1-1-1996

Raising consciousness in the writings of Walter Benjamin.

Jeneen Marie Hobby
University of Massachusetts Amherst

RAISING CONSCIOUSNESS IN THE WRITINGS OF WALTER BENJAMIN

A Dissertation Presented

by

JENEEN MARIE HOBBY

Submitted to the Graduate School of the
University of Massachusetts Amherst in partial fulfullment
of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

May 1996

Department of Political Science

RAISING CONSCIOUSNESS IN THE WRITINGS OF WALTER BENJAMIN

A Dissertation Presented

by

JENEEN MARIE HOBBY

Approved as to style and content by:

Nicholas Xenos, Chair

James Der Derian, Member

Peter Fenves, Outside Member

Samuel Weber, Outside Member

Eric Einhorn, Department Head
Political Science

To my parents

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank the staff members of the New York Public Library for their invaluable help and assistance in locating difficult-to-find materials, and for their general and consistent demeanor. I would like to thank Lutz Kube and the staff members at what was the East German Academy of Arts for his and their help in allowing me access to Benjamin's letters and papers there, during one cold Berlin winter.

I thank my professors, past and present, especially those who have served on my committee, and those who have read portions of the draft in various stages, for their help, criticism, and encouragement. There is not enough room, nor the exact words, to express my gratitude for their part here.

I thank my fellow graduate students, friends, and other colleagues, and particularly those at *Business Week* magazine, who have helped me along the way in the writing of this dissertation. They are too numerous to be named and described in this brief space, yet I hope each knows his or her place in the writing of this dissertation, and the help and inspiration each gave to it.

Last and not least, I thank my parents and my family for their caring support and invaluable assistance in all

too many ways. My indebtedness abounds.

In memory of Walter Grossmann.

ABSTRACT

RAISING CONSCIOUSNESS IN THE WRITINGS OF WALTER BENJAMIN

MAY 1996

JENEEN MARIE HOBBY, B.A. OHIO UNIVERSITY

Ph.D., UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS AMHERST

Directed by: Professor Nicholas Xenos

This dissertation addresses the problem of raising consciousness in Walter Benjamin's writings, which focuses on the problem in his major early works, and in his later writings on photography, film, and mimesis generally. It is a closely-read interpretation, following Benjamin in his attempt to present a historical-philosophical treatment of the literature he was examining. However, it moves away from Benjamin's methodology at critical moments, presenting its own reading of the raising of consciousness as a problem not only for political theorists, but for those interested in the philosophy of history as well.

The chapters focus on Benjamin's key major early works, the untranslated "Concept of Art Criticism in German Romanticism," his dissertation, and the essay on Goethe's *Elective Affinities*. It contains a lengthy chap-

ter on Benjamin's famous *Trauerspiel* book, and two on mimesis and the essay on the work of art in the age of its technical reproducibility.

The dissertation casts these works in a different light, one under which they have not been examined previously: This light bears the shadow of Kant. Although this is not a dissertation on Benjamin and Kant, the place of the subject and its historicity is considered when contemplating the raising of consciousness at stake in each individual chapter. The question of temporality is present in each case, and marks the presence of Kant as the figure who attempted so articulately to bridge reason and history. Benjamin realized this, and so his attention to consciousness and its temporality is so keen in all of his writings.

Conclusions are always difficult to enumerate, especially when a work sees itself as necessarily unfinished. It is the opinion of this author that it is evident, in each chapter, both how Benjamin wrote about raising consciousness, what that meant in each case examined, and how this author interjected to highlight, stress, and invent new ways to read what is often so terribly obscure.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

"Raising consciousness is a difficult topic to raise with regard to the works of any writer, not least because no one agrees upon what consciousness is or means in the twentieth century, let alone attempts to raise it. During Walter Benjamin's time, questions of consciousness and experiments with it were put to serious artistic, literary, psychological, and philosophic-scientific tests: those by Kandinsky, Joyce, Freud, and Wittgenstein, to name a mere few. During our time, those questions and experiments have only proliferated, becoming what is universally regarded as more "technical," less able to be articulated universally, and the aporia meant to be solved swiftly distends, fragments further, and increases.

Walter Benjamin's lifelong and changing attempts to articulate the raising of consciousness are keenly in tune with his era on the one hand, as he dissidently and dissonantly aimed for the future; for the "hopeless," on the other. His work is less a project than a practice, artistic and scientific at its best. In his own words, it is a practice to discover what a work of art (literature) really *is*, and that unearthing takes many shovels. One of these word-excavating picks is the concept of the political.

Raising consciousness has been an ideal for political theory since Plato, as, for example, Jürgen Habermas testifies in his essay on Benjamin, "Consciousness-Raising or Rescuing Critique." But Habermas and others like him forget what Benjamin remembers in his notion of consciousness, something that is brought out in essays by Carol Jacobs--for instance the one on the *Berlin Chronicle*, "Walter Benjamin: Topographically Speaking." This something is embedded in the act of reading and writing. It is into the depths of a text that one digs, not into the thin air of a commentary lacking the inciciveness of a critique that comes in the act of that necessary reading and writing.

It is difficult to summarize the elements that make up the Benjaminian "consciousness." Perception, mimesis, allegory, and the name to be sure, but a (for Rainer Nägele) sliding topography from the heights to the depths and back stamps this consciousness with a continual movement that removes it from any static description. It climbs like Hegel's, but cuts itself off and tumbles downward, in a dizzying stumble toward its origin.

For it is from somewhere that consciousness is raised, presumably, and it is presumed that it is raised up from the depths--of forgetfulness, forgotteness, memory, of beginnings covered over, of words encased in overnaming

chatter, of the lowliness of base philosophies, of the lonliness of the intellectual, of the possibility of radical evil. Raised up from a place of reception, too.

Benjamin wrote his dissertation on the German Romantics, in part, to demonstrate the heights to which a Fichtean-based subjectivity could go; but then he remembered the laughable nature of Schlegel's *Lucinde* and he remembered Goethe. The *Elective Affinities*--the next major work upon which he was to write--brings the dizziness of the Romantics down to the ever-so-earthly grounds of Goethe. And from here he climbs and soars and sinks, like a falling star.

Such a trajectory--or such movements and mirrorings of high and low--shape the form of Benjamin's philosophy of history: it is also represented as a homunculus moving the hands of a puppet, and as an angel with eyes torn open and wings unwillingly outspread. What is seen in the writing imprints itself upon the consciousness; how it is read is a different story--to which "The Storyteller" attests.

But in the *Elective Affinities* essay, Benjamin concertedly introduces the complex of the proper name and its alibis into this question of consciousness, so overpopulated with images. It links itself to the question of fate and character, and appears under the sign of a particular topos, place, or position. The excavating shovel of the

political lies nearby, but the place of the polis is not called to appear in the domestic scene of Benjamin's reworking of Goethe's novella.

In the *Trauerspiel* book, however, it comes into its own. With Plato, Nietzsche, Lukács, Rosenzweig, and Carl Schmitt setting the tone, this neglected and one could say nameless literature is given a place, or at least a role to play. The highly political dramas strew themselves across Benjamin's pages with a revolutionary fervor. The twists and turns that the language takes threaten to fall into a Babelian abyss. But they do not. A stop is put to their turning and overturning. There is a remembering of names; a restoration project that refuses to stick to tradition, that historical-philosophically makes a leap to a different circuit, a higher (lower) level, a new plane.

This is the act of reading the plays that "merit interpretation" in the *Trauerspiel* book. After such a revolution, so many turns and twists, one doesn't know where one's feet--or one's head--will land. Blood is everywhere, just like in World War I, or the Thirty Years' War, or the Jewish War. Heads roll, not only for Salome. The concept of the political meant to further articulate the work of art is highly charged here, and brings together in the figures of the melancholy Sovereign, the tyrant, and the intriguer a scenario of political activity tied to the ups and downs of consciousness as it is tied to the definition

and standing-forth of subjectivity. There is no sublation (*Aufhebung*) of subjectivity in this book. Even if it finds itself on its head, or without one, it still has a body, or body parts to be articulated, or "membered;" there is the corpse, with fingernails and hair still growing on, and the name. From the *Wahlverwandtschaften*, we see how the name and the sublime body connect--the connect through silence or writing, but not through speech (or music). There the body is beautifully intact; preserved, as in Egypt or other places mythologically accompanying the body on to other worlds. In the *Trauerspiel* book the bodies are wasted, and they are prolix, scheming for position.

They are not saved. In Calderón there is salvation, but in the *Trauerspiel* book there is endless reading, allegory, and an apotheosis that does not belong to itself, that comes from elsewhere, so that subjectivity can continue to exist. A name is named, and the architecture of the book comes to a "close." Infinitely more can be said about this book, as I have tried to do in the chapter written on it.

The last two chapters of the thesis deal with the concept of art-politics and with mimesis most directly, as Benjamin laid them out in his later years. To be able to say art-politics, is to say that Benjamin realized early on this realm and this practice had become flattened and fused into one another; that they had not remained sepa-

rate and distinct. This he felt as a loss, for individually, they have far much more to give as historical-philosophical concepts and practices. Politics can no longer be the critical tool it was for the Romantics, and it was in the *Trauerspiel* book. It has merged with art into the primacy of the spectacle. Her ther image can no longer be unexpected or critical (or dialectical), as a falling star, or a falling angel, or a sad, accompanying angel, but it is fascinating, keeping its viewers within the boundaries of its own rhythms. The mass ov moving viewers is nameless; it is a mass. Here Benjamin's work on Baudelaire is necessary, and bring us back to the question of anonymity. Poe's man of the crowd and Baudelaire's are at odds: the one remains the voyeur, protected from the jostling, while the other enters the stream of rushing and pushing bodies. Although he loses his crown in the gutter after a serious shaking-up, the poet of the 19th century does stoop to pick it up and replace it to its rightful spot.

The moviegoer and voter of the 20th century has nothing to lose, except now, what is of premium currency, his face. The faceless massess threaten the individual with loss not only of his face but of his name--his body has been gone for decades. Hence he is free to surrender the authority he still possesses as a subject to a higher one, as ever. This time, to that of the image, fleeting.

That higher authority is certainly not that of a higher consciousness, however, and too bad for the subject who waits for a dialectical solution. Small-brained dinosaurs are one model of identification for the soul-searching individual. The soul is not to be found on the Internet, in a new galaxy, or on talk-shows, though there may be brethren there. The soul is something Benjamin doesn't speak about in his writings on mimesis: he still speaks about limbs and his name. There is something attached to the name that is unspeakable, but again, that is unspeakable.

It is hoped that this introduction will serve as a simple segue into problems and texts far more complex than can be further examined here. It is up to the reader to take that step into the text--as Benjamin describes the task of the translator, calling from the edge into the forest of symbols--and come out on the other side with critical ideas of his or her own.

CHAPTER II
CRIME STORY

Introduction

Being on the trace. "Humans traverse in diverse ways. Whoever follows and compares them will see wondrous figures arise; figures which appear to belong to that great cryptography that one catches a glimpse of everywhere -- on wings, eggshells, in clouds, snow, crystals and in statues, on frozen water, in the innards and on the faces of mountains, of plants, of animals, of humans, in the lights of the heavens, on lightly touched and stroked pieces of pitch and glass, in the file-shavings around a magnet, and in strange conjunctions of fate."[1] To decipher a Benjaminian text as veiled and layered as *The Concept of Art Criticism in German Romanticism*, one needs more than the physical evidence of the other bodies (of writing) strewn about and beside it, more than the alibis of intellectual histories, more than a method of reading to lead the investigation. One needs to be alert to the knowledge that arises from the destruction of clues and the obliteration of traces, if one wishes to encounter the idea of the crime.

---

1 Novalis, *"Die Lehrlinge zu Saïs"*, *Novalis Werke* ed. Gerhard Schulz (Munich: Verlag C.H. Beck, 1981), 95. Translations, unless otherwise noted, are mine.

"Let no thought pass incognito, and keep your notebook as strictly as the authorities keep the register of aliens."[2] Although the truth of an idea never presents itself as a case of mistaken identity, for it does not appear in such terms, it shows forth in many aspects and guises, in order not to divulge its secret. Among the many books that Benjamin recommended to Gershom Scholem during the period of his exile in Switzerland (in addition to being a place of refuge from serving in the destruction of World War I, it was also the place where he researched and wrote his dissertation), was, as Scholem recalls, "one that is completely forgotten today - Louis Lewy's strange book *Die Menschenzwiebel Krzadok und der frühlingsfrische Methusalem* [*Krzadok the Human Onion and Spring-Fresh Methuselah*], a 'detective story' without any point, a hidden metaphysics of doubt."[3] "In those days I wrote Benjamin a great deal about the 'mathematical theory of truth,' which I was speculating about," writes Scholem.[4] Sometimes it would be Walter who would respond to these

---

2 Walter Benjamin, "*Einbahnstraße*", *Gesammelte Schriften* IV.1, ed. Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser (Frankfurt a/M: Suhrkamp, 1974-85), 106. All further references to this edition will be to *GS* and volume number.

3 Gershom Scholem, *Walter Benjamin: The Story of a Friendship* (London: Faber & Faber, 1982), 46.

4 Ibid., 47.

letters, sometimes the sceptical infant Stefan, or, if she wasn't too busy at work on her detective novel, Benjamin's wife Dora would write. "We await and expect you."

But, once arrived, a visitor is not always welcome.

"The work is the death mask of its conception."[5] When one considers the stages through which Benjamin's thoughts passed on their way to the *Trauerspiel* book, it is difficult not to see them through the hand of the serial killer. Prefigured as emblematic, such essays and notes as "On Language as Such and on Human Language," "Toward a Critique of Violence," "On Perception," and "Program for the Coming Philosophy" simultaneously stand alone as individual works and undo themselves in relation to one another. The connections between them are at first writing necessarily inscrutable, are rendered allegorical through second readings, and later become laid out, literally. It takes the writing of the *Baudelaire* book to reveal the crimes committed in "The Task of the Translator", the "introduction" to Benjamin's translations of *Tableaux Parisiens* and other parts of the *Fleurs du mal*. In the age of high capitalism, the writer/translator is arrested for being a physiognomer, a copyist, a sloganeer.

"In times of terror, when everyone is something of a

---

5 Benjamin, "*Einbahnstraße*", 107.

conspirator, everybody will be in a situation where he has to play detective."[6] The use of the pseudonym responds less to the question, "What is an Author?" than it does to the question, "What is a Work of Art?" What is written and published under the signature Ardor, Detlev Holz, J.E. Mabinn, or Walter Benjamin, testifies before the law in its many forms, but testifies always before the one and only law, the law of identity, which is concerned with investigating a single crime, the tampering with its secret. For secret identities are taken on not in order to mask *who* one *is*, but in order to make room for what is being done, to allow for something to be done, for some work to be carried out, before the law.

Before the trace begins, a memory of the crime's springing up and a foretelling of its aftermath stage the scene. The "Theses on the Philosophy of History" leave the door open to the question raised by Benjamin's "Two Poems by Friedrich Hölderlin." *Dichtermut:* "This law of identity implies that all of the unities in the poem already appear in an intensive interpenetration: Never are the elements purely graspable, they are so only in the *joint* of the relationships, in which the identity of the individual essence is a function of an unending chain of

---

6 Benjamin, *Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism* trans. Harry Zohn (London: Verso, 1983), 40.

successions, in which history unfolds itself.[7] The law, according to which all essences in the poetized show themselves as a unity of principally unending functions, is the law of identity."[8] What is presented in Kafka's *Vor dem Gesetz* is much more than the history of a man from the country, a man who is not only nameless, but unlettered, even. Anonymity, the unsigned, being without insignia, is cast as character in a role unwritten, characterless, without a particular cast. This is an historical role, set before the unending passage of time, destined to reveal the unfolding of a set of very particular relationships. The parable echoes, responds, transmits further. *Blödigkeit:* "[The angel of history] has its face turned to the past. Where a chain of occurrences appears before us, he sees there a single catastrophe, which heaps ruin upon ruin without rest and slings this at his feet. He would like to delay, to linger, to wake the dead and fit together what has been smashed to bits...."[9]

The smashed bits cannot be fit together without the joint of relationships being revealed. But revelations do not come about willfully: The "Theses on the Philosophy of

---

7 See Jacques Derrida, *Spectres de Marx: L'État de la dette, le travail du deuil et la nouvelle Internationale* (Paris: Galilée, 1993).

8 Benjamin, "*Zwei Gedichte von Friedrich Hölderlin*", *GS* II.1, 112.

9 Benjamin, "*Über den Begriff der Geschichte*", *GS* I.2, 697.

History" open to a game of chess. As is widely recognized, chess is not one of those games that is considered to be a game of chance. The hand that deliberates over the board moves quite differently from the hand that throws the die, or from the hand that issues commands. All hesitate, perceptibly or not, at different speeds, at different intervals of interruption, marking off forward motion from back, progress from regress, in countless variation. When a steady hand flinches, its secrets are given away.

"Supposedly there was to have been an automaton, constructed in such a way that it responded to every move of a chessplayer with a countermove assured to be a winning one."[10] As if in once upon a time, there was a fairy tale called philosophy. It was a beautiful fairy tale, full of mirrors and stunning, woven cloth of many colors. Because it was sung in various tongues, different versions of the tale were passed down. But all of the songs were sung in praise of a sleeping beauty, who was promised, one day, to wake. "Waiting for the hero" was a popular version: Even if the hero was late or never came, his task lay before him, and he took it seriously. Leaflets were printed and rumors were spread, announcing his arrival. Some offered to lend a hand, others tried to pull strings.

---

10 Ibid., 693.

The hunchbacked dwarf who was a master at chess pulls the strings guiding the hands of the hash smoking, Turkish puppet seated at the chess board that opens the first stanza of Benjamin's "Theses on the Philosophy of History." A system of mirrors creates the illusion that the chess table can be seen through from all sides, but in truth, the dwarf is hidden within. As automaton, the puppet/dwarf combination is to win against all challengers, every time. The puppet was called "historical materialism," the dwarf, "theology." Once upon a time.

The analysis that is to follow attempts to present one facet of Benjamin's writing in critical perspective, that of raising consciousness. But the presentation will not be a facile one: In order to present the facet's many-sidedness -- its reflection upon and contiguity with other sides of the stone, the layers of its surface, its involvement with a light source -- a multi-dimensional approach is required, an appropriate form of address to the question, so that the question does not become exhausted in the questioning, and the text does not become fetishized as an object. What is required is an approach that is scaled down, twelve-toned, raised up to a level of dismantling pitched to the complexity of the construction that is a Benjaminian text. In the sense of Kleist's "*Über das Marionettentheater*," an articulation takes

place, the articulation of a choreography. An articulate choreography raises questions about the laws of movement and connection. Figure dancing -- cutting a rug -- enacts that choreography. The text is scored, even when it is "unaccompanied": The rhythms are played out and overheard, even when they remain silent before the spectacle of the line that is traced.

"Humans traverse in diverse ways. Whoever follows and compares them will see wondrous figures arise; figures which appear to belong to that great cryptography that one catches a glimpse of everywhere -- ...." To see clues everywhere, to follow a lead, is to be lead along paths or into a maelstrom, a whirling confusion of connections, a forest of symbols, an intimation of strange conjunctions of fate. The great criminal takes on mythic powers. Like with the old gods, faith that he will carry out the task before him, the task of breaking the law, is placed in his hands. Those hands are destructive hands, they throw themselves to the laws of chance, that is to say, to no laws at all; they throw themselves into the essence of law, subject themselves to its violence, its in-determinacy, its arbitrariness. As *Figaro-Pravda* reporter Ivan Johnson (alias secret agent Monsieur Caution) says on the way to omega minus in Godard's *Alphaville*, "*d'abord, je tire.*"

The task of raising consciousness can only be considered an accomplice to the crime of breaking the law of identity, an accomplice to the crime of cracking the safes guarding its codes. But if the image of the ax of reason is lent to the task of felling the pillars of myth, it is only done so with the knowledge that what is severed remains, in displaced and disfigured form.[11] "The sleep of reason produces monsters" -- but an ax-wielding serial killer produces corpses, ghosts, and other spirits of its own. Like all true works of art, its work is haunted.

The question of raising consciousness is an historical-philosophical question posed by the idea of art, according to Benjamin. The following essay will analyse this question as it appears in the figure of criticism cut by Benjamin in the dissertation which he wrote on the German Romantics, which focuses largely on Friedrich Schlegel and Novalis.[12]

---

11 See Reiner Ansén, "*Das Monströse Überleben*" from *Defigurationen* (Würzburg: Königshausen und Neumann, 1993), 109-130. See also Nicholas Abraham and Maria Torok, *The Wolf Man's Magic Word: A Cryptonymy* trans. Nicholas Rand (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986).

12 An investigation of identity necessarily leads to abstraction: The closer one gets to the body of evidence/evident body, to the scene of the crime, the farther the remove from the case. This remove opens up a possibility of an approach to the thing itself, as Yve-Alain Bois' essay on Robert Ryman deftly shows: "I would say that Ryman has attempted to paint that he paints that he paints; that he has always wanted, by means of an excess of reflexivity, to outflank the tautological reflexiveness in which modernism has been locked. Further, his success is due not to having attained that literally unthinkable reflexivity, but to the fact that every failure of his

In 1916, Martin Buber invited Walter Benjamin to contribute something to his journal *Der Jude*. Benjamin's response (which, according to Gershom Scholem, was "great-

---

audacious attempt removes him further from his object, driving him to produce objects that are increasingly enigmatic and indeterminable. In a sense each of his paintings revives Poe's statement about the *mise en abîme*: 'Now, when one dreams, and in the dream, suspects that one is dreaming, the suspicion never fails to confirm itself, and the sleeper is almost immediately roused. Thus Novalis is not mistaken in saying that we are close to awakening when we dream we are dreaming.' That is, in this instance, by trying to solve the enigma, by trying to think painting, we always arrive, literally, at the same object or the same absence of object. This is what Ryman demonstrates again and again: There is a threshold of reflexivity beyond which the record is erased." Yve-Alain Bois, "Ryman's Tact," *Painting as Model* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1990), 224-25.

Even the logical investigations pursued by Poe in "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" could not approximate the double erasures and obliteration of traces that would mark the step of Joseph Losey's *Mr. Klein* if he were to stumble onto the set as Antonioni was filming *Blow Up*. The material that could be called up in support of this investigation is without limit. But the question of metaphor in metaphysics only succombs to a bad infinity, to the swamp of "eternity" (apocalypse), when it fails to skip the beat raised by the differential of time. The texts of Jacques Derrida eloquently remind us that although "[c]onstitutionally, philosophical culture will always have been an obliterating one," "there is always the supplement of a square whose opening complicates the calculations." Jacques Derrida, "White Mythology: Metaphor in the Text of Philosophy", *Margins of Philosophy* trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 211; Derrida, "*Le facteur de la verité*", *The Post Card* trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 428.

Walter Benjamin's dissertation, *Der Begriff der Kunstkritik in der deutschen Romantik*, will appear in English upon publication of his *Collected Works* by the Harvard University Press.

ly toned down" from the first version he read) was intended to be polemical. Indeed, the letter to Buber is brutally frank in explaining its author's political position, his position regarding the relationship of language to action, which prevents him from contributing to the journal "in its present stage."[13] It is a letter written against the powers of myth, against the wide-ranging, almost "self evident" opinion that language is a means to the end of action, and that language can influence action by communicating something to it, something other than itself, such as a lesson, a motive, an intention, a moral content. This popular opinion reduces speech (and writing) to a simple means of preparation of motives which determine the inner direction of the soul.[14] It reduces action to something weak and poor, whose sources lie not in itself, but in some sort of communicable, expressible intention: Action is reduced to being the mere effect of a process of calculating motives that are directed to a

---

13 Benjamin, *Briefe* ed. Gershom Scholem and Theodor W. Adorno (Frankfurt a/M: Suhrkamp, 1966), 125-28.

14 This "popular opinion" is of course that expressed by Socrates in the *Phaedrus*. Benjamin's critique of Socrates, and the entire, difficult interpretation of Plato and Carl Schmitt that his work undertakes is taken up in my manuscript *Speak, Golem*, which focuses on Benjamin's essay on Goethe's *Wahlverwandtschaften* and on Benjamin's *Trauerspiel* book.

Cf. Jacques Derrida, *La dissemination* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1972); *Dissemination* trans. Barbara Johnson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981).

specific end. The letter was written just a few months before Benjamin composed the essay "On Language as Such and on Human Language;" it remained an unanswered letter. Benjamin opens the letter by explaining the "heftiness of contradiction" that many of the contributions of the first issue of *Der Jude* awoke in him, especially regarding their support for Germany's role in the "European war." "Every action that lies in the expansive tendency of serializing word-on-word seems horrible to me, and even more devastating, where, as with us in ever intensifying measure, this entire relationship of word to act grasps about like a mechanism directed to the realization of the correct absolute."[15]

Instead of engaging in the exploitation of language and the humiliation of action, Benjamin goes to the heart of the matter. He goes straight to the heart, to the middle place that doesn't translate well, to the place that is betrayed by force and expression.[16] This place is home

---

15 Benjamin, *Briefe*, 126.

16 See "*Zur Kritik der Gewalt*," *GS* II.1, 179-303; "*Notizen über 'Objective Verlogenheit' I*," and "*Notizen zu einer Arbeit über die Lüge II*," *GS* VI, 60-64. See also Peter Fenves, "Testing Right -- Lying in View of Justice," *Cardozo Law Review* 13:4 (December 1991): 1081-1113. Much can be said about the "culture of the heart" in Benjamin, about "the expressionless" ("*das Ausdruckslose*") as it relates to diplomacy and lying, justice and violence. An inordinate amount can be said about it in relation to lyric poetry, of course. See Benjamin, "*Baudelaire II*," *GS* VI, 133-34, and Winfried Menninghaus, "*Das Ausdruckslose: Walter Benjamins Metamorphosen der Bilderlosigkeit*," *Für Walter Benjamin: Dokumente, Essays und ein Entwurf* ed. Ingrid and Konrad Schürmann (Frankfurt a/M:

to the courage of the poet, but only in exile, as diffidence -- *Dichtermut* as *Blödigkeit*. "I can understand writing above all as poetic, prophetic, practical (as regarding its operation), but in any case always only as magical, that is to say as '*un-mittel-bar*' -- immediate, unmediable. Every salutary, every operation of writing not devastating at is core touches on its (the word's, language's) secret. In however many forms language may like to show itself as effective, it will do this not through the mediation of contents, but through the purest opening up of its dignity and essence."[17] The elimination of what Benjamin calls the "unsayable" (*das Unsagbar*) in language falls in with what he calls a "truly relevant, sober way of writing" that is able to "suggest the relation between knowledge and action within linguistic magic." "My concept of a relevant and highly political style and way of writing is to lead onto that which the word denies; only where this sphere of the wordless un-

---

Suhrkamp, 1992).

On the relationship of violence to the power of images, among other things, see generally Anselm Haverkamp, ed., *Gewalt und Gerechtigkeit: Derrida--Benjamin* (Frankfurt a/M: Suhrkamp, 1994); Bettine Menke, *Sprachfiguren: Name--Allegorie--Bild nach Walter Benjamin* (München: Wilhelm Fink, 1991); and Carol Jacobs' important essay on Benjamin's *Zum Bilde Prousts*, "Walter Benjamin: Image of Proust," in *The Dissimulating Harmony: The Image of Interpretation in Nietzsche, Rilke, Artaud and Benjamin* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1978), 87-110.

17 Benjamin, *Briefe*, 126-27.

folds itself in unsayable pure power can the magical spark between word and moving action spring across, where the unity of these two is at the same time actual, real, practical."[18]

Perhaps nowhere in his writing is Benjamin more polemical than in this letter to Buber. Although his writing is sober through and through, it rarely approaches an idea head-on, like a tank.[19] It prefers to follow up its leads by way of detours, *Umwege*, labyrinths, concealing its traces, making way and clearing paths for escape before the arrival of immediate, if unanticipated and unexpected dangers. "For a newspaper, the language of poets, prophets, or of powerholders as well, song, psalm and imperative, which have an entirely other relation to the unsayable and may be source of an entirely other magic, do not come into question - only the relevant, actual way of writing does."[20] This method of writing, one for which he considers himself "unfit," can be found, he writes, in the *Athenaum*.

---

18 Ibid., 127. It is in this context, along with "Toward a Critique of Violence" and the "Destructive Character," that Benjamin's reading of Karl Krauss must be considered. See "Karl Krauss," *GS* II.1, 334-367; "Karl Krauss," *GS* II.2, 624-25.

See also Stéphane Mosès, *L'Ange de l'Histoire: Rosenzweig, Benjamin, Scholem* (Paris: Seuil, 1992).

19 See footnote 79, below.

20 Benjamin, *Briefe*, 127.

A secret has a very different essence from that of a riddle. A riddle can be solved; its essence depends upon its encoding. A secret, however, cannot or must not be told. It is a powerful thing, carrying within it an imperative, an imperative that might be described as categorical. Benjamin's writing does not close in on the secret identity abiding in the relation between word and action in his letter to Buber, but he does detect it. He hints at the opening up of the dignity and essence of language, the matter to which his investigations were devoted on the grandest scale. A case, casket or legal issue is rarely opened with the appearance of the flesh of a living body; more often than not it is a decomposing corpse that is found. In the case of *The Concept of Art Criticism in German Romanticism*, what one has to work with are the bare bones of a skeleton.

The essays and fragments collected under the headings "On the Philosophy of Language and the Critique of Knowledge, or of Recognizability" in volume six of Benjamin's *Collected Works* contain some trace of how those bare bones might flesh out, seen through the technique of negative imaging.[21] Some still might wonder what bearing the phi-

---

21 See Benjamin, "*N* 3,1" from the "*N*" Konvolut, *Das Passagen-Werk* I (Frankfurt a/M: Suhrkamp, 1983), 577-78; "*N*: [Re: The Theory of Knowledge, Theory of Progress]" trans. Leigh Hafrey and Richard Sieburth, *Benjamin: Philosophy, Aesthetics, History* ed. Gary Smith (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 50-51.

losophy of language and epistemological criticism might have on the work of art and on aesthetic discourse.[22] This is of course one of the oldest questions, one of the simplest and most confounding, to which vast libraries give themselves.[23] To excavate the question, one must delve into the catalogue, which means recording the question in analogue, as it appears in registers other than its "own." A work of art is conceptual, writes Benjamin: It can be criticized.

In a letter written from Basel, July 11, 1913, Benjamin tells his school friend Franz Sachs about a visit he made to an exhibition of Dürer's "most famous graphic works: *'Ritter, Tod und Teufel, Melancholie, Hieronymus'* and many others."[24] He also informs his friend that he is reading an essay by Husserl, which Adorno and Scholem are

---

22 See also my manuscript, *Typefacing*, an analysis of Benjamin's description of his life work being devoted to the question of what a work of art actually *is*.

23 See Benjamin, "*Die Aufgabe des Kritikers*" *GS* VI, 171-72. Bernd Witte's 1976 *Habilitationsscrift* remains one of the most well considered study of Benjamin's early work, and makes the claim that Benjamin's writings should not be considered those of a philosopher, but of a literary critic in the end. However, Witte does not fully explicate the historical-philosophical foundations of that claim -- he does not allow his critique of Benjamin to explore the workings of language on which it is based. Bernd Witte, *Walter Benjamin -- Der Intellektuelle als Kritiker: Untersuchungen zu seinem Frühwerk* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1976).

24 Benjamin, *Briefe*, 74-77.

almost certainly right to assume is *Philosophie als strenge Wissenschaft* ("Philosophy as a Rigorous Science") published in the 1910 issue of *Logos*.[25]

From roughly 1917-1919, Benjamin was working on his dissertation "on" the German Romantics. But his thoughts had been preoccupied by those of Kant, on which he first thought he might write the dissertation. In order to appreciate the seriousness of the question that Kant's writings raised for him, and to follow the direction of Benjamin's critique of Kant, one must first consider the situation from Husserl's standpoint.

> High towers, and metaphysically great men resembling them, round both of which there is commonly much wind, are not for me. My place is the fruitful bathos, the bottom-land, of experience; and the word transcendental, the meaning of which is so often explained by me but not once grasped..., does not signify something passing beyond all experience, but something that indeed precedes it a priori, but that is intended simply to make cognition of experience possible. If these conceptions overstep experience, their employment is termed transcendental, the latter being limited to the immanent use, that is, to experience.[26]

---

25 Ibid., 77.

26 Immanuel Kant, "*Prolegomena zu einer jeden künftigen Metaphysik die als Wissenschaft wird auftreten können*," *Werkausgabe* V (Frankfurt a/M: Suhrkamp, 1977), 252; *Prolegomena* trans. Paul Carus (La Salle, Illinois: Open Court, 1902), 150. This reading of Kant owes much to the writings and teachings of Peter Fenves. See Fenves, *A Peculiar Fate: Metaphysics and World-History in Kant* (Ithaca: Cornell, 1991); Fenves, *Raising the Tone of Philosophy: Late Essays by Immanuel Kant, Transformative Critique by Jacques Derrida* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1993).

As if to canonize a genre, Benjamin set forth the "Program for the Coming Philosophy" in 1917-18, a response to Husserl's own "Prolegomena to any Future Metaphysics that will be able to Step Forth as Science," his "Philosophy as a Rigorous Science."[27] The essay was given as a gift, but it arrived a belated birthday present; all Scholem received on December 5, 1917, were "best wishes" from Dora, for the "tyrant" would not allow for the essay to be copied and sent before it was "finished." Gershom Scholem first received the *Programm* in celebration of his arrival at the Benjamins' in Bern, May 4, 1918.[28] But what was given? What was received?

Benjamin's gift to Scholem's future is late in coming, but it announces their program for study to come. Because "so little was to be learned at the university,"[29] the two decided together to take up reading Hermann Cohen's *Kant's Theory of Experience* within the walls of the "Univeristy of Muri," the *trompe l'oeil* academy Benjamin and Scholem erected for their own purposes and pleasure.[30] After

---

27 This program was revised. By 1929 it takes the shape of a "Program for Literary Criticism." Benjamin, "*Programm der literarischen Kritik*," *GS* VI, 161-67.

28 *GS* II.3, 936-38.

29 See Fragment 139, *GS* VI, 172-73.

30 Scholem, *Story of a Friendship*, 58-60. On Benjamin's reading of Cohen, see Gunter Figal's "*Recht und Moral bei Kant, Cohen und Benjamin*," *Materialien zur*

struggling with the canonical text of the Marburg School of Neo-Kantianism for two hours a day that July, they gave up reading Cohen, whose work they found to be "a great disappointment," Scholem proclaims.[31]

> We each at different times had attended courses or individual lectures given by Cohen in Berlin during his advanced years, and we were full of respect and indeed reverence for this figure; thus we approached our reading with great expectations and a readiness for critical discussion. But Cohen's deductions and interpretations seemed highly questionable to us; we dissected them with great severity. I still possess the notes I made after a few such sessions on the critique of Kant's syllogisms in the "transcendental aesthetics" and on the proof of their untenability. Benjamin expressed himself on the attitude of Cohen the rationalist toward interpretation: "He said that for a rationalist not only texts of absolute dignity like the Bible [and, according to Benjamin, Hölderlin as well] were capable of multilayered interpretation, but everything that was a subject was put in absolute terms by a rationalist, thus justifying violence in interpretation, like Aristotle, Descartes, Kant."[32]

Neukantianismus-Diskussion ed. Hans Ludwig Ollig (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1987), 163-183, originally published in the *Zeitschrift für philosophische Forschung* 36 (1982): 361-77. Unfortunately, Figal is not able to translate into language his conceptual analysis of Cohen's and Benjamin's insistence that ethical action takes place outside the realm of purposiveness. As such, he comes to the conclusion that both "run into difficulties, because they both regard as unethical an action which is oriented on intentions." On the importance of Benjamin's reading of Cohen regarding blood and bloodlessness in his *Zur Kritik der Gewalt*, see Anselm Haverkamp, "How to Take It (and Do the Right Thing): Violence and the Mournful Mind in Benjamin's *Critique of Violence*," *Cardozo Law Review* 13:4 (December 1991): 1159-1171.

31 Scholem, *Story of a Friendship*, 58-60.

32 Ibid.

It is precisely violence in interpretation that bars the way to any thinking of the future, to future thinking, to thinking in a futurist way, a way that destroys the rationalist mythologizing of thinking (absolution), and prepares the ground for its appearance as experience. It is against such violence that Benjamin wrote his essay on the coming philosophy, on the coming of philosophy that might one day be able to step forth as doctrine, *Lehre*.

Scholem, apparently, had a lot to learn. As he freely admits, he spent many hours devoted to speculating about the mathematical theory of truth, much to Benjamin's consternation. It is telling that Benjamin's gift did not arrive "on time." The delay makes a gift of time itself, gives Scholem time to pursue other leads, to follow up a letter-trail laced with clues to an idea. In announcing a program to come, the essay grants to the present a future, makes of the future a gift.[33]

Whether or not that gift was appreciated can be read from Scholem's account of the notes he took during the reading group sessions on Cohen that summer. He writes that Benjamin found justification for the phenomenologists in their respect for Hume's critique of Kant, and that Benjamin "had no use for the rationalistic positivism that

---

33 See generally, Jacques Derrida, *Donner le temps: 1. La fausse monnaie* (Paris: Galilée, 1991).

occupied us during this reading, because he was seeking 'absolute experience.'"[34] This is an odd comment to make about someone who, after having struggled with Cohen's tome, complained: "I might as well become a Catholic."[35] Benjamin dubbed Cohen's book "a philosophical vespiary," and turned once more to discussing Nietzsche.[36]

---

34 Scholem, *Story of a Friendship*, 60.

35 Ibid.

36 It is not my task to explore what might have been the nature of Scholem's friendship with Benjamin. It is clear at least from these notes, their letters, and the vast difference in the orientation of their work, that Scholem did not grasp the essence of Benjamin's writing. His description of Benjamin as someone who was questing after "absolute experience" is but one case in point. Again, I quote from his remembrances, and from his journal entries in 1918: "Benjamin was not only a great metaphysician but also a great bibliophile. The enthusiasm with which he was capable of discussing bindings, paper, and typefaces in those years frequently got on my nerves -- at such birthday celebrations, for instance. Today it is hard for me to reconstruct the impression I received then, but I saw an element of decadence in it. I made this note about it: 'Great though [Benjamin's] life may be in every sense -- the only case near to me of a life being led metaphysically -- it nevertheless harbors elements of decadence to a fearful extent. The way one leads one's life has certain hard-to-define boundaries, which decadence exceeds, and unfortunately this is definitely true in Walter's case. I deny that metaphysically legitimate insights can arise from this way of evaluating books on the basis of their bindings and paper. Walter has a lot of illegitimate insights as well There's no way to change him. On the contrary; the only thing I have to guard against is the incursion of this sphere into my own through personal contact.' Shortly before that I had made this note: 'Of late I have been getting along with Walter very well again -- probably because I now have found the locus from which I can tacitly resist him in my inner affairs. This way everything is all right; those scenes were, in the final analysis, nothing but moments at which he glimpsed a sphere of my condition that was not destined for him. After all, he did not reveal such things to me either, and our community consists precisely in each of us

Indeed, a study of the introductions Cohen wrote to each of the three editions of his first (and most influential) book that were issued during his lifetime (1871, 1885, 1918), gives some indication of the gathering of tribes (or the swarming of bees) taking place in the events of those years, and in the revisions to that text, that might awaken a Catholic call in a reader; a call which, to a reader such as Benjamin, could only sound like an alarm.[37] By the time calendar year 1918 had rolled around, or come crashing down, Cohen had resorted to the strategies of "Deutschtum" and "Judentum" to get him through the "experience" of his life's last year.[38]

---

understanding the other man's reticence *without words* and respecting it.'" [Scholem's italics]. Ibid., 71.

37 Obviously, Benjamin only "gave up" reading Cohen temporarily, as the quotes from the *Logik der reinen Erkenntnis* (Berlin, 1902), and the *Ästhetik des reinen Gefühls* (Berlin, 1912) in the *Trauerspiel* book show.

38 In the introduction to the third edition of *Kants Theorie der Erfahrung*, which had been out of print for 10 years, Cohen writes: "The new appearance of the book falls in a difficult, violent time, in which nothing less than the dignity of the German spirit forms the fateful question...." This is a long way away from 1871, when Cohen described how he came to take up "a new grounding" of the Kantian "doctrine of apriority" after having been taught that Kant had been historically "overcome", or relativized -- *ein jeder liest ja seinen Kant* ["everyone reads his own Kant"]. In 1871 he writes: "Immeasurable advances would be readied for philosophical study through the restitution of Kantian authority."

For Cohen, by 1918 Kant's authority for the future of philosophy had been subordinated to the demands of "the simple fact" of German nationalism, of the "German spirit" made absolute. "*Was ist denn der letzte Grund für die schlichte Tatsache, die dennoch immer noch nicht in ihrer Klarheit eingesehen wird und die doch ohne Vertuschung anerkannt werden muß: daß die Eigenart des deutschen*

As in his letter to Buber, Benjamin vents his impatience with a manner of interpretation that does violence to writing, his impatience with a habit of shoring up the "stores" of language - its dignity, spiritual content, ability to move, and to halt - in termini that are fitted with a willful purpose. Against such a habit, a practice of writing that opens language up to critical perceptions is posed, and it is against this practice that Scholem felt he had to guard himself.

What Benjamin transports from Husserl's "Philosophy as a Rigorous Science" into *The Concept of Art Criticism in German Romanticism* does not lend itself to easy measure: here as elsewhere in Benjamin's writing, the call for a *strenge Wissenschaft* is repeatedly responded to, responses that echo feedback and transmit distortion along the line of authorship, like a drilling through the hull of its

---

Wesens im tiefsten Zentrum auf seiner Philosophie beruht und daß die Eigenart seiner Philosophie in Kant und in keinem anderen neben ihm wurzelt? Wie erklärt sich denn die klägliche Unwissenheit und der traurige Übermut, der sich jetzt wieder hervorwagt in der versuchten Gleichmacherei zwischen Kant und den Romantikern, die ihn verleugneten und verwarfen, und nach kurzem Rausche dem Abbruch der Philosophie herbeiführten? Der Grund für die eminente Identität Kants mit dem deutschen Geiste liegt in der Identität Kants mit dem wissenschaftlichen Geiste der Philosophie. In dieser geschichtlichen Einsicht enthüllt sich zugleich die Eigenart des deutschen Geistes in ihrer Harmonie mit dem weltgeschichtlichen Geiste der Menschheit." Hermann Cohen, "Drei Vorrede," *Kants Theorie der Erfahrung* (Berlin: Cassirer, 1925), ix-xxi.

flagship, the signature.[39] But the response that is heard in the "Program for the Coming Philosophy" plays like a prelude to the dissertation, like an overture of condensed theme and arrested development, *heiter bewegt*.

"It is of the greatest importance for the philosophy of the future to recognize and sort out which elements of Kantian thinking must be taken up and cultivated, which must be transformed, and which must be rejected."[40] Benjamin takes up the task of raising consciousness, a task which had been described most articulately within the province of a "timeless" epistemology, and raises it up to the expectations of time: he opens an "epistemological" question up to the future, presenting it to temporal experience, questioning its timeliness. For Benjamin, the dignity of Kant's critical philosophy shows itself in the rigorous questioning of the grounds for the possibility of knowledge, a well handled investigation into the conditions for the possibility of re-cog-nition that might provide the grounds for a case of metaphysics -- like an investigation of a transgression carried out in such a way,

---

39 Cf. Detlev Holz, "*Strenge Kunstwissenschaft*" *GS* III, 363-74.

40 Benjamin, "*Über das Programm der kommenden Philosophie*," *GS* II.1, 159; "On the Program of the Coming Philosophy" trans. Mark Ritter, *Benjamin: Philosophy, Aesthetics, History* ed. Gary Smith (Chicago: Univeristy of Chicago Press, 1989), 1-12. Unfortunately, this translation is error-ridden; the following translations are my own.

that it might be able to lead to knowledge of the *limits* of the law. Kant himself was not to blame for the failure of this investigation, Benjamin insists.[41] He simply was presented with very little evidence for his case: He lived in the age of Enlightenment, which was a low-life age, an age in which experience was measured by the rule of Newtonian physics, in which experience was measured by the rule, by a ruler. It is no wonder that Scholem was unable to appreciate the gifts bestowed upon him by Benjamin: He was too busy speculating about mathematical theories of truth, too caught up in the physical constraints of a Newtonian world-view to realize that this age was slipping away, to realize that age was slipping away, and that he had a future to look forward to.

It took a lightning speed, the speed of light, to put a halt to the naïveté of an Enlightenment world-view and its disregard for the times. Benjamin praises the Neo-Kantians for recognizing that experience is the only "ob-

---

41 "Like every great epistemological problem, the Kantian problem has two sides, and he was able to provide a suitable response to one side of this problem only. First was the question after the certainty of knowledge, which remains; and second was the question after the dignity of an experience, which was fugitive, or fleeting. For the universal philosophical interest is always simultaneously after the timeless binding nature of knowledge and after the certainty of a temporal experience, which, regarded as the immediate, if not the only object of knowledge, is judged. It is only that in its entire structure this experience did not become conscious to philosophers as a singularly temporal one, and it did not become conscious as such to Kant." Ibid., 158.

ject" of knowledge, but his critique of Cohen's rationalism reveals this way of thinking to be chained to the "old" concept of experience, empiricism's concept.[42] Kant's genius is exposed in that he was able to take up the task of his vast project "at the zero point," in a time in which experience was reduced to a minimum of importance, and calculation was the doctrine, the rule of measure against which, among other things, "sense data" were reckoned.[43] For it is precisely Kleist's testimony that Benjamin cites in judgement of Kant's genius, a genius that can be spelled out only in letters. "But it is my conviction: whoever does not feel struggling *the thinking of doctrine itself* in Kant, and therefore whoever does not consider it with its letters [*mit seinem Buchstaben*] as a tradendum, something to be passed down and carried over (and also how far one must transform it,

---

42 Ibid. Such a construction sounds strange to ears that have been trained to pit rationalism against empiricism, Kant against Hume or the like. As will become clearer in the discussion of Benjamin's reading of Husserl, a rationalizing of subjectivity lingers in phenomenology, that, for all of the research undertaken by Husserl and his students regarding the noematic-noetic relationship, does not allow it to transcend the limits of psychology.

43 Benjamin's fascination with Kabbalistic teachings must be considered with this view of the experience of the Enlightenment in mind -- numerology quickly reaches the limits of tempo, of temporality. The best writing on the specifically Judaic elements in Benjamin's thinking has been performed by Stéphane Mosès. Stéphane Mosès, "Walter Benjamin and Franz Rosenzweig" trans. Deborah Johnson, *Benjamin -- Philosophy, Aesthetics, History*, 228-246; Mosès, *L'Ange de l'Histoire*.

later) with the most extreme reverence, knows nothing of philosophy....[A]nd hence it is also my conviction, that Kant's prose represents a limit of high prose art. Why else would *The Critique of Pure Reason* have shaken Kleist so deeply to the core?"[44]

Benjamin's dissertation on Friedrich Schlegel and Novalis subjects Kant to the law of the letter. *The Concept of Art Criticism in German Romanticism* enacts Benjamin's critique of *The Critique of Judgement* phenomenologically: it is a critique of aesthetic reflection *as* it is experienced, as it appears in language. The philosophy to come will subject "experience" to a rigorous critique, in order to raise experience to higher levels of consciousness. And the suspension of judgement carried out by critique in a work of art has the power to open language up to perception, to nondiscursivity; to an idea, to the idea of art.

To the notion that true knowledge of experience would come through a rigorous study of art, Benjamin devoted his most concentrated energy.[45] Mathematics are unable to undertake the phenomenology of noumenology that writing/reading performs -- math operates according to a

---

44 Benjamin, *Briefe*, 150, Benjamin's italics.

45 See Thomas Y. Levin's introduction to, and translation of Benjamin's "*Strenge Kunstwissenschaft*" as "Rigorous Study of Art" *October* 47 (Winter 1988): 77-90. See also Benjamin, "*Lebensläufe*" *GS* VI, 215-228.

determination of rules that addresses time in spatial dimension; it is unable to raise a historical-philosophical question, a self-reflective question, a question into the conditions for the possibility of its appearance.[46] For all of the discursive volume devoted to investigating the epistemological grounding of the sciences in Husserl as an investigation into the "histori-

---

46 Husserl says as much himself in "The Origin of Geometry" when he describes mathematics as a tradition, or, in Benjamin's words, "an unending chain of progressions," a series of successful discoveries or scientific advances that moves *without halt* through time, to reach "us" in the present. "Indeed, [geometrical existence] has, from its primal extablishment, an existence which is peculiarly supertemporal and which -- of this we are certain -- is accessible to all men, first of all to the actual and possible mathematicians of all peoples, all ages; and this is true of all its particular forms." For Husserl, the Pythagorian theorem is self-identical, it is the same in the "original language" of Euclid, and in all further translations. Ideal objects, i.e. geometrical truths, do not experience difference in language; they remain symbolic. Ideal objectivity is able to shed its "linguistic living body", its *Sprachleib*, so that it does not "fall victim to the *seduction of language*." [Husserl's italics]. Edmund Husserl, "The Origin of Geometry" in Jacques Derrida, *Edmund Husserl's "Origin of Geometry": An Introduction* (Lincoln; University of Nebraska Press, 1989), 157-180. To the univocity of spiritual essence for which Husserl strives, to the intention to unify ideality into a whole that is complete at its origin and thus can only be experienced through a structure of repetition without loss or change, Benjamin responds, *einmal ist keinmal*, "once is never enough."

Husserl's excavations of idealities from the sedimentation of meaning that he calls historicity, are very different from Benjamin's concept of history as *Jetztzeit* -- the time of the now -- a time which does not add up to anything, does not culminate or develop into "meaning", but rather flashes up at a moment of recognition. See Peter Fenves, "The Dawn of Judgement: Spatiality, Analogy and Metaphor in Benjamin's 'On Language as Such and on Human Language,'" manuscript.

city" of human experience, the peculiar temporality of that experience is not considered with regard to its occurrence, to its eventuality in language, to its prosaic form. Thus, to address this question in a preliminary and methodical way, Benjamin wrote his dissertation on Novalis and Friedrich Schlegel, which refers phenomenology, via "Kleist," back to Kant. "For the universal philosophical interest is always simultaneously after the timeless binding nature of knowledge and after the certainty of a temporal experience, which, regarded as the immediate, if not the only object of knowledge, is judged. It is only that in its entire structure this experience did not become conscious to philosophers as a singularly temporal one, and it did not become conscious as such to Kant."[47]

> Wherever living spirit appears captured in a formed letter, there is art, there is division, material to be overcome, and tools to be used; there are plans and laws of execution. This is why we see the masters of poetry striving so vigorously to form it in the most manifold way. Poetry is an art, and when it still was not, it had to become so. And when it becomes art, it excites in those who truly love it a strong desire to know it, to comprehend the intention of the master, to grasp the nature of the work, the origin of the school, and to discover the process of its development. Art is based on knowledge, and the discipline of art is its history.[48]

---

47 Benjamin, "*Über das Programm...,*" *GS* II.1, 158.

48 Friedrich Schlegel, *Epochen der Dichtkunst* from "*Gespräch über die Poesie,*" *Kritische Friedrich-Schlegel-Ausgabe* II ed. Ernst Behler, with Jean-Jacques Anstett and Hans Eichner (Munich: Ferdinand Schöningh, 1967), 290; from "Dialogue on Poetry" trans. Ernst Behler and Roman Struc *German Romantic Criticism* ed. A. Leslie Willson (New

Art is conceptual; it can be criticised. The work of art (as "alive", and opposed to ornament, or to kitch) exhibits itself as a crime scene to be dismantled, but the nature of the transgressions committed there remain cloudy, shrouded in night mist and shadow, covered in blood.[49] As in every film of a murder mystery, a mirror

---

York: Continuum, 1982), 84.

49 Werner Hammacher's essay on Benjamin's "smashed" book *Berlin Childhood Around 1900* penetrates through this clouded landscape to the violence that stalks its script, to the violet haunting its signatory: "The name of the ghost may agree with that of the pistol shooter and future author of a *Kritik der Gewalt* (Critique of Violence) -- who published, not accidentally, under the pseudonym Detlev Holz (wood) -- and this name may have something to do with the emergence of a lasting fascination with the color violet: it is Walter." This violence is made palpable, brought to the surface of the text, where it can be re(a)d: Hammacher quotes from the "trashy novel" (*Schmöker*) section of *Berliner Kindheit*:

> To open one [of the books], would have led me into the midst of the womb, in which a changing and gloomy text clouded over, pregnant with colors. they were bubbling and flowing, but always turning into a violet that seemed to stem from the interior of an animal for slaughter. Unnamable and as laden with meaning as this outlawed violet were the titles, every one of which appeared to me more peculiar and more intimate than the previous one. Yet before I could make sure of the first, I awoke without once in the dream having even touched upon the old, boyish books.

Hammacher writes: "But...even before the blood is mentioned, a thread breaks through: the violet of the oldest encounter with a text -- an encounter that cannot be carried through -- already shows through in the letters. They are, if one condenses the dissemination of this 'word' throughout Benjamin's text into a single expression, violetters from the interior of a slaughter animal, which here, through reading, draw into the reader's interior.... The incomprehensible dictates. Whoever bows to this compulsion

is present, and its reflections are heightened beyond all immediate doubling in that they are printed, strapped to the loop of celluloid that is unending. But reflection which is heightened to the point of endless reel, intermittently, is cut.

Critique was for Kant a description of method, an act of reading, which, if properly carried out, might unveil the ground supporting the workings of a text. Benjamin turns to the early Romantics for a critique of violence in interpretation, violence that would be little more than method acting were it not for the dignity accorded to the word itself. As Benjamin writes, the word "critique" took on magical qualities for the Romantics; it became a slogan, an advertisement, an incantation for their literary activity. They took critique to be conceptual

---

turns into a word himself. And indeed into an incomprehensible word. He turns into a part of the interior of the world: into the mummery wherein the world lays open its secret.

> In good time, I learned how to disguise [*mummen*] myself in the words that were properly clouds.

Whoever disguises himself in words turns into their interior and thus into that which they 'properly' are, into clouds. But not only into the 'propriety' of the words but also into the 'core of things' - into *Mummerehlen*....The cloud is the medium of likeness. In it, all things, men, places and experiences can correspond with one another and turn into one another, and they do so whenever they enter into the *Wolke:* into the interior of *Worte*." Werner Hammacher, "The Word *Wolke* - If It Is One" trans. Peter Fenves, *Benjamin's Ground: New Readings of Walter Benjamin* ed. Rainer Nägele (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1988), 147-176.

(*begrifflich*), linguistic (*sprachlich*). For Benjamin, in no other way than through its linguisticity could what Kant presented as the transcendental aesthetic, be experienced; in no other way could the suspension of judgement accompanying a heightened consciousness be presented, than by taking the method at its word, by *enacting* critique, by taking apart the violations of a high and sober prose. Benjamin's critique of Kant, and of Novalis and Schlegel, depends upon reading the concept "synthetic judgement a priori" as *liturgy*.[50]

It is Benjamin's interest in presenting the experience of heightened consciousness as consciousness of this experience that orients his reading of philosophy in language, and orients his understanding of cognition in perception. Against the rule of the "vulgar" concept of experience that emerged in the Enlightenment, Benjamin crypts: "Philosophy is absolute experience deduced in systematic-symbolic correlation as language."[51] However, this "absolute experience" does not just stand in as another dream of a spirit seer, as Scholem might have read, or heard it: Benjamin's rigorous reduction of transcendental thinking opens up the *epoche*, the ungrounding of judgement, to the experience of words.

---

50 See Benjamin, "On Transcendental Method," *GS* VI, 52-3; "On Humor," *GS* VI, 130-31.

51 Benjamin, "On Perception," *GS* VI, 37.

> It may be assumed that Kant's interest in thwarting [literally, "tying down"] empty, fantastical flights of thought will let itself be accomplished differently than through the doctrine of the transcendental aesthetic. In contrast, the question of posing this interest to speculative cognition is much more important, and much more difficult.52

Benjamin picked up Cohen's book with the hope that a reconsideration of the relation between the categories and the forms of intuition (time and space), a relation that Kant had established as a non-relation, a strict differentiation, would lead to a more dignified concept of experience, one in which the "building blocks" of reason that are used to construct the world are themselves experienced, in which cognition is deduced from its principles, in which thinking conceptually is taken at its word.53 Speculative thinking is thinking in concepts, thinking words in their systematic-symbolic correlations, perceiving the world by experiencing its phenomenality and materiality; experiencing the world cinematically (movement-image, time-image), like an artist, by taking it apart, like an editor, or a scientist.54

---

52 Ibid., 35.

53 "Human reason so delights in constructions, that it has several times built up a tower, and then razed it to examine the nature of the foundations." Kant, *Prolegomena*, 2. See Jacques Derrida, "*Des tours de Babel*", *Difference in Translation* ed. Joseph F. Graham (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), 165-207.

54 Cf., Paul de Man, "Phenomenality and Materiality in Kant," *Hermeneutics: Questions and Prospects* ed. Gary

In the most "pregnant" sense of the word, the concept of speculative knowledge is the concept of metaphysics,

---

Shapiro and Alan Sica (Amherst: University of Massachusetts, 1984), 121-144; Henri Bergson, *Matière et Mémoire* in *Oeuvres* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1963), 161-379; Bergson, *Matter and Memory* trans. N.M. Paul and W.S. Palmer (New York: Zone Books, 1988); Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 1, L'Image-Mouvement* and *Cinema 2, L'Image-temps* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1983 and 1985, respectively); Deleuze, *Cinema 1, The Movement-Image* trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam, and *Cinema 2, The Time-Image* trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986 and 1989, respectively); Deleuze, *La Philosophie Critique de Kant* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1963); Deleuze, *Kant's Critical Philosophy: The Doctrine of the Faculties* trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).

It is not my intent here to take up and give de Man's "still-introductory and expository" reading of Benjamin's critique of Kant the attention it deserves. However, as a brief note, his reading corrects Deleuze's interpretation of the transcendental aesthetic's place in Kant's critical philosophy: "The transcendental judgment that is to decide on the possibility of existence of the sublime (as the spatial articulation of the infinite) functions metaphorically, or ideologically, when it subreptitiously defines itself in terms of its other, namely of extension and totality. If space lies outside the sublime and remains there, and if space is nevertheless a necessary condition (or cause) for the sublime to come into being,then the principle of the sublime is a metaphysical principle that mistakes itself for a transcendental one." Paul de Man, "Phenomenality...," 128. Although de Man's conclusion is attentive to the distinction Benjamin raises between intellectual intuition and linguisticity in thinking, he polarizes this distinction into an opposition between *philosophy* and *language* that settles on figurality and trope as the "deciding" moment in reading, a polarization that ignores the differentiation Benjamin makes in his book on the Romantics, a differentiation between *discursivity* and *linguisticity*. Benjamin is keen to the "prosaic materiality of the letter" in Kant, but he does not deny this materiality an ability *to open up phenomenally* into a moment of (re)cognition, an opening up that takes place through the *concept*. De Man: "The bottom line, in Kant as well as in Hegel, is the prosaic materiality of the letter and no degree of obfuscation or ideology can transform this materiality into the phenomenal cognition of aesthetic judgement."(144).

the concept of scientific experience, Benjamin writes.[55] "It is exceedingly strange that in the interest of a-prioricity and logicity Kant makes a sharp discontinuity and separation there where, out of the same interest, the pre-Kantian philosophers looked to create the most intimate continuity and unity; namely, to create the most intimate connection between cognition and experience through speculative deduction of the world."[56] Benjamin's

---

55 According to Benjamin, Kant wrote a metaphysics of nature, an a priori constitution of the things of nature that is based entirely on the determination of the cognition of nature (through the determination of the categories, and the forms of intuition, time and space), without any recourse to experience, including, of course, psychological experience. The separation of the categories from the forms of intuition produced the so-called "material of the senses," Benjamin writes, and separated metaphysics from experience, a separation between pure cognition and experience that would be compensated for in the "feeling of dizziness" that is the *Third Critique;* a separation that prevented him from discovering a single, theoretical center of cognition whose all-powerful gravitational force would have been able "to rip all of experience into it," like an evaporating black hole. Kant's fear of confronting knowledge of experience without first employing the word "transcendental" results in a codification of fear, a work of art that causes its readers to swoon. Benjamin's suggestion that Kant's interest in cutting off empty, fantastical flights of thought might be accomplished in a way other than through the transcendental aesthetic, depends upon distinguishing the "unmediable and natural concept of experience from the concept of experience as a cognitive-correlation." This question is the question theoretical physics poses to itself today; it is also the question posed by modern art. Benjamin, "On Perception," 33-38.

56 Benjamin, "On Perception," 35. See Yirmiyahu Yovel, *Spinoza and Other Heretics* (Princeton: Princeton University press, 1989).

interest in maintaining the possibility of a metaphysics for the future of philosophy leads him to explore the concept of art criticism.

> When a painter sits before a landscape and, as we are in the habit of saying, "depicts" it, or paints it "off" [*abmalt*], then this landscape itself does not emerge as his picture; at the most one could describe it as the symbol of his artistic connection, and certainly, in such a way one would lend to it a higher dignity than the picture itself, and this would be justified./The pre-Kantian confusion of experience with cognition of experience still ruled Kant as well, but the world-picture had transformed itself.[57]

In one sense it can be said that the early German Romantics pick up the trace of this transformed world-picture where phenomenology leaves off; however, their writings are led by the writhings of a divining rod.[58] A philosophy of reflection leads the way to a method of deducing the world, as a deducibility of the experience of that world learned through knowledge of the experience.[59]

---

57 "For the intuition of philosophy, absolute experience is language; language understood as a symbolic-systematic concept. It specifies itself in ways, or forms of language, one of which is perception; the doctrine of perception like with all unmediable appearances of absolute experience, belong to the philosophical sciences in the widest sense." Benjamin, "On Perception," 36-8.

58 A divining rod; a magic wand. "*Der Buchstab' ist der echte Zauberstab*," from a letter from Schlegel to Novalis, quoted by Benjamin, *Der Begriff*, 48.

59 Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* was conceived as just such a science of the experience of consciousness; Benjamin's "return" to Kant insists upon demonstrating the failure of all methods that "progress", or aim to progress, to knowledge of truth in its form as "Absolute Spirit", or the like, as a failure inherent to the ideol-

Benjamin was well aware of the stakes that were raised in pursuit of such sleuthing: The *Athenaeum* fragments he critiques in his dissertation are 451 in number, precisely the temperature in degrees Fahrenheit at which book paper begins to burn. The mass of fragments that is Romantic critical poetry is subjected to the *laws of chemistry*, which combust to reveal a residue, a physical remain, the cinders of memory that might one day matter, might one day step forth as the matter of (meta)physics.[60]

---

ogy of subjectivity -- the uncritical attitude subjective idealism takes with regard to time, to the temporality of its phenomenality. Fichte's philosophy counts as such a failure, as Benjamin presents it in relief from the Romantics. See Gunar Musik, *Die erkenntnistheoretischen Grundlagen der Ästhetik Walter Benjamins und ihr Fortwirken in der Konzeption des Passagenwerks* (Frankfurt a/M: Peter Lang, 1985).

