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Style and Mimesis in the Name of Walter Benjamin

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ABSTRACT

This study locates the consistency of Benjamin's philosophy in its deployment of style. Since the style of his philosophy corresponds to its object, it always manifests differently. But the principle of its presentation remains the same: it is deployed to induce in the reader an act of mimetic assimilation to the constructive principle of the text. The purpose is to bypass theory by effectuating praxis directly in an act of what is here called "staging." Such direct effectuation of praxis by prose is the only way of avoiding contradiction in a philosophy committed to the linguistic nature of recognition. If all factual knowledge derives from a communion with the thing in its name by an act of ecstatic praxis, then this same principle must apply to the presentation of knowledge itself. While this principle had always implicitly informed Benjamin's practice, it was only later that he recognised how the symbolic character of language on which his concept of the name is based presupposes the mimetic faculty of man. The key to grasping the mediation he once claimed to exist from his linguistico-philosophical standpoint to the approach of dialectical materialism is the priority that each assigns praxis. The development of the concept of similitude in terms of a theory of the faculty of mimesis between 1928 and 1933 sets the stage for the materialist appropriation of the conceptual resources of theology that characterises his late philosophy. The role of style and mimesis in the staging of his philosophy has been obscured until now by a neglect of the interdependency of symbolic character and mimetic praxis; by the interpretation of his style in terms of the performative speech act; and by a failure to address part of the reason for his prioritisation of Plato and Kant above all other philosophers, namely the role of dialogue in Plato and the mystical terminology of Kant.

AUTHOR'S DECLARATION

I declare that all the material
contained in this thesis
is my own work.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'PALMER', written in a cursive style.

Francis J. Palmer
30.9.2015

CONTENTS

Acknowledgements	i
Bibliographical Note	ii
Overture	iii
Programme	vii

Part I: Setting the Scene

A Slight Deviation from the Regular Course (I)	1
The Linguistic Nature of Recognition.....	5
The Substance of Style.....	12
The Role of System.....	16
Mimesis in the Early Metaphysics.....	20
Against Neologism.....	24
Ontology is not the Palace.....	27
The Symbolic Character of Language.....	31
The House of Truth.....	35
Loosening the Self.....	39
A Style of the Name.....	43

Part II: Raising the Curtain

Metaphysics and “Metaphysics”	47
The Mystery of Symbolic Character.....	52
Paradise and Classless Society.....	60
The Little Word “I”	65
The Originary Perception of Words.....	75
A Commitment to the Extremes.....	83
The Expulsion of Metaphor.....	89
The Medium of Stance.....	99
Similitude and the Name.....	102
Scooping the Same from Actuality.....	107
A “Metaphysics” of the Image.....	113

Part III: Two Revivals

“The Task of the Translator” (1921)	
Similitude and Totality.....	119

The Same and Identical.....	126
The Law of Translation.....	132
“The Artwork in the Age of its Technical Reproducibility” (1936)	
The Treasure Trove of Language.....	137
Aura and Ornament.....	141
The Good Description.....	144
The Technique of Miniaturisation.....	152
The Double Cut.....	156
Underhanded Control.....	165
The Strongbox of Truth.....	169
Part IV: Waiting in the Wings	
The Redemption of Discontinuity.....	173
The Role of Dialogue.....	179
Against Imitation.....	181
The Truth of Primary Names.....	185
Another Approach to Scientific Knowledge.....	189
The Bipolar Construction of Socrates.....	192
A Slight Deviation from the Regular Course (II)	195
Bibliography.....	200

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BIBLIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

All translations from the German in which a reference to the German text is provided are the author's own. Where two page numbers are provided, the first refers to the published English translation, the second to the German original. The following abbreviations are used for works by Walter Benjamin:

- AP *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999.
- EW *Early Writings: 1910-1917*, trans. Howard Eiland *et al.* Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2011.
- C *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin: 1910-1940*, ed. Gershom Scholem and Theodor Adorno, trans. Manfred R. Jacobson and Evelyn M. Jacobson. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994.
- GB *Gesammelte Briefen*, 6 vols., ed. Christoph GÖdde and Henri Lonitz. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1995-2000.
- GS *Gesammelte Schriften*, 7 vols., ed. Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser *et al.* Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1972-1989.
- O *Origin of German Tragic Drama*, trans. John Osborne. London: Verso, 1977.
- OH *On Hashish*, ed. Howard Eiland, trans. Howard Eiland *et al.* Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2006.
- SW *Selected Writings*, 4 vols., ed. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1996-2003.

OVERTURE

The concept of philosophical style is free of paradox.
Der Begriff des philosophischen Stils ist frei von Paradoxie.
(O, 32; GS I, 212)

“If style is the power to indulge in the length and breadth of the thought of language [*des Sprachdenkens*] without thereby falling into banality,” writes Walter Benjamin, “then it is mostly won by the cardiac strength [*die Herzkraft*] of great thoughts that drives the blood of language [*das Sprachblut*] through veins of syntax into the remotest limbs” (SW 2, 441; GS II, 346). Neither these limbs nor those thoughts are simply available on the pages bearing Benjamin’s name. The path to them is along the very same veins of syntax that link these thoughts and limbs. It is *how* the blood of language is pumped from the heart of his philosophy to its extremities that alone provides access to these poles. The latter will for this reason not be reached by translations that focus solely on *what* these veins transport. A successful transfusion depends on an equivalent syntactical construction. Until the mechanics of his haemodynamics predominate its investigation, more blood will be let in the procedure than is successfully transfused. The translation and interpretation of Benjamin in English is by and large not based on such concern. This study is designed to reveal the vitality that can be won for thought by making style its object of focus. Since existing translations of Benjamin take aim less at *how* his prose is presented than at *what* it appears to present, they serve this study less as a resource than as an impetus. The new translations presented in what follows have been produced on the basis of existing translations that provide guidance without which this study would not have been possible. But there are two sides to the guidance they provide. The first is positive: they offer solutions to the problems posed by this prose to its translation. But just as important are their failures to stick to the letter of what they translate. For the stakes of this letter are thereby set into a relief more stark than it had been in the original. It is for this reason that translation should not be regarded as an obstacle to interpretation. The struggle to translate a prose as considered as that of Benjamin demands an intensity of attention in which new insight can be born.

This study takes up a challenge laid down by Susan Ingram in 1997, not long after the publication of the first volume of the *Selected Writings*. The context was an Anglo-American reception of Benjamin that had up until then been for the most part based on the work of two translators, namely Harry Zohn and Edmund Jephcott.¹ The rigour of the work

¹ The first collection of essays by Benjamin in English appeared in 1968. It was translated by Zohn. The second appeared in 1978. It was translated by Jephcott. The third, which is an expansion of the second, appeared in 1979. Aside from two essays translated by Kingsley Shorter, it was likewise

of Zohn in particular had been cast in doubt by what would become a famous lecture by Paul de Man at Cornell University in 1983.² Its subject was Benjamin's essay "Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers" (1921); its conceit was to connect certain errors of its translation by Zohn—which had appeared in 1968 under the title "The Task of the Translator"—to the impossibility of the task as it is allegedly determined in the essay by Benjamin itself. It is a revised version of the same translation that would eventually appear in the first volume of the *Selected Writings* with whose publication in 1996 "a rather critical juncture in the history of Anglo-American Benjaminia" had, as Ingram put it, been reached.³ After providing background information on both Zohn himself and how he came to translate Benjamin, as well as a close analysis of certain problems with his translation of "Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers," Ingram offers the following by way of conclusion.

Unlike many Benjamin scholars, I believe it is not enough to point out where the Zohn translations are in "error" and then offer new ones in their place, and I remain sceptical that new translations will fair any better than their predecessors. What is the use of new Benjamin translations if these new translations are to be accepted and canonized as quickly and uncritically as [Zohn's] were? While they may be "better" according to current standards of accuracy, their value lies in their potential comparative function. Only if new translations begin to be used alongside [Zohn's], if they encourage discussion of the hows and whys of both translations, only then will their mere presence have accomplished more than [Zohn's] ever could in assisting Anglo-American philosophical discourse wrestle with the meaning of Benjamin's challenging writings.⁴

This study involves sustained commentary on many of the translations of Benjamin so far published in English. To this extent, it indeed uses the new translations it presents alongside the canonical translations. However, this study is based on a conviction strongly opposed to the scepticism by Ingram "that new translations will fair any better than their predecessors." The reason for this is not simply because the substance of Benjamin's philosophy consists *in* its style in such a way that demands a certain literalism when it comes to translating his syntax. While this is indeed a conviction that informs this study, there is

translated by Jephcott. See: Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, ed. Hannah Arendt. New York: Schocken Books, 1968; Walter Benjamin, *Reflections: Aphorisms, Essays and Autobiographical Writings*, trans. Edmund Jephcott, ed. Peter Demetz. New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovitch, 1978; Walter Benjamin, *One-Way Street and Other Writings*, trans. Edmund Jephcott and Kingsley Shorter. London: New Left Books, 1979.

² Paul de Man, "Conclusions: Walter Benjamin's 'The Task of the Translator.'" In *Resistance to Theory*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986, pp. 73-105.

³ Susan Ingram, "The Trouble with Harry, or Producing Walter Benjamin's Anglo-American Reception," *Carleton Germanic Papers* 25 (1997), p. 78.

⁴ Susan Ingram, "The Trouble with Harry," *op. cit.*, p. 86. The surname Zohn replaces the first name Harry, which Ingram uses as part of a play on the title of a film by Alfred Hitchcock, namely *What is the Trouble with Harry?* (1955).

nothing to say that translations executed on its basis will lead any less directly to the uncritical canonisation of just one set of possibilities chosen by a translator. The reason for opposing Ingram's scepticism is that there is a presentation of translation that would almost certainly lead to a heightened sensitivity to the necessary provisionality of its products. This presentation is the facing-page format whose inclusion of the original shifts focus from complaints—as loud as they are empty—on the impossibility of translation onto what it is that translation actually renders possible. In the struggle to translate great prose, not only are what Benjamin calls “rotten barriers of his own language [*morsche Schranken der eigenen Sprache*]” broken by the translator (SW 1, 261; GS IV, 19). The discrepancies from the original foreground certain idiosyncrasies that tend to go unnoticed in reading the latter alone. The claim will not be shied away from: a grasp of the substance of Benjamin's philosophy is rendered tighter by the struggle to translate his style. But what is style? And what is its role in Benjamin? In an untranslated note, Benjamin provides the following highly stylised account.

Thought and style. Style is the jump rope that the thought must take in order to force its way into the realm of writing. Thought must pull all powers together. But style [must] come towards it and slacken, like the rope in the hands of the children who swing it when one among them begins to jump.

Gedanke und Stil. Der Stil ist das Sprungseil, das der Gedanke nehmen muß, um ins Reich der Schrift vorzudringen. Der Gedanke muß alle Kräfte zusammenreißen. Aber der Stil ihm entgegenkommen und nachlassen, wie das Seil in den Händen der Kinder, welche es schwingen, wenn eines unter ihnen zum Sprunge ansetzt. (GS VI, 202)

A beautiful account no doubt, but of limited use for determining the role of style in Benjamin in particular. This study therefore proposes to understand his style along the more indirect lines of that which allows the performance of what Benjamin once called his “thing” (*Sache*). The remark appears in a letter to Gershom Scholem written in 1931 in response to his charge that the claim by Benjamin that a mediation exists “from [his] very peculiar linguistico-philosophical standpoint [*sprachphilosophischen Standort*] to the approach of dialectical materialism [*zur Betrachtungsweise des dialektischen Materialismus*]” is nothing short of disingenuous (C, 372; GB IV, 18). The following remarkable passage is included in Benjamin's reply.

I am determined to do my thing under all circumstances, but this thing is not the same under every circumstance. It is rather something that corresponds. And to correspond correctly—i.e., with something “correct”—to false circumstances, this is not given to me. This is also not at all desirable so long as one exists as an individual and is disposed to stand one's ground. (C, 377)

ich bin entschlossen, unter allen Umständen meine Sache zu tun, aber nicht unter jedem Umstand ist diese Sache die gleiche. Sie ist vielmehr eine Entsprechende. Und falschen Umständen richtig—d.i. mit “Richtigem”—zu entsprechen, das ist mir nicht gegeben. Das ist auch, solange man als einzelner besteht und zu bestehen gesonnen ist, garnicht wünschenswert. (GB IV, 24-25)

Style is what allows Benjamin to do his thing. It is the medium of the exchange of a philosophy whose symbolically charged terms are in each case grounded in its object. By recognising the consistency of his thinking *in the very inconsistency of its style*, this study will demonstrate the possibility of precisely that mediation which Benjamin claimed to exist from his linguistico-philosophical standpoint to the approach of dialectical materialism. But before the show begins, two explanations are demanded. The first concerns its relatively light bibliography. The reason for this is the immanent nature of the analysis, which is undertaken in this form to demonstrate that as long as the substantiality of style is in each case recognised, Benjamin’s various studies, notes, and letters provide material enough from which to reconstruct a consistent philosophy. The second explanation concerns the absence of any reference to *Einbahnstraße* (“One-Way Street”) (1926), an experimental construction of various loosely related fragments, which is traditionally understood to mark the turning point of Benjamin’s practice. This text has been excluded not simply because the role of style is so blatant here that it need not be demonstrated. It has been excluded more precisely because this blatancy has tended to obscure the role of style in this prose which from the start was designed as a stage onto which its readers may step in act of ecstatic praxis.

PROGRAMME

Part I: Setting the Scene

This section presents the necessary background for the subsequent analysis. **A Slight Deviation from the Regular Course (I)** demonstrates how “The Task of the Translator” (1921) is designed not to impart a theory of translation, but rather to effectuate a particular praxis of translation in the act of its reading. **The Linguistic Nature of Recognition** introduces Benjamin’s concept of the name and the ecstatic praxis in terms of which he understands recognition so as to determine the implicit role of mimesis in his early metaphysics of language. **The Substance of Style** determines the consequences of Benjamin’s theory of language in general for the basic understanding of ontology. **The Role of System** explains Benjamin’s preference for Plato over Socrates in terms of the consequences that the absolute nature of the separation between profane and divine has for the presentation of philosophy. **Mimesis in the Early Metaphysics** points out the explicit redemptive role of mimesis in Benjamin’s theory of the personal name, which appears to have gone unnoticed in the literature. **Against Neologism** accounts for the prohibition Benjamin places on the use of neologism in philosophical practice on the basis of a close reading of a passage from one of his letters. **Ontology is not the Palace** accounts for the claim by Benjamin that the terminology of Kant is mystical. **The Symbolic Character of Language** reveals a consistent trend in the literature whereby the symbolic character of language that Benjamin insists must exist in tension with its allegorical character is suppressed. **The House of Truth** sketches the metaphysical intentions of this commitment to symbolic character. **Loosening the Self** provides an example of what this study terms “staging” as it is demanded of the reader by the style of Benjamin’s prose. **A Style of the Name** distinguishes staging from the performative speech act.

Part II: Raising the Curtain

This section is the core of the study. **Metaphysics and “Metaphysics”** distinguishes between these two terms as they apply to Benjamin’s early and late theories of language respectively. **The Mystery of Symbolic Character** explains how the demand of esoteric presentation follows from an understanding of the objectively mysterious nature of the symbolic character of language. **Paradise and Classless Society** determines the homology of the role of the paradisiacal state in Benjamin’s metaphysics of language and the role of classless society in his particular understanding of dialectical materialism. **The Little Word “I”** accounts for the prohibition Benjamin places on using the word “I” in forms of writing other than letters and autobiography. **The Originary Perception of Words** uncovers the materialist orientation of the presentation of what is ostensibly an idealist text, namely the

“Epistemo-Critical Prologue” (1925). **A Commitment to the Extremes** deals with Benjamin’s turn from anarchism to communism by focussing on his identification with the French writer Andre Gide. **The Expulsion of Metaphor** introduces Benjamin’s axiomatic distinction between image and metaphor. **The Medium of Stance** determines the symbolic charge in terms of which Benjamin understands the word *Haltung* (“stance”). **Similitude and the Name** interpolates the concept of *Ähnlichkeit* (“similitude”) in Benjamin’s early metaphysics of language. **Scooping the Same from Actuality** offers a close reading of a passage from a hashish protocol and demonstrates the interconnection between Benjamin’s experiments with intoxication, his philosophy, and his practice of writing. **A “Metaphysics” of the Image** determines the relation between the “metaphysical” concept of the image and the metaphysical concept of the name.

Part III: Two Revivals

This section revives two of the most worn-out essays in Benjamin’s oeuvre. **I. “The Task of the Translator” (1921): Similitude and Totality** determines the interconnection between this prologue, the early metaphysics of language, various contemporaneous notes, as well as the late notes toward a materialist theory of language. **The Same and Identical** offers an interpretation of the concept of pure language on the basis of a contemporaneous note largely ignored in the literature. **The Law of Translation** reveals how Benjamin’s philosophy of art informs his conception of translation and demonstrates how this prologue is designed to effectuate the theory of translation that it by no means imparts. **II. “The Artwork in the Age of its Technical Reproducibility” (1936): The Treasure Trove of Language** introduces the role of tactical construction in this essay by Benjamin. **Aura and Ornament** distinguishes his concept of aura from Adorno’s. **The Good Description** determines the difference between beautiful semblance and its experiential ground, namely auratic appearance. **The Technique of Miniaturisation** explains why Benjamin considers the mid-nineteenth century development of reproductive technology to have lead to a transformation of the concept of the artwork in general. **The Double Cut** elaborates the epistemic value of the principle of montage. **Underhanded Control** demonstrates the tactical construction of this essay, which is designed to transform the habits of its readers. **The Strongbox of Truth** answers the question concerning the relationship of Benjamin’s critique of aura to the auratic character of his own writing.

Part IV: Waiting in the Wings

The final section explains how the neglect of the role of dialogue in Plato is related to the failure by critics to have observed the role of staging in Benjamin. A critique of deconstructive interpretations of Benjamin and Plato is followed by an interpretation of the

Cratylus. **The Redemption of Discontinuity** distinguishes Benjamin's concern with the redemptive potential of nonsynthesis from its interpretation as an inexorable abyss and shows how the latter interpretation is predicated on a suppression of the interconnection between the symbolic character of language and mimetic praxis. **The Role of Dialogue** presents the critique by Charles Griswold of the neglect of the role of dialogue by Derrida in "Plato's Pharmacy" (1968). **Against Imitation** critiques Griswold's understanding of the dialogue as an imitation of reality. **The Truth of Primary Names** provides a critical summary of the relevant arguments in the *Cratylus*. **Another Approach to Scientific Knowledge** reveals the role of staging in the *Cratylus*. **The Bipolar Construction of Socrates** finds in Plato the precedent for Benjamin's predication of dual insight on construction. **A Slight Deviation from the Regular Course (II)** concerns the role of absurdity in philosophy and closes this study with an observation concerning the relation of the form of the *Denkbild* ("thought-image") developed by Benjamin to the dialogue form of Plato.

PART I: SETTING THE SCENE

A Slight Deviation from the Regular Course (I)

“The translation of important works,” writes Walter Benjamin in 1935, “will have all the less chances to succeed the more it will seek to raise its technical serving function [*technisch dienende Funktion*] to that of an autonomous art form” (SW 3, 250; GS VI, 158). This claim found in a sketch for a radio show on translation may come as something of a surprise to readers of “The Task of the Translator” (1921), the infamously obscure prologue to his translation of “Tableaux parisiens” (“Parisian Scenes”), the second section of *Les Fleurs du Mal* (“The Flowers of Evil”) (1857) by Charles Baudelaire. For what it states is that in the case of poetical texts such as this one, it is not the original that translations serve, but the “holy growth [*heilige Wachstum*] of languages” (SW 1, 255; GS IV, 12). This service is provided on the basis of *wörtlich* (“literal” or “word-by-word”) translations of *Dichtungen* (“literary artworks” or “poetic works”), which sacrifice a certain quantity of comprehensibility for the quality of intensively presenting “the most intimate relationships of languages to one another” (*ibid.*). Fourteen years after composing this elaborate metaphysical theory, Benjamin is content to present the function of translation in more familiar, ultimately materialist terms: it is a technical service whose success depends on facing up to the essential heteronomy of its products. If it is tempting to explain this change of tack as a result of the turn of the terms of his thinking from idealist to materialist in the time between these two texts were composed, then it is crucial to resist this temptation. For what the many readings of “The Task of the Translator” (1921) seem to have failed to take into account is the significance of the editorial decisions that determine its original *material* appearance in print.

The book *Tableaux parisiens: deutsche Übertragung mit einem Vorwort über die Aufgabe des Übersetzers* (“Parisian Scenes: German Translation with a Prologue on the Task of the Translator”) (1923) is a facing-page translation, which, moreover, includes no translation of the French title within its pages.⁵ Clearly, this edition is directed at readers of German for whom French is either already not completely foreign, or will not remain completely foreign. The facing-page format expresses a theme not found in the original *Tableaux parisiens*, namely the difference between the French and German languages. Crucially, this theme is no less explicit for its *perceptual* rather than *semantic* expression. Not only must this thematic addition be seen to qualify the call within the prologue itself for strictly *wörtlich* (“literal” or “word-by-word”) translations of poetical texts. The material

⁵ Charles Baudelaire, *Tableaux parisiens: deutsche Übertragung mit einem Vorwort über die Aufgabe des Übersetzers*, trans. Walter Benjamin. Heidelberg: Richard Weissbach, 1923.

format in which it is expressed must also be seen—however implicitly—to locate the presentation of the most intimate relationships of languages to one another not between the lines of the translation, but between these lines and those of the poetic work they translate. From this the following can be concluded: the efficacy of the practice of translation championed in this prologue is predicated on its presentation within a facing-page format in such a way that the possibility of reading a translation as an autonomous art form is precluded.

This is a rather obvious point. That it seems to have remained obscured for so long is likely owed to the fact that facing-page formatting is something of a lost art in the modern world of print. This Benjamin himself bemoans in the aforementioned sketch for a radio show on translation from 1935.

Let us not deceive ourselves: [translation] is above all to begin with a technique. And as such why should it not be combined with other techniques? I am thinking here primarily of the technique of commentary. [...] This felicitous form of translation, which logs accountability for itself in commentary and makes the fact of the different linguistic situation into a theme, has unfortunately to an increasing degree been lost to the modern age. It flourished in an epoch that lasted from the translations of Aristotle of the Middle Ages until the bilingual annotated editions of classics of the seventeenth century. And precisely because the difference of the linguistic situation was conceded, translation could become effective, an integral part of its own world. (SW 3, 250)

Täuschen wir uns nicht: [Übersetzung] ist vor allem einmal eine Technik. Und warum sollte sie als solche sich nicht mit andern Techniken kombinieren lassen. Ich denke da in erster Linie an die Technik des Kommentars. [...] Diese glückliche Form der Übersetzung, die im Kommentar Rechenschaft von sich ablegt und das Faktum der verschiedenen Sprachsituation mit zum Thema macht, ist der Neuzeit leider in wachsendem Maß verloren gegangen. Sie hatte ihre Blüte in einer Epoche, die von den Aristotelesübersetzungen des Mittelalters bis zu den zweisprachigen kommentierten Klassikerausgaben des siebzehnten Jahrhunderts reicht. Und gerade weil die Verschiedenheit der Sprachsituation zugestanden war, konnte die Übersetzung wirksam, zum Bestandteil der eignen Welt werden. (GS VI, 158-9)

That there is no getting around the fact that translation is from the start a technique does not reduce it to a technique of communication. Since not all linguistic constructions are concerned with conveying information, neither should their translations be. It is for this reason that Benjamin concludes this brief defence of combining the technique of translation with that of commentary with a word on its application to “poetical texts [*poetische Texte*]” (SW 3, 250; GS VI, 159). In this case the technique of commentary appears “exceedingly problematic [*überaus problematisch*]” (*Ibid.*). The reason is clear: the effectiveness of

poetry is in general bound to the immediacy of its effect. But the problem of gratuitous mediation in the application of the technique of commentary to poetical texts clearly does not extend to the facing-page format historically associated with it. In fact, this format constitutes the typographic solution to the problem. Since the original remains on the facing page, the language of the translation is free to do what the prologue on translation insists it must, namely “let itself go with regard to sense” as the basis for harmoniously complementing, rather than reproducing, the original (SW 1, 260; GS IV, 18). To what extent has “Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers” (1921) itself been harmoniously complemented in English?

No less than three different translations of this essay, together with revised versions of two of them, have been published in English. Of these three, it is the translation by Harry Zohn that is almost exclusively read by English readers of Benjamin. If the canonisation of this translation was initiated in 1968 by its inclusion in *Illuminations*, the first collection of Benjamin’s work to appear in English, edited by Hannah Arendt, then it was cemented in 1996 by its republication in slightly revised form in the *Selected Writings*. What is generally unacknowledged, however, is that Zohn’s translation was in fact the *second* translation of “Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers” to be published in English. Just months prior in 1968 a translation in facing-page format by James Hynd and E. M. Valk appeared in *Delos: a Journal on and of Translation*,⁶ the short-lived journal of the National Translation Centre at the University of Austin, Texas, which only produced three volumes before folding in 1970. A footnote in the *Delos* translation directs the reader to the forthcoming *Illuminations* volume “to be published by Harcourt, Brace and World, Inc. in 1968”—an advertisement read today with some poignancy given its subsequent eclipse by a product whose format constitutes a significant decline in quality. This decline is maintained in the third English translation by Steven Rendall, which appeared under the slightly different title “The Translator’s Task” in 1997 in the Canadian journal of translation studies *TTR*.⁷ Finally, in 2012 a revised version of Rendall’s translation was published in the third edition of *The*

⁶ Walter Benjamin, “The Task of the Translator,” trans. James Hynd and E. M. Valk. *Delos* 2 (1968), pp. 76-99.

⁷ It was published alongside Rendall’s “Notes on Zohn’s translation of Benjamin’s ‘Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers’” as well as an important review of the history of the essay’s reception in English by Susan Ingram. Although published one year after the 1996 publication of the revised version of Zohn’s translation in the *Selected Writings*, Rendall’s “Notes on Zohn’s translation,” which was written for a talk in 1995, refer to the 1968 *Illuminations* translation. While the *Selected Writings* translation addresses most of the major faults that Rendall points out, many of his more subtle criticisms retain their relevance. Walter Benjamin, “The Translator’s Task,” trans. Steven Rendall. *TTR: traduction, terminologie, rédaction* 10, 2 (1997), pp. 151-165. Steven Rendall, “Notes on Zohn’s translation of Benjamin’s ‘Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers’.” *TTR: traduction, terminologie, rédaction* 10, 2 (1997), pp. 191-206. Susan Ingram, “‘The Task of the Translator’: Walter Benjamin’s Essay in English, a *Forschungsbericht*.” *TTR: traduction, terminologie, rédaction* 10, 2 (1997), pp. 207-233.

Translation Studies Reader edited by Lawrence Venuti.⁸ This is the first time that an alternative translation to Zohn's has been published outside of the relative obscurity of a journal of Translation Studies; however, as part of a Translation Studies anthology, it strictly speaking nevertheless still remains outside of the canonical Benjamin literature in English.

Although the latest translation is in many respects superior to its predecessors, it is not without problems over and above its failure to appear in a facing-page format. One that can be taken as exemplary concerns the concord of the pronoun *dessen* ("its") in the following passage, which appears here in yet another translation.

En archēi ēn ho logos, in the beginning was the word, applies in the domain of translation as well. On the other hand, its [translation's] language can, indeed must, let itself go with regard to sense, so as to let its [the word's] *intentio* ring out not as reproduction, but as harmony, as complement to the language in which this [harmony] is communicated, its [translation's] own kind of *intentio*. (SW 1, 260)

Auch im Bereiche der Übersetzung gilt: En archēi ēn ho logos, im Anfang war das Wort. Dagegen kann, ja muß dem Sinn gegenüber ihre Sprache sich gehen lassen, um nicht dessen intentio als Wiedergabe, sondern als Harmonie, als Ergänzung zur Sprache, in der diese sich mitteilt, ihre eigene Art der intentio ertönen zu lassen. (GS IV, 18)

To what does the *intentio* that the translation ought to let ring out as harmony belong? Each one of the three translations of the prologue published in English provide a different answer to this question. The first grants this *intentio* to "the sense" with regard to which the translation was, however, supposed to have let go;⁹ the second grants it to "the original," a word whose German equivalent is conspicuously absent from the original passage;¹⁰ while the third gives up the search for the corresponding noun and curiously settles for the phrase "the *intentio* to reproduce".¹¹ Each of these translations is inadequate in its own way; but

⁸ Walter Benjamin, "The Translator's Task," trans. Steven Rendall. In *The Translation Studies Reader*, 3rd edition, ed. Lawrence Venuti. Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2012, pp.75-83.

⁹ "In the realm of translation it is also true that *En archēi ēn ho logos*. In the beginning was the Word. Yet the language of the translation can—indeed must—let itself go with respect to the sense of the original, in order that **the *intentio* of that sense** may resonate with its own kind of *intentio*—not as reproduction, but as harmony and as completion of the language in which it appears." Walter Benjamin, "The Task of the Translator," trans. James Hynd and E. M. Valk, *op. cit.*, p. 92.

¹⁰ "In the realm of translation, too, the words *En archēi ēn ho logos* ["In the beginning was the word"] apply. On the other hand, as regards the meaning, the language of a translation can—in fact, must—let itself go, so that it gives voice to **the *intentio* of the original** not as reproduction but as harmony, as a supplement to the language in which it expresses itself, as its own kind of *intentio*." (SW 1, 260)

¹¹ "*En archēi ēn ho logos*, in the beginning was the word: this is also valid in the realm of translation. On the other hand, the translation's language can, indeed must, free itself from bondage to the sense, in order to allow its own mode of *intentio* to resound, not as **the *intentio* to reproduce**, but rather as harmony, as a complement to the language in which it is communicated." Walter Benjamin, "The Translator's Task," trans. Steven Rendall, *op. cit.*, p. 81.

they are united in neglecting the obvious solution: the pronoun *dessen* corresponds to *das Wort* (“the word”). It is the *intentio* of the word that the translation ought to let ring out by letting itself go with regard to the sense of the original. Neither linguistic incompetence on the parts of his translators, nor stylistic indulgence on the part of Benjamin is responsible for this comedy of errors. Rather, the errors follow from the failure to recognise the reason why this passage exploits to the fullest extent the peculiarities of German grammar. The design of its lines namely forces the reader to practice what is for this reason less the *theory* of translation that they *impart* than the *praxis* of translation that they *effectuate*.

At first sight, it is far from clear to which nouns the pronouns *ihre* (“its”), *dessen* (“its”), *diese* (“this”), and the second instance of *ihre* belong. This lack of clarity is partly caused by the fact that three of these pronouns refer to nouns in the preceding sentence. But it is aggravated by the syntax of the sentence which continually interrupts itself with brief opaque phrases the connection between which remains obscure until the pronominal concord is worked out. Crucially, this *also applies to the reader of the German*. Even to the latter the sense of the sentence remains out of reach until it is translated into a less intensely contracted form. The comprehensibility of this “theory” of translation depends on it *first* being put into practice. But if it is true that the *intentio* of the word itself rings out *intensely or not at all*, then the intensity of the words of this sentence demands to be maintained in translation. For this reason, an intralinguistic translation that unpacks its proper contraction is at a further remove from the original than a translation that complements its intensity by achieving a comparable degree within the limits of a foreign tongue.

The Linguistic Nature of Recognition

All of the above depends, of course, on understanding the pronoun in the phrase *dessen intentio* as referring to *das Wort* such that it is the *intentio* of the word that the translation ought to let ring out by complementing its degree. That this is indeed the case is demonstrated quite easily with reference to some of the notes on the theory of language written by Benjamin in the five years leading up to writing “The Task of the Translator” (1921). The following, for example, is taken from an untranslated note written around 1920.

The word is now precisely not sign, but the signified, and not meaning, but *that which means*, which precisely the sign can never be for want of intentional immediacy. Only *that which means* can in intentional immediacy [get] to the meant. [...] The prerequisite of every designation is therefore the correlate of the meant in the sphere of that which means. Precisely that correlate no matter whether known or not is signified; not the meant itself, but that single intentionally immediate correlate is struck.

Das Wort ist nun eben nicht Zeichen, sondern das Bezeichnete, und nicht die Bedeutung, sondern das Bedeutende, was eben das Zeichen mangels seiner intentionalen Unmittelbarkeit nie sein kann. Nur das Bedeutende kann in intentionaler Unmittelbarkeit an das Bedeutete heran. [...] Voraussetzung jeder Bezeichnung ist also das Correlat des Bedeuteten in der Sphäre des Bedeutenden. Eben jenes Correlat gleichviel ob bekannt oder nicht wird bezeichnet; nicht das Bedeutete selbst<, > auf das einzig jenes intentional unmittelbare Correlat auftrifft. (VI, 20)

It is crucial to avoid the conventional translation of *das Bedeutende* (“signifier”) here because what is at stake in this passage is precisely the difference between “that which signifies” (*das Bezeichnende*) and “that which means” (*das Bedeutende*). The signified is not the meant; the signified is the word. It is not the word as a whole that constitutes the signified, however, but what Benjamin calls, in an earlier note from around 1916, its “ground of intentional immediacy [*Grund der intentionalen Unmittelbarkeit*]” (SW 1, 87; GS VI, 11). This ground, “which belongs to everything that means, thus to the word first and foremost, is the name within it” (*Ibid.*). It is only by way of the originary intention toward an object within that which means it—an intention provided by the name concealed within a word—that the object is *erkennbar* (“knowable” or, more precisely, “recognisable”). Hence, the following passage from a note also written around 1916.

The sign never refers to the object, because in it inheres no intention; the object however is accessible to intention alone. The sign never necessarily refers to the signified; it thus does not refer to the object, because the latter makes itself accessible to necessary, inward *intentio* alone. (SW 1, 90)

Das Zeichen bezieht sich niemals auf den Gegenstand, weil ihm keine Intention einwohnt, der Gegenstand aber nur der Intention erreichbar ist. Das Zeichen bezieht sich niemals notwendig auf das Bezeichnete; es bezieht sich also nicht auf den Gegenstand, weil dieser nur der notwendigen, innerlichen intentio sich erschließt. (GS VI, 14)

The significance of this shift from the German word *Intention* to its Latin root *intentio* is pertinent to the passage from “The Task of the Translator” (1921) in which this Latin word appears twice. It presumably concerns the other senses in which this word can be understood, namely in terms of “strain,” “tension,” or “effort.” For it would then indicate that *tension is essential to necessary intention*. Although the object is accessible to intention alone, this *accessibility* is as far removed from unrestricted access as infinity is from finitude. Accordingly, the necessary intention of the name alone by which that which means “gets” to the meant never amounts to the meant being completely “gotten.” Rather, this getting remains an effort, a tension, an infinite striving toward the meant, which *must* on

account of its infinite nature remain out of finite reach. This is why it is not the meant but its correlate that is only ever struck. Crucial to any understanding of Benjamin's early thinking, however, is that the sphere of this correlate—and *not* its unification with that of which it is the correlate—is what is to be understood as the sphere of *logos*. “The order, the sphere of that correlate, the sphere of that which means,” writes Benjamin, “is language (in the sense of logos)” (VI, 20). Contrary to any so-called “metaphysics of presence,” therefore, *logos* (“reason” or “word”), as Benjamin understands it, *never constitutes full presence*. As indicated by the double meaning of the term itself, reason depends on language as much as language depends on reason. Since the continued existence of language demands that its originary intention toward the meant remain unfulfilled, and since reason depends on language, the collapse of this tension would be the collapse of reason as well. From this follows the fact that language can possess no meaning that is nonprovisional because to take possession of ultimate meaning would be to bring about its death. It therefore seems to be a rare mistake on the parts of the editors of the *Gesammelte Schriften* to have attempted to correct a claim in a note Benjamin wrote around 1916 by inserting a negation into the second clause of the first sentence of the following passage. (It appears in angle brackets in the German below, but has not been translated into English.)

Language is based with on meaning; it would be nothing if it also had meaning. Here in this double occurrence of meaning in logic, the linguistic nature of recognition, which is clarified in the philosophy of language, is germinally and allusively indicated.

Die Sprache beruht mit auf Bedeutung, sie wäre nichts wenn sie <nicht> auch Bedeutung hätte. Hier ist in diesem doppelten Vorkommen von Bedeutung in der Logik auf die sprachliche Natur der Erkenntnis, welche in der Sprachphilosophie geklärt wird, keimhaft und andeutend hingewiesen. (VI, 10-11)

The negation inserted by the editors transforms the *double* occurrence of meaning in logic remarked by Benjamin into a *triple* occurrence: (1) language is based *on* meaning, (2) it rests *with* meaning, and (3) it *has* meaning. As such, this “correction” appears to have been made in the name of *common* sense rather than that of the admittedly counterintuitive claim that language “would be nothing if it also had meaning.” The surprising nature of this claim diminishes, however, as soon as it is recognised that were language to *have* meaning in any definite sense, the tension toward the meant on which it is founded would dissolve. Its existence depends on precisely not *having* meaning and instead maintaining its constitutive tension toward that meant whose possession would bring about its death. It is the assumption of the linguistic nature of recognition that informs the epistemological distinction drawn

toward the end of *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels* (“Origin of the German Mourning Play”) (1925). This distinction—which is axiomatic for Benjamin—is between primary knowledge (*primäres Wissen*) that “results from contemplation [*erfolgt aus der Kontemplation*]” and secondary knowledge (*sekundär Wissen*) that “results from praxis [*erfolgt aus der Praxis*]” (O, 233; GS I, 407). It is only *secondary* knowledge that is factual (*sachlich*) because it is based on an ecstatic praxis of recognition (*Erkenntnis*) that involves a mental or spiritual communion (*geistige Gemeinschaft*) of man and thing (*Sache*). This ecstatic praxis is specified quite clearly in “Über Sprache überhaupt und über die Sprache des Menschen” (“On Language in general and on the Language of Man”)(1916), a study on the metaphysics of language written nine years earlier in a form unintended for publication. “Only through the linguistic being of things [*durch das sprachliche Wesen der Dinge*],” writes Benjamin with regard to man, “does he arrive out of himself at their recognition—in the name [*gelangt er aus sich selbst zu deren Erkenntnis—im Namen*]” (EW, 255; GS II, 144). Since knowledge is something already possessed, knowing does not involve arriving outside of oneself at the object known. Consequently, all factual knowledge must be won by a prior ecstatic praxis of recognition.

The paradigmatic case of *primary* knowledge is “[k]nowledge about good and evil” (O, 233; GS I, 407). Such knowledge “is the opposite of all factual knowledge” because its source is not recognition but “the desire for knowledge, or rather for judgement” (*Ibid.*). In other words: the object (*Gegenstand*) of knowledge of evil is “not in the world” (*Ibid.*). Rather, it is a projection onto the world by the human subject. Although knowledge of good does have an object in the world, because this object is in fact simply the world in general as it was created, it likewise constitutes no factual knowledge. For the latter is always grounded on some distinction internal to the world between its factual and fictional appearance. Further, since the specification of knowledge of good as “good” is simply based on its contradistinction from evil, which has no object whatsoever, knowledge about both good and evil “is at bottom just knowledge of evil” the source of which is purely subjective (*Ibid.*). “Evil pure and simple [*Das schlechthin Böse*],” writes Benjamin, “means something other than what it is,” namely “the nonbeing of what it represents [*vorstellt*]” (O, 233; GS I, 406). For this reason, evil cannot find the fulfilment of its meaning in itself. In other words: it exists only in allegory, which, unlike the symbol, lives only in those abstractions that issue from “the one contemplating allegorically who betrays the world for the sake of knowledge” (O, 224; GS I, 398). “As the triumph of subjectivity and the dawn of an arbitrary rule over things that knowledge,” as Benjamin puts it at another point, “is the origin of all allegorical consideration [*Betrachtung*]” (O, 233; GS I, 407). Now, if “[t]he abstract elements of language are rooted in the judging word, in judgement [*im richtenden Wort, dem Urteil*]” whose source is nothing but subjectivity itself, then this *does not mean that all the elements*

of language are abstract (O, 234; GS 1, 407). The allegorical character of language exists in tension with its symbolic character. The basis of *this* character is not “the depth of the subjective” (O, 233; GS I, 407). Rather, it is the ground of intentional immediacy of human language, or in other words: that name, which for languages is “only a ground in which the concrete elements are rooted” (O, 234; GS 1, 407). The epistemic value of human language is owed to the name because it is alone in the name that the thing in itself can—in an ecstatic praxis of linguistic recognition—be recognised. “[T]he thing in itself [*die Sache an sich*],” runs a decisive line in “On Language in general and on the Language of Man” (1916), “has no word; it is created from God’s word and recognised in its name according to the human word” (EW, 260; GS II, 150). That the thing in itself has no word does not mean that it is not already a component of language in general. Rather, it means that it is to the act of its naming that it owes its specification as some particular thing in itself distinguished from nature in general. Crucially, the theological terms employed here are not essential. The point to observe concerns the metaphysical nature of the name, which—as the medium of the recognition of the thing in itself—must, like the thing in itself, exceed spatio-temporal form. This is made quite clear by the following passage from a contemporaneous note.

The name “triangle” exists just as little as there are actually names for the vast majority of objects in language. The latter knows only words for them in which names lie concealed. It is by virtue of the name that words have their intention toward the object; they partake in it by the name. (SW 1, 90)

Den Namen »Dreieck« gibt es ebensowenig, wie es überhaupt Namen für die allermeisten Gegenstände in der Sprache gibt. Diese kennt nur Wörter für sie, in welchen die Namen verborgen liegen. Kraft des Namens haben die Wörter ihre Intention auf den Gegenstand; sie haben durch den Namen an ihm teil<.> (GS VI, 14)

A word partakes in its object of intention by the name that lies concealed in it, but only impurely because it is “bound to a sign” (SW 1, 90; GS VI, 14). If the object of intention is not simply the thing, but the thing in itself, and if “[t]he name is the analogue [*Analogon*] of the recognition of the object in the object itself,” then it follows that the name is a metaphysical medium unconstrained by the dictates of spatio-temporal form (*Ibid.*). Hence why it remains forever concealed in the words whose epistemic values it nevertheless grounds. Now, although this theory is patently metaphysical, the reference to the word of God implies no dogmatism on Benjamin’s part. It is simply a traditional concept of that language of truth “in whose anticipation and description [*Ahnung und Beschreibung*],” as he puts it in “The Task of the Translator” (1921), “lies the sole perfection for which the philosopher can hope” (SW 1, 259; GS IV, 16). Since this true language is *absolute* it cannot

take the position of an object opposed to some subject who could then set about perfecting philosophy by way of its depiction. The possibility of its description (*Beschreibung*) by the philosopher would therefore have to be based on the immanence of this true language to the language alone in which philosophy takes place. It is precisely this immanence that Benjamin hypothesises in the following passage from “On Language in general and on the Language of Man” (1916).

Because God created the things, the creating word in them is the seed of the recognising name, just as God also named each thing at the end, after it was created. But naming is evidently only the expression of the identity of the creating word and the recognising name in God, not the prior solution of that task which God expressly assigns to man himself, namely naming things. By receiving the mute nameless language of things and by translating them into names, man solves this task. It would be insoluble, if the name language of man and the nameless language of things were not affined in God, discharged from the same creating word that in things would have become communication of matter in magical communion, in man language of cognition and name in blissful spirit. (EW, 261-62)

Denn Gott hat die Dinge geschaffen, das schaffende Wort in ihnen ist der Keim des erkennenden Namens, wie Gott auch am Ende jedes Ding benannte, nachdem es geschaffen war. Aber offenbar ist Benennung nur der Ausdruck der Identität des schaffenden Wortes und des erkennenden Namens in Gott, nicht die vorhergenommene Lösung jener Aufgabe, die Gott ausdrücklich dem Menschen selbst zuschreibt: nämlich die Dinge zu benennen. Indem er die stumme namenlose Sprache der Dinge empfängt und sie in den Namen in Lauten überträgt, löst der Mensch diese Aufgabe. Unlösbar wäre sie, wäre nicht die Namensprache des Menschen und die namenlose der Dinge in Gott verwandt, entlassen aus demselben schaffenden Wort, das in den Dingen Mitteilung der Materie in magischer Gemeinschaft, im Menschen Sprache des Erkennens und Namens in seligem Geiste geworden wäre. (GS II, 151)

The distinction between the *expression* of identity in God and this identity itself follows from a basic assumption of the theological doctrine of creation that informs this philosophical investigation. Namely, that the separation between divine creator and profane creature is *absolute*. Its overcoming is only possible on the basis of a messianic act, which divinely completes an identity that can at best be *expressed* in profane language. It is the discontinuity that for this reason must obtain between language in general and the language of truth that explains the exclusion of the word of God from the continuum presupposed by the following metaphysical axiom. “[E]ach higher language,” writes Benjamin, “(with the exception of the word of God) can be considered a translation of all the others” (EW, 261; GS II, 151). The absolute separation between the recognising name and the creating word receives its decisive specification by contrasting the recognition of the thing with

spontaneous creation (*spontane Schöpfung*). For recognition “does not like the latter happen absolutely unlimitedly and infinitely out of language; rather, the name that man gives to the thing is based on how it communicates itself to him [*wie sie ihm sich mitteilt*]” (EW, 260; GS II, 150). Of the various possibilities of *how* a thing can communicate itself to man, its communication must answer to one basic criterion. This criterion is the finitude of the form in which it is received. If the name is given to nature by man “according to the communication [*nach der Mitteilung*] that he receives from it,” then an essential characteristic of this communication is *finitude* (EW, 267; GS I, 157). “God made things recognisable in their names,” writes Benjamin, “[b]ut man names them according to *recognition*” (EW, 259; GS II, 148; emphasis added). Man names the thing according to a recognition of it that—although grounded ontologically in ecstatic praxis—is finite. Hence why it is “in God alone” that “the absolute relationship of name to recognition exists [*Das absolute Verhältnis des Namens zur Erkenntnis besteht*]” (*Ibid.*). Crucially, it is not the thing, but *man* who is responsible for the finite nature of the communication that he receives. The source of its finitude is the act of *judgment* whereby one communication is distinguished from others. Since this act is presupposed by the finite form of the recognition according to which naming must take place, the abstract elements of language are as necessary as the allegorical character of language to which they give rise. But what of its symbolic character? If the symbolic character of language is rooted not in the judging word, but in the recognising name, to which concrete act is the name owed? The answer cannot be naming. For as the following passage makes clear, naming and recognising are reciprocally constitutive.

