The physicist Carl Friedrich von Weizsäcker recounted a walk in the Black Forest with Martin Heidegger. The pair came to a halt on a thick patch of damp moss. Weizsäcker pointed out that the path had come to an end. The philosopher looked at him "craftily" and explained: "It is a Holzweg, it leads to the sources [er führt zu den Quellen]. Of course I didn’t put that in the book." Heidegger could not put it in the book entitled Holzwege (1950) because the two metaphors, Holzweg and Quelle, are incompatible. In a brief foreword Heidegger had explained the book's title. The Holzwege are "forest paths" that seem to lead nowhere. They are cut into the forest on an ad hoc basis by woodcutters to permit them to transport wood out of the forest. When you follow such a path you do not know where you are heading. Your inquiry is not guided by the idea of a goal. To walk the Holzweg is to accept a condition of discontinuity. You have abandoned the known and you cannot say what lies ahead.

The saturated ground noticed by Weizsäcker disturbs the metaphor of the Holzweg because it suggests that the woodcutter’s decision was not arbitrary, but rather guided by knowledge of the location of hidden springs. The damp patch, a trace of a source, explains the abrupt cessation of the path, which until then had seemed mysterious. The real nature of the Black Forest Holzweg exceeds Heidegger’s metaphor. The forest introduces the alternative metaphor, unwanted by Heidegger, of the source as a destination. The wet ground at the end of the path relocates the metaphor of the Holzweg, and the philosophical project it shapes, within a description of culture as a perpetual falling away from authenticity that can only be reversed by a return to the source. Culture, according to this account which Heidegger wished to distance himself from, is the result of an imperfect handing down of messages and symbols from the past to the present, an ongoing accumulating and forgetting. In this version of things, understanding, including the inquiry into being itself, is at the mercy of the transmission. The one who is dissatisfied with this dependency on the course of discourse is invited to correct transmitted culture by returning to the source.

The source corrects transmission because it delivers a first and most trustworthy message. The source is a rising (surgere) or springing up of subterranean waters. The source or spring brings hidden waters to the light of day. The source is the threshold between an unknown

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2. One might coordinate this analysis with the debate between Heidegger and Ernst Cassirer, at Davos in 1929, on Kant and the possibility of a critical philosophy. Here Cassirer described his own project as a “philosophical anthropology” that located its starting point, or terminus a quo, in the practical, everyday sphere of manipulation, and its endpoint, or terminus ad quem, in the free and autonomous realm of the spirit, or “culture,” where pragmatism and materiality are overcome through symbolization. In this way man escapes his finitude. Heidegger responded as follows: “for Cassirer the terminus ad quem is the whole of a philosophy of culture in the sense of an elucidation of the wholeness of the forms of the shaping consciousness. For Cassirer, the terminus a quo is utterly problematical. My position is the reverse: The terminus a quo is my central problematic, the one I develop. The question is: Is the terminus ad quem as clear for me? For me, this occurs not in the whole of a Philosophy of Culture, but rather in the question: [. . .] what in general is called Being?” M. Heidegger, Kant und das Problem der Metaphysik (Frankfurt, 1998), p. 288. For the translation and a discussion see P. E. Gordon, Continental Divide: Heidegger, Cassirer, Davos (Cambridge, MA, 2010), pp. 191–193. See also the remarks by W. Davis, “Visuality and Pictoriality,” in RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics 46 (2004): 22–25.
and a known. Essential to the metaphor is the image of continuity across this divide.

The source or spring is the scene of poetic inspiration, the quarter of the Muses. Thus the opening lines of Hesiod’s *Theogony* (late eighth century B.C.E.?):

I begin my song with the Helikonian Muses whose domain is Helikon, the great god-haunted mountain; their soft feet move in the dance that rings the violet-dark spring and the altar of mighty Zeus.

They bathe their lithe bodies in the water of Permessos or of Hippokrene or of god-haunted Olmeios.

The Muses nourish themselves at the sources; the poet consults the Muses. The Muses speak directly to Hesiod, they “breathe into him”: “With effortless smoothness the song flows from their mouths.” Unlike the damp spots in the Black Forest, these sources are not hidden (the Black Forest sources were twice hidden, first naturally by the topography and undergrowth, then again by Heidegger). Hesiod publishes their location. He names the Hippokrene spring described by Pausanias (ix.31, §3) and invokes, by association with the streams Permessos and Olmeios, the spring Aganippe, later mentioned by Virgil (*Eclogues* 10.12). Both are on the Boeotian mountain Helikon—local for Hesiod, who resided at Ascra below the springs.

The second aspect of the metaphor of the source, equally essential, is the image of a loss of continuity as the emerging current meets and traverses the terrain. The uneven, ramifying flow of water symbolizes the relaying of messages forward in time. The liberated water seeks level ground, forms channels, splits into streams. If the first gush of a spring is a message, then the fortunes of the stream above ground are discourse, constituted by an alternation between the natural continuity of water (language is built out of language) and unexpected discontinuities (language is misunderstood, its ties to reality are always in question, words are asked to stand in for other words). Discourse is a cascade of substitutions, switches, and metaphors. The waters derive: They arrive in the present by a dé-rive, a drift or formless flow that involves both the respect and disrespect of fixed banks as well as a play of movement that can be neither predicted nor tracked. As it divides, the flow loses force; the water seeps back into the earth leaving only dry channels. Jacob Grimm lamented the depletion of the once-forceful stream of mythology: “The source must be divined from the ebbed waters of mythology, the old current from the stillstanding bogs.”

In this scenario, the current recedes and leaves only the parched streambed of modern culture. In another scenario, the stream swells as it gathers other streams into its flow, loses its original identity, and finally issues into a body of water whose homogeneity, overriding its plural sources, stands as the symbol of an unlikely concluding resolution of culture.

The two aspects of the metaphor of the source—continuity across the threshold between unknown and known, and anteriority to the hazards of transmission—account for the double role it plays within historiographies of poetry or art.

Poets themselves, long before professional historians took up the metaphor of the source, faced the choice between being a source and seeking a source. A poet can add to tradition simply by joining the flow of existing poems. But some poets come to see tradition as a horizonless delta of intertextual references no longer in contact with extra-literary reality. Language, in this view, seems mainly to imitate other language. The poet hopes to recover spontaneity, immediacy, and contiguity with the world. Either she summons inspiration to her own private spring in the here-and-now, or she becomes a historian, traveling back up the stream of her own tradition to its source.

Both options are figured by Horace in *Odes* 3.13. By this time the Muses had abandoned the celebrated springs. Already in Homer they were no longer wetlanders. The Roman poet addresses instead a local and unpublished source, perhaps near or even on his own Sabine property:

> O fons Bandusiae, splendidior vitro, dulci digne mero non sine floribus, cras donaberis haedo, cui frons turgida cornibus primis et venerem et proelia destinat. Frustra: nam gelidos inficiet tibi rubro sanguine rivos lascivi suboles gregis.