60 Exactly such alchemal designs lay the foundation for the 46- or so many miles of Superconducting Supercollider now laying dormant in Texas. It is as yet unknown what speeds must be achieved in order to persuade protons to divulge the primary secret of matter, that of mass. "Why does matter have the peculiar property of mass?" ask today's physicists. We lack a theory of gravity equivalent to our current subscription to the laws of quantum mechanics: We lack consciousness of the *present*, which is historical consciousness, knowledge of the elemental connections that would give information about the past and the future -- we lack a metaphysics. As such, a "black hole" is situated as the end point of time and space, from which even the speed of light cannot escape. On a scale of destruction that can only be compared with the burning of books and the razing of temples, one wonders about the fate of the word as it faces such a devouring of "information."

Speculation has it that perhaps this loss of information, this devouring combustion taking place in a black hole, might be felt in the universe, felt as a breakdown in the laws of quantum theory, which could only be felt as a certain dizziness, a sublime swoon. The black hole puts into question not only the law of the conservation of energy, but also the law of causality; namely, that nothing

Pyromania: Hypertroping--or, *heiter bewegt*

"What's commonly called reason is only a subspecies of it: namely, the thin and watery sort. There's also a thick, fiery kind that actually makes wit witty, and gives an elasticity and electricity to a solid style."[61] For

---

can travel faster than the speed of light. The dizzy speculations resulting from such an abyss are put forth with a violence of metaphor and analogy, a violence of interpretation that seeks to represent a paradox of three-dimensionality with the mathematical tools of one-dimensionality: In the March issue of *Physical Review*, Dr. Andrew Strominger of the University of California at Santa Barbara, and Dr. Tom Banks and Martin O'Laughlin of Rutgers University suggested that when black holes evaporate, they may leave a remnant of Planck length behind, to which the three gave the name "cornucopion" as a way to imagine a path leading away from the fate posed by the real possibility of the destruction of space. A cornucopion is a figure easily imagined, like a sci-fi fantasy world that appears as a point in space, without dimension (an evaporated black hole), but *which opens up from within* into a horn of plenty, into plenty of room, an infinite storehouse where all of the lost and forgotten information of the universe may be found, and where we must look to seek our fate. G.A. Taubes, "The Case of the Disappearing Black Hole," *The New York Times*, March 30, 1993, C-1. Cf. the investigations of Oedipa Maas in Thomas Pynchon, *The Crying of Lot 49* (New York: Harper Collins, 1986).

"If you want to penetrate into the heart of physics, then let yourself be initiated into the mysteries of poetry." Friedrich Schlegel, "Ideas" [99], trans. Peter Firchow *Friedrich Schlegel's "Lucinde" and the Fragments* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1971), 250.

And further, to question the questioner: "*Gibt es auf Erden ein Mass?*" asks Hölderlin. "*Es gibt keines.*" ("Is there a mass, a measure on earth? There is none.") Hölderlin, *Selected Verse* ed. and trans. Michael Hamburger (London: Anvil Press Poetry, 1986), 246.

61 Friedrich Schlegel, "*Kritische Fragmente*" [104], *Kritische Friedrich-Schlegel-Ausgabe* II, 159; "Critical Fragments", *"Lucinde" and the Fragments*, 155.

Benjamin, Schlegel's way of thinking moved like a fireball across the page: "It was that of an individual for whom every single insight set the entire mass of ideas into motion, who united phlegma with glowing embers in the expression of his spiritual as well as of his bodily physiognomy."[62] Here, Schlegel figures as an animated Kant for Benjamin, a cartoon version of the phlegmatic type, whose thinking caricatures the idea of critical philosophy by bringing it literally, graphically, into view.

> In relation to intellectual intuition, Schlegel's mode of thought, in opposition to those many mystics, is characterized through indifference to the role of intuition; he does not call on intellectual intuitions and ecstatic states. Rather, in order to fashion together a formula, he seeks an unintuited intuition of the system, and he finds it in language. Terminology is the sphere in which his thought moves beyond discursivity and intuitiveness. For the terminus, the concept contains for him the germ of the system; it is at bottom nothing other than the preformed system itself. Schlegel's thought is an absolutely conceptual one, that is, a linguistic one.[63]

Through the art of Schlegel and Novalis, Benjamin presents art as a medium of reflection: It is conceptual; it can be criticized. "Knowledge in the reflection-medium of art is the task of art critique....Critique is an ex-

---

62 Benjamin, *Der Begriff*, 50.

63 Ibid., 47.

periment on the artwork through which its reflection is awoken to the point where it is itself brought into consciousness and into knowledge."[64] Benjamin prefaces his discussion of the early Romantics' concept of criticism with an analysis of Fichte's speculative philosophy, in order to illustrate what affinities the Romantics shared with his concept of reflective thinking, and to show where their writing departs from his.[65] Fichte's philosophy of reflection is closest to the Romantics' theory of criticism in his 1794 "On the Concept of the Doctrine of Knowledge, or of so-called Philosophy," Benjamin writes.[66]

---

64 Ibid., 65.

65 "The French Revolution, Fichte's philosophy, and Goethe's *Meister* are the greatest tendencies of the age. Whoever is offended by this juxtaposition, whoever cannot take any revolution seriously that isn't noisy and materialistic, hasn't yet achieved a lofty, broad perspective on the history of mankind. Even in our shabby histories of civilization, which usually resemble a collection of variants accompanied by a running commentary for which the original classical text has been lost; even there many a little book, almost unnoticed by the noisy rabble at the time, plays a greater role than anything they did." Schlegel, quoting himself from the *Athenaeum* in the essay "On Incomprehensibility," trans. Peter Firchow "*Lucinde" and the Fragments,* 262-63.

66 Benjamin clearly states that his dissertation is neither meant to be another attempt to grasp the "essence" of Romanticism, nor is it meant to be an instance of historicism, as a history of the concept of criticism, for instance. His dissertation is critical: It poses a philosophical-historical question to material whose existence is linked to the quesiton itself; it is not an arbitrary investigation.

Samuel Weber has given an excellent translation and interpretation for "*Kunstkritik*" in English: "The literal translation of Benjamin's title would be: *'The Concept of Art-Criticism in German Romanticism.'* Art Criticism, of course, in English refers to the plastic arts; *'Kunst'*,

This book describes a relationship between the reflective nature of thinking and its intuitive character; Fichte's interpretation of Kant presents a system of reflection in discursive form that for Benjamin resonates in the writings of the Romantics linguistically: This resonance resonates with a difference. The Romantics share with Fichte the epistemological grounding of thinking in reflection; however, Fichte is interested in reflection for the interest it shows in systematically determining (intuiting) absolute knowledge, conceived as knowledge of

---

for Schlegel and Novalis, however, as Benjamin notes, means primarily, if not exclusively, what we call 'literature'. At the same time, 'literature' (*Dichtung*, *Poesie*) is understood by the early German Romantics as the exemplary instance of all art, and indeed, Benjamin explicitly points to the problem of this exemplification, which does not sufficiently articulate the difference between individual art forms. ("A fundamental deficiency of Romantic theory of art is that 'poetry' and 'art' are not sufficiently distinguished," p. 14.) This tendency to conflate art in general with literature in particular is also responsible for the current use of the terms 'criticism' and 'critical theory,' to designate both the interpretation of literature and at the same time aesthetics and hermeneutics in general. Hence, the most economical and accurate English translation of *'Kunstkritik'* today is simply: 'criticism.'" Samuel Weber, "Walter Benjamin: The Romantic Concept of Criticism," manuscript.

Although I am in agreement with Weber on the necessity of articulating the difference between individual art forms, I feel it is useful in translation to keep the "art" of *Kunstkritik* in view, precisely because Benjamin's presentation of raising consciousness depends upon discerning the relation between the idea of art and the singularity of artworks, be they fragments, buildings, films, paintings, poems, photographs, or performance spaces. The situation of the idea of art, and under that, of individual works of art in his writing, remains central.

the "Absolute." The Romantics, on the other hand, see the intuitive character of reflective thinking in terms of its experience, in terms of experiencing the system of reflection, in terms of reflecting thinking to a point of insight.[67] The positive, systematic nature of reflection, the "immediate" and "unfinished" character of thinking that reflection produces, and on which the Romantic concept of criticism is based, is sacrificed in Fichte for the sake of a narrative, Benjamin writes, for a plot structure that orients thinking into a particular direction: This narrative structure exhibits itself as the essence of narrative, which douses the viciousness out of a "thick, fiery" reason, by watering it down with the willfulness of subjectivity.

It is the way in which the case is handled -- as the managed intrigues of a *Tathandlung* on Fichte's part, as opposed to the sober investigation of a *Tatsache* -- that set the Romantics off his work.[68] For the Romantics, the

---

67 "The moment the history of philosophy in Kant -- if not for the first time, then certainly never so explicitly and emphatically -- had simultaneously maintained the possibility of intellectual intuition for thinking, and its impossibility in the realm of experience, a multifarious and almost feverish endeavor steps forth to win this concept back for philosophy as guarantee of its highest demands. This struggle was initiated foremost by Fichte, Schlegel, Novalis and Schelling." Benjamin, *Der Begriff*, 19.

68 Ibid., 29. "Whereas the current interpretation of criticism is of the most subjective sort, for the Romantics criticism was regulative of subjectivity, arbitrariness and willfulness in the formation of

levels of reflection through which thinking moves, and is intensified, describe the act of reflection as "self-reflection," which is anything but the reflection of an "I," anything but reflection which is caught and controlled by an act of positing, by an act of subjective *Setzung*.[69] As Madame de Staël said of Fichte's "Doctrine of

---

works....[For them,] value is immanent to factual [*sachliche*] investigation and knowledge of the work." (p. 80)

69 "Intellectual intuition is thinking that produces its object, while the meaning of reflection for the Romantics is thinking that produces its form." Benjamin stresses the point that reflection is not a subjective relation to the Absolute produced through the process of self-relation and negation that is won in that act of positing (*das Setzen*). Reflection is "an absolutely systematic thinking, a conceptualizing (*ein Begreifen*). What is principally "new" about Romantic reflection for Benjamin, is that its structure of conceptualization is not rooted ultimately in the priority of a constitutive subject; its structure is fundamentally ambiguous, on two levels. The first can be described as an ambiguity between the poles of subject and object, and the second between the intensification or heightening, and the simultaneous decomposition or disintegration of reflective thinking. In order to demonstrate the productive nature of this ambiguity for thinking, to demonstrate how the Romantic concept of reflection (and further, criticism) is regulative of subjectivity, Benjamin takes apart the three moments, or levels of reflection as they appear in Schlegel.

What Schlegel calls "meaning" Benjamin calls the "first level" of reflection in Fichte, thinking which takes that which is thought as its material, or object; thinking as form. Second, there is "reason" in Schlegel's (thick) sense of the word, thinking which takes meaning as its object, or the thinking of thinking, which makes the form of the reflection self-reflection, self-knowledge; or, as Benjamin puts it, "thinking secures thereby its dignity as method." But it is out of the third level of reflection from which a thinking arises that produces its form, not its object. Pure thinking that is not bounded by a constitutive subject is broken down, *zersetzt* into the ambiguity of a subject/object split, into a constitutive ambivalence that finds reflection (the thinking of thinking) in the position of being either the object of

Knowledge," it is with Fichte like with Baron von Münchhausen, who pulls himself across the river with a single arm.[70] Just as in his response to Buber, Benjamin is critical of writing that does not respect the relationship of the dignity of the word and the dignity of action by putting the one in the service of the other. Such writing only results in a crude "grasping about" for the

---

thinking or its subject (or both). This is the danger, the regressus ad infinitum that pure reflection entails, and back from which the Romantics do not shrink into a reliance on the security of a proper space (the space of the subject). Benjamin, *Der Begriff*, 18-40.

Obviously, Benjamin's reading of Romantic reflection radically destabilizes the ruling interpretation of Romanticism, which operates according to the logic of subjectivity. The mediality of reflection refers to its lack of a grounding in ontology: The "beginning" of reflection is a leap, a spring out of "nothing" as it were. Reflection does not initiate itself out of existence; thinking "springs" into action, it is an originary act, which is not already "there" (*Dasein*). Cf. Rodolphe Gasché, *The Tain of the Mirror: Derrida and the Philosophy of Reflection* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard, 1986).

Also, Benjamin's reading of the "emptiness" of positing subjectivity (Fichte's "Ich" succeeds as an act of will, the most empty act of all) anticipates Slavoj Zizek's reinterpretation of the Hegelian subject out of the lessons of Lacanian lack, and undermines even the interpretation of a split subject by destabilizing (temporalizing) the place of the real, by asking after the speed deferred by the space of the *objet petit a*. See Slavoj Zizek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 1989).

70 Hans Eichner, *Einleitung* to Schlegel's "*Charakteristiken und Kritiken*," *Kritische Friedrich-Schlegel-Ausgabe* II, xxiii. In 1797 Novalis wrote a cautious letter to Schlegel: "You were chosen to guard against Fichte's magic of the aspiring self-thinker." Benjamin, *Der Begriff*, 35.

Absolute, writing that does not recognize (its) limits, which is Catholic writing.[71] It is telling that Benjamin limits his sources in the dissertation to a miniscule portion of Romantic texts. He centers his research on the Schlegels' *Athenaeum* and on Novalis's *Pollen* and other fragments: For Benjamin, the *Windischmann* lectures Schlegel delivered in Cologne and Paris from 1804 to 1806 are a "compromise between the thinking of the young Schlegel that is rich in ideas, and the Restauration philosophy of one who later would become the Secretary to Metternich."[72]

Irony certainly has its place in Schlegel's writing; however, it is a concept opposed to that of criticism, which for Benjamin is a concept that reveals what is *objective* and *sober* in art, that which is divorced from subjective (willful) determination, that which is divorced from caricature. The Romantics completely subjected themselves to the liberal practice of reflection, to an activity of reflection that jumps ambivalently from one level of meaning to the next in a work, mediating the sys-

---

71 Schlegel consciously turns away from the "revolutionary fury of objectivity" that marks the ideas of his youth, a reaction par excellence, that culminates "in the rigor of a Catholic exit," writes Benjamin. Irony is the sign for the sensuousity of subjectivity experienced symbolically; it is directly opposed to the sober, objective writing that characterized the epoch of Schlegel's youth. Ibid., 81.

72 Benjamin, *Der Begriff*, 34.

tem of reflection as it simultaneously condenses that system into the linguistic node of the concept.[73] As such, their thinking has been judged as being "confused:"

> If art as the absolute medium of reflection is the systematic foundational concept of the *Athenaeum* years, it finds itself continually substituted through other descriptions, which evokes the semblance of [Schlegel's] thinking as one of confused polymorphicity. The Absolute appears now as formation, then as harmony, now as genius or irony, then as religion, organization or history. And it is undeniable that in other connections it

---

73 For Schlegel, reflection constitutes the absolute, as a medium, although he himself did not have the expression "medium" at his disposal, writes Benjamin. Reflection is at one and the same time medium itself, and medium as that through which reflection moves: i.e. movement in itself. In a statement which proves that he had properly "digested" Kant's distinction between the mathematical and the dynamic sublime, Schlegel describes the ambiguous movement of reflection as an alteration between powerful intensification or heightening and infinite determination or break-down, the movement of the sublime: "Turning back into itself, the I of the I, is potentiality; 'livening up' or extroversion ["that is to say, the *lowering* of the level of reflection" - note W.B.], is mathematic's pulling out of the roots." Novalis's characterization of this movement is analogous: "Romantic philosophy...successive elevation and degradation." Benjamin underscores the medial nature of reflection; he falls on an expression from Novalis: "Self penetration" (*Selbstdurchdringung*), which marks for Novalis the sign of a future world, a new epoch of humanity, of world history, in which reflection figures as the beginning of a never-ending process of the self penetration of spirit, of "chaos," as its structuration, in levels.

"First thinking originates with reflection, on which will be reflected. Therefore one can say, every simple reflection originates absolutely out of a point of indifference. Whatever metaphysical quality one may ascribe to this indifference point of reflection, remains open." To repeat, according to Benjamin, the point of indifference out of which reflection arises as form for the early Romantics is not the "I" of subjectivity, it is the objective idea of art. Benjamin, *Der Begriff*, 37-39.

> would certainly be conceivable to substitute one of the other determinations - therefore not art, but history, for instance - for the Absolute, insofar as its character as medium of reflection remained discernable.[74]

Benjamin's contention that Kant's interest in paralyzing "empty, fantastical flights of thought" could be accomplished in a different way than through the transcendental aesthetic -- that the question of the sublime should be posed to the active experience reason goes through in cognition, by lighting up that experience as a linguistic one -- shows itself schematically in his dissertation. This schematic, skeletal structure is fleshed out by the body of his writing as it occurs through the

---

74 Ibid. "At the time of the *Athenaeum,* the Absolute was for Friedrich Schlegel the system in the figure of art. But instead of trying to grasp this Absolute systematically, he tried, rather, to grasp the system absolutely." Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy characterize the Romantic attempt to absolutely systematize "system-work," "auto-production," "the auto-recognition of the Ideal as the subject's own form." Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Literary Absolute: The Theory of Literature in German Romanticism* trans. Philip Barnard and Cheryl Lester (Albany: SUNY Press, 1988), 33. As has been mentioned, Benjamin is not engaged in a critique of German Romanticism according to a theory of "literature", but according to the concept of criticism, which makes his study an historical-philosophical one, not a literary one. As such, he interprets what Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy describe as "auto-production", Schlegel's attempt to grasp the system of reflection absolutely, as the essence of his mysticism. Schlegel's question, "are not all systems individuals?" represents for Benjamin Schlegel's self-consciousness of the mystical impulse in his writing, figured as the attribution of an intuitive character to the system, a character which could be penetrated in its entirety, known from within. See footnotes 78 and 79, below.

years of his life. Benjamin's writing marks its way with the chalk and the charcoal, the stone tablets and the erasable bond given to the task of raising consciousness. His dissertation is a primer to the testament that this task can only proceed by way of -- that it constitutes itself through the remains of -- burnt paper, broken stones, repeated erasure, and the severance that comes with so-many snuffings-out of light.

It can be said that the German Romantics line the velvet underground of consciousness with magic jewels. The linguisticity of reflection crystallizes into the magic of *gramma* for them, into the beautiful face of cryptography, into the cultic aspects of the word. "The letter [*Buchstab*] is the true magic wand [*Zauberstab*]."[75] For Benjamin, conceptual thinking is transformed into mystical terminology by the Romantics, and this terminology takes on comic proportion, playing out its leading role in the ever-cruel form of the joke.[76] The concept of criticism is one of the Romantics' most magically incanted words: "To be critical meant pushing the elevation of thought so

---

75 Benjamin, *Der Begriff*, 48; he quotes from Schlegel's correspondence with Novalis. Novalis, *Briefwechsel mit Friedrich und August Wilhelm, Charlotte und Caroline Schlegel* ed. J.M. Raich (Mainz: 1880). For a structuralist interpretation of language-magic in Benjamin, see Winfried Menninghaus, *Walter Benjamins Theorie der Sprachmagie* (Frankfurt a/M: Suhrkamp, 1980).

76 See Benjamin, "*Der Humor*", *GS* VI, 130-31. There is no room here to discuss thoroughly the question of laughter.

far all beyond all ties that, magically as it were, knowledge of the true took off from insight into the falsity of such ties."[77] "Critique" is one of the most frequently repeated hieroglyphs in the writing of Schlegel and Novalis, alongside hieroglyphs like "transcendental poetry," "irony," "arabesque," "romantic." But catachresis as a means of intuition mythologizes knowledge of the Absolute by overloading it with character traits, overnaming it, personifying it through the figure of individuality -- this is the "meaning" of the joke. As Benjamin writes in the essay "Fate and Character," which he completed only a few months after having finished his dissertation, "it is impossible to form an uncontradictory concept of the exterior of an active person whose core is addressed from the point of view of character."[78] "The study of physiognomy, like that of comedy, was a manifestation of the new age of genius," an age of speechlessness that fell quickly into verbosity.[79]

---

77 Benjamin, *Der Begriff*, 51. I would like to thank Samuel Weber for his comments here on the translation.

78 Benjamin, "*Schicksal und Charakter*," *GS* II.1, 173.

79 Ibid., 178. See Benjamin's letter to Hugo von Hofmannsthal of January 13, 1924, reprinted in part by the editors of the *Collected Works* in the notes to "Fate and Character," in which Benjamin writes of his struggle to unearth words from their encasement in abstract concepts. This struggle is not one of armed conflict. It proceeds by way of excursion. "It is of great meaning to me, if I understand correctly, that you so articulately recognize and share the conviction which leads my literary attempts. It is namely that conviction, that each truth has its house, its ancestral palace in language; it is established

Wit jumps infectiously, like an electric spark from one subject/object pole to the next, igniting consciousness into a heightened state of awareness, by actually enlightening reason, by lightening its load, relieving it of the heavy burden of being tied to the identity and feelings of a subject, lighting paths along which an anonymous thinking may find room to travel.

> We cannot contemplate ourselves, the I always escapes us. Though by all means we are able to

---

out of the oldest words. Regarding truth so founded, insights into the individual realms of knowledge remain subaltern, so long as they are content to get by nomadically here and there in the realm of language, caught by its sign character, which impresses irresponsible willfulness upon their terminology. Against this, philosophy experiences the useful reality of an order, due to which its insights aim for very determined words, and under whose magnetic influence words loosen themselves from the crusty surface of the concept, betraying the forms in their closed, linguistic life."

Benjamin explains to Hofmannsthal that such a manner of proceeding describes his attempt of a few years previous, to free the old words fate and character from the slavery of abstract terminology. But "today" such an attempt betrays to him the difficulties inherent in such a "frontal attack" (*Vorstoss*). "Namely there where the view to really loosen the torpid concept-tank proves to be insufficient, it finds itself attempting, in order not to fall back into the barbarity of formal speech, not so much to excavate, but to *drill through* the linguistic and thoughtful depth which lies in the intention of such research" [emphasis mine]. Such a "forcing of views" is the mark of today's unfine pedantry, Benjamin writes, a forcefulness with regard to language that he no longer dared to risk: "*[S]o würde ich den Frontalangriff auf sie kaum mehr wagen, sondern, wie ich es mit dem 'Schicksal' in der Wahlverwandtschaftenarbeit hielt, den Dingen in Exkursen begegnen.*" He approaches a study of fate precisely by side-stepping its face, lighting it from the position of its shadow, comedy. *Briefe* I, 329-330.

> think ourselves. For to our astonishment we appear to ourselves as infinite, because in habitual life we feel so entirely finite.[80]

About fifteen years after the writing of his dissertation, Benjamin reflects upon this quote by Schlegel after hearing it echo in the lyrics of Baudelaire, placing it under the heading of a fragment he may or may not have wanted to have included in a revised edition of *One-Way Street*, under the heading "Foundation of Morality:"

> The highest moral interest of the subject is to remain anonymous to itself. 'Lord, allow me to contemplate my heart and my body without disgust,' as Baudelaire puts it. This wish is only able to be fulfilled if the subject remains anonymous to itself. In the good deed it avoids making acquaintance, avoids familiarity with itself. In the bad it gets to know itself -- and fundamentally. The anonymity of the moral subject touches on a double reservation. First: I have everything to expect from myself, I am capable of everything. And second: I am capable of everything, but can prove nothing to myself.[81]

Anonymity is the "black hole", the once and future bright star of identity that lights up the universe as it is governed uncritically by law, by the law as it appears under various alibi, as it is dressed up in the guise of different forms (two of which go by the name "ethics" and

---

80 Ibid., 32. Benjamin is quoting Schlegel from the *Windischmann* lectures. Friedrich Schlegel, *Philosophische Vorlesungen aus den Jahren 1804 bis 1806*, II ed. C.J.H. Windischmann (Bonn: 1846), 13.

81 Benjamin, "*Grundlage der Moral*," *GS* VI, 59-60.

"aesthetics"), by the law as it goes out in search of character witnesses to cover its traces. Schlegel had no understanding for the systematic worth of ethics, writes Benjamin, "the interest in aesthetics outweighed everything."[82] However, to the extent that the Romantics set out to break the laws of "aesthetics," to break down literary forms into their elemental structures as a way of gaining insight into the connections between elements, and as a way of imagining new configurations and hybrid combinations of those elements, their critical practice was revolutionary.[83] The writing of critical fragments under alias was an anonymous practice of writing, that

---

82 Benjamin, *Der Begriff*, 44. Schlegel's conception of philosophy was formed between alternating poles of reflection, between simple absolute reflection, and simple originary reflection, Benjamin writes. It begins, in Schlegel's own words, "like the epic poem, in the middle," which is to say, *no where in particular*. "That philosophy begins in the middle means that it identifies none of its objects with originary reflection, but rather in them sees a middle in the medium." This indeterminacy of origin, which finds the foundation of reflective thought in mediation, frees up thinking. It opens up the possibility for thinking to redefine itself, to determine itself in terms of another. Both "ethics" and "aesthetics" spring up out of reflection, lending particular forms to the formlessness of thinking, forms which are flexible enough (*die lebendig sind*) to transform themselves, figures well-formed enough to disfigure themselves, characters that can afford to *lose face*.

83 "There are so many people nowadays who are too tender and softhearted to be able to see tragedies, and too noble and dignified to go to comedies -- a tangible proof of the delicate morality of a century that only tried to slander the French Revolution." Schlegel, "Athenaeum Fragments" [251], *"Lucinde" and the Fragments*, 197.

sacrificed the formal beauty of poetry for an idea less well-formed than itself, that of something new, something novel. The novel was the crime of the new century, the *roman policier* of legal breakdown, the prosaic breakdown of aesthetic form. Benjamin writes his dissertation on the Romantic criticism of the *Athenaeum* years not to celebrate the fiery excesses of its "anarchy," but to critically present its reflection on the idea of form/formlessness. Romantic criticism is devoted to the dismemberment of individual forms, to the practice of an ethics of non-identity oriented to the freedom of an idea, an idea which took the form of art, and whose unity reverberated temporally as the continuum of forms.[84]

> The legitimation of critique, which stands opposite all poetic products as an objective instance, consists in its prosaic nature. Critique is the

---

84 "Romantic poetry is therefore the idea of poetry itself; it is the continuum of art forms...the idea of poetry conceived by the Romantics is that of representational forms. (*die Darstellungsformen*)." It is precisely the focus on "forms of presentation" that attracts Benjamin to the Romantic concept of art as a reflection-medium and critique as the completion (destruction) of the artwork, as the future's (metaphysics') response to transcendentalism, to the transcendental aesthetic. Investigation into the representation of form keeps reason from flying off into fanciful flights of the imagination; the presentation of form keeps reason *from losing its balance* when faced with formlessness. "[R]eflection is not a subjectively reflective practice, like judgement; rather it lies contained in the representational form of the work, and unfolds itself in criticism, in order finally to complete itself in the regular (lawful -- *gesetzmassigen*) continuum of forms." Benjamin, *Der Begriff*, 88-9.

> presentation [*Darstellung*] of the prosaic kernel in every work. Thereby the concept of presentation retains its chemical sense as the production of a material through a determinate process to which others are subject.[85]

Police

"If poetry wants to extend itself, it can only do so to the degree that it limits itself; to the degree that it pulls itself together, that it simultaneously lets go what it has to burn, and congeals."[86] An autonomous limitation of reflection occurs within art/literature at its center, a "point of indifference" probably rotten at its core, from which reflection springs and into which it is sucked, when those who desire to know its enigmatic power attempt to lift the veil shrouding its secret, like so many novices of Saïs, or so many eager quantum physicists. On November 8, 1918, Benjamin wrote to Ernst Schoen: "My work on the dissertation is no lost time, even if I can find no good reason for having taken it on myself. What I am learning through it, namely, a glimpse of the relationship of truth to history, will, in any case, be least pro-

---

85 Ibid., 109.

86 Benjamin quotes from a letter Novalis wrote to Friedrich's brother, August Wilhelm, on January 12, 1798: "*Wenn die Poesie sich erweitern will, so kann sie es nur, indem sie sich beschränkt; in dem sie sich zusammenzieht, ihren Feuerstoff gleichsam fahren läßt und gerinnt.*" Ibid., 101.

nounced, but hopefully it will be noticable to sharp readers."[87]

For Benjamin, criticism is devoted to the self-knowledge of art, realized as the cognition of its limits, to the idea of form that emerges via the destruction of individual artworks. Criticism is a dismantling that reveals the structure of form, of the idea, as that of the presentation of form: Critique takes artworks apart in the interest of furthering the task of representation, which is an endless task.[88] Romantic criticism is positive in its destruction, unlike the modern concept of the same: It does not judge works of art, does not subject them to arbitrary rules of taste or moral standards; it deconstructs them, and in so doing, raises consciousness of their connection to the idea of art, raises consciousness of their connection to something *real*, which is knowledge of things grasped in their relations, or the *becoming* of things (in) themselves.[89]

---

87 Benjamin, *Briefe*, 202-3. It is true that Benjamin hasards only a glimpse into the relationship of truth to history in his dissertation, but this glance takes in enough for him to want to stare hard at this relationship, a sighting that takes place in his next major study, *Der Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels*.

88 See Benjamin, "*Die unendliche Aufgabe*," *GS* VI, 51-52.

89 "The theory of object knowledge is determined by the unfolding of the concept of reflection in its meaning for the object. The object, like everything real, lies in the medium of reflection." Benjamin stresses the fact that the philosophy of reflection employed by the Romantics is modeled after Aristotle's schema of thinking -- *noesis noesos* -- the schema in which the two basic moments of all

"The detective story, whose interest lies in a logical

---

reflection find themselves most definitively expressed: self-employment or self-activity, and recognition. Thinking alone is the medium of reflection which can at one and the same time think itself and reflect itself, immediately recognizing itself. For the Romantics, the a priori of simple reflection, the first, originary, material level of thinking is already fulfilled, realized, completed. "On the foundation of this axiom the medium of reflection becomes a system, the methodological absolute becomes ontological." Each determination of the medium of reflection -- nature, art, religion, etc. -- retains its character as a point of connection in a reflective relationship to the Absolute, while simultaneously and "substantially" figuring, knowing itself. Yet the medium of self-reflection does not need to be fixed by the face of an ideal subject, as has been shown.

The anonymity of self-reflection is perhaps best seen from the point of view of the object. Indeed, Benjamin's insistence upon the point of indifference that marks the site of object knowledge and of subjective knowing alike, is illustrated by a quote from Novalis that reemerges remembered in Benjamin's later writings: "In all attributes [*Prädikaten*] in which we see the fossil, it sees us." Novalis captured in the clearest figure the essence of objective knowledge as one of self-knowledge, Benjamin writes: "*die Wahrnehmbarkeit einer Aufmerksamkeit*," "the perceptibility of an attentiveness," or, "perceptibility, an alertness, a vigilance."

Knowledge of the object outside of self-knowledge is not possible according to Romantic principles: The subject-object correlation is suspended in self-knowledge. "However, reality does not form an aggregate of monads closed in themselves, which can not meet each other in any real relationship." All centers of reflection, all unities in reality outside of the Absolute are relative to one another; they are open and related to one another such that the *stepping-up of the tempo* of reflection, the intensification of its rhythm, causes them to incorporate other centers of reflection into knowledge of themselves. Not only humans have this potential to embody other forms of knowledge within their own; in the Romantic imagination, natural things can also experience raised consciousness.

Benjamin describes the incorporation of differenct ways of knowing that occurs in the raising of consciousness as a "coincidence" between the varying speeds of the *strahlen* of things, the "radiation/flashing/shining out" of things, a rhythm with which humans can connect. "Accordingly everything that represents itself to man as his knowledge of a thing, is the reflex of thinking's self-

construction that the crime story as such need not have,...came into being when this most decisive of all conquests of a person's incognito [the invention of photography] had been accomplished. Since then the end of efforts to capture a man in his speech and actions has not been in sight."[90] Benjamin acutely grasped what value photography would have to a world in which action -- performance, work, acting -- finds itself increasingly divorced from the fate of individuals. Who one is is no longer defined by what one does, activity is not determinate of character. We are constantly on the lookout for the third man, who holds the key to solving the crime, to unveiling the anonymity responsible for keeping safe the secrets of the mystery of identity.[91] Benjamin recognized that the death blow photography dealt to portrait miniature would be avenged by Warhol's soup cans --

---

knowledge itself in him." However, a backwards motion does not correspond to the heightening of consciousness: "Alone a breaking-off, an interruption [*ein Abbrechen*]...is thinkable." Benjamin, *Der Begriff*, 54-7.

Cf. Benjamin, "*Lehre vom Ähnlichen*" and "*Über das mimetische Vermögen*," *GS* II.1, 204-210 and 210-213, respectively.

90 Benjamin, "The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire," trans. Harry Zohn *Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism* (London: Verso, 1983), 42-48.

91 And keep in mind that the *Third Man* just might show up as *The Man Who Fell To Earth*. See Nicolas Roeg's film.

"humanity" demands to look itself in the face, to see itself mirrored in the reflection that is the medium of art, even after "humanity" has become faceless, even after it has been reduced to the point of identifying itself with identifying labels.[92]

---

92 Benjamin took personally the revenge that bad art and philistinism tried to take on new forms of representation, on media of reflection that subjected previous forms to a rigorous critique. He describes the miniature photographs that attempted to "capture" his youth by cataloguing its still poses, by still-lifing its movements.

> The accessories used in these portraits, the pedestals and balustrades and little oval tables, are still reminiscent of the period. Because of the long exposure time the subjects had to be given supports so that they wouldn't move. And if at first head-holders or knee-braces were felt to be sufficient, further impedimenta were soon added, such as were to be seen in famous paintings and must therefore be artistic. First it was pillars, or curtains....This was the period of those studios, with their draperies and palm trees, their tapestries and easels, which occupied so ambiguous a place between execution and representation, between torture chamber and throne room, and to which an early portrait of Kafka bears pathetic witness.

Atget's photographs, on the other hand, are critical of their subject; they police the crime of lost identity by stalking the empty streets of Paris:

> Indeed, Atget's Paris photos are the forerunners of surrealist photography; an advance party of the only really broad column surrealism was able to set in motion. He was the first to disinfect the sticky atmosphere generated by the conventional portrait photography of the declining epoch. He cleanses this atmosphere, indeed he dispels it altogether: he initates the emancipation of the object from the aura, which is the signal achievement of the latest school of photography....[A]ll these pictures are empty. Empty the *Porte d'Accueil* by the Fortifications, empty the triumphal steps, empty the courtyards, empty, as it should be, the *Place du Tertre*. They are not lone-

> The creative in photography is its capitulation to fashion. The world is beautiful -- that is its watchword. Therein is unmasked the posture of a photography that can endow any soup can with cosmic significance but cannot grasp a single one of the human connexions in which it exists....[93]

The fall of art as a critical medium of reflection whose task is the raising of consciousness, into a sort of creative philistinism dedicated to shoring up, reifying, and codifying relationships that have long since been

---

> ly, merely without mood; the city in these pictures looks cleared out, like a lodging that has not yet found a new tenant.

Benjamin, "*Kleine Geschichte der Photographie*," *GS* II.1, 368-385; "A Small History of Photography" trans. Edmund Jephcott and Kingsley Shorter *One-Way Street and Other Writings* (London: New Left Books, 1979), 240-257.

Complementary to this history of photography, which reveals its relation to the articulation of the concept of art criticism, is Benjamin's essay "The Work of Art in the Age of its Technical Reproducibility," the essay that subjects to critique the monumentalization of "humanity" that the propaganda films of both the Nazi and Communist parties were producing in the 1930's. The "faceless masses" are given a face in these films: The streets are filled with a flowing mass of anonymous workers that will constitute the building material of the state. Jean Renoir's *La vie est à nous*, made as an advertisement for the future of the French Communist Party in the Popular Front elections of 1936, uses cinematic techniques that are identical to a Riefenstahl film. Even if Renoir's masses flow more "loosely" through the streets than Riefenstahl's stamping columns, the narrative structure controlling the form of the films is the same. Benjamin realized that the fetishization of the word "*L'Humanité*" on the screen was closer to its counterpart in *Deutschland, Deutschland* than most would like to recognize. This logic culminates in the power of a Coke, or a Campbell's soup can.

93 Benjamin, "A Small History," 255.

severed, demonstrates the difficulty, and perhaps the impossibility that a critique of judgement faces when confronted with the ideology of subjectivity. "Not for nothing have Atget's photographs been likened to those of the scene of a crime."

For the early Romantics, the truth (of art, of nature, the perception of elemental connections in the world) could only be revealed historically, as a blue flower in a technological universe, in a universe that was beginning to move faster and faster toward the speed of light.[94] Blue flower, evil flowers -- only a prose poet could begin

---

94 See Novalis, "*Heinrich von Ofterdingen*" *Novalis Werke*, 129-290. The anxious young one lies awake at night, thinking. "*Nicht die Schätze sind es, die ein so unaussprechliches Verlangen in mir geweckt haben, fern ab liegt mir alle Habsucht: aber die blaue Blume sehn ich mich zu erblicken. Sie liegt mir unaufhörlich im Sinn, und ich kann nichts anders dichten und denken. So ist mir noch nie zumute gewesen: es ist, als hätt' ich vorhin getraumt, oder ich wäre in eine andere Welt hinübergeschlummert; denn in der Welt, in der ich sonst lebte, wer hatte da sich um Blumen bekümmert, und gar von einer so seltsamen Leidenschaft für eine Blume hab' ich damals nie gehört.*"

"The unspeakable desire that has been awoken in me does not come from treasures; all possessiveness, all avarice and covetousness lays distant from me: But I desire to glimpse sight of the blue flower. It is incessantly before my senses, and I cannot think or write otherwise. I have never before felt this way; it is as if I had just been dreaming, or that I had slumbered over into another world. For who in the world in which I had otherwise lived would have cared for flowers -- and I have never heard before now of such a strange passion for a flower."

Another extraterrestrial who shared a passion for a single flower, alone in the universe, was Antoine de Saint-Exupéry. See Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, *Le Petit Prince* (Paris: Gallimard, 1946).

to measure the density of a shrinking universe, by taking apart the regular beat of its meters, by stringing out its elemental structure, by presenting the idea of its form. Novalis, Baudelaire, Flaubert, Hölderlin -- these are no nature poets for Benjamin; they are technicians of the spirit, critics of phenomenology, metaphysicians in the finest sense of the word -- those who are able to bring knowledge of experience to consciousness.

Hölderlin emerges at a critical juncture in Benjamin's dissertation, as the Poe policing the pyrotechnics of the Romantics. He steps in soberly, to hold a reflecting light up to the vicious innards of Romantic writing, to dis-mantle, to derobe the bejeweled garments of individuality that drape their prose, the ironic countenance and often grimaced contortions that disfigure the scene of their writing. Hölderlin raises the courage of the poet to the prosaic level of diffidence -- he surveys the scene with detatchment, he executes his technique with the necessary indifference of a general inspector, he performs the task of conducting an experiment on the work that lays before him by engaging the instrument of critique.[95]

---

95 "The determinate form of a particular work, which one can call the form of presentation, becomes the victim of ironic dismemberment [*Zersetzung*]. Above it, however, irony rends open a heaven of eternal forms, the idea of forms, and it shows the survival [*Überleben*] of the work that draws from this sphere its undestroyable constancy after the empirical form, the expression of an isolated reflection has been consumed by it. The ironization of mimetic form is, as it were, the storm that lifts the curtain hanging before the transcendental order of art.

"Conviction"

As the day shines around men brightly, and with the light that springs out from heights unites all dimming appearances, such is knowedge, which deeply goes the way of spirituality.[96]

It is the Hölderlin of the "manic" years that Benjamin calls in on the job, the sobering *Spätlese* that was the production of the "insane" Hölderlin, the one no longer in possession of his wits, who plays witness for the prosecution of the Romantics. Benjamin casts him as a figure in possession of his faculties, or at least as a suitable stand in for the faculty of judgement. "The conception of the idea of poetry as that of prose determines the entire Romantic philosophy of art," Benjamin writes, and this philosophical groundplan serves as the foundation for a wider circle of writerly relationships, out of "whose middle, so to speak" steps a ghost. "This spirit is Hölderlin, and the thesis that founds his philosophical relationship to the Romantics is the principle of the sobriety of art." Prose is a metaphor for the sobriety of the poet, the opposite of Platonic ecstacies, writes Ben-

---

This storm thus reveals the unmediated eistence of the work as a mystery. The work is a mystery of this order, the revelation of its absolute dependence on the idea of art." Benjamin, *Der Begriff*, 86; trans. Peter Fenves.

96 Hölderlin, "*Überzeugung*," *Hölderlin: Selected Verse* intro. and trans. Michael Hamburger (London: Anvil Press Poetry, 1961), 255. My translation.

jamin. "Criticism is the presentation of the prosaic kernal in each work of art."[97]

Schlegel made one attempt to write a novel, and he wrote a trashy novel, a *Schmöker*. Benjamin's critique of *Lucinde* does not have a place in his dissertation on the concept of art criticism; this critique is found in a fragment he wrote during the summer of 1918, just about the same time as he and Scholem put down Cohen's *Kant's Theory of Experience* for more interesting reading. For a *roman à clef*, a *Schlüsselroman* has no place in a book about ideas. If a key can unlock the riddle of a novel, it has nothing to say, nowhere to go -- it has no future. The constellation of relationships that makes up the stuff of *Lucinde*--the intrigues of the brothers Schlegel and their lovers--consumes itself in the revelation of the true identities of the persona portrayed: *Lucinde* combusts in a publicity scandal that leaves one little behind about which to think. Perhaps it succeeded in impressing Goethe; perhaps it managed to infuriate Schiller. Perhaps. But the greatest irony of this book that exhausts itself in its symbolism, this book that is subtitled "Confessions of a Blunderer," this book that is first published in 1799, comes in 1823. Schlegel, having grown old and turned Catholic, decided to omit *Lucinde* entirely from the complete

---

97 Benjamin, *Der Begriff*, 103-09.

edition of his works he was busy editing and publishing. He signs off, erases his name from the page on which he so proudly had it printed twenty years previous.[98]

"Schlegel's weakest prose," writes Benjamin, it is an instance of a certain sort of clarity, but a "mystically working clarity," purchased at the price of philology -- a selling (out) of letters.

> Certainly not with the wish that the public may look for or find the key, but because the relationships are tied to life with a naked unequivocality. And the result is that Schlegel did not poetize something *lived through*, but that he wrote because he experienced. That together with certain clever theories, his life became the sufficient basis for his poetry. Became its form, in a villanous sense. For life, the highest like the lowest, is not the creator, but the midwife of true writing. Hence, real desire is missing from this book about love, it only copies the lines of an earlier, yes, of an old performance. It is like a relief map of love, on which the rises let themselves easily be seen, but the depths (the shadows) do not show themselves. Shadows, depths, desire: these things are missing from this book touched too early by life.[99]

Perhaps Schlegel's most weighty contribution to knowledge of experience can be found in his afterward to the *Athenaeum* fragments, his prelude to the Heisenberg principle, the essay "On Incomprehensibility."[100] It opens the

---

98 Peter Firchow, "Introduction" to *Lucinde*, 5.

99 Benjamin, "*Lucinde*", *GS* VI, 131-32. Emphasis added.

100 "Because of something either in them or in us, some subjects of human thought stimulate us to ever deeper thought, and the more we are stimulated and lose ourselves in these subjects, the more do they become a Single Subject, which, depending on whether we seek and find it in

door to true crime, to a reflection on violence, on the medium of reflection personified by characters. By the time Lewis Levy wrote his "strange book" on the many-

---

ourselves or outside of ourselves, we designate the Nature of Things or the Destiny of Man....

Of all things that have to do with communicating ideas, what could be more fascinating than the question of whether such communication is actually possible? And where could one find a better opportunity for carrying out a variety of experiments to test this possibility or impossibility than in either writing a journal like the *Athenaeum* oneself or else taking part in it as a reader?...

I wanted to demonstrate that words often understand themselves better than do those who use them....I wanted to focus attention on what the greatest thinkers of every age have divined (only very darkly, to be sure) until Kant discovered the table of categories and there was light in the spirit of man: I mean by this a *real language*, so that we can stop rummaging about for words and pay attention to the power and source of all activity....

That I consider art to be the heart of humanity and the French Revolution a marvelous allegory about the system of transcendental idealism is, to be sure, only one of my most extremely subjective opinions. But I have let this opinion be known so often and in so many different ways that I really might have hoped the reader would have gotten used to it by now. All the rest is mere cryptology....All the greatest truths of every sort are completely trivial and hence nothing is more important than to express them forever in a new way and, wherever possible, forever more paradoxically, so that we won't forget they still exist and that they can never be expressed in their entirety....

The new age reveals itself as a nimble and quick-footed one. The dawn has donned seven-league boots. For a long time now there has been lightning on the horizon of poetry; the whole thunderous power of the heavens had gathered together in a mighty cloud; at one moment, it thundered loudly, at another the cloud seemed to move away and discharge its lightning bolts in the distance, only to return again in an even more terrible aspect. But soon it won't be simply a matter of one thunderstorm, the whole sky will burn with a single flame and then all your little lightning rods won't help you. Then the nineteenth century will indeed make a beginning of it and then the little riddle of the incomprehensibility of the *Athenaeum* will also be solved. What a catastrophe!"

Friedrich Schlegel, "*Über die Unverständlichkeit,*"

skinned medium Kzradock, the human onion, photography had prepared the way for film, crime stories had gone the way of detective fiction, and the "efforts to capture a man in his speech and actions" had intensified and accelerated to a pace not even Baudelaire could have expected. We enter the stadium of a trance, lit in red-violet.

> What is to be presented here, is a frightful and bloody secret, not yet known to the author. A secret, which even the Paris Police does not dare to penetrate, although the Chief of Police has the means to do so. For he too knows the medium Kzradock, who is lying at this very moment on my sofa, bound by the hands and feet and with a dagger in his hand. It is already the fourth seance. By the seventh everything is to be revealed, according to the hypnotic order which he received from Lady Florence on the chalk hills of Brighton. The solution to this horrifying drama that already has set in motion so many of the best pens of France and America, and that is so entirely beyond comparison, slumbers in a consciousness that hardly can guess to what uses it might be put. Lady Florence, who was obliged to speak, because keeping still was so limitlessly dangerous for her fate, encapsulated [*hat verkapselt*] her secret in a brain, in a human soul. And there it lies in hiding well, much better than it would anywhere else....**101**

Not all methods of experiencing raised consciousness are as literal as that of a seance. There are other ways of making a head spin, or roll. Revolution overturns the in-

---

Schlegel-Ausgabe II, 363-372; "On Incomprehensibility," trans. Peter Firchow *Schlegel's "Lucinde" and the Fragments*, 259-271.

101 Louis Levy, *Die Menschenzwiebel Kzradok und der frühlingsfrische Methusalem* trans. Hermann Kinn (Berlin: Erich Reiss, 1912), 5-6.

stitution of form holding together the work of art regarded as the most sovereign: that of the state. Criticism reflects upon the representation of form culminating in bad art--in a division between form and content, subject and object, that results in a constitution of the law which regards the sanctity of human life as nothing more than a thing, as *Menschenmaterial*. By 1914 at the latest, as demonstrated among other things by his readings of Hölderlin's translations of Sophocles, Benjamin realised the historical-philosophical question that the event of World War I posed to thinking about the future is a question concerning technology, an "aesthetic" question that the future will respond to in terms of politics. Only today is the scope and limit of this question becoming visible to us, able to be articulated--*gedichtet*--as consciousness of something we have lived through.

Benjamin slips on the anti-gravity boots and steps into the virtually real to play architect to the fragmentation of the 21st century, a *Passagenwerker* exploring the shaky, shifty groundlessness that appears as the only possible foundation for a future metaphysics of morals. In presenting this task to the future anew, we accomplice ourselves to its crime.

CHAPTER III
SPEAK, GOLEM

Ben Sira wished to study the *Book Yetsirah*. Then a heavenly voice went forth: You cannot make him [such a creature] alone. He went to his father Jeremiah. They busied themselves with it, and at the end of three years a man was created to them, on whose forehead stood *emeth*, as on Adam's forehead. Then the man they had made said to them: God alone created Adam, and when he wished to let Adam die, he erased the *aleph* from *emeth* and he remained *meth*, dead. That is what you should do with me and not create another man, lest the world succumb to idolatry as in the days of Enosh. The created man said to them: Reverse the combinations of letters [by which he was created] and erase the *aleph* of the word *emeth* from my forehead--and immediately he fell to dust.[1]

"If we pick up a stone and then let it go, why does it fall to the ground?" The usual answer to this question is: "Because it is attracted to the earth." Modern physics formulates the answer rather differently for the following reason. As a result of the more careful study of electromagnetic phenomena, we have come to regard action at a distance as a process impossible without the intervention of some intermediary medium. If, for instance, a magnet attracts a piece of iron, we cannot be content to regard this as meaning that the magnet acts directly on the iron through the intermediate empty space, but we are constrained to imagine--after the manner of Faraday--that the magnet always calls into being something physically real in the space around it, that something being what we call a "magnetic field." It its turn this magnetic field operates on the piece of iron, so that the latter strives to move towards the

---

1 MS of the *Sefer Gematrioth*, printed in Abraham Epstein, *Beiträge zur jüdischen Altertumskunde* (Vienna, 1887), 122-23, quoted in Gershom Scholem, *On the Kabbalah and its Symbolism* trans. Ralph Manheim (New York: Schocken,1969), 179.

magnet. We shall not discuss here the justification for this incidental conception, which is indeed a somewhat arbitrary one. We shall only mention that with its aid electromagnetic phenomena can be theoretically represented much more satisfactorily than without it, and this applies particularly to the transmission of electromagnetic waves. The effects of gravitation also are regarded in an analogous manner.[2]

Dismembering creatures

The golem, in Paul Wegener's filmic image of him (tk) as in others', is a large creature. He looms over the men who formed him, the earthly massiveness of him. He is a mound of clay, a mound of handfuls of clay, smacked rudely together like any number of shouts one might hear or see quoted in the course of a day. He trips over his own feet, which are like the blocks one lays as the foundation of any building. He has a head of Ceasar, square, and ready to be toppled. When he falls, he falls hard, he crashes down--sometimes he crushes those who are underneath him when he loses consciousness of himself, when he loses that hard-won and crudely developed thing given to him that he cherishes most. His eyes are quite empty; when they reflect the light, they see red.

Gustav Meyrink's cutter of precious stones, Athanasius Pernath, is a cold creature. Life in the narrow streets of the Prague ghetto chills the artist through. His face,

---

2 Albert Einstein, *Relativity: The Special and the General Theory* trans. Robert W. Lawson (New York: Crown, 1961), 63-4.

with its greenish hue, bears a stony countenance and frightens passers-by, as may have many other portraits and sketches seen by, among others, subscribers to *Simplicissimus*.[3] *The Golem* is a "fantastic novel," says Scholem, "fantastic to the point of the grotesque."[4] The image of redemption that is presented there takes the Kabbalistic legend to an extreme, if not to the bombast of Paracelsus at least to the secret orders of Freemasonry.

Stones line the way throughout Meyrink's serial, sealing its fate from the opening sentence. "The moonlight is falling on to the foot of my bed. It lies there like a tremendous stone, flat and gleaming," which leads to that sentence's theme: "only to sink blindly back into the

---

3 Which might be described as a sort of Grimmelshausen's revenge: "For the title of his own magazine, [Albert] Langen (with the aid of his staff) chose the name of a German *picaro*, the hero of the greatest prose work of seventeenth-century Germany, the novel *Der abenteuerliche Simplicissimus teutsch* (1669) by Hans Jakob Christoffel von Grimmelshausen (who also wrote the story on which Brecht based his play *Mother Courage*). In the novel, the clever (though at first naïve and uninformed) Simplicius Simplicissimus undergoes many transformations, but Langen and his people had in mind especially the episode in the character's youth when, pretending to be simpleminded, he becomes a court jester and wittily castigates the failings of all his listeners, whether of high rank or low." *Simplicissimus: 180 Satirical Drawings from the Famous German Weekly* selec., trans. and text by Stanley Appelbaum (New York: Dover, 1975), ix.

As a character, Simplicissimus, perhaps because of his age, offers the reader a much different take on wit than does, say, Baron von Munchhausen, whose age was positively obsessed with the reinvigorated problem of honor in decline.

4 Scholem, *On the Kabbalah*, 158.

realms of semi-consciousness, there to grope and grope in my painful quest for that eternal stone that in some mysterious fashion lurks in the dim recesses of my memory in the guise of a lump of fat," and ends with the apotheosis in the "Last Lamp House" in the Street of the Alchemists up on the Hradschin: "I stand there like a stone, for a long time, staring. It is like the entrance to an unknown world."[5]

At the beginning of his essay on Goethe's *Elective Affinities*, Walter Benjamin gives *The Magic Flute* credit--"insofar as it is possible for an opera [to have a theme] at all"--for developing thematically what stands for ethics on the Goethean flip side of the Enlightenment coin, whose face value is stamped with Kant's ratio, true to itself. *Die Zauberflöte*'s theme, Benjamin says, is less the longing of the lovers for one another than the perseverance of the married couple, a particularly stubborn form of *Treue*. "It is not only to win each other over that they should stride through fire and water, but in order to stay united forever."[6] As much as the spirit of Freemasonry resolves the practical obligations of the

---

5 Gustav Meyrink, *The Golem* trans. M. Pemberton (New York: Dedalus/Hippocrene, 1985), 21, 22, 303.

6 Benjamin, *Goethes Wahlverwandtschaften*, *GS* I.1, 129.

text--in Mozart's case, however not in Goethe's--Benjamin writes, here the suspicion of its actual content comes to its purest expression--in the feeling of loyalty, to the death.

Kant's description of marriage is ridiculous, writes Benjamin, in that he tries to rationally derive a morally lawful, institutional situation from the animal instinct the race has to produce and bear children. Goethe does not fall into such a trap, he realizes that the essence of marriage lies in something close to "das Nichtige," to the spiritual desire lovers have to remain together to the death. He places most of his pronouncements on marriage into Mittler's mouth, the *Scheidekünstler*, or divorce specialist. But this is not the subject of the novel. It is not the essence of marriage, as it might seem to be on its surface, but the presence of myth that is the content of Goethe's *Wahlverwandtschaften*, Benjman writes.

> The object of the *Wahlverwandtschaften* is not marriage. Its moral violence can be sought nowhere within. From the start it is in the process of disappearing, like sand under the water on the incoming tide. Marriage here is neither a moral problem nor a social one. It is no bourgeois lifeform. In its resolution all that is human comes to the fore in appearance and the mythic remains behind alone as its essence.[7]

Goethe must have destroyed all of his working notes and sketches to the *Wahlverwandtschaften*, Benjamin writes, for it can hardly be a coincidence that not even a single

---

7 Ibid., 131.

fragment of its production remains. This act of production should be considered in light of his writing of *Faust*, for which of course much working material remains, beginning with the *Urfaust* (1775, discovered 1887). Benjamin stops short of calling the *Wahlverwandtschaften* a lengthy footnote to, or working sketch of *Faust*. But the novel's formidable mythic content, and its presentation of the theme of loyalty and of death pose questions that are at the very least decisive for a critical reading of Benjamin's study of myth, tragedy, language and mourning play, the *Trauerspielbuch*.

At first reading Goethe's intentions seem to be a matter of outright purpose, of a rational idea carried out by a decision: "'I know very well,' said Eduard as they were going back up to the mansion, 'that everything in the world depends on an intelligent idea and a firm decision.'"[8] Upon closer examination, the feelings expressed in the novel, in this case at the moment of Charlotte's birthday celebration, fall under the sway of myth: "'But...the foundation, is the mason's business and, if we may make so bold as to say so, it is the chief business in the entire undertaking. It is an earnest labor, and our

---

8 Goethe, *Elective Affinities*, trans. R.J. Hollingdale (New York: Penguin, 1971), 68.

summons to you is earnest: for this ceremony is dedicated to the depths. Here within this narrow excavated space you do us the honour of appearing as witnesses of our secret labor.'"[9]

The secret labor carried out by the four lovers, who have only one name--Charlotte, Eduard (Otto), the Captain (Otto), and Ottilie--is sometimes passed on to a nameless accomplice (the schoolmaster, the architect, the valet), as Goethe notes, and in this case the accomplice is the architect.

> This is what happened as soon as Eduard and the Captain had gone: the architect came more and more to the fore with every day that passed. The preparation and carrying out of so many tasks depended solely on him and he proved himself precise, informed and energetic in that work and also able to give support to the ladies in all sorts of ways to to keep them amused in hours of idleness.[10]

Just as the architect steps in in the absence of Eduard and the Captain to entertain and amuse the ladies with his tellurian talents, the arrival of the schoolmaster provokes a telling journal entry by the silent but evermore perceptive Ottilie, one that begins to delve into the creaturly aspect of human comportment:

> How can anyone bring himself to expend such care on depicting horrid monkeys! It is debasing simply to regard them as animals, but it is really

---

9 Ibid., 83

10 Ibid., 155.

more malicious to succumb to the temptation of seeking in them the likeness of people you know....

Only that naturalist is worthy of respect who is capable of describing and depicting the strange and exotic together with its own locality, with all its environs, in its own proper element. How I should like to hear Humboldt on this subject....

The teacher who can rouse our feelings by a single good deed, a single good work of art, achieves more than one who passes on to us in form and name whole rows of inferior natural creatures, for the only result of that is what we know anyway, namely that the human form bears uniquely the image of the divine.

The individual is free to occupy himself with whatever attracts him, with whatever gives him pleasure, with whatever seems to him useful: but the proper study of mankind is man.[11]

It is eventually from Ottilie that one hears more and more, or rather reads more and more, as the plant-like beauty begins to write, as if a Karl Bloßfeldt photograph were to come to life and record its thoughts and observations. It is as if her acting out the living portraits, the tableaux of Poussin and others, gives way to a more mortal depiction, that of her journal, which is left weightily for us to read after her death. Ottilie is not only the "sacrifice of fate," let alone the fact that she "sacrifices herself," writes Benjamin, but that more exactly, and pitilessly, she is the sacrifice for the redemption and salvation of the guilty ones. Sin (redemption) is here meant in terms of the mythic world, says Benjamin, thus is her death an innocent one, for the in-

---

11 Ibid., 215-16.

nocents, despite its being a seemingly free death, and she a martyr. "Fate is the bindingness of guilt for the living," writes Benjamin.[12] "And it is in the presence of simple, naked life that guilt announces itself."[13]

"No feeling is more rife with variants than fear," says Benjamin of Goethe, and Goethe's fear of death plays itself out in a chaos of symbols.[14] How the symbol relates, or mediates the truth content from the objective content of a work, is a matter of great importance for Benjamin, and explains in part his debt to the work of Ludwig Klages and the George circle. As Julian Roberts has written in his fine book, *Walter Benjamin*: "The strategy of this group [the George circle] might be described, using a line from George's poem *Knights Templar*, as 'deifying the body and embodying the deity'--integration of the sensory and the intellectual in art and in life."[15] But here in this piece on the *Elective Affinities*, Goethe initially becomes lost in a forest of symbols, all superstitious, in that they betray an avoidance of death and a preocuppation with the daemonic. When Benjamin refers to

---

12 Benjamin, *GS* I.1, 138.

13 Ibid., 139.

14 Ibid., 151.

15 Julian Roberts, *Walter Benjamin* (London: Macmillan, 1982), 104. See in this regard his chapter "From ethics to politics."

Goethe as "Olympian," stating that his predicament is not a tragic one, he is stating that his character is not "*darstellbar*," not "presentable."

In his chapter on Benjamin's *Elective Affinities* essay, Bernd Witte reminds the reader of the audience for which the essay was intended: an *Athenäum* audience, small, consisting of initiates only, like the audience he imagined for his anti-Georgian *Blätter für die Kunst*, *Angelus Novus*.[16] Benjamin was writing the essay at the same time as he was trying to get the journal underway, as his letters to Scholem and Florens Christian Rang show. The journal was ultimately to fail, but the essay made its way into Hugo von Hofmannstahl's hands, and to publication in the *Neue Deutsche Beiträge*. Witte details this publication history in his book, and makes it known why Hofmannstahl had such a high regard for Benjamin's essay. Hofmannstahl, in a Goethean word, found the essay to be exemplary of *das Gestaltete*, "the well-formed" or "well-designed," one might say, in an architectural sense.

> I can only say that it has marked an epochal change in my inner life and that, insofar as my own work does not claim my full attention, my thinking has hardly been able to let go of it. What I find extraordinary--to speak of apparent externals--is the exalted beauty of presentation in the context of such penetration into secret

---

16 Bernd Witte, *Der Intellektuelle als Kritiker: Untersuchungen zu seniem Frühwerk* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1976), 101.

> depths; this beauty emanates from a wholly secure and pure mode of thinking, to which I know few parallels.[17]

Hofmannstal's afterword to the third volume of the first series of the *Beiträge* alerts its readers to its newly-reinforced intentions: "If we can somewhere embrace what is well-formed with belief and love, there for us is something to celebrate."[18]

In this chapter on the *Elective Affinities* essay, Witte presents Benjamin as a cultural conservative, attracted at this time in his life and career by a lingering "Viennese baroque," a conservatism that finds a place in the Hofmannstahl collaboration. It is a complicated chapter, in which he considers Benjamin's Kierkegaardian turn, and undertakes a study of the expressionless and of metaphor, each of which is penetrating. However, he does not fully take up the stuff, the exact material, of Benjamin's essay, and therefore of Goethe's as well. He mentions, but does not explore, the fact that Benjamin, in his plans for the *Angelus Novus*, had turned down the essay later pub-

---

17 Hugo von Hofmannsthal to Florens Christian Rang, "Briefwechsel," in: *Die Neue Rundschau* 70 (1959), 424ff, quoted in Bernd Witte, *Walter Benjamin: An Intellectual Biography*, trans. James Rolleston (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1991), 65.

18 Hugo von Hofmannstahl, "Nachwort" in *Neue Deutsche Beiträge*, third volume of the first series, 123, quoted in Witte, *Der Intellektuelle*, 103.

lished by Hofmannstahl, written by the friend and mediator who brought them together, Florens Christian Rang. Rang's essay on Goethe's *Selige Sehnsucht* left Benjamin with little to "celebrate" in the way of something well-formed, or well-tempered. Rang, the *Mittler*, becomes his own *Scheidekünstler*, according to Benjamin: he breaks himself up.[19]

---

19 "The three were soon back home and in the dining-room. They ate and Mittler said what he had done and what he was going to do that day. This singular gentleman was in earlier years a minister of religion. Unflagging in his office, he had distinguished himself by his capacity for settling and silencing all disputes, domestic and communal, first between individual people, then between landowners, and then between whole parishes. There were no divorces and the local judiciary was not pestered by a single suit or contention during the whole period of his incumbency. He recognized early on how essential a knowledge of law was to him, he threw himself into a study of this science, and he soon felt a match for the best lawyers." And: "'Let me confess,' said Charlotte, 'that when you call all these curious entities of yours affined, they appear to me to possess not so much an affinity of blood as an affinity of mind and soul. It is in just this way that truly meaningful friendships can arise among human beings: for antithetical qualities make possible a closer and more intimate union. And so I shall wait to see how much of these mysterious effects you are going to reveal. Now I will not interrupt your reading further,' she said, turning to Eduard, 'and, being so much better instructed, I shall be listening to you with attention.'