The translation of the language of things into that of man is not just a translation of the mute into the soundful; it is the translation of the nameless into the name. This is therefore the translation of an incomplete language into a more complete one; it can not help but add something, namely recognition. The objectivity of this translation is however guaranteed in God (EW, 261)

Die Übersetzung der Sprache der Dinge in die des Menschen ist nicht nur Übersetzung des Stummen in das Lauthafte, sie ist die Übersetzung des Namenlosen in den Namen. Das ist also die Übersetzung einer unvollkommenen Sprache in eine vollkommene, sie kann nicht anders als etwas dazu tun, nämlich die Erkenntnis. Die Objektivität dieser Übersetzung ist aber in Gott verbürgt. (GS II, 151)

If recognition is a necessary byproduct of that act of translating thing language into human language in terms of which Benjamin understands naming, and if the name is given according to recognition, then *the act of naming must begin prior to recognition*. In other words: the reception of *how* the thing communicates itself to man on which the name he

gives to it is based begins *before* this communication is rendered finite by his judgement. “Only through the linguistic being of things,” writes Benjamin, “does [man] arrive out of himself at their recognition—in the name” (EW, 255; GS II, 144). If this passage through the linguistic being of things is not capacitated by the faculty of judgement, then to which faculty of man is it owed? The answer should be clear: to the faculty of *mimesis*. For the reception of how the thing communicates itself, which gets its naming underway, *must* have extracognitive origins if recognition is a byproduct of naming. These origins are bodily. More precisely, they are assimilative. The object of this assimilation is how the thing communicates itself to man before his judgement renders its communication finite. On the basis of his mimetic faculty, man assimilates himself not to that communication which he eventually comes to recognise in the name, but to the *principle of its communication*, or in other words: to its *quality*, which is unconstrained by the finite terms to which quantity is always bound. Only for this reason is genuine recognition born in the name as the basis for that factual knowledge which, according to *Origin of the German Mourning Play* (1925), always “results from praxis” (O, 233; GS I, 407). Thus, for what appears to be the first time in at least the English reception of Benjamin, the foundations of his late historical materialist studies of language “Lehre vom Ähnlichen” (“Doctrine of the Similar”) (1933) and “Über das Mimetische Vermögen” (“On the Mimetic Faculty”) (1933), as they are sunk into his early theology of language “On Language in general and on the Language of Man” (1916), have been excavated.

The Substance of Style

A clear view of the standard narrative of the renovation undertaken by Benjamin between 1928 and 1933 of his early metaphysics of language is needed for the significance of this excavation to be appreciated. Such a view is provided by the following extended passage from “Language and Mimesis in Walter Benjamin’s Work,” an essay by Beatrice Hanssen included in *The Cambridge Companion to Walter Benjamin* (2004).

Not only did Benjamin expand the scope of mimesis to the point where it acquired ontological dimensions, spelling a primeval, enchanted state of natural correspondences in which even objects were endowed with mimetic power; he also thoroughly revised his own initial negative appraisal of mimesis as an inauthentic mode of being, whose falseness formed the foil against which the purity of language earlier had acquired shape. Such earlier, sometimes covert, references to “bad” mimesis may have been informed by the Judaic prohibition against idolatry as well as the Platonic critique of mimesis in *The Republic*. The first significant work by Benjamin to break explicitly with this refusal of the mimetic was *The Origin of the German Tragic Drama*, whose study of allegory anticipates his

theory of the dialectical image. For the first time, Benjamin here seriously weighed the dialectical relations between image and language, in advance of his later full-blown fascination with the image culture of photography and film. However, the mimesis study ventured even further since it proved willing to postulate a mimetic stage predating the acquisition of language. Freed of its negative Platonic connotations, the mimetic faculty was modeled on Aristotle's *Poetics*, which had isolated mimesis as a fundamental human activity. For humans to be endowed with the mimetic capacity meant that they possessed the ability not just to recognize (reception) but to produce similarities (spontaneity). [...] Weary, in the end, of the Platonic ban on mimesis, Benjamin thus developed a redemptive concept of imitation, which no longer had anything to do with the production of a "transportable" aesthetic copy snatched from an external object.¹²

This account involves a projection onto Benjamin of a reified concept of mimesis that has no place in his thought. Hanssen grasps mimesis not as a bodily praxis that objectively produces an object for perception, but a sensuous depiction of an object already available in some positivist empirical sense. A note amongst the first sketches of *Das Passagenwerk* ("The Arcades Project") (1927-1940) written in 1928 provides the decisive clarification. "[T]he name," writes Benjamin, "is the object of a mimesis [*Gegenstand einer Mimesis ist*]" (AP, 868; GS V, 1038). To understand this to mean that the name is a sensuous depiction of a sensuous nominatum is, on the one hand, to mistake mimesis for the product of mimicry, and on the other, to misidentify the nominatum as the thing rather than the thing in itself. The place of mimesis in Benjamin's thought is always that of the behaviour capacitated by the mimetic faculty and not the products to which this behaviour may give rise. Mimetic praxis coincides with his practice of a philosophising because its object is not empirical reality, but the violence that first stamps the general *Sein* ("being") of empiricism so as to impress on it the distinction of a particular *Wesen* ("being" or "essence"). It is in terms of this violence that Benjamin understands truth. If the name is the object of a mimesis, then this is because the existence of the name as an object of perception strictly coincides with a mimetic act on the part of man. Thus, just three years after writing *Origin of the German Mourning Play* (1925), Benjamin retrospectively provides a *materialist* justification of a key metaphysical claim that appears in its "Erkenntniskritische Vorrede" ("Epistemo-Critical Prologue").

Not as an intending that would find its determination through empiricism, but as the violence that first stamps the essence of this empiricism does truth exist. The being carried away from all phenomenality alone to which this violence belongs is that of the name. (O, 36)

¹² Beatrice Hanssen, "Language and Mimesis in Walter Benjamin's Work." In *The Cambridge Companion to Walter Benjamin*, ed. David S. Ferris. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004, p. 66, 68.

Nicht als ein Meinen, welches durch die Empirie seine Bestimmung fände, sondern als die das Wesen dieser Empirie erst prägende Gewalt besteht die Wahrheit. Das aller Phänomenalität entrückte Sein, dem allein diese Gewalt eignet, ist das des Namens. (GS I, 216)

The conception of the name as the object of a mimesis critically justifies what would otherwise be a dogmatic mystical claim. For it specifies what conditions the distinguishability of that linguistic being of the name otherwise carried away from all phenomenality. Benjamin does not shy away from specifying this condition directly: “The name,” he writes in 1928, “can be recognised in experiential contexts alone [*kann nur in Erfahrungszusammenhängen erkannt werden*]. Only in them is its being [*Wesen*], i.e. linguistic being, distinguishable [*kenntlich*]” (AP, 868; GS V, 1038). The reason for this is “that the realm of the name is that of the similar [*des Ähnlichen*],” which is an extracognitive realm whose objects only reveal themselves to that sober form of perception which *coincides with mimetic praxis* (*Ibid.*). The clearest explanation of this realm is found in a letter to Adorno from 1939.

Sameness is a category of cognition; strictly speaking it is not found in sober perception. The perception that is sober in the strictest sense, free of every prejudice, would hit in the most extreme case always only upon something similar. Such prejudice which attends perception as a rule without harm can in exceptional cases give offence. It can make the one perceiving identifiable as someone who is *not* sober. This, for example, is the case of Don Quixote to whose head went romances of chivalry. The most diverse can confront him: he perceives therein always the same—the adventure that awaits the knight errant. (C, 597)

Die Gleichheit ist eine Kategorie des Erkennens; sie kommt in der nüchternen Wahrnehmung streng genommen nicht vor. Die im strengsten Sinne nüchterne, von jedem Vor-Urteil freie Wahrnehmung stieße im äußersten Falle immer nur auf ein Ähnliches. Solch Vorurteil, das der Wahrnehmung im Regelfall ohne Schaden beiwohnt, kann im Ausnahmefall Anstoß bieten. Es kann den Wahrnehmenden als einen, der nicht nüchtern ist, kenntlich machen. Das ist zum Beispiel der Fall des Don Quijote, dem die Ritterromane zu Kopfe gestiegen sind. Dem kann das verschiedenste begegnen: er nimmt darinnen immer das Gleiche wahr—das Abenteuer, das des fahrenden Ritters harrt. (GB VI, 224-25)

Although the cognitive category of sameness (*Gleichheit*) generally attends perception without harm, from the standpoint of philosophy this category is *nevertheless a prejudice*. For it is preceded by a judgement that issues from the subject, which informs the perception of the object onto which this judgment is projected. At the most basic level, this judgment

renders finite the communication by the thing of *how* it communicates itself to man. This contaminates the quality of the particular communicability of the thing by projecting onto its act of communicating that limit on which its recognisability depends. Only on the basis of this projected limit does the language of the thing appear to take on the quality of quantifiability. In other words: the question “what is this thing?” is strictly speaking prejudicial because it is based on prejudice. The basic ontological question with regard to the thing is not “*what* is this thing?” Rather, it is “what is the (infinite) principle that informs the (finite) communications in terms of which it is received?” Or more simply: “*how* does this thing communicate itself?” This is why it is so crucial to resist the weight of tradition when it comes to reading “Über Sprache überhaupt und über die Sprache des Menschen” (1916) in English. For this tradition is informed by a title that slightly yet significantly misrepresents the distinction presented in the original between *Sprache überhaupt* (“language in general”) and *die Sprache des Menschen* (“the language of man”).¹³ This title is “On Language *as Such* and on the Language of Man,” which obscures the fact that the significance of this study lies above all in its presentation of *a theory of language in general*. Accordingly, it resists the temptation to conceive language solely from the perspective of human language whose “communication by the word is only a special case” of that “communication of spiritual contents” in terms of which language in general is to be conceived (EW, 251; GS II, 141). That it is Benjamin’s aim to avoid such unjustifiable anthropocentrism is stated quite clearly on its opening page.

There is no event or thing neither in animate nor inanimate nature that would not in some way partake of language, for it is essential to each one to communicate its spiritual contents. The word “language” in such usage is, however, absolutely not a metaphor. For it is a fully substantive recognition that we can think of nothing that does not communicate its spiritual being in expression; the greater or lesser degree of consciousness with which such communication seemingly (or really) is connected can change nothing of the fact that we can imagine a complete absence of language in nothing. (EW, 251-52)

Es gibt kein Geschehen oder Ding weder in der belebten noch in der unbelebten Natur, das nicht in gewisser Weise an der Sprache teilhätte, denn es ist jedem wesentlich, seinen geistigen Inhalt mitzuteilen. Eine Metapher aber ist das Wort »Sprache« in solchem Gebrauche durchaus nicht. Denn es ist eine volle inhaltliche Erkenntnis, daß wir uns nichts vorstellen können, das sein geistiges Wesen nicht im Ausdruck mitteilt; der größere oder geringere Bewußtseinsgrad, mit dem solche Mitteilung

¹³ This translation by Edmund Jephcott was first published in 1978 and has more recently been revised by Howard Eiland for the 2011 publication of the *Early Writings*. One of the revisions not undertaken, however, concerns the translation of a crucial term in its title, namely *überhaupt* (“at all,” “actually,” *but also* “generally”).

scheinbar (oder wirklich) verbunden ist, kann daran nichts ändern, daß wir uns völlige Abwesenheit der Sprache in nichts vorstellen können. (GS II, 140-41)

The consequences of this commitment to a conception of language in general are vast. For it turns on its head the traditional ontological understanding according to which the ultimate reality to be sought by the philosopher is some basic substance that finally answers the question “what?” If that part of the being of things alone through which man arrives out of himself at their recognition in the name is linguistic, then the thinghood (*Sachheit*) of a thing is—by virtue of the linguistic nature of at least that part of its being that has any causal or expressive influence—no longer a “whatness” but a “howness.” “Language,” writes Benjamin, “communicates the particular linguistic being of things; but it communicates its spiritual being only so long as as it lies immediately determined in linguistic being [*sofern es unmittelbar im sprachlichen beschlossen liegt*], [that is to say,] so long as as it is communicable [*mittelbar*]” (EW, 253; GS II, 142). While it remains unclear how far this determination of spiritual being in linguistic being extends in the case of the thing, what is clear from the fact of its conceivability is that it is at least in part communicable. The thinghood of a thing must thus include its language, which is *how* it communicates itself understood not in quantitative, but in strictly qualitative terms. The question to ask is therefore not “*what* is the language of a particular thing?” but “*how* is the language of a particular thing?” In other words: the question of ontology for Benjamin is all style and no substance because the only “substance” that is in any way able to be encountered is *substantial style*.

The Role of System

A commitment to the substantiality of style leads to an idiosyncratic understanding of the philosophical canon. This idiosyncrasy is revealed quite clearly by the fact that what Benjamin is above all concerned to appropriate from the critical philosopher Kant is a character of philosophising that he identifies no less in the metaphysician Plato. “Kant,” writes Benjamin in “Über das Programm der kommenden Philosophie” (“On the Programme of the Coming Philosophy”) (1918), “is the most recent of those philosophers, and *besides Plato* probably also the only one, to whom it was a matter not immediately of the scope and depth, but above all and first and foremost, of the justification of recognition” [*die Rechtfertigung der Erkenntnis*]” (SW 1, 100; GS II, 157; emphasis added). The continuity claimed here by Benjamin between Kant and Plato is as crucial as the neglect of its significance for his understanding of the problem of the presentation of philosophy is widespread. This neglect is reflected by the cursory and dismissive nature of the remarks

made by Hanssen with regard to the role Plato may have played in Benjamin's understanding of mimesis. The "references to 'bad' mimesis" that she emphasises are to be found in his early work "may have been informed by [...] the Platonic critique of mimesis in *The Republic*."¹⁴ Later, after wearying "of the Platonic ban on mimesis," Benjamin "developed a redemptive concept of imitation, which no longer had anything to do with the production of a 'transportable' aesthetic copy snatched from an external object."¹⁵ Although Hanssen restricts her remarks on Plato to the critique of mimesis in *The Republic*, it is important to note that across his many dialogues there are "numerous differentiated contributions to the determination of mimesis."¹⁶ More importantly, it cannot simply be assumed that the author of these dialogues was unaware of the contradiction involved in *The Republic*, which "criticises art as mimesis in principle," but which, as a *dialogue*, is at the same time itself a product of mimetic praxis and for this reason "contains elements of artworks."¹⁷ In other words: any interpretation of *The Republic* that reduces it to a series of thematic claims and thus fails to recognise it as a drama whose object is *staged in the scene of its presentation* lacks all rigour. Irrespective of any thematic claims made by the character named Socrates to the contrary, the dramatisation in terms of which Plato *must* be read makes the role of mimesis in his philosophy nothing short of essential. That it is precisely such an interpretation that informs even Benjamin's early thought is not hard to demonstrate. The most direct evidence is the following passage from an untranslated note written around the time of "On the Programme of the Coming Philosophy" (1918).

The role of system, whose necessity is evident only to those philosophers who know that truth is not a complex of recognition, but a symbolic intention (that of its system-constituents to one another), is played in Plato precisely by DIALOGUE.

Die Rolle des Systems, dessen Notwendigkeit nur denjenigen Philosophen evident ist, die wissen daß die Wahrheit nicht ein Erkenntniszusammenhang, sondern eine symbolische Intention ist (die ihrer Systemglieder aufeinander), spielt bei Platon genau der DIALOG. (GS VI, 39)

"On the Programme of the Coming Philosophy" opens by determining the ultimate criterion of the certainty for which even critical philosophy must struggle to be "systematic unity or truth" (SW 1, 100; GS II, 158). This unity in terms of which Benjamin understands the term "system" receives more precise specification in "Goethes Wahlverwandschaften"

¹⁴ Beatrice Hanssen, *op. cit.*, p. 66

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 68

¹⁶ Gunter Gebauer and Christoph Wulf, *Mimesis: Culture, Art, Society*, trans. Don Reneau. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995, p. 31; Gunter Gebauer and Christoph Wulf, *Mimesis: Kultur, Kunst, Gesellschaft*. Hamburg: Rowohlt Taschenbuch Verlag, 1992, p. 50.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

(“Goethe’s *Elective Affinities*”) (1921), a major essay begun in 1919, but only completed three years later. Here the system of philosophy is described in terms of its “wholeness” or “unbrokenness” (*Ganzheit*) (SW 1, 333; GS 1, 172). The basic idea is that since truth is—as he eventually puts it in the “Epistemo-Critical Prologue” (1925)—“unity in being [*Sein*]” and not “unity in concept,” it is beyond all question [*außer aller Frage*]” because it does not grant the division on which a finite answer must be based (O, 30; GS I, 210). Rather than as enquiry philosophy must instead take shape in view of the absolute discontinuity between the unity of philosophy and the solutions to all its problems. For with regard to any question that managed to enquire after the unity of philosophy, a new question would straightaway arise concerning the basis of “the unity of its answer with that of all others” (SW 1, 333-334; GS I, 172). Since the “full” infinity of the system remains out of reach to the “empty” infinity of possible finite questions that concern it, “system is in no sense enquirable [*erfragbar*]” (SW, 334; GS 1, 172). It is the fundamental inadequacy of enquiry to philosophising that informs the strict distinction Benjamin draws between the character Socrates and the philosopher Plato who wrote the dialogues in which this character appears. For in its reliance on protreptic, the Socratic method presupposes a continuity between objects of recognition and truth, which fails to do justice to the absolute nature of the separation between human and divine. *Pace* Socratic maieutics, the knower does not, as Benjamin writes in “Socrates” (1916), get “pregnant with knowledge [*mit dem Wissen schwanger*]” (SW 1, 53; GS II, 131); and no matter how cunning the protreptic employed, no philosophical midwifery can guide a spiritual pregnancy from profane conception to divine birth. The absolute distinction of divine from human specifies even recognition in the name as distinct from truth, which would instead have to be—as Benjamin famously puts it in the “Epistemo-Critical Preface” (1925)—“the death of intention” (O, 36; GS I, 216).

Truth never enters into a relation and in particular not into an intentional relation. The object of recognition as an object determined in the concept-intention is not truth. Truth is an intentionless being formed of ideas. The behaviour appropriate to it is accordingly not an intending in cognition, but a going down in it and disappearing.¹⁸ (O, 35-36)

Wahrheit tritt nie in eine Relation und insbesondere in keine intentionale. Der Gegenstand der Erkenntnis als ein in der Begriffsintention bestimmter ist nicht die Wahrheit. Die Wahrheit ist ein aus

¹⁸ The translation of *in sie Eingehen* as “going down in it” rather than the more literal “entering into it” is justified on the grounds that the word *eingehen* can—admittedly with specific regard to plants and animals—mean “to die,” or “to wither.” The subsequent characterisation of truth as the *death* of intention suggests this play to be by design and worthy of being translated accordingly. The translation offered here is, moreover, not entirely unconventional: the German equivalent of “to go down in history” is *in die Geschichte eingehen*.

Ideen gebildetes intentionsloses Sein. Das ihr gemäße Verhalten ist demnach nicht ein Meinen im Erkennen, sondern ein in sie Eingehen und Verschwinden. (GS I, 216)

Far from the “living” knowledge of dialogue the epistemic value of which the Platonic character Socrates—but not necessarily the philosopher Plato himself—raises above the “dead” knowledge of books in the *Phaedrus*, truth in fact depends on a certain death, namely that of the subject whose unification with the object presupposes the collapse of both. Whereas enquiry presumptuously demands truth to fit the finite format of an answer, true philosophical style registers the demand of truth. This it does by taking the impression not of the contingent appearance of one of its possible formulations, but of the infinite principle that underlies them all. In other words: philosophy must counterbalance the inexorability of giving the name according to recognition instead of recognisability by registering not the formulation of truth, but its formulability. It is the role of dialogue in Plato that secures what in the “Epistemo-Critical Prologue” (1925) Benjamin refers to as “one of the deepest intentions [...] of the Platonic theory of ideas,” namely the proposition “that the object of recognition is not congruent with truth [*sich nicht deckt mit der Wahrheit*]” (O, 30; GS I, 209). What Benjamin suggests is that the dialogue form exploited by Plato is a response to the inadequacy of protreptic method whose use by philosophy fails to accord with its ultimate criterion, namely “systematic unity or truth” (SW 1, 100; GS II, 158).

The Socratic question is not the holy question that waits for response and whose resonance once again comes to life anew in the response; it does not hold the method within like the pure erotic or scientific question, but rather it violently, indeed impudently, pretending to be a mere means to compel speech, ironises—for it already knows the answer all too precisely. (SW 1, 53)

Die sokratische ist nicht die heilige Frage, die auf Antwort wartet und deren Resonanz erneut in der Antwort wieder auflebt, sie hat nicht wie die reine erotische oder wissenschaftliche Frage den Methodos der Antwort inne, sondern gewaltsam, ja frech, ein bloßes Mittel zur Erzwingung der Rede verstellt sie sich, ironisiert sie—denn allzugenau weiß sie schon die Antwort. (GS II, 131)

The problem with the Socratic method is not its ironising of responses; that the resonance of the holy question is renewed in the arrival of a response means that here too every response is ultimately ironised. But what ironises here is the *absolute* whose messianic arrival can—on account of its radical discontinuity—only be awaited. In the case of the Socratic method, by contrast, the source of ironising is profane, namely the knowledge ostensibly known by Socrates himself. Rather than opening philosophy to disappearance, his method inflates appearance; in confounding the orders of divine and profane, Socratic irony “sticks into [the Socratic question]—if a terrible image for a terrible thing is permitted—an

erection of knowledge [*eine Erektion des Wissens*]” (SW 1, 53; GS II, 131). This misplaced member is fluffed by the myth of immediate knowing via a daemonic voice, which manifests as a hard-on for live dialogue. But the latter in fact precludes going down and disappearing in truth because such intersubjective interaction maintains the intention characteristic of empirical consciousness. The counterpart in Plato to that daemonic voice of Socrates is more sober; “this sobriety,” as Brendan Moran writes, “is Plato’s language usage—the dialogue—addressing itself as this side of something greater than itself to which it nevertheless belongs.”¹⁹ Such address on Plato’s part shows no “smugness with regard to myth”;²⁰ his language makes room, that is, for objective mystery inaccessible to enquiry. “As the immediacy that cannot be reached by questioning, this unity [...] of philosophy,” writes Moran, “constitutes philosophy as performance, which is not containment, of the unity.”²¹

Mimesis in the Early Metaphysics

The last three citations derive from the book *Wild, Unforgettable Philosophy* (2005) by Brendan Moran, which is an exception to the rule of the neglect of the influence of Plato on how Benjamin conceives the role of presentation in philosophy. What proves the rule more decisively than this exception, however, is what appears to be the total neglect of this monograph itself in the literature on Benjamin. In the decade since its publication it appears to have been neither reviewed nor cited by a single scholar in the field. What makes this so curious is that on its cover appears the recommendation of a critic by no means lacking in cultural capital, namely Rainer Nägele who apparently considers the book “by far the best extended study of Walter Benjamin yet written in English.” Whether or not this claim is true, *Wild, Unforgettable Philosophy* (2005) is indeed a remarkable presentation of scholarship. Some aspects of its presentation are, however, more successful than others. While the interruption of its discussion of the early work of Benjamin by unintegrated

¹⁹ Brendan Moran, *Wild, Unforgettable Philosophy in Early Works of Walter Benjamin*. Oxford: Lexington Books, 2005, p. 167.

²⁰ *Ibid.* Jean-François Mattéi understands the role of myth in Plato similarly, but expresses the relation in Hegelian terms. “It seems to me unfruitful to oppose in Plato’s works the mythos to the logos, as one might an unprovable speech to a provable one, with the sole object of concluding that one is *logically* superior to the other. Rather, the mythical language serves another purpose: it offers from a unique standpoint a picture of the world through which dialectic must progress step by step” (p. 68). But Mattéi by no means fails to distinguish Plato from Hegel: “The presence of myth in the inmost recesses of the Platonic search demonstrates that the pedagogy of the soul is eternal, eternal as philosophy itself. Philosophers will never reach the shores of absolute knowledge. Thus Plato is led to acknowledge that the soul could not go beyond the teaching of myth which lays out its own limits” (p. 71). Jean-François Mattéi, “The Theater of Myth in Plato.” In *Platonic Writings/Platonic Readings*, ed. Charles L. Griswold, Jr. New York: Routledge, 1988, pp. 66-83.

²¹ Brendan Moran, *op. cit.*, p. 61

passages from the works of James Joyce is welcome relief from the stale form in which academic writing generally appears, the anagrammatic pseudonym—Monad Rrenban—under which Brendan Moran had his book published is somewhat forced. What is clear, however, is that this book is based on the widest critical engagement with the secondary literature on Benjamin published in English and German and it constitutes the most sustained attempt in English to relate his early work to late-twentieth century French philosophy in general and the linguistico-philosophical standpoint of deconstruction in particular. But it is precisely herein that—despite its various merits—lies the problem with this book. Since Moran confines his analysis to the early work, which he determines—not without emphasising the provisionality of this determination—as ending with *Origin of the German Mourning Play* (1925), at no stage does he attempt to unearth those foundations of “On the Mimetic Faculty” (1933) that lie beneath the surface of the early metaphysics of language and on which Benjamin began to build no later than 1928. The result is a four-hundred page book without a single instance of the word “mimesis.” But as has been indicated above, although Benjamin himself did not realise it until just over a decade after writing “On Language in general and on the Language of Man” (1916), his early metaphysics of language *in fact presupposes the mimetic faculty of man* as that which capacitates the production of the concrete elements of human language. Taken together, these elements comprise that symbolic character of language which exists in tension with its allegorical character. Whereas the latter is an unfortunate byproduct of the judgement necessarily involved in naming, the former is the basis of the “symbolic intention” in terms of which he understands truth (GS VI, 39). Since this metaphysics informs Benjamin’s early work in general, no account of this work is complete without locating in it the role played—however implicitly—by mimetic praxis. What is more, the role of mimesis in this metaphysics is in any event *not only implicit*. For how else but as a product of mimetic praxis is the word *Abbild* (“copy,” “image,” or “likeness”) in the following decisive passage to be understood?

All human language is only reflection of the word in name. The name reaches the word as little as recognition reaches creation. The infinity of all human language remains forever limited and analytic in essence compared with the absolutely unlimited and creating infinity of the divine word. The deepest *likeness* of this divine word and the point at which human language attains the innermost share in the divine infinity of the mere word, the point at which it cannot be finite word and cannot become recognition: this is the human name. The theory of the personal name is the theory of the frontier of finite against infinite language. (EW, 260; emphasis added)

Alle menschliche Sprache ist nur Reflex des Wortes im Namen. Der Name erreicht so wenig das Wort wie die Erkenntnis die Schaffung. Die Unendlichkeit aller menschlichen Sprache bleibt immer

eingeschränkten und analytischen Wesens im Vergleich mit der absoluten uneingeschränkten und schaffenden Unendlichkeit des Gotteswortes. Das tiefste Abbild dieses göttlichen Wortes und der Punkt, an dem die Menschensprache den innigsten Anteil an der göttlichen Unendlichkeit des bloßen Wortes erlangt, der Punkt, an dem sie nicht endliches Wort und Erkenntnis nicht werden kann: das ist der menschliche Namen. Die Theorie des Eigennamens ist die Theorie von der Grenze der endlichen gegen die unendliche Sprache. (GS II, 149; emphasis added)

The theme of the absolute separation between profane and divine should by now be familiar. But what is it that makes the personal name “the word of God in human sounds” (EW, 260; GS II, 150)? Why is it *here* that the likeness of human language with the divine word reaches its zenith? The reason is that the naming of newborn children is not executed on the basis of any knowledge of who they are; by naming beings in recognition of the unrecognisability of what they are naming, “adults dedicate [*weihen*] their children to God” (*Ibid.*). For this act is, wittingly or not, an homage to that whereby God called things into being in the creating word by calling their proper names (EW, 265; GS II, 155). Just as the name has ontological priority over being in the divine act of creation, so too it has this priority in the profane act of naming newborns.

No person should correspond in strict spirit to the name (according to its etymological meaning), for the personal name is the word of God in human sounds. With it each person is guaranteed his creation by God, and in this sense he is himself creating, just as the mythological wisdom expresses it in the view (which doubtless is not seldom found) that the destiny of man is his name. (EW, 260)

Es sollte im strengen Geist auch kein Mensch dem Namen (nach seiner etymologischen Bedeutung) entsprechen, denn der Eigename ist Wort Gottes in menschlichen Lauten. Mit ihm wird jedem Menschen seine Erschaffung durch Gott verbürgt, und in diesem Sinne ist er selbst schaffend, wie die mythologische Weisheit es in der Anschauung ausspricht (die sich wohl nicht selten findet), daß sein Name des Menschen Schicksal sei. (GS II, 149-150)

Man becomes similar to the name he is given, which, by determining who he becomes, constitutes his destiny. In this sense, man himself is creating. The ontological priority of the name of a person over his or her being makes the naming of children structurally homologous to the divine act of creation. Only by becoming creating themselves through this homage to divine creation are people guaranteed their creation by God, because only then—by becoming like the one in whose image they were created—do they do justice to their own creation. The personal name is thus the most profound likeness (*Abbild*) of the divine word because it reflects the priority of name over being in creation. Unlike knowledge (*Wissen*) about good and evil, which is uncreative imitation (*unschöpferische*

Nachahmung), the personal name is an object of a mimesis that is indeed creative because—as Benjamin writes in another context with regard to the artwork—it “bears in its consummation the creator anew” (SW 2, 730; GS IV, 438). Accordingly, it can thus be said that the personal name is “the communion [*Gemeinschaft*] of man with the *creative* word of God” (EW, 260; GS II, 150). The basis of this communion with the word by man are the *acts* of creating himself, which involve “attaching” himself to the name on the basis of that mimetic praxis with which its status as an object strictly coincides. Hence the following note from 1928 amongst the first sketches toward *The Arcades Project*.

Am I the one who is called W.B.? or am I just called W.B.? This is indeed the question that leads into the mystery of the personal name, and it is quite aptly formulated in a posthumous “fragment” by Hermann Ungar: “Does the name attach to us, or are we attached to a name?” (AP, 866)

Bin ich der, der W. B. heißt? oder heiße ich bloß einfach W. B.? Das ist in der Tat die Frage, die ins Geheimnis des Personennamens einführt und sie ist ganz richtig in einem nachgelassenen »Fragment« von Hermann Ungar formuliert: »Hängt der Name an uns oder hängen wir an einem Namen?« (GS V, 1036)

Were this question definitively answerable the personal name would no longer be mysterious. Rather than answering the question, therefore, “On Language in general and on the Language of Man” (1916) provides an account of why the more intuitive first option is an oversimplification. But if those moments of mimetic praxis in which man attaches himself to the name does indeed involve communion with the creative word of God, then it is crucial to observe the discontinuity that still inhabits this communion. For “[t]he name reaches the [divine] word as little as recognition reaches creation” (EW, 260; GS II, 149). Now, a failure to recognise the role of mimetic praxis in the theory of the personal name presented in “On Language in general and on the Language of Man” (1916) not only occludes the logic of this “theory of the frontier [*Grenze*] of finite against infinite language” (*Ibid.*). In addition, it precludes understanding exactly why it was that, as Hanssen herself points out, “Benjamin remained convinced that his early metaphysics of language could securely ground his new theory of a pivotal anthropological [faculty].”²² It is for this reason unsurprising that no account of this conviction is provided in her essay. For to Hanssen the role of mimesis in his early metaphysics is reducible to that “idolatrous practice” initiated by the Fall of Man “in which fallen, mediate language imitated original immediacy.”²³ Crucially, this criticism of Hanssen is no mere polemic. It is advanced solely for the sake of

²² Beatrice Hanssen, *op. cit.*, p. 64

²³ *Ibid.*

clarifying the inaccuracy of that traditional narrative of the development of Benjamin's philosophy of language of which her essay is simply a conveniently concise representative.

Against Neologism

The traditional narrative is more or less owed to that figure whose views continue to frame the debate on Benjamin's philosophy of language, namely his close friend and onetime intellectual ally Gershom Scholem. In a letter to Scholem from 1934, Benjamin describes a letter that he had written three years before to Max Rychner as the sole attempt he had thus far made to express in writing "the whole contradictory foundation from which" the conviction in accordance with which he had always written "arises in its individual manifestations" (C, 439; GB IV, 408). Benjamin thus appeals to this letter as an account of the development of the practice of his philosophising to which Scholem might turn should he wish to understand the continuity of his work. In doing so, Benjamin fails to recall that Scholem had not only read the letter to Rychner soon after it was written, but had in fact also sent Benjamin a lengthy critique of its claims by way of response. The expression of an interest in "how far one as an experiment [*versuchsweise*] might come with the stance of the materialist" Scholem deems utterly disingenuous on the grounds that Benjamin had "evidently [*evidentermaßen*] never and in no case adopted [*eingenommen*] this stance in [his] creative method" (C, 375; GB IV, 29). What is more, Benjamin is "completely incapable of doing so with success" for the reason that his "proper and solid insights [*eigenen und soliden Erkenntnisse*] grow out of, to put it briefly, a metaphysics of language" that is fundamentally irreconcilable with the standpoint of dialectical materialism (C, 375, 374; GB IV, 29, 27). Three years later, Benjamin acknowledges the contradictory nature of the *theoretical* foundation from which the conviction that informs each instance of his philosophical *practice* arises. But what the letter to Rychner to which Benjamin appeals is designed to stage is that this contradiction of theory is resolvable *in praxis*. More precisely, it is resolvable in the mimetic act of reading prose designed to bypass theory by immediately effectuating praxis. Such design is indeed not far from that of "The Task of the Translator" (1921). But a decade later, Benjamin has the materialist rather than merely theological grounds for its deployment. Crucially, it is not the letter itself that effectuates the praxis in which the theoretical contradiction is resolved. Rather, it is designed to stage the possibility of its effectuation. Take, for example, the following passage concerning *Origin of the German Mourning Play* (1925).

Now this book was certainly not materialist, albeit already dialectical. What I did not know at the time of its composition soon became clearer and clearer to me: that from my very peculiar linguistico-

philosophical standpoint to the approach of dialectical materialism there is an—albeit ever so tense and problematic—mediation; to the satiety of bourgeois scholarship there is however no [mediation] whatsoever. (C, 372)

Nun war dieses Buch gewiß nicht materialistisch, wenn auch bereits dialektisch. Was ich aber zur Zeit seiner Abfassung nicht wußte, das ist mir bald nachher klarer und klarer geworden: daß von meinem sehr besonderen sprachphilosophischen Standort aus es zur Betrachtungsweise des dialektischen Materialismus eine—wenn auch noch so gespannte und problematische—Vermittlung gibt, zur Saturiertheit der bürgerlich Wissenschaft aber garkeine. (GB IV, 18)

No less important than the semantic content of the last two clauses is their divergent grammatical structures. The “from ... to” (*von ... aus ... zu*) construction of the first clause creates an expectation in the reader that is met by a noun whose specification divides it from its article: “an—albeit ever so tense and problematic—mediation [*eine—wenn auch noch so gespannte und problematische—Vermittlung*].” The Kantian sense of the term “problematic” is important and will be discussed at a later stage. To recognise here is how the expectation of the reader is met by the intensive form of presentation of an immanently specified object. The mediation from Benjamin’s linguistico-philosophical standpoint to the approach of dialectical materialism is specified not only semantically, but perceptually. Just as the possibility of genuine recognition in the name exists in the present state of language despite its abstract elements, so too the possibility of true (i.e. not false) consciousness exists in the present state of society despite its ideological elements. The task in each case is the purification of myth by the power of that form of presentation alone appropriate to the concrete dialectical analysis of historical objects, namely intensive presentation. That the object of the first clause is so constituted by the tension of its language is confirmed by the total absence of tension from the second clause. For this clause, by contrast, includes no punctuation and no interruption, but instead ever so slackly proceeds to its empty conclusion: the word *garkeine* (“no [...] whatsoever”). In fact, the clause is so slack that it—admittedly without departing from German grammatical convention—can not even muster the strength to repeat the noun to which *garkeine* refers: “mediation” (*Vermittlung*). The impotent clause stages the impotence of that bourgeois scholarship which is its object. Indeed, it *constitutes* its object by failing to utter the name of that whose absence is definitive of it, namely a mediation to Benjamin’s linguistico-philosophical standpoint. In this way, its language stages the supersaturated state designated by *Saturiertheit* (“satiety”), a term coined by Otto von Bismarck in the late nineteenth century soon after the unification of Germany.

The coinage of *Saturiertheit* was part of an attempt by Bismarck to allay fears amongst the major powers over the desire for expansion they suspected might come with unification. By designating “a particular supersaturation of affluence amongst citizens, who place few personal needs, reactions and expressions of will on the day” and consequently have only limited interest in “creativity, spontaneity or political commitment [*Engagement*],” the term fostered an image a citizenry content with the European status quo.²⁴ The Great War not only proved the desire for expansion in a unified Germany true; it also revealed the mendacity of Bismarck’s coinage. From the perspective of Benjamin’s linguistico-philosophical standpoint, however, its mendacity need not in fact have been empirically demonstrated by the warmongering nature of early twentieth century Germany. For all such neologisms are *necessarily* mendacious because what they communicate is not objective “meaning” (*Bedeutung*), but subjective “designation” (*Bezeichnung*). If the term *Saturiertheit* (“satiety”) *designates* a saturated citizenry, it *means* little more than a particular phonic-graphic complex arbitrarily chosen by Bismarck. As such, it is not characterised by that tension toward the meant grounded in the intentional immediacy of the name in terms of which Benjamin understands the symbolic character of language and on which all genuine recognition depends.

A result not of praxis, but of contemplation, neologisms are words in which the symbolic character of language is usurped by its allegorical character. For they have no objects in the world and derive instead from judgment. Such is the basis for the prohibition called for in the “Epistemo-Critical Prologue” (1925) on the use of neologisms in philosophical consideration.

The introduction of new terminologies, insofar as it does not strictly remain in the conceptual domain, but sets its sights on the ultimate objects of consideration, is therefore questionable within the philosophical domain. Such terminologies—a miscarried naming in which intending has more share than language—relinquish the objectivity which history has given to the principal coinages of philosophical considerations. (O, 37)

Die Einführung neuer Terminologien, soweit sie nicht streng im begrifflichen Bereich sich hält, sondern auf die letzten Gegenstände der Betrachtung es absieht, ist daher innerhalb des philosophischen Bereichs bedenklich. Solche Terminologien—ein mißglücktes Benennen, an welchem das Meinen mehr Anteil hat als die Sprache—entzogen der Objektivität, welche die Geschichte den Hauptprägungen der philosophischen Betrachtungen gegeben hat. (GS I, 217)

²⁴ See: <http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Saturiertheit>. Accessed 13 April 2013

Precisely how history has given such coinages objectivity Benjamin does not say here. But it concerns the relation of philosophy to what he calls *Lehre*. This term has posed a problem in the English reception of Benjamin in which it is generally translated as “doctrine” with the proviso that a more accurate yet more awkward translation might be “teachings.” But another English equivalent remains to be exploited. This equivalent is “lore,” a word that in fact derives from *Lehre* itself. “Lore” names the body of largely orally bequeathed traditions and knowledge that inform the way of life of a particular group. Crucially, lore as Benjamin conceives it is not characterised by a distinction between theory and praxis. Its “theory” is *immediately* the “practice” of its traditions; its bequeathal takes place in acts of living lore that are not imitated but appropriated and *transformed* by the one who learns. In other words: when what Benjamin calls “lore” develops it does so on the basis of an individual who, as he puts it in a letter to Scholem from 1917, “encompasses tradition in his own way and teaching, makes it communicable [*auf seine Weise die Tradition umfaßt und lehrend mitteilbar macht*]” (C, 94; GB I, 382). It is only an individual who learns in such a way that he sees “at which point he is alone [*an welcher Stelle er einsam ist*]” in the context of tradition that this lore is at once developed and rendered bequeathable (*Ibid.*).

Ontology is not the Palace

That it is above all Plato and Kant to whom Benjamin attributes the two most significant developments of lore in the context of western philosophy is made quite clear in a subsequent letter in which he writes the following with regard to Kant.

The most profound typology of the thinking of lore has to me always merged into his words and thoughts, and as immeasurably much of the Kantian letter may have to fall, this typology of his system—which within philosophy can to my knowledge be compared only with that of Plato—must be maintained. Only in the sense of Kant and Plato and, as I believe, by way of the revision and further training of Kant, can philosophy turn into lore or at least be incorporated by it. (C, 97)

Die tiefste Typik des Denkens der Lehre ist mir bisher immer in seinen Worten und Gedanken aufgegangen, und wie unermesslich viel vom Kantischen Buchstaben auch mag fallen müssen diese Typik seines Systems die innerhalb der Philosophie nur mit der Platos meines Wissens verglichen werden kann muß erhalten bleiben. Einzig im Sinne Kants und Platos und wie ich glaube im Wege der Revision und Fortbildung Kants kann die Philosophie zur Lehre oder mindestens ihr einverleibt werden. (GB I, 389)

Benjamin goes on to acknowledge the vagueness of the expression “typology of his thinking” and clarifies that what he means to say is that “the *essential* of Kantian thinking is to be preserved” notwithstanding the fact that precisely what constitutes its essence remains unclear to him (C, 97; GB I, 389). In yet another letter written not long thereafter, Benjamin commits to a more precise determination of the significance of Kant, which assists in understanding what is to be understood by the claim in the “Epistemo-Critical Prologue” (1925) that it is history that has given objectivity “to the principal coinages of philosophical considerations” (O, 37; GS I, 217).

Precisely the study of Kantian terminology, probably the only terminology in philosophy that has not only emerged *in toto* but is also created, leads to the recognition of its extraordinary potency and in any case one can, by developing it immanently in itself and rendering it more precise, learn a lot. (C, 103)

Gerade das Studium der Kantischen Terminologie, wohl der einzigen in der Philosophie die im ganzen nicht nur entstanden sondern auch geschaffen ist führt auf die Erkenntnis ihrer außerordentlichen Potenz und jedenfalls kann man, indem man sie in sich immanent entwickelt und präzisiert sehr viel lernen. (GB I, 402-403)

If the potency of Kantian terminology is connected to the fact that it both emerged as a whole and is created, then this does not imply that Kant *coined* each of its individual terms. That for which Kant is responsible is not the coinage of terms such as *Saturiertheit* (“satiety”). Far from adding invented terms to the lexicon of philosophy, Kant loaded traditional terms with what Benjamin calls “symbolic charge [*symbolische Ladung*]” (GS VI, 39). The source of this charge was the struggle to encompass tradition in his *own* way and make it bequeathable. Precisely *this* rather than the particular construction of the Kantian architectonic “is why every criticism of his philosophical style is pure philistinism and profane chatter [*Geschwätz*]” (C, 97; GB I, 389-90). It is in the same untranslated note from around 1918 in which Benjamin specifies the role played by dialogue in Plato that the *mystical* significance of the *esoteric* style of Kant is spelled out most emphatically. The neglect of the significance of this remarkable note in the literature on Benjamin demands it be cited at length.

The system has such a structure that the insights of ontology hang on it on its walls. Ontology is not the palace. To remain in the image: insights of ontology must preserve the dimension of pictures. To clarify the image: all insights must, through their latent symbolic content, be bearers of a powerful symbolic intention that classifies them under the name of ontology to the system itself whose decisive category is *lore*, also *truth*, but not *recognition*. The task of ontology is to so load insights with

symbolic intention that they lose themselves in truth or lore, merge into it, but without justifying them, since their justification is revelation, language. To return to the image: to fill the walls of the palace with images until the images appear to be the walls. This mighty intention toward symbolic impregnation of all insights is the foundation of Kantian mysticism. His terminology is mystical; it is absolutely determined by the ambition to give to the concepts ascertained in it from origin on the symbolic charge, the inconspicuously glorifying dimension of genuine recognition, of the pictures in the palace. All exactitude is only pride in the mystery of this its birth, which critique is unable to eradicate although it does not realise it. This is Kant's esotericism.