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5. Ibid., p. 12.
Horace invokes the function of the spring as a site of sacrifice—the Fontinalia was a festive autumn offering to Fons—before making a double connection with poetry. The talkative water nymphs (loquaces lymphae) spill from the rocks and so model the poet’s own channeling of ordinary language into animated streams. That poetry then turns back upon the fountain recursively through Horace’s resolve to make the Bandusian the most celebrated of sources. But in this ambition he only imitates the Greek poets—his sources—who celebrated sources. By entering his local, proprietary spring into a competition for renown, he acknowledges the transcultural, translational nature of his entire poetic enterprise.

The metaphor of the source was transferred from poetry to the visual arts only late. Vasari never used the word fonte in this sense. A turning point was the self-image of the Romantic painter seeking a path back to a pristine, pre-academic way of seeing. Philipp Otto Runge’s pen and brush drawing Quelle und Dichter (Hamburg, Kunsthalle, 1805) depicts a laurel-crowned nymph and putti. This conceit, which folds the creativity of the draughtsman into an image which for the poet was by now little more than a cliché, may have stood behind the massive polished granite fountain that Karl Friedrich Schinkel designed as the emblematic prelude to his Altes Museum in Berlin (1830). Source is also, since the Romantic era, a governing metaphor of historiography. The Romantic historian, then and now, travels backward up the streams of hearsay and chronicle in search of a reliable witness to what happened. Those witnesses are themselves sources because their testimony precedes the corrupting traffic of report. The historian who mistrusts the received reports about the past and leaps backward over the intervening tradition to the first witnesses is following the lead of the poet, like Horace, who spurned his immediate literary context and instead sought to compete with the older Greeks.

The historian of state or society may well be discomposed by the double reach of her discipline’s own guiding metaphor. For the two aspects of the metaphor of the source interfere with one another. The source promises access to a hidden current of affective life or creative disquiet. But can such a troubled flux ever be a reliable witness to anything but itself? The writing of history, once it borrows the metaphor of the source from the realm of poetry, is threatened by the prospect of a fall into mere literariness. Historians of poetry and art may well entangle themselves willingly in this paradox, because the artists, the source-seekers, are also sometimes the best-positioned sources for a history of art. Art historical scholarship compounds the enigma of the source. In art historical writing, the metaphor of the source slides back and forth between its two zones of sense: on the one hand, creating, and on the other hand, reporting. For this reason the history of art cannot be precipitated out of the historiography of art.

The Viennese scholar Julius von Schlosser (1866–1938) recognized this condition and it paralyzed him as an art historian. The double nature of the source was brought out in relief in Schlosser’s thought because he was at once an exponent of the critical historiography developed by J. G. Droysen and particularly in Vienna...

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8. For Roberto Calasso, the nymphs are both the agents of a certain kind of frenzied possession (“nympholepsy”) and the element of that possession: They are the symbol of a watery “mental matter.” R. Calasso, “La folie qui vient des Nymphes,” RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics 26 (1994): 130.
by Theodor von Sickel, which was systematic in its
treatment of written sources, and an aesthete of the
stamp of Benedetto Croce, who abjured literal-minded
attempts to translate ineffable intuition into non-artistic
media. In 1924 Schlosser published his magnum opus,
*_Die Kunstliteratur: ein Handbuch zur Quellenkunde der
neueren Kunstgeschichte*_: a handbook to the “study of
the sources” of modern art history. This was a history,
with commentary, of writing on and about art from the
Middle Ages to the dawn of the modern age. Schlosser’s
dispiriting thesis in this book is that with few exceptions
the premodern writers on art had no profound grasp of
art. They cannot serve as witnesses to a history of art.
Schlosser brings his history to a close around 1800. There
would seem to be no task left for the modern
historian of art other than a pointless sitting through the
written testimonies and a circling round the taciturn
artworks. And yet Schlosser did write exceptionally
original art history even after the publication of the
_Kunstliteratur*: “I can’t go on, I’ll go on.”

The aim of the present volume is to re-create
Schlosser’s predicament. The authors have been
invited to write “between” the metaphors of wet and
dry furnished by the topos of the source, and to write
without respecting a categorical distinction between a
history of art and a historiography of art. The volume
describes the historiography of art as a metaphorical
field structured by the concept of the source. At the same
time, as a collection of art historical studies, the volume
submits to that field.

The metaphors of wet and dry introduced by
the source shapes several possible responses to two
discontinuities: the inexplicability of creativity and the
unreliability of tradition.

A first response is to reverse the arrow of time by
seeking the purer waters close to the source. To plunge
backward and upward into the flow: This is wet. The
source-seeker hopes to arrive at the place where the
stream flows directly from the earth. At that point the flow
is not yet mixed with the tributary rivulets carrying the
voices of those who know less well, and is not yet guided
by pre-existing terrain, that is, by the conventions and
formulas. The source–seeker seeks to understand how art
comes into being in the first place. The source promises
access to a continuous _course_ that precedes discourse.

A second possible response is to acquiesce in the
hypothesis of discourse as a total context and to reject
as a mere fable the idea of an authorizing origin-
point. The quest for the source is dismissed as a vain
pursuit. The messages or signs delivered by discourse
are understood instead as self-authorizing. Signs only
acquire meaning in their interaction with other signs.
Signs, according to this account of things, are unstable
and cannot be matched up to reality. They are not
images of states of mind. But they have a life of their
own and this is life enough. The signs create the myth of
creativity. This is a _moist_ approach to the problem of the
origins of art.

A third, _dry_ response to the dominion of discourse
is to turn away from signs, which mislead, and instead
place one’s trust in traces. The trace is not a message
but merely a mark which seems likely to have been
caused by an event now distant in time and an agent
now distant in space. For Walter Benjamin, the trace was
the opposite of aura:

The trace [Spur] is appearance of a nearness, however far
removed the thing that left it behind may be. The aura is
appearance of a distance, however close the thing that
calls it forth. In the trace, we gain possession of the thing:
in the aura, it takes possession of us [wenden wir der Sache
habhaft . . . bemächtigt sie uns].

The reader of traces, like a hunter or detective,
reconstructs causal narratives through inference and
intuition. The forensic mind works by contiguity, step by
step, until the puzzle of the mark is solved, declining
to pose questions about ultimate origins. Traces, unlike
signs, are dead and stable. It is not convention or
community that confers meaning on them. There is no life
in them, yet they are really connected to life. Traces are
not images of states of mind, but they may be contiguous
through causality to states of mind. To work dryly with
marks is to assert the materiality and embodiedness
of content. “Aura” is an effect that translates temporal
distance into ontological distance. The auratic sign arrives
from elsewhere, simply, but is interpreted as a message
from another sphere of being. “Trace” is an effect that

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13. On the images that act as placeholders for thought when
philosophical concepts prove inadequate, see H. Blumenberg,
_Asthetische und metaphorologische Schriften_, ed. A. Haverkamp
(Frankfurt, 2001).