'Now you have summoned us up,' Eduard said, 'you cannot get away as easily as that: for the most complicated cases are in fact the most interesting. It is only when you consider these that you get to know the degrees of affinity, the closer and stronger, the more distant and weaker relationships; the affinities become interesting only when they bring about divorces.'

'Does that doleful word, which one unhappily hears so often in society these days, also occur in natural science?' Charlotte exclaimed.

'To be sure,' Eduard replied. 'It is even used to be a title of honour to chemists to call them artists in divorcing one thing from another.'" Goethe, *Elective Affinities*, 33, 53. The translator notes that the pun on

Breaking up was just what Benjamin had in mind when he wrote the *Elective Affinities* essay. The piece is dedicated to the sculptress Jula Cohn, to whom he also sent a fair copy of his work. In April 1921, when Benjamin was working on his essay, she lived for a time with Walter and Dora, a living situation that resulted in a temporary separation from his wife. But he first met Jula in 1912, as she was the sister of Alfred Cohn, Benjamin's friend and classmate, and she was a friend of Gundolf and a member of the larger circle around Stephan George.[20] Benjamin (temporarily) broke off his relationship with her after his marriage to Dora in 1917 (he spent part of the summer of 1926 with her, in Agay on the Cote D'Azur, after Jula's marriage to Fritz Radt, brother of Benjamin's former fiancée, Grete.)[21] What is to follow regarding the *Wahlverwandtschaften* essay aims to trace the circumference of relationships forming a small ring cycle, one penetrated by a critique of Christianity, and one offering a further explication of the symbolic side of Benjamin's theory of language. But first, a detour is necessary.

Scheidung, divorce vanishes in *Scheidekünstler*, analytical chemist, and the name given to Mittler, the divorce artist.

20 Bernd Witte, *Walter Benjamin*, 58.

21 Witte, *Walter Benjamin*, 99-100.

Exergue

One must be careful not to get lost in the forest that is Goethe. There are many ways out, and one may choose to take an unFaustian path and not try them all. One critical shortcut is Avital Ronell's *Dictations: On Haunted Writing*. Ronell listens in on the *Conversations with Eckermann* with a Nietzschean ear, enlarged; an ear for music, one that eventually tunes out the *Gesamtkunstwerk* and hones in on the intracacies of point/counterpoint.[22] Benjamin knew such an ear would be the one to lay close to the *Elective Affinities*. But such a detour, like that of a gabled echo chamber placed strategically above the body of the king or Pharaoh in his pyramid, doesn't get Benjamin successfully out of the woods, not as if a Viennese baton were conducting decidedly still, as the radio plays for children demonstrate clearly. "The Task of the Translator" reminds us of how one attains the proper incline for the

---

22 "What connects the names that are archivized in this work?....I regard Goethe as my attempt at a Great Health. One can also regard him as an early exemplar of the rock star, though it can be argued that Jean Jacques preceded him in institutioning such a cult life, and before him, heavy metal's Joan of Arc. But Goethe--he became the sign for Nietzsche as for Blanchot, from Eckermann or Emerson to Rorty, in fact, for the possibility of affirming life and bypassing the ressentimental traps that cut us off from our own lifelines." Avital Ronell, *Dictations: On Haunted Writing* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska, 1993), xvii.

construction of a great work of art, and how its *inclination* can be translated into another language, *as* the inclination of language.

Benjamin hearkens back in "The Task" to the beginning of the first canto of the *Inferno*: "Midway in the journey of our life I found myself in a dark wood, for the straight way was lost."[23] He comments:

> The task of the translator consists in finding that intended effect [*Intention*] upon the language into which he is translating in which the echo of the original is awoken....Unlike a work of literature, translation does not find itself in the center of the language forest but on the outside facing the wooded ridge; it calls into it without entering, aiming at that single spot where the echo is able to give, in its own language, the reverberation of the work in the alien one. Not only does the aim of translation differ from that of a literary work--it intends language as a whole, taking an individual work in an alien language as a point of departure--but it is a different effort altogether. The intention of the poet is spontaneous [*naïve*], primary, imagistic [*anschauliche*]; that of the translator is derivative, ultimate, ideational. For the great motif of integrating many tongues into one true language is at work.[24]

---

23 Dante, *The Divine Comedy: Inferno* trans. Charles S. Singleton (Princeton: Princeton University, 1977), 3.

24 Benjamin, "The Task of the Translator," trans. Harry Zohn, ed. Hannah Arendt *Illuminations* (New York: Schocken, 1969), 76-77. Translation modified. "*Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers*," forward to Benjamin's translations of Baudelaire's *Tableaux parisiens*. *GS* IV.1, 9-21. Paul de Man's reading of this forward is an important one, for it captures the inherent danger with view to meaning and silence that translation carries: "The emblem of that danger is Hölderlin's translations of Sophocles." Paul de Man, "Conclusions: Walter Benjamin's 'The Task of the Translator,'" *The Resistence to Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 84. But de Man insists on focusing on the missed intention between *Brot [und Wein]* and *pain [et vin]*, instead of *listening to* the inclina-

As "The Task of the Translator" demands, one must call *into* the forest of language, and not wait for a symbolic echo. As Hänsel and Gretel learned, he softly lay little white pebbles (not bread crumbs for the birds) behind him as he entered, to refer him to his way back. This is not enough, of course, as all children know and as Benjamin learned in carrying out his translations of *Remembrance of Things Past* and *The Flowers of Evil*. To a witch in need of a sturdy pair of glasses, a stick *feels* like a thin finger. But it doesn't look like one. Goethe's *Theory of Colors* is not a book for keen eyes. By the time Benjamin got a hold of it, Courbet had launched his revolution, Monet not far behind, and photography chased them all the way to Seurat. "Allons enfants de la patrie..." Benjamin, concerned with the way technology and experience were transforming language and being transformed, embraced the possibilities film offered to vision and to critical thinking. It is in order to make room for the latter that he dedicated his *Wahlverwandschaften* essay to Jula Cohn.

---

tion, the slant, the *call* Benjamin hears and responds to in this essay on language, one that does not neglect to mention *Klänge*. De Man hears "bastard" in his *brood* after considering the sound of a *bâtard,* but this realization does not bring him far enough. It brought Benjamin, who was working himself up to an essay on Goethe, from Hölderlin and George to Ludwig Klages. See Ludwig Klages, *Der Geist als Widersache der Seele* (Munich: J.A. Barth, 1954).

The ring that Rang

Unlike Vienna, Berlin is not rung by a *Ringstrasse*. In Benjamin's day, its *Mitte* was not empty or being rebuilt, but "full." For Benjamin, Berlin's *Mitte* wasn't situated at the cross-streets of *Unter den Linden* and *Friedrich-strasse;* but lay further west, perversely out of kilter with the middle of the city, in his mouth. "What Proust began so playfully, became a breathtaking seriousness."[25] In the *Berlin Chronicle*, Paris is Benjamin's "fourth guide" through the labryrinth of the city which taught him the word that at three he could hardly know but immediately grasped: the word love.[26] Early on, his heart was in his mouth, one might say. But as he makes his way through his Berlin-memory with its many references, Benjamin is confronted with empty spaces, nameless places, that once were inhabited and visited. The story of the rings that he tells in the *Berliner Chronik* of 1932, 10 years earlier he remembers in the *Elective Affinities* essay, where, about the details of the 1914 event, he remains silent.

> Against the background of the city, the people who had surrounded me closed together to form a figure. It was many years earlier, I believe at the beginning of the war, that in Berlin, against the backround of the people then closest to me, the world of things contracted to a symbol similarly profound.

---

25 Benjamin, *Berliner Chronik*, *GS* VI, 465-67.

26 Ibid.

> It was an emblem of four rings....There were, if I am not mistaken, three of us: my friend [Alfred Cohn], his fiancée at the time or Frau Dorothea J., and me. C. asked to see rings--Greek and Renaissance cameos, rings from the imperial period, usually work carved in semiprecious stone. Each of the four that he finally purchased is imprinted unforgettably on my mind....
> I was quite differently affected, however, by the last two rings. One was intended for me, but only as a very temporary owner; it was really destined to reach, through me, my then fiancée, Grete R[adt]. It was the most fascinating ring I have ever seen. Cut in a dark, solid garnet, it portrayed a Medusa's head. It was a work of the Roman imperial period. The thin mounting was no longer the old one. Worn on the finger, the ring seemed simply the most perfect of signet rings. You only entered its secret by taking it off and contemplating the head against the light....Later I tried more than once to seal with this stone, but it proved easy to crack and in need of the utmost care. Shortly after giving it away, I broke off my relationship with its new owner. My heart had already gone with the last of the four rings, which the giver had reserved for his sister. And certainly this girl was the true center of the circle's fate, though years were to elapse before we realized it.[27]

That Benjamin cast the recipient of the fourth stone, Jula Cohn, Alfred's sister, as Goethe's Ottilie in his *Elective Affinites* essay is beyond question, as Witte has demonstrated, and as the "Berlin Chronicle" confirms:

> For apart from her beauty--itself not dazzling, but unseemly and without luster--she had nothing that seemed to destine her for the center of the stage. And in fact she never was the center of people but, in the strictest sense, of fates, as if her plantlike passivity and inertia had ar-

---

27 Benjamin, "Berlin Chronicle," *Reflections* ed. Peter Demetz, trans. Edmund Jephcott (New York: Schocken, 1986), 32-33, translation modified.

> ranged the latter--which, of all human things, seem the most subject to vegetal laws--concentrically about her. Many years were needed before what at that time was in part beginning to unfold in its seed, and in part still dormant, emerged in its ramifications to the light of day: the fate by virtue of which she, who stood in a relation to her brother that by its tenderness filled to the very edge the limits of sisterly love, was to form a liason with her brother's two closest friends--[28]

But her status in the essay is not read out of the picture by its referent. For Benjamin multiplies the Goethean portraits of beauty that stand next to Ottilie: Mignon and Helen are named as *das Ringen Goethes*, Goethe's struggle, the faces that more than any others shook Goethe in his struggle to present the essence of beauty through the pangs of *Selige Sehnsucht* (blessed yearning, or blissful longing) and *Leidenschaft* (passion). These *Gestalten* are not transparent images. They are necessarily veiled, such that they become more than images; "it is the shroud, which must have moved him again and again, where he struggled with insight into the beautiful."[29]

This insight into the beautiful offered by Goethe in the figure of Ottilie allows Benjamin to present his doctrine of the sublime. In order to take it in, one must return to the realm of the myth, not to repeat the movement of Friedrich Gundolf, as will become clear, and to situate Benjamin's critique of Rang.

---

28 Ibid.

29 Benjamin, *Goethes Wahlverwandtschaften*, 197.

Unlike Goethe, Benjamin did not destroy all of his notes to his *Wahlverwandtschaftenarbeit*. An outline survives, which clearly designates the components of the three parts, and names them. The first part is labeled, "The Mythic as Thesis," the second, "Redemption as Antithesis," and the third, "Hope as Synthesis."[30] Witte sees in the tripartite structure "totality" and a dialectical finitude that is at first glance absent from, but on closer examination, completed as well in the *Trauerspielbuch*, with the opening epistemological prologue situated as the "open" closing third to the other two sections on *Trauerspiel*/Tragedy and Allegory/*Trauerspiel*. This interpretation will be taken up further in the section on the *Mourning Play*, for it is not my intent to discuss here whether or not Benjamin was a dialectical critic.[31] Certainly, the dedication "opens" the essay up into a fourth level or moment with the name of J.C., and entirely other layers of meaning and interpretation are revealed than can be encompassed by the ease of a triad.

---

30 *GS* I.3, 835-37.

31 On presentation, disarticulation, preservation and diegesis in language, and in language's relation to justice in Benjamin's *Critique of Violence*, a relation which speaks directly to the *Wahlverwandtschaften* essay and to the Platonic tradition of philosophy, see Peter Fenves, "Testing Right--Lying in View of Justice," *13 Cardozo Law Review 4*, (1991), 1081-1113. Fenves raises the point that in Benjamin's theory of language, the place of origin is a non-place, a radically destabilizing idea that suspends philosophy, "engaging history in its entirety."

Witte is correct, however, to pay attention to the titles of the first sections of each part of the Goethe essay; they underline his thesis that Benjamin is "the intellectual as critic." Corresponding to the "Mythic" section is "Criticism and Commentary;" to the "Redemption" section, "Criticism and Biography;" to the "Hope" section, "Criticism and Philosophy."[32] Consistent to all three sections, of course, is the practice of criticism, which is what a work of art calls for, as Benjamin showed in his dissertation on the Romantics, and which is what Goethe's work calls for, in Benjamin's essay.

What a work of art does *not* call for in interpretation, according to Benjamin, is a conversation. A conversation is of an entirely different linguistic order from the punctuation of a written critique. It is "*mündlich*," spoken, not "*sprachlich*," written. In his "Remark on Gundolf: Goethe"--which dates from 1917 and contains the substance of his Gundolf-polemic at the center of the Goethe essay--lies a key to Benjamin's rejection of Rang's *Goethes Selige Sehnsucht*.

"Objective mendacity is: not recognizing the situation of the decision."[33] An analogy is "responsible" for the absence of a strict decision on Friedrich Gundolf's part

---

32 Witte, *Walter Benjamin--Der Intellektuelle*, 195f.

33 Benjamin, *"Notizen über 'Objektive Verlogenheit' I"*, *GS* VI, 60-62.

between Goethe's life and work, between that which is written down, and that which is passed down by word of mouth, what historically have been the realms of religion and myth, Benjamin writes.[34] For the historian, where it is legitimate, the difference between these realms has been one of meaning, not of value. Gundolf is a truly false biographer ("his book is a veritable falsification of knowledge") in that he uses historical categories unobjectively: Goethe's life as a historical human being is falsified into that of a mythical hero, and Gundolf has no objective idea of Goethe from which to work; he takes him as "an individual" for the empirical embodiment of his methodology, which, according to Benjamin, is an empty methodology, "filled" with the wrong content.

> Actually, here its singularly legitimate objective ground is absent, the divorce [*Scheidung*] between word and writing. That is to say: all imaginable "spoken Tradition" (letters, conversation, etc.) relating to Goethe would have to be transformed essentially into the written one, and exactly the complete influx of the spoken word (not to mention that of the *private life*) into the written one creates an entirely other concept of the written word than is the mythic-religious one; and in the range of this new concept, the work belongs as well, but not in that false exclusivity and monumentality, in which Gundolf seeks to represent it.[35]

---

34 Benjamin, *GS* I.3, 826-28.

35 Ibid, Benjamin's italics.

Florens Christian Rang's "interpretation" of Goethe's poem *Selige Sehnsucht* is not a reading, but a conversation between father and son, dutifully designated "The Elder," "The Younger." The son assumes the position of questioner/editor to the father/author, and asks if a Christian meaning can be attributed to the poem, and to Goethe's life in general.[36] This is exactly the *proton pseudos* in most all new philology, that is to say in such that does not yet determine itself through linguistic- and objective research," and results in poetry being taken as the product of the life and essence of the poet, i.e., in a psychological approach.[37] It is unquestionable, writes Benjamin, that "above all, the work must definitely stand in the forefront." "Works [of art] are, like actions, underivable, and every view which in its entirety grants this proposition in order to resist or oppose it in its separate parts, has lost the claim to their content."[38] Knowledge of the unfathomability of the origin of every work is primary for the understanding of a human life, and especially of those human lives that are "creative," which

---

36 Florens Christian Rang, *Goethes "Selige Sehnsucht." Ein Gespräch um die Möglichkeit einer christlichen Deutung*, ed. Bernhard Rang (Freiburg: Herder, 1949).

37 Benjamin, *GS* I.1, 155.

38 Ibid., 156.

have the double accentuation of being "deciding ones." In conventional biographies, Benjamin writes, where the work, essence of the author and the life are mixed up in an undetermined way, then a unity of these three is expressed, a unity which constructs the appearance of the mythic hero. "There the essence is daemonic, life is fate, and the work, which is only stamped by the other two, living form [*Gestalt*]."[39] This view, which is that of the George circle and out of which Gundolf's book is written, expresses a linguistic confusion that plays itself out in the mythic determination of the life and work of the poet.

Benjamin distinguishes the mythic from the religious conceptions of the poet. "The poet is a not some precursory appearance of human essence than the holy one, measured not in degree, but in kind. For in the nature of the poet a relationship of the individual to the community is determined, in that of the holy one, the relationship of humans to God."[40] Human life does not let itself be viewed analogously to a work of art, Benjamin writes. They occupy different spheres. The polemic against Gundolf reaches its acme in the following passage:

> No manner of thinking is more disastrous as one, that which itself had begun to outgrow myth, confusedly bends back into the same, and which to be

---

39 Ibid., 157.

40 Ibid., 159.

> sure through the herewith forced upon lapse into the monstrous as soon as every reason had warned against it, to which not even a stopover in the wilderness of tropes is acceptable, in a primeval forest [*Urwald*], where words swing like chattering monkeys from bombast to bombast, only in order not to have to touch the ground, which it betrays, that the words can't stand--namely *logos*, where they should stand and where speech should stand.[41]

If what Witte calls the "conservative Benjamin" finds its center here, in a critique of words swinging like chattering monkeys from bombast to bombast, one is certainly back on the *Ringstrasse*. But like Benjamin's essay on Karl Krauss, which takes up the question of the daemonic and the decision, it returns to a "standing" in the word, to the word's standing, which stands in the forefront of every critique.

In the first part of the essay, Benjamin addresses "the meaning of the mythical world for Goethe," in his own words, and in his life.[42] Here, the letter and the conversation with friends form part of a written record which stands beside the written works, but which is distinct from them. They constitute Benjamin's biographical statement about Goethe, which centers, in the case of the *Elective Affinities* at least, on his silence. "On the one hand the technique of the novel and on the other the circle of its motives was to protect its secret. The realm of poetic

---

41 Ibid., 163.

42 Benjamin, *GS* I.3, 836.

technique forms the border between a higher, more freely laid layer of the work and a deeper, more hidden one."[43] The representation of the subjective content is the riddle, the solution of which the poet has to seek in technique. Therefore, Goethe is able to present the mythical as "content" or subjective matter of his work through the emphasis on the elements of the earth, on water, and on the fate of its characters. But, as Benjamin mentions, although Goethe stated he worked on the novel according to an "idea," this idea can only be conceptualized as a technical one, and the destruction of his working notes and drafts points to this fact, to the fact that he had a secret to hide.

"All mythical meaning seeks secrecy."[44] ("Nature loves to hide.") "This word ["Olympier"]--attributed to Jean Paul--shows the dark, mythical nature sunk into itself which, in speechless paralysis, is inherent to the Goethean body of work."[45] This body of work resists criticism: It flees into the forest, or "chaos" of symbols making up "true nature" as the appearance of the *Urphänomen*. "Nowhere did the poet ever try to found a hierarchy of primary pheneomena. The fullness of their

---

43 Benjamin, *GS* I.1, 145.

44 Ibid., 146.

45 Ibid., 147.

forms presented themselves to his mind not otherwise than as the confused world of tones to the ear."[46] "Listening" to nature robbed Goethe of the possibility of drawing boundaries, and existence decays "undifferentiated" into the concept of nature, which grows into the monstrous. Without ruler or limits the life of myth establishes itself as the only power in the realm of beings.

It is the question of power, and of power in the life of human beings, that leads into that of redemption.[47] But the critical difference between the power that holds sway over humans and nature, and the power that is uttered by humans themselves, is a historical difference articulated by Benjamin in a way that is specific to the material of the Goethe's novel, which is also taken up in "Fate and Character" and "Theological-Political Fragment," to name just two. In a fragment from 1918 labeled "On the Problem of Physiognomy and Foretelling," Benjamin writes: "The time of fate is the time which at every moment can be made simultaneous (not present). It stands under the order of

---

46 Ibid., 148.

47 Benjamin's letters reveal the existence of a large, two-part essay on "Politics" (the first part was entitled "The true politician," the second, "The true politics," with chapters including "The dismantling of violence" and "Teleology without final purpose.") This essay, and a shorter sketch called "Life and Violence," are lost. See the editorial notes to "Critique of Violence," *GS* II.3, 943.

guilt, which determines the connection in it. It is a resourceless time and in it is neither present nor past nor future."[48]

In relation to Goethe's aversion to the dark side of myth, the inarticulate, ungraspable ambiguity of nature, its daemonism, Benjamin quotes--twice on the same page--a sentence from the last part of *Dichtung und Wahrheit*: "I tried to save myself from this dreadful being."[49] The idea of the daemonic accompanies Goethe's intuition his life long, writes Benjamin, and in it the idea of fate in the *Wahlverwandtschaften* steps forth. It is fear, fear of death that marks Goethe's life and work with superstition. "It is well known, that no one could speak of cases of death around him, less well known, that he never approached the deathbed of his wife."[50] The immortality-idea of myth expresses a tone of the inhuman, as the fundamental tone of the fear of death produces countless others.

"The symbolic is that in which the indissolvable and necessary combination of a truth content on an objective (thingly) content appears."[51] It is the symbolic which determines Goethe's later life and works. Benjamin quotes

---

48 Benjamin, *GS* VI, 91.

49 Benjamin, *GS* I.1, 150.

50 Ibid., 151.

51 Ibid., 152.

extensively from G. Gervinus's 1836 study on Goethe's letters, and especially from the exchange with Schiller, demonstrating that "after 1797" Goethe began to find everything meaningful and wondrous, every stone, every public act, every medal, every poster "meaningful, full of wonder, incalculable."[52] Fear has its place on this list of things before which one is caught in admiration.

> Man is paralysed in a chaos of symbols and loses freedom, which was unknown to the ancients. He falls under the activity of signs and oracles. In Goethe's life these have not been absent. Such a sign showed him the way to Weimar. Indeed, in *Wahrheit und Dichtung* he tells how, while he was on a walk, struggling with the inner conflict over whether to answer the call to poetry or painting, an oracle set in. The fear of responsibility is the most spiritual of all those under which, because of his being, Goethe was trapped. It is the reason for the conservative attitude, which he showed in the political, societal, and in old age even the literary. It is the root of neglect in his erotic life. That it determined his interpretation of the *Elective Affinities* is certain. For precisely this literary work throws a light on such foundations of his own life, which because they don't betray his admission, also remained hidden to a tradition that has not yet freed itself from its spell.[53]

This mythical consciousness may not be addressed with a trivial turn of phrase under which often the life of the "Olympier" is seen as a tragic one, writes Benjamin. "The tragic exists alone in the existence of the dramatic, that is to say the representative person, never in that of a

---

52 Ibid., 152-54, and *GS* I.3, 863.

53 Ibid., 154.

human." In the quietism of Goethe's life, there is hardly a single "representative" moment. "Therefore, for this life as for each human life, not the freedom of the tragic hero in death is valuable, but redemption in eternal life."[54]

Cut

Florens Christian Rang's writings on carneval, tragedy and agon have their place in Benjamin's book on the *German Mourning Play*, which also has redemption as content. There as in the *Elective Affinities* essay, what is at stake is not a Christian redemption.[55] In order to demonstrate this in the essay, Benjamin follows Goethe's technique, and cuts to the novella inserted in the middle of the novel, "The Wayward Young Neighbors." This cut proves to be decisive.

> To have made their way from water to earth, from death to life, from the family circle to the wilderness, from despair to rapture, from indifference to passionate affection, and all in a moment--the head is inadequate to grasp it without bursting. Here the heart must take its place and do the best it can if such events are to be borne...."Who is this?" cried the mothers. "What is this?" cried the fathers. The young people fell on their knees before them. "Your children!" they exclaimed: "A loving pair. Forgive us!" cried the

---

54 Ibid.

55 Benjamin, "The nazarenian moments are in need of the most severe criticism." "Notes from Francois-Poncet," *GS* I.3, 838-40.

> girl. "Give us your blessing!" cried the youth. "Give us your blessing!" they both cried, as everyone around stood dumb with amazement. For a third time the words resounded: "Your blessing!" And who could have had the heart to refuse them?[56]

The *Elective Affinities* was originally conceived as a novella, not a novel, within the span of Goethe's *Wanderjahre*. The traces of this first thinking of form remain, writes Benjamin; the conflict between the two forms is subdued with violence and a unity reached, in which the conflict improves the form of the novel through that of the novella. Ottilie's unexpected death is illuminated by the telling of the story of the young neighbors, the decision of the brash young woman to actively take her own life if she could not spend the rest of it with her newly returned childhood friend. The presentation (*Darstellung*) of Ottilie's death, unforetold at the time of the telling of the novella, thus comes via a break in the center of the action of the novel, through the "storytelling" aspect of the novella (like that of the novel itself, ultimately), which is meant to pull the readers into its center. "For if the novel, like a maelstrom, pulls the reader without a struggle into its inner core, the novella presses for distance, space, driving out of its magic circle every living being."[57]

---

56 Goethe, *Elective Affinities*, 243-44.

57 Benjamin, *GS* I.1., 167-68.

According to the rules of its form, the untouchable place at its center, or a secret also inhabits the novella. Its secret is the catastrophe, writes Benjamin, the moment when, just as the ship is in danger of grounding and the young neighbor is at the helm, the young woman who is engaged to another throws herself off the yacht for the love of the playmate of her youth, with whom she had a highly conflictual relationship. It is the living principle of the story, displaced in its middle, "while its meaning in the novel remains phenomenal, as that of the concluding event."[58] "And bright light holds sway in this novella. Everything stands, sharply outlined, from the beginning on to the extreme. It is the day of decision, that shines in on the twilight of Hades of the novel. Thus is the novella more prosaic than the novel. In a prose of the highest degree it steps forth to counter the novel. To the novella corresponds true anonymity in its figures, and the half undecided in those of the novel."[59]

Benjamin stresses the fact that the young lovers in the novella are different from those in the novel in two ways. First, the novella-figures do not pay for their happiness with a sacrifice. The young woman throws her garland of flowers at the young man and jumps, to express

---

58 Ibid., 169.

59 Ibid.

that she doesn't want to die "in beauty," that in death, she doesn't want to be crowned like a sacrifice.[60] Secondly, the decision that is made by each young lover is not made out of "a falsely grasped concept of freedom." Freedom is as distant from the young man's decision to save the other as fate is. "The chimerical striving after freedom is what conjures up fate over the figures of the novel. The lovers in the novella stand beyond both, and their courageous resolution is enough to dismember a fate that gathers over them, and enough to see through a freedom that would have pulled them down into the nothingness of choice. [*in das Nichts der Wahl*]. The meaning of their action is in the seconds of their decision."[61]

In other words, they do not have any time, nor do they have "a choice" over their lives, so the young lovers simply throw themselves into action for a second, and a decision occurs. In contrast, the figures in the novel, Ottilie, Eduard, Charlotte and the Captain, have all the time in the world; and although they busy themselves with rearranging the landscape, capturing views of the grounds and lakes, and with group readings, they do nothing. They

---

60 In contrast, here is Goethe's account of Ottilie in her open coffin: "They dressed the gentle body in the finery she herself had prepared; they set on her head a wreath of asters, which glittered strangely like melancholy stars." *Elective Affinities*, 294.

61 Benjamin, *GS*, I.1, 170.

remain bound by their free association, "chemically and physically," and this illusion that they are free binds them to the sacrifice that accompanies fate. Benjamin accords the novella a "commanding meaning" over the novel: "the mythical motives of the novel correspond to those of the novella as motives of redemption."[62]

The third part of Benjamin's essay, labeled hope, which ends famously--"Only for the sake of the hopeless is hope given to us"--begins with a philosophical and critical account of beauty and appearance. It sets up the discussion of the expressionless and caesur, guilt and innocence, and decision and reconciliation that occupies the rest of the piece. He addresses the place and practice of (art) criticism as such (and here he takes off from the final section of his dissertation, "Early Romantic Criticism and Goethe") with an illustration.

> Suppose a person got to meet another, who was attractive but reserved, because he carried a secret with him. It would be abominable, indelicate, to want to force into it. However, it is fully allowable to find out if he has brothers or sisters and if their being perhaps somehow would explain the stranger's enigma. Exactly in this way criticism seeks out siblings of the work of art. And all true works have their siblings in the realm of philosophy.[63]

For the early Romantics, it was the *idea* of art criticism that governed their works; in Goethe, as in other writers,

---

62 Ibid., 171.

63 Ibid., 172.

the *ideal* of philosophical problems appear--or hide--in the content of the work. No single question can be directed at the system of philosophy as a whole, as if there were a unifying answer to the multiplicity of questions residing there. This nonexistent question describes philosophy's ideal. This being the case, there are forms that, Benjamin writes, without being questions, have the deepest affinity with the ideal of the problem of philosophy. These are artworks. "The ideal of the problem does not appear in a multiplicity of problems. Rather it lies buried in that of the work and its challenge is the business of criticism. It lets the ideal of the problem step forth in appearance, in one of its appearances."[64]

For what criticism allows to step forth is the truth content of the work of art, formulated as a philosophical problem, it allows the truth content to "appear." "[W]here the view of the foundation of the novel raises itself to an intuition of its perfection, philosophy instead of myth is called on to lead it."[65] As his notes to the essay, and the essay itself show, Benjamin is giving a preliminary response to Plato's *Symposium*, a work with which he began and to which he will return. The question of the rela-

---

64 Ibid., 173.

65 Ibid.

tionship of the beauty to truth, of the beautiful appearance to truth, and of the necessity of appearance to truth, will, return.

Thus the beautiful creature of Goethe's Ottilie is fully taken up, in order to be dismembered. "Nothing more untragic can be contrived than this mournful [*trauervolle*] ending," writes Benjamin with his next book in mind. Compared to the actions of the characters in the novella, Ottilie's "decision" to stop eating and speaking and to die is neither tragic nor "holy," as Gundolf would have it; nor is it a decision, but rather a "drive" or an inclination--in Benjamin's words, a *Trieb*, and earlier, a *Neigung*, which, as we shall see, is different from a passion, *Leidenschaft*.[66] Ottilie's purity, her chastity, calls forth the appearance of an innocence of natural life that is answered by the heathenish or mythical ideal of virginity in Christianity, the counterpart to Christianity's locating originary guilt in the simple, natural life-drive of sexuality. Benjamin notes that Ottilie's virginal nature is ambiguous. Although Goethe goes to great lengths to mark her nature as "natural," she is untouchable, and this untouchable characterization, which is supposed to be thought as an inner purity, produces desire. Benjamin compares her to the Christian symbol of

---

66 Ibid., 176-77.

the lily, which combines the whiteness of its calyx with a "numbingly sweet, hardly vegetable perfume." "The poet gave Ottilie this dangerous magic of innocence and it is closely related to the sacrifice that celebrates her death."[67] It is the *appearance* of innocence, of purity, that makes her death untragic, without character.

Gravity, Light

Like the magnetic power of the center of the earth that speaks meaningfully (demonically) to the characters, Ottilie's silence pulls the action of the novel into its vortex, ending not, however, in a catastrophe--which would be eventful at least--but in the unhappy resignation of a martyr's death. As Goethe wrote in the *Theory of Colors* (dating from the same time as the *Elective Affinities*, Benjamin notes):

> And thus as we descend the scale of being, Nature speaks to other senses--to known, misunderstood, and unknown senses: so speaks she with herself and to us in a thousand modes. To the attentive observer she is nowhere dead nor silent; she has even a secret agent in inflexible matter, in a metal, the smallest portions of which tell us what is passing in the entire mass.[68]

---

67 Ibid., 175.

68 Goethe, *Theory of Colors* trans. Charles Lock Eastlake, intro. Deane B. Judd (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1970), xxxviii. Quoted by Benjamin, *GS* I.1, 132.

This metal shows itself to be chemically and physically manifest in Ottilie's nature (she is also able to detect, through superstitious sensations, the presence of coal on a path), as the "pendulum experiment" with the English nobleman demonstrates: "He likewise repeatedly

The glassy water into which the anti-heroine's fate falls also appears to hide an other-worldly power, be it from above or below, as the lake is as still ("with riddles") as a mirror; its waters are not "naturally" tumultuous, as they are in the "Wayward Young Neighbors" novella. Ottilie emerges from her "guilt context" upon seeing Eduard at the edge of the waters, by climbing into a boat and onto the water, Charlotte's child and a book in hand, both of which promptly fall in as she grasps for an oar, drowning the child.

"Fate is the guilt context of the living," a sentence Benjamin drops like a lodestone, both in this essay, and

---

maintained that the subject ought not to be abandoned because such experiments as this did not succeed with everyone; indeed, for that very reason it ought to be the more seriously and thoroughly investigated, since many connections and affinities between inorganic materials, between inorganic and organic, and between organic and organic, which were at present concealed from us, would certainly be disclosed in the future....

The women came back. Charlotte understood at once what was taking place. 'I have heard a great deal about these things,' she said, 'but I have never seen them work. As you have everything so nicely prepared, let me try and see if it will succeed with me.'

She grasped the thread in her hand, and as she was taking the matter seriously she held it steadily and without agitation: but not the slightest oscillation was to be observed. Then Ottilie was persuaded to do it. She held the pendulum even more quietly, composedly and unselfconsciously over the metals lying below. But in a moment the suspended object was agitated as if in a definite vortex and turned now to this side, now to that, now in circles, now in ellipses, or swung back and forth in a straight line, according to which metals were placed beneath it. Only the nobleman's companion could have expected this effect, and indeed even his expectations were surpassed." Goethe, *Elective Affinities*, 246-47.

in "Fate and Character."[69] It is a sentence that becomes a lodestar for his later work, and which here is pointedly laid against his question, "Does she have character?" Both depend upon an interpretation of the "natural condition of the living."

> Indeed, just as there is a natural guilt, so is there a natural innocence of life. But this last is not bound to sexuality--even if it is in the negative--but rather bound solely to its opposite, the--equally natural--spirit. Just as the sexual life of humans can become the expression of a natural guilt, so can its spiritual life, related to the unity of its however diffusely created individuality, become the expression of a natural innocence. This unity of individual spiritual life is character.[70]

Insofar as something is fate, it is misfortune and guilt, as Benjamin develops the concept in "Fate and Character;" it is not to be confused with the sphere of the religious, just as the concept of character is not to be confused with the ethical sphere. Happiness, bliss, innocence, have no relation to fate. The sphere in which misfortune and fate "alone carry weight, a balance on which bliss and innocence are found too light and float upward," is the scale of law, in all of its indeterminacy and random order.[71] In tragedy, the pagan chain of guilt and atonement

---

69 Benjamin, *GS* I.1, 138; *GS* II.1, 175; "Fate and Character," trans. Edmund Jephcott *Reflections*, 308.

70 Benjamin, *GS* I.1, 174.

71 Benjamin, *GS* II.1, 174; "Fate and Character," 307. The chain of guilt that hangs over human heads in fate shows itself to be all a matter of timing: "The guilt context is temporal in a totally inauthentic way, very different in

is broken as the moral hero is born, and he is speechless. "It was not in law but in tragedy that the head of genius lifted itself for the first time from the fog of guilt, for in tragedy demonic fate is breached....The paradox of the birth of genius in moral speechlessness, moral infantility, is the sublimity of tragedy. It is probably the basis of all sublimity, in which genius, rather than God appears."[72]

It is the importance of the tragic breach that must be underlined here, the break in speech that marks the lifted head of genius. Genius also shows itself in the the light of comedy, where character appears, as the natural innocence of man. Character is falsely connected to the concept of fate, Benjamin illustrates with a textile metaphor, that quickly turns into a hair shirt. "This connection is effected by the idea of a network that can be tightened by knowledge at will into a dense fabric, for

---

its kind and measure from the time of redemption, or of music, or of truth. On determining the particular nature of time in fate depends the complete elucidation of these matters. The fortuneteller who uses cards and the palmist teach us at least that this time can at every moment be made simultaneous with another (not present). It is not an autonomous time, but is parasitically dependent on the time of a higher, less natural life. It has no present, for fateful moments exist only in bad novels, and past and future it knows only in curious variations."

72 Ibid., 175; 307.

this is how character appears to superficial observation. Along with the broad underlying traits, the trained eye of the connoisseur of men is supposed to perceive finer and closer connections, until what looked like a net [man's fate] is tightened into cloth."[73] The threads of this cloth are to be read as the "moral fiber" of the person, its fine and rough qualities. But, of course, not moral qualities, only actions have ethical significance. In comedy, a character's moral actions and qualities are neither judged nor condemned, but his character appears, the subject of *hoher Heiterkeit*, bright, high mirth. Nor are moral qualities judged by the analysis of psychology: In Molière, one "learns" little about miserliness or hypochondria, states or "traits" that are crassly depicted. Instead: "Character is unfolded in them like a sun, in the brilliance of its single trait, which allows no other to remain visible in its proximity. The sublimity of character-comedy rests on this anonymity of man and his morality, alongside the utmost development of individuality through its exclusive character trait."[74]

---

73 Ibid, 176-77; 309. On this passage see Timothy Bahti, "Theories of Knowledge: Fate and Forgetting in the Early Works of Walter Benjamin," *Benjamin's Ground: New Readings of Walter Benjamin* ed. Rainer Nägele (Detroit: Wayne State University, 1988), 61-82.

74 Ibid., 177-78; 310.

"The character trait is not therefore the knot in the net. It is the sun of individuality in the colorless (anonymous) sky of man, which casts the shadow of the comic action."[75] Character can only be grasped, as the example of ancient and medieval physiognomists show, Benjamin writes, in a small number of morally indifferent concepts, such as those the doctrine of temperaments tried to identify--the sanguine, phlegmatic, choleric, melancholic dispositions. The question again, of Ottilie: "Does she have character?" Her plantlike dumbness, muteness, is of a different order than the speechlessness that accompanies the moral action of tragedy. She keeps her death wish secret, hidden, right up to the end, as if it can save her from inner ruin. "Ottilie's [death] is, like her untouchablity, only the last exit of the soul, which flees from degeneracy. The longing for rest, for quiet, speaks in her death-drive."[76] Hers is a shrinking toward death that remains under the sign of fate and guilt, not a decision that breaks through them. "Plants are like self-willed people with whom you can do anything provided you handle them properly."[77] Thus Ottilie does not only fall as a sacrifice to fate, not to mention that she truly

---

75 Ibid., 178; 311.

76 Benjamin, *GS* I.1, 176.

77 Goethe, *Elective Affinities*, 224.

"sacrifices herself," writes Benjamin, but she is the sacrifice for the atonement of the guilty. "Atonement in the sense of the mythical world, which the poet conjures, since time immemorial the death of the innocents. Thence Ottilie dies, leaving behind a miraculous set of remains, despite her suicide as martyr."[78]

The question of Ottilie's character can only be addressed through the question of her beauty. Benjamin attacks one of the books critics, Julian Schmidt, who asks, "how is it that a so finely fashioned and so well brought up soul as Ottilie could not consciously grasp that she commits a [moral] crime against her guardian, Charlotte, in the nature of her conduct with Eduard?"[79] This question of consciousness says nothing about the inner connections of the novel, Benjamin writes. The silence of the moral voice is not to be taken as a feature of individuality: it is not a determination within the boundaries of human being. "With this silence appearance settled into the heart of the most noble being in a damaging way....All linguistic clarity of action is bound to appearance, and in truth what is inner is clouded and obscure no less to

---

78 Benjamin, *GS* I.1, 140.

79 Julian Schmidt, *Geschichte der Deutschen Literatur seit Lessing's Tod*, vol. 2: *Die Romantik. 1797-1813* (Leipzig, 1866), 590, quoted in Benjamin, *GS* I.1, 177.

the Protector than it is to others."[80] Only in her journal does Ottilie allow her human life to be aroused, only there does she express herself in language. But this journal is like a monument being built for one who is dying; all the secrets she reveals to it come from her memory and are devoted to a decided spectrality.

Benjamin quotes from the *Phaedrus* to show that Ottilie's being is not one that awakens the memory (of the soul), but that beauty remains first and most essential in her. She also stands on the other side of epic beauty, which, in the primary case of Helen, does not rest on the appearance of the beautiful as the essential content of the living; her beauty bears the painterly traits of the modern. But the swearing of oaths is not foreign to her appearance in the novel, in the center of which she is to be found.

> The taking of oaths is the negative counter-image of creation. It, too, asserts to bring the world forth out of nothing. The work of art has nothing

---

80 Benjamin, *GS* I.1, 177. From Benjamin's notes to the essay, which distinguish "the created" (the world) from the origin of the work of art (*ein Entsprungenes*): "What is decisive is that the act of creation dawns on the existence (continuation) of creation, the existence of the world. The origin of the work (of art) however, opens onto its perceptibility from the start. This is situated in the originary tendency of appearance. The life of creation remains in the dark, in the shadow of the creator, until the creator breaks off from it. This detachment of the creator is a moral act. It constitutes the sphere of perception in unbroken, linear intention out of creation, in which it is good, which, only because it is seen as 'good,' constitutes 'seeing.'" *GS* I.3, 830.

> in common with either. It steps forth not out of nothing but out of chaos....Artistic creation 'makes' nothing out of chaos, it doesn't penetrate it; exactly as little--as in truth conjuring does--does it let appearance mix itself out of the elements of that chaos.[81]

Form is what enables a work of art to let the matter of life and the living appear--by paralyzing it, for an instant, as "content." The work of art is "a springing forth," not "a created thing;" only the life of the created (nature, as "the stage of history," and humans) takes part in the uninhibited intention of redemption, writes Benjamin in his notes to the essay. But the work of art has a connection to creation, in that creation is one of the most violent and weighty themes of art. With an ear to Alois Riegl, he writes: "The form of works, whose theme is 'creation,' can be described as 'punched-out form.' These are forms which apparently conceal as many shadows and as much confusion, as the punched- or hammered-out inner side of metal relief work. Such forms are not creation, they aren't even 'created,' rather they only present creation, or moreover they present--this is their actual essence--their content in the high and sublime position of crea-

---

81 Ibid., 180. On the question of the origin of the work of art, particularly as it pertains to the *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels*, see Samuel Weber, "Genealogy of Modernity: History, Myth and Allegory in Benjamin's *Origin of the German Mourning Play*," *MLN* (1991) vol. 106, no. 3, 465-500.

tion. Perhaps all forms have something of this 'punched-out' form, insofar as all works of art have in some way creation as their content."[82]

Here Benjamin puts forth his theory of the expressionless, *das Ausdruckslose* in the work of art, as the momentary interruption of movement and harmony in the word, which causes it to tremble eternally. The expressionless is most violently present in the genius of Greek tragedy and the hymns of Hölderlin, according to Benjamin. "The expressionless is the critical violence, which isn't able to divide appearance from essence in art, but keeps them from mixing. It has this violence as moral injunction." The sublime violence of the true appears in the expressionless: it breaks into pieces what remains living on in the beautiful appearance as the heritage of chaos--false, mistaken totality. "The expressionless first completes the work, which it smashed into scraps and pieces, into fragments of the true world, into the torso of a symbol."[83]

This caesura, rhythmic interruption is what Benjamin elsewhere praises as the "bright light" of the prosaic, always with Hölderlin in mind. It is what gives room to expressionless violence in art--in the case of Greek trag-

---

82 Benjamin, *GS* I.3, 829.

83 Benjamin *GS* I.1, 181.

edy, speechlessness, and in the case of Hölderlin, of "protest" in the rhythm, which can "perhaps never" be called "beautiful."

The counterpart to the expressionless in Hölderlin is the beautiful in Goethe: when taken to the limit of each in art, the one crosses over into madness, while the other, that of Goethe, into conjured appearances. Benjamin writes that the sun never shines openly and clearly in the *Elective Affinities*, everything appears in a half-light, or twilight of reflection. And in the form of the main character, light shimmers, but with a shimmer that always threatens to extinguish itself, like the light of the moon reflected on water when the sky is cloudy. Ottilie shimmers forth like a water nymph, spritely out of the dark depths. Benjamin places "the mild shimmer of her being between hostile glare and sober light," that is to say, between Satan and the genius of Hölderlin.

There is a power at work in the mild, soft beauty of Ottilie, although it is not the violence of the expressionless. On the contrary, the judgement of law, of bourgeois morality as expressed in marriage, which defines the inaction of the sad beauty resigned to death, prevents Ottilie's sacrifice from being a true reconciliation or atonement for the lives of the lovers. Benjamin refers back to the distinction between the novel and the novella--"so much suffering, so little struggle, hence the

silencing of all emotions"--when he says that true atonement lies only with God, and never comes to one who does not destroy or throw off everything alone before God. Atonement is hardly an object for the work of art, he writes; it finds its worldly mirror image in reconciliation, diplomacy, as "The Critique of Violence" also shows. But the characters in Goethe's novel make a pact with an all-too-worldly devil, with the moral passions, which involve the avoidance of pain and the decisions that define love and death, in order to insure the certainty of the "bourgeois, rich, safe life."[84] For to those truly in love, beauty, the beauty of appearances is not decisive.

True love does not rule the lives of Ottilie and Eduard. The elements of apparent love, of the appearance [*scheinhaften Liebe*] of love, are passion and inclination, and "[i]n inclination humans detatch themselves from passion." Inclination is the true work of *eros thanatos*, the admission that man doesn't know how, isn't fully able to love. Whereas in sublime love, through God's salvation, passion and inclination remain secondary; they make up the history of eros. The difference between true and apparent love is marked by death: the lovers in the novella jump to their deaths, and they are given a new life in love; the

---

84 Ibid., 184-85.

lovers in the novel remain bound by the oaths of marriage, however divergent their passions, and they slowly fade away, alone, to death for Eduard and Ottilie, and to an unbearable living-on, like shades in Purgatory, for Charlotte and the Captain. Benjamin notes that Goethe wanted to save the word *Wahl*, choice, for moral thought--present in his forward is the announcement that the "doctrine of nature often serves for ethical comparisons," the key comparison of course being that of *Verwandschaft*, relation, affinity. As Benjamin said early on in his essay, marriage is not the subject or the *middle* of the novel, but its *Mittel*, its medium.

> Only in each case where relation or affinity becomes the object of a resolution, does it step up over the stage or level of choice to that of decision. Decision annihilates choice, in order to found loyalty: only the decision, not choice, is sketched in the book of life. For choice is natural and wants even to be like the elements; decision is transcendent.[85]

In the realm of music, a beauty is found that is restful, that calms the passions and makes peace, Benjamin writes, and it is this type of beauty that fills the eyes with a veil of tears upon hearing. It blinds sight. In humor and in tragedy, clarity shows through, appears. The tears of emotion, in which the eye is veiled, are the true veil of beauty itself. But the world of the novel's

---

85 Ibid., 189.

characters is bereft of music, and Goethe was intent upon presenting, saving the essence of living beauty, Benjamin writes. For the true poet, emotion is never an end--it is a transitional point, a crossing over. The single objective object of emotional shock, or shaking, is the sublime, Benjamin writes. This passage of emotion, that leads away from the passions of eros and toward the reconciliation that would find a voice in the blindness of music, is also, in passing, a ruin--that of appearance. In the figure of Ottilie, the question of the beautiful appearance and of the sublime is raised.

Benjamin reads Plato with Kant to come up with an antipsychological aesthetic theory that begins with and does justice to the spiritual essence of human beings. He begins his brief sketch with reference to the *Symposium*, where the Platonic theory of the beautiful coincides with the (even older) problem of appearance, and the theory is directed onto corporeal living beauty. "Everything that is beautiful in essence is so always and substantially bound in infinitely varying degrees to illusion or appearance (*Schein*). This link achieves its highest intensity in manifest living beings."[86] A moment of appearance is reserved, however, in that which is most unliving, in case it is beautiful in essence, he writes, which is the case in all works of art.

---

86 Ibid., 194.

> Accordingly appearance lingers in all the beauty of art, that is to say, lives on in that brushing up against and that bordering on life, without which beauty is not possible. This however, does not embrace its essence. It shows forth, on the contrary, deeper down as that which may be designated in opposition to appearance, as the expressionless in the work of art....The expressionless belongs therefore, to the appearance, though in opposition--in that kind of necessary relation that precisely the beautiful, whether illusion or not, ceases to be an essential beauty if the illusion, appearance, dies away. Because appearance belongs to the beautiful as its cover and as the law of its being, it shows itself off as that which only appears in disguise.[87]

This oppositional structure allows for the dramatic representation of these concepts: appearance bears a necessary relation to both the expressionless and the beautiful; it stands apart from the one and is inextricably bound to the other. It is philosophical barbarism to say that beauty is truth becoming visible, Benjamin writes. This turns beauty into appearance, which it is not. "Beauty itself is not appearing, but rather being through and through, and such a one that is freely essential and self-same only when it stays under wraps. Thus otherwise appearance would be deceit above all--beautiful illusion is the cover for that which is necessarily the most concealed."[88] The idea of revealing or exposing the beautiful is the idea of art criticism. Art criticism does not have to lift up the

---

87 Ibid.

88 Ibid., 195.

cover of the beautiful, as to reveal its secret; rather it is to raise or elevate the cloak, in its most precise recognition as necessary cloak or cover, to true on-looking of the beautiful. The divine ground of the being of beauty lies in secret, he writes, and thus appearance is not the superfluous concealing of things in themselves, but the necessary concealing of things for us. "Such concealing is divinely necessary at times, just as divinely conditioned it is--namely, revealed at monstrous times, the unseemly (*Unscheinbare*) takes refuge in nothingness, so that revelation dissolves secrets. Kant's doctrine that a relational character exists as the foundation for beauty thus successfully carries out its methodical tendencies in a much higher sphere than that of the psychological. Like revelation, all beauty holds historical-philosophical orders in itself. For it does not make the idea visible, but rather its secret."[89]

The unity of concealment and concealed is meaningful where the duality of nakedness and clothing no longer resides--in art and in the spectacle (appearances) of bare nature. This duality is expressed to the highest degree in humans, Benjamin writes, and this is where he locates the sublime: "in unclothed nakedness the essentially beautiful is abandoned, and in the naked bodies of humans a being

---

89 Ibid.

above all beauty is achieved--the sublime, and a work above all forms--that of the creator's."[90] Ottilie bares her naked breast not to her lover Eduard, but imploringly to the night sky, full of stars.

> Ottilie spoke in haste. All that might happen passed through her mind. She was happy to have Eduard near her and she felt she now had to send him away. 'I beg, I beseech you, beloved! she cried, 'go back and wait for the Major!' 'I shall obey your command,' Eduard replied gazing on her passionately and then clasping her tightly in his arms. She embraced him and drew him with the utmost tenderness to her breast. Hope soared away over their heads like a star falling from the sky. They fancied, they believed they belonged to one another; for the first time they exchanged firm, frank kisses, and when they parted they had to tear themselves away from one another....[the child drowns in the lake]
>
> She tries to render aid herself. She had heard so often about how to save the drowning and she had seen it done on the evening of her birthday. She undresses the child and dries it with her muslin frock. She tears open her clothes and for the first time bares her breast to the open sky; for the first time she presses a living creature to her pure naked breast--alas, a living creature no longer. The unhappy child's cold limbs chill her bosom down to her innermost heart. An unending stream of tears pours from her eyes and imparts to the numb body an appearance of warmth and life.[91]

Ottilie's living body is the cloak of her beauty, which remains a mystery--and the sublime the guarantor of the beautiful. Would this be music to the ears of a sculptress?

---

90 Ibid., 196.

91 Goethe, *Elective Affinities*, 261-262.

"Speak, Ottilie."

Before you wage the battle of your star,
I sing of strife and gains on higher stars.
Before you know the bodies on this star,
I shape you dreams among eternal stars.[92]

Benjamin closes his essay in two ways: he sets it to music, and sends Goethe's image of the shooting star higher by raising it not only symbolically over the heads of the ill-fated lovers as lost hope, but setting it ambivalently as allegorical emblem as well. The music we hear is not Wagner's, despite the halls of Valhalla invoked by Goethe in one of Ottilie's journal entries; it is the strains of Stefan George's dedication to Beethoven that we hear, in one of the "tablets," the "House in Bonn." In this way, he gives voice to the creature that would not or could not speak, to the one remaining as human disarticulated to the point of sheer nature, and to the one elevated out of mythical daemonism in an unheroic death. In this way, a worldly reconciliation and peace (music) is juxtaposed against the possible flash of true redemption in the allegory of the star. As Benjamin quotes more than once from Goethe: "Beauty can never be articulate on or about itself."[93]

---

92 Stefan George, "House in Bonn," trans. Olga Marx and Ernst Morwitz *The Works of Stefan George* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1974), 305.

93 Benjamin, *GS* I.1, 197.

"Nothing mortal is unexposable, unable to be revealed....When they are before God, the human appears to us as a corpse and his life as love. Thus death has power to strip as love does. Unexposable is only nature, which keeps a secret, as long as God lets it endure. The human body strips itself (away), a sign, that man himself steps before God."[94] Ottilie is the most young-like of Goethe's characters, and insofar as she is young she is ready for death--at any minute: she has her life as it has its own death out of its own period of duration. It is the name of Ottilie with which Goethe fascinated the world, actually in order to save one who is passing away (this is the reference to Valhalla), to redeem in her a loved one, writes Benjamin. This is how he reads the warning of the star: "Hope soared away over their heads like a star falling from the sky." In the symbol of the star hope for the lovers appeared, but hope is never preserved for those who tend it, but only for those for whom it is cultivated. It shimmers, like the shine of reconciliation or atonement, which should be hoped for, that shimmers between the blessing that the lovers in the novella carry home, and the hope of redemption that is preserved for the dead.

This is the only right of belief in immortality, Benjamin writes, which may never be kindled on a single being. The mystical Christian moments at the end of the novel speak

---

94 Ibid.

against the immortal hope that is preserved in the image of the star, and it is only in the image of the falling star that a mystery inhabits the work. In dramatic presentation a mystery can never come to expression in words, only in the presentation--it is "the dramatic" in the strictest sense. Benjamin sets the analog of this dramatic presentation--this sober light--in the shimmer of the star. "If music embraces mysteries, so this certainly remains a silent world, out of which its resounding will never rise."[95] In giving room at the end of the essay to George, Benjamin lends "sublime irony" to a closed book. In the line, "Before you know the bodies on this star," the gravity of those bodies is felt as lightness, a soaring. Thus the name of Ottilie is heard, the memory of her beauty preserved, and the knowledge that something has passed or gone missing is registered. And this registration shows up on the spectrum.

"So to sum up: the story goes this way: mumble, mumble, lyrical wave, mumble, lyrical wave, mumble, lyrical wave, mumble, fantastic climax, mumble, mumble, and back into the chaos from which they all had derived. At this superhigh level of art, literature is of course not concerned with pitying the underdog or cursing the upperdog. It appeals to that secret depth of the human soul where the

---

95 Ibid., 201.

shadows of other worlds pass like the shadows of nameless and soundless ships."[96]

---

96 Vladimir Nabokov, *Nikolai Gogol* (New York: New Directions, 1944), 149.

CHAPTER IV
ALLEGORY'S CONSCIOUSNESS

Consciousness does not lie outside the real process of history. It does not have to be introduced into the world by philosophers; therefore to gaze down arrogantly upon the petty struggles of the world and to despise them is indefensible.[1]

I gather flowers on the brink of subsistence.[2]

Part I

When Walter Benjamin quoted *Hamlet* in *Sleeping Beauty*, one of his first published theoretical texts (1911),

> *The time is out of joint--O cursed spite,*
> *That ever I was born to set it right.*

it was with the tone of a call to arms to the youth of his age, to those who might also participate in the journal *The Beginning*.[3] It is with a very different tone that Jacques Derrida quotes those same lines as the foundation for

---

1 Georg Lukács, "Class Consciousness" *History and Class Consciousness* trans. Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT, 1971), 77.

2 Walter Benjamin, from a lost letter quoted by Gershom Scholem, "Walter Benjamin and His Angel," *On Walter Benjamin: Critical Essays and Recollections* ed. Gary Smith (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT), 66.

3 Benjamin, *"Das Dornröschen," GS* II.1, 9-12.

his meditation on and homage to Marx, *Spectres of Marx* (1993). As Bettine Menke would attest, it is more than mere coincidence that would lead these two authors, each poised at opposing ends of a long and highly-developed life of writing--one which traversed the works of Baudelaire, Proust, Nietzsche, Valéry, Mallarmé, Husserl and Plato (to name just a few)--to arrive at the "same" point.[4] The point for both marks a moment of conscious awakening, of a realization of the present moment as a sort of miscalculation on the part of history, a feeling that the age, and that age hasn't properly arrived--the time needs to be set to right.

The book in which Benjamin laid out his historical-philosophy of art most thoroughly is the *Origin of the German Mourning Play*. He labeled it an "end," not a beginning. As Stéphane Moses writes in his book *L'Ange de l'Histoire: Rosenzweig, Benjamin, Scholem*, the reflection on history is one of the constants in Benjamin's thinking, and it is guided by the idea of "the time of today," necessarily a discontinuous history, one opposed to the march of continuity and causality offered up by a progressive conception of history. What in earlier years (of the writings of the *Task of the Translator* and the essay, *On*

---

4 See Bettine Menke, *Sprachfiguren: Name--Allegorie--Bild nach Walter Benjamin* (Munich: Wilhelm Fink, 1991).

Language as Such and the Language of Humans) emerged as a--in Moses' words--theological paradigm of history, and what was later cast as a political paradigm of history (in the *Passagen-Werk* and related essays), was crystallized in the book on the Baroque as an aesthetic paradigm of history.[5] These paradigms must not be viewed as cut off from one another, Moses writes; they inform and fold back on one another, and the structure of each is a conceptual reorganization of material contained in all three. "But from the point of view of its function in the general economy of the thought of Benjamin, it is certain that it is the aesthetic paradigm that plays the most central role....above all because in the last stage [of his writing] the aesthetic plays the role of mediating instance between theology and politics."[6]

In the *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels*, Moses writes, Benjamin's aesthetic paradigm of history is founded on an aesthetic paradigm of consciousness or knowledge. It is this description of consciousness that has preoccupied scholars with its philosophical density, originality, and often impenetrable presentation.[7] In the

---

5 Stéphane Moses, *L'Ange de l'Histoire: Rosenzweig, Benjamin, Scholem* (Paris: Seuil, 1992), 21, 95, 100.

6 Ibid., 101.

7 See for example Gunar Musik, *Die erkenntnistheoretischen Grundlagen der Ästhetik Walter Benjamins und ihr Fortwirken in der Konzeption des Passagenwerks* (Frankfurt a/Main: Peter Lang, 1985), and Rolf Tiedemann *Studien zur Philosophie Walter Benjamins* (Frankfurt a/M: Europäische

Epistemo-Critical Prologue to the book, Benjamin builds upon earlier work for his methodological starting-off point, most immediately that of the *Elective Affinities* essay,[8] in which he laid out theses on the beautiful and the sublime and on the truth as beautiful, with regard to Plato's *Symposium*. A close examination of this Prologue is essential not only to an understanding of the book as a whole, and of its relation to his oeuvre, but particularly

---

Verlagsanstalt, 1965), two full length studies on Benjamin that attempt to situate his thinking within the tradition and concepts of western philosophy. The problem with such an approach is that it does not fully recognize the degree to which Benjamin was questioning that tradition and transforming those concepts in his experimentation with language and his *historical* presentation of ideas. He writes: "In the great philosophies the world is seen in terms of the order of ideas. But the case is the rule that the conceptual frameworks within which this took place have, for the most part, long since become fragile. Nevertheless these systems, such as Plato's theory of ideas, Leibniz's Monadology, or Hegel's dialectic, still remain valid as attempts at a description of the world....The more intensely the thinkers strove to outline the image of reality, the more were they bound to develop a conceptual order which, for the later interpreter, would be seen as serving that original depiction of the world of ideas which was really intended." *GS* I.1, 212; *Origin*, 32.

8 Benjamin asked his friends to provide him with copies of his essay, in particular with a copy of part three, which, in his travels and changes of residence, he did not have with him for months. He asks Florens Christian Rang for a copy on November 8 and December 9, 1923; mentions the third part of the essay again to Hugo von Hofmannstal on January 13, 1924; and badgers Scholem for a copy from Capri, beginning June 13, 1924. *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin, 1910-1940* trans. Manfred R. Jacobson and Evelyn M. Jacobson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 213-14, 222-25, 228-230, 241-244.

to an understanding of how consciousness is figured there, so that it can be seen how it is transformed, or raised in the course of the book. Samuel Weber writes: "For what Benjamin seeks to articulate in that Preface is not simply another form of cognitive investigation, but rather a form of interpretation that does not take cognition for granted."[9]

"Truth, bodied forth in the dance of represented ideas, resists being projected, by whatever means, into the realm of knowledge. Knowledge is a having."[10] This Platonic distinction between truth ("the death of intention," as Benjamin puts it) and knowledge, Benjamin illustrates further with relation to methodology, and thereby illustrates his own methodological stance. "For knowledge, method is a way of acquiring its object--even by creating it in the consciousness; for truth it is self-representation, and is therefore immanent in it as form."[11] The notion of the self-representation of an idea is what places Benjamin's thinking squarely in what Moses calls an aesthetic paradigm, and indeed, Benjamin himself

---

9 Samuel Weber, "Genealogy of Modernity: History, Myth and Allegory in Benjamin's *Origin of the German Mourning Play*," *MLN* 106 (1991), 467.

10 Benjamin, *GS* I.1, 209; *Origin of German Tragic Drama* trans. John Osborne (London: New Left Books, 1977), 29.

11 Ibid., 209-10; 29-30.

situates his practice of writing between that of the artist and the scientist. Like the artist, the philosopher sketches a "little picture" of the world of ideas, which, because it is a likeness, is in every present a definitive one, he writes. And like the scientist, the philosopher is interested in eliminating the purely empirical, and in organizing the dispersal of the world into ideas through concepts.[12]

As Bernd Witte writes, "the mediation between phenomenon and idea, which is to save the phenomena and make the idea presentable is that which Benjamin conceives as dialectical action."[13] This dialectical moment is what differentiates the methodology of the *Trauerspielbuch* from Benjamin's earlier critical practice, says Witte. Just as the idea in Benjamin's criticism of Dostoyevsky's *The Idiot* was crystallized in the name "youth," here the extremes of the analysis are not brought together under the sway of another name, but are placed in relation to one another in a way that results in a meaningful structure. As such, the idea of the *Trauerspiel* does not let itself be expressed by another word, but expresses itself, in critical self-representation of its elements--*Trauer-Spiel*.