Das System hat diejenige Struktur, daß die Erkenntnisse der Ontologie an ihm an den Wänden hängen. Die Ontologie ist nicht der Palast. Um im Bilde zu bleiben: die Erkenntnisse der Ontologie müssen die Dimension von Gemälden bewahren. Um das Bild zu erklären: alle Erkenntnisse müssen durch ihren latenten symbolischen Gehalt Träger einer gewaltigen symbolischen Intention sein, welche sie unter dem Namen der Ontologie dem System selbst einordnet, dessen entscheidende Kategorie Lehre, auch Wahrheit, nicht Erkenntnis ist. Die Aufgabe der Ontologie ist es die Erkenntnisse so mit symbolischer Intention zu laden, daß sie sich in Wahrheit oder Lehre verlieren, in ihr aufgehen, ohne sie doch zu begründen, da deren Begründung Offenbarung, Sprache ist. Um auf das Bild zurückzukommen: die Wände des Palastes so mit Bildern auszufüllen, bis die Bilder scheinen die Wände zu sein. Diese gewaltige Intention auf symbolische Schwängerung aller Erkenntnisse ist der Grund der Kantischen Mystik. Seine Terminologie ist mystisch, sie ist absolut bestimmt aus dem Bestreben, den in ihr ermittelten Begriffen von Ursprung an die symbolische Ladung, die unscheinbar verherrlichende Dimension der echten Erkenntnis, des Gemäldes im Palast zu geben. Alle Akribie ist nur der Stolz auf das Mysterium dieser ihrer Geburt, welches die Kritik nicht auszutilgen vermag, obwohl sie es nicht begreift. Dies ist Kants Esoterik. (GS VI, 39)

Critical philosophy is unable to eradicate the mystery of the birth of the terminology on which it is founded because this mysterious appearance of its divine ground is objective. The essential unity of language *must* appear mysteriously outside of revelation. Since nothing but the revelation of the essential unity of language can justify the objectivity of language which is owed to this unity itself, ontology *must* stop short of justifying the insights (*Erkenntnisse*) for whose symbolic charging it is responsible. But why does the critical philosophy of Kant not “realise” (*begreift*) that mystery is ineradicable from its terminology? Because, as Benjamin puts it in “On the Programme of the Coming Philosophy” (1918), “the fact that all philosophical recognition would have its exclusive expression in language and not in formulas and numbers completely receded for Kant” by virtue of his concern with “the side of philosophy equal to mathematics [*der Mathematik ebenbürtigen Seiten der Philosophie*]” (SW 1, 108; GS II, 168). The result is a “one-sided mathematical-mechanical oriented concept of recognition” from the standpoint of which *objective* mystery is unrecognisable (*Ibid.*). “The great reshaping and correction” of this concept “can only be won by a

connection of recognition to language [*eine Beziehung der Erkenntnis auf die Sprache*]” (*Ibid.*). For understanding recognition as an ecstatic praxis that takes place in the name would alone create a concept of recognition “to which corresponds the concept of an experience of which the recognition is lore [*dem der Begriff einer Erfahrung korrespondiert von der die Erkenntnis Lehre ist*]” (*Ibid.*). But why is “the concept of recognition as lore” necessary (SW 1, 109; GS II, 170)? Because “in its continuous unfolding” this concept “immediately relates” to “a unity of experience that can in no way be understood as the sum of experiences” (*Ibid.*). If it is in terms of “this concrete totality of experience” that Benjamin understands religion, then of concern is not “the relationship between philosophy and religion,” but “the relationship of recognition in general to recognition of religion [*Verhältnis der Erkenntnis überhaupt zur Erkenntnis von der Religion*]” (*Ibid.*). The significance of the latter concerns the fact that “the source of existence lies in the totality of experience” (*Ibid.*). Consequently, it is only in that lore which suffers no breach between theory and praxis that “philosophy hits upon an absolute, as existence [*die Philosophie auf ein Absolutes, als Dasein {stößt}*]” (*Ibid.*). A decade later, once the presupposition of the mimetic faculty in the early metaphysics is recognised, Benjamin can state the problem more simply: linguistic being is distinguishable in “contexts” or “complexes” of experience (*Erfahrungszusammenhängen*) because the recognisability of the name *qua* object of a mimesis coincides with an act of assimilative praxis on the part of man (AP, 868; GS V, 1038).

If philosophy hits upon existence only in recognition—or more precisely, in recognition as lore—, ontology cannot be “the palace” (GS VI, 39). Its task is more modest, namely to exploit language, on the basis of its correlation with recognition, as a resource for loading insights with enough “symbolic intention that they lose themselves in truth or lore” (*Ibid.*). It is in the no doubt *unwitting* fulfilment of this task by Kant that Benjamin locates the basis of the “extraordinary potency” of what is for this reason a mystical terminology (C, 103; GB I, 403). The reason for elevating Kant above every western philosopher since Plato is thus not only that the critical philosophy is concerned first and foremost with “the justification of recognition” (SW 1, 100; GS II, 157). It is also because his mystical terminology is the outcome of a struggle to encompass tradition in his own way, which succeeded in making it communicable so as to produce the most significant development of lore in the history of western philosophers since Plato. Hence why Benjamin opens “On the Programme of the Coming Philosophy” (1918) with the claim that “[t]he historical continuity that will be guaranteed by the connection to the Kantian system is at the same time the sole continuity of decisive systematic importance [*systematischer Tragweite*]” (*Ibid.*). As long as revelation is the ultimate justification of the objectivity of language, the terminology of every *critical* system must involve a symbolic charge that renders it to a certain extent mystical.

The Symbolic Character of Language

Toward the end of “On Language in general and on the Language of Man” (1916) Benjamin warns that, although it has not been dealt with in the study, name and judgement “have not only a communicating function, but in all likelihood also a symbolic function closely connected with it [*höchstwahrscheinlich auch eine mit ihr eng verbundene symbolische Funktion*]” (EW, 266-67; GS II, 156). This proviso is developed in “The Task of the Translator” (1921) in what is perhaps its most obscure passage.

There remains in all language and its constructions besides the communicable a noncommunicable, a—depending on the context in which it is encountered—symbolising or a symbolised. A symbolising only in the finite constructions of languages; a symbolised, however, in the becoming of the languages themselves. (SW 1, 261)

Es bleibt in aller Sprache und ihren Gebilden außer dem Mitteilbaren ein Nicht-Mitteilbares, ein, je nach dem Zusammenhang, in dem es angetroffen wird, Symbolisierendes oder Symbolisiertes. Symbolisierendes nur, in den endlichen Gebilden der Sprachen; Symbolisiertes aber im Werden der Sprachen selbst. (GS IV, 19)

The obscurity of this passage has been dealt with in the reception of this essay either by restating it, explaining it away or simply ignoring it. Take, for example, the relevant chapter of *Benjamin's -abilities* (2008) by Samuel Weber. This critic suggests that “rendering the ‘symbolizing’ of the incommunicable itself as the ‘symbolized’” does not in fact “involve the transformation of the ‘symbolizing’ into its polar opposite, the ‘symbolized.’”²⁵ Rather, what Benjamin actually means is that it involves “their paradoxical and violent convergence in translation, as that which sets the mediality of the language-medium into motion, going nowhere and yet never standing still.”²⁶ This logic finds its most sustained development in “Intensive Sprachen” (“Intensive Languages”) (2001) by Werner Hamacher who attempts to demonstrate the role of Kant’s principle of the anticipations of perception in Benjamin’s theory of translation in such a way that, as Weber himself puts it, “places translation at the core of Benjamin’s thought.”²⁷ The limited significance of this project for grasping the linguistico-philosophical standpoint peculiar to Benjamin is revealed nowise more efficiently than by the fact that the word symbol does not make *a single appearance* in this 60-odd page essay. Here is the passage in which it is most blatantly suppressed:

²⁵ Samuel Weber, *Benjamin's -abilities*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2008, p. 43.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ *Ibid.* p. 333, n. 14. Werner Hamacher, “Intensive Languages,” trans. Ira Allen and Steven Tester. *MLN* 127 (2012), pp. 485-541; Werner Hamacher, “Intensive Sprachen.” In *Übersetzen: Walter Benjamin*, ed. Christiaan L. Hart Nibbrig. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2001, pp. 174-235.

If communicability is the *essence* of language, then, as the translator essay insists, “beyond all communication something ultimate, something deciding” *remains*; it remains in language dividing itself from itself as “a noncommunicable.” Utter translatability, which enables and directs the movements and the becoming of languages into and toward “language as a whole” is equally utter untranslatability—namely, untranslatability of that very translatability. Language is, in an—albeit disintegrating—word, *translatable*. *Recognisable*, *communicable*, *translatable*—in these transcendental concepts that Benjamin uses at critical moments of his argumentation, the suffix of possibility [in German, namely *-bar*] exhibits its adjectival sense and means: *bereft of possibility of recognition, of communication, of translation*.²⁸

*Ist Mitteilbarkeit das Wesen der Sprache, dann bleibt, wie der Übersetzeraufsatz insistiert, »über alle Mitteilung hinaus ein Letztes, Entscheidendes«, es bleibt als in ihr von ihr sich Scheidendes »ein Nicht-Mitteilbares«. Schlechthinnige Übersetzbarkeit, die die Bewegungen und das Werden der Sprachen zur einen »Sprache im ganzen« ermöglicht und leitet, ist ebenso schlechthinnige Unübersetzbarkeit—nämlich Unübersetzbarkeit eben jener Übersetzbarkeit. Sprache ist, in einem—wenn auch zerfallenden—Wort, übersetzbar. Erkennbar, mitteilbar, übersetzbar—in diesen transzendentalistischen Konzepten, die Benjamin in kritischen Momenten seiner Argumentation gebraucht, zeigt das Suffix der Möglichkeit seinen adjektivischen Sinn und bedeutet: bar jeder Möglichkeit der Erkenntnis, der Mitteilung, der Übersetzung.*²⁹

This rhetorical analysis is a mode of interpretation pioneered by Paul de Man who likewise once argued that whatever Benjamin text might say overtly, covertly what it says is that the essential unity of language “does not exist except as a permanent disjunction which inhabits all languages as such.”³⁰ While Hamacher pursues this logic far more rigorously in his interpretation of Benjamin than de Man ever did, the argument is nevertheless based on a mistaken premise, namely that the essence of language is communicability *according to Benjamin*. “So that a self could relate to itself,” writes Hamacher, “it already requires the possibility of translation, mere communicability: and this in Benjamin is called language [*bedarf es schon der Möglichkeit der Übersetzung, bloßer Mitteilbarkeit: und diese heißt bei Benjamin Sprache*].”³¹ Crucially, the adoption of this premise is by no means isolated to Hamacher. It no less decisively informs the interpretation in “Saturnine Vision and the Question of Difference” (1986) by Rodolphe Gasché according to whose interpretation “On Language in general and on the Language of Man” (1916) does not in fact assign to language “a symbolic function” in addition to “its communicating a function” (EW, 266-67;

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 527

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 219

³⁰ Paul de Man, *op. cit.*, p. 92

³¹ Werner Hamacher, *op. cit.*, p. 534; p. 227

GS II, 156). Rather, the thesis of this metaphysics of language is “that language, *qua* language, *qua* linguistic medium, communicates only the unmediated communication of its own communicating.”³² But just as in Hamacher, this interpretation neglects the crucial fact that a word does not only communicate a communicability according to Benjamin; it *must* at the same time, by a distinct yet complementary action, symbolise a noncommunicability. Nowhere is this neglect more obvious, however, than at a certain point in *The Messianic Reduction: Walter Benjamin and the Shape of Time* (2011) by Peter Fenves.³³ The context is a discussion of an untranslated note written by Benjamin around 1920, the decisive passage of which runs as follows.

Linguistic constructions, thus also the word, communicate a communicability and symbolise a noncommunicability. [...] The word “tower” first communicates a communicability of itself. It communicates as a word that it is communicable, and this “it” is a spiritual being. It is something originary and a word thus communicates that a specific, originary spiritual being is communicable. But with that alone the word does not yet mean anything. Sure enough it communicates something, something quite specific and definitive, namely a communicability; but it does not itself communicate that of which it communicates the communicability; it means it. And in order to determine the object of its meaning, a *virtus* in the word other than the communicating one is therefore required.

Die sprachlichen Gebilde, so auch das Wort, teilen eine Mitteilbarkeit mit und symbolisieren eine Nicht-Mitteilbarkeit. [...] Das Wort »Turm« teilt erstens eine Mitteilbarkeit seiner selbst mit. Es teilt als Wort mit, daß es mitteilbar ist, und dieses »es« ist ein geistiges Wesen. Es ist etwas Ursprüngliches und ein Wort teilt also mit, daß ein bestimmtes, ursprüngliches geistiges Wesen mitteilbar ist. Damit allein aber bedeutet es noch nichts. Es teilt zwar etwas mit, etwas ganz Bestimmtes und Endgültiges, nämlich eine Mitteilbarkeit, dasjenige aber von dem es die Mitteilbarkeit mitteilt, teilt es selbst nicht mit, das bedeutet es. Und um den Gegenstand seiner Bedeutung zu bestimmen, bedarf es also einer andern virtus im Wort als der mitteilenden. (GS VI, 15-16)

Since the communication of a communicability by the communicating *virtus* (“character,” or “excellence”) of the word *must* mean something *in particular*, the word *must* have a second character, complementary to the first, which allows the object of its meaning to be determined. This object is the meant. It is determined by the symbolising character of the word, which symbolises the noncommunicability of which the word communicates only the communicable aspect of the relevant spiritual being. Hence the claim

³² Rodolphe Gasché, “Saturnine Vision and the Question of Difference: Reflections on Walter Benjamin’s Theory of Language.” In *Benjamin’s Ground: New Readings of Walter Benjamin*, ed. Rainer Nägele. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1986, p. 93.

³³ Peter Fenves, *The Messianic Reduction: Walter Benjamin and the Shape of Time*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011.

in the contemporaneous note “On Riddle and Mystery” (c. 1920) that within the word there rests “a symbolic kernel beyond the founding kernel communicated within it [*ein symbolischer jenseits des in ihm mitgeteilten gründender Kern*]” (SW 1, 267-68; GS VI, 18). The kernel communicated within the word is the “founding kernel” because language begins with that communication of spiritual content which, according to the basic premise of Benjamin’s metaphysics of language, is essential to every event or thing in either animate or inanimate nature. But since the object of the meaning of the communicability communicated must in each case be determined by the symbolic character of the word as the *particular* noncommunicability from which the communicability is communicated, a mysterious symbolic kernel must also belong to each word. For his part, Fenves makes no mention whatsoever of symbolising character and instead identifies the relevant “supplementary *virtus*” as that “-ability or -barkeit” without which “the communicability of a ‘spiritual essence’ falls short of meaning precisely that object whose essence it is.”³⁴ Not only is this interpretation mistaken, the point at which Fenves eventually arrives on its basis in fact bears out the validity of the claim that the *particularity* of the meant *presupposes* a symbolising character on the part of language. “What is meant by any language,” Fenves tautologically concludes, “is meaning pure and simple.”³⁵

Now, in *Benjamin’s -abilities* (2008), Weber acknowledges “three of those [critics] who quite early discerned and interpreted the significance of ‘-abilities’ in Benjamin’s writing,” namely “Peter Fenves, Rodolphe Gasché, and Werner Hamacher.”³⁶ It can now be seen that the execution of this task by these four critics has been carried out on the basis of a suppression of the significance of the symbolic character that Benjamin attributes to language and on which his philosophy from early to late is based. While Hanssen is correct to warn against performing rhetorical analyses of his work without placing due emphasis on the fact “that the early Benjamin unambiguously embraced an organic, pure language that claimed to be neither metaphorical nor allegorical but if anything was symbolical,” this emphasis is of limited value unless it is accompanied by an explanation of both *why* Benjamin insisted on the symbolic character of language and *why*, as Hanssen seems to imply, this insistence characterises his *early* work alone.³⁷ This study denies this restriction and will demonstrate that a commitment to the symbolic character of language not only informs Benjamin’s philosophy right up to “Über den Begriff der Geschichte” (“On the Concept of History”) (1940). What is more, this commitment is in fact what *motivates* the materialist renovation of his philosophy of language because this character *presupposes* of

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 135

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 132

³⁶ Samuel Weber, *op. cit.*, p. 357-58

³⁷ Beatrice Hanssen, *op. cit.*, p. 62

man a mimetic faculty that *capacitates* the foundation of that ground of intentional immediacy in which the concrete elements of language are rooted and in terms of which Benjamin understands the name. Since no name appears outside of mimetic praxis, it should come as no surprise that there is no symbolic character in Benjamin for Fenves, Gasché, Hamacher and Weber. For in each of the aforementioned studies by these critics the word “mimesis” itself does not appear.³⁸

The House of Truth

The consistency of the suppression of the symbolic and the mimetic amongst these critics bespeaks the commitment they all more or less share to the linguistico-philosophical standpoint of deconstruction. This tradition is characterised by the attempt to reveal the condition of impossibility that attends every condition of possibility so as to demonstrate the preclusion of the presence sought by metaphysics. If, as Benjamin puts it in “On the Programme of the Coming Philosophy” (1918), “Kant nowhere denied the possibility of metaphysics,” but rather merely demanded that “the criteria according to which such a possibility could be proven in the individual case” first be established, then this possibility is indeed denied by deconstruction (SW 1, 102; GS II, 160). For the impossibility of totality precludes what Benjamin specifies as the “distinguishing element in the concept of metaphysics,” namely the universal power of its insights, or in other words: “the power binding total experience with the concept of God immediately by ideas [*die gesamte Erfahrung mit dem Gottesbegriff durch Ideen unmittelbar verknüpfenden Macht*]” (SW 1, 105; GS II, 164). What separates Benjamin from deconstruction is not that he conceives the allegorical character of language to be contingent. On the contrary, it is a necessary consequence of the judgment involved in naming. The distinction of his philosophy lies rather in its commitment to the possibility of a purification from judgement of embodied thought. This purification occurs as a flash of recognition in the name strictly coincident with an ecstatic praxis of mimesis. In this moment the allegorical character of linguistically determined thinking is fleetingly overcome by the concretisation of its symbolic character on the basis of a provisional dissolution of the boundary between subject and object. This occurs in that concrete totality of experience alone in which “philosophy hits upon an absolute, as existence [*ein Absolutes, als Dasein*]” (SW 1, 109; GS II, 170). *Pace* Weber, the significance of the indefinite article here concerns less the “indefiniteness” than the monadic

³⁸ This claim demands the following qualification: in *Benjamin's -abilities* (2008) the word “mimesis” appears twice in a single passage solely concerned with Aristotle.

nature of this epistemic event.³⁹ In other words: the term “an absolute” anticipates what in “On the Concept of History” (1940) Benjamin will eventually name that “monad” in exclusive terms of which the historical object confronts the historical materialist (SW, 396; GS I, 703).

Monad constitutes a particular view of the whole, or an intensive presentation of infinity. What Benjamin calls the constructive principle on which materialist historiography is based allows “a constellation saturated with tensions [*einer von Spannungen gesättigten Konstellation*]” to be presented in which the movement of thoughts can suddenly be brought to a halt (*Ibid.*). The halting of thought has a freezing effect on this constellation; “it gives the latter a shock,” as Benjamin puts it, “by which it is crystallised as monad” (SW 4, 396; GS I, 703). Crucially, the claim to totality of the monad makes of it a theological concept. Hence why Benjamin insists in *The Arcades Project* that whereas philology is the basic science of commentary on a text, theology is the basic science of commentary on actuality (AP, 460; GS V, 574). The crystallisation of monad is predicated on a particular stance of reading language in general that functions as a medium in which the resistance to the unification between subject and object is fleetingly overcome.

The historical method is a philological method informed by the book of life. “To read what was never written” as Hofmannsthal puts it. The reader to be thought of here is the true historian. (SW 4, 405)

Die historische Methode ist eine philologische, der das Buch des Lebens zugrunde liegt. »Was nie geschrieben wurde, lesen« heißt es bei Hofmannsthal. Der Leser, an den hier zu denken ist, ist der wahre Historiker. (GS I, 1238)

This historian is a *function* of reading what was never written. As such, the true historian is strictly coextensive with this act of reading. The comprehension of the whole is not the comprehension of an object by a subject. It is a fleeting arrival at that “sphere of recognition” which in “On the Programme of the Coming Philosophy” (1918) Benjamin describes as a state of “total neutrality with regard to the terms object and subject” (SW 1, 104; GS II, 162). Crucially, the shock of the textual constellation by thought brought to a halt in the genuine philological stance cuts both ways. It not only crystallises the constellation as monad. It also and at the same constitutes the historical materialist. If “the philological interpretation of the author is to be sublated in Hegelian fashion by dialectical materialists,” then the latter are to be understood not as instances of empirical consciousness

³⁹ Samuel Weber, *op. cit.*, p. 312. Weber apparently adopts this point from Fenves whose unpublished paper he references.

(C, 587; GB VI, 184). Neither the monad *nor the historical materialist* are there to be confronted outside of their reciprocal constitution because this “subject” is a *function* of the act of reading what was never written. Hence the following crucial claim from “On the Concept of History” (1940). “The historical materialist,” writes Benjamin, “approaches an historical object solely and exclusively there where it confronts him as monad” (SW, 396; GS I, 703). In *The Art of Reconciliation: Photography and the Conception of Dialectics in Benjamin, Hegel, and Derrida* (2013), Dag Petersson identifies this claim as a paradox. For if “the monad is produced dialectically when thinking comes to a halt in a historical constellation,” then it is not the case that “the materialist only approaches a historical object where it *already* confronts him as a monad.”⁴⁰ But such an understanding conflates the historical materialist with an instance of empirical consciousness and thereby fails to grasp the simultaneity of the reciprocal constitution of historical materialist and monad on whose fusion the truth of this historian is based. If “the possibility of translation, mere communicability” may well, as Hamacher insists, already be required “[s]o that a self could relate to itself,” Benjamin’s concern is always with the dissolution of such a self in a concrete spark that a certain praxis manages to strike across what are nevertheless the absolutely distinct realms of divine and profane.⁴¹

The distinction between the linguistico-philosophical standpoints of Benjamin and deconstruction is condensed in the difference between the terms employed in these two philosophical approaches. Deconstruction tends to rely on neologising at crucial points in its investigations. The most obvious is the term *différance* (“difference” and “deferral”) coined by Jacques Derrida. But an equivalent practice informs various terms introduced by Hamacher in an attempt to specify the significance of Benjamin’s thought in particular. One such term, which appears in “Intensive Languages” (2001), is *Allokategorie* (“allocategory”).⁴² For his part, Benjamin restricts his use of neologism *to staging the fall of language itself*. As Irving Wohlfarth observes in the untranslated essay “Das Medium der Übersetzung” (“The Medium of Translation”) (2001), if the neologisms “*Mittelbarmachung*” (“mediate-making”) and “*Überbenennung*” (“overnaming”) indeed crop up in “On Language in general and on the Language of Man” (1916), then this is because

they are suited for naming the origin and consequences of neologising itself. They mimetically retain the violence that man does to language when he—just as the bourgeoisie according to Marx—makes the world after his own image.

⁴⁰ Dag Petersson, *The Art of Reconciliation: Photography and the Conception of Dialectics in Benjamin, Hegel, and Derrida*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013, p. 122; emphasis added.

⁴¹ Werner Hamacher, *op. cit.*, p. 534; p. 227

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 508; p. 199

*sie geeignet sind, Ursprung und Folgen des Neologisierens selber beim Namen zu nennen. Sie halten die Gewalt mimetisch fest, die der Mensch der Sprache antut, wenn er—wie Marx zufolge das Bürgertum—die Welt nach seinem eigenen Bilde schafft.*⁴³

If the allegorical character of language is ultimately rooted in that subjective act of judgement necessary to naming, then the neologism “allocategory” serves merely to *increase* abstraction by issuing not from a concrete translation of thing language into human language, but from a projection of a human subject. Far from clarificatory, such linguistic engineering serves merely to obscure even further the symbolic character of the name concealed in the word “category.” The conviction underlying such a philosophical praxis is irreconcilable with that conviction which, in a letter to Hugo von Hoffmanstahl from 1924, Benjamin specifies in the following terms:

namely that each truth has its house, its ancestral palace in language; that it is constructed from the oldest *logoi* and that in the face of truth grounded in this way the insights of the individual sciences remain subaltern as long as they make do in, as it were, nomadic fashion now here now there in the realm of language, caught up in that view of the sign character of language which imprints the irresponsible arbitrariness of its terminology. (C, 228-29)

nämlich, daß jede Wahrheit ihr Haus, ihren angestammten Palast, in der Sprache hat, daß er aus den ältesten logoi errichtet ist und daß der so gegründeten Wahrheit gegenüber die Einsichten der Einzelwissenschaften subaltern bleiben, solange sie gleichsam nomadisierend, bald hier bald da im Sprachbereiche sich behelfen, befangen in jener Anschauung vom Zeichencharakter der Sprache, der ihrer Terminologie die verantwortungslose Willkür aufprägt. (GB II, 409)

Crucially, it is not simply the case that a view of the sign character *leads* to irresponsibly arbitrary terminology; such terminology likewise leads to such a view. This is why it is truly a case that this view is something that the individual sciences are “caught up in” (*befangen in*): these sciences are *befangen* (“prejudiced”) because the symbolic character of their terminology is obscured by idealist projection; and they are *befangen* (“self-conscious”) because they are for this reason contingently bound to the false confines of the idealist subject.

⁴³ Irving Wohlfarth, “Das Medium der Übersetzung.” In *Übersetzen: Walter Benjamin*, ed. Christiaan L. Hart Nibbrig. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2001, p. 99.

Loosening the Self

The attempt to distinguish Benjamin's philosophy from the linguistico-philosophical standpoint of deconstruction is as long as his reception by critics invested in that tradition. In "Walter Benjamin's Image of Interpretation" (1979), Irving Wohlfarth takes issue with the de Manian interpretation of "Zum Bilde Prousts" ("Toward Proust's Image") (1929) advanced by Carol Jacobs.⁴⁴ This critic

equates the Proustian *recherché* with the desire for self-coincidence. But no "quest for the self," past or present, obtains. Instead there is a quest for the image. This requires, precisely, practice in *undoing* the self. [...] Between this dismantling of the self and its *mise en question* in recent French philosophy and psychoanalysis there are crucial differences. While each denounces the imperialist self, German "nonidentity" (Adorno) is not synonymous with French "heterogeneity" (Bataille). The demise of the subject is not, for Benjamin or Adorno, the "end of man" but, at least potentially, the beginning of true individuation. Such would be the *utopian* "dialectic of the Enlightenment."⁴⁵

Although Wohlfarth notes that "[t]he mimetic faculty is the subjective correlative of the symbolical or analogical version of the universe," he fails to draw out the significance of this for carrying out the task of undoing the self in what Benjamin calls image.⁴⁶ The question that demands to be addressed concerns how the reader of *Benjamin* no less than that of Proust is drawn into that realm of the similar alone in which the prejudice of prejudgement that contaminates everyday cognition is provisionally overcome. Just as the unconscious is to be read from details that escape conscious censorship by virtue of their unremarkable appearance, Benjamin argues that in Proust it is "inconspicuous portals [*unscheinbare Pforten*]" that alone lead into dream (SW 2, 239; GS II, 313). It is here that his "frenetic study, his passionate cult of similitude" is to be located because only in such portals can the "true signs [*wahre Zeichen*]" of the rule of similitude—still unembellished by subjection to the category of sameness—be recognised (*Ibid.*). One such *Wahrzeichen* ("emblem") is the rolled up sock as it is known by a certain child in such a way that it "has the structure of the dreamworld" (*Ibid.*). This child, of course, is the young Benjamin himself who recounts this experience in most detail in the first version of "Berlin Childhood around 1900" written around four years later.

⁴⁴ Carol Jacobs, *The Dissimulating Harmony: The Image of Interpretation in Nietzsche, Rilke, Artaud and Benjamin*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978. Irving Wohlfarth, "Walter Benjamin's Image of Interpretation." *New German Critique* 17 (Spring, 1979), pp. 70-98.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 79, 81

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 81 n. 9

I came upon my socks, which rested there piled and in traditional fashion rolled and folded in so that each pair had the appearance of a little pouch. Nothing surpassed the pleasure of sinking my hand as deeply as possible into its interior. And not merely on account of its woolly warmth. It was “That Brought With” which I always held in my hand in the rolled-up interior and which drew me in this way into its depths. When I had closed my fist around it and had done my best to confirm possession of the soft, woollen mass, the second part of the game began, which brought the breathtaking unveiling. For now I set about unwrapping “That Brought With” from its woollen pouch. (SW 3, 401)

[I]ch [stieß] auf meine Strümpfe, welche da gehäuft und in althergebrachter Art, gerollt und eingeschlagen, ruhten, so daß jedes Paar das Aussehen einer kleinen Tasche hatte. Nichts ging mir über das Vergnügen, meine Hand so tief wie möglich in ihr Inneres zu versenken. Und nicht nur ihrer wolligen Wärme wegen. Es war »Das Mitgebrachte«, das ich immer im eingerollten Innern in der Hand hielt und das mich derart in die Tiefe zog. Wenn ich es mit der Faust umspannt und mich nach Kräften in dem Besitz der weichen, wollenen Masse bestätigt hatte, fing der zweite Teil des Spiels an, der die atemraubende Enthüllung brachte. Denn nun ging ich daran, »Das Mitgebrachte« aus seiner wollenen Tasche auszuwickeln. (GS IV, 284)

It is from a Freudian perspective that the rolled up sock has the structure of the dreamworld because the two major principles of dreamwork according to Freud play a role in its distortion. It is by condensation (*Verdichtung*) that it is both “Pouch” and “That Brought With,” which conceals that it is actually a sock. And it is by displacement (*Verschiebung*) that “the woollen mass” appears as the object of libido instead of the “magical world” (*Zauberwelt*) to be glimpsed at the moment when mass and pouch are revealed to have transformed into a sock (SW 3, 402; GS IV, 284). This world is the world of deeper similitude “in which what goes on never surfaces identically” (SW 2, 239; GS II, 314). If it is the material common to the *woollen* sock, *woollen* pouch and *woollen* mass that conditions this condensation, then what conditions the displacement is the similitude of this *sensuous* similitude to the deeper nonsensuous similitude devoid of identity fleetingly unveiled at the critical moment of what will have been a *double* transformation. In other words: at stake here is not *simply a Freudian perspective* because similitude—a concept developed by Benjamin himself—is determined as the condition of dreamwork in general.

For now I set about unwrapping “That Brought With” from its woollen pouch. I drew it ever closer to me until something disturbing was accomplished: although completely wrested from its pouch, “That Brought With” was itself no longer present. Not often enough was I in this way able to put that enigmatic truth to the test: that form and content, veil and veiled, “That Brought With” and pouch were one. One—and indeed a third: that sock into which they had both transformed. (SW 3, 401)

Denn nun ging ich daran, »Das Mitgebrachte« aus seiner wollenen Tasche auszuwickeln. Ich zog es immer näher an mich heran, bis das Bestürzende vollzogen war: »Das Mitgebrachte« seiner Tasche ganz entwunden, jedoch sie selbst nicht mehr vorhanden war. Nicht oft genug konnte ich so die Probe auf jene rätselhafte Wahrheit machen: daß Form und Inhalt, Hülle und Verhülltes, »Das Mitgebrachte« und die Tasche eines waren. Eines—und zwar ein Drittes: jener Strumpf, in den sie beide sich verwandelt hatten. (GS IV, 284)

It is not just that two things in the present transform into a third thing; by the same token and at the same stroke, these two things transform *in the past* into a single thing. What makes the truth that form and content were one so enigmatic is that the operation wherein it is tested produces a path from one to three on which the way station “two” will have been bypassed in such a way inconceivable in terms of the category of sameness that governs everyday cognition. It is that inconspicuous portal of a deeper, nonsensuous similitude that capacitates this leap in the face of spatio-temporal form into a world of distortion wherein nothing surfaces otherwise than “similarly: impenetrably similar to itself” (SW 2, 239; GS II, 314). Since “one” plays no role in a world without identity, it is not surprising that Benjamin revises the account in the final version of “Berlin Childhood around 1900” (1938). For now what the operation taught him is “that form and content, veil and veiled are the same [*dasselbe sind*]” (SW 3, 374; GS VII, 417). And from this memory from his childhood he now reads an intimation of his fate: “this operation,” he writes, “led me to producing [*hervorzuziehen*] truth from fiction [*Dichtung*] as carefully [*behutsam*] as the hand of the child retrieved the sock from “The Pocket” (*Ibid.*). Crucially, this care on the parts of child and critic alike involves no slow, continuous movement as the published translation implies. The task of the second part of the game is not “to tease [“That Brought With”] out of its woollen pocket.”⁴⁷ As the first version makes plain, this unveiling is a “miracle” (*Wunder*) conjured by a “sleight of hand” (*Kunstgriff*) on the part of the child (SW 3, 401-402; GS IV, 284). Accordingly, this care is far more that of the dextrousness of the magician, whose magic depends, by contrast, on a swift gesture that produces the semblance of a fold in spatio-temporal form. If truth rather than its semblance is indeed produced from fiction in “Toward Proust’s Image” (1929), then this is because it is no object to be gauged by contemplation, but an act *whose staging by the reader* coincides with a loosening of the ego brought about by design. Its reading performs no less a feat of bodily sleight than that of the magician to produce the distortion of the world distorted in *the state of identity* on which producing truth depends. In other words: it is the dreamworld that is, in the final analysis,

⁴⁷ “For now I proceed to unwrap ‘the present,’ to tease it out of its woollen pocket [*Denn nun machte mich daran, »Das Mitgebrachte« aus seiner wollenen Tasche auszuwickeln*]” (SW 3, 374; GS VII, 416-17).

less distorted than the world of identical terms that, as Irving Wohlfarth puts it, are merely “aberrant, reified forms of similitude.”⁴⁸

Children know an emblem of this world, the sock, which has the structure of the dreamworld when, rolled up in the laundry basket, it is at once “Pouch” and “That Brought With.” And just as they themselves cannot be satiated transforming at a stroke these two: pouch and what lies within into some third thing: into the stocking, so too was Proust insatiable at emptying the dummy, the I, at a stroke so as to bring in ever again that third: the image which stilled his curiosity, no, his homesickness. Torn apart by homesickness he lay on his bed, homesickness for the world distorted in the state of similitude in which the true surrealist face of existence breaks through. (SW 2, 239-40)

Kinder kennen ein Wahrzeichen dieser Welt, den Strumpf, der die Struktur der Traumwelt hat, wenn er im Wäschekasten, eingerollt, »Tasche« und »Mitgebrachtes« zugleich ist. Und wie sie selbst sich nicht ersättigen können, dies beides: Tasche und was drin liegt, mit einem Griff in etwas Drittes zu verwandeln: in den Strumpf, so war Proust unersättlich, die Attrappe, das Ich, mit einem Griffe zu entleeren, um immer wieder jenes Dritte: das Bild, das seine Neugier, nein, sein Heimweh stillte, einzubringen. Zerfetzt von Heimweh lag er auf dem Bett, Heimweh nach der im Stand der Ähnlichkeit entstellten Welt, in der das wahre surrealistische Gesicht des Daseins zum Durchbruch kommt. (GS II, 314)

The image is brought in only when “the dummy, the ego” is emptied out because it is excluded by the category of sameness that would otherwise continue to hold sway. What remains to be accounted for, however, is *how* this demise takes place. The possibility of such an account is both intimated and precluded by the following claim by Wohlfarth apropos the comparison between image and sock: “The analogy itself enacts the logic of similitude.”⁴⁹ For if it enacts this logic, then it does so only because *it is not in fact an analogy*. “Analogy,” writes Benjamin in “Analogie und Verwandtschaft” (“Analogy and Affinity”) (1919), “is a scientific, a rational principle (SW 1, 208; GS VI, 45). Thus, although *presented* as an analogy, the correspondence at stake in the passage above *is not in fact rational*, which specifies this comparison as a trap laid for the dummy (*Attrappe*) that would otherwise have been doing the reading. Three distinct objects are in play in the sock game: “The Pouch,” “That Brought With” and the sock. But no such definiteness of contour is to be found on the other side of the comparison. On the one hand, it is critically unclear whether or not the dummy is synonymous with the ego (*das Ich*). Hence, the expectation

⁴⁸ Irving Wohlfarth, “Walter Benjamin’s Image of Interpretation,” *op. cit.*, p. 80. This is a slight modification of what Wohlfarth actually writes: “The identical terms on which we count are aberrant, reified forms of *similarity*.” For the sake of consistency, “similarity” has been replaced by “similitude.” The same applies to subsequent citations from this text.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 77-78.

that they will constitute, analogously to “The Pouch” and “That Brought With,” two things that transform into a third is disappointed. On the other hand, although the image at first seems to be specified, analogously to the sock, as “that third” (*jenes Dritte*), this specificity is immediately dissolved by a further hesitating and curious specification of the image. Namely, as that “which stilled his curiosity, no, his homesickness.” If the early writings of the Surrealists are characterised by the fact that, as Benjamin puts it in “Surrealism: Der letzte Momentaufnahme der europäischen Intelligenz” (“Surrealism: the Latest Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia” (1929), “image and language take precedence [...] [n]ot only before sense” but also “before the ego,” then, although more subtly than in those writings, this is also the case in “Toward Proust’s Image” itself (1929) (SW 2, 208; GS II, 296-97). The loosening effect of this precedence primes the reader for registering the image in all the indistinctness that belongs to something of that world in which the category of similitude has an unrestricted meaning. In other words: the text induces assimilation to the principle of its construction so as to effectuate a praxis in which the image is rendered fleetingly distinguishable in an act of linguistic staging.

A Style of the Name

The effectuation of praxis on the basis of mimetic assimilation to an esoteric text designed to stage an otherwise indistinguishable object in the act of its reading is to be strictly distinguished from the concept of the performative speech act developed by J.L. Austin.⁵⁰ The reasons for this can be clearly specified. The first concerns what Austin terms “infelicity” with regard to doing things with words: the act must accord with the conventions of, say, apologising otherwise the utterance “I apologise” will “misfire.”⁵¹ The style of presentation peculiar to Benjamin is, by contrast, based precisely on breaking linguistic convention. A masterly account of this has been provided by Wohlfarth himself in a footnote to “On Some Jewish Motifs in Benjamin” (1989), which concerns the conclusion of “Zur Kritik der Gewalt” (“Toward the Critique of Violence”) (1921).⁵²

But how, then, are they going to be able, in a particular case, to distinguish, between the “divine judgment of the crowd on the criminal” and the mythical vengeance of lynch justice, between pure

⁵⁰ J.L. Austin, *How To Do Things With Words*, ed. J.O. Urmson and Marina Sbisa. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975.

⁵¹ Here are the relevant claims: “infelicity is an ill to which *all* acts are heir which have the general character of ritual or ceremonial, all *conventional* acts”; “the illocutionary act is a conventional act: an act done as conforming to a convention”; it has “a certain (conventional) force.” *Ibid.*, p. 18-19, 105, 109

⁵² Irving Wohlfarth, “On Some Jewish Motifs in Benjamin.” In *The Problems of Modernity*, ed. Andrew Benjamin. London: Routledge, 1989, pp. 157-215

and impure forms of immediate violence? Benjamin's essay, which rests its case on the self-evidence of that distinction, concludes by forcefully restating it one last time. The mythical violence which institutes laws is, it announces, to be called *die schaltende*—the present participle of a verb that connotes arbitrary rule; the violence that preserves laws is termed *die verwaltete*—“administered”, “administrative”, and thereby mismanaged, *ver-waltet*; and divine violence is named *die waltende*—from a verb that connotes higher governance. [...] What he has done is to uncouple the idiomatic expression *schalten und walten* (which means “to do as one pleases”) and to transform a tautological echo effect into a rhyming opposition. He has also drawn on the theological connotations of the verb *walten* (as in the expression *Gnade walten lassen*, “to let mercy prevail”) in order to intimate the non-violent telos of divine violence.⁵³

There is indeed very little in common between such a performance of language and the performative speech act “I apologise.” But it is not only because the one breaks with, while the other is based on, convention. More importantly, apologising presupposes a subject performing the apology. “Actions,” writes Austin, “can only be performed by persons, and obviously in our cases the utterer must be the performer.”⁵⁴ Or again: “There is something which is *at the moment of uttering being done by the person uttering*.”⁵⁵ Benjamin's style of presentation is oriented away from having things done by a subject in accordance with convention. Rather, it has the subject *undone* so as to open the realm of the similar excluded by the category of sameness that governs cognition. The praxis of language documented so clearly by Wohlfarth in the passage cited above has no place in a footnote to Benjamin. It characterises the presentation of his thought from early to late and the rigour of its interpretation depends on placing its analysis at the centre of every account. Although Wohlfarth has gone further in this direction than most critics, his analyses do not go far enough. The following passage from his “Das Medium der Übersetzung” (2001) suggests why this has been the case.

The first, unforgettable impression that Benjamin made on Gershom Scholem in 1913 was [...] that of a speaker who has not the slightest regard for his audience. If Benjamin was “the pure instance of a metaphysician,” then the scene that Scholem describes here is the pure instance of a performative speech act. The same linguistic gesture characterises the style of his early linguistico-philosophical writings and finds in them its linguistico-theological grounding. All language is according to them rooted in the *actus purus* of the divine word, and the concept that “again and again has by itself risen at the centre of the philosophy of language” is that of revelation. Not only is Benjamin's early philosophy of language a theology of the word, but the word of God is at the same time the rhetorical model for his own style.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 210-11

⁵⁴ J.L. Austin, *op. cit.*, p. 60

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

Der erste, unvergeßliche Eindruck, den Benjamin im Jahre 1913 auf Gerschom Scholem machte, war [...] der eines Sprechers, der auf sein Publikum nicht die geringste Rücksicht nimmt. Ist Benjamin »der reine Fall eines Metaphysikers« gewesen, so ist die Szene, die Scholem hier beschreibt, der reine Fall eines performativen Sprechakts. Derselbe Sprachgestus kennzeichnet den Stil seiner sprachphilosophischen Frühschriften und findet in ihnen seine sprachtheologische Begründung. Alle Sprache wurzelt demnach im actus purus des göttlichen Worts, und der Begriff, der »sich immer wieder von selbst im Zentrum der Sprachphilosophie erhoben hat«, ist der der Offenbarung. Nicht nur ist Benjamins frühe Sprachphilosophie eine Theologie des Worts, sondern das Wort Gottes ist zugleich das rhetorische Vorbild seines eigenen Stils.⁵⁶

To understand the word of God as the model for his style is to fail to learn the lesson of his theory of the personal name. The latter “is the theory of the frontier of finite against infinite language” because it specifies “the communion of man with the *creative* word of God” in the personal name as arrived at *indirectly* (EW, 260; GS II, 150). The basis of this communion is the ontological priority of the name over the being of the person who becomes self creating by attaching to the name in acts of mimetic praxis. Such acts of self creation indirectly reflect the divine linguistic act of creation, but they in no way directly imitate a divine model. The latter could only ever result in uncreative imitation and profane parody. People commune with the creative word by literally transforming themselves in acts of mimetic assimilation to their personal names. The name is a medium for the redemptive *transformation* of the subject, not its constitution. The model of Benjamin’s style is accordingly not “the pure instance of a performative speech act.” The latter is bound to precisely that constitution of self away from which the presentation of his philosophy is oriented.⁵⁷ The style of the presentation of Benjamin’s philosophy is not, as Wohlfarth

⁵⁶ Irving Wohlfarth, “Das Medium der Übersetzung,” *op. cit.*, p. 85

⁵⁷ For the same reason, the deconstructive critique of speech act theory, which charges it with failing to account for either the performativity of the performative or the constitution of the subject is likewise of only limited relevance for coming to terms with Benjamin’s style. For an overview of this undertaking see: Mauro Senatore, “Introduction: Positing, the Performative and the Supplement.” In *Performatives After Deconstruction*, ed. Maura Senatore. London: Bloomsbury, 2013, pp. 1-39. As Moran emphasises in *Wild, Unforgettable Philosophy* (2005), what he chooses to call the “performative, as variously stressed in Benjamin’s work, is associated with a linguistic excess that renders the subject meaningless” (p. 318 n. 52). But precisely because this word is so strongly associated with speech act theory, it would perhaps have been wisest to simply avoid it in his attempt to determine “Benjamin’s conception of the form, philosophy, as requiring of the practice of philosophy that it present itself as presentation, as performance, and thereby show itself open to the interminable drama of the mystery, which is the form, philosophy” (p. 3). See: Brendan Moran, *op. cit.* Another term to be avoided appears in a pioneering study on style in Benjamin by Sigrid Weigel who characterises a passage in “Surrealism” (1929) in the following terms. “[I]n its style [*Schreibweise*],” she writes, Benjamin’s text “mimetically reenacts the transformation attested therein of surrealist revolt into a revolution [*die darin beschworene Transformation der surrealistischen Revolte in eine Revolution mimetisch nachvollzieht*]” (p. 16; p. 114). The word *nachvollziehen* (“to reenact”) designates a bodily form of empathy. But since it presupposes the prior existence of what is

tentatively suggests, “*self-staging* [Selbstinszenierung].”⁵⁸ It is simply *staging*. And its model is not the word of God, but that symbolic object of a mimesis in which communion with that word is to be found. This model is the name.

imitated, the accuracy of mimetic reenacting would have to be evaluated according to a correspondence theory of truth. For this reason, this notion fundamentally misrepresents style in Benjamin, which is more accurately conceived as the medium of staging genuine recognition on the basis of a certain undoing of the subject. The book in question was initially published in an English translation, before a revised and expanded version appeared in German the following year under the title *Entstellte Ähnlichkeit: Walter Benjamins theoretischer Schreibweise* (“Distorted Similitude: Walter Benjamin’s Theoretical Style”). See: Sigrid Weigel, *Body- and Image-Space: Re-reading Walter Benjamin*, trans. Georgina Paul, Rachel McNicholl and Jeremy Gaines. London: Routledge, 1996; Sigrid Weigel, *Entstellte Ähnlichkeit: Walter Benjamins theoretischer Stil*. Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Verlag, 1997.

⁵⁸ Irving Wohlfarth, “Das Medium der Übersetzung,” *op. cit.*, p. 84; emphasis added

PART II: RAISING THE CURTAIN

Metaphysics and “Metaphysics”

The word “metaphysical” has become so unfashionable that a specification of its meaning is rarely even sought. What is it exactly that makes Benjamin’s early philosophy of a language a metaphysics? A useful starting point is provided by a letter to Scholem from 1918 in which Benjamin offers the following—strictly provisional—specification of the rational sense of this word.

