an economic and juridical principle which guarantees what can be said to count as real. To recall Badiou’s explanation of a materialist ethics, the preemptive clotting of Faustus’s blood gives witness to the filament of the “not-known” which subsists in the given character of the known. And it invites Faustus to accept this equivocal structure as the very heart of an “ethic of truths.”

VII. BLOOD-ARCHIVE III: MELANCHOLIA—BUT WHOSE?

The blood’s humoral archive corroborates the point. Blood known to congeal too quickly is also blood that presents itself as lethargic. According to tenets of humoral theory, lethargic blood bears the impression of the melancholy humor, black bile, associated with commonplaces of the melancholic’s diseased affect: despondency, torpor. Notoriously, both patristic moral theology and early psychoanalytic theory emphasized these features, treating melancholia either as symptom of spiritual apathy (acedia) or as psychogenic failure to complete the work of mourning. Neither judgment quite speaks to the strange agency of Faustus’s blood, however, since the apparent recalcitrance indicates something other than pathology or moral turpitude.

Alternatively, the blood’s motions could be taken as a textual reminder of the pronounced “polymorphism” attributed to the effects of black bile in the inherited humoral tradition. The dossier generated by this feature included anxiety, erotomania, prophetic powers, and the divine frenzy associated with heroic prowess and poetic genius. In his study of the German Trauerspiel, Benjamin rehearses Erwin Panofsky’s and Abby Warburg’s classic accounts of the reception of this tradition in the hermetic and mystical tributaries of Renaissance humanism, and he underscores the essential problem found there: how to “separate sublime melancholy . . . from the ordinary and pernicious kind.” A sedimented form of the problem is legible in Marlowe’s play, in the sense that Faustus’s blood, too,
discloses an impulse to separate. But it is less clear whether the object of such action is to preserve the taxonomic principle through which the integrity of distinct domains of melancholia (sublime vs. ordinary and pernicious) might be maintained.

Simply put, Faustus’s blood speaks a language that neither Faustus nor cultural historians of melancholia can easily decode, because the blood speaks from the unsettled margin that divides the human, and the historical, from the world of things, the creaturely realm. Benjamin’s thoughts on the subject help explain the ethical implications of Marlowe’s way of handling this division. In the *Trauerspiel* study Benjamin suggests that the melancholic’s association with both inconstancy and indolence masks a deeper truth, a heroic “loyalty to the world of things.” Such loyalty is nothing other than a testimonial to the sheer “irredeemability,” “recalcitrance,” and “heaviness” of things—in short, their alterity. It is tempting to read the blood’s stalling action as a comparable injunction urging Faustus to take up a stance of melancholic resistance to the deed of gift. However, as we have seen, the injunction gives Faustus no clear alternative “object” to contemplate or to cling to, and on this score the blood’s relation to the heroic trait of melancholia seems compromised. Tellingly, the passing allusions to melancholia in the play-texts appear in descriptions of Faustus’s increasing susceptibility to an entirely conventional form of religious melancholy: despair at the thought of the decisive loss of grace (grace here figuring as the quintessential lost object of melancholic fixation). The momentum of the plot, in other words, encourages Faustus, as well as readers of the play, to forget what the blood’s stalling action gestures toward: a domain of melancholia that does not entirely belong to Faustus.

Here Benjamin again provides some help. The *Trauerspiel* book suggestively imagines melancholia as an effect of immersion in the creaturely, but the overarching argument is moored to a humanistic and ultimately phenomenological concern to grasp the manner in which the inarticulate world of things presents itself as occasion of melancholic subjectivity. Consciousness, not the world of things as such, is the focal point. But Benjamin’s text is also a palimpsest of earlier writings, and among these the most relevant to Marlowe’s text is the essay “On Language in General and the Language of Man” (1916), which describes a melancholy that pertains to the existence of things themselves, a melancholic expressivity that precedes yet subsists in the allegorical schemes of human consciousness. Benjamin calls this the primordial “lament” or “complaint” (Klage) of nature.
This lament is “the most undifferentiated, impotent expression of language.”\textsuperscript{54} As such, the lament marks a threshold between the nonhuman and the human. It sounds its own entrance into the domain of allegory (that is, the expropriation of things by schemes of knowledge), even as it remembers the sheer indifference of things to allegorical intentions or symbolic recuperation.\textsuperscript{55} The bizarrely scripted tempo of Faustus’s blood flow—is it too fast? too slow?—conveys what Benjamin would call the blood’s lament by disclosing the trace of something irreducibly alien and infra-human in what Faustus has taken for an intimate part of his identity. This something is the hemorrhaging of the powers of human language over the creaturely realm. To his consternation, Faustus finds himself claimed by this event, if only for an instant.