---

12 Ibid., 212; 32.

13 Bernd Witte, *Walter Benjamin--Der Intellektuelle als Kritiker* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1976), 109.

> I would like to retell the fairy tale of Sleeping Beauty.
>
> She lies sleeping in her thorn hedge. And then, after so and so many years, she awakens.
>
> But not because of the kiss of a lucky prince.
>
> The cook woke her up when he boxed the ears of the busboy. The blow, resounding from the conserved energy of so many years, echoed throughout the castle.
>
> A beautiful child sleeps behind the thorn hedge of the following pages.
>
> If only no fortune-hunting prince in the blinding armor of scholarship approach it. For it will bite back during the bridal kiss.
>
> Instead, as head cook, the author has reserved the right to awaken it himself. The blow that is meant to echo shrilly throughout the halls of academia is long overdue.
>
> Then this poor truth that pricked itself on the old-fashioned distaff when it illicitly thought to weave a professorial gown for itself in the attic will also awaken.[14]

Benjamin was proud of this unpublished forward to the *Trauerspiel* book, written after its completion. "Otherwise, nothing much has appeared in print. Most worth mentioning is the ten-line forward to the *Trauerspiel* book, which I wrote to take a dig at the University of Frankfurt and which I consider to be one of my most successful pieces."[15] Of course, Benjamin must not be taken at his word, given the quality and quantity of his writings even at that date. Telling, however, is the emotional force with which it is written, so overt, that it was able to temporarily convince Benjamin himself of its merits.

---

14 Benjamin, in a letter to Scholem from April 5, 1926, *Correspondence*, 295.

15 Ibid., 293.

This tone underlies the whole of the Epistemo-Critical Prologue, although it keeps itself loosely draped in the garb of a professorial gown, clad in the armor of scholarship for the duration of the piece. Underneath the folds of this gown rests a beauty who bites back the kiss of her prince, one who responds to the call of a bang on the ears.

> --the play's the thing
> Wherein I'll catch the conscience of the king.
> --*Hamlet*, act II, sc.II

Although Benjamin girds the Preface with the fragmentary power of staccato precision (a precision he compares to the medieval forms of the treatise and the mosaic), this power does not mimic that of the Baroque in its enthusiasms. The methodology of representation corresponding to the form of the treatise, like the formal beauty of the fragments in relation to the glass paste on which they depend in a mosaic, is one of sober contemplation. "Tirelessly thinking begins always anew, returning to its original object in a long-winded and circumstantial way. The continual pausing for breath is the most proper form of existence of contemplation," whose "aim is not to carry the reader away and inspire him with enthusiasm," but to cause him to pause and reflect.[16] It is again the sober prose of the late Hölderlin that serves as linguis-

---

16 Benjamin *GS* I.1, 208-09; *Origin*, 28-29.

tic guide; but here, transformed into the methodological basis for a simultaneously philosophical, historical, and aesthetic mode of reading, one that will be specifically named allegorical.

"This introduction is unmitigated chutzpah--that is to say, neither more nor less than the prolegomena to epistemology, a kind of second stage of my early work on language (I do not know whether it is any better), with which you are familiar, dressed up as a theory of ideas. To this end, I also plan to read through my work on language once more."[17] Although the work undertaken in "On Language as Such and on Human Language" makes its presence felt in the Prologue, especially in the section on the relation of the idea to the name, its significance comes into its own only with the completion of the book, and *this* "end" reveals again a new beginning. Benjamin's letters to Scholem in particular among his many correspondents unearth his sense of imbalance with respect to the composition of the book: "I have lost all sense of proportion in the course of working on this project."[18] "I have gradually lost my perspective on what I have done....Yet what surprises me most of all at this time is

---

17 Benjamin, letter to Scholem, February 19, 1925, *Correspondence*, 261.

18 Ibid.

that what I have written consists, as it were, almost entirely of quotations. It is the craziest mosaic technique you can imagine."[19]

But like the image of the mosaic he invokes in the Preface, much depends on the coherence provided by the glass paste in the arrangement of such a construction.[20] The theory of ideas Benjamin sketches from his review of the Platonic relationship of truth to beauty is immediately informed by at least three other sources: the scholastic debate between the realists and the nominalists;[21] the Kabbalistic book of the Zohar, a trans-

---

19 Benjamin, letter to Scholem, December 22, 1924, *Correspondence*, 256.

Indeed, Benjamin's conception of the construction of the book changed dramatically over the months of its composition. On March 5, 1924, the chapters read thus: "On History as the Content of *Trauerspiel*; On the Occult Concept of Melancholy in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries; On the Nature of Allegory and Allegorical Art Forms." On September 16, the chapters were still three: "The King in the *Trauerspiel*; *Trauerspiel* and Tragedy; Theory of Allegory." Not until December 22 did he report that the book would be divided into two parts. *Correspondence*, 238, 247, 256.

20 This image of the mosaic finds a counterpart, of course, in the glass architecture of the *Passagen-Werk*, an image Pierre Missac seized on. Pierre Missac, *Walter Benjamin's Passages*, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholsen (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT, 1995).

21 "The decision, at least the provisional one, depends not only (even if to a significant extent) on the question of money but also on how the work on my habilitation dissertation shapes up. All that exists of the dissertation is my intention to work on a particular topic; that is, a research project that falls within the sphere of the larger question of the relationship between word and concept (language and logos). Given the immense difficulties inherent in the project, for the time being I am looking for literature that can no doubt be found only under the

lation of which Benjamin had read; and Franz Rosenzweig's *Star of Redemption*.[22]

Although Rosenzweig's writings on heroic silence in the Metaethical section of the *Stern der Erlösung* are those Benjamin directly interprets in the *Trauer-*

---

rubric of scholasticism or works about scholasticism. In the first case at least, the Latin is going to be a tough nut to crack." Benjamin, letter to Scholem, January 13, 1920, *Correspondence*, 156.

"I have read Heidegger's book on Duns Scotus. It is incredible that anyone could qualify for a university position on the basis of such a study. Its execution requires *nothing* more than great diligence and a command of scholastic Latin, and, in spite of all of its philosophical packaging, it is basically only a piece of good translating work. The author's contemptible groveling at Rickert's and Husserl's feet does not make reading it more pleasant. The book does not deal with Duns Scotus's linguistic philosophy in philosophical terms, and thus what it leaves undone is no small task." Benjamin, letter to Scholem, ca. December 1, 1920, *Correspondence*, 168.

"Regarding my planned project, I have recently been busy with an analysis of the concept of truth, and it is supplying me with some basic ideas for the project." Benjamin, letter to Scholem, December 29, 1920, *Correspondence*, 170.

"Furthermore, the research I have done to date has caused me to proceed with caution and to question whether it is correct to follow scholastic analogies as a guide, or if it would not perhaps be better to take a detour, since Heidegger's work presents, albeit in a completely unilluminated way, the elements of scholastic thought that are most important for my problem, and the general problem can somehow be intimated in connection with this." Benjamin, letter to Scholem, January 1921, *Correspondence*, 172.

22 "My lengthy stay here admonishes me about how *much* work there is to do, and I have nothing better to do than read Rosenzweig." Letter to Scholem, July 12, 1921. *Correspondence*, 181.

spiel/Tragedy section of his book, its influence is generally manifest in the Prologue as well. "Questions of manner, of 'method,' should after all really never be discussed before the work has been done, only afterward."[23] Sharing a discourse in Neoplatonism stirred by Hermann Cohen's Neokantianism, an outlook on aesthetics and history shaped by Nietzsche, and a present marked by the revival of Judaic questioning, a delving into language, and the experience of the destructions of the war, the form of Benjamin's and Rosenzweig's response to the tradition of philosophy in the formulation of an idea--like that of many other of their contemporaries--becomes articulated in the distilled fragment. Benjamin's mosaic does not fall into the shape of the six-pointed star formed by the paths of Creation, Revelation, and Redemption linking the elements Man, World, and God in the *Star*. But like the army post cards on which the *Star* was written, later to be reassembled, each composition bears forth its potential as missive, each letter never sent may still nevertheless arrive. Like the embarrassment of miracles for modern scientific thought and developed theology, an uncertainty principle makes itself felt, one more unnerv-

---

23 Franz Rosenzweig, *The Star of Redemption*, trans. William W. Hallo (Notre Dame, Ind.: Notre Dame Press, 1970), 109.

ing than doubt or dialectics could ever instigate, one balancing precariously on the ledge of life as it remains, in retreat. To piece together the steps of this tottering, to track the line of never-ending fall, is for both writers to grasp the small gesture of this movement, as it promises something unheard of.

> The timing of this about-face is the first observation which forces itself on our attention, and it is already quite remarkable. What had hitherto been the firmest and ultimate line of defense was transformed into a front-line trench, very lightly manned and immediately expendable on the first assault. And the timing of this transformation coincides with that moment which, in the Introduction to the preceding Part, we again and again recognized as critical for philosophy too. It was the moment when the concept of the uniformly cognitive universe, the basic concept of philosophy, burst into pieces in philosophy's hands while they deemed it secure in their grasp. At that moment, philosophy had felt its ancient throne tottering. The dynasty which Thales and Parmenides had founded, and which--an exile of a thousand years included--was more than two millennia old, seemed, in a single greatest scion, headed for an extinction as brilliant as it was sudden. And at approximately the same time, theology too saw itself forced to undertake the aforementioned evacuation of a line it had held for centuries, and to occupy a new position further to the rear. A striking coincidence![24]

In December of 1922 Benjamin wrote to Scholem: "All I want to say about Frankfurt is that I looked up Rosenzweig. Whether because you did not tell me or only told me in passing, or because it seemed unimportant to you, I learned only from his letter and, at the same time,

---

24 Ibid., 93-4.

from a third party that he is seriously ill. The paralysis has reached the speech center so that the only thing he can still do is produce word fragments, which are very hard to understand."[25] Although Rosenzweig could only speak in fragments translated by his wife, Benjamin found him lucid. The conversation turned to Scholem, with whom Rosenzweig had had a passionate disagreement that spring. Benjamin relates to Scholem that Rosenzweig "seems to see you as a hostile force."[26] Their disagreement was over questions of German Jewishness, and of the obligations of military service.

Scholem did not find his way in the metaphors of trench warfare, needless to say. In Israel and through the Kabbalah he found his method of excavation of language, spirit, and name. His lectures on the *Sefer Ha-Zohar*, the "Book of Splendor," (Zohar means "shining") written (or at least circulated) in Castile sometime between 1268 and 1290 most probably by the Kabbalist Moses ben Shemtob de Leon, focus on an interpretation of how the ten spheres, or *Sephiroth* of God's divine manifestation from the *Sefer Yetsirah* or "Book of Creation," emerge to reveal his being through their interconnection, providing a theosophy as

---

25 Benjamin, letter to Scholem of December 30, 1922, *Correspondence*, 204. Rosenzweig suffered from lateral sclerosis.

26 Ibid.

well as a cosmology, and which became a canonic text in Kabbalism.[27] The writing is homiletic, telling the story of the teachings of Rabbi Simeon ben Yohai, in Aramaic, which, Scholem writes, is a purely literary artifice adopted for the novelistic form of the narration from other Jewish literary documents. "Throughout these writings, the spirit of medieval Hebrew, specifically the Hebrew of the thirteenth century, is transparent behind the Aramaic facade."[28] "Everything that has been said of the vocabulary of the Zohar also applies to its phraseology. Whether the style is elliptic and oracular or verbose and circumstantial, there is the same tendency to employ words such as all-profundity, all-completion, all-connection, all-configuration, all-mystery, etc., -- expressions in which the word *de-kola* ("of the whole") is tacked on to the substantive."[29]

Scholem finds the author of the Zohar to be a representative of the Gnostical reaction in the history of Spanish Kabbalism, one united with a Jewish Neoplatonism, developed from reading Plotinus. He attributes both the authorship and the originality of the text to the writer's

---

27 Gershom G. Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (New York: Schocken, 1941), 186-87, 75.

28 Ibid., 163.

29 Ibid., 166.

style rather than to the uniqueness of the substance of his thoughts: "He displays precisely the same preference for endless repetition, verbal bombast and the indiscriminate use of certain terms which are thereby almost robbed of their meaning. No other writer, for example, uses the word 'mystery' half as often as he [Moses de Leon] and the author of the Zohar--in most cases to very little purpose."[30] The Gnostical elements of his thought include the idea of a "left emanation," an ordered hierarchy of the potencies of evil, Satan's realm, which is organized in ten impure spheres or stages, corresponding to the ten holy *Sephiroth*. The world of the *Sephiroth*, of hidden language, the world of the divine names, the ten names most common to God which form one great Name are abstract names, names naming qualities such as wisdom, intelligence, grace, beauty, etc. The ten unholy names are personal names.[31] According to the author of the Zohar, "evil is indeed something which has its ordained place, but in itself it is dead, it comes to life only because a ray of light, however faint, from the holiness of God falls upon it or because it is nourished and quickened by the sin of man; by itself it is simply the dead residue of the process of life. A spark of God's life burns even in

---

30 Ibid., 197.

31 Ibid., 177-78, 213-215.

Sammael, the personification of evil, the 'other' or 'left side.'"[32]

The unfolding of God in his revelation, coincident with creation, has a necessary and direct relationship with the concept of the mystical nothing in the Zohar. The creation of something out of nothing which takes place in God himself is

> also a crisis of the hidden *En-Sof* who turns from repose to creation, and it is this crisis, creation and Self-Revelation in one, which constitutes the great mystery of theosophy and the crucial point for the understanding of the purpose of theosophical speculations. The crisis can be pictured as the break-through of the primordial will, but theosophic Kabbalism frequently employs the bolder metaphor of Nothing. The primary start or wrench in which the introspective God is externalized and the light that shines inwardly made visible, this revolution of perspective, transforms *En-Sof*, the inexpressible fullness, into nothingness....Nothing can change without coming into contact with this region of pure absolute Being which the mystics call Nothing. The difficult task of describing the emergence of the other *Sephiroth* from the womb of the first--the Nothing--is somehow managed with the aid of copious metaphors.
>
> In this connection it may be of interest to examine a mystical *jeu de mots* which comes very close to the ideas of the Zohar and was already used by Joseph Gikatila. The Hebrew word for nothing, *ain* has the same consonants as the word for I, *ani*--and as we have seen, God's 'I' is conceived as the final stage in the emanation of the *Sefiroth*, that stage in which God's personality, in a simultaneous gathering together of all its previous stages, reveals itself to its own creation. In other words, the passage from *ain* to *ani* is symbolical of the transformation by which the Nothing passes through the progressive manifesta-

---

32 Ibid., 239.

> tion of its essence in the *Sephiroth*, into the I--a dialectical process whose thesis and antithesis begin and end in God: surely a remarkable instance of dialectical thought. Here as elsewhere, mysticism, intent on formulating the paradoxes of religious experience, uses the instrument of dialectics to express its meaning.[33]

Aristotle's "All philosophy begins in wonder" marks the wonder over the real, over why there is something rather than nothing. The debate between the realists and the nominalists in medieval Latin scholasticism centered on the problem of universals in the relation between thought and language, a fevered, meticulous search for the referents of names, for the signification and denotation behind appellation. The early fourteenth century realism of "the subtle doctor" Duns Scotus was foundational to Benjamin's thinking on the linguistic structure of the idea.

A common example serves to briefly explain and simplify the debate over universals between the realists and the nominalists.[34] Consider two white stones. Realism affirms there is a universal concept of "whiteness" which these two stones embody. These particular white stones

---

33 Ibid., 217-18.

34 This following example is taken from Alister E. McGrath, *Reformation Thought* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1988). See also, for example, Jorge J.E. Gracia, *Individuation in Scholasticism: The Later Middle Ages and the Counter-Reformation 1150-1650* (Albany, N.Y.: SUNY, 1994); Paul Vincent Spade, *Lies, Lanugage and Logic in the Late Middle Ages* (London: Variorum, 1988).

possess the universal characteristic of "whiteness." While the white stones exist in time and space, the universal of "whiteness" does not. Nominalism, however, asserts that the universal concept of "whiteness" is unnecessary, and instead argues that we should concentrate on particulars. There are these two white stones--and there is no need to talk about a universal concept of whiteness.

Although both realists and nominalists were NeoAristotelians, and rejected the theory of Platonic forms, Benjamin engineers an ingenious reinterpretation of the Platonic idea in light of the realist discussion of universals. Scotus' view on universals begins to be summarized in the following five theses:

> (T1) the nature is common of itself and is also common in reality; (T2) the principle of individuation or contracting difference is numerically one and particular of itself and cannot be common to numerically distinct particulars; (T3) both the nature and the contracting difference exist in reality as constituents of a particular and they can exist in reality only as such; (T4) as a result of combination with the contracting difference, the nature is numerically one denominatively and is numerically many in numerically distinct particulars; and (T5) the nature is completely universal only insofar as it exists in the intellect.[35]

Scotus' theory of universals concludes that "prior to every act of intellect there must be some sort of non-identity or distinction among entities within the real

---

35 Norman Kretzmann, Anthony Kenny and Jan Pinborg, *The Cambridge History of Later Medieval Philosophy* (London: Cambridge, 1982), 414.

thing."[36] This non-identity is a formal distinction, neither a distinction between real things or entities nor a distinction in reason, as being thought by means of distinct concepts. "Thus Scotus' first account of formal non-identity or distinction presupposes an ontology that begins with formalities or realities that can have a double mode of existence: they can exist in reality as constituents of real things or they can have a non-real mode of existence in the intellect as objects of thought or concepts."[37] This split is repudiated by the Nominalist William of Ockham as being counter to a fundamental axiom of identity: "Nothing is individuated through anything extrinsic to it; rather, being identical with itself and being distinct from everything else are properties that a thing has in and of itself."[38]

In some of the early notes on language and logic, Benjamin comments specifically on the eccentric linguistic theory of Duns Scotus, in language that is directly incorporated into the *Task of the Translator*.

> If after the theory of Duns Scotus the indications to certain *modi essendi* are founded according to what these indications mean, then the question naturally arises, how from that which is meant something general and formal as its and therefore

---

36 Ibid.

37 Ibid, 415.

38 Ibid., 420.

> the meaning's *modus essendi* somehow splits off, in order to be valid as the fundament of that which means. And as one is able to abstract from the complete correlation between the meaning and the meant with regard to this question of foundation, so that thus the circle is avoided: That which means aims at the meant and simultaneously touches on it.--This task is to be solved through reflection on the realm of language. As far as a linguistic thing lets itself be lifted out of the meant and secured, is this to be described as its *modus essendi* and therewith as the fundament of that which means. The linguistic realm extends itself as critical medium between the realm of the meaning and that of the meant. Thus can be said: That which means aims at the meant and simultaneously is based on it according to its material determinacy, but not unreservedly, rather only according to the *modus essendi*, which language determines.[39]

In the *Trauerspiel*'s Prologue Benjamin writes that the attempt of the Romantics to revive the theory of ideas resulted in truth assuming the character of a reflective consciousness rather than its linguistic character. He writes: "The idea is something linguistic, it is that moment in the essence of a word in which it is a symbol. In empirical perception, in which words have become fragmented, they possess, in addition to their more or less hidden, symbolic side, an obvious, profane meaning. It is the task of the philosopher to restore, by representation,

---

39 Benjamin, *GS* VI, 22-3. Rolf Tiedemann holds that in Benjamin's doctrine of ideas, the *Trauerspiel* is a universal, although he interprets this passage as stating that language appears as a medium next to or between reality and nominality, and carries that interpretation over onto Heidegger. Rolf Tiedemann, *Studien zur Philosophie Walter Benjamins* (Frankfurt a/M: Europäische Verlagsanstalt, 1965), 27-31.

the primacy of the symbolic character of the word, in which the idea comes to self-consciousness, which is the opposite of all outwardly-directed communication."[40] This process of restoration applies to "the name-giving rights" of the idea, a remembrance that Benjamin distances from Platonic *anamnesis* as he situates it under the sway of Adam, "the father of humans and the father of philosophy."[41]

The essence of truth as the self-representing realm of ideas guarantees that the beauty of truth can never be devalued, he writes. This representational impulse is the refuge of beauty in truth--it shines forth, and in its brilliance, its mere shining (Zohar), it is seductive, pursued by eros and the intellect. The beauty of truth as the erotic component of the idea corresponds to the symbolic, hidden, secretive character of the word, the name's expressionless spiritual content, which does not wish to be exposed (destroyed) by a "brutal truth" but is--with a spark and what is described in Benjamin's metaphor as a purified burning--sublimely, and justly, revealed. "This content, however, does not appear by being exposed; rather it is revealed in a process which might be described meta-

---

40 Benjamin, *GS* I.1, 216-17; *Origin*, 36. Translation modified.

41 Ibid.

phorically as the burning up of the husk as it enters the realm of ideas, that is to say a destruction of the work in which its form achieves its most brilliant degree of illumination."[42]

Although Benjamin states that "the being of ideas simply cannot be conceived of as the object of vision, even intellectual vision," the metaphors he uses to describe their shining are stellar. "Ideas relate themselves to things as constellations do to stars," and later, "Every idea is a sun and is related to other ideas just as suns are related to each other."[43] By calling attention to the discrete, multiple, and monodological nature of ideas illustrated by these images, he maps a sky full of many redemptive stars. The phenomena they represent and save are phenomena they let shine forth, and even for those things that are most unseemly or unliving, even for evil, in Gnostic and Kabbalistic fashion, a moment of appearance is reserved, in case it is beautiful in essence.[44] This is the case for all works of art, Benjamin writes. The method of regarding them is contemplative, for truth is an intentionless state of being. "Truth is the death of intention."

---

42 Ibid., 211; 31.

43 Ibid., 214-18; 34-37.

44 Benjamin, *Goethes Wahlverwandtschaften*, *GS* I.1, 194.

"How can the word, that abstractly encompasses the fullness of empirically found *Trauerspiele*, and the name, which symbolizes the totality of its idea, be mediated?"[45] This task falls to the concepts, with whose help the phenomenon is broken down into its elements, the most important of which are the extremes. In his critique of inductive reasoning for the philosophy of art, Benjamin is careful to insist against the making of words into concepts, which strips the word of its relation to the name. The concept plays a role in articulating the structure of an idea, but can never be taken for one, as his dissertation on the Romantics and his notes on the philosophy of language show.[46] In reviewing the secondary literature on

---

45 Bernd Witte, *Der Intellektuelle*, 109.

46 In an early schema for his Habilitation, Benjamin constructs a "confusion schema" outlining the relation of the symbol, as imaginary object, to the many forms of "objective intention" (some he lists are remembrance, loyalty, truth, philosophy, penitence, and purification). "The object of a symbol is imaginary. A symbol means nothing, but rather is, according to its essence, the unity of the sign and that of its object completed intention. This unity is an objectively intentional one, its object imaginary. One may not ask what a symbol means, but rather how, in the realm of which objective intention and of which sign it is arisen." And later, in another fragment on stages of intention, he writes: "The hierarchy of stages of intention is not something to be understood epistemologically, but rather historical-philosophically." And: "This language of intentionless truth (that is to say, the thing itself) has authority. And this authority of the way of speaking is the measure of thingliness (*Sachlichkeit*)....As far as truth is intentionless, it rips the entire outwardly-become apparatus of induction back into the thing itself and takes hold of it, hidden in the most inner place of the thing, in the interest of authority sovereign, playful, at will." *GS* VI, 21-22, 49-51.

his material, for instance, he asks, whether the tragic is a form that can be realized at the present time, or whether it is an historically limited form. An uncareful examination of what things may have "in common" leaves one "with nothing but some psychological data which bring under cover a poor reaction in the subjectivity if not of the researcher then of the ordinary citizen, to cover over that which is different with similarity."[47] Again Benjamin insists that the concepts of psychology are inappropriate for the representation of an essence in works of art.

In his critique of Konrad Burdach's methodology, he comments on Burdach's "concern for material errors of detail" in the avoidance of constitutive ideas, of universals such as the Renaissance or the Baroque for historical-philosophical research. "However, what such names are not able to perform as concepts they perform as ideas, in which the similar is not brought to cover, but the extreme is brought to synthesis."[48] Through the series of proclamatory tablets he lays forth as the form of the Prologue, Benjamin systematically--and in his words, scientifically--builds the case for a linguistic philosophy of art appropriate to the *Trauerspiel* as an historical

---

47 Benjamin, *GS* I.1, 219; *Origin*, 39, translation modified.

48 Ibid, 221; 41.

essence. Thus against what he calls the Nominalism of Benedetto Croce, Benjamin writes to save "some of the philosophy of art's richest ideas, such as the tragic or the comic," themselves structures, equal in thickness and reality to any individual drama. Even if there were no "pure tragedy" or "pure comic drama," these ideas would still exist, and they would find their essence in what is exemplary, be it the merest fragment.

Samuel Weber has given the definitive interpretation of Benjamin's description of origin and history in the *Trauerspiel* book. His retranslation of the passage describing the dialectical notion of origin in the Prologue sets the stage for his commentary.[49]

> Origin, although an historical category through and through, has nevertheless nothing in common with emergence (*Entstehen*). In Origin what is meant is not the becoming of something that has sprung forth (*Entsprungenen*), but rather that which springs forth out of coming-to-be and passing-away (*dem Werden und Vergehen Entspringendes*). Origin stands in the flow of becoming as a maelstrom (*Strudel*) which irresistibly tears (*reißt*) the stuff of emergence into its rhythm. In the bare manifestation of the factual the original is never discernible, and its rhythm is accessible only to a dual insight. It is recognizable on the one hand as restoration, as reinstatement, and precisely in this as on the other hand incomplete, unfinished.[50]

---

49 Samuel Weber, "Genealogy of Modernity: History, Myth and Allegory in Benjamin's *Origin of the German Mourning Play*," *MLN* 106 (1991): 465-500.

50 Benjamin, *GS* I.1, 226; *Origin*, 45, trans. Samuel Weber.

The category of origin is an historical one, not a logical one, as Benjamin takes from Hermann Cohen. Weber writes, "it is the offspring of coming-to-be and going-away," "conservative and repetitive in the most literal sense."[51] "Origin, which 'stands' firm in the flow of time, as though it were a thing or an entity, is neither: it is, above all, a rhythm, recurring regularly with a force capable of drawing the materials out of which entities and things are composed into its movement."[52] The true--the seal of origin in phenomena--is the object of discovery which is in a singular way tied to recognition, Benjamin writes, underlining the split that fundamentally forms and reveals both the notion of origin and the idea, the historical category that inhabits the linguistic essence. "Instead, the origin is split between a pre-and a post-history and this split is what constitutes its historicity. The historicity of the origin consists in a split in empirical-factual, but also ideal *history*: if the latter evolves in the mode of the present-to-hand (facticity), or of presence to itself (ideality), the origin is true to itself only if we remember that one of the meanings of the German root-word *Sprung* is: *crack*."[53]

---

51 Weber, "Genealogy of Modernity," 469, 471.

52 Ibid., 470.

53 Ibid., 472. Stéphane Moses has brought up the theological connotations of this return to the origin in the Prologue. "Dans la première version de son introduc-

Benjamin describes the monodological structure of the idea as if it were a many-faceted crystal, absorbing the conflictual history of extreme phenomena, and reconfiguring them, much like the fate of Leskov's "Alexandrite" as it is interpreted in "The Storyteller."[54] "The higher the ideas are ordered, the more complete the representation set within them. And so the real world could certainly be a task in the sense that it would be worth penetrating so deeply into everything real, that an objective interpretation of the world would be thrown open."[55]

---

tion (version non publiée de son vivant), Benjamin souligne plus nettement que dans le texte définitif les connotations théologiques de ce retour à l'origine. En effet, l'originel y est défini comme 'restauration inachevée de la Révélation', ce terme devant être entendu comme l'ordre du langage adamique. Cependant, il ne s'agit pas là d'un retour à un commencement dans le temps, mais, à chaque instant, d'une régénération du sens originel des mots." Stéphane Moses, *L'Ange de l'Histoire*, 108.

54 "It deals with a semiprecious stone, the chrysoberyl. The mineral is the lowest stratum of created things. For the storyteller, however, it is directly joined to the highest. To him it is granted to see in this chrysoberyl a natural prophecy of petrified, lifeless nature concerning the historical world in which he himself lives. This world is the world of Alexander II....''What nonsense are you talking,' I interrupted him; 'this stone wasn't found by a magician at all, it was a scholar named Nordenskjöld!' 'A magician! I tell you, a magician!' screamed Wenzel in a loud voice. 'Just look; what a stone! A green morning is in it and a bloody evening...This is fate, the fate of noble Czar Alexander!' With these words old Wenzel turned to the wall, propped his head on his elbows, and...began to sob.'" Benjamin, "The Storyteller," *Illuminations* trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken, 1969), 107. See Nikolai Leskov, "The Alexandrite," from *The Tales of N.S. Leskov* trans R. Norman, (London: Routledge, 1944), vol. I, 195-208.

55 Benjamin, *GS* I.1, 228; *Origin*, 48, translation modified.

The rest of the Epistemo-Critical Prologue is devoted to a brief commentary on the prevailing critical interpretations of the form of baroque drama, to its place in the life of the language, and its present future in Benjamin's age of Expressionism. "And this year, during which we have spoken less with each other, the conversations we did have have come to be extremely vivid in my memory. I have been in dire need of the encouragement I derived from them, and they will come to be more and more indispensable to me. For the forced isolation of thinking people seems to be spreading rapaciously, and it is hardest to endure in large cities where it is necessarily quite involuntary....What is frightening--totally apart from the material hardship--is how the isolation of intellectuals visibly continues to grow. Storm signals."[56] "Men of letters, whose existence today, as always, plays itself out in a sphere cut off from the active body of the nation, are once again consumed with an ambition in the satisfaction of which the writers of the Baroque period were, despite everything, certainly happier than those of today. For Opitz, Gryphius, and Lohenstein were here and there able to perform gratefully rewarded political duties."[57] A

---

56 Benjamin, letter at Christmas 1923 to Florens Christian Rang, *Correspondence*, 225-26.

57 Benjamin, *GS* I.1, 236; *Origin*, 55-6.

tendency to sentimentality, to pathological suggestibility, to exaggeration in language, bombast and excess, a penchant for neologisms, a certain violence of style, equal to that of world events, and the presence of a will in art that gives the isolated, self-contained work over to the epigones coincide both in the Baroque and in the age of Expressionism with an ambition that is decidedly political. Thus Benjamin recognizes in Alois Riegl's concept of artistic will in *Late Roman Art Industry* a resonance with both ages, and it is one of the concepts necessary to breaking down and representing the *Trauerspiel*.[58] However, Benjamin notes that literature in the Baroque experienced a significant rebirth, whereas that of his present age must be characterized as a decline, albeit "preparatory and fruitful." This comparison is made on the basis of the relationship each literature had to the state--the former upholding an absolutist constitution, and the latter either hostile and revolutionary, or indifferent to the state.

The German Baroque drama is forced, Benjamin writes, the violent effort it took its writers to forge it, part of a secular national literature that does not make use of the material of German popular culture, is reflected in

---

58 See Alois Riegl, *Late Roman Art Industry* trans. Rolf Winkes (Rome: Giorgio Bretschneider, 1985).

the simultaneous belabored constraint of inhibition and the excessive violence of their style. Nowhere in the literature is there the lithe ease or virtuosity or personality Calderón gave the Spanish drama, nor the richness and the freedom of Shakespeare.[59] "Their work bore the imprint of the absolutist maxim: everything for the people, nothing by the people themselves."[60] Yet this form, according to Benjamin, which is seen as a caricature of classical tragedy, merits criticism, not "appreciation," (which is what he condemns Cysarz's work for being); it merits elevation to the levels of its extreme possibilities. It deserves to be criticized on its own terms, which are not the terms of Aristotelian poetics. The catharsis of fear and pity do not apply: Benjamin is ever warding off the method of psychology in the philosophy of art, when he states that an artistic form can never be determined by its effect. Citing Novalis, he attributes to this drama a necessity that can only be described as an *a priori* and immanent necessity of works of art "*to be there*." And one of the fundamental misunderstandings in the reception of this form, based on the prejudice that a strange scene couldn't be or wasn't staged, he writes, was the notion that these plays were meant to be read, not

---

59 Ibid., 229; 48-49.

60 Ibid.

staged. "In the passionate and vehement proceedings, which provoke the desire to watch (*die Schaulust*) the theatrical speaks directly with particular violence."[61] The *Trauerspiel* is a source of delight not in its content, but in its theatrical presentation, as Rainer Nägele has shown so well in his study of the *Trauerspielbuch*.

Humoresque

> The body is with the king, but the king is not with the body. The king is a thing
> *Hamlet*, Act IV, sc. II.

Deep in the middle of the second section of the *Trauerspiel* book, Benjamin comments on the series of analogies that encompass the composition thinking-concentration-earth-bile that unmistakenly alludes to a new interpretation of the earth in terms of the ancient structure of wisdom of the doctrine of the four temperaments. The temperament most intimately bound to the earth, to worldly events, the things of the world, and their apparitions, is the dry and cold of the melancholic. The way to approach a critical analysis of this temperament, which serves as one of, if not the prime elements of Benjamin's representation of the *Trauerspiel*, is through the index of the temporal.

> Hamlet: Thrift, thrift, Horatio! the funeral-bak'd meats
> Did coldly furnish forth the marriage tables.

---

61 Ibid., 231; 51.

> Would I had met my dearest foe in heaven
> Ere I had ever seen that day, Horatio!
> Act I, sc. II

The vileness of this contamination, rooted in what would be the otherwise precious and necessary attentions to a tender and earthly respect for the dead, are shattered, made sickly, by an out-of-time joint that unhinges Hamlet. But in continuing to return to the individual figure of Hamlet in this his study of the German Baroque, and in juxtaposing it against the beauty of the form of Calderón, Benjamin is subtly establishing the techniques of temporal movement and structure that uphold and destroy the single subject as it appears in the figure of the sovereign master, as he simultaneously reveals what can occur when this temporal index breaks down from within. Such is the history of history, and which above our heads can be heard not a lament, and certainly not silence, but first, quietly, a humoresque. A representation of the melancholy temper lit from the side-view of the choleric begins to reveal the quality of its humor.

> Kant never perspired, night or day. Yet it was astonishing how much heat he supported habitually in his study, and, in fact, was not easy if it wanted but one degree of this heat. Seventy-five degrees of Fahrenheit was the invariable temperature of this room in which he chiefly lived; and, if it fell below that point, no matter at what season of the year, he had it raised artificially to the usual standard. In the heats of summer he went thinly dressed, and invariably in silk stockings; yet, as even this dress could not always secure him against perspiring when engaged in active exercise, he had a singular remedy in reserve.

> Retiring to some shady place, he stood still and motionless--with the air and attitude of a person listening, or in suspense--until his usual *aridity* was restored. Even in the most sultry summer night, if the slightest trace of perspiration had sullied his nightdress, he spoke of it with emphasis, as of an accident that perfectly shocked him.[62]

With Shakespeare lurking in the wings, such an entrance may find affinity with *Every Man In His Humour*; but then again, *Every Man Not In His Humor*[63] points the way out of sorts and onto the long, dull road toward cell pathology. In his Introduction to his student Rolf Tiedemann's study of Benjamin's philosophy, Adorno remarks: "After this work it will be no longer possible for anyone to take shelter behind the argument that what Benjamin inaugurated was *aperçu*-like or a rhapsodic essence."[64]

> The severe decree of this telling construction, which seized in the eye nothing but the building of the tower, made possible the completion of the plan. Therewith the spiritual overcoming of the technical reached its summit, for the sobriety and reserve of the technical proceedings became a symbol of a real idea. The work of technics is the most articulate expression of that modest, innocent, and severe interpretation of events, which on their most extreme, the purest surface is attached. The entanglements of love, the problems of

---

62 Thomas De Quincey, "The Last Days of Immanuel Kant," *The Collected Writings of Thomas de Quincey*, ed. David Masson (Edinburgh: Adam and Charles Black, 1890), vol. IV, 323-379.

63 See *The Complete Plays of Ben Jonson* ed. G.A. Wilkes (Oxford: Clarenden, 1979-82), vol. I., 277-411.

64 Theodor W. Adorno, "Preface," to Rolf Tiedemann, *Studien zur Philosophie Walter Benjamins*, x.

> knowledge and of art, even the perspective of the moral is entirely eliminated, in order to be able to unfold the utopian image of a spiritual starry world, in the purest and most unambiguous appearance of the technical. In this sense every throwing-open or disclosure and every description of the star's innards is a step which leads away from the true task and oversteps the established boundaries. Art is not the forum for utopia. Even when it seems so, as if out of it the decisive word about this book could be spoken, because it is full of humor, thus it is exactly this humor, which with more certainty climbs over the region of art, and makes the work into a spiritual witness. Its stability is not eternal and not grounded in itself alone, but witness is elevated in greatness, from which it engenders. One cannot speak about greatness--the realization and fulfillment of utopia--one can only bear witness.[65]

From this little piece on Scheerbart, introduced to Benjamin by Scholem, Benjamin comments on the uniting of the "head and rump-system of the Asteroid Pallas" through tunnels and a tower, which recalls (with the significant addition of the orientation of gravity) the hermaphrodite-passage in the *Symposium*.

In the *Trauerspiel* book, Benjamin does not dwell on the loss or the absence of the sanguine or choleric, as if they were not represented.[66] Nor are they locked traumati-

---

65 Walter Benjamin, *"Paul Scheerbart: Lesabéndio"* in *GS* II.2, 618-20. This essay comprises one third of Benjamin's work on the "True Politician," the main substance of which has been lost. See also his short piece on Shakespeare's *As You Like It*. *GS* II.2, 610-11. "Unendingness, infinity, is the universal, it is the essence of all things....Shakespeare is the greatest Romantic, even when that's not all he is."
See Paul Scheerbart, *Lesabéndio. Ein Asteroiden-Romane* (Frankfurt a/M: Suhrkamp, 1986).

66 Max Pensky in his book *Melancholy Dialectics: Walter Benjamin and the Play of Mourning* (Amherst, Mass.: University of Massachusetts Press, 1993), relies upon Julia

cally in the vault of *memoria*. "The body is with the king, but the king is not with the body. The king is a thing." A brilliant, if deceptively calm surface, like the sheen on the lake through which Ottilie falls in the *Wahlverwandtschaften*, or the vault of the black sky that embraces the *Königen der Nacht* in *The Magic Flute*, reflects the techniques of violence. The temperamental garb that outfits the character of the political, in this case tyrant/martyr/intriguer, finds its most sovereign, loyal, and earthly aspect in the melancholy.

Kristeva's *Black Sun* as a setting for a discussion of melancholy in Benjamin. In the discussion of the *Trauerspiel* book, he compares it to Adorno's treatment: "But to read Benjamin's own conclusion to the *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels* as an unequivocal rejection of the 'idealist' encounter with God beyond the vale of melancholy objects is to oversimplify a terrifically complex process, one that Adorno himself is, with extraordinary tact, attempting to register in his own Benjaminian critique of the melancholy Kierkegaard." He does not attempt to confront this complex process: "The conclusion of the *Trauerspiel* book, while certainly not embracing the final spiritual moment of baroque melancholy--while recognizing that allegory thereby betrays its own objects and goes away empty-handed--is not unambiguously critical of it either. The final, postmelancholic image of faith that Benjamin summons at the close of the *Trauerspiel* study is remarkably free of irony, and Benjamin does not see it as constituting an objective mendacity, an illusion." pp. 148-49. Aside from the fact that objective mendacity is not an illusion or image, but rather objective, the necessity of interpreting this passage is not seriously undertaken.

Part II

A new disease? I know not, new or old,
But it may well be call'd poor mortals' plague;
For like a pestillence it doth infect
The houses of the brain. First, it begins
Solely to work upon the fantasy,
Filling her seat with such pestiferous air
As soon corrupts the judgment; and from thence
Sends like contagion to the memory,
Still each to other giving the infection, which as
a subtle vapor spreads itself
Confusedly through every sensive part,
Till not a thought or motion in the mind
Be free from the black poison of suspect.
Ah, but what mis'ry is it to know this,
Or, knowing it, to want the mind's erection
In such extremes! Well, I will once more strive,
In spite of this black cloud, myself to be,
And shake the fever off that thus shakes me.
(Kitely, in *Every Man in His Humour*)[67]

One must become supersaturated in memory before
one can recognize the unknown. The road to excess
leads to one's *own forms*. In order to discover
one's self must first be made unrecognizable.
(Clark Coolidge, to a drawing by Philip Guston)[68]

The Shrunken Thing

In his introduction to the English version of the *Trauerspielbuch*, George Steiner writes that the "dramas of Gryphius, of Lohenstein, of Martin Opitz, remain trapped in their special vortex of brutal sadness and al-

---

67 Ben Jonson, "Every Man in His Humour," ed. J.W. Lever (Lincoln, Neb.: University of Nebraska, 1971), 81.

68 "Philip Guston's Poem-Pictures," at the Drawing Center, New York, through July 28, 1995.

legory....[Benjamin] points to the cultivation of private and public *tristesse* so symptomatic of political and philosophic postures in the seventeenth-century. He relates it to the physiology of humours. He traces the irrational but perfectly congruent network which knits blackness in the individual soul or complexion to planetary maleficence, to bile and, above all, to that proximity of literal hell which haunts Baroque reflexes. Benjamin shows how it is in its figuration of 'world-sadness', of *acedia*--that final boredom of the spirit--that Baroque thought and art achieve their truest depths."[69]

EDWARD KNO'WELL.
Oh, sir, a kinsman of mine; one that may make your music the fuller, an' he please; he has his humour, sir.

WELLBRED.
Oh, what is't? What is't?

EDWARD KNO'WELL.
Nay, I'll neither do your judgment nor his folly that wrong, as to prepare your apprehension. I'll leave him to the mercy o' your search; if you can take him, so.[70]

STEPHEN.
Ay, truly sir, I am mightily given to melancholy.

MATTHEW.
Oh, it's your only fine humour, sir; your true melancholy breeds your perfect fine wit, sir.

---

69 George Steiner, introduction to Benjamin, *Origin*, 19.

70 Jonson, *Every Man in*, 107.

> I am melancholy myself divers times, sir, and then do I no more but take pen and paper presently, and overflow you half a score or a dozen of sonnets at a sitting.[71]

Off-putting may not be the word to describe beginning with a *Lustspiel* as a way to initiate a discussion of Tragedy and *Trauerspiel*. If Jonson's *Every Man* provides the slight and airy counter to the weight Benjamin ascribes to *Hamlet*, it is merely to offer one side view to the conundrum, as perhaps Gryphius' *Lustspiele, Gesangspiele* or *Mischspiele* as *Horribilicribrifax Teutsch, Verliebtes Gespenst* and *Die geliebte Dornrose* do to his *Leo Armenius* or *Catharina von Georgien*. To apply such a strategy means to circumvent and to enlighten simultaneously with the conscious realization that first, simply: 1) the dialectic is alive and well; 2) the masks of tragedy and comedy are both necessary for an understanding of the word, and the thing, *Trauerspiel*; and 3) in order to understand Benjamin's choice of working material, being aware of what he rejected reveals, in part, the nature of what he kept.

Benjamin spent much time considering the wayward longings of love in his *Elective Affinities* essay. It has been shown that more than an analysis of beauty emerges there. For the work that was to go into the *Trauerspiel* book, the

---

71 Ibid., 109.

manner of light heart that sparks the Goethe piece lights on the structure, the organization of the *Mourning Play* book, giving it clarity. It is a superbly organized book. The section that will be considered here, in Part Two, is not an act. All references to the performance aspect of the *Trauerspiel* book aside--it is a work of prose.

Benjamin first ends the second section of his book with the ultimate quote from *Hamlet*, "The rest is silence." He then goes on to say:

> The German *Trauerspiel* was never able to inspire itself; it was never able to awaken within itself the silver light of self-awareness. It remained astonishingly dark and obscure--impenetrable--to itself, and was able to paint the melancholic only in the garish or glaring and worn-out colors of the medieval complexion-books. Why thus then this excursus? The images and figures that the German *Trauerspiel* presents are dedicated to Dürer's genius of winged melancholy. Before him begins the raw staging of its inner life.[72]

Dürer and his--winged--*Melancholia I* will be engraved with the extreme and crass theatrical lines of an unenlightened sadness, and to bring them to consciousness will take more than an entire lighting crew. As Benjamin writes, the *Lustspiel* does not easily light the *Trauerspiel*, although they are related forms, sharing, in Novalis' terms, a "symbolic combination."[73]

---

72 Benjamin, *GS* I, 335.

73 Ibid., 306; *Origin*, 128.

> In England, on the other hand, Shakespeare had based such figures as Iago and Polonius on the old model of the demonic fool. With them the *Lustspiel* enters into the *Trauerspeil*. Through their modulations these two forms are not only empirically connected but in terms of the law of their structure they are as closely bound to each other as classical tragedy and comedy are opposed; their affinity is such that the *Lustspiel* enters into the *Trauerspiel*: the *Trauerspiel* could never unfold in the form of the *Lustspiel*. There is a certain good sense to the following image: the *Lustspiel* shrinks and is, so to speak, absorbed into the *Trauerspiel*.[74]

Understanding what is particularly shrunken in *Trauerspiele* depends in part on the factor of politics. Benjamin turned to the writings of Carl Schmitt to locate and define the nature of this shrunken thing. Schmitt's *Concept of the Political*, *Political Theology*, *Political Romanticism*, and *The Dictator* give an indication of, and further develop the interest Benjamin took in his early writings. They also reveal the weaknesses of Schmitt's writings, their often simplistic nature, and the important but limited use of them Benjamin made in his book.

> Let us assume that in the realm of morality the final distinctions are between good and evil, in aesthetics beautiful and ugly, in economics profitable and unprofitable. The question then is whether there is also a special distinction which can serve as a simple criterion of the political and of what it consists. The nature of such a political distinction is surely different from that of those others. It is independent of them and as such can speak clearly for itself. The specific political distinction to which political actions and motives can be reduced is that between

---

74 Ibid, 306; *Origin*, 127.

> friend and foe.[...]The political is the most intense and extreme antagonism, and every concrete antagonism becomes that much more political the closer it approaches the most extreme point, that of the friend-enemy grouping.[...]Finally even more banal forms of politics appear, forms which assume parasite- and caricature-like configurations. What remains here from the original friend-enemy grouping is only some sort of antagonistic moment, which manifests itself in all sorts of tactics and practices, competitions and intrigues; and the most peculiar dealings and manipulations are called politics.[75]

> Sovereign is he who decides on the exception.[...] It is precisely the exception that makes relevant the subject of sovereignty, that is, the whole question of sovereignty. The precise details of an emergency cannot be anticipated, nor can one spell out what may take place in such a case, especially when it is truly a matter of an extreme emergency and of how it is to be eliminated.[...T]he sovereign is [h]e [who] decides whether there is an extreme emergency as well as what must be done to eliminate it.[...] I have shown in my study of dictatorship that even the seventeenth-century authors of natural law understood the question of sovereignty to mean the question on the exception.[76]

Why Benjamin cited Schmitt in this case is a many-sided question. Its focus lies in the emphasis on the extreme case, the exception, the emergency. At stake is not simply the princely content of *Trauerspiele*, and the concept of sovereignty that distinguishes them from the *agon* of tragedy, a point which Benjamin develops at length, but also at stake is the form or the structural break that the

---

75 Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political* trans. George Schwab (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers, 1976), 26-30.

76 Schmitt, *Political Theology*, trans George Schwab (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT, 1985), 5-9.

concept of the exception exercises upon the position, the placement of the extreme in the book. As an initial example, the break made by the decision in making or breaking an exception to custom, practice, or rule, leads to the violence of the breakdown of the king or prince in these dramas, of the melancholy and often aging, hunched-over king devoted to earthly rule. If politics is the shrunken thing in the hollows of Benjamin's book, and the friend-foe distinction is its guide, the section on Tragedy/*Trauerspiele* must be discussed with regard to an aloneness if the distinction is to make any sense, and its history is to begin to come to consciousness.

The fact of the place upon which the emphasis on the extreme is placed is recognized in the first lines the of the second section of Benjamin's book. He writes: "The necessary tendency towards the extreme which, in philosophical investigations, constitutes the norm in the formation of concepts, means two things as far as the representation of the origin of the German Baroque *Trauerspiel* is concerned. Firstly it serves as a reminder that the whole range of subject matter should be disinterestedly observed.[...]Secondly the study of extremes means taking account of the Baroque theory of drama."[77] He turns to

---

77 Benjamin, *GS* I, 238; *Origin*, 57-8. Benjamin writes: "It is one thing to embody a form; quite another to express, or represent it.[...] The form itself, whose life is not identical with that of the works determined by it, in fact sometimes its self-revelation can stand in inverse proportion to the perfection or completion of a literary

Opitz, not to Aristotle (fear and pity do not take pride of place), for a definition of the character of the *Trauerspiel* itself. Historical life, not myth and the past age of heroes, is its content, its true object, Benjamin writes.[78] "For Opitz, it is not the conflict with God and fate, the making present of a primordial past, which is the key to a living community, but the confirmation of princely virtues, the representation of princely vices, insight into the exercise of diplomacy and the manipulation of all political machinations, which determine the monarch as the main character of the *Trauerspiel*."[79]

In a sentence from his section on "The insignificance of the influence of Aristotle" as far as the poetics of the *Trauerspiel* go, Benjamin writes that the theory of the period does not give a precise definition of the unity of time. Unity of place is largely irrelevant, for the court dramas *move*. Establishing the fact by writing it, Benjamin demonstrates the poetics of the *Trauerspiel* itself by presenting its historical-philosophical content. He writes: "Like today's naming of the 'tragic' so--and with

---

work; the form itself becomes obvious or evident precisely in the thin body of the needy or inferior work, as its skeleton, so to speak." Ibid.

78 Ibid., 242-43; 62.

79 Ibid., 243; 62.

more right or justification--it went for the word '*Trauerspiel*' in the seventeenth century, with equal respect to dramas and historical events."[80]

Sheldon Wolin has given an excellent portrayal of both the history and the theory, or poetics, of the early Christian era--and of Machiavelli and Hobbes--in his book *Politics and Vision*. What he has to say about the development of fear in the early Christian church has relevance for the establishment of a different kind of rule in the seventeenth century, the development of sovereign rule, but it is also important with respect to the content of Baroque dramas, many of which were Herod-dramas, and stories from the Orient. Underlying the high and ultimate rule of the Church or King, was dissent, however removed, sectarian, or silent.

> This whole politico-religious complex was attacked at several crucial points by the dissenters with the result that the Church was driven to a deeper understanding of the political elements in its own make-up. In the first place, the rebels often expressed a view of history and time which, by its radicalism, pointed up the degree to which the Church had tamed and modified the primitive, chiliastic view of time to accord with the needs of an institutionalized order. The spokesmen of the Church sensed the inherent antagonism between the assumptions underlying an ordered structure, with its developing sense of tradition and reliance upon routine, and the assumptions of those who had grouped together in the expectancy that the destruction of the world was imminent. Thus the contrast in conceptions of time was logi-

---

80 Ibid., 244; 63.

> cally accompanied by opposing estimates of the worth of institutional arrangements. On the one hand, there was the high excitement generated by the belief in an impending apocalypse, an irruptive view of time: Christians, Tertullian declared, need no longer obey the biblical injunction to increase and multiply, for the last days were impending. On the other side, there was the contrast of the unruffled, measured outlook of a large organization, sophisticated rather than primitive, viewing time as a gradual, smooth unfolding in the tempo of Elgar's *Pomp and Circumstance*. For the latter, time had to be adjusted to institutional life; to the former, institutions had shriveled to a trifling concern before the impending climax of history.[81]

The shriveling of institutions makes up one part of the shrunken matter of friend and foe.[82] Benjamin's comments on sovereignty at the beginning of the seventeenth century rest on a comparison between the emergency status of the doctrine of that age (say of the politics of Henry IV in the Netherlands), and the one based on an executive power in the modern age. The entire history of early modern political theory is to consult to elucidate the development of this position. Although Benjamin notes that these dramas were largely Lutheran, one example pertaining to the territory is that of the Calvinist Johannes Althusius:

---

81 Sheldon S. Wolin, *Pollitics and Vision: Continuity and Innovation in Western Political Thought* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1960), 109-110.

82 See Jacques Derrida, "The Politics of Friendship," trans. Gabriel Motzkin, *The Journal of Philosophy* 75, 11 (1988): 632-45.

> When Althusius came to write his *Politica*, the estates in many German territories, as well as in the Reich were groping for a position of supremacy. In juristic circles the Bodinian doctrine of sovereignty, heralding the need for one ultimate legislative authority in each well-governed realm, was gaining rapidly. Althusius, by applying the cooperative, associational principle and by linking it with the Aristotelian doctrine of the sociability of man, constructed a theory of the estates' assemblies as the representatives of a federally united people who exercise the sovereignty which is an attribute of the organized community in its entirety. By proclaiming the majesty of the people he vindicated supremacy in the government for the estates. 'Taking the side of the estates in general, and of the third estate in particular as strongly as he did, Althusius' volume seems to have created an immediate sensation among those who were struggling to broaden the power of the Estates.' It seemed at the time the winning side in Germany. In many territories, such as Brandenburg, the estates were triumphing over their territorial lords.[83]

From this new concept of sovereignty emerging in the seventeenth century, with its origins in the Counter-Reformation coming from juridical doctrines of medievalism that settled on the problem of tyrannicide, Benjamin writes: "The sovereign represents history. He holds historical events in his hand like a sceptre."[84] As Wolin notes in his chapter, and as Benjamin stresses, the historical ideal of stabilization and or Restoration, in concert with a flourishing community and all the worldliness of the Baroque is undermined by "the idea of catastrophe"

---

83 Carl J. Friedrich, *The Age of the Baroque: 1610-1660* (New York: Harper & Row, 1952), 23-4.

84 Benjamin, *GS I*, 245; *Origin*, 65.

as an extravagant retarding or delaying transcendence. This antithesis between the desire for historical restauration and stability, and the anxiety produced by the notion of simple catastrophe, produces the theory of the state of emergency. Its core is touched by a temporal unresolve: "There is no Baroque eschatology; and for that very reason it possesses no mechanism by which all earthly things are gathered in together and exalted before being consigned to their end."[85] The Beyond is emptied of all that in which even the lightest breath of world is woven, Benjamin writes, and an ultimate heaven is cleared and as vacuum placed in a position to one day destroy the earth with catastrophic violence.[86] Hence Benjamin notes that the naturalism of the Baroque involves the "art of least distances."

The martyr and the monarch do not shake off their immanence, says Benjamin; and like his metaphor for the idea from the Prologue, he here makes note of the comparison of the prince or worldly power with the sun, underlining the exclusiveness of this power over his realm. Martyr and tyrant are simply two faces of the sovereign, according to the legal aspect of Baroque princedom. This duality is witnessed in the Herod dramas, as Benjamin makes clear: At

---

85 Ibid., 246; 66.

86 Ibid.

the moment when the tyrant is about to fall into insanity and bash in the heads of two babes, "he falls victim to the disproportion between the unlimited hierarchical dignity with which he is divinely invested, and the estate of his impoverished human being."[87] The art of least distances manifest in one being. This dual-mindedness results in the indecisiveness of the tyrant: He who is charged with the announcing of a decision proves incapable of making one. His physical and emotional drives contribute to this. In referring to Lohenstein, Benjamin writes of "the sheer arbitrariness of a constantly shifting emotional storm" and that although the most fleeting expressions can be captured by the genre, it remains helpless when confronted with the human face.[88] The figures he is speaking about he compares to those of El Greco, according to the *smallness of their heads*.[89]

---

87 Ibid., 250; 70.

88 Ibid., 251; 71. Consult the works of Emmanuel Levinas on violence and the encounter of the face: *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Ethics* trans. Alphonso Lingis (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1981); *Existence and Existents* trans. Alphonso Lingis (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1978); *Collected Philosophical Papers* trans. Alphonso Lingis (The Hague: Nartinus Nijhoff, 1987); *Totality and Infinity* trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969); *Time and the Other* trans. Richard A. Cohen (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1987); *Ethics and Infinity: Conversations with Philippe Nemo* trans. Richard A. Cohen (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1985); *Face to Face with Levinas* ed. Richard A. Cohen (Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 1986).

89 See, for example, El Greco (Domenikos Theotokopoulous), *The Vision of Saint John*, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

Benjamin insists that the tyrant- and the martyr-drama are of a piece. In the case of the martyr-drama, which often feature women as victims, a stoicism rules. "To a corresponding fixation [that of the tyrant who relies upon the laws of nature to prevent the chance accident of history] the stoic technique authorizes against an emergency state of the soul, the rule of the emotions. It too seeks an antihistorical new creation..."[90] Benjamin comments upon the temporal structure of these martyr-dramas: "For just as surely as such a line of development is the basis for any pragmatic representation of history, so too does the dramatic genre, by its very nature, demand closed form, in order to achieve that totality which is denied to all external temporal progression. The subsidiary plot, either as a parallel or as a contrast to the main plot, guarantees this totality."[91] This quote makes less difficult to grasp the point Benjamin is making between the established connection between medieval drama and medieval chronicle as precedents for the form of the *Trauerspiel*, especially when he asks why all this sadness was not presented in continuous prose, rather than staged. The

---

90 Ibid., 253; 74.

91 Ibid., 255; 75-6.

dramatic presentation depends upon this deepening understanding of the proximity in time and space offered up by the *Trauerspiel*.

"Heads Up" (Heads go down)

If Benjamin were interpreting these dramas from a psychological viewpoint, he would say that the lack of redemption, or the fulfillment of religious aspirations was repressed and restricted into a secular response, and that a revolution in life's content would have taken place, seeing how a true, direct expression of men's lives was denied. This did not happen, he writes. The Baroque dramas lived under the restrictions imposed upon them, developing in an eccentric and hence more intense form (artistically and metaphysically speaking) than that of the Renaissance, which lived under high skies.

> For the dominant spiritual disposition, however eccentrically it might elevate acts of ecstasy, did not so much transfigure the world in them as cast a cloudy sky over its surface. Whereas the painters of the Renaissance know how to keep their skies high, in the paintings of the Baroque the cloud moves, darkly or radiantly, down towards the earth.[92]

The true counter to the Baroque plays is the genius of Calderón, but this comparison fits with another, that of the Romantics. Specifically German is the consolation

---

92 Ibid., 258-59; 79.

(hopelessness) with a bare state of creation, devoid of transcendence or a state of grace. But, as Benjamin writes: "Here, as in other spheres of Baroque life, what is vital is the transposition of the originally temporal data into a figurative spatial simultaneity. This leads deep into the structure of the dramatic form."[93] The form of its redemption lies in its own destiny, he writes, and in order to demonstrate this point, Benjamin discusses the redemptive power of the King within the court, which produces a brilliant reflective playful solution of the secular drama. Indeed, he writes, "in *La vida es sueño*, the dream stands over waking life like the vault of heaven."

In Calderón, the perfect form of the *Trauerspiel* is to be studied. The aspect of play, of reflection--the play within the play, the extension of the playing sphere into that of the spectators'--depends upon the paradoxical reflection of play and appearance. "It remains indisputable, however, that the German drama of the seventeenth century had not yet mastered the canonic artistic means which enabled the Romantic drama from Calderón to Tieck to employ the techniques of enclosure by a framework, and miniaturization: reflection.[...]In the drama of Calderón it corresponds to the volute in the architecture

---

93 Ibid., 260; 81.

of the time. It repeats itself infinitely, and reduces to invisible immeasurability the circle which it encloses. Both these aspects of reflection are equally essential: the playful miniaturization of reality and the introduction of a reflective infinity of thought into the finite space of a profane fate. For the world of the drama of fate is--to *anticipate our conclusions--a self-contained world.*"[94] Such a reliance upon the architectonic in this book is not seen in Benjamin to such a degree until the *Passagen-Werk*.

Benjamin had already praised the virtuosity of reflection in his book on the Romantics, and although the perfection of form offered by Calderón (and Shakespeare) in terms of being able "to turn the order of fate around like a ball in their hands," he claims for perfection of the form of the *Trauerspiel* itself, he holds that the relationship between the German Mourning plays and those of Calderón exposes an artistic and moral relationship, so that he refers to the German plays as more "responsible," a character that has to do with their Lutheran background.

Just as the Lutherans see themselves as sovereign before God, they rule over the immanence of their own lives similarly to the way in which the sovereign rules over his fellow creatures. But he remains a creature, like them. In

---

94 Ibid., 262; 83.

discussing the role played by honor in the dramas, Benjamin places a stamp on the name. He quotes Hegel, quoting that honor has to do with abstract inviolability of the individual subject, referring to the physical self, flesh and blood. In Benjamin's words the name bears witness to the abstract inviolability of the person as a "shield to protect man's physical vulnerability," recognizing his creaturliness over his "humanity."

This priority of the creature over the moral individual is manifest in the natural aspect of the course of history, as chronicle, as the meticulous artful scheming of the details of political intrigue, and the metaphors used to describe such plotting are natural ones--rocks, trees, mountains, rivers and the like. Benjamin describes it thus: "The creature is the mirror, in whose frame alone the moral world placed itself before the eyes of the Baroque. A concave mirror; for this was not possible without distortion."[95] History is secularized in the frame of the creature, which holds to the timelessness of the state of creation, and imminently bears the conflicts of the world within it as martyr, as did Ottilie in Benjamin's interpretation of the *Wahlverwandtschaften*. He again makes clear: "If history is secularized in the setting, this is an expression of the same metaphysical tendency which si-

---

95 Ibid., 270; 91.

multaneously led, in the exact sciences, to the infinitesimal method. In both cases chronological movement is grasped and analyzed in a spatial image. The image of the setting or, more precisely, of the court, becomes the key to historical understanding."[96] Just as Benjamin reduces the creaturely body to the bare form of a skeleton, he brings up the fact that the scene or setting of the court can be reduced to a scaffold.

"In contrast to the chronological and jerky progression [*zu einem zeitlichen und sprunghaften Verlauf*] of tragedy, the *Trauerspiel* takes place in a spatial continuum--choreographic one might call it."[97] Just as the setting can be reduced to a scaffold, the Baroque drama is replaced by the ballet in the intriguer's (ballet master's) organization of emotion and action. In writing "[t]he reflective intriguer is all will and understanding," Benjamin leads the way through "the anthropological principles" of Machiavelli--the forces of love and fear--through to the spatial arrangements of Hobbes, upon whom he does not elaborate, but whom he realizes is crucial for this transformation of world history into political action, into the clockwork of and particular rhythm of an action that resembles a metronome. Bach's cantatas are one

---

96 Ibid., 271; 92.

97 Ibid., 274; 95.

of his examples; and the mathematical time of Bergson that can be spatially measured gives entrée to the entire body of his work on Baudelaire and the *Passagen-Werk*: "In the course of political events intrigue beats out that rhythm of the second hand which captivates and fixes them."[98] They remain on stage, best foot forward. Like a prima ballerina, spirit shows itself in power, even if it is lifted with the lightest of dictatorial action; as Benjamin writes, such an ability demands just as strict an inner discipline as it demands unscrupulous outer action, an icy coldness matched with a hot-blooded or fiery passion, of the will to power.