I at least—if I were to say what rational sense I would provisionally know to connect us to the word metaphysical until closer determination would say: metaphysical is that knowledge which a priori strives to recognise science as a sphere within the absolute divine context of order whose highest sphere is doctrine and whose quintessence and primal ground is God, and which also considers the “autonomy” of science as sensical and possible only within this context. (C, 112)

Ich wenigstens—wenn ich sagen sollte welchen vernünftigen Sinn ich vorläufig uns bis auf nähere Bestimmung mit dem Wort metaphysisch zu verbinden wüßte würde sagen: metaphysisch ist diejenige Erkenntnis die a priori die Wissenschaft als eine Sphäre in dem absoluten göttlichen Ordnungszusammenhang, dessen höchste Sphäre die Lehre und dessen Inbegriff und Urgrund Gott ist zu erkennen trachtet, und die auch die “Autonomie” der Wissenschaft als sinnvoll und möglich nur in diesem Zusammenhang betrachtet. (GB I, 422)

Since “On Language in general and on the Language of Man” (1916) predicates the solubility of the the task of naming on the affinity in God of the language of man and the language of things, it is clearly a metaphysical text according to this understanding of the word. But if Benjamin’s early thinking is metaphysical, it is crucial to resist the assumption that his turn to a materialist vocabulary around 1925 simply brought an end to such thinking. As he himself noted in 1936 in a letter to Werner Kraft, despite the materialist terms in which it is presented, “On the Mimetic Faculty” (1933) remains a “metaphysics” of language. What the scare quotes in that letter serve to mark, however, is that it does so in terms other than those of the rational sense of metaphysical that he once communicated to Scholem. These terms, which will be demonstrated in what follows, can be anticipated. If it is nonsensuous similitude that founds the tension between that which means and the meant, then this founding is unavailable to contemplation alone for the reason that the perception of similitude coincides with bodily praxis. Consequently, similitude is not deducible a priori, which means that it eludes metaphysical knowledge according to its definition as “that

knowledge which a priori strives to recognise science as a sphere within the absolute divine context of order” (C, 112; GB I, 422). However, the term “metaphysics” can nevertheless not simply be abandoned. For in addition to escaping a priori knowledge, similitude also escapes a posteriori knowledge. Although empirical, similitude is not *based* on any experience because, as Benjamin puts it in a note from 1931, “[I]ived similitudes *are* experience [*Erfahrung sind gelebte Ähnlichkeiten*]” (SW 2, 553; GS VI, 88; emphasis added). Accordingly, rather than based on experience that is in principle repeatable, similitude is, as the organon of experience itself, *coextensive* with an experience that is *singular*. Hence the term “metaphysics.” Now, of the possibility of such a “metaphysics” Benjamin was already in 1918 aware. For why else would he have taken such pains to qualify its specification as only provisionally provided for the pragmatic purpose of connecting himself and Scholem to this word? In any event, it is to such a “metaphysics” that Benjamin tells Kraft the ostensibly impartial essay “Probleme der Sprachsoziologie: Ein Sammelreferat” (“Problems of the Sociology of Language: An Overview”) (1934) should be seen to lead.

As for your remark about my report on the theory of language, the frontiers of which were prescribed by the form: it prejudices nothing about a “metaphysics” of language. And it is arranged by me, though by no means manifestly, such that it leads to the exact place where my own theory of language, which I recorded in a very short programmatic note several years ago on Ibiza, sets in. (C, 521)

Zu Ihrer Bemerkung über mein sprachtheoretisches Referat, dem seine Grenzen durch die Form vorgeschrieben waren: es präjudiziert nichts über eine »Metaphysik« der Sprache. Und es ist von mir, wenn auch keineswegs manifest, so eingerichtet, daß es genau an die Stelle führt, wo meine eigene Sprachtheorie, die ich auf Ibiza vor mehreren Jahren in einer ganz kurzen programmatischen Notiz niedergelegt habe, einsetzt. (GB IV, 552)

In Benjamin’s eyes, the programmatic note “On the Mimetic Faculty” (1933) constitutes a “metaphysics” of language, which could not be included in the essay because it was a *commission* for the *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung* (“Journal for Social Research”). The terms of the commission restricted its form to an overview (*Sammelreferat*) of the relevant literature that had been published during the preceding decade. The compromise is an arrangement that leads to the exact spot where Benjamin’s “metaphysics” of language sets in. The alleged design is confirmed by the final sentence of the essay, which determines where an insight Kurt Goldstein offers on the basis of his studies on aphasia stands in relation to the sociology of language. “This insight,” writes Benjamin, “is what expressly or tacitly [*die ausdrücklich oder stillschweigend*] stands at the beginning [*am Anfang*] of the

sociology of language [*Sprachsoziologie*]” (SW 3, 86; GS III, 480). It stands here, if only tacitly, because all such research is itself *of* language, which is consequently not just a tool for the communication of its findings but the medium in which man *as such* takes shape. Consequently, this medium is ultimately inaccessible to anything but a “metaphysics” of language, which—*in nuce*—is exactly what the citation from Goldstein appears to be:

“As soon as man uses language to establish a living relation to himself or to his peers, language is no longer an instrument, no longer a means, but a manifestation, a revelation of our innermost being and of the psychic bond that connects us to ourselves and our peers.” (SW 3, 85-86)

»Sobald der Mensch sich der Sprache bedient, um eine lebendige Beziehung zu sich selbst oder zu seinesgleichen herzustellen, ist die Sprache nicht mehr ein Instrument, nicht mehr ein Mittel, sondern eine Manifestation, eine Offenbarung unseres innersten Wesens und des psychischen Bandes, das uns mit uns selbst und unseresgleichen verbindet.« (GS III, 480)

The language of the clause that concludes this citation from Goldstein closely recalls that with which the passage from the letter to Scholem on the word metaphysical begins. The latter specifies what Benjamin rationally understands by this word as strictly provisional and communicated to Scholem only “to connect us to the word metaphysical until closer determination [*uns bis auf nähere Bestimmung mit dem Wort metaphysisch zu verbinden*]” (C, 112; GB I, 422). This echoes the claim by Goldstein that language is a revelation of “the psychic bond that connects us to ourselves and our peers [*uns mit uns selbst und unseresgleichen verbindet*].” What should raise the reader’s suspicion, however, is that this citation is in fact a translation from the French by Benjamin himself. And indeed, what a look at the French reveals is that Benjamin makes a small but significant change to what Goldstein actually wrote. According to him, the psychic bond of which language is a revelation “unites us to *the world* and our peers [*nous unit au monde et à nos semblables*],” which Benjamin alters to read “connects us to *ourselves* and our peers [*uns mit uns selbst und unseresgleichen verbindet*].”⁵⁹ This sly move is part of that hidden arrangement that Benjamin discloses to Kraft whereby the reader of this ostensibly impartial overview of recent research in the sociology of language is led “to the exact place [*genau an die Stelle*]” where his own theory of language sets in (C, 521; GB IV, 552). For the alteration of Goldstein’s claim introduces a problem whose solution lies in the basic premise of Benjamin’s own theory of language in general. If a psychic bond connects us to *ourselves*,

⁵⁹ “Dès que l’homme se sert du langage pour établir une relation vivante avec lui-même ou avec ses semblables, le langage n’est plus un instrument, n’est plus un moyen, il est une manifestation, une révélation de l’être intime et du lien psychique qui nous **unit au monde** et à nos semblables” (p. 496). Kurt Goldstein, “Analyse de l’aphasie et essence du langage.” In *Psychologie du Langage*, ed. Henri Delacroix. Paris: Librairie Felix Alcan, 1933.

then we must be characterised by a fundamental breach. Accordingly, the bond that leaps this breach can not simply be of our psyches, but rather must be based on something else. To say that psychic bonds are based on human language only displaces the problem. For the basis of human language itself would then demand to be determined. In short, the problem calls for its solution in a theory of language *in general* such as that provided by “On Language in general and on the Language of Man” (1916). Language is not reducible to human language. On the contrary, “every communication of spiritual contents is language, wherein communication by the word is only a particular case” (EW, 251; GS IV, 140). However much “On the Mimetic Faculty” revises his early theory of language, the place that it begins remains the premise that “[t]here is no event or thing neither in animate nor inanimate nature that would not in some way partake of language, for it is essential to each one to communicate its spiritual contents [*seinen geistigen Inhalt mitzuteilen*]” (EW, 251; GS II, 140).

If it is essential to every event or thing in both animate and inanimate nature to communicate its “spiritual” or “mental” (*geistigen*) content, then—*pace* Goldstein—*human* language is not a revelation of the psychic bond that unites us to *the world* and our peers. This view anthropocentrically reduces language in general to the language of man, which denies the world its linguistic dues. If, by contrast, human language is a revelation of the psychic bond that connects us to *ourselves* and our peers, then this bond must itself be understood as a revelation of something else. Namely, of language *in general*, which is the basis for the connection between any event or thing in both animate and inanimate nature. It is the effort to determine a *material* basis of this connection that distinguishes his late “metaphysics” of language from what Benjamin once described as his “immediately [*unmittelbar*] metaphysical [...] thinking” on the subject (C, 486; GB V, 88). This citation derives from another letter to Werner Kraft written in 1935, just a year before the one discussed above. In this letter, Benjamin identifies the cause of the glacial pace at which work on *The Arcades Project* (1927-1940) had for the last eight years been progressing. Neither the extraordinary extensiveness of the “mass of studies [*Studienmasse*]” that forms its basis was the cause, nor the economic difficulties that beset its author during this period, but the slowness of the orbit that “a mass of thoughts and images [*Gedanken- und Bildermasse*]” had to complete around the constitution of its author (*Ibid.*).

The saturnian tempo of the thing had its deepest cause in the process of a complete revolution, which a mass of thoughts and images that date back to the period long past of my immediately metaphysical indeed theological thinking had to undergo in order to nourish my current constitution with all their energy. This process proceeded in silence; I myself knew so little of it that I was hugely

astonished when—as a result of an external stimulus—the plan of the work was recently recorded in just a few days. (C, 486)

Das saturnische Tempo der Sache hatte seinen tiefsten Grund in dem Prozeß einer vollkommenen Umwälzung, den eine aus der weit zurückliegenden Zeit meines unmittelbar metaphysischen, ja theologischen Denkens stammende Gedanken- und Bildermaße durchmachen mußte, um mit ihrer ganzen Kraft meine gegenwärtige Verfassung zu nähren. Dieser Prozeß ging im stillen vor sich; ich selber habe so wenig von ihm gewußt, daß ich ungeheuer erstaunt war, als—einem äußerlichen Anstoß zufolge—der Plan des Werkes vor kurzem in ganz wenigen Tagen niedergeschrieben wurde. (GB V, 88-89)

The metaphor here mixes astrological with socio-political terms. If Benjamin's constitution is the centre of the solar system of his thinking, then the mass of thoughts and images from its immediately metaphysical period is Saturn, the slowest of the planets to revolve around this sun. But since this sun had itself undergone a change after this period, a drawn-out orbit by this planet had to be completed before its full influence on his earthly practice could be restored. The immediately metaphysical mass of thoughts and images revolved around a constitution for which socio-political revolution had by now become most urgent. In a letter to Gershom Scholem from 1934, Benjamin describes his communism as “a drastic, not unfruitful expression of the impossibility of the present scientific establishment [*Wissenschaftsbetriebes*] to offer a space to [his] thinking, of the present economic form to offer a space to [his] existence” (C, 439; GB IV, 409). But the events of the preceding decade that instilled such urgency in this constitution are not limited to failing to qualify for an academic post and living with the financial consequences soon exacerbated by the Great Depression. Falling in love with a communist revolutionary; witnessing the rise of Nazism and experiencing a life lived in exile without friends, family or financial security; predicting another war the atrocities of which would surpass the one already suffered—each of these events, amongst others, contributed to this constitutional transformation. The upshot of this experience, however, was not that Benjamin *revolted* against an outmoded metaphysical mass of thoughts and images. Rather, this mass itself *revolved* to reveal a side better suited to the task of socio-political revolution. What the increasingly desperate situation of 1930s Europe demanded of this writer was a revision of his theory of language that would ground a practice of writing more urgently politicising than that nevertheless “highly political style [*hochpolitischen Stils*]” which characterises the period of his immediately metaphysical indeed theological thinking (C, 80; GB I, 326). This style is *theological* because its constructions are designed “to lead into the divine [*ins Göttliche zu führen*]” (C, 80; GB I, 327). But it is also *highly political* because it is to such guidance that the sparking of moral action amongst readers of any writing is ultimately owed. A less high—and perhaps less

highfalutin—political style is afforded by his later “metaphysics” of language, which is concerned with the effort to recognise not God as the primal ground of the science of language, but similitude as the organon of experience. This “metaphysics” grounds a practice of writing oriented less toward sparking immediately moral action than toward propagating a “stance” (*Haltung*) amongst its readers whose not necessarily conscious adoption on their parts would provide the medium alone in which the resistance to the unification of a concrete totality of experience could be overcome as the basis for a genuinely materialist insight into history as such.

The Mystery of Symbolic Character

The clearest statement on the *immediacy* of the moral action that his early writing aims to spark is provided by Benjamin himself in a letter to Martin Buber written in 1916. There Benjamin denies that the aim of political writing is “to move people by way of motives of all kinds toward specific actions” (C, 80; GB I, 325). Such writing may fill the heads of its readers with political information, but it will never *politicise* them. The latter is measured by the moral action proven to have been sparked by its reading. Since this spark is never struck merely “by making motives for actions available for use [*an die Hand gibt*],” it is not “the mediation of contents” that constitutes the aim of political writing (*Ibid.*). It is at the immediacy of language that such writing must take aim in order to bring about “the purest opening up of its dignity and its essence [*das reinste Erschließen ihre Würde und ihres Wesens*]” (*Ibid.*). For the basis of moral action is not the interiorising of a motive conveyed by the use of a linguistic instrument, but the unification of word and deed within the *medium* of language into which the interior of the moral agent is drawn by the *quality* of a particular linguistic construction.

My concept of objective and at the same time highly political style and writing is: to lead toward that which is denied to the word. Only where this sphere of the wordless opens itself up in unutterably pure night can the magic spark leap between word and moving deed, where the unity of these two equally real things resides. Only the intensive direction of the word right into the kernel of innermost falling silent arrives at true effect. (C, 80)

Mein Begriff sachlichen und zugleich hochpolitischen Stils und Schreibens ist: hinzuführen auf das dem Wort versagte. Nur wo diese Sphäre des Wortlosen in unsagbar reiner Nacht sich erschließt kann der magische Funke zwischen Wort und bewegender Tat überspringen, wo die Einheit dieser beiden gleich Wirklichen ist. Nur die intensive Richtung der Worte in den Kern des innersten Verstummens hinein gelangt zur wahren Wirkung. (GB I, 326)

Benjamin understands the design of his early lines as motivating no deed to be carried out sometime *after* their having been read. Their design is rather that of a set which presents a stage onto which a reader may step to play the lead in a production of just one act: the striking of a spark that would unite two equally real things, namely “word and moving deed [*bewegender Tat*].” It is from this unity of word and moving deed first called forth by linguistic staging that moral action is *immediately produced*. There is accordingly despite its drama nothing “false” about such construction. Rather, what deserves the judgment of falseness is writing whose style is determined by the “expansive tendency of word-by-word-succession [*des Wort-an-Wort-Reihens*],” which bespeaks a view of language guilty of a double degradation (C, 80; GB I, 326). Not only is “language and writing degraded to a mere means [*zum bloßen Mittel*],” but moral action too is degraded to “a meagre weak deed whose source lies not in itself but in some kind of sayable and expressible motives” (*Ibid.*). To understand why every action that lies in this tendency rather than in “the intensive direction of the word” seemed “appalling [*fürchterlich*]” to Benjamin requires recognition of the context of this letter. It was written in 1916 during the Great War by a German who was, of course, strictly opposed to it in general, and to the part played in it by his country in particular. What Benjamin implies is that the desire for expansion expressed in the invasion by Germany in 1914 of Belgium, Luxembourg and France is not unrelated to the spread of the view that language is a mere means. For this view dampens the flint with which moral action is sparked such that the word runs rampant with potentially devastating consequences.

Every action that lies in the expansive tendency of word-by-word-succession seems appalling to me and all the more devastating where this whole affair of language and deed runs rampant as it does with us to an ever increasing extent as a mechanism for the realisation of the correct absolute. (C, 80)

Jedes Handeln das in der expansiven Tendenz des Wort-an-Wort-Reihens liegt scheint mir fürchterlich und um so verheerender wo dieses ganze Verhältnis von Wort und Tat wie bei uns in immer steigendem Maße als ein Mechanismus zur Verwirklichung des richtigen Absolut um sich greift. (GB I, 326)

This mechanisation of language is based on a degradation of the German language from an intensive totality to which inheres the quality of an “incommensurable one-of-a-kind infinity” to an infinite *quantity* of endlessly concatenating signs (EW, 254; GS II, 143). For this reason, the only absolute realisable by writing turned out by the uniform cogs of this mechanism is an infinity as bad as it seems “correct.” For correctness has no bearing on the absolute before which every standard of the profane world must be rendered irrelevant. Indeed, calculability does not pertain to the affair of language and deed because what

characterises the latter is an *objective* mystery, which for that reason *must* remain incalculable.

Every salutary working of writing, indeed every working of writing not devastating at heart, is based in its (of the word, of language) mystery. (C, 80)

Jedes heilsame ja jedes nicht im innersten verheerende Wirken der Schrift beruht in ihrem (des Wortes, der Sprache) Geheimnis. (GB I, 326)

As Benjamin clarifies five or so years later in “On Riddle and Mystery” (c. 1921), the mystery belonging to language is owed to “a symbolic kernel [*Kern*]” that rests within the word (SW 1, 268; GS VI, 18). This kernel is the symbol of what he refers to as “a noncommunicability [*Nicht-Mittelbarkeit*]” (*Ibid.*). This crucial term of Benjamin’s early theory of language receives its most precise elaboration in the note unpublished in English from around 1920. In this note, Benjamin distinguishes designation (*Bezeichnung*), which involves signs (*Zeichen*), from meaning (*Bedeutung*), which involves names.

The word “tower” means something; this means nothing other than it communicates something. When I designate something, then I do not communicate it; rather, I abstract in general from its communicability in order to insert it into another context. When I designate the three corners of the triangle with ABC, then these letters do not mean the corners of the triangle, i.e. they do not communicate them.

Das Wort »Turm« bedeutet etwas, das heißt nichts anderes als es teilt etwas mit. Wenn ich etwas bezeichne, so teile ich es nicht mit, abstrahiere vielmehr überhaupt von seiner Mittelbarkeit, um es einem andern Zusammenhang einzureihen. Wenn ich die drei Ecken des Dreiecks mit ABC bezeichne, so bedeuten diese Buchstaben nicht die Dreiecksecken, d. h. sie teilen sie nicht mit. (IV, 15-16)

Since the sign ABC does not communicate the corners of the triangle, it *means* nothing but a particular phonic-graphic complex, which stands in for a judgement by a human subject. Whereas designation issues from the “I” and is based on judgement, “meaning only exists under two conditions” (VI, 16). The fulfilment of these conditions is, however, only “made possible [*ermöglicht*]” by the two things that are meant by the tautology “the word ‘tower’ means ‘tower’” (*Ibid.*). The two things are “first that the word “tower” communicates something, second that it symbolises something” (*Ibid.*). That these two things make the fulfilment of the conditions of meaning *possible* is a specification that follows from the distinction applicable to linguistic constructions *in general* between the intention toward the meant and its possession. Since history is itself predicated on these

constructions, the end of their constitutive tension toward what they respectively mean would be the end of history too. Hence, while the conditions of meaning are fulfillable *in principle*, within history they *must* remain strictly unfulfilled. Accordingly, the second instance of “tower” in the tautology “the word ‘tower’ means ‘tower’” must be distinguished from both “the communicated itself” and “the symbolised itself” (*Ibid.*). For that which “tower” means is, on the contrary, “uniquely and exclusively [*einzig und allein*] the meant” (*Ibid.*). Historically, it can only ever be the correlate of this unique meant within the sphere of that which means that is struck, *never the meant itself*. For such a strike would dissolve the tension toward the meant on which linguistic constructions are founded. But what remains to be accounted for is how the uniqueness of the individual meant that every word must respectively mean is determined by the word. “Linguistic constructions, thus also the word,” runs Benjamin’s hypothesis, “communicate a communicability and symbolise a noncommunicability” (VI, 15). This hypothesis reprises the claim toward the end of “On Language in general and on the Language of Man” that name and judgement “have not only a communicating function, but in all likelihood also a symbolic function closely connected with it [*höchstwahrscheinlich auch eine mit ihr eng verbundene symbolische Funktion*]” (EW, 266-67; GS II, 156). In other words: its symbolising character is what Benjamin surmises must provide the complement to its communicating character, which is required for the specific object of the meaning of a word to be determined. For if the word “tower” communicates a communicability,

it does not however itself communicate that of which it communicates the communicability; it means it. And in order to determine the object of its meaning, a *virtus* in the word other than the communicating one is therefore required.

dasjenige aber von dem es die Mitteilbarkeit mitteilt, teilt es selbst nicht mit, das bedeutet es. Und um den Gegenstand seiner Bedeutung zu bestimmen, bedarf es also einer andern virtus im Wort als der mitteilenden. (GS VI, 15-16)

The symbolising character of the word determines the particular meant. If the kernel communicated within the word is the “founding kernel” because language begins with the communication of spiritual content, then for the *particular* noncommunicability of which the word communicates a communicability to be determined, this founding kernel *must* be complemented by a mysterious symbolic kernel (SW 1, 267-68; GS VI, 18). It is on account of this kernel that any word that solves a riddle must itself constitute a further mystery. However, a symbolic kernel rests not just within the word of *human* language but to the “word” of language *in general*. “For precisely as word everything existing bears out [*steht*

alles Seiende aus] of the symbolic power of the word capable of mystery” (SW 1, 267; GS VI, 17). For this reason, everything existing must “have a share in mystery” (*Ibid.*). This share is, however, one “that is never brought to independent existence in something profane [*beim <P>rofanen*], but rather remains forever in bondage [*immer in Gebundenheit steht*]: in the riddle to the solution—in the word to meaning” (*Ibid.*). This bondage is owed to the predication of the mystery characteristic of everything profane on its finite appearance within a particular linguistic construction. Since the language of every construction is constituted by tension toward the meant, there is, in turn, no escape from meaning for the share in mystery that belongs to each construction. The possibility of bringing it to anything but *dependent* existence is for this reason precluded from every profanely existing thing or event.

These two notes on mystery and the symbolic character of the word respectively were written around the same time as “The Task of the Translator” (1921). It is therefore not surprising to find that they shed light on what otherwise remains one of the most opaque passages of this generally obscure prologue. A clarification of this passage will lead back to the claim in the letter to Buber that every working (*Wirken*) of writing that proves salutary must be based on the mystery of its particular construction.

There remains in all language and its constructions besides the communicable a noncommunicable, a—depending on the context in which it is encountered—symbolising or a symbolised. A symbolising only in the finite constructions of languages; a symbolised, however, in the becoming of the languages themselves. And what seeks to be presented, produced even, in the becoming of languages, this is that kernel of pure language itself. But if this kernel, although hidden and fragmentary, is nevertheless present in living as the symbolised itself, it resides only symbolisingly within constructions. (SW 1, 261)

Es bleibt in aller Sprache und ihren Gebilden außer dem Mitteilbaren ein Nicht-Mitteilbares, ein, je nach dem Zusammenhang, in dem es angetroffen wird, Symbolisierendes oder Symbolisiertes. Symbolisierendes nur, in den endlichen Gebilden der Sprachen; Symbolisiertes aber im Werden der Sprachen selbst. Und was im Werden der Sprachen sich darzustellen, ja herzustellen sucht, das ist jener Kern der reinen Sprache selbst. Wenn aber dieser, ob verborgen und fragmentarisch, dennoch gegenwärtig im Leben als das Symbolisierte selbst ist, so wohnt er nur symbolisierend in den Gebilden. (GS IV, 19)

Each of the three published translations mistake the present participle *Leben* (“living”) in this passage for its substantive form *Leben* (“life”). This error makes it impossible to understand the point of this passage. For the symbolised is present neither in some *thing* that lives, nor in all *things* subsumed under a concept of life in general. Rather, the symbolised is

present only in an *act of living*. The acts of the living of language are restricted to the becoming of the languages themselves. This becoming takes place in no finite linguistic construction, but only within an act of translating a construction into another language that will prove to have stimulated the becoming of that other language. Regardless of whether it is constructed from human language or thing language, the language of every linguistic construction exists there in a state that is no longer one of becoming. Rather, it lives here as *ein Seiendes* (“something existing”) and, moreover, as *ein Bedeutendes* (“something meaning”). Accordingly, in contrast to the living of language in which the kernel of pure language is present, within linguistic constructions there rests an intention toward the symbolised, but on no account the symbolised itself. For by virtue of its constitutive tension toward the meant a linguistic construction *must* have meaning, the object of which *must* be determined by a noncommunicability, which can itself *only* be the object of a symbolic intention within the word. Since every thing or event in animate and inanimate nature that appears does so in the form of a linguistic construction, in each appearance a symbolic intention must reside. This intention is not a symbolised kernel of pure language, but a kernel symbolising pure language. It is the fact of this intention that provides the *objective* reason for “that subjective semblance [*Schein*] of the mystery of a construction or incident” (SW 1, 267; GS VI, 17-18). However, such mystery need not necessarily only be thought subjectively. On the contrary, it is possible to think mystery objectively so long as it is thought not in *things* but in *acts*.

Mystery is ultimately able to be thought only *in acts* by way of the living force that fulfils them, not however in things. From which follows that the symbol, which is a mystery, can only be thought basically in an act from the living force that fulfils. This living force is always God. (SW 1, 267; emphasis added)

Geheimnis vermag <e>ben sich letzten Endes nur in Akten durch das Lebendige, das sie vollzieht, zu denken, nicht aber in Dingen. Woraus folgt, daß sich das Symbol, welches ein Geheimnis ist, nur in einem Akt aus dem Lebendigen, das vollzieht beruhend denken läßt. Diese<s> Lebendige ist immer Gott<.> (GS VI, 18)

The symbol is the unity of symbolising and symbolised virtually unfolded from the symbolic kernel that belongs to every word. For this objective mystery to be thought, its thinking must take place in an act that issues from the divine. It is in this sense that the thinking of mystery would be messianic. Those acts ultimately fulfilled by that living force called God include those of communicating and symbolising on which every linguistic construction is founded. Although every linguistic expression of the living is accordingly pervaded by God, since every act of intending must itself also be fulfilled by God, the latter

can not be intended by any single linguistic construction. The intention toward God within language must therefore be understood as composed from the complementary intentions of all possible languages. Crucially, this does not mean that God is absolute meaning. As an infinite striving toward what must historically remain out of reach, meaning is a strictly profane phenomenon. For this reason, God is best characterised in terms of *absolute meaninglessness*. The profanity of the profane world, by contrast, is ensured by the meaning essential to every one of the linguistic constructions that together constitute its appearance. But if this meaning precludes the symbol from being thought outside of a messianic act, then the arrival of the latter need not simply be awaited. For, according to the passage from “The Task of the Translator” that directly follows that cited above, certain acts of translating certain constructions are able to release the mystery that pertains to them from its bondage to meaning.

If that ultimate essentiality, which is there [in living] pure language itself, is in languages bound only to what is linguistic and its transformations, within constructions it is burdened with heavy and foreign sense. To unbind it from the latter, to make the symbolising into the symbolised itself, to regain pure language formed *to linguistic flux*, is the powerful and unique capacity of translation. In this pure language, which intends nothing more and expresses nothing more, but as expressionless and creative word that is in all languages the intended, all communication, all sense and all intention ultimately makes landfall on a stratum in which they are destined to be extinguished. (SW 1, 261; emphasis added)

Ist jene letzte Wesenheit, die da [im Leben] die reine Sprache selbst ist, in den Sprachen nur an Sprachliches und dessen Wandlungen gebunden, so ist sie in den Gebilden behaftet mit dem schweren und fremden Sinn. Von diesem sie zu entbinden, das Symbolisierende zum Symbolisierten selbst zu machen, die reine Sprache gestaltet der Sprachbewegung zurückzugewinnen, ist das gewaltige und einzige Vermögen der Übersetzung. In dieser reinen Sprache, die nichts mehr meint und nichts mehr ausdrückt, sondern als ausdrucksloses und schöpferisches Wort das in allen Sprachen Gemeinte ist, trifft endlich alle Mitteilung, aller Sinn und alle Intention auf eine Schicht, in der sie zu erlöschen bestimmt sind. (GS IV, 19)

Each of the three English translations of this passage attributes a different significance to the dative case of the noun *der Sprachbewegung* (“to linguistic flux”). For Rendall the task is “to recuperate pure language shaped *by* linguistic development”;⁶⁰ for Zohn it is “to regain pure language fully formed *from* the linguistic flux” (SW 1, 261); while for Hynd & Valk it is “to restore universal language, fully formed, *to* linguistic growth and

⁶⁰ Walter Benjamin, “The Translator’s Task,” trans. Steven Rendall, *op. cit.*, p. 80

movement.”⁶¹ The error of the canonical Zohn translation, which “reverses the direction” of the action, has been noted by Samuel Weber for whom the phrase should read “to restore pure language configured *to* the movement of language.”⁶² But this criticism—which in any event fails to acknowledge the precedent of the forgotten Hynd & Valk translation—is only partly correct. For it overlooks the decisive ambiguity that belongs to this phrase by virtue of the unconventional position of the adjective *gestaltet* (“formed” or “shaped”). By appearing after the noun *Sprache* (“language”), it doubles the sense in which *der Sprachbewegung* must be understood. On the one hand, the dative case indicates the direction of regaining pure language *from* static linguistic constructions *to* linguistic flux or becoming. On the other hand, it indicates that the “shape” of this regained pure language *formed to linguistic flux* is a shape that does justice to becoming by being both shapely and unshapely at once. Since meaning necessarily attends any finite formation of language in general, the purification of language depends on its forming simultaneously deforming. If the traditional hierarchy of forming over deforming is in this way neutralised in this phrase, it is reversed in the sentence that follows it. For there it is said that all communication, sense and intention remain blown off course before each “ultimately makes landfall on a stratum in which they are destined to be extinguished [*trifft endlich ... auf eine Schicht, in der sie zu erlöschen bestimmt sind*].” The solid ground toward which language strives would purify it of anything solid as the precondition for its release from bondage to meaning. To extinguish (*erlöschen*) linguistic solidity would be to redeem (*erlösen*) language from its profanity. This act would constitute the messianic end of history. Prior to this it remains a virtual possibility of an act of linguistic staging.

If an objective mystery attends each word by virtue of its symbolic character, then every solution to a riddle must itself constitute a further mystery. For this reason, every solution must at the same time also be the dissolution of its status as solution. To do justice to its symbolic character, writing must be so designed that its reading could stage the exchange between solving and dissolving whereby the intention toward the unsolvable within every word is virtually and provisionally “redeemed.” This is the task to which the phrase *die reine Sprache gestaltet der Sprachbewegung zurückzugewinnen* corresponds. For in one move it presents pure language as both formed and unformed, both something and nothing recuperable. The mutually exclusive sides of this paradox unite, however, not in this linguistic *thing* itself, but only in an *act* of its deforming. This deforming takes place at the hands of a reader. Far from free to read as they please, however, these hands are pulled by strings drawn by lines designed “to lead into the divine [*ins Göttliche zu führen*]” (C, 80; GB I, 327). Only by giving control to the word can the reader be lead “by it itself and its own

⁶¹ Walter Benjamin, “The Task of the Translator,” trans. James Hynd and E. M. Valk, *op. cit.*, p. 94

⁶² Samuel Weber, *op. cit.*, p. 331-32 n. 13

purity” into that divine “sphere of the wordless” (*Ibid.*). And only where this sphere “opens itself up” to a reader lead in that moment outside the confines of subjectivity “can the magic spark leap between word and moving deed” (*Ibid.*). Such would be the basis of that moral action toward whose sparking the highly political style and writing of the early Benjamin is oriented.

Paradise and Classless Society

The letter to Buber from the period of Benjamin’s immediately metaphysical thinking finds its complement in another letter written just two years before he set down his “metaphysics” of language in 1933. This letter was written to Max Rychner in 1931 and concerns the relation of Benjamin’s thinking to materialism. Benjamin proposes that Rychner see in him “not a representative of dialectical materialism as a dogma, but an investigator for whom the *stance* [Haltung] of the materialist seems more fruitful scientifically and humanely in all things that move us [*in allen uns bewegenden Dingen*] than the idealist stance” (C, 372; GB IV, 19). These terms clearly recall those of the letter to Buber, which determine that “objective [*sachlichen*] [...] style and writing” whose reading can unite “word and moving deed [*Wort und bewegender Tat*]” as the basis for moral action (C, 80; GB I, 327). Only here the divine sphere in which this unity is sparked loses the limelight to a scientifically and humanely fruitful stance (*Haltung*) stood squarely in the sphere of the profane. But this location does not withhold a theological *orientation* from this stance, as the terms in which the passage continues make clear.

And if I should express it in a word: I have never been able to study and think otherwise than in an, if I may say so, theological sense—namely in accord with the talmudic doctrine of the forty-nine steps of sense of every passage of the Torah. Now: the most hackneyed communist platitude has in my experience more *hierarchies of sense* than contemporary bourgeois profundity, which always possesses only the one sense of an apologetics. (C, 372-73)

Und wenn ich es denn in einem Worte aussprechen soll: ich habe nie anders forschen und denken können als in einem, wenn ich so sagen darf, theologischen Sinn—nämlich in Gemäßheit der talmudischen Lehre von den neunundvierzig Sinnstufen jeder Thorastelle. Nun: Hierarchien des Sinns hat meiner Erfahrung nach die abgegriffenste kommunistische Platitude mehr als der heutige bürgerliche Tiefsinn, der immer nur den einen der Apologetik besitzt. (GB IV, 19-20)

Antithetical connotations belong to the German words *Platitude* (“platitude”) and *Tiefsinn* (“profundity”). Like its English cognate, *Platitude* derives from the French word *platt*, which means “flat.” *Tiefsinn*, by contrast, comprises the nouns *Tief* (“depth”) and *Sinn*

(“sense”). Conventionally understood, a platitude is a statement flattened by repetition, while a profundity deepens with contemplation. It would therefore indeed be—as Marx wrote of a world in which social relations appear as things and things appear as social relations—“an enchanted, perverted, topsy-turvy world”⁶³ in which a *Platitüde* has more *Tiefe* than a *Tiefsinn*. Any depth that might have belonged to a profundity characterisable as “bourgeois” is *filled in* by the apologetics demanded by a view for which the injustices of the current social order are just so many unfortunate inevitabilities. This contrasts with even “the most hackneyed [*abgegriffenste*] communist platitude” to which always belongs another side in addition to that abraded (*abgegriffene*) one on view. This is the side deep into which the possibilities of a different social order are dug. For the materialist, these possibilities pertain to the order of not just the social, but consciousness itself whose provisional limits prescribe the concept of order in the first place. It is the recognition of the reality of these possibilities that underpins what Benjamin will come to call “the *stance* of the materialist” (C, 372; GB IV, 19). For what characterises this stance is the recognition of *stance* itself—whether consciously adopted or not—as a radically plastic component of that material *circumstance* which in each case of thinking sets its limits by determining the shape it must take. But if by 1931 Benjamin attributes this stance to the materialist, then this is not without the realisation that his own stance had in fact always had a materialist orientation despite the sometime idealist terms of its expression. There are “more *hierarchies of sense*” to be experienced in “the most hackneyed [*abgegriffenste*] communist platitude” than in any “contemporary bourgeois profundity” on account of the vanishing point that determines the radical contingency of each of its possible perspectives (C, 373; GB IV, 20). This vanishing point is classless society, which offers the promise of freedom from false consciousness. What Benjamin comes to realise is that classless society *should* play a role within historical materialism structurally homologous to that of the paradisiacal state within his own philosophy of language. In other words: the mediation to be recognised from his linguistico-philosophical standpoint to the approach of dialectical materialism is, as Benjamin himself specifies, not only “tense [*gespannt*]” but “problematic [*problematisch*]” (C, 372; GB IV, 18). The latter term derives from Kant who distinguishes between three categories of judgement: problematic, assertoric and apodictic. In problematic, “one assumes the affirmation or denial as merely possible”; in assertoric, “it is considered as actual [*wirklich*]”; in apodictic, “one views it as necessary.”⁶⁴ Accordingly, if the mediation from

⁶³ Karl Marx, *Selected Writings*, ed. David McLellan. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000, p. 543. “It is an enchanted, perverted, topsy-turvy world, in which Monsieur le Capital and Madame la Terre do their ghost-walking as social characters and at the same time directly as mere things.”

⁶⁴ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Paul Guyer and Allen Wood. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998, p. 209; Immanuel Kant, *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*. Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verlag, 1956, p. 114. (A 75/B 100)

Benjamin's linguistico-philosophical standpoint is merely a possibility, then the condition of its fulfilment is a dialectical materialist philosophy of language in which the roles of the paradisiacal state and classless society are structurally homologous. How this homology is to be conceived will, however, remain obscure without close attention to how the "reason for the plurality of human languages" is *staged* in "On Language in general and on the Language of Man" (1916) (EW, 262; GS II, 152)

According to the interpretation of the book of Genesis first advanced in the latter study and repeated nine years later in *Origin of the German Mourning Play* (1925), the abstract element of language only arises with the question concerning good and evil in the world. Since nothing that God did not call into existence is strictly speaking nameable, and since the concept of the good only holds in contradistinction to that of evil, "good and evil stand, as unnameable, as nameless, outside the language of name, which man abandons [*verläßt*] in the abyss of this problem [*Fragestellung*]" (EW, 264; GS II, 154). The present tense of the verb "abandons" is crucial. For it indicates that the language of name was not abandoned by man once and for all sometime in the past but that he continually abandons it in the *present* by succumbing to abstraction. The *necessary* impurity of human language is specified quite clearly in the following passage from "On Language in general and on the Language of Man" (1916), according to which it is the divinely ordained task of translating the language of things into that of man *itself* that forces man to abandon this state.

As the mute word in the existence of things remains infinitely far below the naming word in the recognition of man, as the latter in turn no doubt remains below the creating word of God, the reason for the plurality of human languages is given. The language of things can go down in *the* language of recognition and name only in translation—so many translations, so many languages, namely as soon as man at once fell out of the paradisiacal state that knew just one language. (According to the Bible, this consequence of the expulsion from paradise sets in only later.) The paradisiacal language of man must have been the completely recognising one; while later yet at once all knowledge infinitely differentiates in the plurality of language, on a lower level than creation in name as such had to differentiate. (EW, 262)

Wie das stumme Wort im Dasein der Dinge so unendlich weit unter dem benennenden Wort in der Erkenntnis des Menschen zurückbleibt, wie wiederum dieses wohl unter dem schaffenden Wort Gottes, so ist der Grund für die Vielheit menschlicher Sprachen gegeben. Die Sprache der Dinge kann in die Sprache der Erkenntnis und des Namens nur in der Übersetzung eingehen—soviel Übersetzungen, soviel Sprachen, sobald nämlich der Mensch einmal aus dem paradiesischen Zustand, der nur eine Sprache kannte, gefallen ist. (Nach der Bibel stellt diese Folge der Austreibung aus dem Paradiese allerdings erst später sich ein.) Die paradiesische Sprache des Menschen muß die vollkommen erkennende gewesen sein; während später noch einmal alle Erkenntnis in der

Mannigfaltigkeit der Sprache sich unendlich differenziert, auf einer niederen Stufe als Schöpfung im Namen überhaupt sich differenzieren mußte. (GS II, 152)

Various aspects of the published translation obscure the reason given in this passage for the plurality of human languages.⁶⁵ As already mentioned in Part I of this study, the word *eingehen* can—with regard to such *things* as plants and animals—mean “to die,” or “to wither.” The relevance of this connotation is confirmed by a subsequent claim that the name “already withered [*schon welkte*]” in the hundred human languages (EW, 265; GS II, 155). This accounts for the somewhat forced translation of *in eingehen kann* as “can go down in” rather than simply “can pass into.” The language of things *must* wither before being *reborn* as recognising name in human language. If the language of things can go down in the language of recognition *only* in translation, then the language of things must *go down*—must wither or die—for the language of recognition to be born. The birth of the human word is itself the Fall because it presupposes a difference between human language and the language of things and thus a departure from the single language of the paradisiacal state. For this reason every act of naming by man must retroactively differentiate the paradisiacal language. Hence, naming man will have expelled himself again and again from paradise.⁶⁶ No sin against God is required for this expulsion concomitant with carrying out the divinely ordained task of naming. This constitutes a significant departure from the account in the Bible, as noted by the parenthesis: “(According to the Bible, this consequence of the expulsion from paradise only sets in later.)” It is this retroaction that the tension in the first sentence between *sobald* and *einmal* grasps: “as soon as man at once fell [*sobald ... der Mensch einmal ... gefallen ist*]”⁶⁷—a tension even more acute in the subsequent phrase:

⁶⁵ “The language of things can pass *into* the language of knowledge and name only **though** translation—**so many translations, so many languages**—**once** man has fallen, that is, from the paradisiacal state that knew only one language. (Of course, according to the Bible, this consequence of the expulsion from Paradise comes about only later.) The paradisiacal language of man must have been one of perfect knowledge, **whereas** later all knowledge is **again** infinitely **differentiated** in the multiplicity of language, **was indeed forced** to differentiate itself on a lower level **as** creation in the name” (EW, 262). First, the emphasis marked by italics in the original is moved from the definite article to the preceding preposition. Second, *in der Übersetzung* is translated as “through translation” rather than “in translation.” Third, *einmal* is not translated. Fourth, a parenthesis is introduced.

⁶⁶ Wohlfarth says something similar in “On Some Jewish Motifs in Benjamin,” *op. cit.*, p. 179. “As an inside without an outside, a present anterior to any differential temporality, Paradise epitomises what today would be called a ‘metaphysics of presence.’ Its self-presence is that of a language resting blissfully in itself. But a certain tension already ruffles the calm of its present tense. Paradise is a “present anterior” or future perfect, a world which will have always already taken place, rather than a purely self-sufficient, self-defining, timeless state.”

⁶⁷ This tension fails to appear in the published translation, which collapses the distinction between *sobald* and *einmal* by translating them together as “once.” The parenthetical remark “(According to the Bible, this consequence of the expulsion from paradise only sets in later.)” makes no sense as a result. Grammatically, the word *einmal* (literally, “one time”) is either an adverb or a particle. In this instance, an adverbial understanding of *einmal* (“at once”) seems precluded by the opening word of the clause, namely *sobald* (“as soon as”). The latter implies that time passed before this falling,

“while later yet at once [*während später noch einmal*].” At stake here is more the durational simultaneity than logical incompatibility of two opposing claims: the paradisiacal language *must have been* the language that recognises completely, and all knowledge infinitely differentiates in the plurality of language *at once*. Consequently, there is no assumption here of the actual existence of a paradisiacal language. The latter is the purified reality of sheer intensiveness from which actuality (*Wirklichkeit*) is precluded by virtue of the finitude of the forms in which it appears on the one hand, and the concomitance of intention with every finite appearance or linguistic constructions in general on the other. “The Fall is the hour of birth of the *human* word” because the latter is *actually* born (EW 264; GS II, 153).

Now, just as the paradisiacal state of freedom from intentional consciousness is not to be conceived as the starting point of historical development, so too “classless society is not to be conceived as [its] endpoint” (SW 4, 402; GS I, 1232). Rather, each is to be understood as the *interruption* of history by justice—to the symbolic character of the word in the one case, and to the class of the oppressed in the other. This Benjamin makes quite clear in the following proposition from a note associated with “On the Concept of History” (1940)

The classless society is not the final goal of progress within history but its so often miscarried, at last accomplished interruption. (SW 4, 402)

Die klassenlose Gesellschaft ist nicht das Endziel des Fortschritts in der Geschichte sondern dessen so oft mißglückte, endlich bewerkstelligte Unterbrechung. (GS I, 1231)

This interruption is accomplished at long last (*endlich*) because it takes place at the end of time, not in extensive, but in intensive terms. This perspective places Marx’s understanding of revolutions as “the locomotive of world history” in doubt (SW 4, 402; GS I, 1232). If classless society is the interruption of historical development rather than its endpoint, then the train of historical events is not propelled by revolutions, but brought by them to its screeching halt. Rather than the locomotive of history, then, it is perhaps more precise to conceive of revolutions as “the grasp of the human race travelling in this train at the emergency break [*der Griff des in diesem Zuge reisenden Menschengeschlechts nach der Notbremse*]” (*Ibid.*). Crucially, revolutions of *thinking* are isomorphically conceived from the perspective of Benjamin’s linguistico-philosophical standpoint. As the staging at stake in the following passage from the “Epistemo-Critical Prologue” makes clear, it is not by riding

whereas the former implies the opposite. This contradictory temporality encourages reading *einmal* as a particle whose grammatical function is to reinforce the statement and whose negligible independent sense permits it to fall away in translation. But such a reading overlooks the retroaction grasped in this passage.

a train of thought that recognition is reached, but by offsetting its course of intention with unscheduled stops at stations of consideration.