Melancholia and the messianic converge in this instant. Here the blood’s melancholic disposition grasps what Faustus himself is not ready or able to see. The blood is melancholic because it holds on to nothing other than the primordial non-coinciding of things and meaning. Were Faustus to grasp the ethical import of this intuition, he would see that no messianism unconditionally owns the truths it proclaims.\textsuperscript{56} He would see that the messianic interval between promise and fulfillment is divided between two modes of marking time: the objective measure of \textit{chronos} and the subjective supplement of \textit{kairos}. And he would see that \textit{kairos} never comes too late, because once taken up it alters and reforms the entire field of the given, including the objective measure of time.

\textbf{VIII. BLOOD ARCHIVE IV: FAILED ENCOUNTERS}

Faustus sees none of these things. His not seeing, of course, is the condition of the plot. But it also constitutes the fundamental ethical subject of the play. As the plot advances, Faustus’s ways of not seeing—his failed encounters with the messianic temporality of blood—repeatedly introduce an exemption to the economic principle according to which the future is mortgaged to present and past speculation. The pivotal moment in scene twelve illustrates this feature. Provoked by Faustus’s wavering between “Hell” and “grace” (\textit{F}, 12.55), Mephastophilis has just threatened to dismember Faustus for violating the terms of the bond (“I’ll in piecemeal tear thy flesh” \textit{[F, 12.59]}). Faustus’s response, an attempt to buy time, takes the form of a promise to reinstate the terms of the bond. “And with my blood again,” Faustus asserts, “I will confirm / My former vow I made to

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Lucifer” (F, 12.62-63). Faustus has seemingly forgotten his blood’s disturbing recalcitrance in the earlier scene. All the more reason, then, to consider the disruptive effect of the repeated apparitions of Helen of Troy and the Old Man, which frame Faustus’s promise to write the deed of gift in blood a second time.

Helen’s first appearance, accompanied by music, achieves a ceremonial gravitas hitherto unseen in Faustus’s jestbook antics. As the scholars’ litany of praise suggests, Faustus’s power to summon the figure of Helen as she was at the moment of her theft from Menelaus’s house does more than give tangible evidence of her fabled beauty. It rehearses the epic ambitions of the humanist and antiquarian project to master the legacy of classical antiquity embodied by Helen, the “only paragon of excellence” (F, 12.22). By emulating Paris’s choice and erotic fascination, the scholars’ request to see the “peerless dame of Greece” (F, 12.6) exhibits the mimetic as well as acquisitive character of their desire, to the point of condoning on principle the catastrophic consequences of the “rape of such a queen” (F, 12.19). From their vantage point, the Trojan War will always be on the verge of taking place, and the pretext will always be the promise of purchasing “heavenly beauty” (F, 12.20). This is the ethos of religious messianism transposed to the register of humanist bravura.57

The first appearance of the Old Man, moments after Helen has receded from view, suggests the formal symmetry between the two messianisms. It goes without saying that the Old Man’s spiritual counsel presents itself as the sole alternative to the fatal logic encoded in the deed of gift and incarnated by Helen. Yet the “sweet path” the Old Man describes—a digest of atonement theology—observes the same apocalyptic grammar underwriting both the deed of gift and the Troy legend. The explicit premise of the Old Man’s homily is that “mercy” and “guilt” (F, 12.36, 37) are at war. The implicit assumption is that they are congenitally so because they are also defined and mobilized by each other’s claim to autonomy. From either side, a doctrine of mutual exclusivity harbors an undisclosed relation of mutual dependency. (Guilt needs mercy, but the reverse is no less true.)