In the Baroque drama, a shrunken thing remains within, which keeps it from keeping time with its actions, and prevents it from moving in tempo. Benjamin writes that, at the expense of a firmly-defined action or decision, knowledge of the life of the soul is offered, or an overt presentation of the emotions. As he writes about the sovereign tyrant: "In the course of the action his will is increasingly broken by his sensibility: and he ends in madness."[99] The Baroque, in reacting to a certain Aristotelianism, sees itself as "natural" in contrast to the theory of what Benjamin calls "its rival," antiqui-

---

98 Ibid., 275; 97.

99 Ibid., 277; 99.

ty.[100] "Antique tragedy is the fettered slave on the triumphal car of the Baroque *Trauerspiel*."[101] Like the foreign Cassandra, amid such a din, it can only remain silent.

Lurking

Benjamin fully chases the Nietzsche of the early *Birth of Tragedy* out of his crouch in the corner of aestheticism. He goes after him, for his lurking there, as if just outside a room in which things are being discussed. His avoidance of "the question of morality" (leaving it to the epigones) avoids confronting the historical-philosophical question that tragedy poses to modernity.[102]

---

100 See Norbert W. Bolz and Richard Faber, eds., *Antike und Moderne: Zu Walter Benjamins "Passagen"* (Würzburg: Königshausen and Neumann, 1986).

101 Benjamin, *GS I.*, 278; *Origin*, 100.

102 "The very essence which forms the essence of Dionysian music (and hence of music in general) is carefully excluded as un-apollinian--namely, the emotional power of the tone, the uniform flow of the melody, and the utterly incomparable world of harmony. In the Dionysian dithyramb man is incited to the greatest exaltation of all his symbolic faculties; something never before experienced struggles for utterance--the annihilation of the veil of *maya*, oneness as the soul of the race and of nature itself. The essence of nature is now to be expressed symbolically; we need a new world of symbols; and the entire symbolism of the body is called into play, not the mere symbolism of the lips, face, and speech but the whole pantomime of dancing, forcing every member into rhythmic movement. The other symbolic powers suddenly press forward, particularly those of music, in rhythmics, dynamics, and harmony....To understand this, it becomes necessary to level the artistic structure of the *Apollinian culture*, as it were, stone by stone, till the foundations on which it rests become visible." Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of*

Benjamin's quotes are, once again, perfectly timed, selec-

Tragedy out of the Spirit of Music, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1967), 40-41; *Die Geburt der Tragödie, Sämtliche Werke-Kritische Studienausgabe* ed. Giorgio Colli und Mazzino Montinari (München and Berlin: Deutscher Taschenbuch and Walter de Gruyter, 1988), vol. I, 33-34. Nietzsche's stone by stone is Benjamin's sound by sound.

In his two essays from 1916 on "*Trauerspiel* and Tragedy" and "The Meaning of Language in *Trauerspiel* and Tragedy," which precede by a few weeks or months the writing of "On Language Itself and On Human Language," Benjamin asked himself the question: "How can language be inspired or fulfilled, materialized, by mourning at all, and be the expression of mourning?" from a letter to Scholem dated 30 March 1918, *GS* II.3, 929. In this letter Benjamin reminds Scholem of his work of two years prior, in which he questioned the relationship between *Klage*, lamentation, and music in language, and which is why he had turned to Nietzsche in his readings. In 1926 he refers Hugo von Hofmannsthal to this (second) piece on "image, writing, and music," always with reference to Hebrew in the backround.

In the essays Benjamin insists that what is at stake is history, not "aesthetics." After a long passage beginning: "The time of history is unending in every direction and unfulfilled in each blink of the eye," which sets up an echo to be heard in his later essays, ends: "This idea of fulfilled, accomplished or materialized time is called in the Bible by its ruling historical idea: messianic time. In each case however the idea of the fulfilled historical time is not at the same time to be thought as the idea of an individual time." *Trauerspiel und Tragödie, GS* II.1, 134. He makes the comment that in tragedy, which is the only way in which historical greatness can be formed in art, the meaning of materialized time steps forth in tragic fate in the great moments of passivity: in the tragic decision, the retarding moment, in the catastrophe.

When he turns to the *Trauerspiel*, Benjamin speaks without irony of the raised ground of all life in another genos ("*metabasis* allen Lebens *eis allo genos*"). This will reappear in the *Trauerspiel* book itself. "It is repetition on which the law of the *Trauerspiel* touches....The time of the Trauerspiel is not fulfilled and yet finite, limited. It is unindividual, without being of historical universality. The *Trauerspiel* is in each meaning a medium-form, or transitional form. The universality of its time is spectral, not mythic....Thus is the *Trauerspiel* freely not the image of a higher life [though it deals with that of kings...], but rather nothing other than one of two mirror images, and its continuation is not less ghostly than it is itself." Unlike tragedy, the *Trauerspiel* does not fall under the structure of dramatic form, and this is the

ting Nietzsche at his most piquant, and, for Benjamin, most relevant: at stake, the justification of works of art, their necessity to *be there*. Benjamin calls upon Rosenzweig and Lukács[103] to help lift Nietzsche out of his

---

decisive point that divides them, Benjamin writes. Revising Hamlet: "The rest of the *Trauerspiel* is called music." Ibid., 136-37.

The riddle of the *Trauerspiel* leads Benjamin to "the question of morality that Nietzsche avoids. Benjamin asks what metaphysical meaning "feeling" has to the word, to spoken speech, to the linguistic order of art. There is a pure life of feeling of the word, that describes the path from natural sounds to lamentation to music. The essence of the *Trauerspiel* lies in the fact that all of nature would begin to lament or complain, if language were granted to it. "[I]n the midst of this path the nature of language sees itself betrayed, and that enormous inhibition of feeling becomes mourning. The King wears the crown of the world of meaning, "historical time without feeling," which depends upon having nature in a state of lament. "History becomes simultaneous with meaning in human language, this language becomes paralysed in meaning, tragedy threatens and the human being, the pride of creation, alone survives on the feeling in which he becomes King: symbol as carrier of the crown. And the nature of the *Trauerspiel* remains a torso in this sublime symbol, mourning fills the sensible world, in which nature and language meet.[...]The *Trauerspiel* does not rest on the ground of actual, real, language; it touches on the consciousness of the unity of language through feeling, which unfolds itself in the word. In the middle of this deployment the stray feeling raises the grievance of mourning. But it has to disband itself; on the grounds of that previous assumption of unity, it crosses over into the language of pure feeling, in music." And: "Whereas in tragedy the eternal paralysis of the spoken word raises itself, the *Trauerspiel* collects the endless resonance of its strains." *"Die Bedeutung der Sprache in Trauerspiel und Tragödie," GS* II.1, 137-140.

103 "In vain has our democratic age claimed an equal right for all to be tragic; all attempts to open this kingdom of heaven to the poor in spirit has proved fruitless. And those democrats who are consistent about their demand for equal rights for all men have always disputed tragedy's right to existence." Georg Lukács, "The Metaphysics of Tragedy" trans. Anna Bostock, *Soul and Form* (London: Merlin Press, 1974), 173.

kneel, but the main thrust to penetrate the shape of the shrunken thing, like a decaying brain in a skull, comes immediately from the strength of Benjamin's *Elective Affinities* essay. There the question of the individual human body was asked, and it received a sublime answer, one that goes beyond Schmitt's distinction of the beautiful and the ugly of aestheticism, and reaches up, for higher skies, just as simultaneously it is pulled downward, to earthly concerns.

The small, shrunken--even when it appears 'heroic'--human body, friend and foe, takes center stage in Benjamin's querying of Nietzsche's theory of tragedy, of the place to be occupied by the "hard, historical actuality of Greek tragedy."[104] He takes the question of art and morality to the level of the possibility of anatomical representation.

> The object in question here is not the significance of moral content for the criticism of a work of art; the question is a different one, indeed a double one. Do the actions and attitudes depicted in a work of art have moral significance as images of reality? And: can the content of a work of art, in the last analysis, be adequately understood in terms of moral insights?[....]Certainly, the denial of the first proposition can, in different contexts, be more

---

104 See, Benjamin, "*Erfahrung und Armut*," ["Experience and Poverty"] *GS* II.1, 213-219.

> readily justified than that of the second, which is primarily the concern of a philosophy of art. But this much is true even of the former: fictional characters exist only in literature. They are woven as tightly into the totality of the literary work as are the subjects of Gobelins into their canvas, so that they cannot be removed from it as individuals. In this respect the human figure in literature, indeed in art as such, differs from the human figure in reality, where physical isolation, which in so many ways is only apparent isolation, has its true meaning as a perceptible expression of moral seclusion with God. With incomparable emphasis the prohibition of the representation of the human body obviates any suggestion that the sphere in which the moral essence of man is perceptible *can be reproduced*. Everything moral is bound to life in its extreme sense, that is to say where it fulfills itself in death, the abode of danger as such. And from the point of view of any kind of artistic practice this life, which concerns us morally, that is in our unique individuality, appears as something negative, or at least should appear so. For art cannot, for its part, allow itself, in its works, to be appointed a councillor of the conscience and it cannot permit what is represented, rather than the actual representation, to be the object of attention. The truth content of this totality, which is never encountered in the abstracted lesson, least of all the moral lesson, but only in the critical elaboration of the work itself, includes moral warnings only in the most indirect form.[105]

In insisting on the "hard, historical actuality" of Greek tragedy in summarizing other theories of it--Schopenhauer's, Wilamowitz-Moellendorff's, Wackernagel's, Scheler's--Benjamin eventually comes to speak about the relationship between law (*Recht*) and the word, and the relationship between linguistic and physical life, topics that had held, and continued to hold centrality for him in

---

105 Benjamin, *GS I.*, 283-84; *Origin*, 104-05. My emphasis.

other writings.[106] Florens Christian Rang's short treatise on "Agon and Theater" remains one immediate foundational source for Benjamin's interpretation of the place of legend in tragedy, and how tragedy's reinterpretations of legend were made, or had the result of a new aspect: cultivating and forming the life of the community.[107] But

---

106 See, "The Critique of Violence," with which Benjamin famously ends: "The critique of violence is the philosophy of its history," and which reflects his early notes on linguistic philosophy, on the riddle and the secret, on lying, on shame, on death, the body, and on politics, among others. *GS* II.1, 179-204; *GS* VI, 11-16, 17-18, 19-26, 60-64, 69-71, 71, 78-88.

107

Agon and Theater

"The agon has its origin in a sacrifice offered to the dead. The person to be sacrificed may escape if he is fast enough. Since then, the belief that the deceased offers loving benedictions has once again triumphed over the dread fear of the deceased who demands the survivor as a sacrifice. Or, if not the fear of this particular dead person, then of an even loftier one. Thus the agon becomes God's judgment of man, and man's of God. The Athenian-Syracusian theater is an agon (cf. the word *agonist*), indeed, the kind of agon in which a higher redeemer-God is prayed for in the judgment against God. The dialogue is a speaking competition, that is to say, a face. Not only between the two voices accusing and defending the person, or the god, but also between the two of them racing for the common goal to which they escape. This is the last judgment over gods and people. In the theater, the agonistic run is also still a sacrifice to the dead; see the sacrifice of the *archon basileus*. In the theater, the agonistic amphitheater for a race of arbitrary duration and fixes the spatial boundary of the stage. The agonists come running from the door of damnation on the left. The run in unison--through the medium of chaos--through the half circle of the congregation gathered around the sacrificial altar and end up entering the door of salvation--at the right. As last judgment, this race absorbs the human-divine past; the run concludes with the image of the noble dead who have already completed the run. The congregation acknowledges the sacrifice, the death, but at the same time decrees victory to the human

Benjamin had some pointed questions for Rang, which would help him to clarify the nature of the struggle. "I would really like to know whether there is any demonstrable relationships, of a historical or of a purely factual nature, between the dianoetic form of dialogue, especially that of Sophocles and Euripedes, and Attic legal procedure and, if there is, how it is to be understood. I have not found anything at all about this in the literature. I am unable to resolve the question based on my own lack of expertise, and yet it is an obvious question."[108]

His friend's response first turns to the architectonic: *"Tragedy is the breaching of astrology"*--of sealed fate. He compares the theatrical half circle to the circus, "the architectural fixing of the circular run," to a freeing--into a *half* circle of sacrifice. But regarding the question of legal procedure, the Attic partners in dialogue followed the movement of the stars, Rang writes: "what distinguishes justice from revenge--is the placing

---

being as well as to the god." Florence Christian Rang, "Agon and Theater" from a letter to Benjamin reprinted January 20, 1924, trans. Manfred R. Jacobson and Evelyn M. Jacobson, *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin*, 231-32.

108 Benjamin, *Correspondence*, 233. See Peter Fenves, "Testing Right--Lying in View of Justice," *On the Necessity of Violence for Any Possibility of Justice*, special edition of the *Cardozo Law Review* 13 (1991): 1081-1113, especially footnote 70, which reviews Benjamin's presentation of legal history.

of this legal course into the course of the constellations. The 'thing' in German law--which, however, is Old Indo-Iranian and also holds true for Hellas--can only be in session from sunrise to sunset; sentencing must be postponed until the sun goes down because the savior, the champion, could still make an appearance." He ends by praising the advent of a Dionysian moment in the relation between struggle with weapons [the *Oresteia*] and dianoetic struggle, or struggle in formulaic verse. "Here the ordeal is liberated by the *logos*."[109]

In the race around the *thymele*, the word is silenced, yet, not in the advent of law, as Benjamin quotes himself from "Fate and Character," but in the sublime element in tragedy. That sublime element is contained, once again, in the *physis*, the human body. "The content of the hero's achievements belongs to the community, as does speech. Since the community of the nation denies these achievements, they remain unarticulated in the hero. And he must therefore all the more forcefully enclose within the confines of his physical self every action and every item of knowledge the greater and the more potentially effective it is. It is the achievement of his *physis* alone, not of language, if he is able to hold fast to his cause, and he

---

109 Rang, *Correspondence*, 234-35.

must therefore do so in death."[110] The hero, who has inferred that he is better than the gods, "throws the dumb shadow of his being, the self, as sacrifice, while his soul finds refuge in the word of a distant community."[111] This word shines forth elsewhere, after the cloak of the body has been shed, and the poets find new meaning from

---

110 Benjamin, *GS I.*, 287; *Origin, 108*. In "Fate and Character," Benjamin states that it is association with guilt that places character in the ethical realm, and fate in the theological. Fate is all misfortune and guilt, and has nothing to do with innocence or happiness. It is the context of law that grounds fate, and sees happiness and innocence float upward from its scales. But in tragedy, demonic fate is breached, legal guilt is transcended. The sublimity of tragedy is moral infantility, he writes, which is "probably the basis of all sublimity, in which genius, rather than God appears." "Law condemns, not to punishment but to guilt. Fate is the guilt context of the living.[...]It is not therefore really man who has a fate; rather, the subject of fate is indeterminable." "The guilt context is temporal in a totally inauthentic way, very different in its kind and measure from the time of redemption, or of music, or of truth." *GS* II.1, 171-179; "Fate and Character," *Reflections* ed. Peter Demetz, trans. Edmund Jephcott (New York: Schocken, 1978), 304-11. But with regard to character, Benjamin states: "For it is impossible to form an uncontradictory concept of the exterior of an active human being [*wirkenden Menschen*] the core of whom is taken to be character. No definition of the external world can disregard the limits set by the concept of the active man. Between the active man and the external world all is interaction [*Wechselwirkung*], their spheres of action interpenetrate; no matter how different their conceptions may be, their concepts are inseparable." Ibid., 172-73; 305. How Benjamin sketches the place of language in the law (fate, guilt) and in the temperaments (character, moral indifference, light) has been shown in part in chapter two, "Speak, Golem."

111 Ibid., 287-88; 109. See "Two Essays by Friedrich Hölderlin," for Benjamin's early words on "das Gedichtete," life, fate, death, the community, and danger in these poems, "Dichtermut" and "Blödigkeit."

the legend--the *Oedipus* legend, for instance. Benjamin writes that tragic silence becomes a (Niebelungen-like) treasure hoard of the experience of the sublimity of linguistic expression. The gold can be molded into many wondrous, beautiful, and useful items. But a "cloud of guilt" does not cover over the breaking of demonic fate, which is a genius born, as he says, in moral infantility, moral speechlessness.[112]

The word that emerges from the self-contained silence of the heroic, tragic individual, is an unknown word, a mystery. The juxtaposition that Benjamin poses in this discussion on tragedy and silence is that between consciousness, or in the case of Socrates, purely dramatic

---

112 Here Benjamin more explicitly distances himself from Nietzsche's Wagnerian enthusiasm once more, a distancing that is a repeated break for Nietzsche himself: "Therefore, the features of the opera do not by any means exhibit the elegiac sorrow of an eternal loss, but rather the cheerfulness of eternal rediscovery, the comfortable delight in an idyllic reality which one can at least always imagine as real. But in this process one may some day grasp the fact that this supposed reality is nothing but a fantastically silly dawdling, at which everyone who could judge it by the terrible seriousness of true nature, and compare it with actual primitive scenes of the beginnings of mankind, would be impelled to call out, nauseated: Away with the phantom!

Nevertheless, it would be a mistake to imagine that it is possible merely by a vigorous shout to frighten away such a playful thing as the opera, as if it were a specter. He who would destroy the opera must take up the struglle against Alexandrian cheerfulness." Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, 118.

language, histrionics, theatrics, or irony; and lack of consciousness, or tragic irony, related intimately with death: "the self, whose reticence is so profound that it does not stir even when it calls out its own name in its dreams."[113] Benjamin quotes Rosenzweig at length on consciousness, and it, as mentioned previously, has a distinct relationship to aloneness.

> This difference becomes most evident in those moments when the modern hero is alone with himself. The classical hero was really still able to live

---

113 Benjamin, *GS I.*, 297; *Origin*, 117-18. This is a massively interesting point, especially considering the mass of Benjamin's later writings. What other word would the self call out in a dream? Any number of words, of course, including the names of others. But Benjamin, in speaking of the tragic hero and *his* irony, protects his soul with the shield of his name, and thus even this remains forgotten or unheard as the hero offers himself up in the enclosure of his self. One would have to reread the libretto to *Siegfried* to comprehend what Benjamin is actually, and in a very understated manner, saying still about Nietzsche in these passages. Rosenzweig writes of the name in the context of divine revelation: "[I]t carries its here and now with it. Wherever it is, there is a midpoint and wherever it opens its mouth, there is a beginning.[...]One proper name demands others..[...]Thus grounded in the world, it must therefore be grounded in space and time precisely in order to provide a ground for experience's absolute certainty of possessing its own space and its own time. Thus both the midpoint and the beginning in the world must be provided to experience by this grounding, the midpoint in space, the beginning in time. These two, at least, have to be named, even if the rest of the world still lies in the darkness of anonymity. There must be a where in the world, a still visible spot whence revelation radiates, and a when, a yet echoing moment, where revelation first opened its mouth." Rosenzweig, *Stern der Erlösung*, 208-09; *Star of Redemption*, 187.

Cf. Jacques Derrida, *On the Name*, trans. David Wood, John P. Leavey, Jr., and Ian McLeod (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995; *Passions, Sauf le nom, Khora* (Paris: Galilée, 1993).

out his heroism in the monologue--better there than elsewhere. Here, alone with himself, he could be all willful defiance, wholly gathered within himself, wholly immersed in himself, wholly self. For the modern hero, the monologues are mere pauses, moments when he so to speak steps ashore out of that actual life, as agitated as it is active, which he leads in the dialogues; for a time he becomes observer.[...]It is never more than the view of the world and one's own position in it from one specific point of view, to wit, that of the individual, personal I.

And there are many of these I-viewpoints, as many as there are I's. For this is one of the most central differences between classical and modern tragedy, and one which has justifiably caused them to be contrasted as tragedy of action and tragedy of character respectively. The figures of modern tragedy are all different from one another, as different as every personality is from every other. For at bottom, each personality has, after all, a different 'individuality,' a different and indivisible portion of the world which quite automatically also implies a vantage point of its own for regarding the world. It was otherwise in antique tragedy. There only the actions differed, while the hero, as tragic hero, was always the same self defiantly buried within himself. The consciousness of the modern hero is necessarily limited, and the demand that he be essentially conscious, that is to say, when he is alone with himself, thus runs counter to this. Consciousness wants always to be clear; limited consciousness is imperfect (*unvollkommenes*). Thus he should really have a perfect consciousness of himself and the world. And so modern tragedy aims for a goal which is quite alien to antique tragedy: for a tragedy of the absolute man in his relationship to the absolute object. Those tragedies where the hero is to all intents and purposes a philosopher--for antiquity a perfectly fantastic idea--these philosophic dramas are unanimously regarded by us as the high points of modern tragedy altogether: *Hamlet, Wallenstein, Faust.*[114]

---

114 Rosenzweig, *Stern der Erlösung*, 234-35; *Star of Redemption*, 209-10.

The point of convergence desired by all modern heroes is the tragedy of the saint, Rosenzweig writes. Benjamin recognizes this desire coupled with the martyr-drama in the *Trauerspiel*, the future form of which is mirrored in the mystery play. He locates the quality of the language--purely dramatic--in the Socratic dialogues, which restore the mystery that had become worldly in Greek drama. Saint Socrates, who is cattily silent as his disciples speak, becomes the legend of Socrates at his death, who, although he is properly self-restrained, manages to hold forth on immortality in the *Apology*, as a self-conscious, philosophical response to his fate, something, as Nietzsche says, was a "new ideal, never seen before of noble Greek youths." As Benjamin writes, "that silent struggle, that mute flight of the hero, which in the *Dialogues* has made place for such a brilliant display of speech and consciousness."[115] The relationship of each to death is radically apart: Socrates, as a mortal, looks death in the face as something external. For the tragic hero, death is something personal, internal to him, from which his life unfolds, as Benjamin says. Death is "not its end but its form," "the limits of both linguistic and physical life which, in the beginning, are given to him and set within

---

115 Benjamin, *GS I.*, 292; *Origin*, 113.

him."[116] The tragic hero, in his spiritual-physical existence, is the framework of the tragic process, writes Benjamin. "The oracle of tragedy is not only a magical conjuring of fate; it is the outwardly-put certainty that no tragic life takes place without its framework. Necessity, as it appears to be built within its framework, is neither causal nor magical. It is the speechlessness of defiance, in which the self demands to bring forth its utterances. Like snow before the south wind, they would melt under the breath of the word. But only that of an unknown word. Heroic defiance contains this unknown word within it; this distinguishes it from the *hybris* of a man, to whom the fully unfolded consciousness of the community no longer recognizes a secret content."[117]

Burckhardt, not Rang, became Benjamin's most quotable source when it came to the relationship of dianoetic struggle and Attic legal procedure, although the reference to the outbreaking cry of the word is the Dionysian freedom referred to by Rang in his little piece, which Benjamin counts as being most important to his argument. But even the dialogic structure of prosecutor and accused is bounded by a limit, by a *non liquet*, making each decision temporary and debatable.

---

116 Ibid., 293; 114.

117 Ibid., 294; 115. "To give oneself form, that is called hubris." Benjamin, "Two Poems by Friedrich Hölderlin," *GS* II.1, 121.

Benjamin writes that in tragedy, the struggle against the daimonism of the law is bound up with the word of the genius: it is a preliminary stage of prophecy; its content existing only in language. It cannot be examined by psychology; this development coincides with the correlation of tragedy and *Trauerspiel*. *Trauerspiel* is thinkable as pantomime, he writes, not tragedy. *Trauerspiele* hardly touch the realm of grief; they are "plays for the mournful." Bound to the court, the plays are a travelling theater, not the cosmic *topos* of the Greek theater, which, in the words of Nietzsche, has the architecture of a cloud formation over a valley in the mountains. From beneath these clouds, as has been said, heads were raised. And temporally, unlike the *Trauerspiele*, tragedies are not repeatable: each assembly is judged by the spectators, and the chorus sets a limit to the emotional outbursts. The players in a *Trauerspiel* play to the spectators, and play, and play, lamenting ostentatiously as part of the mere spectacle of the thing: the chorus appears like the ornamental borders on the frames of the pages of Renaissance illuminations, or like the borders of Tiepolo's ceiling paintings, or of works of Carracci, or Bernini.

The dimensions taken by the form of the *Trauerspiel* in the south, Benjamin writes, are those of the *Haupt-und Staatsaktionen* and the puppet-play. In such popular forms,

the ministerial intriguer shows his face, as if at the hem of the *Trauerspiel:* "Comedy--or more precisely: the pure joke or fun--is the obligatory inner side of mourning which from time to time, like the lining of a dress at the hem or lapel, makes its presence felt.[...]Rarely, if ever, has speculative aesthetics considered the affinity between the strict joke and the cruel. Who has not seen children laugh where adults are shocked? The alternation in the sadist between such childishness which laughs and such adult shock can be seen in the intriguer."[118] In the secularization of the Passion-plays, the official takes the place of the devil, Benjamin writes, full of scorn for human pride. "If the mourning of the prince and the mirth of his adviser are so close to each other this is, in the last analysis, only because the two provinces of the satanic realm were represented in them."[119] Such proximity produces a miniaturization and an inverse reflection of consciousness and size at the same time: "The comic figure is a *raisonneur;* in reflection he appears to himself as a marionette."[120]

Near the end of the second section of his chapter on Tragedy and *Trauerspiel*, Benjamin utilizes two measuring devices as metaphors, the seismographic needle, and the

---

118 Ibid., 304-05; 125-26.

119 Ibid., 306; 127.

120 Ibid., 306; 127.

tongue of a scale. They are registered in the context of Benjamin's own pronouncements on fate (largely taken from "Fate and Character"), especially in his comparison of the *Trauerspiel* to the fate-drama, one of its offspring. Regarding the seismographic needle, which is to register the emotions, the stirring of the passions in man, the dagger is mentioned, and Hamlet's poisoned sword, as guides for the precision with which the passions are transformed into stage properties. "For fate is not a purely natural occurrence--any more than it is purely historical.[...]It is the elemental force of nature in historical events, which are not themselves entirely nature, because the light of grace is still reflected from the state of creation. But it is mirrored in the swamp of Adam's guilt." And then: "The only philosophical laws which have any place in the work of art are those which refer to the meaning of existence;" the task of the historical-philosopher is not to trace the causality of events on the stage, like a deterministic philosopher.[121] "Fate is the entelechy of events within the field of guilt."[122] Guilt cannot be measured against grace, as Benjamin's utterly still and upward-pointing tongue of the

---

121 Ibid., 308; 129.

122 Ibid.

scale shows--it is weightlessness and light, even when the hour stands bewitched, at midnight. The weighty concerns of guilt, however, can be transferred onto something earthly and resonant, like the dark ink of a tracing needle, the bloody tip of a dagger, or onto the other stage properties of the fate-dramas and the *Trauerspiele*.

"The subject of fate cannot be determined," writes Benjamin, there is no individual hero in the *Trauerspiel*, only constellations of heroes. This has force for the meaning of consciousness that is being developed in the book: It is not the consciousness of the individual tragic hero, who rises above demonic fate in self-contained silent but proud self-consciousness and death, losing his life but saving his name, but a seismographic consciousness, one which registers the combined anonymity of a particular transcendental time-frame and immanent spatial given: a communal fate of eternally recurring death. Fate, which settles into the stage property, also lingers as a spectre or ghost, appearing usually at night. From "Fate and Character" he pens: "Now since fate, itself the true order of eternal recurrence, can only be described as temporal in an indirect, that is parasitical sense, its manifestations seek out the temporal dimension. They stand in the narrow frame of midnight, an opening in the passage of time, in which the same ghostly image constantly reap-

pears."[123] Like the Wilies in *Giselle*, who appear at night, the many living dead are constantly looking for new companions, to whom they put the test, dance until death. Those who "survive" lose their names, but they keep their roles in the *corps de ballet*, endlessly dancing, testing the limits of repetition itself. The temporality of endlessness is sought out by the fated, in Benjaminian terms, which is the temporality of night, be it a white night, as Blanchot shows.

No Vacancy

Imagine the future of phenomenology tied to the theory of melancholy--Paracelcus and/or Aristotle, Saturn or cold, dry, splenetic black bile as an orientation for the interpretation of what became a crisis. Benjamin realized that in the Lutheran Baroque drama "something new arose: an empty world." And yet, it is a world so crowded with objects and the emotions bound up with them, that there is no room at the inn, so to speak. Nor is there room inside a shrinking, shrunken, or mad head for an idea to occur. A gravitational interiorization and dark concentration of gray matter coupled with a spinning exteriorization and slowing localization of that matter prevents a sovereign

---

123 Ibid., 313-14; 135.

from making a clear decision. The light that would illumine such activity comes from without, not from within. The Baroque *Trauerspiel* remains a matter of darkness.

"Mourning is the state of mind in which feeling, mask-like, revives the emptied world, and derives an enigmatic satisfaction in contemplating it. Every feeling is bound to an *a priori* object and the representation of this object is its phenomenology.[...]For feelings, however vague they may seem when perceived by the self, respond like a motorial gesture to an objective construction of the world."[124] Though not exactly a feeling, tenacious intention, matched perhaps only by the feeling of love, describes the movements of attraction and repulsion that characterize the melancholic temper, such as self-absorption and ostentation. The theory of melancholy was inherited from Greek tragedy, Benjamin writes, but it is deeply marked by both the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, producing in the Baroque, an extreme and intense portrait. "The deadening of the emotions, and the ebbing away of the waves of life which are the source of these emotions in the body, can increase the distance between the self and the surrounding world to the point of alienation from the body."[125] A few sentences later, he writes that the

---

124 Ibid., 318; 139.

125 Ibid., 319; 140.

Renaissance explores the universe while the Baroque searches through libraries.

How the body makes its way through the ages is and has been a topic for many researches. Benjamin's focus on the concentrated, stooped body of Dürer's *Melencolia I* and various readings of it organizes and gives an image to the theory he is developing, without stamping it as an end, even though Erwin Panofsky viewed it as a "spiritual self-portrait" of the engraver-painter/commissioner, scholar-pensioner/sovereign--Dürer-Maximilian.[126] Both the physiological and the astrological description of melancholy are present in this engraving, the central bodily

---

126 Jane Campbell Hutchison, *Albrecht Dürer: A Biography* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1990), 116-18. As Benjamin does, Hutchison takes her cue from Karl Giehlow's study, "Dürers Stich 'Melencolia I' und der maximilianische Humanistenkreis," *Mitteilungen der Gesellschaft für vervielfältigende Künste*, vol. XXVI (1903), and vol. XXVII (1904).

An eery coincidence: "Another artist important for the young Dürer who was active in Mainz during the 1480s and early 1490s was the Master W.B., whose painted portraits of an unknown man and woman, dating from about 1484, greatly influenced Dürer's portraits of the late 1490s, including those of the Tucher family, and his own *Self-Portrait* done in 1498 (Madrid, Prado). These, unlike Dürer's portraits of his parents, show the sitters in fully developed architectural settings featuring windows opening into landscapes and elegant brocaded wall-hangings. Fedja Anzelewsky has make the intriguing suggestion that Master W.B. may have been Wolfgang Peurer--for the letters B and P were quite interchangeable in south Germany in the fifteenth century. Peurer's name and the date 1484 appear in Dürer's handwriting on a pen drawing, *The Courier*, now in Gdansk (Muzeum Pomorskie)." Hutchison, *Dürer*, 35.

figure "surrounded by the attributes of Geometry, Architecture, Mathematics, and Astronomy, who can grasp only the weights and measures of the material world."[127] "Just as the ancient pathology of the humours was revived in the school of Salerno, under the mediating influence of Arabian science, so too did Arabia preserve the other Hellenistic science which nourished the doctrine of the melancholic: astrology."[128]

The cosmos and the body face one another, and as far as room goes, the Baroque lowers its skies and allows for elaborate and endless contortions, dismemberments, and disfigurations of the body. This simultaneous contraction and elongation, or condensation and dispersal, are intimately related to melancholy. The horizon of the sea in Dürer's engraving represents the melancholic's inclination for long travels. Quoting Giehlow, Benjamin writes: "The astronomic deduction of this is obscure. But not if the distance of the planet from the earth and the consequently long duration of its orbit are no longer conceived in the negative sense of the Salerno doctors, but rather in a beneficent sense, with reference to the divine reason which

---

127 Ibid., 117: "In this regard, it should be remembered that Dürer himself had seen a comet, noting the fact in his *Gedenkbuch* without speculating as to its meaning, and that he was now the owner of Bernard Walther's observatory and custodian of the latter's scientific library."

128 Benjamin, *GS I.*, 326; *Origin*, 148.

assigns the menacing star to the remotest place, and if, on the other hand, the introspection of the melancholy man is understood with reference to Saturn which 'as the highest planet and the one farthest from everyday life, the originator of all deep contemplation, calls the soul from externalities to the inner world, causes it to rise ever higher, finally endowing it with the utmost knowledge and with the gift of prophecy.'"[129] The Panofsky-Saxl study is also quoted with reference to this dualistic of extremes.

He writes: "The history of the problem of melancholy unfolds within the perimeter of this dialectic. Its climax is reached with the magic of the Renaissance. Whereas the Aristotelian insights into the soulful doubleness of the melancholy disposition and the antithetical nature of the influence of Saturn had given way, in the Middle Ages, to a purely demonic representation of both, such as conformed with Christian speculation; with the Renaissance the whole wealth of ancient meditations reemerged from the sources."[130] The Middle Ages "which was bent at all costs on gaining access to the sources of occult insight into nature," tried to solve the quandary of melancholy by separating the sublime, prophetic powers of Saturn, and

---

129 Ibid., 326-27; 149.

130 Ibid., 328; 150.

escape the madness of its flip side; to make a cut, and sever the faces in two, as in Plato's hermaphrodite in the *Symposium*. Jupiter is called in to balance Saturn.

The Renaissance, on the other hand, is more difficult to decipher. Imperative is the importance of the emblem, the properties that litter the Baroque stage and the foregrounds and backgrounds of Renaissance painting. The dog and its gaze appear in *Melencolia I*, sharing with the melancholic the delicate and active organ of the spleen. Benjamin notes this dog is asleep--it could be having either bad or prophetic dreams. He continues to stress: "For all the wisdom of the melancholic is subject to the nether world; it is secured by immersion in the life of creaturely things, and it hears nothing of the voice of revelation. Everything Saturnine points down into the depths of the earth[....]For the melancholic the inspirations of mother earth dawn from the night of contemplation like treasures from the interior of the earth; lightning-flash (*blitzschnell*) intuition is unknown to him."[131] As has already been stated, only in *Hamlet* does such consciousness and light reflect back from within the self-absorption of the play. But Benjamin introduces something strange and difficult into his interpretation--it leads the way to the section of the book on allegory. He brings up a row of

---

131 Ibid., 330; 152-53.

analogies: thinking, concentration, earth, and gall, and this not to lead from first to last in a row, he writes, but in thinking of a new interpretation of the earth within the framework of the theory of the temperaments. He refers first, to gravity, in the emblem of the stone, calling to the earth's spherical form and the centripetal force of concentration. The stone is referred to a seed, which lies ready to spring into bloom, if held in check by the power of a genius in the allegorical fullness of the Baroque. The stone, unlike the cold, dry earth, sweats from the outside.

A telltale heart? It is to the question of loyalty, and betrayal that Benjamin turns to at the end of this section of his book. The fifth (Dante) of the seven deadly sins (*acendia*), which produces sloth, apathy, slowness, and indecisiveness in its bearer, hinders the Prince: "The fall of the tyrant is caused by indolence of the heart." This is matched, at times by a Machiavellian treachery on the part of the courtier, at others by a loyalty to the crown, purple, and scepter, which causes him to be disloyal or inattentive. Benjamin writes that loyalty is appropriate only to the relationship of man to the world of things, even, and especially to the smallest fragment, endowed with memory. "In other words, all essential decisions in relation to men can offend against loyalty; they are subject to higher laws.[...]Melancholy betrays the

world for the sake of knowledge.But its tenacious self-absorption embraces dead objects in its contemplation, in order to redeem them.[...]Faithfulness is the rhythm of the emanatively descending levels of intention, in which the ascending ones of neo-Platonic theosophy in appropriate transformation are reflected."[132]

Part III

> "Although [memory] is a part of my nature, I cannot understand all that I am."[133]
>
> He is lost and bewildered. Every new path in this country excites his curiosity and awe. Why did he rob the pear tree? Why does tragedy please? He worries such problems as a dog worries a bone. He wanders hither and thither in his own mind and speaks the very language of a traveler.[...]When once the ancients are read in this way, then to imitate the ancients means to write allegory.[...]But the lasting consequence of all these writers, for the history of imagination, is far more certain than any assessment of their individual merits. In all of them alike, as I hinted above, we see the beginnings of that free creation of the marvelous which first slips in under the cloak of allegory.[134]
>
> For Rousseau, as for Nietzsche, number is par excellence the concept that hides ontic difference under an illusion of identity.[135]

---

132 Ibid., 333-34; 156-57.

133 Saint Augustine, *Confessions* book 10; 8 (Middlesex: Penguin, 1961), 216.

134 C.S. Lewis, *The Allegory of Love: A Study in Medieval Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1936), 65, 85, 82.

135 Paul de Man, "Rousseau: Metaphor (*Second Discourse*)" *Allegories of Reading: Figural Language in Rousseau,*

> The scriptural plays themselves were associated with the festival of Corpus Christi, and Calderón's religious plays are explicitly autos sacramentales or Eucharist plays. The appeal of the myth-play is a curious mixture of the popular and esoteric; it is popular for its immediate audience, but those outside its circle have to make a conscious effort to appreciate it. In a controversial atmosphere it disappears, as it cannot deal with controversial issues unless it selects its audience. In view of the ambiguities attaching to the word myth, we shall speak of this genre as the auto.[...]We are here concerned only with tragedy as a species of drama. Tragic drama derives from the auto its central heroic figure, but the association of heroism with downfall is due to the simultaneous presence of irony. The nearer the tragedy is to auto, the more closely associated the hero is with divinity; the nearer to irony, the more human the hero is, and the more the catastrophe appears to be a social rather than a cosmological event.[136]

Physis, Meaning, Death: Writing

"Allegory--as the following pages will serve to show--is not a playful illustrative technique, but expression, just as speech is expression, and, indeed, just as writing is."[137] Benjamin recognizes allegory's elective affinities with writing--they are not signs; nor can they be reduced

---

Nietzsche, Rilke, and Proust (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1979), 154.

136 Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1957), 282-84. Although Benjamin would certainly object to Frye's categorizations of genre, this passage is revealing regarding the theme of the relation of the subject/individual and the community, about which Benjamin speaks at length with regard to allegory, in the *Trauerspielbuch* and elsewhere.

137 Benjamin, *GS I*, 339; *Origin*, 162.

to "the expression of a concept and the expression of an idea," as in the misuse of the concept of the symbol as it is used in an 'artistic' sense, as totality within the fleetingness of a moment, seen canonically in Greek sculpture: "The unity of the material and the transcendental object, which constitutes the paradox of the theological symbol, is distorted into a relationship between appearance and essence.[...]The idea of the unlimited immanence of the moral world in the world of beauty is derived from the theosophical aesthetics of the Romantics."[138] And, he writes, once the ethical subject has been absorbed into the perfect, beautiful individual, then no "rigorism--not even Kantian rigorism--can save it and preserve its masculine profile. Its heart is lost in the beautiful soul."[139] The immediate problems of the Baroque are political-religious problems, writes Benjamin, and the figure of the individual falls away to make room for the religious community as subject. The concept of allegory did not exist at that time, but can be seen as speculative, he writes, providing the dark background against which the bright light of the symbol would appear.

---

138 Ibid., 336-37; 160. This was one of Benjamin's preoccupations before, during, and after the writing of his dissertation on the Romantics. See my chapter, "Crime Story."

139 Ibid.

The light of allegory is split--a chiaroscuro of movement between extremes, a *Zwielicht* of presentation. It is this new theory of allegory that Benjamin is about to present.

> For the conflict between a theory of the symbol, which emphasizes the organic, mountain and plant-like quality in the make-up of the symbol on the one hand, and Creuzer's emphasis of its momentary quality, points very clearly to the real content. The measure of time for the experience of the symbol is the mystical instant (*Nu*) in which the symbol assumes the meaning into its hidden and, if one might say so, wooded interior.[140] On the other hand, allegory is not free from a corresponding dialectic, and the contemplative calm with which it immerses itself into the depths which separate visual being from meaning, has none of the disinterested self-sufficiency which is present in the apparently related intention of the sign.[...]Within the decisive category of time, the introduction of which into this field of semiotics was the great Romantic achievement of these thinkers [Creuzer and Görres], permits the incisive, formal definition of the relationship between symbol and allegory. 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. Everything about history that, from the very beginning, has been untimely, sorrowful, unsuccessful, is expressed in

---

140 "Unlike a work of literature, translation does not find itself in the center of the mountainous forest of language itself, but on the outside of it; it calls into it without entering, aiming at that single spot where the echo is able to give, in its own language, the reverberation of the work in the alien one. Not only does the aim of translation differ from that of a literary work--it intends language as a whole, taking an individual work in an alien language as a point of departure--but it is a different effort altogether. The intention of the poet is naive, primary, graphic; that of the translator is derivative, ultimate, ideational." Benjamin, "The Task of the Translator," *Illuminations*, 76, translation modified; *GS* IV.1., 16.

> a face--or rather in a death's head. And although such a thing lacks all "symbolic" freedom of expression, all classical proportion, all humanity--nevertheless, this is the form in which man's subjection to nature is most obvious and it significantly gives rise not only to the riddling question of the nature of human existence as such, but also of the biographical historicity of the individual. This is the heart of the allegorical way of seeing, of the baroque, worldly explanation of history as the Passion of the world; it is meaningful only in the stations of its decline. The more meaning, the greater the subjection to death, because death digs most deeply the jagged line of demarcation between *physis* and meaning. But if nature has always been subject to the power of death, so it is that it always has been allegorical.[141]

Benjamin spends time tracing, in historical-philosophical terms, the analysis of emblematics as a prelude to his laying out of a theory of allegory. The visual, imagistic element is emphasized over the literary (or alphabetical)--Egyptian, Greek and Christian pictorial languages became intertwined, through early humanism, the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, to the point where, in commenting on Georg Böckler's *Ars heraldica* (1688) which focuses on leaves and clouds, he discovers a pictorial Nominalism: "The most astonishing thing is a complete system of chromatic hieroglyphs, in the form of combinations of two different colors, towards which this book points. 'Red and silver, the lust for vengeance,...blue...and red, discourtesy,...black ...and purple, constant piety.'"[142]

---

141 Benjamin, *GS I*, 342-43; *Origin*, 165-66.

142 Ibid., 350; 174. See Thierry de Duve, *Pictorial Nominalism: On Marcel Duchamp's Passage from Painting to the Readymade*, trans. Dana Polan, forward John Rajchman

Human nature is expressed through a nature composed of emblems--rocks, leaves, clouds, and even colors make up its composition. As in an emblem book, these are to be read, whereas the movement of history meets the limits of its restriction. "Devoted neither to the earthly nor to the moral happiness of creatures, [a Baroque teleology's] exclusive aim is their mysterious instruction. From the point of view of the Baroque, nature serves the purpose of expressing its meaning, for the emblematic representation of its sense, and as an allegorical representation it remains irremediably different from its historical realization. In moral examples and in catastrophes history served only as a material moment of emblematics. The transfixed face of signifying nature is victorious, and history must, once and for all, remain contained in the subordinate role of stage-property."[143]

This teaching mode allegory offers, of "mysterious instruction," is a dialectical mode, Benjamin insists, one that on the one hand stands as a corrective to art, and to Classicism in particular (as did Romanticism on the other side of the linear time-line), and on the other, represents a form of writing that meets the conflict be-

---

(Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991, especially the chapter, "Color and its Name," 119-142.

143 Ibid., 347; 170-71.

tween theological and artistic intentions as a *treuga dei*. The dialectic form of expression (of convention) that is allegory was regarded as grotesque and distrusted as ambiguity. The reason for this: "Any person, any thing, any relationship can mean something else arbitrarily. With this possibility a destructive, but just verdict is passed on the profane world: it is characterized as a world in which the detail is of no great importance. But it will be unmistakably apparent, especially to anyone who is familiar with allegorical textual exegesis, that all of the things which are used to signify derive, from the very fact of their pointing to something else,[144] a power which

---

144 This gestural movement is repeated not only in Benjamin's work, but can be illuminated by comparison to, in this case, two texts by Wittgenstein and Mondrian.

"How does one tell that human beings *see* three-dimensionality?--I ask someone about the lie of the land (over there) of which he has a view. 'Is it like *this*?' (I shew him with my hand)--'Yes.'--'How do you know?'--'It's not misty, I see it quite clear.'--He does not give reasons for the surmise. The only thing that is natural to us is to represent what we see three-dimensionally; special practice and training are needed for two-dimensional representation whether in drawing or in words. (The queerness of children's drawings.)" Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G.E.M. Anscombe (New York: Macmillan, 1953), 198.

"The art of our time has created neutral forms free lines and colors, exact relationships. By the interiorization of forms (abstraction), [their] mutual and inherent relationships really are established as relationships; that is, they exactly express the positions and dimensions of the forms, lines and colors, and therefore the composition. By this fact *they establish equilibruim in an exact and clear way*.

We can thus justifiably speak of a new art, created gradually at first, then very rapidly by abstracting from natural appearances. That is why we speak of an abstract art: which nevertheless is more concrete than naturalistic art.

makes them appear no longer commensurable with profane things, which raises them onto a higher plane, and which can, indeed, sanctify them. Considered in allegorical terms, then, the profane world is both elevated and devalued."[145] *Erhoben wie entwertet*. Of the many dialectics crossing paths in Benjamin's book, this may be one of the most crucial. And the solution lies "in the essence of writing itself." Just as Baroque teaching conceives of history as creative events, he writes, allegory is regarded as created, like holy scripture; an expression of authority which is both secret and public at the same time. Its codification lies in its predilection to form complexes of words, like hieroglyphs, or a visual language, one unlike the atomistic alphabetic language that arbitrarily forms words through groupings of letters. But, he says, "there will always be a conflict between sacred

---

That is why we can say that the new art begins when the means of expression and relationships are established determinately.

In the whole history of art, we see no real change in the representation of the means of expression and of their relationships until our epoch, which freed forms and relationships from their subjugation and determined them in a new way by stripping forms of their particular character and relationships of their static expression." Piet Mondrian, fragment on "Structure, Dynamic Movement" from *The New Art--The New Life: The Collected Writings of Piet Mondrian*, ed. and trans. Harry Holzman and Martin S. James (New York: Da Capo, 1993), 383.

145 Benjamin, *GS I.*, 350-51; *Origin*, 173.

standing and profane comprehensibility" as the word tends toward the visual emblem, more difficult to read, but more "full" of the world. The "confused investigator" must go over the allegory "part by part and limb by limb." "In the field of allegorical intuition the image is a fragment, a rune. Its beauty as a symbol evaporates when the light of divine learning falls upon it. The false appearance of totality, is extinguished. For the *eidos* disappears, the simile ceases to exist, and the cosmos it contained shrivels up."[146]

This is another sober light of learning to fall upon a Benjaminian text, erasing appearances, or at least showing (off) beauty, not to see, nor know, what lies underneath--but to read what shows itself, to write what hasn't been written, to write the history of what hasn't been shown, of what has been most unseemly, most hidden under cover. The shrunken thing does not disappear, however. Benjamin calls attention to the task of the poet as combiner, one who constructs, builds from the pieces, as a craftsman, or a sovereign manipulator. In Calderón, one sees the

---

146 Ibid., 352; 176. Regarding his point about Romanticism and the Baroque being on either side of Classicism, and each in its own way a corrective to art, he writes: "Whereas Romanticism inspired by its belief in the infinite, intensified the perfected creation of form and idea in critical terms, at one stroke the profound vision of allegory transforms things and works into stirring writing." Ibid.

ostentation of the craftsmanship which especially shows forth like the walls of a building whose plaster has broken and fallen away. This is place for the shrunkenness of nature in the allegorical ruin: "Thus, one might say, nature remained the great teacher for the writers of this period. However, nature was not seen by them in bud and bloom, but in the over-ripeness and decay of her creations. In nature they saw eternal transience, and here alone did the saturnine vision of this generation recognize history.[...]In the process of decay, and in it alone, the events of history shrivel up and become absorbed in the setting."[147] Setting, stage-prop, framework ("dedications, prefaces and epilogues, by the authors themselves or by others, testimonials, acknowledgements of the great masters--these are the rule")--thus does history make an appearance.

> When, as is the case in the *Trauerspiel*, history becomes part of the setting, it does so as script. The word 'history' stands written on the countenance of nature in the characters of transience. The allegorical physiognomy of the nature-history, which is put on stage in the *Trauerspiel*, is present in reality in the form of the ruin. In the ruin history has physically merged into the setting.[...]For the unknowing, beauty has nothing inalienable or particular. For those the German *Trauerspiel* is unyielding as any. Its appearance has died away because it was the rawest. What remains is the extraordinary detail of the allegorical references: an object of knowledge which has settled into constructed ruins

---

147 Ibid., 355; 179.

> which have been thought-through. Criticism means the mortification of the works: not then--as the Romantics have it--awakening of the consciousness in living works, but the settlement of knowledge in dead ones. Beauty, which endures, is an object of knowledge.[...]Philosophy must not attempt to deny that it re-awakens the beauty of works.[...]The object of philosophical criticism is to show that the function of artistic form is as follows: to make historical content, such as provides the basis of every important work of art, into a philosophical truth.[148]

Regarding the relationship of knowledge vs. consciousness to artistic production, Benjamin writes that allegory declares itself to be beyond beauty. It clings to the world of things, to the point where they decay. It remains with a stubbornness that turns raw and ugly and lets go the moment of beauty most often referred to as beauty. It is dark, but lit from outside, from the "light of learning," "the footlights (*Rampenlicht*) of apotheosis." Its cosmos, like nature, shrunken, it holes up in libraries, and reads, closely. "That which lies here in ruins, the highly significant fragment, the remnant, is, in fact, the finest material in Baroque creation. For it is common practice in the literature of the Baroque to pile up fragments ceaselessly, without any strict idea of a goal, and, in the unremitting expectation of a miracle, to take the repetition of stereotypes for a process of intensification."[149] Of course something is lost in this process, in

---

148 Ibid., 353, 357-58; 177, 181-82.

149 Ibid., 354; 178.
The closeness of this passage with its *Haufen* of fragmentary ruins, to the ninth thesis on the "Philosophy of

this weighty accumulation: the promptings or pull for the small and the secret cannot be replaced by an ambiguous enigma or what is hidden, the concealed. They are of a different order entirely.

When Benjamin writes that under the gaze of melancholy, an object becomes stripped naked (like beauty) of its meaning, remains dead but *there*, falling under the sway of the allegorist, being incapable of emanating anything of its own; and the meaning that it acquires, is placed within it by the allegorist, he means this "not in a psychological but in an ontological sense." "This is what determines the writing-character of allegory. It is a schema, and as this schema an object of knowledge, but it is not unable to be lost until it becomes a fixed schema: fixed image and fixing sign in one."[150] This schema can be stored (so in the libraries, now more expansive and mminute methods of storing are in use), and called up to be sent off bearing new messages: it lacks the most essential feature--pronunciation. Before one turns to the voice, and noise, and music, one should listen to Benjamin as he makes a familiar point about the temporal: "The mystical instant (*Nu*) becomes the 'now' (*Jetzt*) of con-

---

History" is unmistakable and striking.

150 Ibid., 359; 184.

temporary actuality; the symbolic becomes distorted into the allegorical. The eternal is separated from the events of the story of salvation, and what is left is a living image open to all kinds of revision by the interpretative artist.[...]Above all it is the offensive, the provocative quality of the gesture which is Baroque. Where man is drawn towards the symbol, allegory shoots out from the depths of its being to intercept the intention, and to decisively vanquish it. The same tendency is characteristic of Baroque lyric."[151] It captions (and capsizes) in a flash, "like the appearance of the print when a page is turned."

Benjamin's pages on allegorical fragmentation begin with a cutting remark about the behavior of apes before it moves to the set-up of the "person." He writes how the rhythm of exhausting emblems continually could be found by the speculatively inclined observer, in the behavior of apes. "But again and again the amorphous details, which are only understood allegorically, keep coming up."[152] This fragmentation keeps the human body from collecting itself, for it is an attention to each limb, and it keeps humanism's desire for symbolic totality from insisting upon the sovereignty of the self. "[I]t is as something

---

151 Ibid., 358-59; 182-83.

152 Ibid., 361; 185.

incomplete and imperfect (*als Stückwerk*) that objects stare out from the allegorical structure."[153] He continues: "And even today it is by no means self-evident that the primacy of the thing over the personal, the fragment over the total, represents a confrontation between the allegory and the symbol, to which it is the polar opposite and, for that very reason, its equal in power. Allegorical personification has always concealed the fact that its function is not the personification of things, but rather to give the concrete a more imposing form by getting it up as a person."[154] The human body is fragmentary, and from an allegorical standpoint, consciousness of itself is impossible from within. Through proper collection and a source of light, however, an elevation (as well as the devaluation) can take place. This is what the Baroque shares with the Romantics, Benjamin writes--the importance and place of the fragment. "Mankind has, then, the capacity of eternal improvement; but also hope?--"[155] "And the relationships between these two [the technique of Romanticism and the technique of allegory--jmh] might be

---

153 Ibid., 362; 186.

154 Ibid., 362; 187.

155 Jean Paul, "On the Desert and the Promised Land of the Human Race," from "Hesperus; or, 45 Dog Post Days" *Jean Paul: A Reader* ed. Timothy J. Casey, trans. Erika Casey (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), 116.

formulated as follows: In its fully developed, Baroque, form, allegory brings with it its own court; the profusion of emblems is grouped around the figural center, which is never absent from genuine allegories, as opposed to periphrases of concepts. They seem to be arranged in an arbitrary way: *The Confused 'Court'*--the title of a Spanish *Trauerspiel*--could be adopted as the model of allegory. This court is subject to the law of 'dispersal' and 'collectedness.' Things are assembled according to their meaning; indifference to their existence allowed them to be dispersed again."[156]

A comet: "*Kennst Du das Land?...Kennst Du es wohl?*"

Mignon's voice can be heard in the distance projected by the arc of a comet that transversed the Baroque. It is not for nothing that Benjamin names Jean Paul as the greatest allegorist of German literature. As Benjamin delves into his own theory of Baroque language, he finds himself again and again closer to the Romantics. Nietzsche's voice is included here as well, but it shouts against the frivolity and recitative that arose when the *Trauerspiel* "degenerated" into opera. The nature of the stage also bothers the *Gesamtkunstwerk* extremely. What? No

---

156 Benjamin, *GS I.*, 364; *Origin*, 188.

horses, no Rhine, no circle of fire, no vociferous matching vigorous action? Mignon reflects more closely on the language of allegory:

"Do you know this house? On pillars its roof reposes,
Its hall gleams, its chambers shimmer,
And marble statues stand and look at me;
'What has been done to you, unhappy child?'
Do you know it, I wonder? To that place
O my protector, I should like to fly with you."[157]

In describing the techtonics of the *Trauerspiel* out of the technique of allegory, and one that begins to show the connections between pure spectacle and allegory, Benjamin writes: "The acts do not follow rapidly from each other, but they are built up in the manner of terraces. The dramatic joint is such that there are several broad layers of simultaneous perspective, and the level represented by the interlude became the site for a display of expressive statuary."[158] This site of the display of expressive statuary is what Benjamin calls, along with the chorus, "the critical points at which the edifice, which so boldly

---

157 Schumann, "Mignon," op. 98a, no. 1, text by Goethe, trans. Robert Cowart; Richard Goode, piano, Dawn Upshaw, soprano, Nonesuch recording, 1994.

Second stanza:
Kennst du das Haus? Auf Säulen ruht sein Dach,
Es glänzt der Saal, es schimmert das Gemach.
Und Marmorbilder stehn und sehn mich an;
Was hat man dir, du armes Kind, gethan?
Dennst du es wohl? Dahin, dahin
Möcht' ich mit dir, o mein Beschützer, ziehn.

158 Benjamin, *GS I.*, 369; *Origin*, 192.

raised the claim to be a Greek temple, was stormed in order to destroy it."[159] This critical location and locution, "is the only background against which the image of the *Trauerspiel* stands out in living and--if one may venture to say so--beautiful colors, the only background not darkened by the gray of retouching."[160] As unlike the German chorus or interlude is from the Greek chorus, national necessities make themselves felt. But in the German chorus, or the interlude, allegory is no longer rich and colorful but pure and severe; and because it was so earnest, it never mastered the art of using allegory inconspicuously, Benjamin writes.

"[T]he world which becomes perceptible in the chorus is the world of dreams, and meaning. The experience of the unity of these two is the sole property of the melancholic. But also the radical distinction between action and interlude does not remain before the eyes of its chosen spectator. Here and there the connection is revealed in the dramatic action itself."[161] Into the simultaneous terracing of the interludes, action inserts itself, producing a movement in what would appear to be static spatial forms, for static temporal entrances and

---

159 Ibid., 366; 189.

160 Ibid.

161 Ibid., 369; 193.

exits. "Then for the making present of time in space--and what else is meant by its secularization other than its transformation into the strictly present--then the most radical procedure is to make events simultaneous."[162] Like letters in a monogram, even the most singular, individual character is multiplied--terraced--in the allegory, Benjamin writes. This is one sign of the drama's complexity. Entire speeches, or utterances, form the foundational pillars of the *Trauerspiel*, and they sound as if they belong below an allegorical engraving, he says. And to return to Scholem's Golem from the previous chapter on the *Elective Affinities*, Benjamin begins a lengthy comment on the silence of the creature which hints at why those Babelian[163]

---

162 Ibid., 370; 194.

163 See Lucas van Valckenborch, *La Tour de Babel*, the Louvre, Paris. See also, Jacques Derrida, "*Les Tours de Babel*," in *L'art des confins mélanges offerts à Maurice Gandillac* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1985), 209-37, who limits himself to a discussion of Benjamin's "Task of the Translator" in not taking up as well "On Language as Such and on Human Language" for, as he states, what is at stake here is the name, the symbol, the truth, and the letter. Language as an Babelian event, he writes, "*c'est l'être-langue de la langue, la langue ou le langage* **en tant que tels,** *cette unité sans aucune identité à soi qui fait qu'il y a* **des** *langues, et que ce sont des* **langues."** And just prior to that: "*La traduction promet un royaume à la réconcilliation des langues.*" And after: "*C'est ce qui se nomme ici désormais Babel: la loi imposée par le nom de Dieu qui du même coup vous prescrit et vous interdit de traduire en vous montrant* **et** *vous dérobant la limite. Mais ce n'est pas seulement la situation babélien, du texte de la Genèse (texte à cet égard unique) comme texte sacré.[...]Il fait la loi dont il parle, et de l'abîme en abîme il déconstruit la tour, et chaque tour, les tours en tous genres, selon un rythme.*

Ce qui se passe dans un text sacré, c'est l'événement d'un **pas de sens."** Emphasis in the original, pp. 225, 235,

pillars and terraces would be undermined by so many flapping, and sticking-out of tongues.

> Only twenty-five years ago R.M. Meyer could write: 'We find it disturbing when in the paintings of old masters the figures have scrolls hanging out of their mouths...and we find it almost horrifying that there was a time when every figure created by the hand of an artist had, so to speak, such a scroll in its mouth, which the observer was supposed to read like a letter, and then forget the bearer. However, we must not...overlook the fact that this almost childish conception of the detail was based on a magnificent overall idea.'[164] [...]The allegorical maxim is comparable to the scrolls. Or again, it can be described as a conventional sector or frame, into which the action, in constant variations, intermittently penetrates, to reveal itself therein as an emblematic subject. The *Trauerspiel* is therefore in no way characterized by immobility, nor indeed by slowness of action[...], but by the irregular rhythm of the constant pause, the sudden change of direction, and new paralyses.[165]

What comes between the idea and the word is an image in the *Trauerspiel*, and when it doesn't, what one has is a gross combination of an abstract idea and a concrete work, creating a neologism.[166] Some examples Benjamin takes from

---

236-37.

164 Richard M. Meyer, "Über das Verständnis von Kunstwerken,' *Neue Jahrbücher für das klassische Altertum, Geschichte un deutsche Literatur*, IV (1901), (=*Neue Jahrbücher für das klassische Altertum, Geschichte und deutsche Literatur und für Pädagogik*, VII), 367, quoted in Benjamin, *GS I.*, 373; *Origin*, 197.

165 Ibid., 373; 197.

166 See the work of, among others, Wichael W. Jennings, *Dialectical Images: Walter Benjamin's Theory of Literary Criticism* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1987), which, though useful, is at points irrevocably flawed: "Thus Benjamin's theory of language contains more than the mere assertion of the instability and even impotence of

the plays he is working with are: Innocence-cedars, friendship-blood, slander-lightning, and haughtiness-poison. Otherwise a line is lined with decorative names, which are to serve as emblems. The stage-property takes its place of importance on the stage, metaphorically. Ideas evaporate into images, as he learns from Hallmann's *Mariamne*. Metaphors begin, and are extended. But it is the

---

language. It calls, in its equation of signification and death, for a fundamentally nihilistic attitude toward language. The nihilism evident in the book on the *Trauerspiel* is in fact implicit in the 1916 essay." p. 111.

Cf. Carol Jacobs, "Walter Benjamin: Image of Proust," in *The dissimulating Harmony: The Image of Interpretation in Nietzsche, Rilke, Artaud, and Benjamin* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), which gives both a closer and more evenly-tempered reading of the image--which both books are about, and about which more and more is being written and said--one that does not fall into the feignt of nihilism: "The path from the fullness of life to the image has become so familiar that its precipitousness no longer shocks us.[...] This image of ourselves, although it records our lived lives, also indicates our absence in the face of that experience.[...]Thus all remembrance of things past indicates the inevitable absence of the self from itself.[...]The gap between life and literary language could be maintained as constant only if the two poles of the trajectory could be definitively determined.[...]The image arises out of the discrepancy between life and the language than names life (whether it be called 'ornament,' 'image,' or 'physiognomy'): the path between the two poles is traversed only at the price of learning that that which the image names is absent." pp. 98, 101, 103.

See also Carol Jacobs, "Walter Benjamin: Topographically Speaking," *Walter Benjamin on Romanticism*, special edition of *Studies in Romanticism* 31 (1992): 501-524.

Also to consult is Bettine Menke's Derridean interpretation of Benjamin, *Sprachfiguren: Name, Allegorie, Bild nach Walter Benjamin* (Munich; Wilhelm Fink, 1991).