For [contemplative presentation] it is no goal to entrain and to inspire. Only where it compels the reader to halt at stations of consideration is it sure of its [goal]. The greater its object, the more offset this consideration. Its prosaic sobriety remains the single style of writing this side of the commanding sermon that befits philosophical investigation. (O, 29)

Für [die kontemplative Darstellung] ist es kein Ziel mitzureißen und zu begeistern. Nur wo sie in Stationen der Betrachtung den Leser einzuhalten nötigt, ist sie ihrer sicher. Je größer ihr Gegenstand, desto abgesetzter diese Betrachtung. Ihre prosaische Nüchternheit bleibt diesseits des gebietenden Lehrwortes die einzige philosophischer Forschung geziemende Schreibweise. (GS I, 209)

The influence on the reader of such an esoteric design is not just theoretical. It is practical. An example is the obscurity of the pronominal concord in the final phrase of the second sentence above: *ist sie ihrer sicher* (“is it sure of its [...]”). The reader is compelled by the design of this sentence to halt at this station to determine the object that such halting is said to ascertain. This object is the “goal” (*Ziel*) of contemplative presentation, which is thereby not reached theoretically before being put into practice by the reader. In other words: rather than imparting theory, this presentation of philosophy *effectuates a praxis*.

The Little Word “I”

If it is “entering into [truth] and disappearing” that is “the behaviour appropriate to it [*das ihr gemäße Verhalten*],” then this entering into truth is not, however, an exiting from language, but its purification from intention, and thus its purification from actuality (*Wirklichkeit*) (O, 36; GS I, 216). The task of the philosopher, according to the “Epistemo-Critical Prologue” (1925) is to set the scene in which this purification can take place in an act of contemplating in which “the idea qua word breaks itself [*löst ... sich los*] from the innermost core of actuality [*aus dem Innersten der Wirklichkeit*]” (O, 37; GS I, 217). This break from actuality is its interruption by the reality of linguistic thinghood (*Sachheit*), which is not a pure but a *purified* quality. As Benjamin puts it in the essay “Karl Kraus” (1931) completed not long before writing the letter to Rychner, “purity does not stand in the origin of the creature, but purification,” which means that “there is no idealist, but only a materialist liberation from myth” (SW 2, 455; GS II, 365). Crucially, it is only its *explicitly* materialist terms that distinguish this passage from its substantive precedent in “On Language in general and on the Language of Man” (1916).

The recognition of things is based in the name; but recognition of good and evil is in the profound sense in which Kierkegaard grasps this word, “chatter” and knows only a purification and elevation under which the chatty man, the sinful, has also been placed: the court [of justice].... In the Fall, because the eternal purity of the name was touched, the stricter purity of the judging word, of judgment, arose. (EW, 263)

Die Erkenntnis der Dinge beruht im Namen, die des Guten und Bösen ist aber in dem tiefen Sinne, in dem Kierkegaard dieses Wort faßt, »Geschwätz« und kennt nur eine Reinigung und Erhöhung, unter die denn auch der geschwätzige Mensch, der Sündige, gestellt wurde: das Gericht.... Im Sündenfall, da die ewige Reinheit des Namens angetastet wurde, erhob sich die strengere Reinheit des richtenden Wortes, des Urteils. (GS II, 153)

Five years later, in “The Task of the Translator” (1921), Benjamin argues that it is above all the translator to whom the task of doing justice to the symbolic character of the word falls. But the design of this argument *is not simply discursive*. Its logic does not appear outside of the struggle to translate its lines because it is designed to effectuate a *praxis* rather than to impart a theory. Between a line such as *die reine Sprache gestaltet der Sprachbewegung zurückzugewinnen* and its translation, the reader is lead outside of intention along a lining of language that interrupts its linearity so as to stage the exchange of forming and deforming demanded to “redeem” the intention toward the unsolvable constitutive of its construction. After his ostensible turn from an idealist to a materialist stance, Benjamin is no less invested in the task of doing justice to the symbolic character of the word by inducing a *praxis* of the purification of language in general. For it is precisely on these grounds that he praises “the redeeming and punishing quote” as it appears in the work of Kraus (SW 2, 454; GS II, 363). This quote, writes Benjamin, “calls the word by name, breaks it, destroying, from its context, but in so doing it calls the same back to its origin as well [*ruft das Wort beim Namen auf, bricht es zerstörend aus dem Zusammenhang, eben damit aber ruft es dasselbe auch zurück an seinen Ursprung*]” (*Ibid.*). In such a quote “language proves itself as the *mater* [“mother”] of justice” to which the realms of origin and destruction must answer (*Ibid.*).

Before language both realms—origin just as destruction—identify themselves in the quote. And conversely: only where they interpenetrate—in the quote—is language complete. (SW 2, 454)

Vor der Sprache weisen sich beide Reiche—Ursprung so wie Zerstörung—im Zitat aus. Und umgekehrt: nur wo sie sich durchdringen—im Zitat—ist sie vollendet. (GS II, 363)

Already in the ostensibly idealist “Epistemo-Critical Prologue” (1925), Benjamin commends “the authoritarian quote [*das autoritäre Zitat*]” for its reduction of intention to “a single piece of inventory [*einziges Bestandsstück*]” (O, 28; GS I, 208). This is an “almost more nurturing than teaching intention [*mehr fast erziehlichen als lehrenden Intention*]” since the aesthetic education it offers is less epistemic than moral (*Ibid.*). The authoritarianism of the redeeming and punishing quote is predicated neither on the authority of its original author nor on that of its original context, but—on the contrary—on its *breaking from both*. This double break alone is what fulfils the purification of the word whereby it is called back to the intentionless state of its origin wherein its symbolic character is virtually restored. The interpenetration of the realms of origin and destruction demanded in the essay on Kraus is closely linked to the exchange of forming and deforming staged in “The Task of the Translator” (1921). But now it is the authoritarian quote to which Benjamin accords the greatest purifying power. The reason for this lies implicit within one of the most curious and least commented upon lines from the letter to Rychner written the same year.

You understand that I could not remain silent toward your little call, even though I know quite well that every attempt at written understanding in the nondefinitive letter-form must expose just as many weaknesses as it contains words” (C, 372).

Sie verstehen, daß ich zu Ihrem kleinen Anruf nicht schweigen konnte, obwohl ich genau weiß, daß jeder Versuch schriftlicher Verständigung in der unmaßgeblichen Briefgestalt eben so viel Blößen freigeben muß als er Worte enthält. Da kann man nichts machen. (GB IV, 19)

The letter is not a *Form* of writing, but a *Gestalt*. The distinction derives from the aesthetics of Schiller and Goethe developed in the years immediately preceding the publication of *On the Aesthetic Education of Man* (1795). It is, however, generally lost in English translations of Benjamin, which either render both terms as “form” or fail to note the significance of the difference between “form” (*Form*) and “shape” or “figure” (*Gestalt*). The latter is strictly phenomenal and contrasts with the virtuality of ideational *Form*. Whereas “*Gestalt* always connotes formal relations as they are perceived in some actual phenomenon [...], *Form* [...] tends in the direction of *Idee* and connotes formal relations after they have been abstracted from particular phenomena.”⁶⁸ The letter is a *Gestalt* by virtue of its status as correspondence. As writing written from one human subject to another, it remains bound to the presupposition of empirical consciousness. Since the latter is unthinkable outside of its

⁶⁸ Friedrich Schiller, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*, trans. Elizabeth M. Wilkinson and L.A. Willoughby. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967, p. 309.

opposition to objects, the possibility to release the reader of a letter from the confines of intention is precluded. It is this logic that informs the brazen prescription to younger writers that appears at the outset of Benjamin's untranslated review of *Le Théâtre de Maurice Boissard* (1926) by Paul Léautaud.

Writers should become accustomed to regarding the little word "I" as their iron ration. Just as soldiers may not touch theirs before the passing of thirty days, so writers should not fish out the "I" before the end of their thirtieth year. The earlier they resort to it, the poorer they understand their craft.⁶⁹

Schriftsteller sollten daran gewöhnt werden, das Wörtchen »Ich« als ihre eiserne Ration zu betrachten. Wie Soldaten vor Ablauf von dreißig Tagen die ihrige nicht anrühren dürfen, so sollten Schriftsteller nicht vor geendigtem dreißigstem Jahr das »Ich« auskramen. Je früher sie darauf zurückgreifen, desto schlechter verstehen sie sich auf ihr Handwerk. (GS III, 68)

These lines were written by a thirty-five year old five years before he wrote the first draft of his posthumously published memoir "Berlin Childhood around 1900" (1938), which, of course, is littered with the little word "I." In the draft version called "Berliner Chronik" ("Berlin Chronicle") (1932), Benjamin reveals this prescription as the trick—as simple as it is significant—that had all along determined his own trade of writing.

If I write a better German than most writers of my generation, then I would have for the most part to thank the twenty year observance of a single little rule. It reads: never use the word "I" except in letters. (SW 2, 603)

Wenn ich ein besseres Deutsch schreibe als die meisten Schriftsteller meiner Generation, so verdanke ich das zum guten Teil der zwanzigjährigen Beobachtung einer einzigen kleinen Regel. Sie lautet: das Wort »ich« nie zu gebrauchen, außer in den Briefen. (GS VI, 475)

The observance of this rule is subsequently indirectly related to "the precaution of the subject represented by its 'I' not to be sold out [*nicht verkauft zu werden*]" (SW 2, 603; GS VI, 476). In other words: good style belongs to that writing alone which does not betray the subject. The most common way in which it is betrayed is by reducing it to empirical consciousness. It is this danger that attends the use of the little word "I." But its source is not

⁶⁹ There are however exceptions. The exceptions are the great polemicists. Their "I" is a constructive performance. It is transparently and prismatically designed and every reaction within them is subject to moral laws, which are exact like the laws concerning the angle of refraction.

Es gibt aber Ausnahmen. Ausnahmen sind die großen Polemiker. Ihr »Ich« ist eine konstruktive Leistung. Es ist durchsichtig und prismatisch angelegt und jede Reaktion in ihnen untersteht moralischen Gesetzen, die exakt sind wie die Gesetze über die Brechungswinkel. (GS III, 68)

the word itself but those “primitive elements of an unfruitful metaphysics” that remain to be eliminated from modern epistemology and in line with which this word continues to be understood (SW 1, 102; GS II, 160). This epistemology, writes Benjamin in “On the Programme of the Coming Philosophy” (1918), is ultimately owed to Kant. Its primary metaphysical element is “the subject-nature of recognising consciousness,” which “arises from the fact that it is formed in analogy to empirical consciousness, which of course has objects opposite it” (SW 1, 103; GS II, 161). For the “notion of an individual corporeal-spiritual I [*leibgeistigen ich*] that receives sensations by means of the senses and forms its notions on their foundation” is from a philosophical perspective nothing but a mythological assumption (*Ibid.*). What its role in the Kantian concept of recognition leads to is a gratuitous curtailment of the bounds of the realm of experience. “Kantian ‘experience’ is in *this* respect—with regard to its naive notion of receiving perceptions—metaphysics or mythology and in fact only a modern and religiously particularly unfruitful one” (SW 1, 103; GS II, 161). Accordingly, it is not the metaphysical nature of these elements that is the problem, but their illegitimate appearance within epistemology and the unfruitfulness of the metaphysics they imply.

Every metaphysical element in epistemology is a pathogen that manifests itself in the isolation of recognition from the realm of experience in all its freedom and depth. [...] Philosophy is based on the fact that within the structure of recognition lies that of experience, which is to be unfolded from it. This experience also includes religion, namely as true experience, wherein neither God nor man is object or subject of experience; this experience is however based on pure recognition as whose epitome alone philosophy can and must think God. (SW 1, 102, 104)

In der Erkenntnistheorie ist jedes metaphysische Element ein Krankheitskeim der sich in der Abschließung der Erkenntnis von dem Gebiet der Erfahrung in seiner ganzen Freiheit und Tiefe äußert. [...] Die Philosophie beruht darauf daß in der Struktur der Erkenntnis die der Erfahrung liegt und aus ihr zu entfalten ist. Diese Erfahrung umfaßt denn auch die Religion, nämlich als die wahre, wobei weder Gott noch Mensch Objekt oder Subjekt der Erfahrung ist, wohl aber diese Erfahrung auf der reinen Erkenntnis beruht als deren Inbegriff allein die Philosophie Gott denken kann und muß. (GS II, 160, 163)

God can and must be thought by philosophy as the epitome (*Inbegriff*) of pure recognition. It is on such thinking that religious experience is based. As an experience wherein neither God nor man is either its object or subject, what religious experience experiences is a state of being without intention. It is for this reason that it is true. The possibility of such experience presupposes a state of consciousness on which it is based that, unlike empirical consciousness, is not bound to intention. This is what Benjamin calls “pure

recognition-theoretical (transcendental) consciousness [*reinen erkenntnis-theoretischen (transcendentalen) Bewußtsein*]” (SW 1, 104; GS II, 162). But since this “systematic specification of recognition” strips “everything to do with the subject [*Subjekthaften*]” from this state, it is not clear whether “the application of the term consciousness here” is even admissible (SW 1, 103, 104; GS II, 162, 163). This so-called “consciousness” must be understood as a state of “total neutrality with regard to the terms object and subject,” a more precise term for which is therefore simply “sphere of recognition” (SW 1, 104; GS II, 162). It is only by determining for recognition its own autonomous primal sphere that the remaining metaphysical elements carried within modern epistemology can be eliminated. But such elimination is not carried out in order to do away with metaphysics, but precisely to unlock its realm for modern thought (SW 1, 102; GS II, 160). If the Kantian concept of recognition is characterised by a “one-sidedly mathematical-mechanical” orientation, then its “great reshaping [*Umbildung*] and correction ... can only be won,” insists Benjamin, “by a connection of recognition to language” (SW 1, 108; GS II, 168). For understanding recognition as an ecstatic praxis that takes place in the name would alone create a concept of recognition “to which corresponds the concept of an experience of which the recognition is lore [*Lehre*]” (*Ibid.*).

A won-in-reflection-on-the-linguistic-nature-of-recognition concept of this reflection will establish a corresponding concept of experience that will also encompass realms at whose truthful systematic classification Kant has not succeeded. As their topmost the realm of religion is to be named. (SW 1, 108)

Ein in der Reflexion auf das sprachliche Wesen der Erkenntnis gewonnener Begriff von ihr wird einen korrespondierenden Erfahrungsbegriff schaffen der auch Gebiete deren wahrhafte systematische Einordnung Kant nicht gelungen ist umfassen wird. Als deren Oberstes ist das Gebiet der Religion zu nennen (GS II, 168).

The sentence in German is not much less awkward than this translation, which corrects a serious error in the published version. The feminine pronoun *ihr* (“it”) refers not to the masculine noun *der Begriff* (“concept” or “term”), but to the feminine noun *die Reflexion* (“reflection”). What will establish a concept of experience that encompasses religion is therefore not “a concept gained from reflection on the linguistic nature of knowledge,” but a concept *of* this reflection itself (SW 1, 108). The concept is literally a piece of this reflection, a fragment that breaks off from it to establish the concept of experience. As Benjamin puts it in a note from around 1916, “the concept derives from the object; it is affined to it (SW 1, 89; GS VI, 13-14). Accordingly, its reference “to the object is no intentional reference, but a relation of derivation [*Abstammungsverhältnis*]” (*Ibid.*). What this passage from around two

years later now suggests is that it is experience that constitutes the medium of this derivation. For if this fragment is won only *in* the act of reflecting, then the latter must thus itself be understood in terms of experience. To be in reflection on the linguistic nature of recognition coincides with *experiencing* this nature. The establishing term for the concept of experience that encompasses religion is a fragment of an experience of the nature of recognition—which is why Benjamin claims this concept will *correspond* to this term. The immanence of the structure of experience to that of recognition, which allows experience to be defined as “the uniform and continuous manifold of recognition,” follows from the metaphysical axiom concerning the ecstatic nature of recognising set in “On Language in general and on the Language of Man” (1916). “Only through the linguistic being of things,” writes Benjamin, “does [man] arrive out of himself at their recognition—in name” (EW, 255; GS II, 144). It is such a connection of recognition to language that capacitates an epistemology that would not fall prey to the Kantian isolation of recognition from the realm of experience. For it would, on the contrary, unfold the structure of experience out from where it *must* lie *within* the structure of recognition (SW 1, 108; GS II, 168).

That “On the Programme of the Coming Philosophy” (1918) raises the possibility of establishing a concept of experience that encompasses religion on the basis of a fragment of an experience of the nature of recognition is corroborated nowhere more decisively than on the opening page of the “Epistemo-Critical Prologue [*Erkenntniskritische Vorrede*]” composed six years after this critique (*Kritik*) of Kantian epistemology (*Erkenntnistheorie*).

The alternative to philosophical form provided by the concepts of doctrine and of the esoteric essay is that which the concept of system of the nineteenth century ignores. Insofar as this concept determines philosophy, the latter threatens to accommodate itself to a syncretism that seeks to trap truth in a spiderweb spun between insights as if it would have flown this way from outside. (O, 28)

Die Alternative der philosophischen Form, welche durch die Begriffe von der Lehre und von dem esoterischen Essay gestellt wird, ist's, die der Systembegriff des XIX. Jahrhunderts ignoriert. Soweit er die Philosophie bestimmt, droht diese einem Synkretismus sich zu bequemen, der die Wahrheit in einem zwischen Erkenntnissen gezogenen Spinnennetz einzufangen sucht als käme sie von draußen herzugeflogen. (GS I, 207)

It is less against Kantian than Hegelian philosophy that this critique is now oriented. The German Idealist concept of system (*Systembegriff*) overlooks the significance of the particular concepts in which philosophy is expressed. What truth does settle in any branch of philosophy did not migrate there from some extralinguistic land to hover between its insights, but hatched there as a symbolic charge stored in its terminology. This charge marks the terms of all great writing and none more so than that oeuvre in which German Idealism

has its roots. “[Kant’s] terminology,” runs a line from the untranslated note from 1918, “is mystical; it is absolutely determined by the effort to give to the concepts ascertained within it [*den in ihr ermittelten Begriffen*] from origin on ... the inconspicuous exalting dimension of genuine recognition,” namely a “symbolic charge [*Ladung*]” (GS VI, 39). The torturous “exactitude [*Akribie*]” that characterises Kant’s prose is therefore “only pride in the mystery [*Mysterium*]” of the birth of genuine recognition, “which critique [*Kritik*] is unable to eradicate, although it does not realise it” (*Ibid.*). This mystery is ineradicable because it is only an intensification of the objective mystery of the symbolic character of the word. No great writing is without esotericism. For a symbolic charge must belong to its terms, which builds up with each twist and turn away from profane meaning toward symbolic character. Crucially, if Kantian terminology is “probably the only terminology in philosophy that has not only emerged *in toto* but is also created,” the furnace in which these terms are forged is not system (C, 103; GB I, 403). It is *style*. This is both the reason why philosophy will always remain intransigent to systematisation and why Benjamin insists in “that in the great scientific creations art must also be encompassed (and vice versa),” which accounts for his “conviction that Kant’s prose itself presents a *limes* of high artistic prose [*einen limes der hohen Kunstprosa darstellt*]” (C, 98; GB I, 390).

Kant’s prose presents such a “*limes*” or “frontier” because, however unwittingly on the part of Kant, it is tasked with, as Benjamin puts it in the untranslated noted from around 1918, filling “the walls of the palace with images until the images appear [*scheinen*] to be the walls” (GS VI, 39). In other words: Kant’s philosophy shares—at least to a certain extent—the problem of its presentation with that tradition of art tasked with the presentation of essential beauty. For the latter is always a question of *Schein* (“appearance,” “illusoriness,” but also “shine” in the positive, luminous sense). “Neither the veil nor the veiled object,” runs the famous line in “Goethe’s *Elective Affinities*” (1921), “is the beautiful; the latter is rather the object in its veil” (SW 1, 351; GS I, 195). Consequently, if the beautiful “ceases to shine [*aufhört zu scheinen*]” through the veil of what is therefore an objectively mysterious object, then, as Benjamin puts it in a note from 1935, “it ceases to be beautiful” (SW 3, 137; GS VII, 667). Just as the divine ground of being of beauty referred to in the following passage from “Goethe’s *Elective Affinities*” (1921) can only appear as objectively mysterious semblance (*Schein*), so too the mystery of the divine ground of a symbolically charged terminology is ineradicable outside of that revelation alone in which semblance disappears.

Since the beautiful alone and nothing but it can essentially be veiling and veiled, the divine ground of being of beauty lies in mystery. The semblance in beauty is then precisely this: not the superfluous veiling of things in themselves, but the necessary veiling of things for us. Such veiling is

at times divinely necessary, just as it is divinely conditioned that, unveiled at the wrong time, that inconspicuous element volatilises into nothing, whereby revelation replaces mysteries. Kant's theory that a relational character may be the foundation of beauty thus victoriously accomplishes its methodical tendencies in a much higher sphere than the psychological. All beauty holds, like revelation, historico-philosophical orders in itself. For it makes visible not the idea but its mystery. (SW 3, 351)

Weil nur das Schöne und außer ihm nichts verhüllend und verhüllt wesentlich zu sein vermag, liegt im Geheimnis der göttliche Seinsgrund der Schönheit. So ist denn der Schein in ihr eben dies: nicht die überflüssige Verhüllung der Dinge an sich, sondern die notwendige von Dingen, für uns. Göttlich notwendig ist solche Verhüllung zu Zeiten, wie denn göttlich bedingt ist, daß, zur Unzeit enthüllt, in nichts jenes Unscheinbare sich verflüchtigt, womit Offenbarung die Geheimnisse ablöst. Kants Lehre, daß ein Relationscharakter die Grundlage der Schönheit sei, setzt demnach in einer sehr viel höhern Sphäre als der psychologischen siegreich ihre methodischen Tendenzen durch. Alle Schönheit hält wie die Offenbarung geschichtsphilosophische Ordnungen in sich. Denn sie macht nicht die Idee sichtbar, sondern deren Geheimnis. (GS I, 195-96)

Unlike the idea, mystery is not eternal because it takes shape in accordance with what appears mysterious according to a particular historically contingent organisation of human perception. If the shining of beauty through the veil of the object constitutes the experiential ground of beautiful semblance, then this shining would have manifested itself differently to, say, the Greeks of antiquity than it did to the Germans of the Enlightenment. Now, if, as Benjamin makes clear in a note from 1935, the veil of the object through which beauty must shine "is nothing other than aura," then this does not mean that aura belongs to the essentially beautiful alone (SW 3, 137; GS VII, 667). Rather, aura belongs to everything objectively mysterious. Since the communication of every spiritual being is received as a finite linguistic construction that symbolises that of which it communicates only the communicable aspect, a mysterious symbolic kernel resides in every communication. It should thus come as no surprise that, in a hashish protocol from 1930, Benjamin writes that "genuine aura appears in all things" (OH, 58; GS VI, 588). It is accordingly the symbolic, *not* the allegorical character of words that accounts for the claim in "Über einige Motive bei Baudelaire" ("On Some Motifs in Baudelaire") (1939), that "[w]ords can also have their aura" (SW 4, 354; GS I, 647). If "[t]he closer one looks at a word, the more distantly it looks back [*Je näher man ein Wort ansieht, desto ferner sieht es zurück*]," then this is because the mystery of the divine linguistic ground of its *symbolic* character is ineradicable rather than because its meaning fails to find fulfilment in itself (*Ibid.*). Since all great writing, including great scientific writing, is based on the symbolic character of its language, all such writing

must be characterised by a certain esotericism. Hence the following passage from the “Epistemo-Critical Prologue” (1925).

What in philosophical designs is method does not merge into its didactic facility. And this means nothing other than that an esotericism belongs to them, which they are unable to discard, which is forbidden to them to deny, which to praise would judge [and straighten] them. (O, 28)

Was an den philosophischen Entwürfen Methode ist, das geht nicht auf in ihrer didaktischen Einrichtung. Und dies besagt nichts anderes, als daß ihnen eine Esoterik eignet, die abzulegen sie nicht vermögen, die zu verleugnen ihnen untersagt ist, die zu rühmen sie richten würde. (GS I, 207)

The sense of this passage turns on the ambiguity of the verb *richten* (“to judge” and “to straighten”) on the one hand, and its correspondence with the noun *Einrichtung* (“facility” or “mechanism”) on the other. Whereas the didactic facility of method is indeed straight, philosophical method as a whole is irreducible to this aspect by virtue of the esotericism that must belong to its design. This esotericism cannot be the object of praise because its esoteric nature would have to be shorn for it to take the position of an object. To praise the esotericism of a design is to confront it in terms of the subject-object split presupposed by any act of judgement. But it is precisely its avoidance of such a split that the esotericism of a philosophical design is praiseworthy in the first place. Unlike that of a textbook, the style of philosophical designs (*Entwürfen*) is not functional. It produces an imagistic *medium* of thinking, rather than a *means* for communicating information. This medium knows no mould. It must be produced every time anew in accord with the demands of the thing to be thought. It is in this regard that “[t]he alternative to philosophical form [*Form*] provided by the concepts of doctrine and of the esoteric essay” are necessary (O, 28; GS I, 207). This is not an alternative to *Form*, but a complementary *Form*. Where the two intersect is the site of philosophy. The esoteric designs of the one combine with the symbolically charged terms of the other. One such term is *Form* itself, which for Benjamin always applies to a literary medium in which intention may die. The form of the letter is a *Gestalt* because the presupposition of empirical consciousness is ineradicable from correspondence, which precludes from its reading that genuine recognition predicated on the death of intention. No matter how much twisting and turning away from profane meaning, symbolic charge will always dissipate from the egocentric energy centre of what is for this reason the nondefinitive letter-form (*Briefgestalt*). Hence why the letter to Rychner concludes with the claim that answers “more sound [*fundiertere*]” than those Benjamin could give “*expressis verbis*” to the question posed by Rychner concerning the relation of his thinking to

materialism should be found “between the lines” of his essay “Karl Kraus” (1931) (C, 373; GB IV, 20).

The Originary Perception of Words

Although not yet expressed in *explicitly* materialist terms, the priority accorded purification over purity in “Karl Kraus” (1931) and the consequent demand for a materialist liberation from myth already characterises the immediately metaphysical thinking of “On Language in general and on the Language of Man” (1916). It is the following corollary of the basic premise of his theory of language in general that secures this priority for his standpoint.

An existence that would be completely without relation to language is an idea; but this idea can even in the domain of ideas, whose circumference designates that of God, not be made fruitful. (EW, 252)

Ein Dasein, welches ganz ohne Beziehung zur Sprache wäre, ist eine Idee; aber diese Idee läßt sich auch im Bezirk der Ideen, deren Umkreis diejenige Gottes bezeichnet, nicht fruchtbar machen. (GS II, 141)

The words that determine what one would expect to be an uncircumscribable circumference—namely that which designates the idea of God—are presented here as circumscribed. What they are circumscribed by are *words* that determine the fruitlessness of any existence completely without relation to language. The idea cannot be made fruitful because it is strictly noncommunicable. It can for this reason bear no name let alone the meaning attributed to what, in turn, can only be the *sign* for it in the first clause of the sentence above. It is the necessarily hypothetical nature of this *designation* that is registered by the disjunction between the subjunctive and indicative moods of the clause: “An existence that *would be* completely without relation to language *is* an idea.” But if such an existence must remain unknowable, then the theory of ideas that Benjamin advances nine years later in the “Epistemo-Critical Prologue” (1925) would have to be informed by an understanding of the idea according to which it is not in fact without relation to language—which, of course, is precisely the case:

The idea is something linguistic and indeed in the essence of the word in each case that moment in which it is symbol (O, 36)

Die Idee ist ein Sprachliches, und zwar im Wesen des Wortes jeweils dasjenige Moment, in welchem es Symbol ist. (GS I, 216)

If Benjamin once described this prologue to Scholem as “a kind of second, I do not whether better, stage of the early study on language [...], coiffed [*frisiert*] as a theory of ideas,” then this redefinition of the idea is the pomade that holds its new look in place (C, 261; GB III, 14). The idea is no longer that which would be without relation to language, but the virtual unity of symbolising and symbolised. Crucially, it is not materiality that is thereby located at the heart of ideality, but ideality that is located at the heart of materiality. Just as in the sentence that stages the circumscription *by* language of the ultimate circumference of that without relation *to* language, ideality is to be found at the innermost symbolic core of linguistic materiality. Despite its idealist dressing, the locks of this second stage of the study on language can thus be seen to be rooted in the very same scalp as the first. Only because ideas are themselves something linguistic can they be staged with the help of concepts.

Distinction within concepts is beyond any suspicion of destructive sophistry only there where it takes aim at that salvaging of phenomena in ideas, the Platonic *ta phainomena sozein* [“saving the phenomena”]. Through their mediating role concepts lend to phenomena a share in the being of ideas. And precisely this mediating role makes them suited to the other, equally ordinary task of philosophy, to the presentation of ideas. By fulfilling the salvation of phenomena by means of ideas, the presentation of ideas within the medium of empiricism is fulfilled. For not in themselves, but solely and exclusively in an allocation of concrete elements in the concept are ideas presented. And they indeed do it as a configuration of these elements. (O, 34)

Die Unterscheidung in Begriffen ist über jedweden Verdacht zerstörerischer Spitzfindigkeit erhaben nur dort, wo sie auf jene Bergung der Phänomene in den Ideen, das Platonische ta phainomena sozein es abgesehen hat. Durch ihre Vermittlerrolle leihen die Begriffe den Phänomenen Anteil am Sein der Ideen. Und eben diese Vermittlerrolle macht sie tauglich zu der anderen, gleich ursprünglichen Aufgabe der Philosophie, zur Darstellung der Ideen. Indem die Rettung der Phänomene vermittels der Ideen sich vollzieht, vollzieht sich die Darstellung der Ideen im Mittel der Empirie. Denn nicht an sich selbst, sondern einzig und allein in einer Zuordnung dinglicher Elemente im Begriff stellen die Ideen sich dar. Und zwar tun sie es als deren Konfiguration. (GS I, 214)

The symbolic being of ideas is made available to phenomena by language that presents ideas. But it is not just the concept that plays a “mediating role” (*Vermittlerrolle*) in this production. It is “by means of” (*vermittels*) ideas that phenomena are saved within the “medium” (*Mittel*) of empiricism. Unlike the positivist depiction, there is no offstage to this

staging of language, which takes aim at no idea in itself, but at the *linguistic act* of saving phenomena. This salvation takes place in the idea, which, for its part, only “comes to self-understanding” in this *act of reading* wherein the symbolising and symbolised unite as idea; or, in other words, as symbol, understood as “the opposite of all outwardly oriented communication” (O, 36; GS I, 216). What Benjamin only realises around three years later, however, is that this act of reading is capacitated by a mimetic praxis, which not only presupposes of man a mimetic faculty, but implies that this unification is always mediated by the human body. If metaphysical knowledge is a priori deducible, then what is demanded is no longer a metaphysics, but a “metaphysics” that can account for the generation of singular experience as well as the possibility of its concretion in an historical, monadic totality. Returning to the “Epistemo-Critical Prologue” (1925), the unity of symbolising and symbolised whose possibility it banks on does not preexist the materialist purification that brings it about: ideas are staged as a configuration of *concrete elements in the concept*. It is in terms of a gesture toward such a configuration that the solution Benjamin proposes in the letter to Rychner to the problem of the relation of his thinking to materialism demands to be read. Namely,

to see in me not a representative of dialectical materialism as a dogma, but an investigator to whom the *stance* of the materialist seems more fruitful scientifically and humanely in all things that move us than the idealist [stance]. (C, 372)

in mir nicht einen Vertreter des dialektischen Materialismus als eines Dogmas, sondern einen Forscher zu sehen, dem die Haltung des Materialisten wissenschaftlich und menschlich in allen uns bewegenden Dingen fruchtbarer scheint als die idealistische. (GB IV, 19)

The final word of the translation appears in square brackets because it has no equivalent in the original, which ends with the adjective *idealistische* (“idealist”). Such hanging adjectives are permitted by German grammar since concord is registered by suffix and gender. What it allows for in this case, however, is a difference to be staged between the primacy of an *emphatic* stance in the phrase “the *stance* of the materialist” and the secondariness of an *implicit* stance in the phrase “the idealist [stance].” Already in the “Epistemo-Critical Prologue” (1925), Benjamin criticises the Hegelian motto “So much the worse for the facts” for its “genuinely idealist stance [*echt idealistische Haltung*]” (O, 46; GS I, 226). What this motto basically means according to Benjamin is that “insight into essential connections [*Wesenszusammenhänge*] reconciles with the philosopher [*liegt beim Philosophen*] and essential connections remain what they are, even if within the world of facts they are not minted purely [*rein nicht ausprägen*]” (*Ibid.*). The stance of the prologue

is not idealist in this sense because the idea itself only comes to self-understanding in a unique act of purification of material. The particular is saved only there where “it stands within the idea and becomes what it was not—totality” (O, 46; GS I, 227). This place is the unity won between the genuine and its recognition, which is in each case unique and depends on a stance oriented toward its discovery. If the task of the investigator of the world of ideas is to secure its connection to the world of facts, then no fact can be considered secured before “its innermost structure appears so essential that it reveals it as an origin [Ursprung]” (*Ibid.*). And it is above all any “proof of origin [Ursprungsnachweis]” *itself* that must “verify itself as genuine” (*Ibid.*). This is precluded from philosophical writing subordinated to a German Idealist “concept of system [Systembegriff]” (O, 28; GS I, 207). Only lines designed to lead a reader outside the confines of system—together with a stance of reading sensitive to such designs—could possibly achieve a recognition whose genuineness is marked by an appearance of the “originary seal within phenomena” (O, 46; GS I, 227).

If philosophy is to maintain the law of its form, not as a mediating instruction manual for cognition, but as a presentation of truth, then weight is to be granted to the exercise of this, its form, not however to its anticipation in a system. This exercise has imposed itself on all epochs to which the noncircumscribed essentiality of the true was apparent in a propaedeutic that one may therefore address with the scholastic term “tract” because it contains that albeit latent reference to the objects of theology without which truth can not be thought. (O, 28)

Will die Philosophie nicht als vermittelnde Anleitung zum Erkennen, sondern als Darstellung der Wahrheit das Gesetz ihrer Form bewahren, so ist der Übung dieser ihrer Form, nicht aber ihrer Antizipation im System, Gewicht beizulegen. Diese Übung hat sich allen Epochen, denen die unumschreibliche Wesenheit des Wahren vor Augen stand, in einer Propädeutik aufgenötigt, die man mit dem scholastischen Terminus des Traktats darum ansprechen darf, weil er jenen wenn auch latenten Hinweis auf die Gegenstände der Theologie enthält, ohne welche der Wahrheit nicht gedacht werden kann. (GS I, 208)

The central object of theology is not God or the absolute, but religion understood as that true experience in which neither man nor God are subject or object. If the law of the form of philosophy is the presentation of truth, then “the business [Sache] of the philosopher” is “to reinstate by presentation [Darstellung] the primacy of the symbolic character of the word” (O, 36; GS I, 216). As a concern with this character, this business must deal with the objective mystery of linguistic constructions in general. No return should be expected from an investment in thinking that fails to do justice to mystery. And no philosophy can deal with the mystery of language without the resources of symbolically charged terms. The law

of the form of philosophy is for this reason best exercised in that literary form the quintessence of whose method is staging. It is in terms of this character that Benjamin understands the “tract” (*Traktat*).

The tract is an ancient concise form of what is conventionally understood as not just *didactic* but *dogmatic* writing on religious or political topics. For this reason, the form is not without negative connotations from a scientific point of view. The endeavour to reclaim such a term for science is demanded by the linguistico-philosophical standpoint for which those moments in which words are symbols “are given without intention in naming” (O, 37; GS I, 217). For what follows from this is that the negative connotations that accrue over time to any word in which a symbolic kernel must lie concealed is merely the result of its misuse, misapplication, and misunderstanding. The quality of name must be restored to the word within that contemplation in which actuality is interrupted by the purified reality of linguistic thinghood (*Sachheit*).

Adamic name-giving is so far removed from being play and arbitrariness that rather precisely in it the paradisiacal state is confirmed as such [a state] that still had no wrestling with the communicating meaning of words. (O, 36).

Das adamitische Namengeben ist so weit entfernt Spiel und Willkür zu sein, daß vielmehr gerade in ihm der paradiesische Stand sich als solcher bestätigt, der mit der mitteilenden Bedeutung der Worte noch nicht zu ringen hatte. (GS I, 217)

Why this sentence does not imply the historical existence of a prelapsarian state concerns the interplay between the different tenses of its three clauses: present continuous (*ist zu ... sein* “is ... being”), simple present (*sich bestätigt* “proves true”), and past perfect (*hatte* “had”). As a state “that still *had* no wrestling with the communicating meaning of words,” the paradisiacal state is only constituted *retroactively* ever again in the present first and “precisely *in*” Adamic name-giving. Likewise, the Fall is not to be understood as a completed act in the past, but the continual falling back out of the state thus constituted ever again in the now of name-giving. The latter is thus originary rather than original. It is the act whereby the word is not so much named for the first time as *called by its name*. As Benjamin will eventually put it in “Karl Kraus” (1931), this call is sounded by “the redeeming and punishing quote,” which breaks the word from its context and which at the same time calls the word “back to its origin as well” (SW 2, 454; GS II, 363). The simultaneity of origin and destruction is crucial to the act of Adamic name-giving because “language is complete” only where its forming is simultaneously deforming (*Ibid.*). The authoritarian quote is the site of such paradoxical interpenetration because it justifies itself

not before man but before language itself. It breaks words from their original context to release them from the semblance of authority based on discursive argument and authorial intention in order to return them to their originary context: the primacy of the objectively mysterious symbolic character of the word. Neither the past existence or future possibility of an actual state that could remain spared from wrestling with the communicating meaning of words is implied by the sentence cited above. The bout will always have actually begun, but its actuality may be interrupted by the purified reality of the state of paradise free from wrestling. The paradisiacal state is the purified reality of the unity of language, which demands to be renewed in philosophical contemplation.

Just as ideas give themselves without intention in naming, so they have to renew themselves in philosophical contemplation. In this renewal the originary perception of words is reestablished. And thus philosophy in the course of its history, which was so often an object of ridicule, is with reason a struggle over the presentation of a few, time and again the same, words—of ideas. (O, 37)

Wie die Ideen intentionslos im Benennen sich geben, so haben sie in philosophischer Kontemplation sich zu erneuern. In dieser Erneuerung stellt das ursprüngliche Vernehmen der Worte sich wieder her. Und so ist die Philosophie im Verlauf ihrer Geschichte, die so oft ein Gegenstand des Spottes gewesen ist, mit Grund ein Kampf um die Darstellung von einigen wenigen, immer wieder denselben Worten—von Ideen. (GS I, 217)

Intention meets its end in the pure intensiveness that characterises “the originary perception of words [*das ursprüngliche Vernehmen der Worte*].” This is a perception not of words by humans, but a perception that *belongs to the words themselves*. It is in this “primal perception [*Urvernehmen*] in which words possess their naming nobility not lost in recognising meaning” that ideas are given (O, 36; GS I, 216). The struggle over the presentation of words is the struggle for participation in this originary perception whereby the reader of not just human language, but language in general is saved from intention. As the “presentation of truth [*Darstellung der Wahrheit*],” the law of the form of philosophy is exercised there where intention is lead to the end of its line (O, 28; GS I, 208). Only in its death could symbolising and symbolised unite in a moment of language opposed to all outwardly oriented communication. Such moments are most efficiently cultivated in the form of the tract the specification of whose character in the following passage is just as perceptual as semantic.

In its canonical form the authoritarian quote establishes itself as the single piece of inventory of an almost more nurturing than teaching intention. Presentation is the quintessence of its method. Method is detour. Presentation as detour—this is the methodical character of the tract. Renunciation

of the nonoffset course of intention is its primary characteristic. Persistently thinking lifts off ever anew, circuitously it harks back to the thing itself. This unrelenting intake of breath is the ownmost form of existence of contemplation. For by following the different steps of sense in the consideration of one and the same object, it receives the impetus of its ever renewed onset as well as the justification for its intermittent rhythm. (O, 28)

In ihrer kanonischen Form wird als einziges Bestandteil einer mehr fast erziehlischen als lehrenden Intention das autoritäre Zitat sich einfinden. Darstellung ist der Inbegriff ihrer Methode. Methode ist Umweg. Darstellung als Umweg—das ist denn der methodische Charakter des Traktats. Verzicht auf den unabgesetzten Lauf der Intention ist sein erstes Kennzeichen. Ausdauernd hebt das Denken stets von neuem an, umständlich geht es auf die Sache selbst zurück. Dies unablässige Atemholen ist die eigenste Daseinsform der Kontemplation. Denn indem sie den unterschiedlichen Sinnstufen bei der Betrachtung eines und desselben Gegenstandes folgt, empfängt sie den Antrieb ihres stets erneuten Einsetzens ebenso wie die Rechtfertigung ihrer intermittierenden Rhythmik. (GS I, 208)

The word “offset” (*abgesetzt*) is a technical term from printmaking. It names an indirect process of planographic printing once common in book publishing wherein no contact is made between plate and surface because a rubber blanket mediates between them. In the printing of philosophical contemplation, this mediating role is played by symbolically charged terms. One such term is “nonoffset” (*unabgesetzt*).⁷⁰ No straight method is possible for philosophy whose designs are irreducible to its didactic facility (*Einrichtung*). The reader must be led off the beaten track through that thicket of esotericism which springs up at every turn on an offset course of intention. The hallmark of this course is the intermittency of its rhythm, which must characterise not just philosophical, but metaphilosophical designs. The intermittent rhythm of the passage above is for this reason no mere stylistic indulgence on Benjamin’s part. Were this metaphilosophy to be presented in an exoteric design, it would constitute a contradiction in terms. It is on these admittedly highly precarious grounds that the prologue to the *Trauerspiel* book is defended against the criticism Hans Heinz Schaefer advances in the letter to Hugo von Hofmannstahl in which he accounts for his decision not to review the book.

Since I esteemed the author from before, I myself have made the effort to suss out at least somewhat the sense of the first chapter by a triple reading and philosophical interpretation of the individual sentences. But I do not conceal from myself the fact that only very few readers will

⁷⁰ The published translation obscures the point completely by translating *unabgesetzten Lauf der Intention* as “The absence of an uninterrupted purposeful structure” (O, 28).

likely have enough patience and time for this highly individual scholasticism, darkened to the point of incomprehensibility, to be assimilated.⁷¹

*ich selber habe mir, da ich den Autor von früher her hochschätzte, die Mühe gegeben, durch dreimalige Lektüre und philosophische Interpretation der einzelnen Sätze wenigstens einigermaßen hinter den Sinn des ersten Kapitels zu kommen. Aber ich verhehle mir nicht, daß wohl nur ganz wenige Leser Geduld und Zeit genug haben werden, um sich diese ganz individuelle und bis zur Unverständlichkeit verdunkelte Scholastik zu assimilieren.*⁷²

While the “Epistemo-Critical Prologue” (1925) is indeed a piece of highly individual scholasticism darkened to the point of incomprehensibility, it is precisely to this frontier that philosophical designs must lead irrespective of how little patience or time most readers no doubt have. Only a style of writing that consumes time and tests patience could possibly constitute the scene of genuine recognition. This style is that of the tract whose stop-start nature marks the rhythm of its offset course, which follows “the different steps of sense [*Sinnstufen*] in the consideration of one and the same object” (O, 28; GS I, 208). Six years later, in the letter to Rychner, Benjamin reveals that it is the talmudic tracts that, in his opinion, most closely approximate the canonical form of this style of writing. “I have never been able to study and think,” he writes, “otherwise than [...] in accord with the talmudic doctrine of the forty-nine steps of sense [*Sinnstufen*] of every passage of the Torah” (C, 372; GB IV, 19). And just as reading this passage from “Epistemo-Critical Prologue” effectuates a praxis rather than imparts a theory, so too reading the letter to Rychner produces no mere discursive statement. Only here, it is—on account of that nondefinitive letter-form which *must* fail to break from empirical consciousness—not a question of overcoming the contradictions of theory in praxis. Rather, it is more simply a question of staging this possibility for its reader by distinguishing the intensive presentation that *should* characterise materialist dialectics from the extensive presentation of bourgeois scholarship summed up by the neologism *Saturiertheit* (“satiety”) coined by Bismarck. As designation, this coinage *taints* rather than purifies language, for it *means* nothing other than a particular phonographic complex chosen by Bismarck. Not only does the act of adding it to language presuppose a view of the latter for which “the expansive tendency of word-by-word-succession” is not ultimately devastating (C, 80; GB I, 326); the very reason Bismarck added it to the lexicon was to ward off not war but its fear by conjuring a semblance of a satiated citizenry with the magic of this semiotic spell. This term could not be further removed from

⁷¹ Cited in: Gershom Scholem, *Walter Benjamin: The Story of a Friendship*. Jewish Publication Society of America, 1982, p. 148.

⁷² Cited in: Gershom Scholem, *Walter Benjamin: die Geschichte einer Freundschaft*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1975, p. 184.

an objectively mysterious symbolically charged term: it is a window—as clean as it is false—into the thinking of a citizenry whose expansive view of politics was not unrelated to that of language.