Faustus, of course, does not see this. More to the point, his manner of not seeing this introduces a surplus figure into the scene. This figure does not take the form of a competing apparition. It appears solely in nuances of discourse and staging, through which Helen and the Old Man nearly coalesce. This fugitive event opens
up, by gradual increments, a messianic prospect from which to see a “way of life” (\textit{F}, 12:27), an ethos, which escapes the \textit{quid pro quo} espoused by either Trojan or Christic exemplars of blood sacrifice.

Consider Faustus’s reaction to the Old Man’s homily. He immediately sees himself in the homily’s description of the deadlock between mercy and guilt in the reprobate soul. By contrast, the preceding \textit{tableau vivant} of Helen provokes a reaction only from the attending scholars. Faustus seems an indifferent witness both to the spectacle and to the scholars’ rapture. The suggestion of indifference makes little sense if construed as a signifier of Faustus’s moral or psychological state (Helen, after all, marks the zenith of Faustus’s necromantic powers). Here, however, indifference serves an ideological function. It reinforces what the metaphysical argument of the play requires: the disparity between the two apparitions’ respective domains. The staging of the episode repeats the argument: Helen and the Old Man do not occupy the stage at the same time. Figuratively, then, Faustus sees only the Old Man. But what he sees, what he internalizes as a crisis of conscience (“I do repent, and yet I do despair” [\textit{F}, 12.54]), is no more than the partial truth conveyed by the homily’s emphatic distinction between illusory and authentic figures of plenitude: Helen’s “heavenly beauty” and the Old Man’s promise of “celestial rest” (\textit{F}, 12.20, 29).

The second appearance of Helen and the Old Man discloses the full measure of what Faustus does not see: the two figures’ proximity and resemblance. It bears noting that Faustus’s promise to spill blood a second time in order to rewrite the deed of gift is not carried out. Instead, Faustus makes two requests: that Mephastophilis torture the Old Man and conjure Helen to be Faustus’s “paramour” (\textit{F}, 12.74). In Faustus’s fantasy, the paired promises of physical torment and erotic gratification make effective substitutes for the blood writing, because the apparent contrast between the imagined events gives graphic expression to the oppositional logic that underwrites the deed of gift: the refusal of grace. Further, by voicing the hope that the “sweet embracings” of Helen “may extinguish clean” the thoughts of repentance provoked by the Old Man, Faustus admits that his “longing” to possess Helen is inseparable from his desire to silence her opponent (\textit{F}, 12.73, 76). The admission situates the nature of his desire within the immersive ethos that Mephastophilis calls “hell” (\textit{F}, 3.76).

Yet Faustus’s capacity to imagine the complicity of pleasure and pain also troubles the metaphysical argument driving the plot. While it sounds a commonplace in amatory discourse (Petrarchan and

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mystical idioms of *jouissance*, for example), in this play such complicity harbors an untenable prospect: the post-apocalyptic disclosure of a world in which opposing elements converge in networks of mutual implication. Stage directions again supply a visual cue. In the midst of Faustus’s encomium to the newly conjured Helen (“Was this the face that launched a thousand ships” [*F*, 12.81]), the Old Man reappears, a silent observer. Only after Faustus and Helen leave the stage does he speak, condemning Faustus’s continued refusal of grace and mocking the devils that arrive to administer the ordered torture. Given the Old Man’s consistent identification with reformist orthodoxy, it is easy enough to align his silent presence with the play’s moralizing scheme. Whereas the earlier choreography of the apparitions emphasized the disparity between Helen and the Old Man, here the Old Man’s inclusion as silent observer italicizes Helen’s unreality and the idolatrous character of Faustus’s speech. What this gesture cannot entirely occlude is the formal proximity between Helen’s silence and the Old Man’s. Their silent congress suggests a measure of equivalency, not because the two silences signify the same thing—they clearly don’t—but because each gives witness to an essentially recessive space within the ongoing work of signifying, of aligning form and content. The shared silence of Helen and the Old Man thus echoes the melancholic expressivity of the blood’s preemptive clotting. In other words, their silence commemorates the thingness of being, in its primordial difference from extant redemptive schemes of history.