"up-and-coming Viennese docent by the name of Cysarz"[167] who "observes pertinently: 'Every idea, however abstract, is compressed into an image, and this image, however concrete, is then stamped out in verbal form.'"[168] Again from Hallmann's *Mariamne*, the word "comet" is used as a grotesque allegorically, in that the image it is to bear, to describe the events taking place in Jerusalem, is one of copulating comets in the innards of Salem's castle.[169]

---

167 Benjamin, from a letter to Scholem from Capri, September 16, 1924, *Correspondence*, 247. He continues: "After looking through it, my opinion that my work is packed from beginning to end with passages that illuminate the subject in a most surprising way was confirmed. Neither Cysarz's documentation nor his particular viewpoints are in error. Yet all in all his book completely succumbs to the vertiginous attraction this material exerts on the person who plants himself before it for the purpose of describing it. Therefore, instead of shedding light on the subject, the only thing that emerges is again a little bit of post-baroque (with one r!); or: it is an attempt to part the hair of the degenerate boor, which is what expressionistic reporters' style is, with the comb of the exact sciences! It is quite characteristic of Baroque style that anyone who stops thinking rigorously while studying it immediately slips into a hysterical imitation of it. The fellow sometimes comes up with very apt epithets, and in this regard I can learn from him."

168 This quote is attributed to Cysarz, but not footnoted by Benjamin.

169 Josephus, *The Jewish War* trans. G.A. Williamson, (London: Penguin, 1959), 87: As Josephus tells the story, the bedroom is often an offshoot of the court as the place not only of betrayal, but of intrigue and treachery. "Herod was thunderstruck; in his passionate love he was tormented by jealousy; and he thought of the terrible skill with which Cleopatra had disposed of King Lysanias and the Arab Malchus--he knew he was in danger of losing not only his queen but his own life. So, as he was bound for foreign parts, he put Mariamme in the care of Joseph, husband of his sister Salome, a trustworthy man, loyal because of their kinship, giving him secret instructions to kill her if Antony killed Herod himself. Joseph, with no

This image which comes between idea and word to obscure them, is also in one way mimed by the voiced (creaturly) aspect of language. The singing or vocal part of language is silenced in the Baroque, silenced by an over-weightiness of meaning. "This poetry was in fact incapable of releasing in inspired song the profound meaning which was here confined to the verbal image. Its language was heavy with material display.[...]For its writing does not achieve transcendence by being voiced; rather does the world of written language remain self-sufficient and intent on the display of its own force or weight. Written language and sound confront each other in tense polarity."[170] This dialectic is not a happy one: it goes

---

evil intention but simply to prove to her how passionately the king loved her, as he could not bear that even death should part them, disclosed the secret. On his return Herod, during intercourse, protested with many oaths his devotion to her, the only woman he had ever loved. 'And a nice way,' she exclaimed, 'to show your love for me--giving Joseph instructions to kill me!' When he learnt that the secret was out, Herod was frantic, and declared that Joseph would never have revealed his instructions unless he had seduced her. Blind with rage he leapt from the bed and rushed wildly about the palace. This opportunity for slander his sister Salome seized with both hands, assuring him that his suspicion of Joseph was true. Driven mad by uncontrollable jealousy he ordered the instant execution of them both. But rage quickly gave way to remorse, and as anger died down love was rekindled. So hot was the flame of his desire that he could not believe her dead, but in his sickness of mind talked to her as if still alive, until time revealed to him the terrible truth, and filled his heart with grief as passionate as his love had been while she lived."

170 Benjamin, *GS I.*, 376; 200-01.

to the depths. It overcomes its dizziness at this irreconcilable difference, and regards the profundity of the abyss before it. Benjamin writes that the cleft opened up in the mass of verbal meaning between the meaningful written-image and the intoxicating linguistic-sound forces the gaze into the depths of language. For the written word, phonetics pose a decided violence.[171]

---

171 Jacques Derrida has written volumes on this distinction. At least one quote deserves to be heard here. It is interesting to note that it is part of a reply to a discussant of his work, not a written piece: "I am going to begin by taking two examples. *Finnegans Wake* is for us today the major corpus, the great challenge to translation, although certainly not the only one. However, a Babelian motif runs from one end of *Finnegans Wake* to the other. Although this motif takes many different forms, which I can't go into now, at a certain moment, referring to the event of the Tower of Babel, at the moment when Yahweh interrupts the construction of the tower and condemns humanity to the multiplicity of languages--which is to say, to the necessary and impossible task of translation--Joyce writes (and here I isolate these three words only for the convenience of our discussion, even though it would be necessary to reconstitute the whole page, all the pages): 'And he *war*.' That's what one reads at a certain moment on one page of *Finnegans Wake* in an episode concerning Babel. In what language is this written? Obviously, Despite the multiplicity of languages, cultural references, and condensations, English is indisputably the dominant language in *Finnegans Wake*--all of these refractions and slippages are produced in English or through English, in the body of that language. French would translate the English as: *il-guerre* [he wars], he declares war. And that's indeed what happens: God declares war on the tribe of the Shems, who want to make a name for themselves by raising the tower and imposing their tongue on the universe. But obviously the German word *war* influences the English word, so we also have: He was, he was the one who said, for example, 'I am that I am,' which is the definition of Yahweh. And then one also hears the ear, which is very present in the rest of the text. One hears a thousand things through other tongues.[...]What happens in the Babel episode, in the tribe of the Shems? Notice that the word 'shem' already means *name*: Shem equals name. The Shems decide to raise a tower--not just in order to reach

Benjamin quotes Jacob Böhme at length, "one of the greatest allegorists, [who] upholds the value of sound over silent profundity.He developed the doctrine of the 'sensual' or natural language.[...]The spoken word, it might be said, is the ecstasy of the creature, it is exposure, rashness, powerlessness before God; the written word is the composure of the creature, dignity, superiority, omnipotence over the objects of the world. This, at least, is the case in the *Trauerspiel*, whereas in Böhme's more friendly outlook there is room for a more positive image of spoken language."[172] Benjamin confronts

---

all the way to the heavens but also, it says in the text, to make a name for themselves. They want to make a name for themselves, and they bear the name of name. So they want to make a name for themselves--how eill they do it? By imposing their tongue on the entire universe on the basis of this sublime edification. Tongue: actually the Hebrew word here is the word that signifies lip. Not tongue but lip. Thus, they want to impose their lip on the entire universe. Had their enterprise succeeded, the universal tongue would have been a particular language imposed by violence, by force, by violent hegemony over the rest of the world. It would not have been a universal language--for example in the leibnizian sense--a transparent language to which everyone would have had access. Rather, the master with the most force would have imposed this language on the world and, by virtue of this fact, it would have become the universal tongue. This, then, is their project: to make a name for themselves by imposing their lip on the world...." Derrida, "Reply to Patrick Mahony," *The ear of the Other* ed. Christie McDonald, trans. Peggy Kamuf and Avital Ronell (Lincoln, Neb.: University of Nebraska Press, 1988), 98-110.

172 Benjamin, *GS I.*, 377; *Origin*, 201.
"[Böhme] thinks of the language of creatures 'not as a realm of words but...as something resolved into its sounds and noises.'"Ibid., 379; 204. Benjamin quotes from *De signatura rerum*, (1622) which has been translated as *Concerning the Birth and Designation of All Things*. See Peter Schäublin, *Zur Sprache Jakob Boehmes* (Winterthur: P.G.

the natural (onomatopoeic) theory of language with its history, noting that the assimilation of oral manifestations is and has been attempted to be traced back to a single, primeval linguistic state. "The theory that [German] was directly descended from Hebrew was widespread, and it was not the most radical theory. There were others which actually traced Hebrew, Greek, and Latin back to German.[...]And so, on the one hand, attempts were made to lay claim to the most remote cultural materials, and on the other hand, the aim was to conceal the artificiality of this attitude in an extreme foreshortening of the historical perspective."[173] The thinking of this naturalism was that the task of German lyric was to grasp the language of nature in words and rhythms. Benjamin counters this position by calling attention to the alexandrine verse-form of the *Trauerspiel*, which produces a conflictual dialectic of its own, mirroring the conflict itself. Quoting Borinski, he writes: "If, in the fact of the colossal proportions of Baroque architecture and Baro-

---

Keller, 1963). On the dialectic of the word he writes: "*Eigenartig, kühn und tief ist diese Theorie von der Beziehung, bzw. Beziehungslosigkeit in der Sprache. Sie spiegelt rein das dialektische Denken wider und dazu eine große, lautere Achtung vor dem Wort, dem sie Ewigkeit zudenkt.*" p. 52.

173 Ibid., 378; 203.

que painting, it has been permissible to emphasize the 'tendency to simulate the occupation of space' that is common to both, then the language of the *Trauerspiel*, which expands in painterly fashion in the alexandrine, has the same function."[174]

The following alexandrine from the end of Hallmann's *Mariamne* shows that the conflict portrayed is irreconcilable, and that the words have petrified into personifications of words, broken, and lamenting. Just as Hallmann moved to the writing of operas late in his life, these last words could be sung.

Palaestina:

Ach! Ach! Ach!
How clear-blazing revenge torments me!
Is Palaestine then to sink into the Dead Sea?
To drown in its own blood?
Who was I certainly before this time?
A land / where milk and honey flew without stop/
A land / that had encompassed the highest, most extreme, itself;
An image of eternity.
But ach! Ach! Now I am entirely mocked and jeered!
My scepter taken away, and dethroned!
Doesn't anyone anymore take up my cares?
Just heavens hear! Ach listen to my laments!
For hardly still can I breathe;
And save me from the torments that fly into a rage!

Tyranny:
Silence! your whimperings are too much!

---

174 Ibid., 380; 206.

This is only a children's game /
And a foretaste of greater plights.
On whom happiness always shines /
It is strange to them / when they cry /
And see comets before suns.
Rise up sisters! Come over here!
Pair yourselves with tyranny!
Don't be lax in serving me!
Hunger / Discord / Plague / and Conflict /
Which rule you broad and wide /
Come / and martyr Palaestine![175]

The pleas of Palestine wake the ghost of King Solomon from his grave, who implores them to dry their tears, for the Holy Land lies close at hand, in Austria.

"Your Salomon / to whom God and the world are in favor /
To Christian protection / the great LEOPOLD
[...]It is he / who crowns you with laurels;
He who saves you from the wrathful Saracen /
And soon will raise you up just to the heights of the Pole!

Palestine is overjoyed. Both she and Solomon shout "Long live Leopold" and the play ends. Before the end, Hallmann mentions the rule of Hadrian over Jerusalem, and one is suggested to associate the insurrection of 66 A.D. with Bar Kokba of 135 A.D.; Herod with Hadrian. Hence the politically controversial Christian, and Holy Roman ending. An interesting point further illuminates Benjamin's construction of the book. During Leopold I's reign Vienna grew to become the cultural center that it did. The man himself loved music, and was not a bad composer.

---

175 Johann Christian Hallmann, *Mariamne: Trauerspiel* (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1973), 126. The play was published in 1670.

"Language which, on the one hand, seeks, in the fullness of sound, to assert its creaturely rights, is, on the other hand, in the pattern of the alexandrine, unremittingly bound to a forced logicality. This is the stylistic law of bombast, the formula for the 'Asian words' of the *Trauerspiel*. The gesture, which thereby seeks to incorporate meaning, is of a piece with the violent distortion of history. In language, as in life, to adopt only the typical movement of the creature and yet to express the whole of the cultural world from antiquity to Christian Europe--such is the remarkable mental attitude which is never renounced even in the *Trauerspiel*. The enormous artificiality of its mode of expression thus has its roots in that same extreme yearning for nature as the pastoral plays. On the other hand, this very mode of expression, which only represents--that is to say represents the nature of language--and as far as possible avoids profane communication, is courtly and refined."[176] The violent distortion of history that Benjamin speaks about, and that can be seen in Hallmann above and the *Trauerspiel* itself, can be attributed on the one hand to a line Benjamin writes about Johann Wilhelm Ritter. He writes, first, that the Romantic philosophers' musical philosophy has an affinity with the Baroque that should be heard, and heeded.

---

176 Benjamin, *GS I.*, *Origin*, 210.

He questions the theatrical role of sound or music, and then establishes a position he himself was to take up: Penetrating this perspective "could only be accomplished by a fundamental discussion of language, music, and script."[177] As has been studied fervently by many, this relationship between music, language, and script is also an everyday matter. As I overheard a young woman recently

---

177 Ibid., 387; 213. One six-page passage out of Ritter's *Fragmente ous dem Nachlasse eines jungen Physikers: Ein Taschen buch für Freunde der Natur* (Hanau/Main: Müller & Kiepenheuer, 1984), 270-277, begins: "What is of value here is the complete construction of consciousness, and once everything was consciousness in sound (*Laut*) or tone, as especially *Herder* showed so marvellously. That we now are conscious and think, *without* speaking about sound therewith, is an abstraction out of simple convention, --(to hinder us as well, is that our *language* is no longer the natural one, hence we prefer to stutter and keep silent), --and, since then, we also don't *think* so energetically anymore. From the still fully natural humans we hear truly now still overall at the same time mentioning, singing, screaming, and so forth, and even to praise the educated one, to awakening of his highest consciousness, God *sounds*." He continues: "All of life is music, and all music as life itself--at least its *image*." "*Musik disintegrates* in languages." "Only the one who speaks, that speaker in a particular language, has song, where language is accompanied with music: the human."

"Truly the *entire language is creation* and *literally* made through the *word*, and the *created and the creating word themselves*.--This whole thing deserves a great and beautiful development.

To this *word* however, is *in large measure the letter* so undividably tied, even in the smallest. The *world*, insofar as it is visible, and can become so, is this *letter*, this *writing*. The word writes, the letter sounds; both in their undividability is being, consciousness, *life;* thus upwards to God." Ibid.

Ritter doesn't stop there, however. He moves right from the word and writing and sound to the body, to physics.

say: "I can read Hebrew, but I have no idea what it means." I have also heard someone say: "I can speak Hebrew, but I cannot read it."

Benjamin couldn't read Hebrew. But he could hear it around him being spoken, like music. The words were *only* images for him; allegorical emblems. The meanings he drew from them can not have been linguistic; they are meaningless. He understood that with music, "the obstacle of meaning and intrigue loses its weight," and that it is the opposite of meaning-laden speech. The fragments of the elements of language rebel against one another, which is part of the allegorical approach, he writes. "Even in their isolation the words reveal themselves as fateful. Indeed, one is tempted to say that the very fact that they still have a meaning in their isolation lends a threatening quality to this remnant of meaning they have kept. In this way language is broken up so as to acquire a changed and intensified meaning in its fragments. With the Baroque the place of the capital letter was established in German orthography. It is not only the aspiration to pomp, but at the same time the disassociating, atomizing principle of the allegorical approach which is asserted here."[178] When the dialogic exchanges become more violent and angry, they become even more fragmentary, he states.

---

178 Ibid., 382; 208.

On the particle of speech named sound, he quotes Nietzsche, mostly. But he does stress that it is the sensuous aspect of language, whereas meaning finds its place in the written word. "And the spoken word is only afflicted by meaning, so to speak, as if by an inescapable disease; it breaks off in the middle of the process of resounding, and the damming up of feeling, which was ready to pour forth, wakes up mourning. Here meaning is encountered, and will continue to be encountered as the reason for mournfulness. The antithesis of sound and meaning could not but be at its most intense where both could be successfully combined in *one*, without their actually cohering in the sense of forming an organic linguistic structure."[179]

---

179 Ibid., 383; 209. In "Criticism and Crisis," regarding immediately Husserl and Rousseau, Paul de Man writes: "Husserl's text reveals with stiking clarity the structure of all crisis-determined statements. It establishes an important truth: the fact that philosophical knowledge can only come into being when it is turned back upon itself.[...]These texts can be called romantic, and I have purposely chosen them within the period and the author [Rousseau] that many consider the most deluded of all. But one hesitates to use terms such as nostalgia or desire to designate this kind of consciousness, for all nostalgia or desire is desire of something or for someone; here, the consciousness does not result from the absence of something, but consists of the presence of a nothingness. Poetic language names this void with ever-renewed understanding and, like Rousseau's longing, it never tires of naming it again. This persistent naming is what we call literature." Paul de Man, "Criticism and Crisis" in *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1983), 16-18.

It is the relationship of the figure of the intriguer to language that shows up the relationship between pure sound and meaning. The intriguer--in a pure form such as that of Herod's son Antipater--lies.[180] Meaning, if it is to have any relation to truth (and not knowledge) meets a lie in the breath (and breadth) of the word. The intriguer

---

180 "However, the brothers did not leave their divisions behind but parted still more suspicious of each other, Alexander and Aristobulus resenting Antipater's rights as the eldest, Antipater grudging even second place to his brothers. Antipater however was extremely shrewd and kept his mouth shut, concealing with the utmost cunning his detestation of the other two; whereas they, proud of their birth, made no secret of their feelings, goaded all the time by their 'friends,' many of whom nosed their way in to spy on them. Every word uttered in Alexander's circle was immediately repeated in Antipater's, and passed on, with additions, by Antipater to Herod. The young man could not make the most innocent remark without getting into trouble; everything he said was given an incriminating twist, and if he spoke unguardedly, mountains were manufactured out of molehills. Antipater employed a succession of agents to draw him on, so that his own lies should have some foundation of truth, and if any one of the statements attributed to Alexander was proved authentic, the rest were taken for granted. All his own friends were either naturally secretive or induced by gifts to divulge absolutely nothing: Antipater's life might fairly be described as a mystery of wickedness. Alexander's companions, on the contrary, had succumbed to bribery or subtle flattery, Antipater's invariable weapon, and become informers who betrayed all his actions and words. By the most adroit stage-management Antipater showed himself a past master in the art of making slander sink into Herod's ears, himself acting the part of an affectionate brother and leaving the tale-bearing to others. Whenever a story was told to the discredit of Alexander, he would make his entrance and act his part, first tearing the story to pieces, then subtly confirming it and stirring the king to anger. Everything was turned into proof of conspiracy, and nothing did so much to win acceptance for the slanders as Antipater's appeals on his brother's behalf." Josephus, *The Jewish War*, 90-91.

is the master of meanings, Benjamin writes. And thus the pent-up mournings of a natural language (Palestine) are made to be the responsibility of the intriguer as well: "If the echo, the true domain of the free play of sound, is now, so to speak, taken over by meaning, then it must prove to be entirely a manifestation of the linguistic, as the age understood it."[181] As the age understood it. Benjamin speaks of the choreographic style of the intrigue, which helped to dissolve the *Trauerspiel* into opera. For the echo resounds in the interlude, a pillar, part of the architecture of the drama. Benjamin, after quoting Ritter on oral and written language, and he writes that they are a unity and a dialectic, but to give music or sound its proper place and not to dismiss it in the *meaning* of language, would be to "investigate how written language grows out of music and not directly from the sounds of the spoken word."[182] "With the theory that every image is only a form of writing, he gets to the very heart of the allegorical attitude. In the context of allegory the image is only a signature, only the monogram of essence, not the essence itself in a cloak."[183] One would have to do an entire study of Nietzsche in this connection to do justice

---

181 Benjamin, *GS I.*, 384; *Origin*, 210.

182 Ibid., 388; 214.

183 Ibid.

to Benjamin's allusion, one which listens in on Josephus.

> The Parthians in Jerusalem turned to looting, breaking into the houses of those who had fled and into the Palace, and sparing only Hyrcanus' money, which did not exceed three hundred talents. The total sum found fell short of their expectations; for Herod, long suspicious of Parthian trustworthiness, had already transferred the most valuable of his treasures to Idumenea, an example followed by all his friends. The looting finished, the Parthian conduct became so outrageous that they filled the whole country with war to the death, blotted out the city of Marisa, and after making Antigonus king, actually handed Phasael and Hyrcanus over to him in fetters to be tortured. When Hyrcanus fell down at his feet, Antigonus with his own teeth mutilated his ears, in order that he might never again resume the high priest-hood in any circumstances; for a high priest must be physically perfect.[184]

Which day?

Benjamin's reference to the exception, the emergency, and the decision in Schmitt in the early part of the book return at its "end" to question the status of the extremity of the Day of Judgment. For the action and its suspension that are tied to the decision and from which they issue does not meet anyone anywhere on the Day of Judgment itself. This action is carried out alone, as it became atomized in the personification of a single character, M. Satan. is the personification of intrigue, of slander and the lie--and of spirituality--and he is alone.

> Through me you enter the woeful city
> Through me you enter eternal grief,
> Through me you enter among the lost.

---

184 Josephus, *The Jewish War*, 62-3.

> Justice moved my high maker:
> The divine power made me,
> The supreme wisdom, and the primal love.
> Before me nothing was created
> If not eternal, and eternal I endure.
> Abandon every hope, you who enter.
>
> These words of obscure color I saw inscribed over a portal; whereupon I said, "Master, their meaning is hard for me." And he to me, as one who understands, "Here must all fear be left behind; here let all cowardice be dead. We have come to the place where I have told you you will see the wretched people who have lost the good of intellect" ("c'hanno perduto il ben de l'intelletto"). And when he had placed his hand on mine, with a cheerful look from which I took comfort, he led me among the secret things ("dentro a le segrete cose").[185]

The secret things (the objects of knowledge) are sought after with the help of another, a necessary help when one is surrounded by those who have lost the good of the intellect.[186] "Underlying most of the problems we have encountered, including those of the postulates, is Kant's radical split between reason and nature, itself a derivative of the duality of spontaneity and receptivity. This duality is the most fundamental principle of the critical system. Without it, the Copernican revolution will make no sense, and there will be no transcendental science and no necessary and universal foundations for knowledge and

---

185 Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy: Inferno, Canto III*, trans. Charles S. Singleton, (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1970), 25.

186 See the work of Emmanual Levinas.

ethics. Also, without this duality, reason cannot be subject to a critique that defines and restricts its boundaries. The split between spontaneity and receptivity expresses the finitude of man, his being a 'limited rational being.' As such, man is no *intellectus archetypus* but is bound by sense-perceptions in knowledge and by natural appetites and desires in action."[187] This split is not one that can be described in the language of ambiguity. It is a radical split, that denies mending.

Kant's *Critique of Judgment*, as it was introduced by Benjamin, presents itself at the "end" of the chapter on allegory, redrawing the lines between aesthetics and theology that were set up there. After Benjamin writes that what by now should be evident is the *idea* of the *Trauerspiel*, he repeats: "Moreover this assimilated content cannot be elucidated without the aid of the theological concepts, which were indispensable even to its exposition. If, in the concluding part of this study, we do not hesitate to use such concepts, this is no *metabasis is allo genos* [transition to a different subject]. For a critical understanding of the *Trauerspiel*, in its extreme, allegorical form, is possible only from the higher domain of theology; so long as the approach is an aesthetic one,

---

187 Yirmiyahu Yovel, *Kant and the Philosophy of History* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1980), 298-99.

paradox must have the last word."[188] This may be true. But the question he himself raises, of a *metabasis eis allo genos*, remains. Is it? The next question he asks brings the mutilation of ears by mastication to a level parallel to that invoked by Lacan in "Kant avec Sade"[189], but it does not rest on this level, for desire and its accoutrements is not its domain. He queries: "Above all: What is the significance of those scenes of cruelty, agony and horror in which the Baroque drama revels?"[190] Part of the answer lies, he says, in parts, body parts that is. For the strict emblematist could not *make an exception* for the human body in granting it symbolic totality: It too, like the rest of nature, had to be broken up into remnants, scattered meanings, like the significance of a severed ear, a slit eyeball, or a hand that lies there on its own, without any attachment. The fragmented body has haunted the consciousness of ones that for centuries imagined themselves whole, a horror that takes the form of hal lucinations, ecstatic states, and madness. The man who abandons a *physis* equipped with consciousness "to scatter it to the manifold regions of meaning" is left with a

---

188 Benjamin, *GS I.*, 390; *Origin*, 216.

189 Jacques Lacan, "Kant avec Sade," *Ecrits* (Paris: Seuil, 1966), 765-90.

190 Benjamin, *GS I.*, 392; *Origin*, 216.

shrunken head and a politicized former body, uncollectible in a Hobbesian or any other sense. Only as a corpse does the body come into its own, Benjamin writes, and this in its allegorical sense: "Seen from the point of view of death, the product of the corpse is life."[191] Here, Hobbes comes into his own: He is able to gather together the fragments of what will be a Kingdom, and give it the semblance of a community of working parts. As Benjamin writes; "Since, in fact, the spirit is in itself pure reason, true to itself, and it is physical influences alone which bring it into contact with the world, the torture which it endures was a more immediate basis of violent emotions than so-called tragic conflicts."[192] Benjamin attributes this long-lasting dualism to Descartes and the theory of the passions. In death the spirit becomes free, in the manner of spirits, and the body comes to justice, as corpse, he holds. And a *memento mori* wakes in the *physis*, he writes, Mneme itself.[193]

---

191 Ibid., 392; 218.

192 Ibid., 391; 217.

193 The works of Henri Bergson are indispensible when considering the relationships between matter, memory, consciousness, the body, perception, action, and the idea. "But these two extreme states, the one of an entirely contemplative memory which apprehends only the singular in its *vision*, the other of a purely motor memory which stamps the note of generality on its *action*, are really separate and are fully visible only in exceptional cases. In normal life they are interpenetrating, so that each has to abandon some part of its original purity. The first reveals itself in the recollection of differences, the second in the perception of resemblances: at the meeting

But another *Geist* is present in these last pages, and

---

of the two currents appears the general idea.[...] But, in the degree that these recollections draw nearer to movements, and so to external perception, the work of memory acquires a higher practical importance. Past images, reproduced exactly as they were, with all their details and even with their affective coloring, are the images of idle fancy or of dream: to act is just to induce this memory to *shrink* [my emphasis--jmh], or rather to become thinned and sharpened, so that it presents nothing thicker than the edge of a blade to actual experience, into which it will thus be able to penetrate.[...] According to our view, an appeal is made to activity at the precise moment when perception gives rise to imitative movements which scan it, as it were, automatically.[...] This spontaneous recollection, which is masked by the acquired recollection, may flash out at intervals, but it disappears at the least movement of the voluntary memory. If the subject sees the series of letters, of which he thought he retained the image, vanish from before his eyes, this happens mainly when he begins to repeat it: the effort seems to drive the rest of the image out of his consciousness. Now, analyze many of the imaginative methods of mnemomics and you will find that the object of this science is to bring into the foreground the spontaneous memory which was hidden, and to place it, as an active memory, at our service; to this end every attempt at motor memory is, to begin with, suppressed. The faculty of mental photography, says one author, belongs rather to subconsciousness than to consciousness; it answers with difficulty to the summons of the will.[...] Now in what does this hypothesis of ours consist, and at what precise point does it part company with the other? Instead of starting from *affection*, of which we can say nothing, since there is no reason why it should be what it is rather than anything else, we start from *action*, that is to say from our faculty of effecting changes in things, a faculty attested to by consciousness and toward which all the powers of the organized body are seen to converge.[...] Lastly, I interrogate my consciousness as to the part which it plays in affection: consciousness replies that it is present indeed, in the form of feeling or of sensation, at all the steps in which I believe that I take the initiative, and that it faces and disappears as soon as my activity, by becoming automatic, shows that consciousness is no longer needed. Therefore, either all these appearances are deceptive, or the act in which the affective state issues is not one of those which might be rigorously deduced from antecedent phenomena, as a movement from a movement; and, hence, it really adds something new to the universe and to its history. Let us hold to the appearances; I will for-

it is the *Geist* of Kant that Benjamin calls up in his beginning attempt at a construction of a doctrine (of ideas) which has been spoken about.[194] The section "On

---

mulate purely and simply what I feel and what I see: *All seems to take place as if, in this aggregate of images which I call the universe, nothing really new could happen except through the medium of certain particular images, the type of which is furnished me by my body.*" [author's emphasis]. Henri Bergson, *Matter and Memory*, trans. Nancy Margaret Paul and W.Scott Palmer (New York: Zone Books, 1988), 155, 106-07, 87, 63, 18.

194 "Now [using] this [concept of the technic of nature] does not add a new part to philosophy as a doctrinal system of our cognition of nature and of freedom: for our presentation of nature as art is a mere idea that serves as a principle for our investigation of nature, and hence merely for [us] subjects, so that we may possibly introduce into the aggregate of empirical laws, as empirical laws, the coherence that a system has, by attributing to nature a reference to this our need [for systematicity]. On the other hand, our concept of a technic of nature, as a heuristic principle for judging nature, will belong to the critique of our cognitive power, [the part of this critique] which indicates what cause we have for presenting nature in this way, where this idea originates and whether it is to be found in an a priori source, and also what the range and the limit of its use are. In a word, such an inquiry will belong, as a part, to the system of the critique of pure reason, but not to the system of doctrinal philosophy." Immanuel Kant, "On the System of the Higher Cognitive Powers Which Lies at the Basis of Philosophy," *Critique of Judgment* trans. Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987), 394. The concept of nature as art is the concept of the technic of nature, which does not provide the basis for any theory, Kant writes, nor does it contain cognition of objects, but it makes it possible to investigate nature, according to a principle that allows one to proceed by empirical laws. "But this [concept of the technic of nature] does not enrich our knowledge of nature with a special [*besonder*] objective law, but only serves judgment as the basis for a maxim by which we [can] observe nature and to which we [can] hold up [and compare] nature's forms." Ibid.

Ethicotheology" of Part II of the *Third Critique*, which focuses on the final purpose of (natural) human beings--happiness--addresses that purpose from the standpoint of evil. Satan "forfeits his subjective purpose (i.e. happiness)"[195] for an objective one, Benjamin would say. This purpose is the purpose of creation itself. "*Moral* teleology compensates for the deficiency of *physical* teleology and for the first time supplies a basis for a *theology*. For physical teleology on its own, if it proceeded consistently instead of borrowing, unnoticed, from moral teleology, could not provide a basis for anything but a *demonology*, which is incapable of [providing] a determinate concept [of the deity].[...]What matters, then, is whether we do have a basis, sufficient for reason (whether speculative or practical), for attributing a *final purpose* to the supreme cause acting in terms of purposes. For [even] a priori we may then consider as certain, given the subjective character of our reason, or given even that of the reason of other beings no matter how such reason might be conceived, that this final purpose can only be *man under moral laws*. On the other hand, we are quite unable to cognize a priori the purposes of nature in the physical order; above all we have no insight of any kind [that tells us] that a nature could not exist

---

195 Ibid., 332.

without such purposes."[196]

"On the other hand." *Is* this book a *metabasis eis allo genos*, and if so, where have we, as readers, been led? Into a theater of cruelty, from which there is no escape? Artaud wouldn't stand for it, although he would be able to stage it: the tyrant producing corpses for the *Trauerspiel*, machine-like. Benjamin writes, reminding us again of the *Theses on History* to come, of the expert chess-playing humunculus hidden by mirrors under the table but who pulls the strings of the puppet playing who wins "every time:" [D]ramatists avail[ed] themselves of an Italian trick[....] Through a hole in the top of a table, the cloth of which hung down to the ground, there appeared the head of an actor [at the banquet of death]."[197] Disembodied heads, without resource, though thickly bloodied.

Where have we been led? Back into the middle, into the Middle Ages, for one, back to the face of the figure of Christ and its mirror image. "There is a threefold material affinity between Baroque and Medieval Christianity. The struggle against the pagan gods, the triumph of allegory, the torment of bodiless, are equally essential to both.[...] And it is only in these terms that the origin of allegory can be illuminated. If the dissolution

---

196 Ibid., 331-34.

197 Benjamin, *GS I.*, 393; *Origin*, 219.

of the pantheon of antiquity has a decisive role in this origin, it is exceedingly instructive that its reinvigoration in humanism arouses the seventeenth century to protest."[198] The conflict is over mythologism, and just as Gnosticism was there to intervene in a neo-Platonic way between antiquity and Christianity, Rosicrucianism, alchemy, astrology ("the ancient occidental residue of oriental paganism") and other occult tendencies mixed themselves in the middle between Renaissance humanism and the Baroque. "European antiquity was split and its obscure after-effects in the Middle Ages enlivened itself anew in

---

198 Ibid., 394; 220. The companion volumes of critical essays on Benjamin collected by Norbert Bolz and Richard Faber contain some original critiques, two of which come from Norbert W. Bolz and Richard Faber, eds., *Antike und Moderne: Zu Walter Benjamins 'Passagen'* (Würzburg: Königshausen and Neumann, 1986), a volume that focuses on the *Passagenarbeit/Baudelaire* work in analyzing how antiquity is incorporated or otherwise represented in Benjamin's "modernity." Two essays that stand out are Ulrich Rüffer's "*Taktilität und Nähe*," which summerizes many points this dissertation has been making in its chapters; and Jacob Taubes's "*Walter Benjamin--ein moderner Marcionit?*" which asks about the positions the "originary heretic" takes in Buber's, Bloch's and Scholem's work, and in the early Judeo-Christian and Gnostic traditions, before asking what relation Benjamin's possible split between creation and redemption would have for the interpretation of the past and the future. He leaves him (with Bloch) as a "mystical Marxist." (p. 147)

See also *Walter Benjamin: Profane Erleuchtung und rettende Kritik* ed. Norbert W. Bolz and Richard Faber (Würzburg: Königshausen and Neumann, 1985), and *Walter Benjamin--Zeitgenosse der Moderne* ed. Peter Gebhardt, Martin Grzimek, Dietrich Harth, Michael Rumpf, Ulrich Schödlbauer, and Bernd Witte (Kronberg/Ts.: Scriptor, 1976).

its radiant after-image in Humanism.[...]The Renaissance stimulates the visual memory--how much, can be seen from the conjuration scenes in the *Trauerspiel*--but at the same time it awakens an imagistic speculation which is perhaps of greater import for the formation of style."[199] Until Augustine locates in the beyond blessed incorruptible cor-

---

199 Ibid., 395; 221. Meyer Schapiro's essay "Style" not only presents excellent summaries of Wölfflin and Riegl, but offers the following commentary: "A style is like a language, with an internal order and expressiveness, admitting a varied intensity or delicacy of statement." And: "Another interesting exception to the homogeneous in style is the difference between marginal and the dominant fields in certain arts. In early Byzantine works, rulers are represented in statuesque, rigid forms, while the smaller accompanying figures, by the same artist, retain the liveliness of an older episodic, naturalistic style. In Romanesque art this difference can be so marked that scholars have mistakenly supposed that certain Spanish works were done partly by a Christian and partly by a Moslem artist. In some instances the forms in the margin or in the background are more advanced in style than the central parts, anticipating a later stage of the art. In medieval work the unframed figures on the borders of illuminated manuscripts or on cornices, capitals, and pedestals are often freer and more naturalistic than the main figures. This is surprising, since we would expect to find the most advanced forms in the dominant content. But in medieval art the sculptor or painter is often bolder where he is less bound to an external requirement; he even seeks out and appropriates the regions of freedom. In a similar way an artist's drawings or sketches are more advanced than the finished paintings and suggest another side of his personality. The execution of the landscape backrounds behind the religious figures in paintings of the fifteenth century is sometimes amazingly modern and in great contrast to the precise forms of the large figures. Such observations teach us the importance of containing in the description and explanation of a style the unhomogeneous, unstable aspect, the obscure tendencies toward new forms." Meyer Schapiro, "Style" in *Theory and Philosophy of Art: Style, Artist, and Society: Selected Papers, Vol. IV* (New York: George Braziller, 1994), 57-58, 62.

porality and the pleasure of the naked human body [from *The City of God*], "nakedness remained a sign of impurity, and as such it was, at most, appropriate for Greek gods, or infernal demons. Accordingly, whenever Medieval scholarship came across unclothed figures, it sought to explain this impropriety with reference to a symbolism which was frequently far-fetched, and generally hostile."[200] Then allegorical practice establishes, from a Christian point of view, Benjamin writes, the demonic nature of the ancient gods and the pious mortification of the body. "It is therefore no accident that the Middle Ages and the Baroque *took pleasure* in the *meaningful* juxtaposition of statues of idols and the bones of the dead."[201] These images are not filled out with the flesh of the symbol, but remain skeletal and significant in the exigency and play of allegory.

"The three most important impulses in the origin of western allegory are non-antique, anti-antique: The gods project into the alien world, they become evil, and they become creatures. The dress of the Olympians is left behind, so that in the course of time emblems collect around it. And this attire is creaturely as is a devil's

---

200 Benjamin, *GS I.*, 395; *Origin*, 222.

201 Ibid., 396; 222.

body."[202] Christianity attempts to dress Satan in the garb of guilt, to charge him with, as Benjamin says, *the changes in legal norms,* with their claims to eternal validity, to charge him with transitoriness as well as eternity, this one "creature." But via the developments of early Christianity, and continuing through occultism, it became obvious that many gods had been transformed into little devils, and many little devils into *one*. In a switch from the beautiful to the sublime, the gods are shed of their swathes of drapery and try to hide. But their secrets are unconcealed, and in this nakedness, like in the statues of nymphs being disrobed by satyrs, a marble silence reigns, one overheard by a snickering laughter.

Like phosphorescent light, which continues to glow even after the radiation which was its cause has ceased, a form of light that was developed in the seventeenth century, highly poisonous and fusing with the organic, allegory shows itself to have pyrophoric tendencies, almost Elsinorian. "If the church had been able quite simply to repress the gods from the memory of the faithful, allegorical language would never have come into being. For it is not an epigonal victory monument; but rather the word which has the mission to ban the unbroken remains

---

202 Ibid., 399; 225.

(*Rest*) of antique life."[203] One route of return, through Christianity, is by way of guilt, a ban coming from bad conscience that doesn't make its way to verbal expression. "Guilt is not confined to the allegorical observer, who betrays the world for the sake of knowledge, but it also attaches to the object of his contemplation. This view, rooted in the doctrine of the fall of the creature, which brought down nature with it, is responsible for the ferment which distinguishes the profundity of western allegory from the oriental rhetoric of this form of expression. Because it is mute, fallen nature mourns. But the converse of this statement leads even deeper into the essence of nature: its mournfulness makes it become mute."[204] The word cannot ban the individual pagan god from being remembered; it has a name. Benjamin writes that to be named, regardless of the namer, is perhaps always a presentiment of mourning. But *not* to be named, only to be read and reread by the allegorist, as mute nature is, is much more mournful. And yet only thanks to him does nature, or the object, in their guilt-laden degradation, attain significance. "On the other hand, alongside the emblems and the clothing, the words and the names remain behind, and, as the living contexts of their birth dis-

---

203 Ibid., 396; 223.

204 Ibid., 398; 224.

appear, so they become the origins of concepts, in which these words acquire a new content, which is predisposed to allegorical representation; such is the case with Fortuna, Venus (as Dame World) and so on."[205]

One Day? Which day? And who leaps from the balcony?

The proximity of death being necessary for conceptual significance having been established, one can begin to ask more pressing and unanswerable questions, perhaps, of the end of this book, one that "ends" similarly to other unfinished books, such as the *Symposium*, with the sound of music; or to an assembly of Nietzschean fragments, shrilly or with a demand; or like Kafka's *America*, up on pillars at the Theater of Oklahoma. One question is that of action, of the decision which returns, and which causes allegory to turn somersaults in the air. Tosca leaps immediately upon realization of the death of Cavaradossi from the Castel Sant'Angelo with the words "*O Scarpia, avanti a Dio!*" ("Scarpia, before God!"). Although Juliet remains on her balcony, both these characters meet violent death. The last words of the Duke of Albany in *King Lear* compare well to those of Prince Escalus in *Romeo and Juliet*.

> Albany: The weight of this sad time we must obey;
> Speak what we feel, not what we ought to say.
> The oldest hath borne most: we that are young

---

205 Ibid., 399; 225-26.

Shall never see so much nor live so long.
[Exeunt, with a dead march.

Prince: A glooming peace this morning with it brings;
The sun for sorrow will not show his head:
Go hence, to have more talk of these sad things;
Some shall be pardon'd and some punished:
For never was a story of more woe
Than this of Juliet and her Romeo. [Exeunt.

But a study of last words, at least as far as allegory is concerned, must concern itself with the leap, the jump, the somersault just spoken of, and of the idea of origin [*Ursprung*] outlined in the first part of this chapter. The raising of consciousness is on the line, if not on-line, sublimely, quietly, and infinitely connected, *Blue Technics à la Turk*, or *à la Tartar*, as Benjamin would have it over Stan Getz/Dave Brubeck. Consciousness' *Sprung* out of devaluation, unending contemplation, and, ultimately, *evil*, falls into life. First, much laughter is heard.

"Here is the first point to which we call attention. There is nothing of the comic outside of that which is properly *human*."[206] The figure of Satan trumps all set-ups of the human, all personification, all images, all characterization of the human. All such images become allegorical in his realm of knowledge, and such they are reduced to bare bones and statuesque stares, resembling Juliet in

---

206 Bergson, *Le Rire: Essai sur la signification du comique, Oeuvres* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de Paris, 1963), 388.

her false bier, hence. The unification of the material and the spiritual is accomplished by him in the interstice between the paganism of the Renaissance and the Christianity of the Counter-Reformation. The Middle Ages contributed to the unification of a multitude of demons left over in paganism, into one, theologically-defined Antichrist.[207]

But it is precisely the *resemblance* of humans to Satan (as to Christ, or God in the doctrine) is comical, and Benjamin writes: "If it is the creaturely world of things, the dead, or at best the half-living, that is the object of the allegorical intention, then man does not enter its field of vision. If it sticks exclusively to emblems, then revolution [*Umschwung*], salvation is not unthinkable. But scorning all emblematic disguise, the undisguised visage of the devil can raise itself up from out of the depths of the earth into the view of the allegorist, in triumphant

---

207 "To determine the characteristics of a theology--in the present case monastic theology--does not mean isolating it from the whole doctrinal current of a given period. Fundamentally, as there is but one Church, one faith, one Scripture, one tradition, and one authority, there is but one theology. Theology cannot be the specialty of any one milieu, where it would be, as it were, imprisoned. Like every great personality, every culture, and even more, necessarily, every reflection on the Catholic faith, every theology is, by its essence, universal and overflows the confines of specialization. It is only within the great cultural entities which have succeeded one another in the life of the Church that different currents can be observed; but they cannot be separated." Jean Leclercq, O.S.B., *The Love of Learning and the Desire for God: A Study of Monastic Culture*, trans. Catharine Misrahi (New York: Fordham University Press, 1961), 193.

vitality and nakedness.[...]According to gnostic-manichaean doctrine, matter was created to bring about the 'de-Tartarization' of the world, and was destined to absorb everything devilish, so that with its elimination the world might display itself in its purity; but in the devil it calls to mind its Tartarean nature, scorns its allegorical 'significance,' and mocks anyone who believes he can pursue it into the depths with impunity. Just as earthly mournfulness is of a piece with allegorical interpretation, hellish gaiety belongs to the undoing of desire in the triumph of matter."[208] The dumb creature is able *to hope* for salvation through (devilish-allegorical) meaning. Insofar as man thinks he is clever and speaks his piece out clearly, and through base calculation, makes its material similar to, or resembling the human in self-consciousness, he meets the allegorizer in the scornful laughter of hell. In laughter precisely, matter takes on with highest eccentric pretense --"*Überschwänglich*"--excessively--spirit. It becomes so full of spirit, Benjamin writes, that it overshoots language.

It overshoots the elemental aspect of language, its parts. Benjamin writes that the *Sturm und Drang* had eyes only for the elemental aspect of Shakespeare, and not the allegorical. Both are essential: the elemental is primary

---

208 Benjamin, *GS I.*, 400-01; *Origin*, 227.

in Shakespeare; the allegorical in Calderón. But he writes, Satan tempts before he terrorizes with mourning, he tempts the curious, those who want knowledge just for the sake of it, out of pure curiosity. This is the basis of culpable knowledge, Benjamin writes. It is empty, pure curiosity; it neglects the simplicity of things in its impatience to get to the core of the matter, to get to the core of matter, to get to the center of the earth where all of its secrets lie, in the depths. "Magical knowledge, which includes alchemy, threatens the adept with isolation and spiritual death."[209] This attitude is not restricted to the Baroque, he writes; moreover, it is a sign of Baroque qualities in later periods (such as that of expressionism). "Knowledge, not action, is the most characteristic mode of existence of evil."[210] The basis of the existence of evil is "revealed in a *fata morgana* of a realm of absolute, that is to say godless, spirituality, bound to the material as its counterpart." Mourning, the mother of allegories and their content, he writes, gives birth to three satanic promises, all spiritual in kind, shown by the *Trauerspiel* now in the figure of the tyrant, now in that of the intriguer. "What tempts is the illusion of freedom--in the experience of what is forbidden; the illu-

---

209 Ibid., 403; 229.

210 Ibid., 403; 230.

sion of independence--in the secession from the community of the pious; the illusion of infinity--in the empty abyss of evil."[211] Three spiritual illusions, in which humans wish to experience a symbolic totality: freedom, independence, and infinity. The question remains how these conceptual elements relate to truth, and its linguisticity, its elemental structure and presentational power. Benjamin writes: "The purely material and this absolutely spiritual are the poles of the satanic realm; and consciousness is their illusionistic synthesis, in which the genuine synthesis, that of life, is imitated [*äfft*]."[212]

THE FIRST

And this Last is not Last, but an ever Nigh, the Nighest; not the Last, in short, but the First. How difficult is such a First! How difficult is every beginning! To do justice and to love mercy--that still looks like a goal. Before any goal, the will can claim to need a little respite first. But to walk humbly with thy God--that is no longer goal. That is so unconditional, so free of every condition, of every But-first and Tomorrow, so wholly Today and thus wholly eternal as life and the way. And therefore it partakes of the eternal truth as directly as do life and the way. To walk humbly with thy God--nothing more is demanded there than a wholly present trust. But trust is a big word. It is the seed whence grow faith, hope, and love, and the fruit which ripens out of them. It is the very simplest and just for that the most difficult. It dares at every moment to say Truly to the truth. To walk humbly with thy God--the words

---

211 Ibid., 404; 230.

212 Ibid.

are written over the gate,
the gate which leads out
of the mysterious-mira-
culous light of the
divine sanctuary in
which no man can
remain alive.
Whither, then,
do the wings of
the gates open?
Thou knowest
it not?
INTO LIFE[213]

An *Umschwung* (turnabout), *umspringen* (jump around--in the air), and *sich überschlagen* (somersaulting, tumbling, skipping [a page]), reveal a sober exit from what might be left as the self-delusionary "knowledge" and transforma-

---

213 Rosenzweig, *Star of Redemption*, 424. He writes: "THE LAST. In the innermost sanctum of the divine truth, where man might expect all the world and himself to dwindle into likeness of that which he is to catch sight of there, he thus catches sight of none other than a countenance like his own. The Star of Redemption is become countenance which glances at me and out of which I glance. Not God became my mirror, but God's truth. God, who is the last and the first--he unlocked to me doors of the sanctuary which is built in the innermost middle. He allowed himself to be seen. He led me to that border of life where seeing is vouchsafed. For 'no man shall see him and live.' Thus that sanctuary where he granted me to see him had to be a segment of the hypercosmos in the world itself, a life beyond life. But what he gave me to see in this Beyond of life is--none other than what I was already privileged to perceive in the midst of life; the difference is only that I see it and no longer merely hear it. For the view on the height of the redeemed hypercosmos shows me nothing but what the word of revelation already enjoined in the midst of life. And to walk in the light of the divine countenance is granted only to him who follows the words of the divine mouth. For--'he has told thee, oh man, what is good, and what does the Lord thy God require of thee but to do justice and to love mercy and to walk humbly with thy God.'" Ibid., 423-24.

tions of allegory, which would dizzily head head first, shrunken or not, emblem for emblem, for the abyss. This overturning moment reveals the limit of allegory, not its ideal. What this ideal would be--distance from God, vainglory, and darkness--evil--is revealed to be as illusionistic as the consciousness that comes between the material and the spiritual. This book, about extremes, approaches the middle from the wings of a gate, in Rosenzweig's words, from the vortex of the divine mouth, which might be closer to a Hölderlinian interpretation,[214]

---

214 "Is there a measure on earth? There is none. For never the Creator's worlds constrict the progress of thunder. A flower too is beautiful, because it blooms under the sun. Often in life they eye discovers beings that could be called much more beautiful than flowers. Oh, well I know it! For to bleed both in body and heart, and wholly to be no more, does that please God? Yet the soul, it is my belief, must remain pure, else on pinions the eagle reaches far as the Mighty with songs of praise and the voice of so many birds. It is the essence, the form it is. You beautiful little stream, you seem touching, as you flow so clear, clear as the eye of divinity, through the Milky Way. I know you well, but tears gush out of my eyes. A serene life I see blossom around me in the shapes of creation, because not unfittingly I compare it to the solitary doves of the churchyard. But the laughter of man seems to grieve me, for I have a heart. Would I like to be a comet? I think so. For they possess the swiftness of birds; they blossom with fire and are like children in purity. to desire more than that, human nature cannot presume. The serenity of virtue also deserves to be praised by the serious spirit which wafts between the garden's three columns. A beautiful virgin must wreathe her head with myrtle, because she is simple both in her nature and in her feelings. But myrtles are to be found in Greece.

If someone looks into the mirror, a man, and in it sees his image, as though it were a painted likeness; it resembles the man. The image of man has eyes, whereas the moon has light. King Oedipus has an eye too many perhaps. The sufferings of this man, they seem indescribable, unspeak-

or from the split in tragic action and tragic silence that Nietzsche sees in Aeschylus, say. Satan traipses through the chorus or interlude, clad as an intriguer, knocking out a section of the pillar that might just be the choral ode to man in Sophocles' *Antigone*, by confusing the rhythm and the syntax, not to mention the meaning of the verse. "The bleak confusion of Golgotha, which can be recognized as the schema underlying the allegorical figures in hundreds of the engravings and descriptions of the period, is not solely a symbol of the desert of all human existence. In it passing-away is not signified or allegorically represented, so much as, self-signifying, proffered as allegory. As the allegory of resurrection."[215]

---

able, inexpressible. If the drama represents something like this, that is why. But what comes over me if I think of you now? Like brooks the end of something sweeps me away, which expands like Asia. Of course, this affliction, Oedipus has it too? Of course, that is why. Did Hercules suffer too? Indeed. The Dioscuri in their friendship, did not they bear afflictions too? For to fight with God, like Hercules, that is an affliction. And immortality amidst the envy of this life, to share in that, is an affliction too. But this also is an affliction, when a man is covered with freckles, to be wholly covered with many a spot! The beautiful sun does that: for it rears up all things. It leads young men along their course with the allurements of its beams as though with roses. The afflictions that Oedipus bore seem like this, as when a poor man complains that there is something he lacks. Son of Laios, poor stranger in Greece! Life is death, and death is also a life." Hölderlin, *Selected Verse* trans. Michael Hamburger, (London: Anvil Press Poetry, 1986), 246-48.

See Anselm Haverkamp, *Laub voll Trauer: Hölderlins späte Allegorie* (Munich: Wilhelm Fink, 1991).

215 Benjamin, *GS I.*, 405-06; *Origin*, 232.

This reversal of fortune has a temporal index: "The seven years of its sinking are but one day." Even this time of hell is secularized in space, Benjamin writes. This world, in which Satan has had his play, belongs to God, and in God's world the allegorist awakens, to rediscover itself--not playfully in the secret, privileged world of underground knowledge, of the arbitrary world of dead things, but stripped naked and bare of all of its tricks, soberly bereft of all that belonged to it, apparently. For its "last things," in which melancholy believes it can most fully secure for itself the discarded, by turning into them into allegories, that they fill out and deny the nothingness in which they are represented, just as the intention does not rest faithfully on empty bones, but leaps without faith to resurrection.[216] The desire to open up space inside, in the middle (of a ceiling painting, by Carracci in the Palazzo Farnese, or by Andrea Pozzo in the church of St. Ignazio in Rome) demonstrates the need to hold up the sky with pillars and arches from below. And if not a sky, then at least a balcony.[217] The lighting is important, to scatter heresies to utter darkness. But the timing is even more crucial: The speed of

---

216 Ibid., 406; 232-33.

217 See Jean Genet, *Le balcon* cover by Alberto Giacometti, (Decines: L'arbalète, 1970).

speech holds up a tumbling tower with perfectly-tongued pillars, so that it might have a chance to stay up longer before being toppled in an untimely fall. To get them to coincide, speed of sound and speed of hand (writing, building, signing, conducting, painting, drawing, sword-fighting, etc.) would be to beautify the sublime, in the aesthetic realm, and in the (symbolic) theologic, to make a place for allegory that would rescue the individual from the arbitrary. It would be time for judgment, in the space of a stage direction.

For the first time, in the last ten lines of the *Trauerspiel* book, Benjamin mentions the phrase "allegorical totality," and it would most certainly seem to be a contradiction in terms, given the content of the book. Only a more highly developed intrigue would have lead the Baroque drama to that scenic organization with which one of the images of the sequence would stand out to be *different* (*Artverschiedenes*) in the image of the apotheosis, and show mourning at the same time the cue for its entry and exit. This different image is the image of subjectivity, and it remains caught in the middle between heaven and hell, were it not for allegory, strangely enough. "Thus it is that the pillars of a Baroque balcony in Bamberg are in reality arrayed in exactly the way in which, in a regular construction, they would present them-

selves from below."[218] This perspective is echoed in the hallucination of St. Theresa. Benjamin quotes Borinski: The upper regions seem self-supporting, as in the image of soaring angels; while attention is drawn to the lower regions, the "violence of the supporting and supported forces, the enormous pedestals, the doubly and triply augmented projecting columns and pilasters, the strengthening and reinforcement of their interconnecting elements, all bearing--a balcony? What other function have they than to emphasize the soaring miracle above, by drawing attention to the difficulties of supporting it from below."[219]

This support system is not like the cement found under the floor of the reconstructed Carnegie Hall, which caused it to buckle, and the acoustics to warble, and which has had to be removed. It is the life of an individual, in all of its parts, which stands under the lights--of the sun, of the stage, of a phosphorescent glow--to present itself, to be represented, in an historical-philosophical way attuned to its being. Thus was the image of Satan so gravenly detailed by Benjamin; it was the image of God reflected in man, man who had forgotten the elements of language he

---

218 Ibid., 407-08; 234.

219 Karl Borinski, *Die Antike in Poetik und Kunsttheorie von Ausgang des klassischen Altertums bis auf Goethe und Wilhelm von Humboldt, I, Mittelalter, Renaissance, Barock*, (Leipzig: 1914), 193, quoted by Benjamin, Ibid., 408; 234.

was responsible for, most immediately, the name. He over-named; he overturned. He wanted to overturn...judgment. He wanted to overturn. He wanted to fill out what was empty-handed with his own voice or his own face--this is evil, writes Benjamin. "Allegory exits empty-handed. Evil as such, which it cherished as enduring profundity, exists only in allegory, is nothing other than allegory, and means something different from what it is. It means precisely the non-existence of what it presents.[...] By its allegorical form evil as such reveals itself to be a subjective phenomenon. the enormous, anti-artistic subjectivity of the Baroque converges here with the theological essence of the subjective.[...] Knowledge of evil therefore has no object. There is no evil in the world. It arises in man himself, with the desire for knowledge, or rather for judgment. Knowledge of good, as knowledge, is secondary. It ensues from practice. Knowledge of evil--as knowledge this is primary. It ensues from contemplation. Knowledge of good and evil is, then, the opposite of all factual knowledge. Related as it is to the depths of the subjective, it is basically only knowledge of evil. It is 'nonsense' [*Geschwätz*] in the profound sense in which Kierkegaard conceived the word. This knowledge, the triumph of subjectivity and the onset of an arbitrary rule over things, is the origin of all allegorical contempla-

tion."[220]

But what of allegorical totality? It is still a question of days, the first day, the last day. The last sentence of the book begins with a quote from Goethe's *Faust* and ends with a holding pattern set on the image of the beautiful, not lifted with the elevation of the sublime. Rilke, among others, could hear "*Herr, es ist Zeit, der Sommer war sehr groß,*" in "*Wenn andere herrlich wie am ersten Tag erstrahlen,*" for instance. If there were scrolls set in his mouth he set them down in script, like Matthew in Jonson's *Every Man In...*: "I am melancholy myself divers times, sir, and then do I no more but take pen and paper presently, and overflow you half a score or a dozen of sonnets at a sitting." What is the *end* of allegory in this book, and does it have an end? "In the ruins of great buildings, the idea of the plan speaks more impressively than in lesser buildings, however well preserved they are; and for this reason the German *Trauerspiel* merits interpretation."[221] That is to say, it has no end. But Benjamin doesn't end there. He takes his bow earlier, by introducing an idea that he will leave behind him, to be picked up like a fall leaf. It is the reference

---

220 Ibid., 406-07; 233. See also Peter Fenves, *"Chatter": Language and History in Kierkegaard,* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1993).

221 Ibid., 409; 235.

to the Fall, to the nameless things of good and evil and to the language of names that he turns, not overturning. "For languages the name is only a ground in which the concrete elements take root. The abstract elements of language, however, take root in the evaluative word, the judgment. And while, in the earthly court, the uncertain subjectivity of judgment is firmly anchored in reality, with punishments, in the heavenly court the illusion of evil comes entirely into its own. Here the unconcealed subjectivity triumphs over every deceptive objectivity of justice, and is incorporated into divine omnipotence[...], as hell."[222]

Allegorical totality is not mentioned until after Dante's cantos have been sung and the way traversed. It is only after the entry of Calderón, and *Life is a Dream*, after *ponderación misteriosa*, the possibility of the intervening of God into the work of art, that the naked truth of subjectivity in the face of the lie is unconcealed: "Subjectivity, like an angel falling into the depths, is brought back by allegories, and is held fast in heaven, in God, by *ponderación misteriosa*."[223] The *Trauerspielbuch* ends just as the *Wahlverwandtschaften* essay did: "*Nur um der Hoffnungslosen willen ist uns die Hoffnung*

---

222 Ibid., 407; 234.

223 Ibid., 406; 235.

gegeben." ("Only for the sake of the hopeless is hope given to us.") Subjectivity is lent a major stage-prop in the *Trauerspiel:* all of its body parts get collected, or at least counted and mourned. These fragments pile up, and amount to something. Since not even Yorick's skull sits on top of the pile, we might suggest a raising of consciousness takes place, in place of the saving of face.[224]

> Clotaldo: Thou art obliged to me, and I to him,
> For giving and receiving; therefore, in
> This present action my love finds no cheer:
> I am both plaintiff and defendant here.[225]

It is the "Spaniard" El Greco who presents Benjamin with his famous shrunken heads filled with intrigue that would later turn into legalisms.[226] But in the night of bodily conflict of Verdi's Castilian *Il Trovatore,* the violence and the lyricism of the troubadour Manrico are at such variance that his identity comes into question, and as the famous gypsy chorus, "Who brightens up the gypsy's day?" (*Chi del gitano i giorni abbella?*) repeats, the sound of the hammer and the anvil resounds while a phosphorescent light shines from the bowl of drink that gives them vigor.

---

224 See chapter one of this dissertation, and the work of Emmanuel Levinas on ethics.

225 Calderón, *La Vida Es Suenock* trans. William E. Colford, (Woodbury, N.Y.: Barron's Educational Series, 1958), 79.

226 See El Greco, *The Vision of Saint John*, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

Yet the moon shines brightly on the heartfelt songs of the lovers Leonora and Manrico. When both die, Azucena, the witch, his "mother," remains to mourn the son of her enemy, dragged to the block, the "son" who is truly the brother of her enemy; and she remains to take revenge for the burning at the stake of her mother and for the sacrifice of her own son thrown on the pyre in a frenzy of confusion.

Benjamin presents an image of beauty that will be held fast on the very last day in the *Trauerspiel*. It is, like the brief moment of realization of simultaneous love and loss shared by Manrico and Leonora in the prison cell, one of hope for the sake of the hopeless. A moment, just a spark, of truth, that for them is not meant to last. An allegory of maternal and fraternal feeling fragments, and all is torn to pieces. The name doesn't fit the right body; it has more than one name. For a book without a certain end, there is a certain wonder in the way in which Walter Benjamin stops turning the page.

CHAPTER V
TYPEFACING: ON WALTER BENJAMIN'S CONCEPT OF ART-POLITICS

One of the most compelling constructions in Walter Benjamin's now very famous essay "The Work of Art in the Age of its Technical Reproducibility," remains the most misunderstood: It is that one found in the Epilogue of the essay, which describes war as the completion of *l'art pour l'art*, the degree of self-alienation achieved by humans wherein they have become "their own showpiece, enjoying their own self-destruction as an aesthetic pleasure of the highest order. This is the aestheticisation of politics that fascism manufactures, which is answered by communism's politicization of art."[1] With these words Ben-

---

1 Walter Benjamin, "*Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit*," in *GS* I.2, what the editors initially referred to as the "first version," of the text is printed on pages 431-469; "second version," 471-508; and the first published - French - version of the text is reprinted, 709-739. Original publication of the text appears as "*L'oeuvre d'art a l'époque de sa reproduction mécanisée*," in the *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung* V (1936): 40-68. The English translation of the "second version" of the text appears as "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), 217-251. In 1989 the editors of the collected works published what they refer to as the "painfully missed version" of the text in which form Benjamin originally wanted to see it published, found by Gary Smith in the Max Horkheimer Archive in Frankfurt "a few years ago." (*GS* VII.2, 661). This is the first typewritten version of the text, which includes important art- and mimetic-theoretical, as well as mass- and revolutionary-theoretical notes which were initially removed, and have since remained absent from all published versions of the text. It is referred to by Benjamin as his "*Urtext*" (*GS* I.3, 991), and by the

jamin ends the Epilogue, which is hardly an end. The Epilogue refers directly back to the "beginning" of the essay, a beginning which remains obscured.

---

editors subsequently as the "second version," making what was considered the "second version" now the "third." In no case may it be assumed, however, that the publication of this recently discovered version of the essay closes the book on the issue of the essay's origin and development. Indeed, the insistence of the editors upon "definitive versions" can only be read as a comic attempt on their part to secure and lend authority to the now-completed *Collected Works*. The authority of this editorial project has been repeatedly questioned. The editors neglected to publish writings of Benjamin they either could not decipher, could not understand, or could not fit into their editorial schema. Volume six is titled, "Fragments of mixed content/Autobiographical writings," while volume seven is labeled, "Addenda." These volumes hardly contain Benjamin's extant writings, however. The letters and manuscripts which he left behind in Paris upon his flight from the city, were seized by the Gestapo in 1940 and transferred to Berlin. Being located in the Soviet sector of occupied Berlin, they eventually came into the authority of the German Democratic Republic, which transferred them first to Potsdam, and then back to East Berlin, where they remained in the archives of the Academy of Arts. Since the fall of the Wall, they have been accessible to West German researchers, and are in the process of being incorporated into what was the West-Berlin Academy of Arts.