14. C. Ginzburg, “Clues: Roots of an Evidential Paradigm,” in
96–125; S. Krämer, “Was also ist eine Spur? Und worin besteht ihre
epistemologische Rolle? Eine Bestandsaufnahme,” in _Spur: Spurenlesen
als Orientierungsfein und Wissenskunst_, ed. S. Krämer, W. Kogge,
and G. Grube (Frankfurt, 2007), pp. 11–33.

reduces the sign to a mere piece of evidence. Distance is conceived in strictly spatial or temporal terms. Everything happens on one plane of being.

The “dry” thinker, unlike the “wet” thinker, does not believe that the historical compounding of meaning in language can be reversed. There is no path back to a source. The dry thinker recognizes that the source is a metaphor of continuity attempting to repair a discontinuity, and that any such attempt is futile because metaphors themselves contain discontinuity. At the same time there is no access to linguistic meaning outside of metaphor. Metaphors—the dry thinker understands—are devices that manage gaps between things and concepts, or between things and things, but do not close those gaps.

A fourth way to escape the dependency on discourse is to deny that meaning is immanent in culture and to seek it instead beyond the plane of relations among human subjects and other entities. This is the fiery way, and because it imagines a place beyond ordinary experience it has something in common with the wet way. Heidegger’s skepticism toward culture is a version of this reaction. Heidegger did not employ the language of transcendence. However, he did not wish to see his philosophical inquiry reduced to a philological or historiographical pursuit. Thus he rejected both the description of existence as the product of a series of translations and the metaphor of the source that was designed to compensate for that description.

Source and trace are the key images that structure the project of art history. The dry trace is implicated because the historian of art deals with made things—artifacts, images—not verbal signs. Art history can never be “moist” because its objects, literal and material, are never only signs. They are not so easily buffeted about by convention. The wet source is implicated because the historian of art retains some investment in the problem of creativity, or is at least unwilling to defer the problem indefinitely. The wet way tends to supplant the “fiery” way, which for moderns, so frequently skeptical about transcendence, has itself become a mode of deferral.

In the early nineteenth century the poetical and historiographical senses of the metaphor of the source were intertwined. Poets, making explicit what was only implicit in Horace, relocated the source within the individual poet. At the beginning of Goethe’s Faust, in the Prelude in the Theatre, the Poet is bidden by the Jester to ply his art and so inspire the young, the “becoming.” The poet responds (1.184):

> Then give me back, my friend, the times
> When I myself was also growing
> And when a well of rushing rhymes
> Renewed itself as it was flowing;
> The world was shrouded in a haze,
> The bud still promised wondrous powers,
> I would break a thousand flowers
> With which all valleys were ablaze.16

The Poet recalls his youthful versifying ease when he himself was yet becoming and when songs still welled up “uninterrupted.” The relocation to the self obscures the source. Goethe affirms that the gods are no longer involved by moving directly from the Prelude in the Theatre, the poem’s second framing device, to the Prologue in Heaven, its third: a colloquy involving archangels and the Lord invented by the reluctant Poet at the prompting of the Jester. The two linked passages suggest that poetic language has no other source than the poet on earth, a historical and practical figure. His verse is neither referential nor intertextual. The scene in Heaven is pure fantasy and its ties to prior texts parodic. Creativity is now grasped, at best, as a process hidden below the surface of personhood and discontinuous even with the language of psychology. The subterranean life of the waters figures the incomprehensible workings of poesis.

In 1808 Achim von Arnim was compiling folksongs for the subsequent volumes of the anthology he had launched three years earlier with his friend Clemens Brentano, Des Knaben Wunderhorn, and not without improving the archaic and often ungainly verse with his own poetic supplements. Brentano wrote to Arnim in March of 1808: “in a poetic fever . . . you (took) one after another all the epochs and often gave them unwillingly and needlessly something from your own Hippokrene.”17 Hesiod’s mountain source has migrated into Arnim’s head. But there is a competing source which, according to Brentano in his chiding letter,
ought to trump Arnim's private inspiration, namely, the collectivity, the people, whose simple songs bring the modern poet a surge of new words and rhythms. *Des Knaben Wunderhorn*, even more patently than *Faust*, was a primitivist project. The entire German language was conceived by Arnim and Brentano as a current whose waters are purest, least contaminated by literariness, when they issue from the mouths of the people. That current must be charted historically, however, with proper differentiation of one historical style from another. This is the sense of Brentano's reproach of Arnim's “feverish” homogenization of the *Saecula*, the epochs. For Goethe and Brentano and Arnim, to be modern was to recognize the duty of self-correction through self-relativization by way of historical study. But private inspiration threatened to interfere with the recovery of the historical voice of the people. And the historicist reconstruction of an archaic poetic sensibility in turn interfered with inspiration, and even with the very idea of inspiration, because the poet, guided by his discoveries in the archives, began to compose archaic-sounding verse. If the poet's voice can be altered under the pressure of scholarship, then the wellspring deep inside the self no longer seems quite so inviolable and stable as a metaphor.

Achim and Brentano were restless within the literary tradition. They yearned to break with established canons and handed-down conventions. They mistrusted other people's myths, and all hearsay. They wanted to know for themselves. They were critical historical scholars, or tried to be. Their ambitions are echoed by the student Wagner who, seeking encouragement from his disenchanted teacher Faust, complains (I, 560):

> Mir wird, bei meinem kritischen Bestreben, Doch oft um Kopf und Bogen bang. Wie schwer sind nicht die Mittel zu erwerben, Durch die man zu den Quellen steigt! Und eh man nur den halben Weg erreicht, Muß wohl ein armer Teufel sterben.

> I fear that with my critical endeavor My head and heart may come to grief. How hard the scholars' means are to array With which one works up to the source; Before we have traversed but half the course, We wretched devils pass away.18

Wagner is prepared to undertake the long trek upriver in hopes of mastering the ancient wisdom. He echoes the humanist philologists of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries who called for a backward leap across the

Middle Ages, rejecting the faulty transcriptions of the monks and the distorting interpretations of the scholastics and instead going directly *ad fontes*: to the texts of the ancient authors as they were meant to be read.19 Faust, jaded, recommends an alternative path to understanding that leads not from parchment to dry parchment, but rather inward to the private, ever-moist spring (I, 566):

> Das Pergament, ist das der heil'ge Bronnen, Woraus ein Trunk den Durst auf ewig stillt? Erquickung hast du nicht gewonnen, Wenn sie dir nicht aus eignem Seele quillt.

> Parchment—is that the sacred fount From which you drink to still your thirst forever? If your refreshment does not mount From your own soul, you gain it never.20

Wagner's humanistic vision of the ascent to the sources of wisdom by critical means, rejected by Faust, is the historical bridge between the source-metaphor of the poets and the source-metaphor of the nineteenth-century historians. This shared metaphor is the clue to the hidden continuity between the Romantic conception of creativity and modern historical scholarship.