Marlowe’s text further indicates that this transient memory is charged with a Pauline sense of messianic possibility. Thus the stage cue for Helen’s final appearance: Mephastophilis declares that she will arrive “in twinkling of an eye,” citing Paul’s famous metaphor for the sudden onset of the messianic conversion of the world. The ironic citation calls attention to the fact that the name given to Helen’s adversary also carries a Pauline pedigree, but doctrinally it is the wrong one. In Paul’s lexicon of conversion, the “new creation” (Gal 6:15) belongs to the “new man” of grace, not the “old man” (Eph 4:22, 24), who remains attached to the constituted order of the real (variously indicated as sin, flesh, or law). No doubt Marlowe’s blasphemous wit shows its hand here, unsettling the necessary distinctions upon which the stated drama of redemption depends. But the same wit also amplifies the ethical gesture of the blood in the wager scene. The scrambled citations identify both Helen and the Old Man as distorted figures of Paul’s messianic intuition. Where,
then, is the messianic? Marlowe’s answer is that it resides in the recognition of the distortion, and in the further recognition that all historical messianisms as such are distortions of the messianic.

IX. ARCHIVING THE MESSIANIC

Admittedly, this is a strange form of recognition. It yields no new rule of faith, since its messianic intuition does not reach Faustus. Indeed, it cannot reach him, since it belongs to the suspended time and space between Faustus and the motions of his blood. But this suspension is no mere abstraction. It is woven into the discursive texture of the play-world; it belongs to the play’s ethos. And it surrounds Faustus, giving persistent, though mute, testimony to the profound historicity of the ethical. To read with the blood is to be reminded, in other words, that both historicity and ethics reside in the division between received forms of knowledge and the actions through which these forms are taken up and put into practice. Both historicity and ethics harbor a vacant space of possibility, through which the previously unthinkable may take form. This is the argument of Faustus’s blood-writing, and it constitutes Marlowe’s way of thinking the messianic.

At the end of the play, the argument once again inhabits the dramatic action, this time through Marlowe’s staging of a typographical convention already taken up by the blood in the wager scene: spacing between words. The unmarked space between “Homo” and “fuge” on Faustus’s arm returns as the tensed break that separates two events: Faustus’s fleeting vision of Christ’s blood streaming “in the firmament,” and the catastrophic coupling of instrumental clock time and “ireful” divine judgment (F, 13.74, 80). From the dramaturgical standpoint, the space is simply vacant. But from the standpoint of a materialist ethics, vacancy here constitutes an event, by registering the oblivion into which the initial aspect of Faustus’s blood—its untimely clotting—has already fallen. All that Faustus sees, at this critical juncture, is the complicity between chronological historicity and juridical modes of knowing. What he loses sight of—literally, what he cannot hold on to—is the messianic temporality of blood, which appears in its purest, most radical form in the preemptive cessation of the blood’s flow in the scene of the wager. To be sure, the vision of Christ’s cosmic bloodletting carries a messianic charge as well, and it is perfectly legible. It represents the fulfillment of the messianic promise as rehearsed in doctrinal Christology. But the
vision, for all its baroque intensity, does not supersede the unvoiced messianicity of the pooling blood in the earlier scene. Something has been lost in translation. In brief, the ethical provocation of the final scene does not issue from Faustus’s failure to embrace the Christological gift. It issues from Marlowe’s staging of the missed rendezvous between Christ’s streaming blood and Faustus’s congealing blood. The missed rendezvous poses the question of what can be said to count as a thinkable theological and historical relation between messianism and messianicity. In other words, what is subtracted from the scene—the missed rendezvous—is what holds open the possibility of envisioning redemption, and the shape of the future, outside the language of bonds and debts.