Benjamin's estate in Jerusalem, located since September 1984 in the manuscript-department of the Jerusalem National and University Library, contains a wealth of Benjaminiana. Throughout his life, Benjamin sent a large portion of his writings - original manuscripts and copies, notebooks, letters - to Gershom Scholem. Included in this archive are the original manuscripts of the *Trauerspiel* book and the essay on Goethe's *Elective Affinities*, in addition to variations on the Karl Kraus-, Kafka- and *Storyteller*-essays. The contents of both archives remain unpublished, and were not consulted by the editors of the *Collected Works*. See Klaus Garber's feuilleton on the Jerusalem archives, "*Ungehobene Schätze: Editorische Versäumnisse bei der Werkausgabe Walter Benjamins - Ein Besuch in der Sammlung Scholem in Jerusalem*," *Frankfurter Rundschau*, June 3, 1992, p.8

The following will consider all available published versions of the text, including the textual varia collected in the editorial reports on the essay found in *GS*

Originally it was omitted. The first publication of Benjamin's "preliminary, constructive considerations on the fate of art in the nineteenth century, recognized in its present lived-through situation by 'us'"[2] appeared in French translation, in issue 5, 1936, of the *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung*. After having corresponded with Max Horkheimer on the piece, and having worked through a translation with Pierre Klossowski, Benjamin completed editorial revisions with Horkheimer's Paris secretary and right-hand man, Hans Klaus Brill. Brill then, however, saw fit to, in his own words to Horkheimer, "make yet some further cuts, with which Benjamin is not in agreement."[3] The most serious cut resulted in the entire elimination of the first section, despite an elegantly indignant letter written to Horkheimer by Raymond Aron, head of the Paris *Dépendance* of the New York Institute. Aron demanded clarification and the restitution of the text, and despite vehement protests by Benjamin himself thereto - "the entire text has been rendered completely in-

---

I.3, 982-1063, and *GS* VII.2, 661-690.

2 *GS* I.3, 983; Walter Benjamin, *Briefe* ed. Gershom Scholem and Theodor W. Adorno (Frankfurt a/M: Suhrkamp, 1966), 690, 695, 700.

3 *GS* I.3, 988.

comprehensible"[4] - Horkheimer refused to restore it, calling to his aid "the Institute's right to editorial changes" to prevent it from falling prey to the danger of "politicization."[5] "We must do everything that stands in our powers in order to protect the journal as a scholarly organ, from being pulled into political discussions in the press."[6] Other changes that Horkheimer - speaking for "the members of the Institute" - insisted upon, were the substitution of "*l'état totalitaire*" for the word "*le fascisme*" and the substitution of "*les forces constructives de l'humanité*" for "*le communisme*" throughout the text.[7]

Benjamin was acutely aware of his surroundings. He writes in his letter of February 29, 1936 to Horkheimer: "Brill does not know and can not measure which particular intentions you connect directly with the French publica-

---

4 Ibid., 997.

5 Benjamin's unsuccessful attempts to publish the essay in Moscow, "where it belongs" (*Briefe*, 710), through the *Internationale Literatur* and *Das Wort*, are documented in Tiedemann and Schweppenhäuser's editorial comments, *GS* I.3, 1020-1028.

6 *GS* I.3, 997.

7 Horkheimer obviously did not consider Benjamin's objections to the "editorial comments" as serious. In his letter to Brill of March 26, 1936 discussing "the case of Benjamin," Horkheimer scoffs: "I received a letter from him today which strongly evokes the tone of an orthodox Muslim [sic] immediatly after a malicious defilement of the Hagia Sophia." *GS* I.3, 1010.

tion of this work. I do not know all of the places in the text which were met by Brill's attacks without my foreknowledge. It certainly seems to me that precisely if this work is to have informative worth for the avant-garde of the French intelligentsia, its political ground plan must not be wiped out."[8] The editorial erasure of Benjamin's foundational outline has been reinforced by an unfortunate translation into English. A literal translation of the last two (italicized) sentences of the preface in German reads, "[t]he concepts introduced into the theory of art in what follows are new, and differentiate themselves from the more familiar ones in that they are entirely unusable for the purposes of Fascism. On the other hand they are usable for the formulation of revolutionary demands in art-politics."[9]

What has been translated here as "art-politics" ("*Kunstpolitik*") appears in Harry Zohn's translation as, "the politics of art."[10] However, Benjamin's text does not read "*die Politik der Kunst,*" a construction which would directly resonate with the one found in the Epilogue, "*die Politisierung der Kunst.*" The concepts that have entered history as "new" cannot be contained or

---

8 *GS* I.3, 992.

9 *GS* I.2, 435, 473.

10 *Illuminations,* 218.

claimed by any individual instance of antiquarianism, i.e. the history of art theory, the history of perception, the history of technology, the social history of mass movements, the history of film, the history of modernism, etc., all of which are attempts to explain and control the ways in which ideas and events connect in language by characterizing them, typifying them.[11] These new concepts center around the idea of our time, the organizing principle of the twentieth-century's work of art: reproduction-labor ("*Reproduktionsarbeit*"). Just as the presentation of the idea of the 17th century's art form, the Baroque mourning-play, could only be accomplished through historical materialism properly understood,[12] so must the

---

11 Cf. Benjamin, "*Eduard Fuchs, der Sammler und der Historiker*," *GS* II.2, 465-505. Benjamin writes of the explosive power of Engel's thinking, which placed the closed nature of areas of study and their forms into question, replacing a contemplative view of the past from the perspective of the present, with a critical practice of writing, one that records the emergence of an occurrence as a process of constant change, whose before and after images are never the static, thingly, consumable poles of "origin" and "development" produced by a moralistic historicism, an upright stance. Benjamin's writing of history is precisely dizzying. For an excellent description of this practice, see Samuel Weber, "Genealogy of Modernity: History, Myth and Allegory in Benjamin's Origin of the German Mourning Play," *MLN* 106 (1991): 465-500.

12 For the most thorough demonstration of historical materialism's methodology as understood and practiced by Benjamin as critical history, read his *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels*, in *GS* I.1, 203-430; *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, trans. John Osborne (London: New Left Books, 1977).

presentation of the of the work of art in its present form, which is precisely a lack of form, a non-idea or non-entity, also be undertaken. The idea of our time is, on the one hand, that of its end, the leitmotif of modernism's triumphal completion, *l'art pour l'art*. On the other hand, it is also the phenomenon of survival, of the work of art's existence after its destruction/completion. Benjamin's letter of October 16, 1935 tells Horkheimer of his plans for the writing of the Arcades Project, which, in however preliminary an image his historical considerations were fixed at the time - the exposé to the *Passagenwerk*, "Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century" - lead in the direction of a materialist theory of art. "This time the task will be to specify the precise location in the present to which my historical construction will be related, as its vanishing point. If the sketch of the book is the fate of art in the nineteenth century, then this fate has something to say to us only because it is contained in the ticking of a clock, whose striking of the hour is now penetrating our ears. To us...the fateful hour of art has struck, and I have fixed its stamp in a row of introductory considerations, which bear the title 'The Work of Art in the Age of its Technical Reproducibility.' These considerations make the attempt to give the questions of art theory a truly present face; and from within, as it were, avoiding all unmediated

relations to politics."[Benjamin's italics][13] This description of the transformation of the work of art no longer corresponds to its destruction and preservation through ironic critique, a process Benjamin analyzed in his dissertation on the German Romantics, nor does it reflect allegory's redemption of the work. The age in which the work of art aims at its own technical reproducibility is the age of its literalization, the information age. The name given to the remains of art in light of such a fate is "*Kunstpolitik,*" art-politics. What follows is a discussion of Benjamin's essay that hopefully changes the nature of the debate surrounding "aesthetics and politics" as it has arisen in the aftermath of his writing.[14]

---

13 *Briefe*, 690.

14 See, for example, the collection *Aesthetics and Politics*, ed. and trans. Ronald Taylor (London: Verso, 1980); Ansgar Hillach, "*'Aesthetisierung des politischen Lebens.' Benjamins faschismustheoretischer Ansatz - eine Rekonstruktion,*" "*Links hätte noch alles sich zu enträtseln...": Walter Benjamin im Kontext*, ed. Burkhardt Lindner (Frankfurt a/M: Syndikat, 1978), 127-167; Burkhardt Lindner, "*Technische Reproduzierbarkeit und Kulturindustrie. 'Positives Barbarentum im Kontext,'*" in "*Links...*", 180-223; Hartmut Engelhardt, "*Reproduktion der Reproduktion: Wenn Warhol sich den Benjamin anzieht,*" in "*Links...*", 258-277; Joel Snyder, "Benjamin on Reproducibility and Aura: A Reading of 'The Work of Art in the Age of its Technical Reproducibility,'" *Benjamin - Philosophy, Aesthetics, History*, ed. Gary Smith (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 158-174; Jennifer Todd, "*Production, Reception, Criticism: Walter Benjamin and the Problem of Meaning in Art,*" in *Benjamin - philosophy...*, 102-125; Miriam Hansen, "Benjamin, Cinema and Experience: The Blue Flower in the Land of Technology," *New German Critique* 40 (Winter 1987): 179-224. For a discussion of the essay's place in the literary-politics of the

"What made me the most happy in what you write regarding my work, is that, despite its new, and certainly also in many cases surprising tendency, you recognized its continuity with my earlier writing attempts; a continuity, which is indeed founded above all in that all through the years I have sought to construct an ever more exact and uncompromising concept of what a work of art is."[15] So writes Benjamin to his friend Alfred Cohn on July 4, 1936, after the latter had responded to the artwork essay. Although Benjamin held a high estimation of this work - "I'm keeping it very secret, because it is better suited to thievery than most of my thoughts"[16] - the canonical status this essay has achieved hardly corresponds to Benjamin's own consideration of it: "*die Reproduktionsarbeit*" was most definitely work in progress interrupted only by the German invasion of Poland and Benjamin's consequent three-month internment in a French "camp of voluntary

---

Popular Front's "defense of culture," see Chryssoula Kambas's book, *Walter Benjamin im Exil. Zum Verhältnis von Literaturpolitik und Aesthetik* (Tubingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 1983).

15 *Briefe*, 715.

16 Ibid., 695.

laborers" for German refugees.[17] Just prior to this he had informed Gretl Adorno, in a letter dated June 26, 1939, of his plans to integrate decisive motives from the "Reproduction-work" and the "Storyteller" combined with those from the *Passagenarbeit* into a new version of the "*Flaneur*" chapter of his *Baudelaire* book.[18]

That Benjamin considered the main project of his life's work to be to construct a more exact conception of what a work of art actually *is*, can be recognized through an involvement with what remains of his "corpus."[19] Such

---

17 Bernd Witte, *Walter Benjamin* (Hamburg: Rowohlt Taschenbuch Verlag, 1985), 131; trans. James Rolleston (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1991), 197.

18 *GS* I.3, 1035; *Briefe*, 821.

19 See also the six *Lebensläufe* (literally "course of life," but what in English is usually referred to as a "personal statement") that span the years 1925-40. In the spring of 1925 he wrote: "Because the main emphasis of my scientific interests lies in aesthetics, the connection between my literary-historical and my philosophical works fashioned itself ever more closely." In 1928: "Just as Benedetto Croce laid free the path to the individual, concrete work of art through the demolition of the doctrine of art-forms, so have my investigations to date attempted to open up the way to the work of art through the demolition of the doctrine of the territorial, or disciplinary character of art." He goes on to describe that the intention of his investigations is an interdisciplinary one, which seeks to penetrate the religious, metaphysical, political, and economic tendencies of an epoch through an analysis of the individual work of art. This attempt was taken up in largest measure, he writes, in the *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels*, and recognizes similar pursuit in the methodological ideas of Alois Riegl and Carl Schmitt. Riegl is again mentioned in his 1940 *Lebenslauf*, and he writes: "From the start, the interest in the philosophy of language next to that in the theory of art has remained predominant for me." *GS* VI, 215-228.

an involvement demonstrates at least that Benjamin did not pick and choose "subjects" on which to write. The many-sided image of his writing that is produced in its reading reflects the degree to which he was able to transmit language, in and through interruption; to poeticize, critically; to locate the bearings of the stuff of the world in the rhythms of its appearance.

In considering the question which posed itself most fundamentally to Benjamin, "what is a work of art?" one immediately risks falling into the abyss of questing after the origins of language were it not for the luck of a limit, the limit of the knowable, of that which can be recognized by human beings. "All men by nature (*physei*) desire to know," as Aristotle begins the *Metaphysics*, "a sign for which is the esteemed love for things sensual, things perceptible."[20] Although the other animals are born with the ability to perceive (*aisthesis*), only some of them develop memory in addition to the sense of sound, enabling them to learn. Those intelligent animals who live by memory and appearances, however, have but "a small share of experience."[21] "But the human race lives by art and reasoning ("*techne kai logismois*")," writes

---

20 Aristotle, *Ta meta ta physika* (trans. Hugh Tredennick) 980a. Translation modified.

21 Ibid., 980b.

Aristotle.[22] Only the human is capable of producing the capacity for a single experience, by being able to connect several memories of a thing, in recognition of the connection. The ability to recognize connections forms experience. And from experience come art and science ("*techne kai empeiria*").[23]

The human ability to experience, to recognize connections between things, is at base a mimetic faculty, according to Benjamin, an ability to imitate those connections. Aristotle's digression on the origins of poetry reads as follows:

> Speaking generally, poetry seems to owe its origin to two particular causes, both natural. From childhood men have an instinct for mimesis, and in this respect man differs from the other animals in that he is far more imitative and learns his first lessons by imitating things. And then there is the complete enjoyment or rejoicing in imitation. What happens in actual experience is a sign for this, for we enjoy looking at accurate likenesses of things which are themselves painful to see, lower beasts, for instance, and corpses.[24]

Benjamin's rewriting of Aristotle's *Poetics* immediately after Hitler's seizure of power in January 1933, stands as a radical critique of the mimetic faculty. "The Doctrine

---

22 Ibid.

23 Ibid., 981a.

24 Aristotle, *Peri poietikes* (trans. W. Hamilton Fyfe) 1448b. Translation modified. Cf. Henri Focillon, "Nature as well as life creates forms." *The Life of Forms in Art*, trans. Charles B. Hogan & George Kubler (New York: Zone Books, 1989), 34.

of the Similar" demonstrates to what extent Benjamin recognized the danger of an uncritical, unhistorical training and exercise of this faculty, a faculty which has, in his words, "not remained the same in the run of time."

> Nature creates similarities. One only needs to think of mimicry. The highest capacity for producing similarities, however, is the human's. Yes, perhaps there is none of his higher functions which is not decisively determined by the mimetic faculty. This faculty, however, has a history....[25]

Aristotle distinguishes the imitative (poetic) arts from one another according to their means, object and manner of imitation. The means of imitation - rhythm, language, harmony - may be used singly, or combined to produce the arts we recognize as dance (pure rhythm), flute-

---

25 "*Lehre vom Ähnlichen,*" *GS* II.1, 204. The essay was rewritten over a two year period, taking form in a second version as the one first published in German as "*Über das mimetische Vermögen.*" Benjamin's critique of the mimetic faculty directly bears on his writing in the earlier, only on the surface seemingly disparate works, "Theories of German Fascism" (1930), "On Language itself, and on the Language of Humans" (1916), and develops itself in essays that follow it - "Problems in the Sociology of Language" (1935), "Experience and Poverty" (1933), and the "Work of Art in the Age of its Technical Reproducibility" (1935-39). The radicality of his critique of the mimetic faculty is only appreciated if one has a sense for its timing, for timing is exactly what this dense, formidable piece is all about, and its time signature determines how the score, art-politics, will play itself out. Utter imitability flashes up, as an instant, before vanishing just as quickly, but not without leaving an imprint. This imprint is the recognition of its passing, and is necessarily recorded as an after-effect, the sad fate of the trace.

or lyre-playing (combination of rhythm and harmony), or the "anonymous" art that imitates through the use of language alone, or through a combination of language and rhythm, what we have come to call prose.[26] But all of the arts are united in their object of imitation: those who are doing something, who are carrying on ("*prattontas*"). And the art form which achieves the highest degree of realization of mimesis is of course, tragedy. For tragedy is the art form in which action is imitated, is transmitted through the instrument and locus of action, the human body.

For Aristotle, the art of making ("*poesis*") is always necessarily morality play: Imitation reveals action as being representative of character, habit or custom ("*ta ethe*") by measuring it against a standard image of comportment instructive to the crowd. One either appears worthy of being imitated - as serious, important, quick - or is shunned for appearing in some way repulsive - as trivial, ordinary, lazy. Benjamin's revision of Aristotle critiques this moralism for what it is: reliance upon the beautiful appearance ("*der schöne Schein*") for instruction of the soul. The difference between "*Vorbildlichkeit*," model behavior, living one's life according to a projected

---

26 "We have no common name for a mime of Sophron or Xenarchus and a Socratic Conversation...." *Peri poietikes* 1447b.

image of the good, and actually living a transformed life could not be made more explicit: It is the difference between folk art or kitch serving as a binding force of the clan, and art as the technique for bringing about a penetrating transformation of human experience by effecting a change in perception, a change in the manner in which connections are recorded.[27] Benjamin writes: "The gift to see similarities which we possess, is nothing else but a weak rudiment of that violent compulsion in former times to become similar and to behave similarly." [my italics][28]

The art of becoming similar, of imitating action, has a history "in both the ontogenetic and the phylogenetic sense," writes Benjamin.[29] The child plays not only teacher and grocer, but also windmill, and train. This is his or her education, his or her ontogenesis: One learns about the world by imitating it, by playing in it, disfiguring it. Benjamin immediately asks the crucial question: Of what *use* is this education, this schooling of the mimetic faculty? An answer to this question depends upon an articulation of the phylogenetic meaning of the mimetic faculty, he writes, upon its relation to the development of the tribe or the family.

---

27 See the fragment "*Einiges zur Volkskunst*," *GS* VI, 185-187.

28 *GS* II.1, 210.

29 Ibid., 204-05; 210.

The history of the mimetic faculty can be seen on the one hand in terms of its progression in one direction, that of its atrophy; or, on the other hand, in terms of its transformation, its metamorphosis into something else. For primitive people, the law of mimesis was consciously life-determining, whereas "today" the cases in everyday life in which similarities are consciously recognized, i.e. in faces, are but a tiny portion of those which unconsciously determine life.[30] Benjamin asks, "may one suppose that the blinking of an eye was the first mentor of the mimetic faculty? That the first correspondence came to pass in the blink *(Blick)*?"[31] Benjamin's description of pure mimesis, of utter imitability, is a photographic image, one that flashes up for an instant of recognition before vanishing. The child's exposure to the world at the moment of its birth takes place in the blinking of an eye. At that moment it is most fully exposed to the sky, to bearing the imprint of the constellations - historical, ethical, stellar - momentarily figured in a particular way.

As Benjamin writes in the closing section of *One-Way Street*, "To the Planetarium," the way in which human beings receive, perceive and represent the powers of the

---

30 Ibid., 205; 211.

31 *GS* II.3, 958.

cosmos determines their life experience - how they learn what they know and how that knowledge determines the way they live. "Nothing distinguishes the ancient from modern man so much as his abandonment, or surrender to a cosmic experience that the latter hardly knows. Its waning is announced by the flowering of astronomy at the beginning of the modern age."[32] Modern man is optically connected to the universe, and his astronomy corresponds to the invention of a perspective based from the position of an individual standpoint and oriented toward a vanishing point, whose vista is that of landscape with horizon. The ancient's relation to the cosmos could not be more different: It is that of the ecstatic trance, a physical connection to the universe, in other words. The analogy for Benjamin's oft-quoted formulation for the interpretation of history, "dialectics at a standstill,"[33] is the epileptic fit: "For it is in the ecstatic experience alone that we secure for ourselves what is most near, and what is farthest away, and never the one without the other. That means, however, that the human being can communicate with

---

32 *Einbahnstrasse, GS* IV.1, 146.

33 From the "N" convolut of *Das Passagen-Werk* I, ed. Rolf Tiedemann (Frankfurt a/M: Suhrkamp, 1982), 577. "N [Re the Theory of Knowledge, Theory of Progress]," trans. Leigh Hafrey & Richard Sieburth, ed. Gary Smith *Benjamin: Philosophy, Aesthetics, History,* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 49.

the cosmos ecstatically only in the community."[34] It is the optical illusion of modern man to think himself able to subject physical human experience of the world, getting to know the cosmos by imitating it, to the privacies of the individual. Individual poetic raptures, however well and widely published, do not satisfy the clan's need for the self-representation of intermittent ecstasies, transformations, or other convulsions.[35]

---

34 Ibid., 147.

35 In the fragment entitled "Something about folk art," Benjamin distinguishes between what is called "high art" and folk art, or kitch. "All folk art pulls the human into relation with itself: It only speaks to him in such a way that he must answer. And he answers with the questions: 'Where? and when was that?' The thought occurs to him that in his existence this very same place and time, this instant and position of the sun, must have been given already once before." Benjamin compares this situation to throwing an old, well-worn coat around oneself - "the deepest seduction, that the refrain of the folk song awakes." He describes folk art as the experience of the *déjà vu*, which is an entirely different perception than that of intellectual knowledge or recognition: the new situation appears to be the same as that of the old. The *déjà vu* is an experience of the mask: it is slipped on over one's head, one veils the image of one's character in it, in order to investigate the past's knowledge of the future. This image has become "so discontinuous, so much improvisation," that suggestions from every corner - "graphologists, palm readers and other practitioners" - are gladly welcomed in the attempt to shed light on its darkness by revealing, clearing a path for the shining-through of fate. "Only the impoverished, desolate human being knows no other way of transforming itself than through disguise....In the mask man looks out from the position of the situation and forms his faces in its innards." Benjamin refers to the supply of masks that primitive man had at his disposal to combat the mythic powers of fate as an "arsenal;" in folk art and kitch, modern man and woman don the same as a tactic of tricking fate, giving false face. Only in understanding kitch does one clearly and fundamentally realize how it is distinguished from true "art" in the narrow sense of the

The image of a vulnerable birth, of the small, frail, individual human being exposed alone and without resources against a commanding sky repeats itself at crucial instances in Benjamin's work, those that announce a fundamental transformation in human experience; that is to say, those that announce a technological transformation, one that constitutes the relationship between humanity and nature. For Benjamin, such transformations are absorbed and registered by, written on the human body.

> It would be more emphatic than it ever has been up until now, to make fruitful for the early history of the arts the recognition, that the first material to which the mimetic faculty applied itself is the human body. It should be questioned if the earliest mimesis of objects in dance- and image-representation does not extensively rest on the mimesis of routine acts, through which the primitive entered into relationships with these objects. Perhaps the human from the stone-age sketches the elk so incomparably, only because the hand which leads the crayon still recalls the bow with which it shot the animal.[36]

Language and reason learn instrumentality from the experience of the hand.[37] Training and technique, well-schooled by the pleasure of repetition, traumatically inscribe upon

---

word, he writes. "Art teaches us to see into things. Folk art and kitch allow us to see out, from the perspective of things." *GS* VI, 185-87.

36 Fragment "On Aesthetics" 98, dated 1936, *GS* VI, 127.

37 Although it is Benjamin who quotes from Focillon's 1934 *La vie des formes* in the *Passagen-werk*, Focillon's book often reads like a dilettante's study of Benjamin. "Knowledge of the world demands a kind of tactile flair. Sight slips over the surface of the universe....Surface, volume, density and weight are not optical phenomena. Man first learned about them between his fingers and in the

the body its desire to come into more intimate contact with, to better know and represent its environs, origins, direction.[38] The convulsive shudder that the body experi-

---

hollow of his palm. He does not measure space with his eyes, but with his hands and feet....Language, first experienced by the whole body and mimed in the dance, was also formed by the hands. In everyday use, movements of the hands gave zest to the language, helped articulate it, separate its elements, isolate them from a vast sonorous syncretism and helped to give rhythm to language, even to color it with subtle inflections. From this mimicking of the spoken word, from these exchanges between voice and hands, some trace remains in what the ancients called oratorical gesture. Physiological differentiation has further specialized our organs and functions, which scarcely collaborate any more. Speaking with our mouths, we remain silent with our hands, and in some parts of the world it is bad taste to express oneself both by voice and gesture. Elsewhere, however, this dual and poetic manner of expression has been preserved with the most affectionate ardor. Even when its effects are a little vulgar, it expresses accurately an early state of man, the memory of his efforts to invent a new language. There is no need to choose between the two formulae over which Faust hesitates: In the beginning was the Word, in the beginning was Action; because Action and the Word, the hands and the voice, are united in the same beginnings." From "In Praise of Hands," *The Life of Forms in Art*, 162-164.

38 The obvious connection to Freud that Benjamin's writings on the mimetic faculty suggest is made explicit a year after they were written with specific reference to Freud's "*Psychoanalyse und Telepathie*." The editors of the collected works report from an unpublished letter from Benjamin to Gretel Adorno dated October 9, 1935: "I don't want to forget to properly thank you for sending the psychoanalytic almanach [*Almanach der Psychoanalyse*, Vienna, 1934 - R.T. & H.S.] [...] I hope very much that you read the contribution from Freud on telepathy and psychoanalysis. It is wonderful, even if only because it once again makes one notice the old-style of writing of its author, which can never-enough be praised. But I am thinking of something specific. Namely, in the course of his reflections Freud construes - in passing, as he often takes up the weightiest thoughts - a connection between telepathy and language, in which he makes the first into a means of understanding - in illustrating this he refers to the state of insects - as phylogenetic precurser of the second. Here I again encounter ideas that are dealt with

ences as it emerges from an ecstatic trancelike state mimics the violence of the encounter itself, while simultaneously cutting itself off, freeing itself from that encounter. This body is, in Benjamin's words, "innervated," suffused with innumerable shocks. Such an image of the trembling individual body standing transformed, out in the open in the aftermath of a shock experience, is found at the close of *One-Way Street*, at the opening of "The Storyteller," and at the center of "Experience and Poverty," as the image of a body that managed to survive World War I.[39] This body trembles, as if one judged,

---

decisively in a little sketch written in Ibiza - "On the Mimetic Faculty." I can not give you any further hints regarding them, and consider it possible that I did not tell you anything about this important fragment the last time we met - aside from being quite certain of its importance. I had sent it to Scholem, who has an ancestral interest in my considerations on the theory of language and from whom it, to my astonishment, has been repaid without the least bit of comprehension. Hence the Freud piece from your almanach was a real gift for me. Thank you!" *GS* II.3, 952-53. See Sigmund Freud, "*Psychoanalyse und Telepathie*," *Gesammelte Werke* XVII, ed. Anna Freud, E. Bibring, W. Hoffer, E. Kris, O. Isakower (Frankfurt a/M: Fischer, 1941), 25-44.

39 "A generation, which had still gone to school with a horse-drawn cart now stood under the open sky in a landscape in which nothing remained unchanged except the clouds, and in the middle, in a forcefield of destructive torrents and explosions, the tiny, fragile, human body." *GS* II.1, 214; II.2, 439.

"It is the dangerous error of modern men to regard this experience [that of ecstatic contact with the cosmos - J.H.] as unimportant and avoidable, and to consign it to the individual as the poetic rapture of starry nights. It is not; its hour strikes again and again, and then neither nations nor generations can escape it, as was made terribly clear by the last war, which was an attempt at a new and unprecedented commingling with the cosmic powers. Human multitudes, gases, electrical forces were hurled into

standing before the court of the future, accused of the crimes of the past. It has no name, having been relieved of its given ones, its future ones yet to be announced.

Family Values

War in the age of bourgeois morality and technical reproducibility remains a family matter, getting to know the cosmos in the gestalt of national character, if one will. As the figure most integral to the genre of writing known as modern political theory, the poeticization of the tactics and strategies of modern warfare, defines and limits the language of the rational organization of the state, as its origin and end. Jacob Burckhardt begins his famous study of the rational ordering of modern families, *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy,* with a description of the state as a work of art:

---

the open country, high-frequency currents coursed through the landscape, new constellations rose in the sky, aerial space and ocean depths thundered with propellers, and everywhere sacrificial shafts were dug in Mother Earth. This immense wooing of the cosmos was enacted for the first time on a planetary scale, that is, in the spirit of technology. But because the lust for profit of the ruling class sought satisfaction through it, technology betrayed man and turned the bridal bed into a bloodbath. The mastery of nature, so the imperialists teach, is the purpose of all technology." *GS* IV.1, 147. "One-Way Street (selection)," trans. Edmund Jephcott, ed. Peter Demetz *Reflections* (New York: Schocken Books, 1978), 93.

> In them [republics and despotic states - J.H.] for the first time we detect the modern political spirit of Europe, surrendered freely to its own instincts, often displaying the worst features of an unbridled egotism, outraging every right, and killing every germ of a healthier culture. But, wherever this vicious tendency is overcome or in any way compensated, a new fact appears in history - the State as the outcome of reflection and calculation, the State as a work of art. This new life displays itself in a hundred forms, both in the republican and in the despotic States, and determines their inward constitution, no less than their foreign policy.[40]

The state as a work of art would of course be nothing without the art of war, the perfecting of which ornaments the life of the state with the beauty of deaths "freely" met, nobly given. Benjamin's theses on Futurism and Fascism simply represent the culmination, the emptying out of the ritual of war as an art form through its aestheticisation: war is no longer enjoyed as the spectacle performed before and in the service of the family of nations, but in, of and for itself - art for art's sake. Total war is the *Gesamtkunstwerk* wherein the "newly created" masses may experience their own destruction as an aesthetic pleasure of the highest order. It repairs the break rending the mode of representation traditional to modern politics, that of the individual's relation to the family, by replacing an aesthetic of the sublime with that of the beautiful.

---

40 Jacob Burckhardt, *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy,* an essay, trans. S.G.C. Middlemore (London: Phaidon Press, 1950), 2.

The two main plots of what Benjamin refers to as human beings' "first" nature, love and death, are replaced by the plots of a "second" nature, society and technology.[41] For Benjamin, the experience of World War I demands the recognition that humans have reached a level of existence outdone by their powers of self-destruction: The annihilation of human beings on such a scale and with such means marks the advent of humanity, of that which is similar to the human, "*das Menschenähnliche*." Benjamin's insight into this historical event conducts an experiment with the late-nineteenth- and twentieth-century obsession with the body in literature and cultural studies. This literary obsession corresponds to the keen political interest nation-states have taken in the regulation and control of citizen bodies and their parts; and to the return in the art market of figurative painting, which bears an existential-ethical insistence on depicting the human body, more often than not via its most literal leavings, blood and feces.[42]

---

41 *GS* VII.2, 665-66.

42 Benjamin's confrontation with the poetry of Stephan George and the phenomenon of his circle, stands as a critique of the "pathological suggestibility" of Expressionism, its reactionary political nature, its cult of feeling as the matter with which the will creates, or forms movements. See the section "Baroque and Expressionism" in the *Trauerspiel* book: "The analogy between the endeavours of the Baroque and those of the present and the recent past is most apparent in the use of language. Exaggeration is characteristic of both. The creations of these two literary styles do not emerge from any sense of communal existence; the violence of their manner is, rather, designed to conceal the absence of widely accepted

The immanent threat of the human body's own vanishing or replacement is being met by many types of vigorous study, or conservation, in all academic/scientific fields.[43] Benjamin's writing on the physiognomy of language, on graphic inscription, or corporeality, however, couldn't be more directly at odds with the preserves of "cultural studies": Upon the massive collecting and printing of data found therein, his essays conduct experiments.

Benjamin located "now" as the vanishing point of the history of art whose convention of perspective is

---

works of literature. For like expressionism, the Baroque is not so much an age of genuine artistic achievement [or practice - J.H.] as an age possessed of an unremitting artistic will. This is true of all periods of so-called decadence. The supreme reality in art is the isolated, self-contained work. But there are times when the well-wrought work is only within reach of the epigone. These are the periods of 'decadence' in the arts, the periods of artistic 'will.' Thus it was that Riegl devised this term with specific reference to the art of the final period of the Roman Empire. The form as such is within the reach of this will, a well-made individual work is not. The reason for the relevance of the Baroque after the collapse of German classical culture lies in this will. To this should be added the desire for a vigorous syle of language, which would make it seem equal to the violence of world-events....Now, as then, many [neologisms] are an expression of a desire for new pathos." *GS* I.1, 234-36; *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, trans. John Osborne (London: New Left Books, 1977), 54-56.

43 In this respect cyborg literature shares with the literature of new-age, whole-body, feel-good therapies its subject matter. For a summary of "current events," see the essays by Jean-Francois Lyotard recently collected and translated as *The Inhuman: Reflections on time*, trans. Geoffrey Bennington & Rachel Bowlby (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991).

determined by just such a vanishing point.[44] In his essay on Goethe's *Elective Affinities,* Benjamin makes his own contribution to the history of the discourse on the beautiful and the sublime. While much more can be said about this essay than time and space allow for here, it is necessary to refer to the section in which Benjamin discusses the old problem of sensuous representation, in order to appreciate the place occupied by the human body in his consideration of aesthetics.

> Everything that is essentially beautiful is so by being always and substantially bound in infinitely varying degrees to illusion. This link achieves its highest intensity in manifest living beings, indeed precisely here in the polar sense of triumphing and extinguishing appearance. The higher its life is articulated, the more the living being is released to the realm of the essentially beautiful, and thus in the guise of the living being, the essentially beautiful announces itself mostly as illusion....Precisely in this sense the Platonic theory of the beautiful coincides with the even older problem of appearance, in that after the *Symposium,* the theory above all is directed on corporeal living beauty.[45]

Living things appear; only by having an attachment to the living can an appearance be said to have a claim to

---

44 Cf. Barnett Newman, "Response to Clement Greenberg," "The New Sense of Fate," "The Object and the Image," "Ohio, 1949," and "The Sublime is Now," in *Selected Writings and Interviews,* ed. John P. O'Neill (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 161-175.

45 *GS* I.1, 194. Note that "*Schein*" is translated here by both "appearance" and "illusion." One wonders what concepts might have determined the western philosophy of art had Socrates' jealousy not aroused Alcibiades' shame.

beauty, writes Benjamin, soberly.[46] But beauty is not defined by appearance. It is defined by an opposition, the opposition of appearance to "the expressionless," ("*das Ausdruckslose*") in the work of art - to what, since its popularization by Plato, has been referred to as "the true." For Benjamin, to describe the beautiful as the true cloaked by appearance, as if the latter could be removed, is to resort to philosophical barbarism and miss what is essential about beauty, by turning it into illusion itself. "Beauty is not illusion, not a cover for another. Beauty itself is not appearance, but rather being through and through, and such a one that is freely essential and self-same only when it stays under wraps."[47] The essence of beauty is formed by the connection of clues to a secret, which vanishes if the clues are deciphered and the secret revealed; then beauty becomes unseemly, it ceases to be itself, to be beautiful.

At "monstrous times" ("*zur Unzeit*"), the bride is stripped bare by her bachelors, even. Such revelation un-

---

46 With one exception: "A moment of appearance, however, is reserved in that which is most unliving, in case it is beautiful in essence." *GS* I.1, 194. From the fragment "Beauty and appearance," written at about the same time as the *Elective Affinities* essay (1919-1921): "I. Every living thing that is beautiful is illusionary. II. Every art-like thing that is beautiful is illusionary, because it is in some way living. III. There remain therefore only dead things of nature, which perhaps without being tied to appearance, can be beautiful." *GS* VI, 129.

47 *GS* I.1, 195

covers beauty's secrets, and raises the opposition between the expressionless and appearance to a level at which it can be appreciated, which is the level of its undoing.[48] "The more articulately this duality is expressed, in order to enforce itself ultimately to the highest degree in humans, the more it becomes clear: In unclothed nakedness the essentially beautiful is surrendered, and in the naked bodies of humans a being above all beauty is achieved - the sublime, and a work above all those that are formed - that of the creator's."[49]

---

48 Ibid., 196. In the sketch "Categories of the aesthetic," Benjamin writes: "The concept of creation does not enter the philosophy of art as one of origin. Because in 'creation,' the power of origin unfolds at all only in a single realm, that of the 'created.' But the work of art is not something 'created.' It is something that rises up and springs out, that escapes ("*ein Entsprungenes*")....- The relation of creation on the work of art does not therefore allow itself to be grasped in the schema of origin and result or impact. Nevertheless creation often has a connection with great works of art. Namely as content. Creation is one of the most violent themes of art....One can describe the form of works whose theme is creation as 'punched-out' or 'stamped-out' forms. They are forms which appear to shelter or hide as much shadow and confusion, as the hollow punched- or hammered-out inner side of metallic relief work. But such forms are not creation, they are not once "made," rather they only present creation ("*sie stellen nur Schöpfung dar*"), or better, they represent - and this is their true essence - their content in the elevated and sublime upright position of creation. Perhaps all forms possess something of this punched-out form, insofar as all works of art in some way have creation as their content." *GS* I.3, 828-29. The important presence of Alois Riegl's *Late Roman Art Industry* to Benjamin's writing once again makes itself explicit.

49 *GS* I.1, 196.

Benjamin's writing shifts the fault line that determines Kant's discussion of the beautiful and the sublime away from the realm of the imagination and into that of presentation - from "*Vorstellung*" to "*Darstellung*," in other words: from a low, or unquestioned conception of the experience of formlessness, to a higher level of perception or recognition of such experience, one which questions the foundations for the possibility of presenting, of representing that experience. The work, the activity of art - presentation, annunciation, but decidedly not creation - ceases when confronted by the limit posed by the naked human body, by its createdness, by the impenetrable level of articulation that it exhibits.[50]

An articulate body is able to pick up signals and transmit them, transform them, even if they are not immediately perceptible to the senses, not easily read. "It is very meaningful that our own body is inaccessible to us in so many ways: We cannot see our face, our back, our entire head, that is to say the most distinguished parts

---

50 This analysis depends upon a more detailed consideration of Benjamin's writings on perception, experience and knowledge than can be undertaken here, writings which include his dissertation, and his plans for a *Habilitationsschrift* on Kant. See "On Perception," *GS* VI, 33-38. From the fragment "Perception and Body" it reads: "We are placed in the world of perception, therefore in one of the highest levels of language, through our corporeality, strictly speaking, most immediately through our own individual body." *GS* VI, 67.

of the body; we cannot pick ourselves up with our own hands, we cannot embrace ourselves. We project ourselves equally into the world of perception with the feet, not with the head./ Hence the necessity, that in an instant of pure perception our body metamorphises itself before us; hence the sublime torment of the eccentric regarding his body."[51] Benjamin refers to ancient astrology as a way of making understandable the concept of a non-sensuous similarity that can be - only in the flash - physically recognized and picked up, physically read; this perceptive faculty is catalogued, passed down into a canon or reserve that moderns possess as a repository, or memory bank of that once-active ability to record, replay, and rewrite time and its many signatures, time and its signs. "And this canon is language."[52]

---

51 Ibid. See also Benjamin's description of a similar disfiguring torment, the torment of being "outside" - being outside oneself, as well as the thought of being simply "outside," of "a thick lingering having webbed and spun itself, a spider's web in which happenings scatter just like the hanging-around of the sucked-out bodies of insects" - found in his "Main characteristics of the second hash-impression," *GS* VI, 561.

52 *GS* II.1, 207; 211. The mimetic faculty in language - its foundation - only appears by virtue of being bound to a foreign body, which is the semiotic, the sign-character of language, Benjamin writes. "It is non-sensuous similarity which establishes the bracing, the bridge, not only between what is spoken and what is meant, but also between what is written and what is meant, and similarly between what is spoken and what is written....The most important of these bridges may yet be the last, that one between the written and the spoken. For the ruling similarity here is comparatively the most nonsensual." *GS* II.1, 208.

Human beings have a motor drive that allows them to express themselves, to make recordings. Idiom records the manner in which the hand makes its way to the mouth: onomatopoesis reflects not only the technique of perfecting the animalistic in the human - the Jabberwock - but extends the technique to include the walkie-talkie as well ("the child plays also windmill and train").[53] In his 1935-published "Problems in the Sociology of Language," Benjamin furthers the connection between language and thinking laid out in the "Doctrine of the Similar" and "On the Mimetic Faculty" in the context of a review and critique of recent publications on language theory and sociology, including those by Karl Buehler, Nikolaus Marr, L.S. Vygotski, Rudolf Carnap, Edmund Husserl, Jean Piaget. His review stands as a critique of nationalistic theories of language, of the notion that national languages express the lives of races or peoples, as their instruments, their loud-speakers.[54]

---

53 See "Problems in the Sociology of Language," *GS* III, 452-480.

54 For example, see what he has to say about Georg Schmidt-Rohr's 1932 study, "*Die Sprache als Bildnerin der Volker,*" in which the "people" - taken as a natural given - are willed or fated [sic] to become a "nation" - a linguistically founded cultural unity. "This [attitude] currently appears in the *Gestalt* of that irrationalism which is the rule in nationally-directed or -oriented literature." Benjamin's reading of Vygotski and Marr corrects this irrationalism with a return to the question of the origin of language, posed as the springing up of an intersection ("*ein Schnittpunkt*") of an intelligence-coordinate and a gestic (hand- or sound-) coordinate. "We may concur immediately with the doctrine by Marr, following which the

When language is described as a means of communication, as a way of holding together the natural linguistic body by enabling that body to self-express, to give itself voice, to project an inner being into the outer world, there is no break from the family confines. Just as the child invents new and better ways to assert its refusal to be dragged into conversations in which it has no desire to participate, for it has "nothing" to express, so do the stutterer, the aphasic, or the neurotic share an ability to articulately imitate what cannot be expressed. They do not adorn language with the appearance of beautiful speech - they do not engage in dubbing - being much more occupied with physically enacting the unsayable. They stare at the ground; they do not sit up straight. The model behavior demanded by the empty chatter of moralism - upright stance, head held high, don't look back - does not always find a following, being always followed by shame.

Moralism seeks to endow humanity's second nature with a recognizable face, to legislate a continuity, an identity, between what Benjamin calls its first nature and its second. But society and technology, as the forms as-

---

manipulation of tools must have preceded the wielding of language. As the use of tools is not possible without thinking, so it goes that there must have been a form of thinking which is earlier than that of speaking....'Tool-thinking' is independent of language." Ibid., 471-73.

sumed by the human after it has been both raised on, and laid low by the family values of war and work, are precisely different in kind from the forms of the body's first nature in that they are characterless, without face; anonymous, without name.

The art of interpreting the relationship between human beings and their environment was once societally determined by cult values, Benjamin writes, technology and ritual once "melted together."[55] Whereas "today" technology has been freed up from its dependence upon the fragile corpus and its habits, its rituals; habits have been mechanized, regularized by the machine. The body has turned into an appendage, a trick which solves at last the riddle of the part and the whole. Benjamin writes:

> [T]he tendentious difference that exists between that form of technics [the one tied to ritual] and ours [the one mechanized], is that the first employs, sets up, or installs the human as much as possible, and the second as little as possible. The greatest technical achievement of the first form is, so to speak, human sacrifice, while that of the second lies in the line of the airplane maneuverable from a distance, which does not need to be manned. The motto for the first form of technics is the "once and for all" (which goes for the offense which can never be made good, or the eternally vicarious sacrificial death). The motto of the second is "once is never enough" (it has to do with the experiment and its tireless varying of the test requirements).[56]

---

55 *GS* VII.1, 358-59.

56 Ibid., 359.

The human body has been dismembered, disarticulated - it has changed its nature. "It is a different nature that speaks to the camera than that which speaks to the eye."[57] The eye is unable to perceive what takes place between the hand and the metal of a lighter or spoon, for instance, in picking it up: The film camera, however, perceives and presents an image of an isolated, disjointed action that represents more than a clarification of that action; enlargements and slow-motion frames discover new movements, new techniques of writing, of inscribing or putting at hand what is unknown to the eye. Benjamin recognizes the structural potential film has to loosen things up, to sever the gaze that keeps ones eyes fixed on faces that have ceased to look back, but which are invested with the desire for a return, for blood and soil, for a timelessness found only in the comforts of home.[58] Film is the art form which literalizes the disjunction between the spoken

---

57 *GS* I.2, 500.

58 See Benjamin's discussion of the utopias respective to the first and second human natures, and Fascism's attempt to dislocate the way to both. "If one lends an ear in this connection to the words 'blood and soil,' then there appears Fascism standing, as it tries to misdirect the way to both utopias. 'Blood' - that goes against the utopia of the first nature, whose medicine wants to give all microbes their room to play. 'Soil' - that goes against the utopia of the second nature, whose realization should be a perogative of that type of human being, who climbs up into the stratosphere, in order to drop bombs down from there." *GS* VII.2, 666.

and the written word, for it has an ability to exhibit the radicality of contemporary existence, which moves at an unspeakable speed. The work of art that registers and transmits shock non-sensuously activates the non-sensual. The presentation, representation ("*Darstellung*") of "our time" is exhibited ("*ausgestellt*"), placed on view.[59]

According to Benjamin, the film audience constitutes an unorganized mass that is "open" to innervation, whose habits are regulated not by the repetition of old values, but by a training demanded by the requirements and speed of the camera, and of the cut. Stripped of all relations save those to arbitrary measure (i.e., the hands of the clock), the audience constitutes a preformed mass that actualizes temporality.[60] With film, Benjamin suggests, art

---

59 See Eva Geulen's, "*Zeit zur Darstellung. Walter Benjamins Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit,*" *MLN* 107 (1992): 580-605, which offers to the secondary literature on this essay a contribution which seriously addresses its substance.

60 "Historical time is in every direction unending and in every instant unfulfilled. That means that no single empirical event is thinkable, that would have a necessary relationship to the particular location in time in which it occurred. For empirical happenings time is but a form, but what is more important, as a form unfulfilled. The occurrence does not fill the formal nature of time in which it lies. This is so not in order to think that time is nothing other than the mass, with which the duration of a mechanical transformation is measured. This time is a relatively empty form indeed, and to think of its filling out makes little sense. There is something different however, than the time of history construed as that of mechanics. Historical time determines far more than the possibility of space-transformations of a particular size and regularity - namely of the movement of clock-hands - while being simultaneous space-transformations of a complicated structure. Without determining what transgresses, goes

has entered the age of literal transcription, which amounts to the end of art as the end of translation, and the inauguration of the age of the copy, the clone, the citation. Reproduction work describes the activity of the twentieth century: literalizing the figural. Hence Benjamin was able to write to Horkheimer that his essay on contemporary concepts in art theory avoided all unmediated relations to politics. In the age of technical reproducibility, the reproduction of reproducibility accomplishes a collapse of spheres linguistically and intellectually related to one another, into one another: Art and politics, once conceptually distinguishable from one another in terms of their orientation to the idea of representation (mimesis), are no longer translatable. Art-politics is the name Benjamin gives to the simulcast of pure media, to the casting simultaneously of works of reproduction that once operated at different speeds. Semantically, semiotically and acoustically speaking, Benjamin's historical-philological analysis of art forms culminates in the graphic, if not the pornographic, as the

---

beyond, what else determines historical time - therefore without defining its difference to mechanical time - is to say, that the determining power of the historical form of time can be fully comprised and fully collected by no empirical event. Such an occurrence that is "complete" in the sense of history, is much more entirely something empirically indeterminable, namely, an idea." From "*Trauerspiel und Tragodie*," *GS* II.1, 134.

actualization of body politics, the writing of will and desire, otherwise known as film. Speechlessness describes the agon of tragedy for Benjamin, the conflict between mythic fate and hubris in the emergence of individual characters, who stutter over what can not be said to the gods, that they have been defeated. The domination of nature by the thicket of language in the Baroque results in mourning-play, or pure music according to Benjamin, the technique of orchestrating meaningless sensuosity. Romanticism glories in the idea of ultimate self-control, self-reflection, or self-rule: That the work of art's destruction through criticism could be considered a triumph represents the degree to which romanticism subsumes itself under the spiritual content of language, its intellect. Strangely enough, it is with the latter form, with romantic criticism, that Benjamin's study of "*Kunstpolitik*" finds its greatest affinity.

Tempo House

"And a Micky Mouse film can rhythmically direct an entire public."[61] Adorno's response to Benjamin's essay never made much sense, in part because certain references - to audience laughter at Disney films, to the newspaper boy as "expert" - are only found in the "original" copy of

---

61 *GS* II.3, 962.

the text, the one less marked by the heavy hand of Horkheimer's editing job, the one which was believed to have been lost.[62] Now found and published, the essay in its many forms stands a better chance of being reconsidered, without having to be classed under the tutelage of the Frankfurt-school's moral tone.

Benjamin describes film as an agent of mass movements. It takes its most positive, "progressive" form in a destruction of family values, the "liquidation of the culture's inherited traditional values."[63] The violent shaking of tradition that film accomplishes structurally, however, is countered by the politically reactionary force

---

62 See Adorno's letter of March 18, 1936 to Benjamin: "To a certain extent I must accuse your essay of this second romanticism. You have swept art out of the corners of its taboos - but it is as though you feared a consequent inrush of barbarism (who could share your fear more than I?) and protected yourself by raising what you fear to a kind of inverse taboo. The laughter of the audience at a cinema - I discussed this with Max, and he has probably told you about it already - is anything but good and revolutionary; instead, it is full of the worst bourgeois sadism. I very much doubt the expertise of the newspaper boys who discuss sports; and despite its shock-like seduction I do not find your theory of distraction convincing - if only for the simple reason that in a communist society work will be organized in such a way that people will no longer be so tired and so stultified that they need distraction. [...] But if you take Micky Mouse instead, things are far more complicated [....] The goal of the revolution is the abolition of fear. Therefore we need have no fear of it, nor need we ontologize our fear." *Aesthetics and Politics*, trans. ed. Ronald Taylor (London: Verso, 1980), 123-25.

63 *GS* VIII.1, 354.

formed by Fascism's pact with the capital of the film industry. The "regressive" forms film takes on in a media-controlled state appear in the return of cult values to technologies of reproduction, to ritual viewing of the aspect of the beautiful face, upon which all gazes are fixed, as an illusion sacrificed for the lost humanity of that gaze, an illusion offering humanity's renewal in the guise of a mask. In Benjamin's words, the exhibition value of film is taken over by the beautiful appearance, aestheticism's old cult value, betraying a faint hope in the promise that the sublime body of the human will be actualized as an individual.[64] Where humanity refuses to parade its mirror-image around, to assert its face in the field of every viewfinder, there can be found a hidden political meaning, writes Benjamin. Atget's photographs of the streets of Paris function like the disturbing scenes of a crime, emptied of humans. The modern subject has a chance through film to recognize its anonymity and inhumanity, to have its consciousness raised, to pursue knowledge of itself.[65] Any image taken of it, however,

---

64 "The meaning of anarchy for the realm of the profane is to be determined out of the historical-philosophical place of freedom. (Difficult proof: here the foundational question of the connection between corporeality and individuality appears)." *GS* VI, 99.

65 See "Foundation for Morality:" "The highest moral interest of the subject is to remain anonymous to itself. 'Lord, allow me to contemplate my heart and my body without disgust,' as it is called by Baudelaire. This wish is only able to be fulfilled if the subject remains anonymous to itself. In the good deed it avoids making

would be necessarily ghostly.

Such an image is of course duly provided by the film industry, interested in forming an ever-larger compact mass set in its ways, whose movements can be easily predicted, directed, and followed.[66] Benjamin criticized the communist tactics of speaking in the German press about the "winning of the petty bourgeoisie," which played directly into the hands of the Fascists by determining this mass as a class, which it is not; thus hanging the proletariat, which Benjamin describes as "a loose, relaxed mass" with enlightened consciousness.[67] Unemotional and literate, able to read what it has written, the film audience reproduces in the cinema at night what it has produced in the street and workplace by day: the rhythm of

---

acquaintance, avoids familiarity with itself. In the bad it gets to know itself - and fundamentally. The anonymity of the moral subject touches on a double reservation. First: I have everything to expect from myself, I am capable of everything. And second: I am capable of everything, but I can prove nothing to myself." *GS* VI, 59-60.

66 To this mass is offered speculation in the careers and love-lives of stars, beauty contests, and marketing-research polls - pale substitutes for the legitimate claim modern subjects have on playing, on passing tests, and on taking part, participating.

67 Too often this essay has been misread as blueprint for a "communist" or "proletarian aesthetic," or as a training manual for a "materialist pedagogy," whatever that might mean. See the variant on the concept of the formation of masses being confused with the concept of the formation of classes, and their relation to the cinema audience. *GS* VII.2, 668.

regularized shock, the pace of measured moments. Film is able to open the audience up to itself, which means learning to perceive without being able to rely on old habits of recognition, getting used to strange surroundings, groping about for orientation in a world which bears little resemblance to the one recently exited.

Groping about for orientation with the hands and feet that is, not with the head. Borrowing from, yet radicalizing the notion of distraction introduced by Sigfried Kracauer's 1926 "Cult of Distraction," Benjamin poses to film the question he raised in his dissertation on Friedrich Schlegel and Novalis - the question of raising consciousness through art-criticism's destruction of the work of art - by standing this question on its head. "We project ourselves into the world of perception with the feet, not with the head."[68] The fundamental changes in apperception that are required for survival in every-day life, for passing the test, living-through the shocks leveled at one by apparati of all kinds - vehicles of transportation, industrial machines, systems for gathering and processing information - are architectural changes. Film gives shelter. Being an art form received in a state of distraction, it is used, not contemplated; it is critically enjoyed by the tactile, not the optical uncon-

---

68 *GS* VI, 67.

scious.[69] Freud's *Interpretation of Dreams* reminds one of how shock destroys consciousness, how the unconscious operates as a screen, a writing pad, a shock-absorber for consciousness. Only by grasping the emphasis Benjamin places on the overcoming of optical reception through tactile (habitual) reception of architectural works of art, including film, can one begin to approach what he described as the heightened consciousness of a critical mass formed in a state of distraction, of lowered consciousness.[70] Film forms a public, a "society" loose or level enough to play havoc with appearances, to dismantle the upright gait assumed by a state interested in preserving and building upon its moral laws, by shaking the ground that has become hard beneath so many stamping feet.[71] Like

---

69 *GS* VII.1, 380-81.

70 "To face the contemplation, which in the degeneration of the bourgeoisie became a school of asocial behavior, steps distraction as a play-form of social behavior." *GS* VII.1, 379.

71 "Hitler's following - to be compared with Chaplin's public. Chaplin - the ploughshare, which goes through the masses; laughter loosens the masses up. The ground of the Third Reich is stamped down firm and no grass grows there any longer. Ban on puppets in Italy, on Chaplin-films in the Third Reich - each marionette can do Mussolini's chin and every inch of Chaplin the *Fuhrer*. The poor devil wants to be taken seriously and so immediately he has to summon up all of hell. Chaplin's submissiveness lies before all to see. Hitlers only before his employers. Chaplin points out the comedy of Hitler's seriousness....Chaplin has become the greatest comedian, for he *embodies* the deepest horrors and gruesomeness of his contemporaries." [my italics] *GS* VI, 103. See also "Toward a Critique of Violence," *GS* II.1, 179-203.

the "swamp world" out of which Kafka's "main" characters - the anonymous, speedy, patient, diligent, ever-awake yet unknowing (often webbed-fingered) assistants - emerge, the world of perception opened by film is like the one induced by Benjamin's opium, hashish and mescaline experiments, one learned about through unsteady grasping, jerks, and jolting.[72]

"Innervation of the collective body" is what Benjamin referred to as the chopped up, discontinuous bits of motion characterizing the critical, comic commentary offered by Chaplin's mimetic behavior. Convulsive laughter is not the same thing as panic or the expressive forms that it can take (war excitement, Jew-hatred, the drive for self-preservation), a physically relaxed mass not being the same as a hard, compact, uptight one. Adorno certainly missed Benjamin's point with his comments on "revolution

---

72 Benjamin began experimenting with drugs in 1927, when he was 35. He planned to write a book on hashish. "I have seen why if one hides oneself in grass one can fish in the earth," *GS* VI, 617. The image of clearing and loosening ground, making room for an experiment, takes many forms in his writing. Benjamin's radio programs written for children are often tales of individuals who manage to outlive the destruction wrought by civilizations, by political cultures. See, for example, what he has to say to children about Herbert Hoover, military technology, and the creation of mass homelessness in "The Mississippi Flood of 1927," GS VII.1, 237-243. "The mass is a matrix, out of which all previous, or traditional behavior toward works of art issues newly-born today." *GS* VII.1, 380. See also Benjamin's essay, "*Johann Jakob Bachofen,*" *GS* II.1, 219-233, and "The Destructive Character," *GS* IV.1, 396-98.

accomplishing the abolition of fear." Adorno approaches a critique of mimesis from the perspective of pathos, (that is to say, from no perspective at all), whereas Benjamin approaches it from the position of dis-location, eccentricity, dis-figuration, *Ent-stellung* - from "outside" - from the position of non-synchronicity between the written and the sounded, or betoned language.[73] In a "*Schnittpunkt,*" a crucial juncture, the cutting edge between an intelligence-coordinate and a hand- or gestic-coordinate of language, its exhibitionary, eventful capacity lights up its communicative side: The moment flashes up, and flits past, enlightening, giving a future to the overburdened overnaming, overly-sensuous rigidity of language-chatter at a tempo that can neither be fixed nor willfully controlled.[74] The attempt to synchronize language, to dub film, to fine-tune written and spoken language into simultaneity, is hubristic.[75]

---

73 Cf. Horkheimer and Adorno's coarse plagarism of Benjamin's ideas in *Dialektik der Aufklärung* (Frankfurt a/M: Fischer, 1969).

74 See note 54, above.

75 An interesting footnote to Benjamin's writing on national languages and aestheticism can be found in the contemporary situation of Hungarian film. The Hungarian film industry devotes a large part of its enterprise to the dubbing of foreign films, for obvious reasons. Helyei Laszlo, to the Hungarian public a well-known actor, successfully does the voice of Gerard Depardieu in the national version, not because Helyei's voice sounds like Depardieu's, but because he looks like him.

Benjamin had no illusions about any pretense revolution would have to "abolish fear." The future is not something that can be spoken about as such. His comments on the phenomenon of "*der Micky-Maus*" however, tell of the contemporary necessity to learn fear, in order to survive culture.

> Property relationships in a Mickey-Mouse film: here appears for the first time that one's own arm, even one's own body can be stolen....
> In these films humanity prepares itself for outliving civilization.
> The Mickey-Mouse represents that the creature still remains standing, even when it has cast-off everything resembling the human ("*alles Menschenähnliche*"). It breaks through the hierarchy of creatures conceptualized by humans.
> These films disavow all experience, more radically than ever was the case. In such a world, it is not worth having experiences.
> Similarity with the fairy tale. Never since then have the most important and most vital happenings been lived as non-symbolic, lacking atmosphere....All Mickey-Mouse films have as point of departure the motive of learning fear.
> Hence the basis for the incredible success of these films is not "mechanization," not the "formula," not a "misunderstanding," but rather that the public recognizes in them its own life.[76]

---

76 "*Zu Micky-Maus*," *GS* VI, 144-45. See his essay on the new barbarism and the coming war, also written in 1933 - "Experience and Poverty" - in which Benjamin recognizes the potential Mickey-Mouse has not only to loosen-up its audience with laughter at a being who is able to overcome the technology to which the audience must daily submit (which is the task the audience demands of every film actor), but also the potential this thing has to meet the purposes of Fascism, by appearing as a free-floating redemptive figure whose creaturely features can nonetheless be distorted to resemble something vaguely human. "No one feels more than those touched by Scheerbart's words: 'You are all so tired - and only because you don't concentrate all of your thoughts on an entirely simple but magnificent plan.' Sleep follows tiredness, and so it is then not at all rare that the dream compensates for the sadness and discouragement of the day, and the entirely

Film throws a glance onto the current situation of today's writing. Mass reproduction reproduced in the form of art-politics gives a disfigured, transfigured face to the physiognomy of previous graphic inscriptions, of previous typeface. Benjamin's essay points out one way of deciphering this script.

---

simple but magnificent existence for which strength fails when awake, shows itself realized in the dream. The existence of Mickey-Mouse is such a dream of today's people. This existence is full of wonders, which not only surpass or outdo the technical ones, but make fun of them as well. For the most extraordinary aspect of them is that they emerge alltogether without machinery, improvised, out of the body of Mickey-Mouse, its partisans and followers, out of the most ordinary furniture as well as out of trees, clouds or lakes. Nature and technology, primitivity and comfort have become completely one here before the eyes of people who have become tired of the endless complications of daily life. To those to whom the purpose of life only enters the picture as the most distant vanishing point in an unending perspective of means, appears redeemingly an existence, that in every turning satisfies itself in the simplest and most comfortable way, in which a car is no heavier than a straw hat and the fruit on a tree rounds itself as quickly as from the gondola of an air balloon....[H]umanity prepares itself, if it must be thus, to outlive culture. And what the most important point is, is that it is done laughing. Perhaps this laughter sounds here and there barbaric. Good. In the meantime let the individual donate a little humanity to that mass which will one day pay him back with interest compounded." *GS* II.1, 213-19.

CHAPTER VI
BENJAMIN AND THE FACULTY OF MIMESIS

Wie das Boot erfunden wurde und warum es Boot heißt

Vor allen anderen Menschen lebte einer, der hieß Boot. Er war der erste Mensch, denn vor ihm war nur der Engel da, der sich in einen Menschen herunterverwandelt hatte; und das ist eine andere Geschichte.

Also der Mann Boot wollte auf das Wasser -- damals gab es viel mehr Wasser als heute, das mußt Du wissen. Da band er sich Bretter mit Stricken um, ein langes Brett unter den Bauch, das war der Kiel. Und nahm eine spitze Mütze aus Brettern, die war, wenn er im Wasser lag, vorne -- das wurde die Spitze. Und hinten streckte er ein Bein aus und steuerte damit.

So legte er sich auf das Wasser und steuerte und ruderte mit den Armen und fuhr mit der Brettermütze, weil sie spitz war, ganz leicht durch das Wasser. Ja, so war es; der Mann Boot, der erste Mensch, hatte sich aus sich selbst ein Boot gemacht, mit dem man im Wasser fahren konnte.

Und deshalb -- nicht wahr, das ist doch ganz klar -- weil er doch selber das Boot war, nannte er das, was er da gemacht hatte, "Boot". Und darum heißt das Boot "Boot".[1]

How the boat was discovered and why it is called Boat

Before all other humans lived one, who was called Boat. He was the first human, for before him only the angel was there, who had transformed himself down into a human; but that's another story.

The man Boat wanted to go onto the water -- in those days there was much more water than today, that you must know. So he bound himself boards with rope around, a long board under the belly --

---

1 Walter Benjamin, in *GS* VII.1.

that was the keel. And he took a pointed board as cap, which was, when he lay in the water, fore -- that became the bow. And behind he stretched out a leg and steered.

Thus he lay himself onto the water and steered and ruddered with the arms and headed off with the board-cap -- because it came to a point -- totally light and with ease through the water. And so it was; the man Boat, the first human, had made himself, himself, out of himself, a boat, with which one could travel in water.

And therefore -- isn't that right? this is certainly clear -- because he was the boat it(him)self, he named that, what he had made there, "Boat". And that is why the boat is called "Boat".