Nineteenth-century historical scholarship adapted the old metaphor of the poetic source by distinguishing between primary and secondary sources, that is, between those who witnessed and those who merely relayed report.21 An event or an experience becomes historical as soon as it is isolated, named, described, and commented upon. The witnesses to the event, or the self-witnessing experiencers, are the first historians. Subsequent historians are alienated from the moment and condemned to report upon the earlier reports. For the historiographical source-seeker, history is driven by pre- or non-linguistic acts, drives, and forces. The witness bears witness by translating the event into words. The event re-emerges in language and is instantly lost, unintelligible. The testimony of the sources registers at most a tremor of the motors of history. Language immediately begins to slide along the courses of metaphor toward fiction and ideology.

Modern historians, who in the spirit of the Enlightenment mistrust hearsay, wish to travel back

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before the propaganda and legends and instead listen to the voices of the first witnesses. Modern historians acknowledge the decreasing reliability of witnesses over time, recognizing that later reports are mostly reports upon reports, inviting the supplements of imagination or the adjustments of interest. They accept that language falls away from truth. The second- and third-order reports level off into rhetorical and topical convention, in other words, literariness. History writing since the nineteenth century no longer offers itself as a straightforward contribution to the permanent accretion of tradition, as once embodied by the annalistic form. Instead, the historian undertakes a permanent backward quest for the best sources. The writers Christoph Martin Wieland, Friedrich von Schiller, and Jean Paul all used the word *Quelle* in this critical sense. The use of the English word “source” to denote a trustworthy witness is harder to track. The *Oxford English Dictionary* gives only one such usage from the eighteenth century, from the preface to the *History of America* by the Scot William Robertson. Noting that his account of the Spanish incursion into the New World differs from others, he professes an obligation “to mention the sources from which I have derived such intelligence.”22 He goes on to describe the various archives, collections of papers, and printed books he consulted.

Discouraged by the lability of the linguistic sign, the historian can also elect to limit himself to the study of traces. Archeology, a relatively late-developing form of historical scholarship, is a recourse to the direct, mute testimony of material relics. These are the dry indexes of human experience. The trace “knows” of what it reports, but cannot say it; this is the opposite of the source which, sibyl-like, speaks but does not know. The archeological approach abandons hermeneutics in favor of epistemology. The risk of this ascesis is that you end up reconstructing the material setting for past experience, but are unable to say anything about that experience.

The historian who is unwilling to reduce her activity to forensics, by contrast, keeps faith with writing. Such a historian hopes to capture past experience by listening to voices even if those voices are always already writeably. History writing that trusts writerly sources generally, in the name of experience, consciousness, and imagination, will often tend to compensate, paradoxically, by distancing itself from poetry. It is as if historical writing secures its status as a reliable writing by dismissing poetry as an unreliable writing. Poetry itself can be the object of historical study and thus susceptible to elucidation by extra-poetical sources, but it is an unreliable source for extra-poetical reality. Historical scholarship suffers poetry to have its own ideas about sources. It is indifferent to poetry, which it believes can be compartmentalized. Metaphor is absolutely to be mistrusted when it infiltrates the historiographical tradition; metaphor is absolutely to be trusted as long as it abides in its own proper domain. Historical scholarship tends to blackbox the subterranean prehistory of the flow of words and images; it tends not to ask first questions, in other words, about creativity.

The limitations of historical scholarship as it developed in the modern West are thrown into relief by the reflections of a transcultural commentator, Rabindranath Tagore (1861–1941), the Bengali poet and thinker, who noted the insensitivity of conventional history writing and historical criticism to the character of everyday experience and the coiled-up possibilities latent in every moment.23 For Tagore, literature itself makes up for this poverty by delivering a hidden history of creativity that is beyond the depth of fact-oriented scholarship. The past renews itself in literature. Poetry and art are not unreliable witnesses but the most privileged of sources, if only one surrenders to them. They are sources among us; there is no need for travel. Tagore reveals why the discipline of art history is so unsecured. Art history is not sure it needs history at all; history is not sure that it wants even to pose the kinds of questions that art is an answer to.

Conventional empirical scholarship accepts a reverse Faustian bargain: eternal life in the form of a quest for a certain kind of knowledge, but at the price of never really satisfying the thirst for another knowledge that lies at a deeper stratum. Historical scholarship accepts limits on its own ability to grasp art.

Art history and the histories of poetry, music, and dance exist as possibilities just on the horizon of conventional historical scholarship. These possible histories are defined against a normal history that doesn’t understand them. Such histories are shadowed by an awareness that historical narrative or historical scholarship might not be the best mediums for the self-exposition of the arts. Awareness of those possible histories dawned on the historian just as the artist and the connoisseur first began, in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, to

think historically about art. Until then, histories of art were mostly celebratory narratives of progress oriented by a fixed concept of successful art. Art history as a modern project is relativist and anti-academic.

Art history established itself in the German, Swiss, and Austrian universities in the nineteenth century. The new discipline needed to justify its privileged new niche alongside history, archeology, philology, law, and other established university subjects. Archeology was an attractive model for art history because paintings and sculptures and buildings, besides being signs that generate unexpected meanings in the field of time, are also material relics of a singular past. It simplifies matters to downplay the sign-quality and instead stress the trace-quality of artworks; it simplifies matters even further to broaden the scope of the inquiry beyond artworks to all kinds of depictions and artifacts. The first task of nineteenth-century art historical scholarship was the securing and identification of the material artifacts themselves. The second task was the collection of documentary material associated with the making and purchasing of art. The imperial collections in Vienna, for example, published vast lists of contracts and inventories compiled in the late Middle Ages and Renaissance. Because such compilations were never intended to deliver messages to the future about what art in general was all about, but rather had local and practical purposes, and need to be linked back to their causative impulses (a desire to make or buy art, presumably) by inferential reasoning, they are better described not as sources but as traces.

The true sources for a modern historian of pre-modern art are the verbal testimonies to the historical functions and experiences of art. This is writing that does not merely register the lives of artists and artworks in passing, but takes art as its subject matter. Manuals of art-making, comments on artists and works, biographies of artists, and theoretical disquisitions on art or beauty translated the conversations of the workshop, collector’s cabinet, gallery, or academy into writing. Some of these texts claimed intimacy with art and art-making. Others suggested that art had a history, narrating the rise or fall of the arts or revealing art’s sensitivity to the vicissitudes of politics or the fortunes of patrons. A precocious example of a text that does all this is the Commentaries of the Florentine sculptor Lorenzo Ghiberti (1378–1455), an autobiographical, historical, and theoretical treatise.

Julius von Schlosser, in an essay of 1910 announcing a future critical edition of Ghiberti’s Commentaries, warned that the historical study of post-antique art, a discipline housed “for only a little over three generations at the university,” tended to handle its written sources in a “hasty and dilettantish” manner. Here and in a later comprehensive survey of art historical studies in Vienna, “Die Wiener Schule der Kunstgeschichte” (1934), Schlosser credited the connoisseur and aesthete Giovanni Morelli (1816–1891) with the introduction of a properly philological approach to the literary sources of Renaissance art. The Viennese art historians Rudolf Eitelberger (1817–1885) and Schlosser’s own teacher Franz Wickhoff (1853–1909) emulated Morelli’s rigor. More direct was the influence of the Viennese doyen of the so-called Hilfswissenschaften—paleography, diplomacy, and chronology—the historian Theodor von Sickel (1826–1908). In 1871 Eitelberger launched a series of compilations and editions of art historical source material, the Quellenschriften für Kunstgeschichte und Kunstechnik des Mittelalters und der Renaissance. The series included editions of the Carolingian sources on art, edited by Schlosser himself, as well as texts by Cennino Cennini, Leon Battista Alberti, Albrecht Dürer, Lodovico Dolce, and others.