A Commitment to the Extremes

The materialist orientation of Benjamin's early metaphysics remains hidden to those who fail to read his prose in terms of the design of its lines and the symbolic charge of its terms. The ease with which this point is missed is demonstrated by the fact that precisely this failure characterises its reading by the person who regarded himself as Benjamin's closest intellectual ally: Gershom Scholem. The expression of an interest in "how far one as an experiment [*versuchsweise*] might come with the stance of the materialist" Scholem deems utterly disingenuous on the grounds that Benjamin had "evidently [*evidentermaßen*] never and in no case adopted [*eingenommen*] this stance in [his] creative method" (C, 375; GB IV, 29). What is more, doing so successfully is precluded by the fact that his "proper and solid insights [*eigenen und soliden Erkenntnisse*] grow out of, to put it briefly, a metaphysics of language" (C, 375, 374; GB IV, 29, 27). The certainty that the freedom of both his thinking and existence would be curtailed were he to join the Communist Party of Germany (KPD) is proof that his work "does not in truth provide any genuine contribution" to "materialist reflection" (C, 376; GB IV, 29). Needless to say, nowhere in this letter does Scholem address the idiosyncrasy of either the design or the terms of the letter to Rychner. With regard to its terms, nowhere is their symbolic charge more decisively lost than in the word "stance" (*Haltung*) as it appears in the plea by Benjamin

to see in me not a representative of dialectical materialism as a dogma, but an investigator to whom the *stance* of the materialist seems more fruitful scientifically and humanely in all things that move us than the idealist [stance]. (C, 372)

in mir nicht einen Vertreter des dialektischen Materialismus als eines Dogmas, sondern einen Forscher zu sehen, dem die Haltung des Materialisten wissenschaftlich und menschlich in allen uns bewegenden Dingen fruchtbarer scheint als die idealistische. (GB IV, 19)

The grammatical character of this passage stages the distinction between the materialist and the idealist in terms of the different role in each case played by stance. The primacy of the emphatic stance of the materialist contrasts with the secondariness of implicit stance in the case of the idealist. This distinction is formulable more precisely on the basis of the essay "Surrealism: The Latest Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia" (1929). A focus of

this essay is the development of Surrealism from a bourgeois cultural avant-garde to a Marxist revolutionary movement on the side of the proletariat. In terms of political events, the impetus for its transformation was above all the intervention by France in 1925 in the Second Moroccan War on the side of Spain. But what ultimately “pushed Surrealism to the left,” according to Benjamin, was “the hostility of the bourgeoisie to any exhibition of radical intellectual freedom” (SW 2, 213; GS II, 303). As “the first to demolish the fossilised liberal moralist-humanist ideal of freedom” unchallenged in Europe since the mid-nineteenth century anarchism of Mikhail Bakunin, the Surrealists were effectively forced into opposition to the ruling class by virtue of its hostility to their “radical concept of freedom” (SW 2, 215; GS II, 306). The dialectical development of the movement consisted, then, in a “transformation of an extreme contemplative stance [*extrem kontemplative Haltung*] into revolutionary opposition” (SW 2, 213; GS II, 303). Four years later, Benjamin returns to the topic of this transformation in “Zum gesellschaftlichen Standort des französischen Schriftstellers” (“Toward the Social Standpoint of the French Writer”) (1933). His concern is to distinguish its *contingency* from the *necessity* of the comparable transformation that occurred in the novelist André Gide, which involved, like the political transformation of Benjamin himself, a push not to the left, but within it, from an anarchist individualism to a communist collectivism. This comparison Benjamin introduces by recounting a murder scene from the novel *The Vatican Cellars* (1914) by Gide. It is spontaneously committed in a train by Lafcadio, the hero of the story. His victim is an old man who happens to be sharing the same compartment. Lafcadio finds him ugly and contemplates pushing him out the train just to test his ability to commit murder. After citing the passage leading up to this point, Benjamin writes:

And slowly, cold-bloodedly Lafcadio counts to ten so as thereafter to push out his fellow traveller, groundlessly and only out of curiosity about himself. In the Surrealists Lafcadio has found his most willing pupils. They began like him with a series of “actions gratuites”—groundless or all but idle scandals. But the development that their activity has taken is entirely appropriate to throw light back on the figure of Lafcadio. For more and more they showed themselves eager to reconcile scenes, which had perhaps initially been put into the work by them only playfully, out of curiosity, with the watchwords of the International. (SW 2, 759)

Und langsam, kaltblütig zählt Lafcadio bis zehn, um sodann seinen Reisegefährten hinauszustoßen, grundlos und nur aus Neugier seiner selbst. In den Surrealisten hat Lafcadio seine gelehrigsten Schüler gefunden. Begonnen haben sie wie er mit einer Reihe von »actions gratuites«—grundlosen oder beinah müßigen Skandalen. Die Entwicklung jedoch, die ihre Aktivität genommen hat, ist ganz geeignet, rückwärts auf die Gestalt Lafcadios Licht zu werfen. Denn immer mehr zeigten

sie sich bestrebt, Auftritte, die zunächst vielleicht von ihnen nur spielerisch, aus Neugier ins Werk gesetzt worden waren, mit den Parolen der Internationale in Einklang zu bringen. (GS II, 797)

What separates Benjamin from the Surrealists is the same thing that separates Gide from Lafcadio: there was nothing accidental about the path by which the former in each case arrived at extreme collectivism from extreme individualism. Benjamin, who was Jewish, recognised an affinity with Gide, who was Christian, as early as 1919⁷³. “His Jewish seriousness,” he writes to Ernst Schoen, “addresses me in an affined way [*spricht mich verwandt an*]” (C, 148; GB II, 47). The secular sense of “Jewish” at stake here turns on the absence of playfulness that distinguishes Judaic monotheism from other ancient, polytheistic religions. But this is different from an absence of play. It is the seriousness with which Gide undertakes play that registers in a comment he makes a decade later in conversation with Benjamin: “A large part of our commonplace as of our extraordinary decisions elude traditional moral evaluation. And because this is so, it is necessary first of all to record such cases, precisely, without cowardice and without cynicism [*solche Fälle zunächst einmal aufzunehmen, genau, ohne Feigheit und ohne Zynismus*]” (SW 2, 96; GS IV, 508).

Whatever Gide has written toward the study of these things [...], his detractors would have forgiven him if it included just the small shot of cynicism that reconciles snobs and philistines with everything. What gets on their nerves is not the “immorality,” but the seriousness. (SW 2, 96)

Was immer Gide zum Studium dieser Dinge [...] geschrieben hat, seine Gegner würden es ihm vergeben, wäre darin nur der kleine Schuß von Zynismus, der die Snobs und die Spießherren mit allem aussöhnt. Was ihnen auf die Nerven geht, ist nicht die »Unmoral«, sondern der Ernst. (GS IV, 508)

While it indeed involves play to imagine, for example, the scene in which Lafcadio acts in cold blood on a whim to murder his fellow traveller, to bring the contingencies of traditional morality into so accurate a relief that its historical basis is not just exposed but *primed* for its renovation, demands a recording of play so precise that it requires serious execution. It is by virtue of such a dialectical stance that the extremes were destined to meet not just in Gide’s moral but in his political philosophy as well. For in the face of the rise of

⁷³ In a letter to Ernst Schoen, Benjamin writes:

His Jewish seriousness addresses me in an affined way. And yet the whole appears refracted, as in a turbid medium, in *the material element* of a narrow, Christian-ascetic event in the foreground, which is vitally surmounted a thousand times over by the intention of the interior and thus fundamentally rigid, remaining unalive. (C, 148)

Sein jüdischer Ernst spricht mich verwandt an. Und dann erscheint dennoch das Ganze gebrochen, wie in einem trüben Mittel, im Stofflichen eines engen, christlich-asketischen Geschehens im Vordergrund, welches tausendfach lebendig überragt wird von der Intention des Innern und so im Grunde starr, unlebendig verharrt. (GB II, 47)

fascism in Europe and against the grain of his prior commitment to extreme individualism, Gide came out in 1932 in support of the communist cause. Four years later, after a trip through the Soviet Union organised by its union of writers, Gide published an account of his experience that proved critical of communism in its Stalinist incarnation. *Return from the U.S.S.R* (1936) was not taken well by communists who proceeded to vilify Gide in France. Since he never joined the French Communist Party, he took the form of a particularly easy target, namely as a “fellow traveller”⁷⁴ to be pushed out of communism as unceremoniously as the ugly old man in *The Vatican Cellars* is pushed out of the train by Lafcadio. As a result, Gide distanced himself from the Communist Party. But it was just after Gide first expressed solidarity with communism and before his trip to the Soviet Union that “Toward the Social Standpoint of the French Writer” (1933) was written. Had it been a few years later, Benjamin would no doubt have emphasised more clearly the nonequivalence of communism with its Soviet incarnation.

And if there could still be any doubt about the sense of that extreme individualism under whose sign Gide’s work began, then in the face of his latest avowals it has lost its right. For they express the way in which, by having put it to the test on his environment, this individualism heightened to its extreme had to turn into communism. (SW 2, 759)

Und könnte noch ein Zweifel an dem Sinn jenes extremen Individualismus bestehen, in dessen Zeichen Gides Werk begann, so hat er vor dessen letzten Bekenntnissen sein Recht verloren. Denn sie sprechen aus, auf welche Weise dieser ins Extrem gesteigerte Individualismus, indem er auf seine Umwelt die Probe machte, in den Kommunismus umschlagen mußte. (GS II, 797)

The necessity according to which Benjamin understands this turn is not logical. It is historical. It is by putting his extreme individualism to the test on a *particular social environment* that it *had* to turn into communism. This environment is a politico-economic liberalism characterised by hostility “to any exhibition of radical intellectual freedom” and, by extension, the preclusion of the possibility of extreme individualism (SW 2, 213; GS II, 303). It is the recognition of this preclusion that Benjamin must have taken away from his conversations with Asja Lacis in 1924. For, as he put it that year to Scholem, these conversations resulted in “a vital liberation and an intensive insight into the actuality of a radical communism [*einer vitalen Befreiung und einer intensive Einsicht in die Aktualität eines radikalen Kommunismus*]” (C, 245; GB II, 473). Later that year he clarifies the “communist signals” sent in the previous letter as

⁷⁴ The term was coined by Leon Trotsky to refer to those writers who supported revolution and socialism but were not members of the Communist Party.

primarily indications of a turn that has awakened in me the will not to mask quaintly as before the actual and political moments in my thoughts, but to develop them, and this, as an experiment, extremely. (C, 255)

zuerst Anzeichen einer Wendung, die in mir den Willen erweckt hat, die aktuellen und politischen Momente in meinen Gedanken nicht wie bisher altfränkisch zu maskieren, sondern zu entwickeln, und das, versuchsweise, extrem. (GB II, 511)

To be tested in this experiment is not the extent to which these moments of his thoughts can be developed. Rather, as in Gide, it is the environment in which the experiment takes place that is its subject. This is less a matter of developing “extreme ideas” than occupying a negatory stance toward every “golden mean” to whose uncritical observance the status quo owes its justification. It is in such commitment to the extremes that the affinity of Benjamin and Gide is located, which finds no better expression than this commentary on a remark from their conversation in 1928 that appears in “Toward the Social Standpoint of the French Writer” (1933).

“I went in each direction that I embarked upon to its extremes so as to be able thereafter to turn in the opposite direction with the same resolve.” This fundamental negating of every golden mean, this commitment to the extremes is dialectics, not as method of an intellect, but as vital breath and passion. Even in the extremes the world is still whole, still healthy, still nature. And what drives him to these extremes, this is not curiosity or apologetic zeal, but dialectical passion. (SW 2, 758)

»Ich ging in jeder Richtung die ich einmal einschlug, bis zum Äußersten, um sodann mit derselben Entschiedenheit der entgegengesetzten mich zuwenden zu können.« Dies grundsätzliche Verneinen jeder goldenen Mitte, dies Bekenntnis zu den Extremen ist Dialektik, nicht als Methode eines Intellekts, sondern als Lebensatem und Passion. Die Welt ist auch in den Extremen noch ganz, noch gesund, noch Natur. Und was ihn diesen Extremen zutreibt, das ist nicht Neugier oder apologetischer Eifer, sondern dialektische Leidenschaft. (GS II, 795)

The last two sentences repeat the commentary in “Conversation with André Gide” (1928). But not without a crucial revision. The term “dialectical insight [*Einsicht*]” is replaced by “dialectical passion [*Leidenschaft*]” (SW 2, 96; GS IV, 508). The basis of this revision is the retrospective inauguration the year of his conversation with Gide of the tradition of what in “Surrealism” (1929) Benjamin famously calls “anthropological materialism.” The distinguishing characteristic of this materialism is the bodily nature of the praxis on which its insights are grounded. It is consequently no surprise that the distinction drawn in the passage above between a dialectical method of the intellect and dialectical

passion is not elaborated in direct discursive terms. For such elaboration would then have been grounded in contradiction. But this does not mean that it is not elaborated. It is just that it takes place *mimetically*. If Gide says the following with regard to himself:

“I went in each direction that I embarked upon to its extremes so as thereafter to be able [*bis zum Äußersten, um sodann ... zu können*] to turn in the opposite direction with the same resolve.” (SW 2, 758; GS II, 795)

Then Benjamin writes the following with regard to Lafcadio:

And slowly, cold-bloodedly Lafcadio counts to ten so as thereafter to push out [*bis zehn, um sodann ... hinauszu stoßen*] his fellow traveller, groundlessly and only out of curiosity about himself. (SW 2, 759; GS II, 797)

In each case a limit is approached for the sake of arriving at motivational effect. But whereas the limit to which Lafcadio counts is an arbitrary projection imposed by an intellect to motivate a deed with no ground but solipsistic curiosity, the one at which Gide arrives is first discovered upon arrival. Encountering the extremes of any direction demands giving up method because extremes exceed preconception *by definition*. But dialectics “as vital breath and passion” rather than “as method of an intellect” is not for this reason unphilosophical. Just as anticipating its form rather than exercising the law of its form atrophies philosophy, so too expressing the desire to think some object rather than staging it atrophies writing in general. In each case, projection contaminates what ought to be a discovery; and in each case, it is *bodily* training that provides the necessary purification. Ultimately, the success of any venture to the extremes depends on the *ascetic style* in which “The Good Writer” (1933) has been trained.

It is the gift of the good writer to grant with his style to thinking the spectacle offered by a spirited sinewy body. He never says more than he has thought. Thus his writing benefits not himself but that alone which he wants to say. (SW 2, 724)

Es ist die Gabe des guten Schriftstellers, das Schauspiel, das ein geistvoll durchtrainierter Körper bietet, mit seinem Stil dem Denken zu gewähren. Er sagt nie mehr, als er gedacht hat. So kommt sein Schreiben nicht ihm selber, sondern allein dem, was er sagen will, zugute. (GS IV, 429)

The Expulsion of Metaphor

If in 1924 Benjamin indeed experienced “a vital liberation and an intensive insight into the actuality of a radical communism [*einer vitalen Befreiung und einer intensive Einsicht in die Aktualität eines radikalen Kommunismus*],” then it is crucial to distinguish *this* communism from any communism historically realised or theorised by anyone else (C, 245; GB II, 473). What makes it radical is its transformation of the Marxist concept of classless society from “the final goal of progress within history” to “its so often miscarried, at last accomplished interruption [*so oft mißglückte, endlich bewerkstelligte Unterbrechung*]” (SW 4, 402; GS I, 1231). This interruption takes place at the end of time *in strictly intensive terms*, which, of course, is why Benjamin specifies his insight as “intensive.” The world that such an interruption of time unlocks is what, in a note associated with “On the Concept of History” (1940), Benjamin calls “the messianic world” (SW 4, 404; GS I, 1235). This world is messianic not because it is the world from which the Messiah will come, but because admission to it coincides with what will have been revealed to be a *messianic action*.

Its genuine messianic face must be restored to the concept of the classless society, and this in the interests of the revolutionary politics of the proletariat itself (SW 4, 403)

Dem Begriff der klassenlosen Gesellschaft muß sein echtes messianisches Gesicht wiedergegeben werden, und zwar im Interesse der revolutionären Politik des Proletariats selbst. (GS I, 1232).

Such a face belongs to this concept because the strictly provisional accomplishment of this interruption by purified reality coincides with a bodily praxis that unlocks “the world of all-sided and integral actuality [*die allseitiger und integraler Aktualität*]” (SW 4, 404; GS I, 1235). This actuality—which strictly coincides with praxis—is “all-sided” and “integral” because within it time is concretised and condensed in that provisional completion of history presupposed by monadic experience. The intensive insight by Benjamin is accompanied by a “vital liberation [*vitalen Befreiung*]” because the reciprocal renovation of dialectical materialism and his linguistico-philosophical standpoint that it involves brings classless society back to earth from its elevation to an ideal in social democratic political philosophy (C, 245; GB II, 473). It does this by exploiting the conceptual resources of theological lore out of which philosophy developed, resources that, if left untapped, tend not to fade away, but to manifest in falsely secularised form. The idealist conception of classless society is a case in point. For it is, of course, just the naïve concept of heaven by another name. Benjamin refused to gratuitously constrain thought by theoretical contradictions such as those between theology and materialism, which are to be resolved in dialectical praxis. What

ultimately capacitated the “vital liberation” of 1924 was the *transformative power of the immersion in the medium of tradition* on the part of Benjamin himself. In other words: his philosophical practice was still informed by the basic understanding of education (*Erziehung*), which he articulates in a letter to Scholem from 1917 in the following terms.

I am convinced: tradition is the medium in which the one learning *continually* transforms himself into the one teaching and this in the whole range of education. In tradition all are educating and to be educated and everything is education. These relationships are symbolised and integrated in the development of lore. Whoever has not learned cannot educate because he does not see at which point he is alone, where he therefore encompasses tradition in his own way and teaching, makes it communicable. Whoever has grasped his knowledge as bequeathed knowledge in which it is alone bequeathable, he will be free in an unheard of way. (C, 94)

Ich bin überzeugt: die Tradition ist das Medium in dem sich kontinuierlich der Lernende in den Lehrenden verwandelt und das im ganzen Umfang der Erziehung. In der Tradition sind all Erziehende und zu Erziehende und alles ist Erziehung. Symbolisiert und zusammengefaßt werden diese Verhältnisse in der Entwicklung der Lehre. Wer nicht gelernt hat kann nicht erziehen denn er sieht nicht an welcher Stelle er einsam ist, wo er also auf seine Weise die Tradition umfaßt und lehrend mitteilbar macht. Wer sein Wissen als überliefertes begriffen hat in dem allein wird es überlieferbar, er wird in unerhörter Weise frei. (GB I, 382)

The problem of making tradition instructively communicable orients Benjamin’s philosophical practice from early to late. The fact that he predicated its possibility on encompassing tradition in his *own* way means that one should not expect to find in his thought any aspects of tradition that are not radically transformed. Since it was Scholem himself to which these lines were addressed, it was with total disbelief that Benjamin read the following question put to him in a letter from 1934. “Is this,” asks Scholem with regard to “Toward the Social Standpoint of the French Writer” (1933), “supposed to be a communist credo [*Soll das ein kommunistisches Credo sein?*]” (C, 439; GB IV, 407). Benjamin’s response is lengthy, but its core is the exasperated question of whether he *really* has to tell an old friend who should by then have been intimately familiar with his style of the name that “of all possible forms and modes of expression the least appropriated by [his] communism is that of a credo” (C, 439; GB IV, 409). If the transformation of Benjamin’s own “extreme contemplative stance into revolutionary opposition [*extrem kontemplative Haltung*]” was primed in 1924 by a vital liberation and an intensive insight, then the rejection of *Origin of the German Mourning Play* (1925) by the scientific establishment the following year resolved his conviction (SW 2, 213; GS II, 303). Crucially, in the case of both Surrealism and Benjamin himself, it is not just its *extremity* but its status as a “stance”

(*Haltung*) that capacitated this transformation. For no such revolutionary transformation is possible for “that mindset [*Denkart*] prevalent in the so-called well-meaning left-wing bourgeois intelligentsia,” which constitutes not a stance, but a sentiment (*Gesinnung*) (SW 2, 213; GS II, 304).

The characteristic feature of this entire left-wing bourgeois position is its incurable coupling of idealist morality with political praxis. Only in contrast to the helpless compromises of “sentiment” are certain core elements of surrealism, indeed the surrealist tradition to be understood. [...] Where do the conditions of revolution lie? In the alteration of sentiment or of external circumstances? This is the cardinal question that determines the affair between politics and morality and which allows no cover-up. Surrealism has come ever closer to its communist answer. And this means: pessimism all along the line. Yes indeed and absolutely. Mistrust in the fate of literature, mistrust in the fate of freedom, mistrust in the fate of European humanity, but above all mistrust, mistrust and mistrust in all understanding: between classes, between peoples, between individuals. (SW 2, 214, 216)

Das Charakteristische dieser ganzen linksbürgerlichen Position ist ihre unheilbare Verkuppelung von idealistischer Moral mit politischer Praxis. Nur im Kontrast gegen die hilflosen Kompromisse der »Gesinnung« sind gewisse Kernstücke des Surrealismus, ja der surrealistischen Tradition, zu verstehen. [...] Wo liegen die Voraussetzungen der Revolution? In der Änderung der Gesinnung oder der äußeren Verhältnisse? Das ist die Kardinalfrage, die das Verhältnis von Politik und Moral bestimmt und die keine Vertuschung zuläßt. Der Surrealismus ist ihrer kommunistischen Beantwortung immer näher gekommen. Und das bedeutet: Pessimismus auf der ganzen Linie. Jawohl und durchaus. Mißtrauen in das Geschick der Literatur, Mißtrauen in das Geschick der Freiheit, Mißtrauen in das Geschick der europäischen Menschheit, vor allem aber Mißtrauen, Mißtrauen und Mißtrauen in alle Verständigung: zwischen den Klassen, zwischen den Völkern, zwischen den Einzelnen. (GS II, 304, 308)

It is in the alteration of external circumstances that communism locates the conditions of revolution because they tend to develop in such a way that safeguards existing relations of production. If revolution depends on actively counteracting this tendency, then the “extreme contemplative stance” of Surrealism—namely, absolute pessimism with regard to the project of European humanism—was never far from the “revolutionary opposition” into which it eventually developed (SW 2, 213; GS II, 303). No such dialectical kernel is to be found in left-wing bourgeois sentiment by virtue of the idealist morality that determines what is for this reason ultimately a counterrevolutionary position. A revolutionary stance recognises morality itself as a product of an education whose control by the bourgeoisie tends to manifest in a way that protects its interests. What must therefore be confronted with a stance of absolute pessimism by anyone concerned with the interests of the proletariat *is the traditional sense of the terms in which this education takes place*. One such term that calls

for reengineering is *Haltung*. The logic behind the operation is best revealed in the passage from “The Author as Producer” (1934) where Benjamin writes that

the proletarianisation of the intellectual almost never makes a proletarian. Why? Because the bourgeois class gave to him in the form of education a means of production that makes him, due to educational privilege, in solidarity with it, and still more it with him. It is therefore perfectly correct when Aragon [...] declared: “The revolutionary intellectual appears first and foremost as a traitor to his original class.” In the writer, this betrayal consists in a behaviour that transforms him from a supplier of the production apparatus into an engineer who sees it as his task to adapt this apparatus to the goals of the proletarian revolution. (SW 2, 780)

die Proletarisierung des Intellektuellen fast niemals einen Proletarier macht. Warum? Weil ihm die Bürgerklasse in Gestalt der Bildung ein Produktionsmittel mitgab, das ihn aufgrund des Bildungsprivilegs mit ihr, und noch mehr sie mit ihm, solidarisch macht. Es ist daher vollkommen richtig, wenn Aragon [...] erklärt hat: »Der revolutionäre Intellektuelle erscheint zunächst und vor allem als Verräter an seiner Ursprungs-klasse.« Dieser Verrat besteht, beim Schriftsteller, in einem Verhalten, das ihn aus einem Belieferer des Produktionsapparates zu einem Ingenieur macht, der seine Aufgabe darin erblickt, diesen den Zwecken der proletarischen Revolution anzupassen. (GS II, 700-701)

The production apparatus of education is above all language. The “mediating activity [vermittelnde Wirksamkeit]” of the revolutionary intellectual consists in reengineering its terms to rid them of the idealist bourgeois morality that informs their sense (SW 2, 780; GS II, 701). But the task is not a matter of projecting a different sense onto these terms, but of reading a materialist sense out from the terms themselves. The distinction between *Gesinnung* and *Haltung* is a case in point. In the latter appears the word *Halt*, which like its English cognate is a call to stop abruptly.⁷⁵ In the former appears the word *Sinn* (“sense”), precisely that idealist abstraction stopped by an extreme contemplative stance in whose practice image and language take materialist precedence over the idealist concepts of sense and ego. It is of this precedence, which characterised Surrealist writing in the early-1920s, that Benjamin takes particular note.

⁷⁵ This is noted by Rainer Nägele: “Benjamin reads it as interruption of a movement, in the same way that Brecht’s “*Halt!*” marks the very beginning of the play *Die Maßnahme* with an interruption in order to get it going” (p. 143). But his suggestion to translate this term “strongly invested with military connotations” and which represents “a force other than psychological motivations” as “posture” or “attitude” is less felicitous than “stance,” as the first remains too lax, the second too psychological (p. 142, 140). See: Rainer Nägele, *Theater, Theory, Speculation: Walter Benjamin and the Scenes of Modernity*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1991.

Life seemed worth living only where the threshold between waking and sleeping was in each case worn through as by footsteps of images periodically flooding en masse, language itself only where sound and image and image and sound meshed with automatic precision so fortunately that no further gap for the penny “sense” remained. Image and language take precedence. [...] Not only before sense. Also before the I. In the fabric of the world the dream loosens individuality like a hollow tooth. This loosening of the I by intoxication is at the same time precisely the fruitful, living experience that allowed these people to emerge from the spell of intoxication. (SW 2, 208)

Das Leben schien nur lebenswert, wo die Schwelle, die zwischen Wachen und Schlaf ist, in jedem ausgetreten war, wie von Tritten massenhafter hin und wi[e]der flutender Bilder, die Sprache nur sie selbst, wo Laut und Bild und Bild und Laut mit automatischer Exaktheit derart glücklich ineinandergriffen, daß für den Groschen »Sinn« kein Spalt mehr übrigblieb. Bild und Sprache haben den Vortritt. [...] Nicht nur vor dem Sinn. Auch vor dem Ich. Im Weltgefüge lockert der Traum die Individualität wie einen hohlen Zahn. Diese Lockerung des Ich durch den Rausch ist eben zugleich die fruchtbare, lebendige Erfahrung, die diese Menschen aus dem Bannkreis des Rausches heraustreten ließ. (GS II, 296-297)

As becomes clearer later when Benjamin refers to “ourselves [*uns selber*]” as “that most terrible drug ... that we take in solitude,” material experience of a loosened individuality in the intoxicated has the power to dislodge the idealist faith in a transcendental subject (SW 2, 216; GS II, 308). It is from the spell of such idealism that people may emerge through the “fruitful, living experience” of intoxication. Such is the dialectical moment contained in intoxicated states. Its recognition is the basis of the concept of “*profane illumination*, a materialist, anthropological inspiration for which hashish, opium and whatever else can provide the preschool” (SW 2, 209; GS II, 297). But it is how the priority granted image and language in Surrealist writing is framed four years later in “Toward the Social Standpoint of the French Writer” (1933) that most clearly reveals his identification with the dialectic according to which the development of Surrealism took place. After repeating the first sentence of the passage above almost verbatim,⁷⁶ Benjamin writes:

“To win for revolution the forces of intoxication”—that was the real undertaking. The dialectical development of the movement took place, however, in the fact that that image-space which had been so daringly opened by it proved itself more and more identical with that of political praxis. In any case, it is into this space that the members of the group relocated the home of a classless society. It may be that the promise of such a society spoke to them less from the didactic materialism of a Plekhanov and Bukharin than from an anthropological materialism as their own experiences and the earlier ones of Lautreamont and Rimbaud contained it. Be that as it may,—this world of thought

⁷⁶ The word *Groschen* (“penny”) is omitted.

prescribed the laws to the action and production of the group, which was at that time lead by Breton and Aragon, until political development allowed them to be formulated more simply and concretely. (SW 2, 759-760)

»Die Kräfte des Rausches für die Revolution zu gewinnen«—das war das eigentliche Unternehmen. Die dialektische Entwicklung der Bewegung aber vollzog sich nun darin, daß jener Bildraum, welchen sie sich auf so gewagte Weise erschlossen hatte, sich mehr und mehr mit dem der politischen Praxis identisch erwies. In diesen Raum verlegten jedenfalls die Angehörigen der Gruppe die Heimat einer klassenlosen Gesellschaft. Mag sein, daß die Verheißung einer solchen Gesellschaft ihnen weniger aus dem didaktischen Materialismus eines Plechanow und Bucharin gesprochen hat als aus einem anthropologischen, wie ihre eigenen Erfahrungen und frühere Lautreamonts und Rimbauds ihn enthielten. Wie dem auch sei,—diese Gedankenwelt schrieb der Aktion und Produktion der Gruppe, welche damals von Breton und Aragon geleitet wurde, die Gesetze vor, bis die politische Entwicklung ihr gestattete, sich einfacher, konkreter zu formulieren. (GS II, 798)

Likewise in the case of Benjamin it was ultimately political development that allowed the laws of his production to be formulated more simply and concretely. The nature of this development has already been sketched. It comprises not just political events, but the consequences of “the hostility of the bourgeoisie to any exhibition of radical intellectual freedom” (SW 2, 213; GS II, 303). These consequences manifest as the divestment of the means of production from Benjamin to whom communism thereafter appears as “the obvious, reasonable attempt [...] to proclaim in his thinking as in his life the right to them” (C, 439; GB IV, 409). It is the currency of the language of communism that simplifies and concretises the laws of his production. The outmoded concept of the paradisiacal state is substituted by the structurally homologous concept of classless society, but not without a renovation of the latter on the basis of the former. Just as the paradisiacal state is not to be conceived as some prelapsarian actuality of language in general but as its interruption by the purified reality of linguistic being, so too “classless society is not to be conceived as the endpoint of an historical development” but as the interruption of history by a purified reality (SW 4, 402; GS I, 1232). It is the experience of such interruption that Benjamin imputes to the Surrealists. But if the promise of a classless society that spoke to them is “an anthropological materialism as their own experiences and the earlier ones of Lautreamont and Rimbaud contained [*enthielten*] it,” then these experiences are not the private ones undergone in the lifetimes of these figures. Rather, they are those experiences of which their respective writings are the mediums. For how else would they have been available as the containers of the materialism in question?

The tradition of anthropological materialism that Benjamin retrospectively inaugurates proves itself in those experiential contexts in which linguistic being is alone distinguishable.

This being is not a *what* but a *how*. It is a style. More precisely, it is a style that interrupts. The object of this style of interruption is idealist projection. It shatters ideas such as ego, linear temporality, and above all sense, which contingently organise experience and determine the bounds of apparent possibility. What distinguishes such materialism from “the didactic materialism of a Plekhanov or Bukharin” is its orientation toward material staging by effectuation of praxis instead of imparting what would otherwise be just a *theory* of materialism lacking its own material grounding. It is on account of this lack that such materialism is to be termed “metaphysical” (SW 2, 217; GS II, 309). Its presentation is designed according to a conception of language as a means for communicating ideas from one ego to another within a sphere of contemplation secured by the conventional dictates of sense. The conception of language operative in anthropological materialism, by contrast, is that of a medium in which experience irreducible to contemplation is first staged for writer and reader alike. Grounded in the experience of that “image-space” to which the style of “a Hebel, Georg Büchner, Nietzsche, or Rimbaud” grants access, this is a genuine materialism because it exists *as praxis from the start* (SW 2, 217; GS II, 309-10).

The term “image-space” (*Bildraum*) refers to the nondiscursive space of the messianic world, which is closed to contemplation on account of the bodily passivity that characterises the contemplative mode of thinking. Far from an idealist concept, image-space is indissociable from the “body-space” (*Leibraum*) on whose manipulation its experience will always depend. This intertwined space is

in a word, the space in which political materialism and the physical creature share with each other the inner man, the psyche, the individual, or whatever we want to throw at them, according to dialectical justice so that to him no limb remains untorn. But still—indeed precisely after such dialectical annihilation—this space will still be image-space, and more concretely: body-space. (SW 2, 217)

der Raum mit einem Wort, in welchem der politische Materialismus und die physische Kreatur den inneren Menschen, die Psyche, das Individuum oder was sonst wir ihnen vorwerfen wollen, nach dialektischer Gerechtigkeit, so daß kein Glied ihm unzerrissen bleibt, miteinander teilen. Dennoch aber—ja gerade nach solch dialektischer Vernichtung—wird dieser Raum noch Bildraum, und konkreter: Leibraum sein. (GS II, 309)

It is the continual correspondence of image-space and body-space that explains why “that image-space which had been so daringly opened by [Surrealism] proved itself more and more identical with that of political praxis” (SW 2, 760; GS II, 798). The latter, in turn, explains why the “image-space” into which anthropological materialism relocates classless society is synonymous with what Benjamin calls “the messianic world” (SW 4, 404; GS I,

1235). The praxis that grants access to this world is ultimately rooted in a stance of absolute pessimism with regard to external circumstances in recognition of their tendency to develop in support of the current relations of production. But what transforms this extreme contemplative stance into revolutionary opposition is the organisation of this pessimism. “Organising pessimism means nothing other than expelling moral metaphor from politics and discovering in the space of political action the hundred percent image-space” (SW 2, 217; GS II, 309). In other words: the discovery of the redemptive image coincides with the expulsion of metaphor from politics.

Metaphor is on the side of sentiment (*Gesinnung*). It is a traditional framework projected onto the world whose survival within tradition attests to its conformance to the morality in line with which education shapes the linguistic status quo. The image is on the side of stance (*Haltung*). It is discovered each time anew as a style of interruption.⁷⁷ The reason that “nowhere do these two—metaphor and image—clash [*treffen ... aufeinander*] so drastically and so irreconcilably as in politics” is that here metaphor is nothing but a cover-up for its affair with morality (SW 2, 217; GS II, 309). The image, by contrast, constitutes no cover-up. A trace of freedom from this affair is, on the contrary, to be discovered in the image. For its style of interruption constitutes an *index of redemption*.

[W]hat is the programme of the bourgeois parties? A bad springtime poem. Filled to bursting with metaphors. The socialist sees that “finer future of our children and grandchildren” in the fact that all act “as if they were angels” and each has as much “as if he were rich” and each lives “as if he were free.” Of angels, wealth, freedom no trace. All only images. And the treasure trove of images of this social-democratic poets association? Its *Gradus ad Parnassum*? Optimism. But one traces another air there in the document by Naville that makes the “organisation of pessimism” the order of the day. (SW 2, 216)

[W]as ist das Programm der bürgerlichen Parteien? Ein schlechtes Frühlingsgedicht. Mit Vergleichen bis zum Platzen gefüllt. Der Sozialist sieht jene »schönere Zukunft unserer Kinder und Enkel« darin, daß alle handeln, »als wären sie Engel« und jeder so viel hat, »als wäre er reich« und jeder so lebt, »als wäre er frei«. Von Engeln, Reichtum, Freiheit keine Spur. Alles nur Bilder. Und

⁷⁷ Benjamin connects the distinction between metaphor and image to “a felicitous insight into questions of style” by Louis Aragon (SW 2, 217; GS II, 309). Curiously, he refrains from specifying which insight in *Treatise on Style* (1928) he has in mind. It is likely that concerning the cataclysmic nature of the image. The passage in which it appears begins with the claim that humour is “the sine qua non of poetry” (p. 69). Literary images are then identified as “the vehicles of humour” on the one hand, and humour as “what gives an image its force” on the other (*Ibid.*). To this “proportional reciprocity” corresponds the following corollary: unlike metaphor, the image does not outlast the moment of its humorousness, which “is assigned to an image only for a short time” (*Ibid.*)□ The “catapultic language” of poetry in which “every image should produce a cataclysm□” is thus distinguished from “tired-out metaphors” on the basis that it interrupts those patterns of thinking in terms of which the latter grasp the world (*ibid.*). See: Louis Aragon, *Treatise on Style*, trans. Alyson Waters. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1991.

der Bilderschatz dieser sozialdemokratischen Vereinsdichter? Ihre »Gradus ad parnassum«? Der Optimismus. Da spürt man denn doch andere Luft in der Schrift von Naville, die die »Organisierung des Pessimismus« zur Forderung des Tages macht. (GS II, 308)

The noncontemplative, bodily nature of its gauging is registered by the echo in the words *Spur* (“trace”) and *spürt* (“traces”) which, however, fails to sound in the published translation.⁷⁸ While there is presently no trace of the freedom promised in the metaphors of bourgeois political programmes, another air is there to be traced in a document “that makes the ‘organisation of pessimism’ the order of the day.” For this air blows in from paradise for the reason that it concerns itself not with promises for the future, but with organising *against the present*. Only on the basis of present praxis do those images that, as Benjamin puts it in *The Arcades Project* (1940), are “synchronistic” with every present become recognisable; only in these acts does “the death of *intentio*” coincide “with the birth of genuine historical time, the time of truth” (AP, 463; GS V, 577). It is this same paradisiacal air that Benjamin traces in those writings of anthropological materialism that constitute mediums for the experience of image-space. It is obvious that this tradition includes not just the writers Benjamin mentions—Johann Hebel, Georg Büchner, Isidore-Lucien Ducasse, Arthur Rimbaud, Friedrich Nietzsche, and the Surrealists—but himself too. The question is: where does Karl Marx stand in relation to this tradition? The passage in which “Surrealism” (1929) culminates provides a partial answer to this question. For it implicitly includes the authors of the most famous programme for the organisation of pessimism in the tradition of a materialism grounded in symbolic praxis rather than allegorical contemplation.

Only when in [profane illumination] body- and image-space interpenetrate so deeply that all revolutionary tension becomes bodily collective innervation, and all bodily innervations of the collective become revolutionary discharge, has actuality surpassed itself as much as the communist manifesto demands. (SW 2, 217)

Erst wenn in [profane Erleuchtung] sich Leib und Bildraum so tief durchdringen, daß alle revolutionäre Spannung leibliche kollektive Innervation, alle leiblichen Innervationen des Kollektivs revolutionäre Entladung werden, hat die Wirklichkeit so sehr sich selbst übertroffen, wie das kommunistische Manifest es fordert. (GS II, 310)

⁷⁸ The verb *spüren* (“to feel,” “to sense”) primarily refers to acts of bodily sensation. But in the language of hunters it has a more specific sense based on its etymological meaning, namely “to follow a trace” (*Duden*). This nuance is overlooked by the published translation in which this echo fails to sound: “Of angels, wealth, freedom, not a trace.... A very different air is *breathed* in the Naville essay...” (SW 2, 216; emphasis added).

This passage proves mistaken the claim by Peter Osborne that the opening fragment of *One-Way Street* “is the closest thing to a reading of the *Manifesto* left to us by Benjamin.”⁷⁹ For a reading of this text is precisely that on which this passage turns. If the demand that actuality surpass itself is here ascribed to the *Manifesto*, how the latter issues this demand is left unspecified. Less discursive than imagistic, this demand is not so much stated as staged by the language of this “extraordinary literary achievement.”⁸⁰ While locating the source of the power of the *Manifesto* in “its ability to present a historical argument imagistically”⁸¹ comes close to this insight, presenting this ability as what allows the *Manifesto* “to produce a structure of experience within the reader *equivalent* to the experience of history itself”⁸² degrades image to metaphor and confounds praxis with theory. At stake in written praxis is not a will to action, but action itself. Hence, if a manifesto is indeed “primarily a performance,” it uses language not “to enact a will to realise a particular future,” but to enact a particular *present* regardless of the will of the actor; and if the present tense is indeed characteristic of this literary form, it is used not so that “what is desired is presented *as if* it were already the case, in order that it might become so,” but so that it is presented *as already the case* so as to initiate the re-habitation *now* on which a different future would depend.⁸³

⁷⁹ Peter Osborne, *How to Read Marx*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2005, p. 87.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 85

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

⁸² *Ibid.*; emphasis added

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 88. One such habit to be reengineered is that of confounding image and metaphor. The extent of its entrenchment is registered by the “like” (*wie*) that slips into the interpretation of the conclusion of “Surrealism” (1929) by the critic who has otherwise done most justice to the image in Benjamin, namely Sigrid Weigel.

“This image in Benjamin’s text on Surrealism—which in its style mimetically reenacts the transformation attested therein of surrealist revolt into a revolution so as finally to erupt in a steadily increasing acceleration *like* in an uninterrupted striking of an alarm clock—appears in the same moment in which, with the end of the essay, the movement of the text comes to an abrupt standstill.” (p. 14)

“*Dieses Bild in Benjamins Text über den Surrealismus, der in seiner Schreibweise die darin beschworene Transformation der surrealistischen Revolte in eine Revolution mimetisch nachvollzieht, um schließlich in einer stetig sich steigenden Beschleunigung wie in einem ununterbrochenen Wecker-Anschlag zu explodieren, erscheint im selben Moment, in dem mit dem Ende des Essays die Textbewegung abrupt zu einem Stillstand kommt.*” (p. 114)

The acceleration in which the essay finally erupts is not *equivalent* to the uninterrupted striking of an alarm clock. This would be a metaphor. The eruption *is* the image, and the image *itself* sounds the alarm. Although Weigel emphasises the collapsing of space and time at stake in this “embodied image that rings in the loss of time [*ein leibhaftiges Bild, das den Ausfall der Zeit einläutet*]” and which “keeps on at the subject as it were [*dem Subjekt gleichsam auf den Leib gerückt*],” these two forms remain propped up in her account by metaphorical language such as *gleichsam* (“as it were”) and *wie* (“like”) (p. 15; p. 115). This language reinstates the boundary “between the organic and the mechanical” which, as she notes, is eliminated by the image of facial exchange between clock and man with which the essay breaks off (*ibid.*). The gap through which metaphor reenters her pioneering study of Benjamin’s theoretical style is in the understanding that his style “mimetically reenacts” (*mimetisch nachvollzieht*) its object. The inaccuracy of this characterisation has already been determined: it presupposes the prior existence of what is imitated, which implies it is to be evaluated according to a correspondence theory of truth. See: Sigrid Weigel, *Body- and Image-Space*, *op. cit.*; Sigrid Weigel, *Entstellte Ähnlichkeit*, *op. cit.* Here is the relevant passage from “Surrealism” (1929).

Above all, the object of such writing is the sentiment of its readers. But it is concerned less with supplanting this sentiment with another, than with reengineering it to form a stance.

The Medium of Stance

Unlike a change of sentiment, there is nothing necessarily conscious about the adoption of stance. It is the possible unconsciousness of stance that renders irrelevant the criticism by Scholem that in his creative process Benjamin had “evidently [*evidentermaßen*] never and in no case adopted [*eingegenommen*]” the stance of the materialist (C, 375; GB IV, 29). Sentiment, it is true, involves such evident and conscious adoption. But as Benjamin insists in a letter to Adorno from 1940 stance is not

in all cases “paraded” or “adopted.” It can however absolutely be found as unconscious without thereby being any less of a stance. [...] In short: stance, as I understand it, differs from the one you denounce just as the brand differs from the tattoo. (C, 632-33)

in allen Fällen »zur Schau getragen« oder »eingegenommen«. Sie kann aber durchaus als unbewußte vorgefunden werden ohne darum weniger Haltung zu sein. [...] Kurz: Haltung, wie ich sie verstehe, unterscheidet sich von der, die Sie denunzieren, so wie das Brandmal von der Tätowierung. (GS VI, 451)

The stance Adorno denounces is what Benjamin terms “sentiment.” Sentiment is to stance as the tattoo is to the brand (*Brandmal*)—a comparison in accordance with the distinction between “absolute sign” and mark (*Mal*) developed some two decades earlier in the immediately metaphysical study “On Painting, or Sign and Mark” (1917).⁸⁴ The

“The collective is also bodily. And the *physis* that organises itself to it in technology is to be produced according to its total political and objective actuality only in that image-space in which profane illumination makes us at home. Only when in [profane illumination] body- and image-space interpenetrate so deeply that all revolutionary tension becomes bodily collective innervation and all bodily innervations of the collective become revolutionary discharge has actuality surpassed itself as much as the communist manifesto demands it. For the moment the Surrealists are the only ones who have grasped its contemporary command. They give, man after man, their facial expression in exchange for the dial of an alarm clock that every minute strikes sixty seconds long.” (SW 2, 217)

“Auch das Kollektivum ist leibhaft. Und die Physis, die sich in der Technik ihm organisiert, ist nach ihrer ganzen politischen und sachlichen Wirklichkeit nur in jenem Bildraume zu erzeugen, in welchem die profane Erleuchtung uns heimisch macht. Erst wenn in ihr sich Leib und Bildraum so tief durchdringen, daß alle revolutionäre Spannung leibliche kollektive Innervation, alle leiblichen Innervationen des Kollektivs revolutionäre Entladung werden, hat die Wirklichkeit so sehr sich selbst übertroffen, wie das kommunistische Manifest es fordert. Für den Augenblick sind die Surrealisten die einzigen, die seine heutige Order begriffen haben. Sie geben, Mann für Mann, ihr Mienenspiel in Tausch gegen das Zifferblatt eines Weckers, der jede Minute sechzig Sekunden lang anschlägt.” (GS II, 309-310)

⁸⁴ Rainer Nägele interprets this simile in terms of the difference between “a wilful marking of the skin that shows off a claim to individuality” and a mark that “is burnt into the skin by another force” and

adjective “absolute” specifies that at stake here is “the mythological essence (*Wesen*) of the sign” and not its everyday sense (SW 1, 84; GS II, 604). Two examples of the absolute sign from Abrahamic mythology are the sign of Cain and “the sign with which in the Tenth Plague in Egypt the houses of the Israelites were designated” (*Ibid.*). These examples indicate that the sign is imprinted (*aufgedrückt*), and it appears on animate and inanimate things alike. The mark is different. As the examples of the blush (*Erröten*) and stigmata of Christ (*Wundmale Christi*) reveal, the mark “emerges [*hervortritt*],” and “principally appears in the living [*am Lebendigen*]” (SW 1, 84; GS II, 605).⁸⁵ Whereas the sign of Cain both characterises this person and constitutes a warning to other people, the blush runs in a contrariwise direction, which is specified most clearly in the untranslated note “On Shame” (c. 1919).