Faustus’s blood-writing thereby presents itself as an exemplary archiving of the “not-known” that is consistent with Paul’s messianic intuition. Not because it envisions Paul’s messiah, and still less the ecclesiological carapace of Pauline messianism, but because it takes up the Pauline gesture of openness and fidelity to a counterintuitive perception of the real. This trait accounts for its proximity to the twentieth-century interrogations of Pauline messianicity I have pulled into the orbit of Marlowe’s play, from Benjamin to Badiou. Perhaps more graphically than its twentieth-century compatriots, Marlowe’s blood-archive in *Dr Faustus* also documents the central weakness of the messianic: the insubstantiality of its content, as distinct from the more emphatic articulation of messianism. The weakness of the messianic, however, is not necessarily a liability. Put simply, if the blood could speak, it would declare nothing. It would instead pose two questions to its audience and readership. Is the messianic no more than a distortion of the real which appears only in moments of transition or conflict between different symbolic orders? Or is the messianic the name for what actually happens to symbolic orders when they are fully inhabited, and, being so, become susceptible to mutations which have real effects in history but which escape the legislated forms of historical knowledge? The career of the blood suggests that neither question can be discounted, because it is the oscillation between the two—and the corresponding weakening of each question’s argumentative edge over the other—which defines the force of the messianic as a posture of vigilance toward the “not-known” in what is at hand, in intimate proximity.

* * * * * ** Faustus’s Blood **
Reading *Dr Faustus* with these questions in mind does not mean abdicating interest in the historical specificity of Marlowe’s play and the early modern habits of thought it reflects. Instead, the point of such questions—the point of reading with the blood—is to reinvigorate materialist inquiry’s commitment to seek out ways of acknowledging more fully the necessary wagers, the gains and losses, attending the conversion of archived matter into the discursive forms that define what counts as history. In *Dr Faustus* those forms are more conspicuously marked by religious messianism than the forms materialist scholarship employs to describe the complexity of Marlowe’s early modern world. But materialism has its own brand of methodological messianism. It leaves its mark in the custodial ambition to gain access to the presence of the past for its own sake, as though quarry and means of capture were discrete entities. To identify this ambition as a form of messianism may seem a strained analogy—a false messianism. Yet the mounting challenge to thought posed by the implosion of cultures on the geopolitical map in late modernity reminds us that the task of interrogating the ethical solvency of rival messianisms in all domains is more than an academic exercise. If the question of the day indeed remains “Who doesn’t historicize?” that question is now inescapably connected to another: “Who is not invested in thinking the messianic?” Marlowe’s play already knows this.

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NOTES

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4 Helpful accounts of the genealogy and critical stakes of the question of ethics are in *The Ethics of Postmodernity: Current Trends in Continental Thought*, ed. Gary B.

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5 Marlowe’s treatment of Faustus’s blood is related to the play’s ambiguous depiction of the problem of local agency, which has received notable attention in Marlowe scholarship. See, for example, Leah Marcus, “Textual Indeterminacy and Ideological Difference: The Case of Doctor Faustus,” *Renaissance Drama* 20 (1989): 1–29; and Luke Wilson, *Theaters of Intention: Drama and the Law in Early Modern England* (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 2000), 185–215. My approach differs from both Marcus’s and Wilson’s in that it is not primarily invested in the correlation of agency and subjectivity with local theological influences or contexts. The purpose of this exercise, however, is not to discount the historical conditions of the scene of the wager but instead to address the specific textual conditions out of which different historical frames for the blood’s agency can be imagined.


7 Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (New York: Zone Books, 1999), 24. I use the word “singularity” in the Deleuzian sense taken up by Charles E. Winquist, *Desiring Theology* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1995): “Singularities are points of resistance within the interpretive meaning of experience. They are ambivalent since they are not fixed within the frame of their occurrence. The singularity is an event around which thinking recoils. Thinking turns on itself in an experience of inadequacy. The singularity is yet something to be thought and we do not know until it is thought whether it can be thought in the frame of its occurrence” (48).


12 Badiou, *Ethics*, 50. What is important in the phrasing of this question is the equivocal status of the word “consistency” (consistance). Consistency does not simply mean conformity to the already-known because it is informed by a conjectural element: a projected memory of what it will have meant to have been seized by the not-known. Thus Badiou: “consistency . . . is to submit the perseverance of what is known to a duration peculiar to the not-known” (*Ethics*, 47). The original text reads, “mettre la perseverance de ce qui est su au service d’une durée proper à l’insu.” Badiou, *L’éthique: Essai sur la conscience du Mal* (Paris: Hatier, 1993), 43.