These texts are the sources of the modern historiography of art. The flow of words they initiated is swelled by the writings of the present-day art historian. The rivulets of art historiography that began with Cennini and Ghiberti around 1400 gathered over more than four centuries into a vast current. Nineteenth-century academic art history is not the beginning of art history, but rather the beginning of the end. It was the attempt to systematize, through subjection to the conventions of the university, a living tradition of writing about art.

Most academic art historians were and are alienated from art-making, just as academic political historians are mostly alienated from politics. Meanwhile there was and is much writing outside the university, estranged from academic art history but convinced of its own superiority.

24. Every number of the Jahrbuch der Kunsthistorischen Sammlungen des Allerhöchsten Kaiserhauses, beginning in 1883, published material from the imperial archives.


by virtue of its purported continuity with intimate and non-writerly involvements with art. The self-described connoisseurs, “the ones who know,” assert that they trust not the ideas of this or that authority but only secure facts and direct experiential knowledge.

This was the predicament of art historical writing that Schlosser felt so acutely. A disciple and personal friend of the Neapolitan philosopher Benedetto Croce, he was dissatisfied with art history and felt that academic scholarship was alienated from its true object, namely creativity or intuition. In the foreword of Die Kunstdliteratur he distinguishes between Urkunden, which he describes as “impersonal” testimonies—inscriptions, documents, inventories—and Quellen, which are personal and literary.28 The term “handbook” in the title implies stability. The book is in fact unsettled, and unfolds under a melancholic sign.29

Schlosser describes himself as a latecomer to a tradition of writing initiated by Johann Joachim Winckelmann, who in his History of Ancient Art (1764) conceived of art as a continuous, evolving process with a life of its own: art, as Schlosser puts it, as zoon.30 Winckelmann narrated not a succession of artists but a succession of forms. The continuous flow of art, forms generating forms, is the object of study of the morphologist. The content of these forms is secondary to their movement. The morphologist does not inquire too deeply about whether the form might also be a sign that delivers meaning from elsewhere, testifying to the artwork’s participation in extra-artistic spheres.

For Schlosser, the great modern exponents of the morphological and formalist project initiated, in his view, by Winckelmann were his own older Viennese colleague Alois Riegl (1858–1905), who had worked closely with Wickhoff, and the Swiss art historian Heinrich Wölflin (1864–1945). Schlosser considered Wölflin, only two years his senior, the most significant modern art historian.31 Yet he himself never wrote

30. Schlosser (see note 28), Die Kunstdliteratur, p. 460; La letteratura artistica, p. 521.
31. Ibid., Die Kunstdliteratur, p. 461; La letteratura artistica, p. 522.
32. Schlosser invokes the thesis of the Romance philologist Karl Vossler (1872–1949), also a follower of Croce, regarding the nature of language as “creation” and “evolution” (Sprache als Schöpfung und Entwicklung, 1905); Schlosser (see note 28), Die Kunstdliteratur, p. 461; La letteratura artistica, pp. 522–523. See R. De Mambro Santos, “The Concentric Critique: Schlosser’s Kunstdliteratur and the Paradigm of Style in Croce and Vossler,” Journal of Art Historiography 1 (2009).
33. Hans Tietze, a student of Wickhoff and Riegl as well as of Schlosser, published in 1913 the treatise Method der Kunstgeschichte, a lengthy, slow-moving volume not much read anymore, a guide to the identification of art historical sources. Tietze defines Quellen as the traces left in the world by the Kunstvolken. The Quellen are, on the one hand, the artworks themselves, and on the other hand, documents and texts. Tietze levels artwork and text, subordinating them both to a principle of pure creativity (Riegl’s “creative thought”) that we have no access to other than through the Quellen. This is very different from Schlosser, who would not have assented to the equivalency of text and artwork.
34. Schlosser (see note 28), Die Kunstdliteratur, p. 107; La letteratura artistica, p. 122.
35. Ibid., Die Kunstdliteratur, pp. 265–284; La letteratura artistica, pp. 303–322.
36. Ibid., Die Kunstdliteratur, pp. 373, 394; La letteratura artistica, pp. 429, 454.
of shifting trends, to the grand historical schemas of Vasari, Gian Pietro Bellori, or Filippo Baldinucci.37
The one fixed point that anchored all of Schlosser’s work, and the only text he describes that he truly trusts, was the treatise by Ghiberti. For Schlosser, only Ghiberti was sufficiently sachlich, or “to the point,” and pragmatic; only Ghiberti gave access to the artist, the true source of art.38
The proper form of art historical writing, according to Schlosser’s logic, ought to be the monograph, the textual representation of the unity of the artist’s life and work. His exposition of the Kunstliteratur ends at 1800, the very moment of the birth of the monograph, which arrives as if to rescue the broken-down art-writing project initiated by Ghiberti. The monograph was the symbolic form invested, in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, with the hope of figuring the continuity between the flow of life and the flow of the artistic imagination.39 Schlosser expressed his unreserved admiration for the modern monographs by Friedrich Rintelen on Giotto (1911), Roberto Longhi on Piero della Francesca (1927), and above all by Wölfflin on Dürer (1915). He himself undertook one monograph—on Ghiberti, of course—which was published posthumously in incomplete form.40
If the eyewitness to art, as Schlosser came to believe, is already blind, then there is no basis for distinguishing between primary and secondary sources. Vasari, Lomazzo, Denis Diderot, and Luigi Lanzi witnessed different phenomena on different levels. Vasari was a compiler and historian who interviewed living artists and mediated information about older artists still locked in manuscripts, such as Ghiberti’s Commentaries or the Libro of the merchant Antonio Billi. But Vasari was also a successful painter and architect. The Milanese Lomazzo was a painter but at the same time a writer of some reach, a poet as well as the author of two theoretical treatises on art. Diderot, when it came to painting, was an outsider, a layman. Yet his commentaries on the annual salons can only be read from within the context of his massive, indeed world-shaping, literary and intellectual achievement. Lanzi was a Jesuit cleric, a classical archeologist, and keeper of the Uffizi galleries, as well as the author of a comprehensive history of Italian painting. Today he is more valuable as a witness to his own times than as an authority on historical art. Down goes the hierarchy of testimony that underwrites modern historical scholarship. The binary of primary and secondary sources is revealed as a myth invented by someone who is not sure if he can append himself even to the secondary level. The category of Kunstliteratur is porous at its borders. Schlosser points out that the new image of antiquity developed in the late Renaissance was confirmed by the poetical theorists of the day, such as Marco Girolamo Vida and Joseph Justus Scaliger.41 One can understand why Schlosser might have wished to escape from his self-imposed category of Kunstliteratur into poetry and poetics, for here one is perhaps more likely to open a window onto art. Schlosser’s own earlier sourcebook for medieval art history worked with a more expansive conception of sources. Schlosser included, for example, several ekphrastic passages from The House of Fame (ca. 1380) by Geoffrey Chaucer, a poem about a glass temple adorned with gilded depictions of the Trojan heroes, the dreamed setting of a meditation on fame:

... many subtell compassings,  
As babeuries and pinnacles,  
Imageries and tabernacles,  
I saw, and full eke of windowes,  
As flakes fallen in great snowes.42

If the Kunstliteratur had opened itself to comparably imagistic passages from sixteenth- or seventeenth-century poetry, the project would have quickly expanded beyond manageability. On the last page of the Kunstliteratur, Philipp Otto Runge fleetingly appears as the “new conscience” of a new art contemptuous of the academic heritage. But unlike some superficial enthusiasts of his generation, Runge wrote from the “secure terrain of his métier,” and so figures for Schlosser as an “insular” creative ‘monad’ of the type perfectly grasped, not by Vasari, but

38. Schlosser (see note 28), Die Kunstliteratur, pp. 87–90; La letteratura artistica, pp. 101–104.
42. Schlosser (see note 28), Die Kunstliteratur, p. 405; La letteratura artistica, p. 453.
by his unpretentious predecessor Ghiberti. Elsewhere Schlosser would assert that in Ghiberti’s art historical writings the artist “is entirely absorbed into his work,” just as the empirical person Ghiberti disappears into his autobiography. There is no extra-creative margin to the person who remains outside the work. In Runge, too, Schlosser seems to place hopes.

For Schlosser, the metaphors of the Quelle (source or spring), which Runge in the purity of his vision seemed to reinstate, had by 1800 been mostly obscured by the metaphor of the fountain (Latin fons, from fondere, to pour out). The fountain is the architectonic marker of the source. Civilization marks the threshold between the unknown below and the experienced world above by constructing a platform. The fountain regulates the flow of water and adapts it to human purposes. The fountain channels the water at the point of its emergence and gives it shape. The fountain establishes a stable ground that only dramatizes the emergence of the flow. The fountain frames the passage from dark to light. The fountain gives the water the shape that matches the qualities sought: violent or playful, split or homogeneous, transparent or opaque. In order to anthropomorphize the flow of water, the fountain is willing to take the water out of circulation. The fountain is not ecological. The fountain is a concession that the subterranean life of the water cannot be known and is not ecological. The fountain is a concession that the subterranean life of the water cannot be known but only imagined, re-created. The fountain is the representation of passage. It makes visible an invisibility. It is a metaphor of continuity that accepts its own lack of continuity with its content. It offers not understanding but only an idea. The fountain creates the idea of the Quelle as the true source that hides behind the fountain.

The message of Schlosser’s book amounts to this: the literary sources of art history turn out to be no more revealing than fountains. In iconography the fountain is often a tomb-like structure, an ironic contrast to the nutritive and restorative quality of the water it delivers. Notable examples are the adapted sarcophagi with, respectively, relief sculpture and inscription in Titian’s Sacred and Profane Love (Rome, Galleria Borghese) and Lucas Cranach’s Nymph at the Fountain (Leipzig, Museum der bildenden Künste). G. E. R. Lloyd noted an ambivalence among ancient Greek thinkers toward the polarity of wet and dry. Sometimes humidity connoted life and aridity death; sometimes it is the wet that is base and “privative.”

The historian Droysen himself, in a passage cited by Hans Blumenberg, had contended against the positivism of Leopold von Ranke and his school that the sources bring us only to the threshold. It is not real knowledge. We are only getting “vapours.” Schlosser, Heidegger, and Benjamin were all in different ways dissatisfied by the image of the source, which was tired by the 1920s. Poetry, with its myth of origins in an uncalculated, divinely sponsored flow of words—a myth recognizable only in its parody in the automatic writing of the Surrealists—was losing its authority as the paradigm for creativity in general. Benjamin developed a non-historical concept of the Ursprung in the preface to his book The Origin of German Tragic Drama (1928): “Origin [Ursprung], although an entirely historical category, has, nevertheless, nothing to do with genesis [Entstehung].” The term ‘origin’ is not intended to describe the process by which the existent came into being, but rather to describe that which emerges from the process of becoming and disappearance. Origin is an eddy in the stream of becoming, and in its current it swallows the material involved in the process of genesis.” Such an Ursprung is not a distant destination but is present all the time. Heidegger, meanwhile, in his essay “The Origin of the Work of Art,” developed the idea of the artwork as Ursprung, which literally means “primal leap”: “Art lets truth originate. Art, founding preserving, is the spring that leaps to the truth of what is, in the work. To originate something by a leap, to bring something into being from out of the source of its nature in a founding leap—this is what the word origin means. . . . [A]rt is by nature an origin: a distinctive way in which truth comes into being, that is, becomes historical.” His essay winds up,
later on the same page, with a passage from Hölderlin invoking an Ursprung. The essay was composed in 1935–1936 but published only in 1950, in the volume entitled Holzwege.

Heidegger, however, was not quite able to divest his thought of the image of the source as a place to seek out rather than as a “head start,” as he puts it in “The Origin of the Work of Art.” This more traditional conception of the source surfaced late in his life (as we saw at the outset of this essay) in his conversation, occluding his other goal, expressed in writing, of having no goal. In Being and Time (1927) Heidegger introduced the source (Quelle) several times, ambiguously. Early in the book he disparages tradition because “it bars access to those original ‘wellsprings’ [Quellen] out of which the traditional categories and concepts were in part genuinely drawn.” The scare quotes show that Heidegger is aware that the very word Quelle is problematic. But he cannot resist using it in order to expose the false promise of tradition, which masks true origins. Later he invokes flowers and springs with apparent and jarring sentimentality: “The botanist’s plants are not the flowers of the hedgerow, the river’s ‘source’ [Entspringen] ascertained by the geographer is not the ‘source in the ground’ [Quelle im Grund].” Here, too, the scare quotes indicate his awareness that the Quelle is an artifact of poetic Romanticism. And yet the spring is “ready-to-hand” (zuhanden) and therefore preferable to the scientist’s merely “available” (vorhanden) location.