The blush rises not from the interior up [...]; rather it douses the one ashamed from outside, from above, and extinguishes within him the disgrace and at the same time withdraws him from the desecrators. For in that dark redness with which shame douses him it withdraws him as if under a veil from the gazes of people. He who is ashamed sees nothing, only he is also not seen.

Die Schamröte steigt nicht aus dem Innern hoch [...], sondern von außen von oben her übergießt sie den Beschämten und löscht in ihm die Schande und entzieht ihn zugleich den Schändern. Denn in jener dunklen Röte, mit der die Scham ihn übergießt, entzieht sie ihn wie unter einem Schleier den Blicken der Menschen. Wer sich schämt der sieht nichts, allein auch er wird nicht gesehen. (GS VI, 69-70)

That the blush rises not from the interior of the person does not mean that it is after all imprinted like the sign. Although it douses the one ashamed from without, it does not manifest as an imprinted sign of guilt. The source of shame is not a wrongful act but its judgement as such by man, which, of course, is itself a shameful act because such judgement is reserved for God alone. It is for this reason that the people who gaze at the one ashamed are themselves to be understood as the desecrators (*den Schändern*). It is from their gazes as well as from his own that the blush withdraws the one it douses so as to extinguish within him the relevant disgrace. Unlike a sign, the mark of the blush does not characterise the person blushing, but precisely expels the personal. As Benjamin puts it in “On Painting, or

which “has the authority of the seal” (p. 150). But to describe the brand as “a metonymic reminiscence of burnt offerings,” which “is still invested with the traces of the sacred” is contradictory (*Ibid.*). Sacrifice is as wilful as this understanding of the tattoo: it is performed to find favour with the divine. By reading the brand (*Brandmal*) metonymically, Nägele spatialises this mark (*Mal*) and thereby obscures its difference from the tattoo, which is a sign. See: Rainer Nägele, *op. cit.*

⁸⁵ It is no accident that these examples mix the mythological (stigmata) and the everyday (blush). For “[t]he contrast between mark and absolute mark does not exist because the mark is always absolute, and in appearing is similar to nothing else” (SW 1, 84; GS II, 605).

Sign and Mark,” what “emerges quite shockingly in the blush” is that to the medium of the mark belongs “a meaning of dissolving personality into certain primal elements [*eine die Persönlichkeit in gewisse Urelemente auflösende {Bedeutung}*]” (SW 1, 84; GS II, 605). To this dissolving meaning of the medium of the mark is to be added a temporal meaning, which concerns the part it plays not in the designation of guilt like the sign of Cain, but in atonement.

Quite striking is how, in accordance with its occurrence in the living, the mark is so often connected to guilt (blush) and innocence (stigmata of Christ). [...] Since the interconnection between guilt and atonement is a temporal magical connection, this *temporal* magic appears especially in the mark in the sense that the resistance of the present between the past and the future is disabled and the latter, united in a magical way, befall the sinner. (SW 1, 84)

Ganz auffallend ist wie das Mal gemäß seinem Auftreten am Lebendigen so oft mit Schuld (Erröten) bzw. Unschuld (Wundmale Christi) verbunden ist. [...] Insofern der Zusammenhang von Schuld und Sühne ein zeitlich magischer ist, erscheint vorzüglich diese zeitliche Magie im Mal in dem Sinne, daß der Widerstand der Gegenwart zwischen Vergangenheit und Zukunft ausgeschaltet wird und diese auf magische Weise vereint über den Sünder hereinbrechen. (GS II, 605)

The mark allows the resistance of the present, which prevents the unification of past and future, to be disabled so that the act of atonement may befall the sinner. This logic is isomorphic to that in terms of which—eight years later, in the prologue to the *Trauerspiel* book (1925)—Benjamin conceives the paradisiacal state of language. The reinstatement of the symbolic character of language coincides with the disabling of intention in the medium of the name. Since “the symbol, which is a mystery, can only be thought basically [*sich .. beruhend denken läßt*] in an act from the living force that fulfils,” namely God, it is a *divine linguistic act* that unifies symbolising and symbolised in the paradisiacal state (SW 1, 267; GS VI, 18). Such thinking for which God is the “quintessence and primal ground [*Inbegriff und Urgrund*]” of “the absolute divine context of order [*absoluten göttlichen Ordnungszusammenhang*]” is immediately metaphysical (C, 112; GB I, 422). But it is crucial to observe that neither of the texts from which these last two citations derive were intended for publication. The first is a private note, the second a letter to a friend. Nowhere in his published writing does such thinking appear unmediated by the style of writing Benjamin terms “contemplative presentation [*kontemplative Darstellung*]” (O, 29; GS I, 209). This style constitutes a manipulation of the body-space of writing designed to awaken the mimetic faculty of its reader so as to instigate that stance on which the effectuation of the praxis that grants access to image-space depends. For just as in his conceptions of atonement and the paradisiacal state, so too in his conception of classless society a redemptive

interruption of profanity is predicated on a messianic act in which a resistance to unification is disabled in a medium.⁸⁶ As its comparison to the brand indicates, this medium is stance. What distinguishes stance from blush is its coincidence with the human body as a whole that is more an active response to a stimulation of the mimetic faculty than a passive response to shame. And what distinguishes it from the name is that it is not the object of a mimesis, but the medium in which the praxis that reveals such objects is based. Stance provides a materialist, anthropological grounding to its capacitation of singular experience. The *profane* messianic action whereby image-space and political praxis unify in an experience of a classless society depends on disabling contemplation in the medium provided by a stance of organised pessimism.

Similitude and the Name

In the same letter from 1925 in which Benjamin tells Scholem that his request for *Habilitation* had been denied, he announces his acceptance of a commission to translate *Sodome et Gomorrhe* (“Sodom and Gomorrah”), the fourth volume of *À la recherche du temps perdu* (“In Search of Lost Time”) by Marcel Proust. His interest in the task, he says, is based on “how close to me is [Proust’s] philosophical approach [*Betrachtungsweise*]” (C, 278; GB III, 63).

I felt something strongly affirmed whenever I read some of his things. I am curious about whether this will now be confirmed in an intimate confrontation. (C, 278)

Ich fühlte sehr Verwandtes, sooft ich von seinen Sachen etwas las. Wie das nun bei einer intimen Auseinandersetzung sich bewähren wird, darauf bin ich gespannt. (GB III, 63)

The project soon grew to include the second volume *À l'ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs* (“In the Shadow of Young Girls in Flower”) to be translated in collaboration with Franz Hessel. A year or so later, both projects complete, Benjamin shares with Scholem the results of the confrontation. To be said “about this work itself,” he writes, is above all “that it makes me in a certain sense sick” (C, 305; GB III, 195).

⁸⁶ The intentionlessness of the blush is noted by Peter Fenves: “The coloration of shame is the ‘natural’ reduction of the ‘natural’ attitude, which can be accomplished only by those who have no intention of doing so: it gives evidence of pure outwardness, which can be called ‘death’ and which solicits terms like ‘mortification’” (p. 70). But by reading the note “On Shame” in terms of a revision of Husserlian phenomenology, Fenves overlooks the crucial structural homology of atonement, the paradisiacal state and classless society in Benjamin’s thinking. “Just as the intuition of essence [according to Husserl’s *Ideas*] requires that the so-called ‘natural’ attitude be ‘turned off’ (*ausgeschaltet*), so in the presence of the absolute mark ‘the resistance of the present to the future and past is switched off [*ausgeschaltet*]” (p. 100). See: Peter Fenves, *op. cit.*

The unproductive engagement with an author who so greatly pursues intentions that are affined to the, at least former, intentions of myself brings about in me from time to time something like inner symptoms of poisoning. (C, 305)

Die unproduktive Beschäftigung mit einem Autor, der Intentionen, die, ehemaligen zumindest, von mir selber, verwandt sind, so großartig verfolgt, führt bei mir von Zeit zu Zeit so etwas wie innere Vergiftungserscheinungen herauf. (GB III, 195)

The aetiology of this sickness is the following double bind. The proximity to so masterly a pursuit by Proust of “the, at least former, intentions” of Benjamin himself reveals to the latter something problematic about these intentions. But this same proximity also prevents what is problematic about them from being determined with any precision. Translating Proust both capacitates and forestalls the inspection of the foundations of his own thinking, which may or may not require renovation after being shaken first in 1924 by “an intensive insight into the actuality [*Aktualität*] of a radical communism,” and second by the rejection of the *Trauerspiel* book the following year (C, 245; GB II, 473). As a result, this person accustomed to such control over his thinking is left feeling invaded by *his own thoughts* as if by some toxin. It is in this light that the remark he once made to Adorno about the need to ration his reading of Proust is to be understood. As Adorno recalls it, Benjamin once said that

he did not want to read one more word of Proust than he must in each case to translate because otherwise he would get into an addicted dependency that would hinder his own production.

*er wolle nicht ein Wort mehr von Proust lesen, als er jeweils zu übersetzen habe, weil er sonst in süchtige Abhängigkeit gerate, die ihn an der eigenen Produktion ... hindere.*⁸⁷

What Benjamin fears from *In Search of Lost Time* is that the greatness of its pursuit of intentions affined to those of his early metaphysics of language would create a dependency that would hinder the revision required for it to be brought in line with the change the mid-1920s had wrought on his constitution.⁸⁸ The affinity Benjamin felt with Proust is indicated

⁸⁷ Theodor Adorno, “Im Schatten junger Mädchenblüte.” In *Dichten und Trachten: Jahresschau des Suhrkamp Verlags*, vol. 4. Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1954, p. 74.

⁸⁸ This interpretation contradicts the claim by Peter Szondi that the “elective affinity between the two authors” at which the remark recalled by Adorno hints is in fact “merely an appearance that” risks “obscur[ing] the fact that the intentions” of *In Search of Lost Time* and *Berlin Childhood around 1900* “are not only not related but are in fact totally opposed” (p. 138, 141). While the latter may be true, the analysis on which it is based indulges in anachronism. Benjamin ceased translating Proust in 1928, some four years before writing the first studies toward his great autobiographical work.

quite clearly by the decidedly Proustian theme of a note amongst the first sketches toward the *Arcades Project* written in 1928, the same year in which his work of translating Proust came to an end. In this note, which appears to belong to the earliest phase of that production which further proximity to Proust might have hindered, Benjamin records the topic of a conversation he had had with Adorno on the operas *Electra* and *Carmen*. Namely,

to what extent their names already contain in themselves their intrinsic character and thus give to the child, long before he even knows these operas, an intimation of them. [...] Recognition in the name is the most developed in the child because in most people the mimetic capacity diminishes in later life. (AP, 868)

wiefern ihre Namen schon ihren eigentlichen Charakter in sich enthalten und so dem Kinde lange schon, ehe es diese Opern noch kennt, eine Ahnung von ihnen geben. [...] Die Erkenntnis im Namen ist am meisten im Kinde ausgebildet, weil die mimetische Fähigkeit im späteren Alter bei den meisten Menschen abnimmt. (GS V, 1038)

The resonance of such thoughts with the following passage from *Du côté de chez Swann* (“The Way by Swann’s”) (1913), the first volume of *In Search of Lost Time*, is unmistakable. “[S]ince my parents had told me that, for my first visit to the theatre, I should have to choose between these two pieces [*Diamants de la Couronne* and *Domino Noir*], I would study exhaustively and in turn the title of one and the title of the other (for these were all that I knew of either), attempting to snatch from each a foretaste of the pleasure it

Szondi’s essay—perhaps understandably since it was written five years before the first publication of Benjamin’s letters in 1966—projects back a certainty onto an author for whom in 1928 his current intentions were not completely clear. The “deeper significance” of the remark to Adorno lies not in the danger “that in his fascination with a work only apparently similar to his own, [Benjamin] risked becoming alienated from his innermost intention” (p. 141). What Benjamin fears from Proust is a dependency that would have hindered the revision of his early metaphysics, which transforms it into the “metaphysics” of language in which his late philosophy of history is grounded. This grounding calls for a more nuanced account than the comparative analysis by Szondi provides. If what Proust seeks in *In Search of Lost Time* is “escape from the sway of time itself” and, more precisely, “from the future, filled with dangers and threats” by rediscovering lost time “in the coincidence of time past and present,” then Benjamin can not simply be distinguished from Proust on the basis that, unlike the latter, he “does not want to free himself from temporality” (p. 142, 145). For if the author of *Berlin Childhood around 1900* “does not wish to see things in their ahistorical essence,” then the same can not be said of the author of the letter to Florens Christian Rang from 1923 for whom the artwork “is according to its essential aspect ahistorical [*ist seinem Wesentlichen nach geschichtslos*]” (C, 223; GB II, 392). The intentions of *Berlin Childhood around 1900* to identify the promise of a particular future in its past in such a way that reveals the past in general to be “open, not completed” must be distinguished from those of his earlier immediately metaphysical thinking, which Benjamin himself acknowledges are affined to those of Proust (p. 145.). In other words: to understand Benjamin’s late philosophy of history its foundation in his “metaphysics” of language must be grasped. See: Peter Szondi, “Hope in the Past: On Walter Benjamin,” trans. Michael Hays. In *Walter Benjamin: Critical Evaluations in Cultural Theory*, vol. II, ed. Peter Osborne. Abingdon: Routledge, 2005, pp. 137-152.

promised, and to compare this with the pleasure latent in the other.”⁸⁹ But Benjamin desists from understanding such experience in terms of mere “daydreams [...] conditioned by the associations of the words forming the titles of the plays, and also by the colour of the bills [...] on which those words stood out.”⁹⁰ Instead he hypothesises an *objective* form of such intimation by securing its possibility in the following two conditions. The first is the heightened “mimetic capacity” of children relative to adults. The second, which Benjamin determines in a contemporaneous note, is the status of the name itself as “an object of a mimesis [*Gegenstand einer Mimesis*]” (AP, 868; GS V, 1038). Since “the name is something (an element) in the object of intention itself”—since it “is not accidental [*zufällig*]”—mimetic comportment to the title of an opera in which the name lies concealed could create a context in which the nature of that opera is somehow distinguishable to someone with a heightened mimetic capacity (SW 1, 87; GS VI, 11). But if “[a]ll human language is only reflection [*Reflex*] of the [divine] word in name,” then what is it that grounds the objectivity of this reflection (EW, 260; GS II, 149)? It is the experience of translating “Proust’s frenetic study, his passionate cult of similitude [*Ähnlichkeit*]” that suggests a solution (SW 2, 239; GS II, 313). By revealing “the realm of the name” to be “that of the similar,” translating Proust finally inspires the long-since promised development of the concept of similitude whose contours were first sketched a decade prior in the “preliminary remark” to the brief study “Analogy and Affinity” (1919) (AP, 868; GS V, 1038).

[The concept of similitude] is not identical with that of analogy. Analogy is probably a metaphorical similitude, i.e. a similitude of relations, whereas only substances can be similar in the intrinsic sense (nonmetaphorically). The similitude of two triangles, for example, would accordingly have to prove to be a similitude of some “substance” in them whose manifestation, then, is the sameness (not similitude!) of certain relations in them. (SW 1, 207)

[Der Begriff der Ähnlichkeit] ist mit dem der Analogie nicht identisch. Analogie ist vermutlich eine metaphorische Ähnlichkeit, d. h. eine Ähnlichkeit von Relationen, während im eigentlichen Sinne (unmetaphorisch) ähnlich nur Substanzen sein können. Die Ähnlichkeit zweier Dreiecke z.B. müßte < sich > demgemäß als Ähnlichkeit irgend einer “Substanz” an ihnen erweisen, deren Manifestation dann die Gleichheit (nicht Ähnlichkeit!) gewisser Relationen an ihnen ist. (VI, 43)

This distinction between metaphorical and nonmetaphorical similitude implicitly corrects a note from 1916, which states that the name is both concealed in the word and is “the analogue [*Analogon*] of the recognition of the object in the object itself” (SW 1, 90; GS

⁸⁹ Marcel Proust, *Remembrance of Things Past*, vol 1, trans. C.K. Scott Moncrieff and Terence Kilmartin. London: Penguin, 1989, p. 79.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

VI, 14). By locating the name in two places at once, this note situates it beyond spatio-temporal form. Three years later in “Analogy and Affinity,” Benjamin grounds the spatial collapse presupposed in the earlier note not in analogy, which is a metaphorical similitude, but in similitude in a nonmetaphorical sense. The similitude of the “substance” of two objects is the *sameness* of their respective relations, which thus do not suffer the breach over which metaphor must leap. The respective relations of similar objects *literally coincide* in a spatial-temporal collapse. In other words: similitude names a communion between things characterised by immediacy. On the basis of this understanding, it is not difficult to interpolate this rough concept of similitude briefly sketched in the “preliminary remark” to “Analogy and Affinity” (1919) in the early study on language written three years before. It is namely similitude that grounds the immediacy of every language, which, in turn, in each case conditions its particular infinity.

The medial, which is the *immediacy* of all spiritual communication, is the fundamental problem of linguistic theory, and if one wishes to call this immediacy magic, then the primary problem of language is its magic. At the same time the dictum of the magic of language points to another: to its infinity. The latter is premised on immediacy. For precisely because nothing is communicated *through* language, what is communicated *in* language can not be limited or measured from the outside, and for this reason to every language inheres its incommensurable one-of-a-kind infinity. Its linguistic being, not its verbal contents, designates its frontier. (EW, 253-54)

Das Mediale, das ist die Unmittelbarkeit aller geistigen Mitteilung, ist das Grundproblem der Sprachtheorie, und wenn man diese Unmittelbarkeit magisch nennen will, so ist das Urproblem der Sprache ihre Magie. Zugleich deutet das Wort von der Magie der Sprache auf ein anderes: auf ihre Unendlichkeit. Sie ist durch die Unmittelbarkeit bedingt. Denn gerade, weil durch die Sprache sich nichts mitteilt, kann, was in der Sprache sich mitteilt, nicht von außen beschränkt oder gemessen werden, und darum wohnt jeder Sprache ihre inkommensurable einziggeartete Unendlichkeit inne. Ihr sprachliches Wesen, nicht ihre verbalen Inhalte bezeichnen ihre Grenze. (GS II, 143)

If the primary problem of linguistic theory is the magic of language, it is obviously not simply solved by what is little more than a speculative sketch of the concept of similitude in “Analogy and Affinity.” In any event, Benjamin himself did not interpolate this concept in his early study on language before it had developed sufficiently to produce “Doctrine of the Similar” (1933). Crucially, the path of this development did not just lead through Proust. When Benjamin claims in “Surrealism” (1929) that “[t]he true, creative overcoming of religious illumination ... lies in a *profane illumination*, a materialist, anthropological inspiration to which hashish, opium and whatever else can provide the preschool,” he is speaking as an alumnus of this nursery (SW 2, 209; GS II, 297). Unlike his early

philosophical notes drawn up in a strictly contemplative mode, the notes of primary importance in the development of the concept of similitude are above all records of intoxication.

Scooping the Same from Actuality

By early 1928 Benjamin had, as he puts it in a letter to Scholem, “already twice entered the realm of hashish” (C, 323; GB III, 324). The role of this realm in developing his linguistico-philosophical standpoint was immediately apparent.

The records that I have made partly independently, partly afterward based on the protocols of the experiments, are likely to provide an appendix well worth reading to my philosophical notes with which they, and in part even my experiences while intoxicated, have the closest connection. (C, 323)

Die Aufzeichnungen, die ich teils selbständig, teils im Anschluß an die Versuchsprotokolle darüber gemacht habe, dürften einen sehr lesenswerten Anhang zu meinen philosophischen Notizen geben, mit denen sie, und z.T. sogar die Erfahrungen im Rausch, die engsten Beziehungen haben. (GB III, 324)

That what forges this most close connection between his records of hashish intoxication and his philosophical notes is above all similitude is revealed nowhere more clearly than in the similitude of terms between the passage cited above in which the incommensurable infinity inherent to every language is secured in the early language study and the following passage from *The Arcades Project*.

The appearances of superposition, of covering, that arise with hashish are to be accommodated under the concept of similitude. When we say a face is similar to another, that means that certain traits of this second face appear to us in the first without the latter ceasing to be what it was. But the possibilities of appearing in this way are subject to no criterion and are therefore unlimited. The category of similitude that for waking consciousness has only a very restricted meaning, gains in the world of hashish an unrestricted meaning. In it everything is namely: face; everything has the degree of bodily presence that allows for emerging traits to be hunted in it as in a face. (AP, 418)

Die Erscheinungen der Superposition, der Überdeckung, die beim Haschisch auftreten, unter dem Begriffe der Ähnlichkeit zu fassen. Wenn wir sagen, ein Gesicht sei dem andern ähnlich, so heißt das, gewisse Züge dieses zweiten Gesichts erscheinen uns in dem ersten, ohne daß das erste aufhört zu sein, was es war. Die Möglichkeiten derart in Erscheinung zu treten sind aber keinem Kriterium unterworfen und daher unbegrenzt. Die Kategorie der Ähnlichkeit, die für das wache Bewußtsein nur eine sehr eingeschränkte Bedeutung hat, bekommt in der Welt des Haschisch eine uneingeschränkte.

In ihr ist nämlich alles: Gesicht, hat alles den Grad von leibhafter Präsenz, der es erlaubt, in ihm wie in einem Gesicht nach erscheinenden Zügen zu fahnden. (GS V, 526)

The correspondence to the early concept of similitude is clear: just as the similitude of two triangles is of some “substance” whose manifestation is the sameness of certain of their relations, so too in the similitude of two faces the traits of one literally appear in the other in a collapse of spatial form. But now what is emphasised is the contingency of the restriction that waking consciousness places on the meaning of the category of similitude. This restriction follows from waking consciousness denying its objects that degree of “bodily presence” (*leibhafter Präsenz*) on which a discovery of “emerging traits” (*erscheinenden Zügen*) will have depended. The concept of similitude has thus undergone a threefold determination. It is largely nonsensuous from the standpoint of waking consciousness; it is as fleeting as the emergence of traits of one face in another; and it only appears in some sort of bodily substratum. These three characteristics Benjamin eventually codifies in the note from 1933 that interpolates the developed concept of similitude in the early language study.

The specific empirical—albeit nonsensuous—similitude flashes always in an heterogenous substratum, namely in the sign character of the word. (SW 2, 717)

Die bestimmte empirische—wenn auch unsinnliche—Ähnlichkeit blitzt stets an einem heterogenen Substrat, nämlich am Zeichencharakter des Wortes auf. (GS VII, 795)

The notion that the sign character of the word constitutes the substratum alone in which something radically heterogenous is consistent with Benjamin’s early metaphysics of language. In a note from 1916, the sign is determined as what “designates the word,” where the latter is understood as “that which indicates [*das Hindeutende*] the object of intention immediately yet not necessarily (like the name)” (SW 1, 87; GS VI, 11). Whereas the word is something that means and “refers to essence unclearly,” the name concealed within it is “not something that means, but something in the thing itself” (SW 1, 88; GS VI, 12). The foundation of the name is the magical communion with things peculiar to human language, which is laid in the following passage from the early language study.

To things the pure linguistic principle of form—sound—is denied. They can communicate with one another only by a more or less material communion. This communion is immediate and infinite like that of every linguistic communication; it is magic (for there is also a magic of matter). The incomparable feature of human language is that its magical communion with things is immaterial and purely spiritual, and for this the symbol is the sound. (EW, 258)

Den Dingen ist das reine sprachliche Formprinzip—der Laut—versagt. Sie können sich nur durch eine mehr oder minder stoffliche Gemeinschaft einander mitteilen. Diese Gemeinschaft ist unmittelbar und unendlich wie die jeder sprachlichen Mitteilung; sie ist magisch (denn es gibt auch Magie der Materie). Das Unvergleichliche der menschlichen Sprache ist, daß ihre magische Gemeinschaft mit den Dingen immateriell und rein geistig ist, und dafür ist der Laut das Symbol. (GS II, 147)

Crucially, this immaterial and purely spiritual communion occurs not in sound, but in name. For despite its intangibility sound itself remains one of those *material* substrata that constitute the sign character of the word. Hence, this is no simple phonocentrism on Benjamin's part. Sound constitutes the "symbol"⁹¹ of this special communion because sound most manifestly differentiates human language from the mute language of things on the one hand, and because in sound semblance, and thus mystery, contracts to a minimum on the other. Now, if the foundation of the name is, as Benjamin confirms in 1933, "communication of matter in its magical communion" (SW 2, 717; GS VII, 795), then it is the role of similitude in its foundation that retrospectively accounts for both the status of the name as "[t]he being carried away from all phenomenality [*Das aller Phänomenalität entrückte Sein*]" as well as the necessity of its intention (O, 36; GS I, 216).

The communication of matter in its magical communion occurs by similitude.

To the fleeting flash of this similitude in the object corresponds the fleeting existence of the same similitude in the sound. (SW 2, 717)

Die Mitteilung der Materie in ihrer magischen Gemeinschaft erfolgt durch Ähnlichkeit.

Dem flüchtigen Aufblitzen dieser Ähnlichkeit im Gegenstand entspricht die flüchtige Existenz der gleichen Ähnlichkeit im Laute. (GS VII, 795)

The correspondence between sound and object is nonmetaphorical. The similitude in each *is literally the same*, which presupposes a collapse of spatial form. The purely spiritual communion of human language with things—the name, or "Adamic spirit of language" (*adamitischen Sprachgeist*)—solely obtains as such collapse. Consequently, it is not at home in the world determined by waking consciousness where the category of similitude "has only a very restricted meaning" (AP, 418; GS V, 526). Rather, it is at home in "the world distorted in a state of similitude," as Benjamin puts it in "Toward Proust's Image" (1929), "in which the true surrealist face of existence breaks through" (SW 2, 240; GS II, 314).

⁹¹ This instance of the word "symbol" is to be understood in a loose sense. It conforms neither to the early understanding of symbol as the unity of symbolising and the incommunicable symbolised, nor to the late understanding of symbol as a "a sign in which no similitude whatsoever can appear" (SW 2, 717; GS VII, 795).

Here, in this world of similitude, “everything has the degree of bodily presence that allows for emerging traits to be hunted in it as in a face. Even a sentence gains under these circumstances a face (not to mention an individual word)” (AP, 418; GS V, 526). It is his experience of this world that Benjamin stages in the record of his fourth experience of the realm of hashish, which he entered in Marseilles in 1928.

A highly immersed feeling of happiness that subsequently arose on the square off La Canebière where Rue Paradis opens out into a park is more difficult to reach than everything before. Happily on my newspaper I find the proposition: “With a spoon one must scoop the same from actuality.” (OH, 54)

An ein sehr versunkenes Glücksempfinden, das nachher auf einem Seitenplatze der Canebière auftrat, wo die rue Paradis in Anlagen mündet, ist schwerer heranzukommen als an alles bisherige. Ich finde glücklicherweise auf meiner Zeitung den Satz: »Mit dem Löffel muß man das Gleiche aus der Wirklichkeit schöpfen.« (GS VI, 585)

A feeling arose upon approaching a park in the old quarter of the city near where the high street La Canebière meets Rue Paradis. This feeling is a feeling of happiness (*Glücksempfinden*), the difficulty of which to grasp is happily (*glücklicherweise*) mitigated by finding (*finden*) on his newspaper a sentence that he himself no doubt had written. Its sense turns on the ambiguity of the words *schöpfen* (“to scoop” and “to create”) and *Löffel* (“spoon” and “ear”⁹²). The latter sense of *Löffel* derives from hunting rabbits whose pricked ears—which indicate heightened awareness—resemble spoons. The proposition *»Mit dem Löffel muß man das Gleiche aus der Wirklichkeit schöpfen«* must thus be read in the following two ways at once. “With a spoon one must scoop the same from actuality”—“With pricked ears one must create the same from actuality.” As the resemblance between *Glücksempfinden* and *find glücklicherweise* already suggests however, it is less pricked ears than peeled eyes that will create the same from that actuality which only then—in the act of its reading—will have been scooped by this passage. It continues:

Several weeks previously I had noted a sentence by Johannes V. Jensen that said something seemingly similar: “Richard was a young man who had a sense for everything of the same kind in the world.” This proposition had pleased me very much. It now makes it possible for me to confront the political-rational sense that it implied for me with the individual-magical sense of my experience the day before. Whereas the sentence in Jensen amounts for me to the fact that things are so, as we well

⁹² A German equivalent of the English expression “to give someone a clip round the ears” is *jemandem ein paar hinter die Löffel geben*.

know, thoroughly mechanised, rationalised, and the particular today remains only in nuances, the new insight was absolutely different. I namely saw only nuances: and these were equal. (OH, 54)

Mehrere Wochen vorher hatte ich einen Satz von Johannes V. Jensen notiert, der scheinbar Ähnliches sagte: »Richard war ein junger Mann, der Sinn für alles Gleichartige in der Welt hatte.« Dieser Satz hatte mir sehr gefallen. Er ermöglicht mir jetzt, den politisch-rationalen Sinn, den er für mich besaß, mit dem individuell-magischen meiner gestrigen Erfahrung zu konfrontieren. Während der Satz bei Jensen für mich darauf hinaus kam, daß die Dinge so sind, wie wir ja wissen, durchtechnisiert, rationalisiert und das Besondere steckt heute nur noch in den Nüancen, war die gestrige Einsicht durchaus anders. Ich sah nämlich nur Nüancen: und die waren gleich. (GS VI, 585)

Each sentence speaks of a sense for the same. But the similitude that seemingly obtains between them runs deeper than any apparent thematic proximity, not least because semantically the two sentences are in fact “absolutely different.” Whereas an individual-magical sense belongs to the ambiguous, perhaps mystical, first sentence, a political-rational sense belongs to the second. To have a sense for everything of the same kind (*alles Gleichartige*) in the world is to recognise the homogenising tendency of modernity wherein the difference presupposed by the particular is reduced to mere nuances of the same. Benjamin’s experience was the reverse. He saw not radical homogeneity but radical heterogeneity, which, however, likewise produced conditions under which the difference presupposed by the particular failed to take root. Thus, precisely because he saw *only* nuances, the absence of difference meant that these nuances were, at bottom, equal (*gleich*). The similitude between the two sentences is consequently based not on proximity, but distance: they meet as the extremes of the selfsame polarity. Although this unexpected communion extends far deeper than the sensuous resemblance of the terms *das Gleiche* (“the same”), *alles Gleichartige* (“everything of the same kind”), and *gleich* (“equal”), this variation of the same word stages the sameness of that one name which lies concealed within each of its nuances. In other words: the word “namely” (*nämlich*) in the final sentence of the citation above must be taken literally. The nuances that Benjamin alone saw were equal *because he recognised them in name*.

I namely saw only nuances: and these were equal. I delved deeply into the paving before me which by a kind of salve—magic salve—with which I, as it were, smeared it could have been, precisely as this selfsame and named paving, also the paving of Paris. (OH, 54)

Ich sah nämlich nur Nüancen: und die waren gleich. Ich vertiefte mich innig in das Pflaster vor mir, das durch eine Art Salbe—Zaubersalbe—mit der ich gleichsam es überstrich, als eben dieses Selbe und Nämliche auch das Pariser Pflaster sein konnte. (GS VI, 585)

Benjamin attributes the spatial collapse whereby this selfsame (*Selbe*) paving of Marseilles could also have been the paving of Paris—and thus whereby the nuances he saw were equal (*gleich*)—to a magic salve (*Salbe*) with which this paving was as it were (*gleichsam*) smeared by him. The correspondences between these two pairs of German terms specify the nature of this magic salve: a state of consciousness wherein the category of similitude attains an unrestricted meaning. Smearing this salve on paving stones grants even them “the degree of bodily presence that allows for emerging traits to be hunted in it as in a face” (AP, 418; GS V, 526). But it is the correspondence between *Nämliche* and *nämlich* (“namely”) that proves most decisive. *Nämliche* is a nominalisation of the antiquated adjective *nämlich* (“same”) as it appears, for example, in the phrase *die nämlichen Steine* (“the same stones”). The instance of *nämlich* (“namely”) in this passage is, by contrast, an adverb. Like its English cognate, it is used to introduce a specification or justification of a preceding statement. What the correspondence between *Nämliche* and *nämlich* achieves is to emphasise the root of each word so as to supplant their conventional meanings with the word “name” literally concealed within them. The object staged in this passage is less the actual paving stones spatially located somewhere in Marseilles, than “something in the thing itself,” the name concealed in the word designated by the sign “paving” (*Pflaster*) (SW 1, 88; GS VI, 12). *This* paving in Marseilles could *also* have been *that* paving in Paris because in the Adamic spirit of language—in name—they are one. Accordingly, if a “highly immersed [*sehr versunkenes*] feeling of happiness ... arose on the square off La Canebière where Rue Paradis opens out into a park [*in Anlagen mündet*],” then this was because it was not just an actual park into which Paradise Street opened out, but a real Garden of Eden (OH, 54; GS VI, 585). Hence, both the immersion of the feeling and the difficulty with which it is reached. But this does not render the actual paving irrelevant to the experience. The purified reality of the name is not beyond actuality (*Wirklichkeit*), but rather will have constituted its innermost core. Just as philosophising in an Adamic rather than Platonic stance is characterised by contemplation wherein “the idea is loosened [*löst sich los*] from the innermost core of actuality as word, which claims its naming rights anew,” so too its name must be loosened from the actual paving for it to be experienced (O, 36; GS I, 217). Crucially, this loosening does not apply solely to the thing. The subject of the experience must likewise be loosened. As Benjamin puts it in “Surrealism” (1929), just months after this entrance into the realm of hashish:

In the fabric of the world the dream loosens individuality like a hollow tooth. This loosening of the I by intoxication is at the same time precisely the fruitful, living experience that allowed these people to emerge from the spell of intoxication. (SW 2, 208)

Im Weltgefüge lockert der Traum die Individualität wie einen hohlen Zahn. Diese Lockerung des Ich durch den Rausch ist eben zugleich die fruchtbare, lebendige Erfahrung, die diese Menschen aus dem Bannkreis des Rausches heraustreten ließ. (GS II, 296-297)

This spell is cast by “that most terrible drug—ourselves [*uns selber*—which we take in solitude” (SW 2, 216; GS II, 308). But to emerge from it one must graduate from the preschool of profane illumination provided by intoxication by attaining such “a materialist, anthropological inspiration” in a flash of enhanced sobriety (SW 2, 209; GS II, 297). Above all, this inspiration manifests as an owning up to the contingency of the meaning of the category of identity as it applies to waking consciousness. It is such an inspiration that this passage on the paving in Marseilles is designed to stage. The semantic tautology *dieses Selbe und Nämliche* is perceptually nuanced by sensuous correspondences that divert its linear reading. In this way, the passage stages a confrontation between waking consciousness and the dreamworld wherein the rule of identity is however provisionally usurped by that of similitude.

A “Metaphysics” of the Image

The dialectical moment of sobriety that Benjamin insists is to be discovered in intoxication is no doubt informed by the role played by hashish in successfully avoiding the “addicted dependency” he is said to have feared from translating Proust. But alongside this training in profane illumination runs the development of an antidote to the poisoning whose symptoms translating Proust occasionally brought about. This antidote is the record (*Aufzeichnung*) that was to be titled “*En traduisant Marcel Proust* [On translating Marcel Proust]” which already in 1926 he had been contemplating “for who knows how long” (C, 305; GB III, 195). By early 1929, Proust was *still* too close to get to grips with. As Benjamin puts it in a letter to Rychner,

I have already thought about contributing something toward the interpretation of Proust. But I am still too close to the whole; it still stands too tall before me. I will wait until I see details along which I will then, as with irregularities of a wall, climb up. (C, 344)

ich daran schon gedacht habe, etwas zur Deutung Prousts beizutragen. Ich stehe aber dem Ganzen noch zu nahe, es steht noch zu groß vor mir. Ich warte, bis ich Details sehe, an denen ich dann, wie an Unebenheiten einer Mauer, hochklettern will. (GB III, 432)

The value of this vantage point lies not in the perspective it offers *on* Proust, but the perspective it offers *from* Proust on certain fundamental philosophical problems with which Benjamin is concerned. What he seeks is less the definitive interpretation than one that contributes both to the interpretation of Proust as well as to the development of his own linguistico-philosophical standpoint. This is what makes *this* engagement with Proust, unlike translating him, productive; and what it produces is a concept of the image forged on the basis of his experiences on hashish. Indeed, it is his experience of how under its influence “everything has the degree of bodily presence that allows for emerging traits to be hunted in it as in a face” that leads his theory of name “Toward Proust’s Image” (1929) (AP, 418; GS V, 526).

Certainly most memories after which we search come up to us as facial images. And even the freely-rising formations of the *mémoire involontaire* are for the most part still isolated, merely enigmatically present, facial images. But precisely for this reason one has—so as to be knowingly committed to the innermost swaying in this fiction—to put oneself in a special and deepest stratum of this involuntary remembrance in which the moments of memory inform us of a whole no longer individually, as images, but nonpictorially and amorphously, indefinitely and weightily as the heaviness of the net informs the fisherman of his catch. (SW 2, 246-47)

Gewiß treten die meisten Erinnerungen, nach denen wir forschen, als Gesichtsbilder vor uns hin. Und auch die freisteigenden Gebilde der memoire involontaire sind noch zum guten Teil isolierte, nur rätselhaft präsente Gesichtsbilder. Eben darum aber hat man, um dem innersten Schwingen in dieser Dichtung sich wissend anheimzugeben, in eine besondere und tiefste Schicht dieses unwillkürlichen Eingedenkens sich zu versetzen, in welcher die Momente der Erinnerung nicht mehr einzeln, als Bilder, sondern bildlos und ungeformt, unbestimmt und gewichtig von einem Ganzen so uns Kunde geben wie dem Fischer die Schwere des Netzes von seinem Fang. (GS II, 323-24)

The image toward which Benjamin’s essay is oriented is no such individual image. On the contrary, *this* image never surfaces otherwise than “nonpictorially and amorphously, indefinitely and weightily” and never bears a face identically. Just as the name is distinguished from any phonic-graphic complex, so too *this* image is distinguished from any pictorial phenomenon.⁹³ Each remains concealed within heterogenous substrata wherein

⁹³ Sigrid Weigel was the first to give the nonpictorial character of the image its due emphasis. But it is not enough to write that Benjamin’s “thinking goes back to a tradition of the image which precedes that of the function of pictorial representation,” namely “a biblical or Judaic tradition . . . in which the image figures as a synonym for likeness, resemblance, or similitude (*Ähnlichkeit*), and expressly for a non-material and non-sensuous similitude” (p. 46, 48). To overlook in this way how the distinction between metaphor and image is grounded in Benjamin’s particular linguistico-philosophical standpoint obscures the materialism of the image, which, at the very least, overlaps with name. The similitude at play in the image is—*pace* Weigel—not nonmaterial. In fact, it is not even nonempirical.

flashes that similitude which respectively founds them. Although the nonpictorial conception of the image clearly overlaps with the nonphenomenal conception of the name, the two are not, however, identical. The reason for this is simple: each belong to a world wherein the category of similitude has an unrestricted meaning, which forever usurps the category of identity from its rule in waking life. It is in this world that “the true surrealist face of existence breaks through” because it is the state of identity that in fact constitutes the real distortion of the world (SW 2, 240; GS II, 314). In other words: “the world distorted in the state of similitude” merely distorts the distortion imposed by identical terms projected by the ego, which are, as Irving Wohlfarth puts it, merely “aberrant, reified forms of similitude.”⁹⁴

The similitude of one thing to another with which we reckon that concerns us in waking, only paraphrases the deeper similitude of the dreamworld in which what goes on never surfaces identically, but similarly: impenetrably similar to itself. (SW 2, 239)

Die Ähnlichkeit des Einen mit dem Andern, mit der wir rechnen, die im Wachen uns beschäftigt, umspielt nur die tiefere der Traumwelt, in der, was vorgeht, nie identisch, sondern ähnlich: sich selber undurchschaubar ähnlich, auftaucht. (GS II, 314)

The word *umspielen* (literally, “to play around”) names a light and playful movement of one thing around another. An obvious example is the movement of gentle waves around rocks at the beach. But *umspielen* likewise carries a more technical musical sense synonymous with *paraphrasieren* (“to paraphrase”), which, like its English cognate names the action of quoting and embellishing a melody. It is in this sense that the similitude that concerns us in waking “paraphrases” the deeper similitude of the dreamworld. Conscious similitude is merely the tip of the iceberg of similitude, which is largely unconscious; and this tip is ornamented by details that prove pleasing to the ego because they appear subject to the category on which its self identification is based. To intimate the whole iceberg demands a forgetting of self, which is precisely what is capacitated by “Proust’s frenetic study, his passionate cult of similitude” (SW 2, 239; GS II, 313).

Torn apart by homesickness he lay on his bed, homesickness for the world distorted in the state of similitude in which the true surrealist face of existence breaks through. To this world belongs what happens in Proust, and how gently and genteelly it surfaces. Namely, never isolated emotive and visionary, but announced and frequently supported by a fragile precious actuality bearing: the image.

It is merely precluded from contemplative gauging. See: Sigrid Weigel, *Body- and Image-Space*, *op. cit.*

⁹⁴ Irving Wohlfarth, “Walter Benjamin’s Image of Interpretation,” *op. cit.*, p. 80

It dissolves from the structure of Proust's sentences just as under Françoise's hands in Balbec the summer day, old, immemorial, mummified, dissolves from the lace curtains. (SW 2, 240)

Zerfetzt von Heimweh lag er auf dem Bett, Heimweh nach der im Stand der Ähnlichkeit entstellten Welt, in der das wahre surrealistische Gesicht des Daseins zum Durchbruch kommt. Ihr gehört an, was bei Proust geschieht, und wie behutsam und vornehm es auftaucht. Nämlich nie isoliert pathetisch und visionär, sondern angekündigt und vielfach gestützt eine gebrechliche kostbare Wirklichkeit tragend: das Bild. Es löst sich aus dem Gefüge der Proustschen Sätze wie unter Françoisens Händen in Balbec der Sommertag, alt, unvordenklich, mumienhaft aus den Tüllgardinen. (GS II, 314)

The traditional understanding of metaphor is inverted: here it is from something fabricated (lace curtains, sentences) that something real (the summer day, the image) dissolves (*löst sich aus*). Hence, it is not the image that bears actuality, but “a fragile precious actuality” that bears the image. But if what happens in Proust belongs to the world in which the true surrealist face of existence breaks through, then what is it that happens? On the one hand: nothing. “[Proust],” writes Max Unold, “says: Imagine that, dear Reader, yesterday I dunked a sponge in my tea when it occurred to me that I was in the countryside as a child—for this he uses 80 pages” (Cited in: SW 2, 239; GS II, 313). On the other hand: since how these pages are written “is so enchanting [*hinreißend*]” something more profound than any narrative event does actually end up happening, namely “one no longer believes oneself to be the one listening, but the one daydreaming himself” (*Ibid.*). This, then, is what happens in Proust: the reader has *an experience*, which for this reason is less recounted than *staged*. Decisive here is how this experience surfaces, namely as “gently and genteelly [*behutsam und vornehm*]” as only incubation by boredom would allow.

If sleep is the high point of physical relaxation, then boredom is the high point of mental relaxation. Boredom is the dream-bird that hatches the egg of experience. (SW 3, 149)

Wenn der Schlaf der Höhepunkt der körperlichen Entspannung ist, so die Langeweile der geistigen. Die Langeweile ist der Traumvogel, der das Ei der Erfahrung ausbrütet. (GS II, 446)

These lines from “The Storyteller” (1936) apply equally to Proust whose writing had to construct a nest for this bird now that its roost in activities connected to boredom such as weaving and spinning had been lost in modern cities (*Ibid.*). But why is boredom the incubator of experience? Because it promotes the forgetting of self on which any depth attained by impressions depends. “The more self-forgetful the one listening,” writes Benjamin, “the more he is engrained by what is heard [*tiefer prägt sich ihm das Gehörte*”

ein]” (SW 3, 149; GS II, 447). And likewise apropos someone reading. Crucially, the experience at stake in what happens in Proust is not *of* the image. The image is *immediately* experience. A note from 1931 suggests why. “Lived similitudes,” writes Benjamin, “are experience” (SW 2, 553; GS VI, 89). Since similitude in general is actively produced by mimetic behaviour on the part of man, the term “lived similitudes” approaches tautology. To be understood here is what, in an untranslated note from around 1933, Benjamin refers to as “the true sense of similitude”:

Similitudes between two objects are always mediated by the similitude which man finds in himself with both objects or which he assumes as [having] with both. This most certainly does not preclude that the directives for such behaviour are objectively present. The objective presence of such directives actually defines the true sense of similitude.