13 The flame is presumably infernal; following W. W. Greg’s observation, Gill notes that “no earthly fire will liquefy congealed blood” (in *Faustus*, page 71, n. 71).
Wilson’s claim that the “theological point” of the congealing blood “is fairly simple” seems intuitively right, but the corollary he draws, while plausible, effectively forecloses the disturbing impact of the blood’s action. Wilson reads the theological point characterologically: “Faustus is as usual a poor theologian” (209).

Benjamin uses the image of the caesura to describe a critical phase in the advent of what he calls a “constellation”: it is through the “the caesura in the movement of thought” that “the past and the present moment flash into a constellation.” Benjamin, Gesammelte Schriften 5:595, cited in Eduardo Cadava, Words of Light: Theses on the Photography of History (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1997), 61.


Mention of the “unconditional urgency of a Now” appears in Slavoj Žižek’s discussion of Pauline messianicity in The Puppet and the Dwarf: The Perverse Core of Christianity (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2003), 135. John D. Caputo observes that the “distinguishing feature of any messianism is that it determines the figure of the Messiah, gives the Messiah a determinate characterization and specific configuration, with the result that the Messiah is identifiably Jewish, Christian, Islamic, or, God forbid, Capitalistic, where a supply-side, free market Messiah is the latest teleological consummation of History.” (“The Messianic: Waiting for the Future,” in Deconstruction in a Nutshell: A Conversation with Jacques Derrida, ed. Caputo [New York: Fordham Univ. Press, 1997], 160–61).

Thus Paul’s assertion that Christic redemption participates in God’s “plan for the fullness of time [kairōn], to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth” (Eph 1:10). All biblical citations are from the New Revised Standard Version. For a discussion of Pauline kairos which stresses Paul’s ethical grasp of messianic time, in contradistinction to the apocalyptic messianism associated in modernity with the thought of Hans Blumenberg and Karl Löwith, see Agamben, Le temps qui reste: un commentaire de l’Épître au Romains, trans. Judith Revel (Paris: Editions Payot & Rivages, 2000), 104–15. Benjamin, Gesammelte Schriften 1:701, 2:134, cited in Cadava, 64–65. An account of the conceptual similarity of Paul’s kairos and Benjamin’s Jetztzeit is in Agamben, Le temps qui reste, 217–27. Whatever their territorial differences, Benjamin’s most notable interlocutors in contemporary philosophy—Jacques Derrida as well as Agamben and Badiou—appreciate the Pauline undertow to Benjamin’s ruminations on the messianic. I consider Derrida’s investment below. As for Badiou, something of Benjamin’s Pauline cast of mind informs Badiou’s voicing of the “only” question that matters in an “ethic of truths”: this is the one that remembers—or, better, is unable to forget—the provocation of having been seized by the “not-known” (Badiou, Ethics, 50). Badiou’s interest in the political implications of Pauline messianicity is documented in Badiou, Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism, trans. Ray Brassier (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 2003).


Agamben, Potentialities, 153. (“What cannot be saved”) 158.

As Cadava puts it, “The truth of history is performed when we take the risk of making history rather than assuming it to belong only to the past” (72). A sobering counterpoise to Cadava’s reading appears in Vincent P. Pecora’s cautionary words:
“The problem for contemporary critical history is that the true diversity of the past actually yields an excess of these redemptive moments. In effect, Benjamin’s ‘nunc stans’ is not simply a correspondence between the present and any number of lost opportunities for transformation rescued from the past. His ‘now-time’ is itself irrediculously plural and contradictory, and so is its messianic promise” (“Benjamin, Kracauer, and Redemptive History,” Genre 35 [2002]: 80). However, the conclusion Pecora reaches—“pretending that one can still invoke Benjamin’s ‘now-time’ without irony may be no better than the complacent bourgeois dream of automatic, unthinking progress” (83)—appears to rely on the assumption that contradictions or antagonisms internal to Benjamin’s writing militate against engaged implementation (as opposed to skeptical critique) of his thought. Perhaps the practical limit resides not in the fact that, given the lessons of history, Benjamin’s “now-time” can only be taken ironically, but rather that the “now-time” he envisions has only ever been taken up without allowing for the productive force of ironic entailments. In other words, perhaps critical invocations of the “now-time” tacitly over-invest in the normalizing gestures they ostensibly disown, so that the perceived partiality or failure of such gestures serves to reinforce the illusion that efficacious change should result in a field of action or belief without contradiction.