When Walter Benjamin signed his name to the review of Roger Caillois' "*L'aridité*" he wrote for the seventh issue of the *Journal for Social Research*, he did so with the initials J.E. Mabinn. This 1938 issue of the *Zeitschrift für Socialforschung* contains three reviews of works by Caillois: Adorno's review of *La mante religieuse*, Aron's review of *Le mythe et l'homme*, and Benjamin's review -- which discusses, in addition to "Aridity", Julien Benda's *Un regulier dans le siècle*, Georges Bernanos' *Les grands cimetières sous la lune*, and the Jesuit Father Fessard's *Le dialogue catholico-communiste est-il possible?* -- presenting the reader with a small summary of the state of late, pre-war French clericalism. Benjamin begins his review by endorsing Adorno's, a critique of the "mythographic and psychological" impulses that lead Caillois to regard humans as beings whose imaginary world

takes after the behavioral characteristics of the praying mantis: Either during or after the act of mating, the (demonic) female of the species consumes the male who seduced her. Adorno's review is not entirely negative, however. Despite a mythic, biologistic reductivism, Caillois offers a "critique of the isolation of the spheres of society and nature" which has its "progressive side," Adorno writes, "and the attempt to trace back psychological tendencies to real somatic factual findings rather than to the conscious life of the autonomous individual, offers a truly materialistic aspect."[2]

Out from under the light cover of his Mabinnian mask, Benjamin writes: "In this essay, ['Aridity'] C's renowned talent [*die namhafte Begabung*] has an object upon which it can't make itself be known in a way other than through the figure of impudence [*als in der Gestalt der Frechheit*]. It's repulsive how the historically conditioned characteristics of today's bourgeois assemble, with the aid of metaphysical hypostasizing, into an outlined remark on the edge of the age, written in an elegantly penciled hand. The cramped strokes of this sketch carry all the markings of pathological cruelty."[3] J.E. Mabinn wasn't the first

---

2 Theodor W. Adorno, "Roger Caillois, *La mante religieuse*," *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung* VII (1938): 410-411.

3 "*Die gedrängten Striche dieses Dessins tragen alle Merkmale pathologischer Grausamkeit.*" J.E. Mabinn, "Roger Caillois, *'L'aridité'*," *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung* VII (1938): 463-66.

name Benjamin elegantly penciled in to Horkheimer as a possible pseudonym for his review. "Hans Fellner" was his first suggestion for an alibi. But the anagramm -- more "impudent" in its obviousness, more of a risk to his cover -- suited the author. Apparently, he didn't want to fell Caillois with a single, blunt stroke of Hans Fellner's pen.[4]

"When Caillois says: 'One works for the liberation of beings whom one desires to enslave and whom one wishes to see obedient only to oneself,' he has sketched very simply the praxis of fascism." "It is sad," Mabinn writes, "to see such a wide, muddy stream be fed out of high-laying sources."[5] This was not the first time Benjamin followed the precise course of a direct line in the wake of its

---

4 In a letter written in French to Gretel Adorno on January 17, 1940, Benjamin mentions: "Independent of my other work, I will again take up with pleasure the analysis of *nouveautés françaises*. There is one, moreover, rather comical piece, which has just come to the light of day in Argentina. It is from there that [Roger] Caillois has just published a requisition against Nazism in a small volume, the argument of which repeats, neither with nuance nor with any modification whatsoever, the one occupying the dailies of the entire world. It was hardly necessary to go to the farthest reaches of the intelligible world or of the earthly world, in order to bring back that. It is true that Caillois publishes, on the other hand, a theory of the festival in *La nouvelle revue française*, about which I will speak in my next communication with Max." Walter Benjamin, *Briefe* ed. Gershom Scholem and Theodor W. Adorno (Frankfurt a/M: Suhrkamp, 1966), 845.

5 *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung* VII, 464.

wanderings, to chart the path of its disfiguration onto a surface -- into a wide swath of clouds, as in "Experience and Poverty", or *Berlin Childhood around 1900*; into cloudy waters, as in the children's radio address "The Mississippi Flood of 1927"; or into the depths of cloudy reasoning, as in One-Way Street.[6] But in order to address this question of writing's line, and of its surface-ground support more directly, a detour is necessary, one that passes through the frame.

Caillois' "Mimicry and Legendary Psychasthenia" originally appeared in 1935 in the surrealist publication *Minotaure*, two years before the *Collège de Sociologie* was founded by him, Bataille and Leiris as an organ devoted to the resacralization of "a society which has so totally profaned itself."[7] It is the essay that Jaques Lacan

---

6 *GS* II-VII (1974-91). As Werner Hammacher writes: "The cloud is the medium of likeness. In it, all things, men, places and experiences can correspond with one another and turn into one another, and they do so whenever they enter into the *Wolke*: into the interior of *Worte*....The word -- cloud -- the medium of likeness, is the absolutely unlike. It is the likeness that slips away from itself, dissemblance without semblance." Werner Hammacher, "The Word *Wolke*, if it is one -- " trans. Peter Fenves, *Benjamin's Ground: New Readings of Walter Benjamin* ed. Rainer Nägele (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1988), 147-176.

7 Caillois, from "*Le vent d'hiver*," quoted by Denis Hollier, "Mimesis and Castration 1937" trans. William Rodarmor, *October 31* (Winter 1984): 5. See Caillois, "The Winter Wind" trans. Betsy Wing, *The College of Sociology* ed. Denis Hollier (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), 32-42. In that lecture's third section, "The Ethic of the Closed Community," Caillois writes:

credited as having played a crucial role in the construction of the concept central to his lecture "The mirror stage as formative of the function of the I", first delivered in August 1936 at Marienbad, long before the Alains Resnais and Robbe-Grillet had arrived to film their *Last year* there.[8] But perhaps the initial translation

---

Precise and meticulous as court etiquette, courtsy, with ritualizes human beings' mutual relationships in their secondary aspects, for that very reason, relieves the mind and increases its ease accordingly. Moreover, it contributes to maintaining a certain internal tension that would be hard to preserve if simple manners were neglected. In a closed type of association, destined to aggravate separations, courtesy is part of the ethic and becomes almost an institution. Codifying the relations of the initiates, its esoteric and conventional character finds itself reinforced because it must serve to differentiate them even further from the uninitiated. The discourteous person, in fact, is not so much one who neglects customs as one who is ignorant of them or practices those of another group. Therefore, courtesy, a way to recognize each other and to recognize intruders, becomes a practical means of standing aloof. In fact, when one must demonstrate one's hostility or one's contempt for someone, all that is necessary, as we all know, is to affect an extreme courtesy which makes the other as uncomfortable as a reprimand would and immediately excludes any familiarity. In this regard, we should never forget the manner in which certain important individualists, such as Baudelaire, sensed how implacable a weapon perfect correctness concealed, and made dandyism the privileged form of modern heroism.

8 Jacques Lacan, "The mirror stage as formative of the function of the I as revealed in psychoanalytic experience" trans. Alan Sheridan, *Écrits* (New York: Norton, 1977), 1-7.

into English of the title of the lecture -- "The Looking-glass Phase" -- reveals the path and the frame through which one must step in order to cross an imaginary-symbolic threshold and come into contact with something closer to the real, in the mimetic faculty, as it is presented by Benjamin.[9]

In order to come into contact with a tactility, that is to say. Benjamin's "concept" of mimesis was never written as such. The two short (four page) essays he wrote in 1933 describe a "doctrine" and a "faculty", but not a concept, and certainly not an idea of mimesis, even though he regarded this work -- at the time, and years later -- as fundamental to his work on the philosophy of language, and as fundamentally related to his essay "On Language as Such and on Human Language" from 1916.[10] "The Doctrine of the Similar" is prefaced with the remark that insight into the realm of similarity is of ground-laying importance for en-

---

9 One of the more recent, interesting readins of Benjamin and Lacan is the review by Fritz Gutbrodt of Bettine Menke's work in *Sprachfiguren: Name -- Allegorie -- Bild nach Walter Benjamin* (Munich: Wilhelm Find, 1991), and of Muller and Richardson's edited volume *The Purloined Poe: Lacan, Derrida and Psychoanalytic Reading* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988). See Fritz Gutbrodt, "Poedelaire: Translation and the Volatility of the Letter," *Diacritics* 22: 3-4 (Fall-Winter 1992): 49-68.

10 Peter Fenves presents this text in its relation to phenomenology in "The Dawn of Judgment: Spatiality, Analogy and Metaphor in Benjamin's 'On Language as Such and On Human Language'", manuscript.

lightenment into major areas of occult knowledge. It was written in Berlin, in January of 1933, as the Hitler dictatorship came to power. Three months later Benjamin began a serious reconsideration and rewriting of the essay from his summer exile on Ibiza, and, as of September, the new text carried the title "On the Mimetic Faculty."[11] It is specifically to this text, and to the one translated above, dated, eerily enough, Sept. 26, 1933 -- which the editors of Benjamin's collected works first found and published in 1989 -- that my comments will refer.[12]

Humans are the beings that are called upon to respond. The task of the human -- if it can still be spoken about as such -- is to recognize that one is being addressed, by someone, or something else, and to respond to that address, to recall, to call the thing or the other by its name, to recognize it for what it is.[13] Everything

---

11 *GS* II.3, 950; VII.2, 791.

12 The date of writing, 60 years prior to the day of this conference, coincides with the date of Benjamin's suicide in 1940. *GS* VII.2, 647.

13 Cf. generally Benjamin, "*Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers*" *GS* VI.1, 9-21; "The Task of the Translator" trans. Harry Zohn, *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken, 1969), 69-82; Paul Celan, "*Stimmen*", "*Engführung*", *Sprachgitter* (Frankfurt a/M: Fischer Taschenbuch, 1980); Jacques Derrida, *Schibboleth: Pour Paul Celan*, (Paris: Galilée, 1986); Derrida, *Cinders*, bilingual, ed. and trans. Ned Lukacher (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1991); Georg Trakl, *Sebastian im Traum* (Leipzig: Kurt Wolff Verlag, 1915).

mediated by knowledge -- all invention and construction and testing and portrayal and demonstration -- is secondary, and abstract, when compared to the priority of the call and of the response. The writing of philosophy is the history of recognizing that this call receives both poor and brilliant responses, literally. The writing of philosophy is the philosophy of its history -- a question of timed response. Response time is difficult to measure, especially when all parties, objects, situations and conditions involved are in a constant state of motion and change.[14]

The question concerning technology concerns the relationship between what in Greek is called *physis* (poorly translated through Latin as "nature") and *poesis* -- poetry, making, bringing forth; *techne* brings forth what has been called forth, even when what has been called forth is *physis*, that which brings *itself* forth.[15] Slavoj

---

14 Cf. Peter Fenves' introduction, "The Topicality of Tone," and Jacques Derrida's essay, "On a Newly Arisen Apocalyptic Tone in Philosophy", translated, revised and reprinted, with late essays on *Schwärmerei* and practical reason by Kant, in *Raising the Tone of Philosophy* ed. Peter Fenves (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993). See also, Jacques Derrida, *Spectres de Marx* (Paris: Galilée, 1993).

15 It would take a Martinus Scriblerus to write a proper bibliographic note to the literature of mimesis, a *peri bathous* of the genre's own. [Alexander Pope, "The Art of Sinking in Poetry", *Selected Poetry and Prose* ed. William K. Wimstatt, Jr. (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1962), 306-360.] Indespensable are rereadings of Jacques Derridas "White Mythology: Metaphor in the Text of Philosophy" trans. Alan Bass, *Margins of Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 207-271. See also,

Zizek has a section in his book *Looking Awry* called "Nature does not exist": this is certainly true if one remains trapped in a bourgeois philosophy of language, one in which the materiality of the signifier is ultimately read -- and traded -- symbolically.[16] In the symbolic uni-

---

generally, *Mimesis desArticulations* (Paris: Flammarion, 1975); Derrida, *Dissemination* trans. Barbara Johnson, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972); Derrida, *The Truth in Painting* trans. Geoff Bennington and Ian McLeod, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987); Martin Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit* (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1960); Heidegger, *An Introduction to Metaphysics* trans. Ralph Manheim (New Haven: Yale, 1959); Heidegger, "The Origin of the Work of Art" trans. Albert Hofstadter *Poetry, Language, Thought* (New York: Harper and Row, 1971); "The Question Concerning Technology" trans. William Lovitt, *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays* (New York: Harper and Row, 1977).

16 Slavoj Zizek, *Looking Awry* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT, 1991), 34-39. The violation of ethics is narrated by the structure of ideology, as Zizek's book *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 1989), shows so well. The cruelty excercised by this joke in the literature of history repeats itself in endless, non-stop laughter and unyielding punishment. [See Nietzsche on "*Gut und Böse, Gut und Schlecht*", guilt and bad conscience. *Zur Genealogie der Moral* ed. Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari *Friedrich Nietzsche: Kritischen Studienausgabe* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1988).] "In other words, the repetition announces the advent of the Law, of the Name-of-the-Father in place of the dead, assassinated father: the event which repeats itself receives its law retroactively, through repetition. That is why we can grasp Hegelian repetition as a passage from a lawless series to a lawlike series, as the inclusion of a lawless series -- as a *gesture of interpretation par excellence*, as a symbolic appropriation of a traumatic, non-symbolized event...Hegel was thus probably the first to articulate the *delay* which is constitutive of the act of interpretation: the interpretation always sets in too late, with some delay, when the event which is to be interpreted repeats itself; the event cannot already be lawlike in its first advent. This same delay is also formulated in the Preface to Hegel's *Philosophy of the Law*, in the famous passage about the owl of Minerva (that is, the philosophical comprehension of a certain epoch) which takes flight only in the evening,

verse, when "nature" has been subjected to excessive human/inhuman demands to call *it* forth, it either does not appear, or it appears to humans in the figure of a monstrous and sublime image -- *als eine Ungeheuerlichkeit*. In *The Prelude*, the Alps loom. The ocean spreads its engulfing expanse across the pages of Kant's *Third Critique*. In the linguistic universe that can be referred to as American, animated dinosaurs currently threaten the safety and reason of the Oedipal, consuming family. (And Spielberg's film is not the only example of this phenomenon. In Roger Corman's *Carnosaur*, Laura Dern's mother Dianne Ladd gives birth to a dinosauer. For months, dinosauer topiary inhabited the promenade at Rockefeller Plaza in Manhattan. *BusinessWeek* magazine recently ran an article entitled "Wouldn't you like to knock the stuffing out of Barney?", inciting a small letter-writing flurry among parents as to the moral and educational uses of the stuffed toy for their children. And *The New York Times* entered this "ethical" debate with an editorial -- "Should we revive the dinosaurs?" -- the structure of which was indistinguishable from those the paper ran on whether "we" or "the Europeans" should "get involved" in the Balkans.[17]

---

after this epoch has already come to its end." *Sublime Object*, 61-6.

17 "Wouldn't you like to knock the stuffing out of Barney?" *BusinessWeek*, 16 August 1993: 34; "Should we revive the dinosaurs?" *The New York Times*, 13 June 1993, sec. 4: 18.

) A statement such as "nature does not exist" *makes no sense* (and gives no change), when the gift of language is taken into account, outside the strict laws of exchange, yet within the techniques of its practice. A philosophy of language that concerns language as such, in addition to the language of humans and the language of things, gives itself time to register *how* nature still might continue to exist or persist, registration time that occurs in the instant of a flash.[18]

It is precisely the activity of children that gives insight into a human response to a call from somewhere else that is not a linguistically violent response, one not marked by the presence of the judging word, one not speaking the symbolic language of rights.[19] Although Ben-

---

18 See "Technical Aid" from *Einbahnstrasse*: "Suddenly, with one stroke and like a smack, truth wants to be frightened out of its self-immersion, be it through riot, be it through music or through cries for help. Who would want to count the alarm signals that equip the innards of the true writer? And what is called 'writing' is nothing other than the practice of setting them off." *GS* IV.1, 138.

19 See generally the two *Cardozo Law Review* issues devoted to publishing work on Benjamin's "*Zur Kritik der Gewalt*" presented at the conferences held in 1989 and 1990 at the Law School -- 11 *Cardozo Law Review* 919 (1990) and 13 *Cardozo Law Review* 1081 (1991). See also Drucilla Cornell, "Institutionalization of Meaning, Recollective Imagination and the Potential for Transformative Legal Interpretation," *University of Pennsylvania Law Review* 136: 2 (1988), and *The Philosophy of the Limit* (New York: Routledge, 1992).

jamin knew well how difficult -- impossible it was, and would be, to forget the not-so-gentle rules learned by heart à la *Émile*, the childlike ability to plunge into the heart of language confronts the inherent violence of its law(s) with a diplomacy, an invitation infinitely more disturbing than the line of desire.[20] Benjamin writes that the mimetic faculty -- the ability to recognize and produce similarities -- has a history in both the ontogenetic and the phylogenetic sense. Ontogenetically speaking, in playing, children learn how to translate the various languages of things into their own by imitating them, and this imitation is not restricted to forms of human behavior. Benjamin's example is a telling one: "The child plays not only shopkeeper or teacher, but also windmill and train. What does this schooling in the mimetic

---

20 "The event of this 'Come' precedes and calls the event. It would be that starting from which there is any event, the coming, the to-come of the event that cannot be thought under the given category of event....Accelerating the movement, I shall then say this. Come from the other already as a response, and a citation without past present, 'Come' itself, a narrative [*un récit*], already a recitative and a song whose singularity remains at once absolute and absolutely divisible. 'Come' no more lets itself be arraigned [*arraisonner*] by an onto-theo-eschatology than by a logic of the event, however new they may be and whatever politics they announce. In this *affirmative* tone, 'Come' marks in itself, in oneself, neither a desire nor an order, neither a prayer nor a request [*demande*]." Jacques Derrida, "On a Newly Arisen Apocalyptic Tone in Philosophy" trans. John Leavey, Jr., *Raising the Tone*, 164-65.

ability actually bring him for a use?" he asks. The question echoes through the remembrance written in *Berliner Kindheit um Neunzehnhundert*, the story of a childhood that learned how to survive the thicket of misunderstandings composing the adult semantic/symbolic landscape, by taking a literal approach to language:

> So accident, chance, would have it that at one time copper engravings [*Kupferstichen*] were spoken about in my presence. The next day I stuck my head under a chair: that was a 'head-hiding' [*ein Kopf-verstich*]. If I thereby defaced both the word and myself, I only did what I had to do, in order to find my way through life [*um im Leben Fuß zu fassen*]. In good time I taught myself to masquerade in words, which were truly clouds. The gift of recognizing similarities is nothing other than a weak remain of the old compulsion to become similar, and comport oneself as such. But words exercised this compulsion on me. Not those that made me into models of morals, but similar to apartments, furniture, and clothes. *Only never in my own image [Nur meinem eigenen Bilde nie]*. And thus I became entirely clueless, when someone desired from me similarity with myself.[21]

---

21 *GS* IV.1, 261, my emphasis. Compare Lacan: "The only object that is within the analyst's reach is the imaginary relation that links him to the subject *qua* ego. And although he cannot eliminate it, he can use it to regulate the yield of his ears, which is normal practice, according to both physiology and the Gospels: having ears *in order not to hear*, in other words, in order to pick up what is to be heard. For he has no other ears, no third or fourth ear to serve as what some have tried to describe as a direct transaudition of the unconscious by the unconscious. I shall deal with the question of this supposed mode of communication later....

"The psychoanalytic experience has rediscovered in man the imperative of the Word as the law that has formed him in its image. It manipulates the poetic function of language to give to his desire its symbolic mediation. May that experience enable you to understand at last that it is in the gift of speech that all the reality of its effects resides; for it is by way of this gift that all reality has come to man and it is by his continued act

Phylogenetically speaking, the mimetic faculty has transformed "over time" -- only a weak rudiment of what it once was able to copy remains, and these remains are to be found in a canon, in the archive of language. Taking a literal approach to language as a means of survival in the world of abstraction means more than looking beyond the fascination of a word's image or hearing beyond the music of its voice. It means reading writing as something other than a worn-out system of signs. A non-sensuous similarity burns "like a flame" on the semiotic aspect of language -- meaning acts as a bearer, or a carrier, for what in writing remains, and falls away, ashen. The technique, the activity of writing, the tactility of handwriting brings something forth, to hand, something other than itself, something "expressionless", which is bound to the meaning of the word as to a means of transport, bound to be communicated, witness genesis unbound.[22] Boat.[23]

---

that he maintains it." Jacques Lacan, "The Function and Field of Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis," *Écrits*, 30-113.

For an excellent interpretation of the narcissistic ego in Lacan and Freud see Samuel Weber, *Return to Freud: Jacques Lacan's Dislocation of Psychoanalysis* trans. Michael Levine (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991). On ears that have been finely-tuned see Avital Ronell, *The Telephone Book: Technology, Schizophrenia, Electric Speech* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1989): "The call of the Other is essentialy anonymous." (p. 59).

22 "It would be more emphatic than it ever has been up until now, to make fruitful for the early history of the arts the recognition that the first material to which the mimetic faculty applied itself is the human body. It

"It flits past." "*Sie huscht vorbei.*" Lightly and with ease the boat glides through the water, a "self-made" human, able to recognize the material out of which it is made as the matter of its being, able to put that ability to recognize and respond to good use, in a time of high waters.[24] Like a body, a vessel in fragments can be collected and cited, sighting a path through a thicket of pronouncements, remembering, in laying itself out, what once it might have meant to stand upright. Ethics, being upright, like the characters of a beautiful orthography emerging from a writing straight, straight from -- , takes a circuitous route. Writing that heads off with the head -- and lets go the feet -- points a way out of the conundrum of identity tied like the measured feet of a certain

---

should be questioned if the earliest mimesis of objects in dance- and image-representation does not extensively rest on the mimesis of routine acts, through which the primitive entered into relationships with these objects. Perhaps the human from the stone-age aketches the elk so incomparably, only because the hand which leads the crayon still recalls the bow with which it shot the animal." Benjamin, "On Aesthetics" Fragment 98, dated 1936, *GS* VI, 127. See also his fragment on folk art and kitch, *GS* VI, 185-87.

23 See also Benjamin, "The Judgment of Defining," "Word Skeleton," "On the Riddle and the Secret," "Theses on the Problem of Identity," "On Perception," "Foundation of the Moral," "Objective Mendacity," "Turning Red in Anger and Shame," *GS* VI, 9-129.

24 "*Die Mississippi-Überschwemmung 1927*" was broadcast over Berlin radio on March 23, 1932. See Jeffrey Mehlman's essay on this text, and on some of the other radio pieces Benjamin wrote for children. Jeffrey Mehlman, *Walter Benjamin for Children* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993).

cretinism to the ground.[25] In relation to the Law, being collected beyond recognition of the self in the other risks a decisive transportation of the symbolic mirror image, through the tain or beyond the frame of "the cracked lookingglass of a servant", "*la servante au grand coeur dont vous étiez jalouse.*"[26] This being collects itself, readies itself in thinking for a transmutation not knowable in advance, a collective dissimulation, a change.[27]

---

25 "It is very meaningful that our own body is inaccessible o us in so many ways: We cannot see our face, our back, our entire head, that is to say the most distinguished parts of the body; we cannot pick ourselves up with our own hands, we cannot embrace ourselves. Equally, we project ourselves into the world of perception with the feet, not with the head./Hence the necessity, that in an instant of pure perception our body metmorphise itself before us; hence the sublime torment of the eccentric regarding his body." "On Perception," *GS* VI, 33-38. In another phenomenological fragment, "Perception and the Body," Benjamin writes: "We are placed in the world of perception, therefore in one of the highest levels of language, through our corporeality, strictly speaking, most immediately through our own individual body." *GS* VI, 67. Benjamin's interpretation of Kafka deserves to be discussed in relation to these fragments. Conversations I have had with Hedda Sterne about verticality and horizontality in painting and drawing have also contributed to these thoughts.

26 James Joyce, *Ulysses* ed. Hans Walter Gabler (New York: Vintage, 1986), 6; Baudelaire, "*L'amour du mensonge*" *Les Fleurs du Mal* ed. Marthiel and Jackson Mathews (New York: New Directions, 1955), 344-346. This line, which Benjamin was unable to translate in stanza form, he cited in prose: "*Über einige Motive bei Baudelaire*", *GS* I.2, 617.

27 See "Moscow" and *Moscow Diary* for a clue to Benjamin's disappointment with seeing the religious cult of the leader revealed in bust after bust of Lenin's image, and in the incantations of his name repeated endlesly in the city, on his first and only trip there during the winter of 1926-27. *GS* IV.1, 316-348, and *GS* VI, 292-409. Benjamin, "Moscow" trans. Edmund Jephcott, *Reflections* (New York: Schocken, 1986), 97-130. Benjamin, "Moscow Diary" trans Richard Sieburth, *October* 35 (Winter 1985): 9-135.

> The highest moral interest of the subject is to remain anonymous to itself. "Lord, allow me to contemplate my heart and my body without disgust," as Baudelaire calls to it. This wish is only able to be fulfilled if the subject remains anonymous to itself. In the good deed it avoids making acquaintance, avoids familiarity with itself. In the bad it gets to know itself -- and fundamentally. The anonymity of the moral subject touches on a double reservation. First: I have everything to expect from myself, I am capable of everything. And second: I am capable of everything, but can prove nothing to myself.[28]

Of the Law's relation to the body, and of the body's position as to writing, the graphic crimes of the scribblers give evidence. As Adorno said of Caillois' cramped strokes, "the attempt to trace back psychological tendencies to real somatic factual findings rather than to the conscious life of the autonomous individual, offers a truly materialistic aspect." Benjamin elongates those cramped strokes, draws a line out through its wandering stanzas into the sobering light of a stance, a stop as brief and furtive as an unreturned glance.[29] Moving on, the encounter marks a palpable form, which, given certain levels of acceleration, can be read. "'Through these

---

28 Benjamin, "Foundation of the Moral," *GS* VI, 59-60.
29 Which is an act of positioning altogether at odds with that reading of Benjamin recommended by Susan Buck-Morss and others. See Anselm Haverkamp's critique, "Notes on the 'Dialectical Image' (How Deconstructive Is It?) *Diacritics* 22: 3-4 (Fall-Winter 1992): 70-80. See also Winfried Menninghaus, "*Das Ausdruckslose: Walter Benjamins Metamorphosen der Bilderlosigkeit*," *Für Walter Benjamin: Dokumente, Essays und ein Entwurf* ed. Ingrid and Konrad Schurmann (Frankfurt a/M: Suhrkamp, 1992).

waters, then,' said I, 'with great toil and pain we have made our way.'"[30] "It is not improbable that the speed of writing and reading heightens the fusion of the semiotic and the mimetic in the sphere of language."[31] The boat is called, Boat.[32] The path it cuts through the water traces a line of response that appears to expect, perhaps, itself, if only in a flash, given time.[33]

---

30 So Socrates to Glaucon. Plato, *Res Publica (Politeia)* 441C (trans. Paul Shorey, translation modified).
31 *GS* II.1, 213.
32 Cf. Bettina Menke, *Sprachfiguren: Name, Allegorie, Bild nach Benjamin* (Munich: Fink, 1991).
33 "But if something different manifests itself in the individual, we will return again to the state and test it there and it may be that, by examining them side by side and rubbing them against one another, as it were, from the fire-sticks we may cause the spark of justice to flash forth, and when it is thus revealed, confirm it in our own minds." Plato, *Res Publica* 435A (trans. Paul Shorey). See generally Jacques Derrida, *Donner le temps, 1. La fausse monnaie* (Paris: Galilée, 1991).

CONCLUSION

If the introduction to this thesis introduced an origin that is not a simple beginning, this conclusion can only bear to be, at a certain level, inconclusive. That is not to say that an appropriate summary is unthinkable, only that it is difficult. For the nature of this project is to go on.

One thing, immediately, must be said about the "non-sensuous similarity" in language that Benjamin speaks about--in the essays on mimesis, but earlier also, and what is crucial to some of the later writings. Every language is onomonopoetic, he writes, and, as Carol Jacobs has vividly demonstrated in her essay, "Walter Benjamin: Topographically Speaking," the space between the word and the name and the place and the voice can crack, like the inscription read on a tombstone. What status that crack has, that split, has been endlessly discussed, and will continue to be so. But to return to the place of excavation of the word, and of the work of art, the spade picks out the space from which something can be seen and heard. That is, something regarding the relation between the word and the thing. The meaning of "bread" in French and German does not "mean" the same thing, Paul de Man strangely

wrote in his essay on Benjamin's "Task of the Translator." *Pain* does not signify the same thing as *Brot*. Two kinds of bread, one heavy, one light, presumably, but both "bread." Heavy and light, up and down, in and out: these are the directions, and the weights and measures by which consciousness is taken.

Spade/space. The dig of remembrance makes itself felt, and makes room for another, gruesome as it may sound, and as Yorick's skull makes known: it is not alone. Death penetrates the workings of consciousness, even when they stretch to the point of cracking, to that of madness, or enlightenment, perhaps. Light/life. Just as one can see the stars in the day from the bottom of a deep well, perhaps they could be seen from the deep of a trench, as well. Many spades are necessary to lift the work of art out from its buried place in the nomenclature of aesthetics, and out to fairly meet the realm of ethics, which it confronts.

But a spade, say of the political, also lends to the work not only the space of the political, but a certain time, or a rhythm. A "now" or a "stop" can be vital: they are words to live by. A pause for breath, a rereading, an act, all breathe life into the dead of forgetting or dogma or unreason. Here and how consciousness is raised, if it can and has begun to be made clear, in this movement and

this attention that Benjamin has given us in his writing, has been the purpose of this dissertation.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Works by Benjamin

Briefe, ed. Gershom Scholem and Theodor W. Adorno. Frankfurt a/M: Suhrkamp, 1966.

Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism, trans. Harry Zohn. London: Verso, 1983.

The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin 1910-1940, trans. Manfred R. Jacobson and Evelyn M. Jacobson, ed. Gershom Scholem and Theodor W. Adorno. Chicago: University of Chicago, 1994.

Gesammelte Schriften I-VII, ed. Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser. Frankfurt a/M: Suhrkamp, 1974-89.

Illuminations, trans. Harry Zohn, ed., intro. Hannah Arendt. New York: Schocken, 1969.

Moscow Diary, trans. Richard Sieburth, ed. Gary Smith, preface Gershom Scholem, in *October* 35 (1985): 9-135.

One-Way Street and Other Writings, trans. Edmund Jephcott and Kingsley Shorter. London: New Left Books, 1979.

The Origin of German Tragic Drama, trans. John Osborne, intro. George Steiner. London: New Left Books, 1977.

Reflections, trans. Edmund Jephcott, ed., intro. Peter Demetz. New York: Schocken, 1986.

Other Works

Abraham, Nicholas and Maria Torok. *The Wolf Man's Magic Word: A Cryptonymy*, trans. Nicholas Rand. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986.

The Actuality of Walter Benjamin, ed. Laura Marcus and Lynda Nead, special edition of *New Formations* 20 (1993).

Adorno, Theodor W. "Caillois, Roger, *La mante religieuse*," reviewed in the *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung* 7 (1938): 410-11.

Aesthetics and Politics, trans., ed. Ronald Taylor. London: Verso, 1980.

Agacinski, Sylviane et al. *Mimesis DesArticulations*. Paris: Flammarion, 1975.

Alter, Robert. *Necessary Angels: Tradition and Modernity in Kafka, Benjamin, and Scholem*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1991.

Ansén, Reiner. "*Das Monströse Überleben*," in *Defigurationen*. Würzburg: Königshausen und Neumann, 1993.

Aragon. *Paris Peasant*, trans., intro. Simon Watson Taylor. London: Pan, 1980.

Aristotle. *Metaphysics*, trans. W.D. Ross, in *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, ed., intro. Richard McKeon. New York: Random House, 1941.

_____. *Poetics*, trans. Ingram Bywater, in *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, above.

Augustine. *Confessions*, trans., intro. R.S. Pine-Coffin. London: Penguin, 1961.

Bahti, Timothy. "Theories of Knowledge: Fate and Forget ting in the Early Works of Walter Benjamin," in Rainer Nägele,ed., *Benjamin's Ground*, below.

Baldwin, John W. *The Scholastic Culture of the Middle Ages 1000-1300*. Lexington, Mass.: D.C. Heath, 1971.

Baudelaire, Charles. *Art in Paris: 1845-1862, Salons and Other Exhibitions*, trans., ed., Jonathan Mayne. Oxford: Phaidon, 1981.

_____. *The Flowers of Evil*, ed. Marthiel and Jackson Mathews. New York: New Directions, 1989.

_____. *Intimate Journals*, trans. Christopher Isherwood. San Francisco: City Lights, 1983.

_____. *The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays*, trans., ed. Jonathan Mayne. New York: Da Capo, 1964.

_____. *Paris Spleen*, trans. Louise Varèse. New York: New Directions, 1970.

_____. *Selected Critical Studies of Baudelaire*, ed., intro. D. Parmée. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1949.

Behler, Ernst. *Friedrich Schlegel*. Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1966.

Benjamin, Andrew and Peter Osborne, eds. *Walter Benjamin's Philosophy*. London: Routledge, 1994.

Bergson, Henri. *Matter and Memory*, trans. N.M. Paul and W.S. Palmer. New York: Zone, 1988.

_____. *Oeuvres*, intro. Henri Gouhier. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1963.

Berlin, Isaiah. *The Magus of the North: J.G. Hamann and the Origins of Modern Irrationalism*, ed. Henry Hardy. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1993.

Berman, Russell A. *Modern Culture and Critical Theory: Art, Politics, and the Legacy of the Frankfurt School*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989.

Bois, Yve-Alain. *Painting as Model*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1990.

Bolz, Norbert W. and Richard Faber, eds. *Antike und Mod erne: Zu Walter Benjamins "Passagen."* Würzburg: Königshausen und Neumann, 1986.

_____. *Walter Benjamin: Profane Erleuchtung und rettende Kritik*. Würzburg: Königshausen und Neumann, 1985.

Boman, Thorleif. *Hebrew Thought Compared with Greek*, trans. Jules L Moreau. New York: Norton, 1970.

Broch, Hermann. *Hugo von Hofmannsthal and his Time: The European Imagination, 1860-1920*, trans., ed., intro. Michael P. Steinberg. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984.

Buck-Morss, Susan. "Aesthetics and Anaesthetics: Walter Benjamin's Artwork Essay Reconsidered." *October* 62 (1992): 3-41.

_____. *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1989.

_____. *The Origin of Negative Dialectics: Theodor W. Adorno, Walter Benjamin, and the Frankfurt Institute*. New York: Free Press, 1977.

Burckhardt, Jacob. *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*, trans. S.G.C. Middlemore. London: Phaidon, 1950.

Caillois, Roger. "Mimicry and Legendary Psychasthenia," trans. John Shepley, in *October* 31 (1984): 17-32.

_____. "The Winter Wind," trans. Betsy Wing in *The College of Sociology 1937-39*, ed. Denis Hollier. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 32-42.

Calderón. *Life is a Dream*, trans., intro. William E. Colford. Woodbury, N.Y.: Barron's, 1958.

Cohen, Hermann. *Kants Theorie der Erfahrung*. Berlin: Cassirer, 1925.

Commemorating Walter Benjamin, ed. Ian Balfour and Cynthia Chase, special edition of *Diacritics* 22 (1992).

Cornell, Drucilla L. *The Philosophy of the Limit*. New York: Routledge, 1992.

Croce, Benedetto. *Aesthetic: As Science of Expression and General Linguistic*, trans. Douglas Ainslie. Boston: Godine, 1978.

Dante Alighieri. *The Divine Comedy: Inferno*, trans. Charles S. Singleton. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1980.

de Duve, Thierry. *Pictorial Nominalism: On Marcel Duchamp's Passage from Painting to the Readymade*, trans. Dana Polan, foreward John Rajchman. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991.

Deleuze, Gilles. *Cinema 1, The Movement-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam, and *Cinema 2, The Time-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986 and 1989, respectively.

_____. *Kant's Critical Philosophy: The Doctrine of the Faculties*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984.

_____. *The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque*, trans., foreward Tom Conley. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993.

de Man, Paul. *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the The Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism*, intro. Wlad Godzich. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983.

_____. "Conclusions: Walter Benjamin's 'The Task of the Translator,'" in *The Resistance to Theory*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986.

_____. "Phenomenality and Materiality in Kant," in *Hermeneutics: Questions and Prospects*, ed. Gary Shapiro and Alan Sica. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1984.

_____. "Rousseau: Metaphor (*Second Discourse*)," in *Allegories of Reading: Figural Language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke, and Proust*. New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1979.

de Quincey, Thomas. "The Last Days of Immanuel Kant," in *The Collected Writings of Thomas de Quincey*, ed. David Masson. Edinburgh: Adam and Charles Black, 1890: vol. IV, 323-379.

Derrida, Jacques. *Acts of Literature*, ed. Derek Attridge. New York: Routledge, 1992.

_____. *Cinders*, trans., ed., intro. Ned Lukacher. Lincoln, Neb.: University of Nebraska Press, 1991.

_____. *Derrida: A Critical Reader*, ed. David Wood. Oxford: Blackwell, 1992.

_____. *Dissemination*, trans., intro. Barbara Johnson. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981.

_____. *Donner le temps: 1. La fausse monnaie*. Paris: Galilée, 1991.

_____. *The Ear of the Other: Otobiography, Transference, Translation*, trans. Peggy Kamuf and Avital Ronell, ed. Claude Lévesque and Christie McDonald. Lincoln, Neb.: University of Nebraska Press, 1988.

_____. *Edmund Husserl's* **Origin of Geometry***: An Introduction*, trans. John P. Leavey, Jr. Lincoln, Neb.: University of Nebraska Press, 1989.

_____. "*Force de loi: le 'fondement mystique de l'autorité'*"/"Force of Law: The 'Mystical Foundation of Authority,'" trans. Mary Quaintance, in special edition on Walter Benjamin of the *Cardozo Law Review* 11 (1990): 920-1045.

_____. *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982.

_____. *On the Name*, trans. David Wood, John P. Leavey, Jr., and Ian McLeod, ed. Thomas Dutoit. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995.

_____. *The Other Heading: Reflections on Today's Europe*, trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael B. Naas. Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1992.

_____. *Passions, Sauf le nom, Khôra*. Paris: Galilée, 1993.

_____. "The Politics of Friendship," trans. Gabriel Motzkin in *The Journal of Philosophy* 75, 11 (1988): 632-45.

_____. *The Post Card*, trans. Alan Bass. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987.

_____. *Spectres de Marx*. Paris: Galilée, 1993.

_____. *Spurs: Nietzsche's Styles/Éperons: Les styles de Nietzsche*, trans. Barbara Harlow, intro. Stefano Agosti. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979.

_____. *"Les Tours de Babel,"* in *L'art des confins mélanges offerts à Maurice Gandillac*. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1985: 209-37.

_____. *The Truth in Painting*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Ian McLeod. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987.

_____. *Writing and Difference*, trans., intro. Alan Bass. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978.

Duns Scotus, John. *Philosophical Writings: A Selection*, trans., intro. Allan Wolter, foreward Marilyn McCord Adams. Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987.

Einstein, Albert. *Relativity: The Special and the General Theory--A Clear Explanation that Anyone can Understand*, trans. Robert W. Lawson. New York: Crown, 1961.

Eisenstein, S.M. *Eisenstein on Disney*, trans. Alan Upchurch, ed. Jay Leyda, intro. Naum Kleiman. London: Methuen, 1988.

El Greco. *The Vision of Saint John*. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

Fenves, Peter. *"Chatter:" Language and History in Kierkegaard*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993.

_____. "The Dawn of Judgement: Spatiality, Analogy and Metaphor in Benjamin's 'On Language as Such and on Human Language,'" manuscript on file with the author.

_____. *A Peculiar Fate: Metaphysics and World-History in Kant*. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1991.

_____. "Testing Right--Lying in View of Justice," *On the Necessity of Violence for Any Possibility of Justice*, special edition of the *Cardozo Law Review* 13 (1991): 1081-1113.

_____, ed. *Raising the Tone of Philosophy: Late Essays by Kant, Transformative Critique by Derrida*, trans. Peter Fenves and John Leavey, Jr. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993.

Fichte, J.G. *Science of Knowledge*, trans. A.E. Kroeger. Philadelphia: J.P. Lippincott, 1868.

_____. *Versuch einer neuen Darstellung der Wissenschaftslehre (1979-98)*, ed. Peter Baumanns. Hamburg: Felix Meiner, 1975.

_____. *Wissenschaftslehre (1804)*, ed. Wolfgang Janke. Frankfurt a/M: Klostermann, 1966.

Figal, Gunter. "*Recht und Moral bei Kant, Cohen, und Benjamin*," in *Materialien zur Neukantianismus-Discussion*, ed. Hans Ludwig Ollig. Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1987.

Focillon, Henri. *The Life of Forms in Art*, trans. Charles Beecher Hogan and George Kubler, intro. Jean Molino. New York: Zone, 1989.

Fourier, Charles. *Design for Utopia*, trans. Julia Franklin, intro. Charles Gide. New York: Schocken, 1971.

Freud, Sigmund. "*Psychoanalyse und Telepathie*," in *Gesammelte Werke XVII*, ed. Anna Freud, E. Bibring, W. Hoffer, E. Kris, O. Isakower. Frankfurt a/M: Fischer, 1941: 25-44.

Fried, Michael. *Realism, Writing, Disfiguration: On Thomas Eakins and Stephen Crane*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987.

Friedrich, Carl J. *The Age of the Baroque 1610-1660*. New York: Harper and Row, 1952.

Frye, Northrop. *Anatomy of Criticism*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1957.

Fuld, Werner. *Walter Benjamin: Zwischen den Stühlen--Eine Biographie*. Frankfurt a/M: Fischer, 1981.

Gebhardt, Peter et al. *Walter Benjamin--Zeitgenosse der Moderne*. Kronberg/Ts.: Scriptor, 1976.

Geist, Johann Friedrich. *Arcades: The History of a Build ing Type*, trans. Jane O. Newman and John H. Smith. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1985.

Genet, Jean. *Le balcon*. Decines: L'arbalète, 1970.

George, Stefan. *Gedichte*, ed. Robert Böhringer. Stuttgart: Reclam, 1958.

_____. *The Works of Stefan George rendered into English*, trans. Olga Marx and Erst Morwitz. Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 1974.

German Romantic Criticism, ed. A. Leslie Willson, forward Ernst Behler. *The German Library*, vol. 21. New York: Continuum, 1982.

Geulen, Eva. *"Zeit zur Darstellung. Walter Benjamins Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit,"* in *Modern Language Notes* 107 (1992): 580-605.

Giedion, Sigfried. *Space, Time, and Architecture: The Growth of a New Tradition*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1970.

Goethe, Johann Wolfgang von. *Elective Affinities*, trans. R.J. Hollingdale. London: Penguin, 1971.

_____. *Gesammelte Werke*, ed. Bernt von Heiseler. Bielefeld: C. Bertelsmann, 1957.

_____. *Faust*, ed. Ernst Merian-Genast. Basel: Birkäuser, 1944.

_____. *Faust, Part I and Selections from Part II*, trans., intro. Walter Kaufmann. New York: Doubleday, 1961.

_____. *Theory of Colours*, trans. Charles Lock Eastlake, intro. Deane B. Judd. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1970.

Gracia, Jorge J.E. *Individuation in Scholasticism: The Later Middle Ages and the Counter-Reformation 1150-1650*. Albany, N.Y.: SUNY Press, 1994.

Gryphius, Andreas. *Catharina von Georgien*, ed. Alois M. Haas. Stuttgart: Reclam, 1975.

_____. *Horribilicribrifax Teutsch*, ed. Gerhard Dünnhaupt. Stuttgart: Reclam, 1988.

_____. *Leo Armenius*, ed. Peter Rusterholz. Stuttgart: Reclam, 1971.

_____. *Verliebtes Gespenst, Die geliebte Dornrose*, ed. Eberhard Mannack. Stuttgart: Reclam, 1985.

Guston, Philip. *Philip Guston's Poem-Pictures*. The Drawing Center, New York, through July 28, 1995.

Hallmann, Johann Christian. *Mariamne*, ed. Gerhard Spellerberg. Stuttgart: Reclam, 1973.

Hamann, Johann Georg. *Socratic Memorabilia*, trans. and commentary James C. O'Flaherty. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1967.

Hammacher, Werner. "The word *Wolke*--If It Is One," trans. Peter Fenves, in *Benjamin's Ground*, ed. Rainer Nägele, below.

Hansen, Miriam. "Benjamin, Cinema and Experience: 'The Blue Flower in the Land of Technology.'" *New German Critique* 40 (1987): 179-224.

_____. "Of Mice and Ducks: Benjamin and Adorno on Dis ney." *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 92 (1993): 27-61.

Haverkamp, Anselm, ed. *Gewalt und Gerechtigkeit: Derrida--Benjamin*. Frankfurt a/M: Suhrkamp, 1994.

_____. *Laub voll Trauer: Hölderlins späte Allegorie*. Munich: Wilhelm Fink, 1991.

Heidegger, Martin. *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson. New York: Harper and Row, 1962.

_____. *An Introduction to Metaphysics*, trans. Ralph Manheim. New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1959.

_____. *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans., intro. Albert Hofstadter. New York: Harper and Row, 1971.

_____. *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, trans., intro. William Lovitt. New York: Harper and Row, 1977.

_____. *Der Ursprung des Kunstwerkes*, intro. Hans-Georg Gadamer. Stuttgart: Reclam, 1960.

Hölderlin, Friedrich. *Gedichte/Hyperion*. Munich: Wilhelm Goldmann, v. 429.

_____. *Selected Verse*, trans., ed., intro. Michael Hamburger. London: Anvil Press Poetry, 1986.

Horkheimer, Max and Theodor W. Adorno. *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. John Cumming. New York: Continuum, 1972.

Husserl, Edmund. *Philosophie als strenge Wissenschaft*, ed. Wilhelm Szilasi. Frankfurt a/M: Klostermann, 1981.

Hutchison, Jane Campbell. *Albrecht Dürer: A Biography*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1990.

Iversen, Margaret. *Alois Riegl: Art History and Theory*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1993.

Jacobs, Carol. *The Dissimulating Harmony: The Image of Interpretation in Nietzsche, Rilke, Artaud, and Benjamin*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978.

_____. "The Monstrosity of Translation: Walter Ben jamin's 'The Task of the Translator,'" in *Telling Time: Lévi-Strauss, Ford, Lessing, Benjamin, de Man, Wordsworth, Rilke*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993, 128-141.

_____."Walter Benjamin: Topographically Speaking," in *Walter Benjamin on Romanticism*, special edition of *Studies in Romanticism* 11 (1992): 501-524.

Jean Paul. *A Reader*, trans. Erika Casey, ed. Timothy J. Casey. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992.

Jennings, Michael W. *Dialectical Images: Walter Benjamin's Theory of Literary Criticism*. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1987.

Jonas, Hans. *The Gnostic Religion: The Message of the Alien God and the Beginnings of Christianity*. Boston: Beacon, 1963.

Jonson, Ben. *The Complete Plays of Ben Jonson*, ed. G.A. Wilkes. Oxford: Clarenden, 1979-82.

_____. *Every Man in His Humor*, ed. J.W. Lever. Lincoln, Neb.: University of Nebraska Press, 1971.

Josephus. *The Jewish War*, trans. G.A. Williamson, intro. E. Mary Smallwood. London: Penguin, 1959.

Joyce, James. *Ulysses*, ed. Hans Walter Gabler with Wolfhard Steppe and Claus Melchior. New York: Vintage, 1986.

Kafka, Franz. *Gesammelte Werke*, ed. Max Brod. Frankfurt a/M: Fischer, 1983.

Kambas, Chryssoula. *Walter Benjamin im Exil: Zum Verhältnis von Literaturpolitik und Ästhetik*. Tübingen: Max Niemeyer, 1983.

Kandinsky, Wassily. *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, trans., intro. M.T.H. Sadler. New York: Dover, 1977.

Kant, Immanuel. *Critique of Judgement*, trans. Werner S. Pluhar. Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987.

_____. "*Prolegomena zu einer jeden künftigen Metaphysik die als Wissenschaft wird auftreten können*," in *Werkausgabe V*. Frankfurt a/M: Suhrkamp, 1977.

_____. *Prolegomena*, trans. Paul Carus. La Salle, Ill.: Open Court, 1902.

Klages, Ludwig. *Der Geist als Widersache der Seele*. Munich: J.A. Barth, 1954.

Kracauer, Siegfried. "On the Writings of Walter Benjamin," in *The Mass Ornament: Weimar Essays*, trans., ed., intro. Thomas Y. Levin. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1995, 259-264.

Kraus, Karl. *In These Great Times: A Karl Kraus Reader*, trans. various, ed. Harry Zohn. Manchester: Carcanet, 1976.

Krauss, Rosalind E. *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1986.

Kretzmann, Norman, Anthony Kenny and Jan Pinborg. *The Cambridge History of Later Medieval Philosophy*. London: Cambridge University Press, 1982.

Lacan, Jacques. "*Kant avec Sade*," in *Écrits*. Paris: Seuil, 1966.

_____. *Écrits: A Selection*, trans. Alan Sheridan. New York: Norton, 1977.

Lacoue-Labarthe, Philippe and Jean-Luc Nancy. *The Literary Absolute: The Theory of Literature in German Romanticism*, trans. Philip Barnard and Cheryl Lester. Albany: SUNY Press, 1988.

Leclercq, Jean. *The Love of Learning and the Desire for God: A Study of Monastic Culture*, trans. Catharine Misrahi. New York: Fordham University Press, 1982.

Lefebvre, Henri. *The Production of Space*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith. Oxford: Blackwell, 1991.

Leibniz, Gottfried Wilhelm. *Discourse on Metaphysics, Correspondence with Arnauld, Monadology*, trans. George Montgomery, intro. Paul Janet. La Salle, Ill.: Open Court, 1902.

Le Rider, Jacques. *Modernity and Crises of Identity: Cul ture and Society in Fin-de-Siècle Vienna*, trans. Rosemary Morris. New York: Continuum, 1993.

Leskov, Nikolai. "The Alexandrite," in *The Tales of N.S. Leskov*, trans. R. Norman. London: Routledge, 1944: vol. I, 195-208.

Levin, Thomas Y. "Walter Benjamin and the Theory of Art History." *October* 47 (1988): 77-83.

Levinas, Emmanuel. *Collected Philosophical Papers*, trans. Alphonso Lingis. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1987.

_____. *Ethics and Infinity: Conversations with Philippe Nemo*, trans. Richard A. Cohen. Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1985.

_____. *Existence and Existents*, trans. Alphonso Lingis. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1978.

_____. *Face to Face with Levinas*, ed. Richard A. Cohen. Albany, N.Y.: SUNY Press, 1986.

_____. *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Ethics*, trans. Alphonso Lingis. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1981.

_____. *Time and the Other*, trans. Richard A. Cohen. Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1987.

_____. *Totality and Infinity*, trans. Alphonso Lingis. Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969.

Levy, Louis. *Die Menschenzwiebel Kzradok und der frühlingsfrische Methusalem*, trans. Harmann Kinn. Berlin: Erich Reiss, 1912.

Lewis, C.S. *The Allegory of Love: A Study in Medieval Tradition*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977.

Lindner, Burkhardt, ed. *"Links hätte noch alles sich zu enträtseln...:" Walter Benjamin im Kontext*. Frankfurt a/M: Syndikat, 1978.

Lukács, Georg. *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics*, trans. Rodney Livingstone. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1971.

_____. *Soul and Form*, trans. Anna Bostock. London: Merlin, 1974.

Lyotard, Jean-François. *The Inhuman: Reflections on Time*, trans. Geoffrey Bennington and Rachel Bowlby. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991.

Mainstone, Madeleine and Rowland. *The Seventeenth Century*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981.

Markner, Reinhard and Thomas Weber, eds. *Literatur über Walter Benjamin: Kommentierte Bibliographie 1983-1992*. Hamburg: Argument, 1993.

McGrath, Alister E. *Reformation Thought*. Oxford: Black well, 1988.

Mehlman, Jeffrey. *Walter Benjamin for Children: An Essay on His Radio Years*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993.

Mencken, H.L. *Friedrich Nietzsche*, intro. Richard Flatham. New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction, 1993.

Menke, Bettine. *Sprachfiguren: Name--Allegorie--Bild nach Walter Benjamin*. Munich, Wilhelm Fink, 1991.

Menninghaus, Winfried. *"Das Ausdruckslose: Walter Ben jamins Metamorphosen der Bilderlosigkeit,"* in *Für Walter Benjamin: Dokumente, Essays und ein Entwurf*, ed. Ingrid and Konrad Schürmann. Frankfurt a/M: Suhrkamp, 1992.

_____. *Schwellenkunde: Walter Benjamins Passage des Mythos*. Frankfurt a/M: Suhrkamp, 1986.

_____. *Walter Benjamins Theorie der Sprachmagie*. Frankfurt a/M: Suhrkamp, 1980.

Meyrink, Gustav. *The Golem*, trans. M. Pemberton, intro. Robert Irwin. New York: Hippocrene, 1985.

Missac, Pierre. *Walter Benjamin's Passages*, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholsen. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1995.

Mondrian, Piet. *The New Art--The New Life: The Collected Writings of Piet Mondrian*, trans., ed. Harry Holtzman and Martin S. James. New York: Da Capo, 1993.

Mosès, Stéphane. *L'Ange de l'Histoire: Rosenzweig, Ben jamin, Scholem*. Paris: Seuil, 1992.

Musik, Gunar. *Die erkenntnistheoretischen Grundlagen der Ästhetik Walter Benjamins und ihr Fortwirken in der Konzeption des Passagenwerks*. Frankfurt a/M: Peter Lang, 1985.

Nabokov, Vladimir. *Nikolai Gogol*. New York: New Directions, 1944.

Nägele, Rainer. *Theater, Theory, Speculation: Walter Benjamin and the Scenes of Modernity*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991.

_____, ed. *Benjamin's Ground: New Readings of Walter Benjamin*. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1988.

Newman, Barnett. *Selected Writings and Interviews*, ed. John P. O'Neill, intro. Richard Shiff. Berkeley: Uni versity of California Press, 1992.

Nietzsche, Friedrich. *The Birth of Tragedy*, trans. Walter Kaufmann. New York: Vintage, 1967.

_____. *Die Geburt Der Tragödie, Kritischen Studienaus gabe I*, ed. Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari. Ber lin: Walter de Gruyter, 1967-77 and 1988.

_____. *Oeuvres*, ed. Jean Lacoste and Jacques Le Rider. Paris: Robert Laffont, 1993.

Novalis. *Gedichte, Die Lehrlinge zu Sais*, ed. Johannes Mahr. Stuttgart: Reclam, 1984.

_____. *Hymns to the Night*, trans. Richard C. Higgins. Kingston, N.Y.: McPherson & Co., 1988.

_____. *Pollen and Fragments: Selected Poetry and Prose of Novalis*, trans., intro. Arthus Versluis. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Phanes, 1989.

_____. *Novalis Werke*, ed. Gerhard Schulz. Munich: C.H. Beck, 1981.

On the Necessity of Violence for Any Possibility of Jus tice, special edition of the *Cardozo Law Review* 13 (1991).

Opitz, Michael and Erdmut Wizisla, eds. *Aber ein Sturm weht vom Paradiese her: Texte zu Walter Benjamin*. Leipzig: Reclam, 1992.

Ott, Ulrich, ed. *Walter Benjamin 1892-1940*, worked on by Rolf Tiedemann, Christoph Gödde and Henri Lonitz. Marbach a/Neckar: Deutsche Schillergesellschaft, 1990.

Panofsky, Erwin. *Gothic Architecture and Scholasticism*. New York: New American Library, 1976.

Pensky, Max. *Melancholy Dialectics: Walter Benjamin and the Play of Mourning*. Amherst, Mass.: University of Massachusetts Press, 1993.

Pichois, Claude. *Baudelaire*, trans. Graham Robb. London: Hamish Hamilton, 1989.

Plato. *The Collected Dialogues of Plato, Including the Letters*, trans. various, ed. Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1961.

Plotinus. *The Enneads*, trans. Stephen MacKenna, intro. John Dillon. London: Penguin, 1991.

Poe, Edgar Allan. *Selected Writings*, ed., intro. David Galloway. London: Penguin, 1967.

Pope, Alexander. "On the Art of Sinking in Poetry," in *Selected Poetry and Prose*, ed. and intro. William K. Wimsatt, Jr. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1962.

Proust, Marcel. *Du côté de chez Swann*, preface Antoine Compagnon. Paris: Gallimard, 1988.

_____. *Remembrance of Things Past*, trans. C.K. Scott Moncrieff and Terence Kilmartin. New York: Vintage, 1982.

Rang, Florens Christian. *Goethes "Selige Sehnsucht." Ein Gespräch um die Möglichkeit einer christlichen Deutung*, ed. Bernhard Rang. Freiburg: Herder, 1949.

Riegl, Alois. *Late Roman Art Industry*, trans., forward, Rolf Winkes. Rome: Giorgio Bretschneider, 1985.

Ritter, Johann Wilhelm. *Fragmente aus dem Nachlasse eines jungen Physikers: Ein Taschenbuch für Freunde der Natur*, ed. Steffen and Birgit Dietzsch. Hanau: Müller and Kiepenheuer, 1984.

Roberts, Julian. *Walter Benjamin*. London: Macmillan, 1982.

Ronell, Avital. *Dictations: On Haunted Writing*. Lincoln, Neb.: University of Nebraska Press, 1993.

_____. *The Telephone Book: Technology, Schizophrenia, Electric Speech*. Lincoln, Neb.: University of Nebraska Press, 1989.

Rosenzweig, Franz. *The Star of Redemption*, trans. William W. Hallo. Notre Dame, Ind.: Notre Dame Press, 1985.

_____. *Der Stern der Erlösung*. Frankfurt a/M: Suhrkamp, 1990.

Schapiro, Meyer. *Theory and Philosophy of Art: Style, Artist, and Society, Selected Papers IV*. New York: George Braziller, 1994.

Scheerbart, Paul. *Lesabéndio. Ein Asteroiden-Romane*. Frankfurt a/M: Suhrkamp, 1986.

Schlegel, Friedrich. "Dialogue on Poetry," trans. Ernst Behler and Roman Struc, in *German Romantic Criticism*, above.

_____. *Epochen der Dichtkunst* from *"Gespräch über die Poesie,"* in *Kritische Friedrich-Schlegel-Ausgabe II*, ed. Ernst Behler, with Jean-Jacques Anstett and Hans Eichner. Munich: Ferdinand Schöning, 1967.

_____. *Friedrich Schlegel's* Lucinde *and the Fragments*, trans., intro. Peter Firchow. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1971.

_____. *Philosophische Vorlesungen aus den Jahren 1804 bis 1806 II*, ed. C.J.H. Windischmann. Bonn: 1846.

Schmitt, Carl. *The Concept of the Political*, trans., intro. George Schwab. New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1976.

_____. *Political Romanticism*, trans. Guy Oakes. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1986.

_____. *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty*, trans. George Schwab. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1985.

Scholem, Gershom. *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*. New York: Schocken, 1961.

_____. *On the Kabbalah and Its Symbolism*, trans. Ralph Manheim. New York: Schocken, 1969.

_____. *Walter Benjamin: The Story of a Friendship*, trans. Harry Zohn. London: Faber & Faber, 1982.

_____, ed. *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin and Gershom Scholem, 1932-1940*, trans. Gary Smith and Andre Lefevere, intro. Anson Rabinbach. New York: Schocken, 1989.

Schumann, Robert. *"Mignon," op. 98a, no.1*. Text by Goethe, trans. Robert Cowart. Nonesuch Recording, 1994.

Second Special Issue on Walter Benjamin, New German Critique 39 (1986).

Shakespeare, William. *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare*, intro. St. John Ervine. London: Collins' Clear-Type Press, 1923.

Smith, Gary, ed. *Benjamin: Philosophy, Aesthetics, History*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989.

_____, ed. *On Walter Benjamin: Critical Essays and Recollections*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1988.

Sontag, Susan. *Under the Sign of Saturn*. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1980.

Spade, Paul Vincent. *Lies, Language and Logic in the Late Middle Ages*. London: Variorum, 1988.

Special Walter Benjamin Issue, New German Critique 17 (1979).

Special Walter Benjamin Issue, New German Critique 48 (1989).

Talmon, J.L. *The Origins of Totalitarian Democracy*. New York: Praeger, 1960.

Tiedemann, Rolf. *Studien zur Philosophie Walter Benjamins*, intro. Theodor W. Adorno. Frankfurt a/M: Europäische Verlagsanstalt, 1965.

Valéry, Paul. *Oeuvres*, ed. Jean Hytier. Paris: Gallimard, 1957.

_____. *Selected Writings*, trans. various. New York: New Directions, 1950.

Vlastos, Gregory. *Socrates: Ironist and Moral Philosopher*. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1991.

von Lohenstein, Daniel Casper. *Sophonisbe*, ed. Rolf Tarot. Stuttgart: Reclam, 1970.

Walter Benjamin, special edition of the *Modern Language Notes* 106 (1991).

Walter Benjamin: 1892-1940, special edition of the *Modern Language Notes* 107 (1992).

Weber, Samuel. "Genealogy of Modernity: History, Myth, and Allegory in Benjamin's *Origin of the German Mourning Play*," in *Modern Language Notes* 106 (1991): 465-500.

_____. "Laughing in the Meanwhile." *Modern Language Notes* 102 (1987): 691-707.

_____. *The Legend of Freud*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982.

_____. *Return to Freud: Jacques Lacan's Dislocation of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Michael Levine. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991.

_____. "Upsetting the Set Up: Remarks on Heidegger's Questing after Technics." *Modern Language Notes* 104 (1989): 977-992.

_____. "Walter Benjamin: The Romantic Concept of Criticism." Manuscript on file with the author.

Werkbund-Archiv, ed. *Benjaminiana*, with Hans Puttnies and Gary Smith. Giessen: Anabas, 1991.

_____. *Bucklicht Männlein und Engel der Geschichte: Walter Benjamin, Theoretiker der Moderne*. Berlin: Museumspädagogischer Dienst, 1990.

Wills, David. *Prosthesis*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995.

Witte, Bernd. *Walter Benjamin*. Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1985.

_____. *Walter Benjamin: An Intellectual Biography*, trans. James Rolleston. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1991.

_____. *Walter Benjamin--Der Intellektuelle als Kritiker: Untersuchungen zu seinem Frühwerk*. Stuttgart: Metzler, 1976.

Wittgenstein, Ludwig. *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G.E.M. Anscombe. New York: Macmillan, 1953.

Wölfflin, Heinrich. *Principles of Art History: The Problem of the Development of Style in Later Art*, trans. M.D. Hottinger. New York: Dover, 1950.

Wolin, Sheldon S. *Politics and Vision*. Boston: Little, Brown, 1960.

Wordsworth, William. *The Prelude, or Growth of a Poet's Mind*, ed., intro. Ernest de Selincourt. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970.

Yovel, Yirmiyahu. *Kant and the Philosophy of History*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1980.

_____. *Spinoza and Other Heretics: The Adventures of Immanence*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1989.

Zizek, Slavoj. *Looking Awry: An Introduction to Jacques Lacan through Popular Culture*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1991.

_____. *The Sublime Object of Ideology*. London: Verso, 1989.