The damp patches in the moss made no appearance in Being and Time. There they were still masked by the philosopher’s half-hearted mockery of the poetic Quelle. The moisture on the forest floor, presumably, was “ready-to-hand”; there was no need to explain the damp patches, as there would be, decades later, when the city-dweller Weizsäcker stumbled upon them. In their anticlimactic simplicity the wellings-up on the forest floor resemble Schlosser’s insular, pragmatic artists, Ghiberti and Runge, the witnesses to art nearly obscured by the grand writerly tradition. The damp patches are completely unframed. They are the anti-fountains. The water they produce is immediately dispersed, ecologically. The moisture is ungraspable. The springs symbolize pre-predicative experience: content before it has entered into language. They are invisible to the overcivilized man. You cannot arrive at the spring by the methodical or scholarly tracing backward of a river’s path. The source is not a destination: it is local, as it was for Hesiod. Heidegger did suggest something like this in Being and Time, in a passage about historical scholarship. Here he quotes the nineteenth-century historian Paul Yorck von Wartenburg, contrasting his hermeneutic approach to the past to that of Leopold von Ranke: “Historical knowledge is, for the best part, a knowledge of the hidden sources [Quellen].” The archaic Greek source was audible. The sound of the water drew you. Its visible aspect was unformed, a fold or dark place in the terrain. Heidegger’s source is both inaudible and invisible; you can only sense it.

Still another approach to the impassability of the fountain is to learn to live with indirectness. In practice this was Schlosser’s approach, although he never put it this way.

The poet and essayist Paul Valéry (1871–1945), only five years Schlosser’s junior, returned compulsively to the thematics of the source, in search of the pre-predicative point of departure of his own writerly voice, the pure and undivided “I” where the self is finally present to itself. In Jacques Derrida’s reading, Valéry was wise enough not to approach the source directly but rather to try to glimpse it “on the bias.” For the source becomes an image, and thus knowable, only by dividing itself and deviating into “turns of speech, allegories, figures, metaphors.” The self is multiplied by the difference of the other and so is cut off from its origin. Valéry shared Schlosser’s intuition of the unapproachability of the source, though not his gruff impatience with the deviations of discourse. Valéry learned to make his own approaches and aversions the subject of his writing. The tomb-like fountain, which represents the materiality of the signifier, is divided from the origin and this is the condition of its representational capacity: “the source is the fact within which the imaginary is proposed.”

The source is a departure, a division, a turmoil. Derrida brings this out by relating the cognates Qual (torment) and Quelle, an affinity already detected by Hegel. The source is supposed to be continuous, untroubled; it turns out to be turbulent. The source is

52. Ibid., Being and Time, §15, p. 66; Sein und Zeit, p. 70.
53. Ibid., Being and Time, §76, p. 366; Sein und Zeit, p. 401.
55. Ibid., p. 280.
56. Valéry, quoted in ibid., p. 297, n. 25.
already a fountain. The metaphor of the source describes not the beginning of the water’s flow, but rather the point at which the water finally enters the world so that it can bear tormented witness to what lies below, just as the undivided voice that Valéry sought but never found was not the beginning of the self but rather the self’s barely credible testimony to itself.

The impulse to locate and then to experience the source is born out of dissatisfaction with the iterability, citability, and context-independence of the sign. The source-seeker attempts to restore authority to the sign, written or pictorial, by resituating it in its origin in consciousness or, better still, the unconscious: definitive liquid contexts. Derrida instead stresses the trace-like qualities of signs, namely, their spatiality, materiality, and distance from their causes. The spatiality of signs, he asserts, permits their iteration and reuse. Meaning is generated only by appropriating signs already used by others. The sign has to be re-contextualizable in order to function at all. But these conditions, which according to Derrida are inescapable, interfere with the vital reconnection to a definitive context sought by the source-seeker.

The living causes of the sign are not present. But Derrida is unwilling to say that those causes are absent, because such an absence, calling for a replenishment through inferential reasoning, is the ordinary criterion of the trace. “Trace” is ordinarily a synonym of “clue” or “evidence.” Such a trace is connected by a real event or chain of events to its absent cause. The sign is linked to reality only by convention. “Sign” and “trace,” in familiar usage, each stand out in relief against the stable ground of the other. “Trace” for Derrida, by contrast, indicates an unresolvable state between absence and presence. His trace is a global category that embraces both the sign and the trace in their customary senses. By declining to pose questions about causality (i.e., questions about origins), Derrida dissolves the distinction between signs and traces. Like the verbal sign, and unlike the evidentiary trace, Derrida’s trace is always becoming the center of a new context. Like the evidentiary trace, and unlike the verbal sign, Derrida’s trace is a material reality that takes up space in the world and is discontinuous with “mind” or “meaning.”

The signature is ordinarily understood as a special category of sign that borrows the authority of the trace in order to establish a direct, physical connection to a legitimating cause and source of meaning: the free will of the signer. Yet the signature, paradoxically, must be iterable or else it will not be legible. According to Derrida, it is not essentially different from other kinds of signs. Even the signature, the mark whose only function is to attest to the singular self, is according to this discours très sec not securely tied to its origin.57

The terminus of the historicist project of art history loomed into view in 1924. Schlosser’s handbook of that year is recursive: The writing of art history is presented here as the possibility of a belated contribution to an already-alienated tradition of writing. The ends are contained in the beginning. But Erwin Panofsky’s essay “Perspective as Symbolic Form,” of the same year, was also recursive. Panofsky turned the history of art back on itself by suggesting that Renaissance painting provided the metaphor of the “intellectual distance between the present and the past” that “enables the scholar to build up comprehensive and consistent concepts of bygone periods” and implies charity toward both the claims of the researcher and the claims of the past, a past that included Renaissance painting.58 These texts might have formed a conceptual pivot on which the entire discipline turned. Instead, the discipline was violently splintered by National Socialism. Lives and projects were displaced and interrupted. The implications of disciplinary recursivity went unexplored.

The 1930s also brought, it would seem, a definitive exportation of the puzzles of creativity and origins outward into other disciplines. Historical scholarship of the late nineteenth century had been agnostic or even incurious about the origins of art. The emblem of this paralysis was the near-total inability of the historicist discipline, in Schlosser’s lifetime, to assimilate the discovery of Paleolithic painting. The discovery of parietal paintings at Altamira in northern Spain in 1879 might have represented a catastrophe in the history of art, in the original sense of the word: an overturning of discourse. The vast walls, hosts to teeming herds of buffalo painted in vivid colors, were unconnected in style to anything ever seen. They were a thousand miles and ten thousand years removed from the oldest known paintings. They seemed to emerge out of nothing, connect to nothing. They matched no principle of morphology, no conventions of representation. The cave paintings seemed to register

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57. J. Derrida, “Signature Event Context,” in Margins of Philosophy (see note 54), p. 329; the word meaning “dry” refers acronymically to the title of the essay (SEC). See also the reflections on the trace in the essays by Chiara Cappelletto and Nicola Suthor in this volume, as well as Aurélie Verdière’s discussion of authorship, the signature, and the “quasi-name.”

a bursting forth of creativity in the attempt to control or channel animal life through images. In the caves, the non-artistic was transformed into the artistic. The paintings at La Mouthe near Les Eyzies, in the Dordogne, were discovered in 1895, those at Font-de-Gaume and Les Combarelles in 1901. By 1902 the great antiquity of Altamira itself, after twenty-three years of doubt and skepticism, was finally proven. Yet Altamira and the other Paleolithic murals remained outside the frontiers of the discipline that takes principal responsibility for the study of the visual arts, and were instead left in the custody of archeologists and paleoanthropologists as well as artists and writers: the Surrealists Georges Bataille and Joan Miró, for example, or the critics and historians Max Raphael and Sigfried Giedion. The question of the origins of art—prehistoric, anthropological, psychological—was abandoned by the academic discipline of art history. If Paleolithic painting was a riddle too deep, so too was the art of children, the art of the mentally disturbed, and the invisible realm of amateur, recreational, therapeutic, or hobbyist art. Art history has no native discourse of creativity, which is one of the reasons why it is vulnerable today to the leaden, reductive hypotheses of so-called neuroaesthetics. Inside art history, there is no wet access to wetness.