23 “In a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trump: for the trumpet shall sound, and the dead shall be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed” (1 Cor 15:52).

24 As Paul S. Clarkson and Clyde T. Warren observe, “Marlowe wanted to give the scene the dignity of legal verisimilitude,” though they concede that Marlowe’s “primary purpose” was to strike “the ear and the eye as plausible, intense, impressive, brilliant theatre” (The Law of Property in Shakespeare and the Elizabethan Drama [Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1942], 182). Clarkson and Warren suggest that the kind of experience provoked in Marlowe’s dramaturgy is not bound by extant codes of verisimilitude or topically conditioned conventions for encoding the real.


26 See Clarkson and Warren, 182. In the English Faust Book, included as an appendix in Gill’s edition of Marlowe’s play, Faustus describes the written document as a “covenant”; the narrator calls it an “Obligation” (see Faustus, Appendix A, page 93).

27 See Daniel Boyarin, A Radical Jew: Paul and the Politics of Identity (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1994). The strict correlation of Pauline universalism with a totalizing ethos (one in which the possibility of difference is cancelled out) is problematic, however. Recent Pauline scholarship argues that the interpretation of Paul’s universalism as a code word for the hegemonic erasure of cultural and ethnic difference is based on a misprision of the true radicality of Paul’s messianic conviction. In modernity, such misprision seems to draw its energy from a highly selective reading of the theological subtext of Hegel’s dialectic. A discussion of this point is in Cyril O’Regan, The Heterodox Hegel (Albany: SUNY Press, 1994), 29–44, 189–234.


As both Hebraic and Christian scriptures indicate, the notion of an End-time (eschaton) shuttle between two domains: the historical, understood as the collective and public sense of a meaningful relation between past, present, and future times; and the ethical, which includes an affective element of vigilance toward an event whose parameters and significance are both bound and unleashed between the “not yet” and the “already.” The critical literature on this topic is immense, but a useful account of the basic issues is in Greg K. Beale, “The Eschatological Conception of New Testament Theology,” in *The Reader Must Understand: Eschatology in Bible and Theology*, ed. K. E. Brower and M. W. Elliott (Nottingham, England: Apollos, 1997), 11–52.

Jacques Derrida, “The Villanova Roundtable: A Conversation with Jacques Derrida,” in *Deconstruction in a Nutshell*, 22. For a succinct account of Derrida’s notion of messianicity and his debts on this account to Maurice Blanchot as well as Benjamin, see Caputo, 156–80. From the materialist-messianic perspective espoused by Benjamin, stigmata can be construed as powerfully evocative instances of the temporality of the “dialectical image,” in which “the Then and Now come together into a constellation like a flash of lightning” (Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften* [5:578], quoted in Walter Benjamin: Critical Essays and Recollections, ed. Gary Smith [Cambridge: MIT Press, 1988], 50). Agamben advances the claim that Benjamin’s sense of image (Bild) in his last writings on the dialectical image is indebted to Paul’s sense of eschatological vigilance as a “messianic kairos” (*Le temps qui reste*, 221). Pauline stigmata, I would argue, constitute the exemplary embodied manifestation of messianic temporality.

The detail of the blood’s preemptive clotting appears to be Marlowe’s innovation. The *English Faust Book* mentions only the dermagraphism (the “homo fuge” text): “[H]e tooke a small penknife, and prickt a vaine in his left hand, and for certaintie therevpon, were seene on his hand these words written, as if they had been written with blood, O HOMO FUGE; whereat the Spirit vanished, but Faustus continued in his damnable minde, and made his writing as followeth” (*Faustus*, Appendix A, 93).


Though the language of covenant does not inform his argument in *Archive Fever*, Derrida uses cognate expressions. The archive’s domain, he writes, resides

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between that of a “wager [gageure]” and a “pledge [gage], a token of the future” (Archive Fever, 18).