The choice between wet and dry is dramatized by Roberto Calasso’s reading of the “Finale” of Claude Lévi-Strauss’s Mythologiques, where the anthropologist reveals the basis of his lack of sympathy for ritual and his preference for myth as the object of analysis. For Lévi-Strauss, ritual is a vain attempt to re-establish a lost continuity, the original wetness of affective life:

The fluidity of the real is such that it constantly tends to escape through the mesh of the grid that mythic thought has placed over it. . . . Ritual, by fragmenting operations and repeating them unwearingly in infinite detail, takes upon itself the laborious task of patching up holes and stopping gaps, and it thus encourages the illusion that it is possible to run counter to myth, and to move back from the discontinuous to the continuous.61

Here “myth” corresponds to the lucid system of combinations and interrelations of artworks; “ritual” is the neurotic backward plunge deplored equally by Freud, for whom the displacement of the id by the ego was the civilizing process itself, comparable to “the draining of the Zuider Zee.” Freud, in Calasso’s interpretation, was as guarded as Schlosser, disapproving of a “complicity” between the psyche and external reality, shunting that “estuary where the waters of the unconscious mingle with those of the world.”

In the appendix to his essay on “The Uncanny” (“Das Unheimliche,” 1919), Freud cites the entry heimlich (“secret”) in Sander’s German Dictionary, which in turn had cited a passage from the writer Karl Gutzkow:

“‘The Zecks [a family name] are all ‘heimlich.’” “Heimlich’? What do you understand by ‘heimlich’?” “Well, . . . they are like a buried spring or a dried-up pond. One cannot walk over it without always having the feeling that water might come up there again.” “Oh, we call it ‘unheimlich’; you call it ‘heimlich’.”

The dried-up pond: the trace of the source. Psychoanalysis once had an intimate relationship with art history, but has not for some time now.

There can be no question, for a historian of art, of simply plunging headlong back toward a mirage of a pre-cultural authorizing source. Still, many of the authors invited to contribute to this volume chose to develop the association it proposes between creativity and the qualities of wetness, fluidity, and continuity. Others interpreted the volume as an occasion to challenge the conventional distinction between primary and secondary sources, recognized already by Schlosser, and instead to gather the sources into non-hierarchical constellations. Art might then be sought in the geometry of the constellation rather than at the headwaters of a tradition. If to write about texts about art is already to write about art, then criticism and discourse might be grasped not as a falling away from the origin but as an accumulating intensification. Is it not the case that scholarship today is increasingly practiced as historiography, as if art history were only ever a subroutine embedded inside historiography? Secondary history, which soon becomes tertiary history, the observation of observers observing observers, is one of the modern modes of the philosophical treatment of art.

Schlosser’s sources are not the sources of a possible history of art, but of a possible history of the


60. See the essay by Barbara Wittmann in this volume.


63. Ibid., p. 190.

historiography of art. If you wish to undertake to write the history of historical reflection on art in the West, Schlosser is saying, you would need to start with these texts. He is not saying: If you wish to write an art history, that is if you wish to write about art itself in its historical life, you should begin with these texts. An art history does not need these texts. But a history of art historiography does.

Schlosser’s restless, opinionated, querulous, ironic presentation of the literary sources is duplicated in the rest of his non-historiographical work. His enduring art historical texts are his lengthy studies of late medieval model-books, the Kunst- und Wunderkammer, and wax portraits.65 Alois Riegl was interested in works of art, Aby Warburg in images. Schlosser was not so much interested either in artworks or images, but instead lingered in damp, half-lit recesses where one might hope to discern art itself, at the moment of its emergence from the mind and before it pools into form. This scholarly work was bricolage that brought him into close spiritual proximity with his exact contemporary Warburg, as Georges Didi-Huberman has noted.66 Schlosser rarely wrote directly about artworks. Instead he came very close to grasping what was art-like in, say, quattrocento art by studying non-art, like wax portraits. In the same way, he came close to art by writing about other writers writing about art, creating and then adding to a branching, accumulating network of texts that are really more about each other than they are about artworks. The virtue of Schlosser’s “indirect” art history, and this is true of many of the literary sources he disdained and yet dedicated himself to, is a paradoxical one: In his unwillingness to bring art into resolution, he also leaves it untranslated. By contrast, an ideological approach to art, an anthropological approach to art, or the varieties of Bildwissenschaften or visual culture studies often translate art into other terms, other impulses, other activities.

If you read the sources ironically and against themselves you “look away” from art. But then you have a chance to glimpse its reflection, which might be more true. One is reminded of Pausanias’s account of the Temple of Despoina at Lycosura, where the cult statues—but nothing else—were visible in a mirror mounted near the door of the sanctuary, as if in the mirror you saw what could not be seen directly, namely the deities themselves.67 The source is specular; it reflects the origin.68 The process Schlosser describes in Die Kunstliteratur is one of texts continually feeding back into the production of art, until by modern times the works and the texts are compounded one on the other such that it no longer makes sense to try to distinguish the artwork from the commentary and theorizing that grip it. This may well be our condition today, though only some Italian art historians ever seem to surrender to it, perhaps because they descend from the same dual tradition, so impressive to Schlosser, of respect for fact and direct experience, on the one hand, and Crocean protectiveness toward aesthetic intuition, on the other. The art historian Ferdinando Bologna, for example, wrote an entire history of Italian art as a story of art’s accumulating awareness of its own place within the history of Italian art.69 The book is both perfectly recursive and perfectly exclusive, since no other art of any other nation, except China, could pretend to such reflexive closure. Even more eccentric is Giovanni Agosti’s recent book on Andrea Mantegna, which delivers a completely new picture of the fifteenth-century painter, based on the discovery and interpretation of many new textual documents, framed within a highly personal narrative involving Agosti’s visits to certain key exhibitions as well as a thorough reflection on the reception of Mantegna in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.70 The artist himself, according to the author of the book, “calls for a method of study made of layers and intersections, moving up and down the moving scales of tastes and epochs, of parallel chronologies, of encounters without end with the writers of every period, and the crossroads of the arts. . . . Any innocent response, then, must be willed, a blindness for adults.”71 The historical Mantegna, surely the “source” of Agosti’s book, is both everywhere and nowhere.


69. F. Bologna, La coscienza storica dell’arte d’Italia (Turin, 1982).
71. Ibid., p. 82.