37 Derrida, Archive Fever, 20.
40 Pliny, Natural History, 285.
41 See Bloy, 2–4, 42–43, 86–87.
44 In modern medical terms, the initial presentation of Faustus’s blood would indicate hypercoagulation, a condition caused by various abnormalities in the clotting factor. Clinically, Faustus would make a likely candidate for deep vein thrombosis or pulmonary embolism. The point is not entirely tangential, if you consider that one of the risk factors for such events is a sedentary lifestyle, which would include one of the occupational hazards of Faustus’s scholarly profession: melancholia.

45 A helpful discussion of the relation between moral and humoral pathologies in discourses on melancholy is in Françoise Meltzer, “Acedia and Melancholia,” in Walter Benjamin and the Demands of History, 141–63.
46 See Alexander Garcia Düttmann, The Gift of Language: Memory and Promise in Adorno, Benjamin, Heidegger, and Rosenzweig, trans. Arline Lyon (Syracuse Univ. Press, 2000), 68. Düttmann refers to the description of “the fluctuating power of black bile” in the Aristotelian Problema, XXX.1. By the late sixteenth century the semantic field of the word “humor” included “the transitory mood, the fad, and the fashionable affectation” (David Riggs, Ben Jonson: A Life [Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1989], 40).
50 Benjamin, Origin, 157. This train of thought partly explains the revisionist sentiment driving post-Freudian accounts of the relation between mourning and melancholy. On these accounts, it is mourning, not melancholy, which is suspect. Mourning is aligned with the mystifying and hegemonic operations of the status quo and its regimented representations of normalcy; whereas melancholy, no longer pathologized, represents heroic fidelity to the lost object. One of the conceptual difficulties with this type of argument, however, is the fact that it leaves unchanged the logic of the zero-sum game it purports to transgress. The lost object of melancholic fixation (or fidelity) acquires the same idealized and homogeneous cast as the field of norms from which it is ostensibly excluded. See Žižek, Did Somebody Say Totalitarianism?: Five Interventions in the (Mis)Use of a Notion (London: Verso, 2001), 141–52.
51 The B Text makes the connection explicit. In scene thirteen, Mephastophilis observes how Faustus’s “heart blood dries with grief” (Faustus, 13.13), and, noting Faustus’s despondency, two of the attending scholars come up with the following diagnostic: “[2 Scholar:] Is all our pleasure turned to melancholy? [3 Scholar:] He is not well with being over-solitary” (Faustus, 13.34–35). The A Text is less explicit: “[3 Scholar:] Belike he is grown into some sickness, by being over-solitary” (Faustus, 13.7–8).

52 It is in this context that Benjamin works out his revalorization of baroque allegory over and against the mystifying synthetic imagination presupposed by the romantic conception of symbol, as expressed in the famous aphorism: “Whereas in the symbol destruction is idealized and the transfigured face of nature is fleetingly revealed in the light of redemption, in allegory the observer is confronted with the facies hippocratica of history as a petrified, primordial landscape” (Origin, 166).


55 Thus Düttmann, following Benjamin: “The thing which laments does not become an allegory because the lament does not allow itself to be reduced to its representation or schematic appropriation. . . . The lament is neither symbolic nor allegorical, it preserves the thing both from the idealization operated by the symbol and from the mortification which it must suffer to become an object of knowledge and criticism” (59–60). See also Hanssen’s examination of the way in which Benjamin’s early interest in the “mystical topos of nature’s mourning” reveals an emergent, and unresolved, gesture toward an “ethico-theological response to the creatural” that “fundamentally and resolutely resists incorporating the other” (160, 162).

56 This is the sense of Blanchot’s retelling of an anecdote, taken from Jewish messianic lore, concerning the appearance of the Messiah “at the gates of Rome among the beggars and lepers” and the paradoxical question posed to him once he is recognized: “When will you come?” (Blanchot, The Writing of the Disaster, trans. Ann Smock [Lincoln: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 1995], 141). The “presence” of the Messiah, Blanchot points out, “is no guarantee” (142).


58 As Paul argues in the second letter to the Corinthians, weakness and force disclose their profound intimacy within the messianic: “[My] force is accomplished in weakness” (2 Cor 12:9). See Agamben’s discussion of this passage apropos of Benjamin’s messianic, in Le temps qui reste, 215–27.