Die Ähnlichkeiten zwischen zwei Objekten sind stets vermittelt durch die Ähnlichkeit, welche der Mensch mit beiden in sich findet oder die er als mit beiden annimmt. Ganz gewiß schließt das nicht aus, daß die Anweisungen zu solchem Verhalten objektiv vorhanden sind. Das objektive Vorhandensein von solchen Anweisungen definiert sogar den wahren Sinn von Ähnlichkeit. (GS II, 956)

Similitude in its true sense is handled by behaviour that conforms to certain directives given in the conjunction of objects between which obtains a natural correspondence. Although unavailable to conscious perception, this correspondence awakens the mimetic faculty of man, which responds by capacitating a bodily assimilation wherein similitude is simultaneously produced and perceived—but only for a moment. For in every case the perception of similitude is “bound to a flash. It flits past, is perhaps to be regained, but can not actually be held fast like other perceptions” (SW 2, 695; GS II, 206). It is such production and perception of similitude—which will only then have been lived—that generates experience. Now, if the foundation of the image occurs, like that of the name, by similitude, and if experience is, at bottom, lived similitudes, then their recognition is impossible outside experiential “contexts” or “complexes” (*Zusammenhängen*). As Benjamin puts it in a note from 1928:

[T]he realm of the name is that of the similar. And since similitude is the organon of experience, this therefore implies: the name can be recognised in experiential complexes alone. Only in them is its being, i.e. linguistic being, distinguishable. (AP, 868)

[D]er Bereich des Namens [ist] der des Ähnlichen. Und da die Ähnlichkeit das Organon der Erfahrung ist, so besagt das: der Name kann nur in Erfahrungszusammenhängen erkannt werden. Nur an ihnen wird sein Wesen, d. h. sprachliches Wesen kenntlich. (GS V, 1038)

In other words: the complexes alone in which the name and, by extension, the image can be recognised must themselves be generated by the production of similitude precisely because the latter is the organon of experience. The distinguishability of linguistic being depends on a bodily praxis of assimilation to the substantial style of the thing. This is a significant departure from the immediately metaphysical understanding of experience that informs “On the Programme of the Coming Philosophy” (1918). “Experience [*Erfahrung*],” writes Benjamin there, “is the uniform and continuous manifold of recognition” (SW 1, 108; GS II, 168). A decade later, while such continuity may characterise the mere experience of witnessing events (*Erlebnis*), full experience (*Erfahrung*) is now considered fundamentally discontinuous because generated only by a certain praxis capacitated by the mimetic faculty of man. But Benjamin’s renovated theory of name does not for this reason lose completely its metaphysical aspect. If the name is what “dissolves out from [*sich aus herauslöst*]” the object of intention in the praxis of naming, then the image is what “dissolves from [*löst sich aus*]” those sentences that do justice to the name (SW 1, 87; GS VI, 11). What Benjamin now realises is that the context wherein such justice can alone be done. Contrary to the “Epistemo-Critical Prologue” (1925) according to which “the idea is loosened [*löst sich los*] in philosophical *contemplation* from the innermost core of actuality as word, which claims its naming rights anew,” it is only by living similitude that the image could be loosened in *experience* that would only then do justice to the name (O, 36; GS I, 217). Its coincidence with handling, with praxis—its preclusion from contemplation alone—means that similitude is not deducible a priori. Accordingly, it escapes metaphysical knowledge according to its definition as “that knowledge which a priori strives to recognise science as a sphere within the absolute divine context of order” (C, 112; GB I, 422). But if a philosophy that locates similitude at the heart of language is for this reason not a metaphysics of language, the term “metaphysics” can not simply be abandoned. For in addition to escaping a priori knowledge, similitude also escapes a posteriori knowledge. Although empirical, similitude is not *based* on any experience, let alone one that is repeatable. Rather, as its organon, similitude is *coextensive* with an experience that is singular.

PART III: TWO REVIVALS

I. “THE TASK OF THE TRANSLATOR” (1921)

“The Task of the Translator” (1921) is not a theory of translation in general. It is specifically concerned with the question of how to translate great poetic works in such a way that the necessary profanity that attends such finite linguistic constructions is provisionally and virtually redeemed. This prologue to Benjamin’s translation of Baudelaire’s *Tableaux parisiens* will remain misunderstood until it is read not *despite*, but *in terms of* its esotericism. Nowhere is this esotericism greater than in the two sentences that follow its infamous declaration that “Translation is a form [*Übersetzung ist eine Form*]” (SW 1, 254; GS IV, 9). The significance of these lines will here be determined by reconstructing the philosophy that informs their design.

Similitude and Totality

In 1935, Scholem sent Benjamin his German translation of a portion of the Zohar, the foundational text of the Jewish tradition of mystical thought known as Kaballah. Although Benjamin did not read Aramaic, he nevertheless felt justified in praising the translation most highly on the basis of its technique.

The translation of the text before you was, I am sure, no easier than that of a flawless poem. Only translators of poetry do not usually possess the renunciation that here is a condition of the success and at the same time provides the methodological directives to combine commentary with translation. In this respect, I regard your feat as exemplary beyond the bounds of [the] matter. (C, 512)

Die Übersetzung des Dir vorliegenden Textes war bestimmt nicht leichter als die eines vollkommenen Gedichts. Nur verfügen die Übersetzer von Dichtung für gewöhnlich nicht über die Entsagung, die hier Bedingung des Gelingens ist und zugleich die methodische Weisung gibt, mit der Übersetzung den Kommentar zu verbinden. Insofern halte ich Deine Leistung für vorbildlich über die Grenzen der Materie hinaus. (GB V, 187)

The terms of this praise accord with the contemporaneous sketch for a radio show on translation that predicates its success with regard to “important works” on resisting the temptation “to raise its subservient technical function to that of an autonomous art form” (SW 3, 250; GS VI, 158). Instead, “the fact of the different linguistic situation [*Sprachsituation*]” is made into a theme by combining the technique of translation with that

of commentary (*Ibid.*). Translation can “become effective, an integral part of its own world [*wirksam, zum Bestandteil der eignen Welt werden*]” only by conceding this difference because the latter is crucial to “the purpose [*Sinn*] of translation,” namely “to represent [*zu repräsentieren*] foreign language in one’s own” (SW 1, 250, 251; GS VI, 158, 160). A translation must not just speak on behalf of another language, it must somehow be *entitled* to do so.⁹⁵ But what is the basis of its entitlement? The ambiguity of the phrase *über die Grenzen der Materie hinaus* (“beyond the bounds of *the* matter” and “beyond the bounds of matter”) in the letter to Scholem provides an important clue. His feat is exemplary beyond the bounds of the matter at stake in the Zohar because—by freeing “in the reworking that pure language imprisoned in the work” and thus by fulfilling “The Task of the Translator” (1921)—it *goes beyond the bounds of matter in general* (SW 1, 261; GS IV, 19).

It will hopefully not surprise you to hear that this matter still remains very close to me even if you have probably not understood the little programme in which this circumstance found expression in Ibiza—“On the Mimetic Faculty”—in this sense. Be that as it may: the concept of nonsensuous similitude developed there finds multiple illustration in the way that the author of the Zohar apprehends [vocal] articulations, and probably [written] characters even more, as deposits of worldly complexes. Of course he seems to be thinking of a correspondence that does not trace back to any mimetic origin. This may be related to his attachment to the doctrine of emanation to which my theory of mimesis in fact presents the strongest antagonism. (C, 512)

Es wird Dich hoffentlich nicht überraschen von mir zu hören, das diese Materie mir noch immer sehr nahe steht, wenn Du auch wohl das kleine Programm, in dem dieser Umstand in Ibiza seinen Niederschlag fand—“Über das mimetische Vermögens”—nicht in diesem Sinne verstanden hast. Wie dem auch sei: der dort entwickelte Begriff der unsinnlichen Ähnlichkeit, findet vielfache Illustration in der Art wie der Soharautor die Lautbildungen, und mehr wohl noch die Schriftzeichen als Depositoren von Weltzusammenhängen aufsaßt. Freilich scheint er an eine Entsprechung zu denken, die auf keinerlei mimetischen Ursprung zurückführt. Das dürfte mit seiner Bindung an die Emanationslehre zusammenhängen, zu der in der Tat meine Mimesistheorie den stärksten Antagonismus darstellt. (GB V, 187)

The doctrine of emanation is the major theological alternative to the doctrine of creation. Whereas the latter posits an absolute separation between divine creator and profane creature, the former understands all creation to flow from God through degrees of diminishing divinity and proportionally increasing profanity. It is a version of the doctrine of creation that informs the theory of language developed in “On Language in general and on the

⁹⁵ The meaning of the German verb *repräsentieren* is narrower than its English cognate “to represent,” which is to be understood here in its political sense of being entitled to speak on behalf of another.

Language of Man” (1916). “All higher language,” runs its concluding line, “is translation of lower language, until in ultimate clarity the word of God unfolds, which is the unity of this movement of language” (EW, 267; GS II, 157). Although the task of naming “would be insoluble if the name language of man and the nameless language of things were not affined in God [*in Gott verwandt*],” there is a discontinuity between these languages and the “creating word” from which they “discharge [*entlassen*]” (EW, 262; GS II, 151). If naming is ultimately translation, and if “[t]ranslation is the conversion of one language into another through a continuum of transformations,” no continuum of transformations obtains between the word of God and the language of man because—in line with the theological doctrine of creation—between creator and creature the separation is absolute (EW, 261; GS II, 151). Hence both the exclusion of the word of God from the axiom which states that “each higher language (with the exception of the word of God) can be considered a translation of all the others,” as well as the claim that “naming is only the expression of the identity [*Ausdruck der Identität*] of the creating word and the recognising name in God, not the prior solution of that task” (EW, 261-62; GS II, 151).⁹⁶ Now, the theory of the origin of language outlined in “On the Mimetic Faculty” (1933) is not a theory of its creation, but a theory of how the tension toward the meant constitutive of language is founded. Crucially, this founding occurs not once in the past, but ever again in the present—which explains the present tense of the verb “founds” (*stiftet*) in what is perhaps the decisive passage of this programme.

If one [...] arranges words of different languages that mean the same around that meant as their midpoint, then one ought to investigate how they all—often without possessing the slightest similitude with one another—are similar to that meant in their centre. [...] In short, it is nonsensuous similitude that *founds* the tensions between not only the spoken and the intended, but also between the written and the intended and likewise between the spoken and the written. (SW 2, 721-22; emphasis added)

Ordnet man [...] Wörter der verschiedenen Sprachen, die ein Gleiches bedeuten, um jenes Bedeutete als ihren Mittelpunkt, so wäre zu erforschen, wie sie alle—die miteinander oft nicht die geringste Ähnlichkeit besitzen mögen—ähnlich jenem Bedeuteten in ihrer Mitte sind. [...] Kurz, es ist unsinnliche Ähnlichkeit, die die Verspannungen nicht nur zwischen dem Gesprochenen und Gemeinten sondern auch zwischen dem Geschriebenen und Gemeinten und gleichfalls zwischen dem Gesprochenen und Geschriebenen stiftet. (GS II, 212)

⁹⁶ In terms of the note “On Riddle and Mystery” (c. 1921), this identity itself rather than its expression “can only be thought basically [*sich ... beruhend denken läßt*] in an act from the living force that fulfils. This living force is always God” (SW 1, 267; GS VI, 18). In other words: no amount of translating can make up for that fact that it is a messianic act alone that would in the end be responsible for the unfolding in its ultimate clarity of the word of God. For only the divine can bridge the absolute disparity between itself and the profane.

If, as Benjamin puts it in the prologue to the *Trauerspiel* book (1925), “[i]n origin is meant no becoming of something sprung, but something springing from growth and decline [*vielmehr dem Werden und Vergehen Entspringendes gemeint*],” then it is to mimetic behaviour on the part of man that the origin of language is to be traced (O, 45; GS I, 226). With regard to language, the originary does not outlast the instant of the mediation of the nonsensuous similitude between word and thing, which is “always mediated by the similitude which man finds in himself with both” (GS II, 956).⁹⁷ Since this mediation is capacitated by mimetic behaviour performed in an inconsistent historical context and from which identical repetition is accordingly precluded, this mediation is in each case singular. Hence why—in the longer text from which “On the Mimetic Faculty” is distilled—Benjamin specifies that the tension toward the meant is founded by similitude “each time in a completely new, originary, nondeducible way [*jedesmal auf eine völlig neue, originäre, unableitbare Weise*]” (SW 2, 697; GS II, 208). Despite the coincidence of its perception with its production in unrepeatable mimetic praxis, despite being coextensive with singular experience, similitude accordingly remains an empirical phenomenon. “Philology,” writes Benjamin in a letter to Adorno from 1938, “is that inspection of a text which, advancing on its details [*diejenige an den Einzelheiten vorrückende Beaugenscheinigung eines Textes*], magically fixes the reader to it” (C, 587; GB, VI, 184-85). What casts this spell is the production and perception of similitude. But if the view espoused in the passage cited above is for this reason not “foreign to empirical philology,” then on what grounds is this view also “most intimately affined [*engstens verwandt*] to mystical or theological theories of language” (SW 2, 696; GS II, 208)? A clue is provided by the passage above from the letter to Scholem in which Benjamin claims that the concept of nonsensuous similitude “finds multiple illustration in the way that the author of the *Zohar* apprehends articulations

⁹⁷ This interpretation partially contradicts an influential interpretation by Werner Hamacher of this passage concerning the nonsensuous similitude of words from different languages for the same thing. “Nothing could be more idle than to go searching for some sensual likeness, however small it may be, between a word and its intended meaning; nothing would be more foreign to Benjamin’s investigative hypotheses than the assumption that there is a substantial middle, independent of the movement of particular languages, around which one could arrange particular words in order to establish, through a process of comparison, their likeness to the thing itself. On the contrary, this middle point is first constituted by the arrangement of the particular words of the language, and it must be thought of as their dynamic result and as itself a linguistic being. The likeness Benjamin speaks of is thus neither the likeness between a sign and a thing, nor that between a sign and a representation, but rather the likeness between the words—and these words are never reduced to their sign character—of virtually all languages, on the one hand, and their configuration, on the other. This likeness does not *persist*, is not static and has no consistency, but is generated—and indeed without pre-given rules—by each new configuration ‘every time in a completely new, original and non-deducible way’” (p. 152-53). Hamacher neglects both the role of mimetic behaviour in the mediation of similitude, and the difference between the sign and the name. Only on the basis of this neglect can he present Benjamin’s theory of language as “a calculus of modalities without substance” and thus to understand it in the nonmetaphysical terms of his own deconstructive theory. See: “The Word Wolke—if it is one,” trans. Peter Fenves. In *Benjamin’s Ground: New Readings of Walter Benjamin*, ed. Rainer Nägele. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1986.

[*Lautbildungen*], and probably characters [*Schriftzeichen*] even more, as deposits of worldly complexes [*Depositen von Weltzusammenhängen*]" (C, 512; GB V, 187). From the standpoint of Benjamin's theory of mimesis, correspondences may obtain between particular articulations and the world as a whole because of how the latter is involved in the foundation of the name. As Benjamin puts it in "On Language in general and on the Language of Man" (1916), "the communication of things is certainly of such a sort of communality [*Gemeinschaftlichkeit*] that it involves the world in general as an undivided whole [*daß sie die Welt überhaupt als ein ungeschiedenes Ganzes befaßt*]" (EW, 266; GS II, 156). A worldly complex becomes stored in an articulation as a trace of the involvement of the world as an undivided whole in the communication of matter in its magical communion. The affinity of Benjamin's theory of the mimetic origin of language to theological theories is to be sought in its commitment to a concept of totality.

It is the role of similitude in the mediation of totality that accounts for the claim in "Analogy and Affinity" (1919) that "similitude is in certain cases able to herald affinity [*Verwandtschaft anzukündigen vermag*]" (SW 1, 207; GS VI, 43). The reason why affinity can only be heralded is that "affinity refers undivided to the whole being [*bezieht sich ungeteilt auf das ganze Wesen*] without seeking a particular expression" (*Ibid.*). Since no particular expression does justice to the unity to which affinity refers, affinity is to be understood as expressionless or unutterable. Accordingly, it is in terms of the affinity of language in general that the term "the unutterable" (*das Unaussprechliche*) in the following passage from the early language study is to be understood.

The highest spiritual domain of religion is (in the concept of revelation) at the same time the sole domain that does not know the unutterable. For it is addressed in name and utters itself as revelation. (EW, 257)

Das höchste Geistesgebiet der Religion ist (im Begriff der Offenbarung) zugleich das einzige, welches das Unaussprechliche nicht kennt. Denn es wird angesprochen im Namen und spricht sich aus als Offenbarung. (GS II, 147)

As Benjamin puts it five years later in "The Task of the Translator" (1921), the "imagined [*gedachte*], innermost relationship of the languages [...] consists in that languages are not foreign to one another, but a priori and irrespective of all historical relations affined in that which they wish to say [*in dem verwandt sind, was sie sagen wollen*]" (SW 1, 255; GS IV, 12). Because what languages wish to say is that unity of linguistic movement to which no expression is adequate, the unutterable addressed in name is only accessible "to the allness [*Allheit*] of their mutually complementing intentions" (SW

1, 257; GS IV, 13). This allness, this uttering of the unutterable as revelation, is what Benjamin calls either “true” or “pure” language. The latter alone would be without that tension toward the meant which characterises every construction of language in general. Hence why Benjamin describes such language as that “in which the ultimate mysteries for which all thinking toils are stored without tension and even silent [*spannungslos und selbst schweigend*]” (SW 1, 259; GS IV, 16). The thesis of “The Task of the Translator” is that this language of truth “in whose anticipation and description lies the sole perfection for which the philosopher can hope” is “concealed intensively in translations” (SW 1, 259; GS IV, 16). Not, however, in every translation; nor indeed in certain translations of every work. Rather, pure language is intensively concealed in successful translations of great poetic works (*Dichtungen*). The reason for this is the natures of their respective intentions.

[The intention of the translation] not only amounts to something different from that of the poetic work, namely to a language as a whole from a single artwork in a foreign language, but it itself is also a different intention: that of the poet is naïve, primary, concrete, that of the translator is derivative, ultimate, ideational. For the great motif of an integration of multiple languages into one true language fulfils his work. (SW 1, 259)

[Die Intention der Übersetzung] geht nicht allein auf etwas anderes als die der Dichtung, nämlich auf eine Sprache im ganzen von einem einzelnen Kunstwerk in einer fremden aus, sondern sie ist auch selbst eine andere: die des Dichters ist naïve, erste, anschauliche, die des Übersetzers abgeleitete, letzte, ideenhafte Intention. Denn das große Motiv einer Integration der vielen Sprachen zur einen wahren erfüllt seine Arbeit. (GS IV, 16).

The intention of the translator is ideational (*ideenhaft*) because its object is strictly virtual, namely the unutterable affinity of languages, their innermost relationship. Consequently, it accords not with empirical reality, but with the purified reality of one true language. The intention of the poet, by contrast, is naïve in the Schillerian sense, namely in full accord with nature and actuality (*Wirklichkeit*). For, as Benjamin writes in “On Language in general and on the Language of Man” (1916), “all art, poetry not excluded, is based not on the ultimate quintessence of linguistic spirit [*dem allerletzten Inbegriff des Sprachgeistes*], but on concrete linguistic spirit [*dinglichem Sprachgeist*], albeit in its consummate beauty” (EW, 257; GS II, 147). As “at least partly founded in the name language of man,” the language of poetry has its concrete basis in the fact that the name is a *translation* of the language of the thing into the language of man (EW 266; GS II, 156). It is by virtue of the name concealed within it that the word means (*bedeutet*) that of which it communicates a communicability on the one hand, and that representation (*Repräsentation*) exists in meaning (*Bedeutung*) on the other (GS VI, 16, 10). The name is entitled to speak on

behalf of its mute nominatum because it dissolves out from the latter by way of a conversion of its language into another through a continuum of transformations. Or again: a word means its meant by virtue of the necessary and immediate symbolic intention of the name, which—in a collapse of spatio-temporal form—is something in the thing itself. It is such thinking that is behind the endorsement of the following ostensibly circular claim that Benjamin attributes to the author of the early fourteenth century text *Grammatica Speculativa*, Thomas of Erfurt.⁹⁸ “That which means aims at [*zielt hin auf*] the meant and is at the same based on it” (SW 1, 228; GS VI, 22). The rest of the note from which it is taken—written just months before “The Task of the Translator” (1921)—is devoted to explaining how it can be understood in such a way that avoids any circularity.

Insofar as the linguistic element can be set apart and extracted from the meant, the latter is to be designated as its *modus essendi* [“mode of being”] and thus as the foundation of that which means. The realm of language extends as a critical medium between the realm of that which means and the realm of the meant. What can thus be said is: That which means aims at the meant and is with regard to its material determination at the same time based on this meant, not however unlimitedly, but only with regard to the *modus essendi* that language determines. (SW 1, 228)

Soweit Sprachliches sich aus dem Bedeuteten abheben und gewinnen läßt<, > ist dies als dessen modus essendi und damit als das Fundament des Bedeutenden zu bezeichnen. Der Sprachbereich erstreckt sich als kritisches Medium zwischen dem Bereich des Bedeutende<n> und dem des Bedeutete<n>. So daß also gesagt werden kann: Das Bedeutende zielt hin auf das Bedeutete und gründet zugleich hinsichtlich seiner Materialbestimmtheit auf diesem, aber nicht uneingeschränkt, sondern nur hinsichtlich des modus essendi, den die Sprache bestimmt. (GS VI, 23)

The medium of language is “critical” (*kritisch*) in the mathematical sense of the term. The acts of naming on which language is based introduce into things points of transition from one state to another, from one mode of being into another. The particular mode of being that materially determines that which means is itself determined by human language in the act of naming. The latter sets apart and extracts the linguistic element *qua* name from the meant *qua* nominatum. If the meant is the foundation of that which means, then the particularity of the former is owed to the very same act that gives rise to the latter such that the meant is as much a product of naming as the name. In other words: the name dissolves out from the object of intention and, in so doing, sets the communicable aspect of the thing apart from what is only *then* determinable as the particular meant of that which means. What capacitates this dissolution is the communication of matter in its magical communion, which

⁹⁸ Benjamin himself, like the rest of his generation, mistakenly identifies the philosopher in question as Duns Scotus.

occurs by similitude. Since only the communicable aspect of the thing participates in this communion, the way in which that which means is materially determined by the meant is limited. Were that which means based unlimitedly on the meant, there would be no difference between the two, no tension toward the meant, and thus no meaning. It is such a state that constitutes the unity of linguistic movement in which languages are affined, which Benjamin variously terms the word of God, true language, pure language, and—perhaps most accurately—the unity of the essence of language.

The Same and Identical

In the note “Sprache und Logik” (“Language and Logic”) written shortly before “The Task of the Translator” (1921), Benjamin determines the difference of the sphere of essence (*Wesen*) from the sphere of recognition (*Erkenntnis*) on the basis of the different relationships that respectively reign in each. Whereas in the sphere of recognition genus *subsumes* species, in the sphere of essence essential unity *pervades* essential multiplicity.

In the sphere of essence the highest does not behave incorporatingly toward the others. The essential unity pervades an essential multiplicity in which it appears, but with regard to which it always remains disparate. [...] The multiplicity of languages is one such essential multiplicity. [...] The doctrine of the mystics of the decline of the true language can thus truthfully not boil down to its dissolution in a multiplicity that would contradict the original and divinely ordained unity; rather—since the multiplicity of the languages is no more a product of decline than that of the peoples, indeed is so far removed from this that precisely this multiplicity alone utters its essential character,—the doctrine cannot amount to its dissolution in a multiplicity, but rather must speak of an increasing impotence of integral ruling power. (SW 1, 273)

In der Sphäre der Wesen verhält sich das oberste zu den andern nicht einverleibend. Die Wesenseinheit durchwaltet eine Wesensvielheit in der sie erscheint, der gegenüber sie aber immer disparat bleibt. [...] Die Vielheit der Sprachen ist eine derartige Wesensvielheit. [...] Die Lehre der Mystiker vom Verfall der wahren Sprache kann also wahrheitsgemäß nicht auf deren Auflösung in eine Vielheit, welche der ursprünglichen und gottgewollten Einheit widerspräche, hinauslaufen, sondern—da die Vielheit der Sprachen sowenig wie die der Völker ein Verfallsprodukt, ja soweit davon entfernt ist es zu sein, daß gerade eben diese Vielheit allein deren Wesenscharakter ausspricht,—sie kann nicht auf deren Auflösung in eine Vielheit gehen, sondern muß vielmehr sprechen von einer zunehmenden Ohnmacht der integralen Herrschgewalt. (GS VI, 24)

Although the integral ruling power of language is indeed a “revealed essential unity of a linguistic type,” what would appear at the end of the unfolding of the unity of essence is—

pace the doctrine of the mystics—nothing “originally actually spoken” (SW 1, 273; GS VI, 25). Rather, what would appear is the “originary harmony that makes itself perceptible from the spoken all [*die ursprünglich aus den gesprochenen allen sich vernehmbar machende Harmonie*],” and which would be “of incomparably greater linguistic power [*Gewalt*] than any single language would possess” (*Ibid.*). It is into this originary harmony, this one true language, that it is “The Task of the Translator” (1921) to integrate the multiplicity of languages.⁹⁹ If, according to “On Language in general and on the Language of Man” (1916), the task of naming “would be insoluble if the name language of man and the nameless language of things were not affined in God [*in Gott verwandt*],” then what “Language and Logic” (c. 1921) retrospectively clarifies is the anticipatory nature of this affinity (EW, 262; GS II, 151). The various languages are affined in God not because they discharge from the same creating word, but because—*pace* the traditional understanding of the doctrine of creation—they each intend the same “originary harmony that makes itself perceptible from the spoken all” (SW 1, 273; GS VI, 25). It is this problem of affinity in—despite discontinuity with—God that is solved by the crucial distinction developed in “The Task of the Translator” between “the manner of intending” (*die Art des Meinens*) and “the intended” (*das Gemeinte*).

All suprahistorical affinity of languages is based [...] in the fact that in each of them as a whole one and the same is in each case intended, which is nevertheless accessible to no single one of them,

⁹⁹ This interpretation of pure language contradicts those of a whole host of critics. Carol Jacobs claims that pure language “does not signify the apotheosis of an ultimate language (even at the end of history) but signifies rather that which is purely language—nothing but language” (p. 82). In Paul de Man it is “the fiction or the hypothesis of a ... language devoid of the burden of meaning”—a language that “does not exist except as a permanent disjunction which inhabits all language as such” (p. 84, 92). Jacques Derrida understands pure language as “the being-language of the language, tongue or language *as such*, that unity without any self-identity that makes for the fact that there are plural *languages* and that they are *languages*” (p. 222). For Rodolphe Gasché it is “language beyond its utilitarian and symbolic functions, beyond the burden of extra-linguistic meaning and the structures upon which it rests; which is to say, toward the difference that language as language makes” (p. 91). For his part, Samuel Weber conceives pure language as, on the one hand, the aporetic notion of “a language that would consist of pure signifying,” and, on the other, that which “goes on all the time, more or less, as the countless interruptions that scan our utterances” (p. 75, 78). According to Werner Hamacher, it is “bare, pure language, denuded of communications [*die bloße, von Mitteilungen entblößte, reine Sprache*]” (p. 515; p. 206). Thus stripped, language remains merely as the self-relation of language, which is equivalent to a state of pure intensity or prolepsis and thus self-difference. The closest interpretation to that provided here is by Brendan Moran. “Benjamin,” he writes, “does not contrast God and language but seems to regard God as the inner limit of spiritual being in relation to linguistic being.... The idea of God concerns the unsurpassable pure language in which every idea is beyond any concept or meaning that we might have of it” (p. 49). See: Carol Jacobs, “The Monstrosity of Translation.” In *In the Language of Walter Benjamin*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999, pp. 75-90; Paul de Man, *op. cit.*, pp. 73-105; Jacques Derrida, “Des tours de Babel,” trans. Joseph F. Graham. In *Psyche: Inventions of the Other*, Vol. 1, ed. Peggy Kamuf and Elizabeth Rottenberg. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007, pp. 191-225; Rodolphe Gasché, *op. cit.*, pp. 83-104; Samuel Weber, *op. cit.*; Werner Hamacher, “Intensive Languages,” *op. cit.*; Brendan Moran, *op. cit.*

but only to the allness of their mutually complementing intentions: pure language. For while all the individual elements, the words, sentences, contexts of foreign languages exclude one another, these languages complement one another in their intentions themselves. To grasp this law—one of the basic laws of the philosophy of language—precisely is to distinguish within intention the manner of intending from the intended. (SW 1, 256-57)

[A]lle überhistorische Verwandtschaft der Sprachen [beruht] darin, daß in ihrer jeder als ganzer jeweils eines und zwar dasselbe gemeint ist, das dennoch keiner einzelnen von ihnen, sondern nur der Allheit ihrer einander ergänzenden Intentionen erreichbar ist: die reine Sprache. Während nämlich alle einzelnen Elemente, die Wörter, Sätze, Zusammenhänge von fremden Sprachen sich ausschließen, ergänzen diese Sprachen sich in ihren Intentionen selbst. Dieses Gesetz, eines der grundlegenden der Sprachphilosophie, genau zu fassen, ist in der Intention vom Gemeinten die Art des Meinens zu unterscheiden. (GS IV, 13-14)

The distinction between the manner of intending and the intended allows the unity of the movement of the languages to be anticipated without eliding their actual diachronic and synchronic differences. Wherever and whenever a language begins, and however it is constituted at any point in the course of its development, each language as a whole will have as its intended one and the same “expressionless and creative word [*ausdrucksloses und schöpferisches Wort*]” (SW 1, 261; GS IV, 19). This pure word is “the unutterable [*das Unaussprechliche*],” which “is addressed in name and utters itself as revelation” (EW, 257; GS II, 147). In other words: this word is the unity of the essence of language, the affinity of languages, pure language. Now, it is crucial to distinguish the pure word intended by every language as a whole and addressed in name from the meant a word means by virtue of its symbolic intention. For without so distinguishing between the intended that pertains to an individual word and the intended that pertains to an individual language, the passage that directly follows the one cited above remains incomprehensible.

In “*Brot*” and “*pain*” **the intended** is indeed the same, the manner of intending it is, by contrast, not. For it is in the manner of intending that the two words mean something different to the German and Frenchman respectively, that for neither they are interchangeable and in fact ultimately strive to exclude one another; but it is down to **the intended** that, taken absolutely, they mean the same and identical. While the manner of intending in these two words resists one another in this way, it is complemented in the two languages from which they derive. In them the manner of intending is in fact complemented toward **the intended**. In the individual, the uncomplemented languages **their intended** is namely never to be encountered in relative independence, as in individual words or sentences, but is rather caught up in constant change, until it is able to emerge from the harmony of all those manners of intending as pure language. (SW 1, 256)

In »Brot« und »pain« ist das **Gemeinte** zwar dasselbe, die Art, es zu meinen, dagegen nicht. In der Art des Meinens nämlich liegt es, daß beide Worte dem Deutschen und Franzosen je etwas Verschiedenes bedeuten, daß sie für beide nicht vertauschbar sind, ja sich letzten Endes auszuschließen streben; am **Gemeinten** aber, daß sie, absolut genommen, das Selbe und Identische bedeuten. Während dergestalt die Art des Meinens in diesen beiden Wörtern einander widerstrebt, ergänzt sie sich in den beiden Sprachen, denen sie entstammen. Und zwar sich in ihnen die Art des Meinens zum **Gemeinten**. Bei den einzelnen, den unergänzten Sprachen nämlich ist ihr **Gemeintes** niemals in relativer Selbstständigkeit anzutreffen, wie bei den einzelnen Wörtern oder Sätzen, sondern vielmehr in stetem Wandel begriffen, bis es aus der Harmonie all jener Arten des Meinens als die reine Sprache herauszutreten vermag. (GS VI, 14)

Of the four instances of the term *das Gemeinte* (“the intended”) in this passage, the first two pertain to the respective German and French words for “bread,” while the second two pertain to the German and French languages as wholes. Since the manners of intending of the individual elements of languages are not static, their harmony is precluded from emerging before the end of the history of the languages. For in, say, the German language as a whole, its intended is caught up in constant change. In the individual word *Brot*, by contrast, its intended is to be encountered in relative independence because, although the manner of intending its particular intended changes over time, the intended itself remains the same. This intended is the noncommunicable element of bread in itself, “the same and identical” (*das Selbe und Identische*) symbolised by its name which—in a collapse of spatio-temporal form—is both something in bread in itself and something concealed in any word that means “bread.”¹⁰⁰ To take a word absolutely is therefore to consider it in terms of its necessary and immediate symbolic intention. Since every finite linguistic construction in

¹⁰⁰ That the same and identical is merely meant by the absolutised word repeats the caution in “On Language in general and on the Language of Man” (1916) that “naming is only the expression of the identity [*Ausdruck der Identität*] of the creating word and the recognising name in God, not the prior solution of that task” (EW, 261-62; GS II, 151). Nevertheless, this thinking remains metaphysical. An influential representative of the opposing view that this passage in fact belongs to a nonmetaphysical philosophy of language is Werner Hamacher. Hamacher glosses this passage with the claim that what *Brot* and *pain* “mean is first constituted through their reciprocal supplementation, carried out in the act of translation. The meaning is always only the relationship between the modalities of meaning and thus, in the end, is what Benjamin calls pure language” (p. 153.). Accordingly, he understands Benjamin’s philosophy of language as “a calculus of modalities without substance” (*Ibid.*). Although originally written in German, this essay has only appeared in an English translation by Peter Fenves. The fact that Fenves translates the phrase *das Selbe und Identische* as “one and the same” rather than “the same and identical” merely reflects the neglect of this phrase in Hamacher’s commentary. This neglect is demanded by any nonmetaphysical interpretation of Benjamin’s philosophy of language. This is illustrated by the recent support for Hamacher’s interpretation by Dag Petersson. “Meaning,” writes the latter, “is produced from the difference of language modes that has no common substance...; lexica are always provisional, loose, derived, and temporary.... Translating between modes does not merely produce meaning, it also establishes an instance of unity and completeness for individual modes. Total unity—pure language—is impossible to attain” (p. 88). This is an oversimplification, which neglects the affinity in God of languages. See: Werner Hamacher, “The Word Wolke—if it is one,” *op cit.*; Dag Petersson, *op. cit.*

general is characterised by tension toward, and thus difference from, the meant, the latter resides within them “only symbolisingly” (SW 1, 261; GS IV, 19). In those successful acts of translating great works that prove to have stimulated the becoming of languages, by contrast, the noncommunicable is “present as the symbolised itself” because the tension toward the meant is provisionally dissolved in the process of converting one language into another (*Ibid.*).

If pure language is only accessible to the allness of the mutually complementary intentions of the various languages, and if the manner of intending of each language as a whole does not remain the same over the course of its history, the completion of this complementation presupposes the cessation of the diachronic development of language. Although “predetermined,” the “realm of the reconciliation and fulfilment of languages” is for this reason nevertheless “refused [*versagten*]” before the “messianic end” of the history of languages (SW 1, 257; GS IV, 15). On the other hand, Benjamin insists that “within this realm lies that which in a translation is more than communication,” namely “that kernel [*Kern*] of pure language itself” which “seeks to present itself, to produce itself even, in the becoming of languages” (SW 1, 257, 261; GS IV, 15, 19). “This essential kernel,” he writes, “can be determined more precisely as that which in the translation itself is not in turn translatable” (SW 1, 257; GS IV, 15). It is not translatable because it anticipates a “stage of all linguistic foreordination [*Sprachfügung*]” whose “ultimate, definitive and decisive” character precludes from it transformability and thus translatability (*Ibid.*). It is by anticipating the essential unity of language prior to its ultimate unfolding that this kernel lies in the “realm of the reconciliation and fulfilment of languages” (SW 1, 257; GS IV, 15). And it is only because this kernel lies—in a collapse of spatio-temporal form—both in this realm and in a translation that the latter “means a higher language than it is [*bedeutet eine höhere Sprache als sie ist*]” (*Ibid.*). Accordingly, if pure language is “concealed intensively in translations,” it is only in successful acts of translating great poetic works (*Dichtungen*) that the anticipation on which this concealment is based takes place (SW 1, 259; GS IV, 16). For the scope of extracting pure language from a work in translation is strictly proportional to the “value and dignity of its language” (SW 1, 262; GS IV, 20).

If translation is a form, then translatability must be essential to certain works. Translatability characterises certain works essentially—this means not that their translation is essential for them themselves, but that a particular meaning which inheres in the originals expresses itself in their translatability. [...] How far a translation is able to correspond to the essence of this form is objectively determined by the translatability of the original. The less value and dignity its language has, the more it is communication, the less there is for the translation to extract in the process, until

the full excess weight of that sense, far from being the lever of a form-fulfilling translation, prevents it. (SW 1, 254, 262)

Wenn Übersetzung eine Form ist, so muß Übersetzbarkeit gewissen Werken wesentlich sein. Übersetzbarkeit eignet gewissen Werken wesentlich—das heißt nicht, ihre Übersetzung ist wesentlich für sie selbst, sondern will besagen, daß eine bestimmte Bedeutung, die den Originalen innewohnt, sich in ihrer Übersetzbarkeit äußere. [...] Wie weit eine Übersetzung dem Wesen dieser Form zu entsprechen vermag, wird objektiv durch die Übersetzbarkeit des Originals bestimmt. Je weniger Wert und Würde seine Sprache hat, je mehr es Mitteilung ist, desto weniger ist für die Übersetzung dabei zu gewinnen, bis das völlige Übergewicht jenes Sinnes, weit entfernt, der Hebel einer formvollen Übersetzung zu sein, diese vereitelt. (GS IV, 10, 20)

If translation is a form, it is because it constitutes a medium in which intention may die as the necessary basis for encountering the symbolised. Since all finite linguistic constructions mean that of which they communicate a communicability, it is not *whether* a work is symbolising that decides its translatability, but the *degree* to which it is symbolising. The higher the degree, the more it is translatable. As “that *through* which nothing more communicates itself, and *in* which language communicates itself and absolutely [*dasjenige, durch das sich nichts mehr, und in dem die Sprache selbst und absolut sich mitteilt*],” the dimension of language in which symbolising reaches its zenith and communication its nadir is the name (EW, 255, GS II, 144). The particular meaning that expresses itself in the essential translatability of the work is grounded in the name by virtue of which a word means or symbolises that of which it communicates only a communicability. Since the name is concrete, so too is the translatability in which its meaning expresses itself. Hence why the extent to which “a translation is able to correspond to the essence [*Wesen*] of this form is objectively determined by the translatability of the original” (SW 1, 262; GS IV, 20). “The higher a work is **mannered** [*geartet*],” writes Benjamin, “the more it remains even in the most fleeting touch of its sense still translatable” (*Ibid.*). It is *still* translatable because it is essentially translatable, which is determined not by its sense, but its symbolic “**manner** of intending” (*Art des Meinens*). Justice to the name conditions not only the essential translatability of a poetic work, but its “relationship of content (*Gehalt*) to language,” which “form a certain unity like fruit and skin” (SW 1, 257; GS IV, 15).¹⁰¹ The conditions under

¹⁰¹ This interpretation contradicts an increasingly influential interpretation by Werner Hamacher. The latter understands translatability as “the transcendental of the languages” such that it is to be conceived as “a demand of the essence of every work and, beyond that, of the language itself in which the work is composed” (p. 507, 491; p. 197; 180). In line with this, Hamacher argues that for Benjamin the historical “surviving” of every language “presents itself in always singular exhibitions, of which none is comparable with another and of which each is an unsurpassable extreme” such that *every* translation is to be understood as “an eschaton of the original” (p. 497; p. 187). By generalising the singularity of translation, the qualitative aspect of the task of the translator drops out of

which this unity is recognisable—which are the same as those under which essential translatability is determinable—are specified in the early essay “Zwei Gedichte von Friedrich Hölderlin” (“Two Poems by Friedrich Hölderlin”) (1915).

The Law of Translation

In “Two Poems by Friedrich Hölderlin” (1915), Benjamin terms the unity of the relationship of content (*Gehalt*) to language in a poetic work (*Dichtung*) “the poetised” (*das Gedichtete*). The poetised is the sphere in which “that peculiar region is to be opened up that contains the truth of the poetic work” (EW, 172; GS II, 105).

This “truth,” which precisely the most serious artists claim so insistently of their creations, is to be understood as the concreteness of their production, as the fulfilment of the respective artistic task. The poetised is in its general form a synthetic unity of spiritual and concrete order. This unity receives its particular shape as inner form of the particular creation. [...] As a category of aesthetic investigation, the poetised differs decisively from the form-material schema in that it preserves in itself the fundamental aesthetic unity of form and material and instead of separating the two, impresses in itself their immanent necessary connection. (EW, 172)

Diese »Wahrheit«, die gerade die ernstesten Künstler von ihren Schöpfungen so dringend behaupten, soll verstanden sein als Gegenständlichkeit ihres Schaffens, als die Erfüllung der jeweiligen künstlerischen Aufgabe. Das Gedichtete ist in seiner allgemeinen Form synthetische Einheit der geistigen und anschaulichen Ordnung. Diese Einheit erhält ihre besondere Gestalt als innere Form der besonderen Schöpfung. [...] Das Gedichtete unterscheidet sich als Kategorie ästhetischer Untersuchung von dem Form-Stoff-Schema entscheidend dadurch, daß es die fundamentale ästhetische Einheit von Form und Stoff in sich bewahrt und anstatt beide zu trennen, ihre immanente notwendige Verbindung in sich ausprägt. (GS II, 105-106)

The particular shape of the poetised is received as the “inner form” of the poetic work, which, Benjamin writes, is “what Goethe designated as content [*Gehalt*]” (EW, 171; GS II, 105). There is no direct equivalent in English for the latter term. From the fifteenth century until its appropriation by Schiller in the 1780s, *Gehalt* had an exclusively financial sense, namely the gold or silver component of coins.¹⁰² It distinguishes between two contents, one

Hamacher’s account. In other words: he neglects the fact that it is, according to Benjamin, only in successful translations of great poetic works that pure language is intensively concealed. Werner Hamacher, “Intensive Languages,” *op. cit.*

¹⁰² The aesthetic sense of *Gehalt* can apparently be traced back to 1781 when Schiller predicated the understanding of his play “The Robbers” on a certain *Gehalt von Geisteskraft* (“content of mental or spiritual power”). See the entry “Gehalt” in: *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie*, ed. Joachim Ritter *et al.* Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1971-2007.

prioritised over the other, which appear mixed together to form the coin. It is this distinction internal to the concept of “content” that Schiller exploits in his metaphorical application of the term to the artwork. The *Gehalt* of the artwork is to its actual contents (*Inhalt*) as the gold component of the coin is to the coin as a whole. By the mid-1790s, with influence from Goethe who he befriended in 1794, Schiller understands the *Gehalt* of the artwork more precisely as that in which it transcends the finitude of its actual (*wirklich*) existence. If the artwork were a gold coin, then its *Gehalt* would refer no longer to its finite gold component, but to its infinite aspect as a quality divorced from any quantity. It is in this sense of the term that, in “The Task of the Translator” (1921), Benjamin writes that the content (*Gehalt*) and language of the poetic work “form a certain unity” (SW 1, 257; GS IV, 15). This unity is the poetised: a synthetic unity of spiritual and concrete order (*geistigen und anschaulichen Ordnung*), where content is the spiritual, language the concrete dimension.

Now, although the remarks in “Two Poems by Friedrich Hölderlin” (1915) on the poetised in general indeed contribute to its theorisation, Benjamin warns that since this essay “concerns the poetised of individual poems,” the fundamental aesthetic unity of the poetised “cannot be observed theoretically, but only in the individual case [*kann ... nicht theoretisch, sondern nur am einzelnen Fall bemerkt werden*]” (EW, 172; GS II, 106). While the possibility of its theoretical observation is not ruled out, its intransigence to anything but investigation on a case by case basis is to be emphasised on account not just of the fact that for each poetic work it “has a particular shape [*Gestalt*],” but because *its constitution as an object is in fact owed to its investigation*. Conventional theoretical observation is precluded from the poetised because, as Benjamin puts it, it “is at once product and object of the investigation [*ist Erzeugnis und Gegenstand der Untersuchung zugleich*]” (EW, 172; GS II, 105). This claim, which is decisive for this early philosophy of art, presupposes the mimetic faculty of man. That an object of an investigation can at the same time be its product anticipates quite clearly his determination of the name thirteen years later as “an object of a mimesis [*Gegenstand einer Mimesis*]” (AP, 868; GS V, 1038). Just as the concreteness (*Gegenständlichkeit*) of the name—its existence as an object—is a function of an act of mimesis on the part of man, so too the production of the poetised as an object is owed to the very act of its investigation. It is precisely this logic that reappears at a crucial point in “The Task of the Translator” (1921).¹⁰³ Only it is not so much stated as *staged* by the language of the passage that specifies how it is possible to apprehend translation as a form, and, by extension, how the essential translatability of an original is to be determined.

¹⁰³ If Sigrid Weigel is correct to say that “[t]he concept of resemblance [*Ähnlichkeit*] has no clear profile” in “The Task of the Translator,” to claim that “its significance is dismissed in favour of the notion of kinship [*Verwandtschaft*]” goes too far. For it is not true that the mimetic does not “have much significance in the essay.” It is just that its significance is not stated but *staged*. Sigrid Weigel, *Body- and Image-Space*, *op. cit.*, p. 134.

Translation is a form. To apprehend it as such, it is necessary to trace back to the original. For in it lies its [translation's] law as decided in its [the original's and the law's] translatability. (SW 1, 254)

Übersetzung ist eine Form. Sie als solche zu erfassen, gilt es zurückzugehen auf das Original. Denn in ihm liegt deren Gesetz als in dessen Übersetzbarkeit beschlossen. (GS IV, 9)

Each of the three published English translations render the verbal phrase *zurückzugehen auf das Original* as “to go back to the original.”¹⁰⁴ Although technically correct, this translation fails to grasp adequately the nature of this return to an object whose constitution is in fact owed to this act itself. For this object is not the original *qua* collection of signs, but the “particular meaning [*bestimmte Bedeutung*]” that inheres in it and which expresses itself in its translatability (SW 1, 254; GS IV, 10). That this meaning is owed to the unity of content (*Gehalt*) and language in the poetic work is staged by the increasing grammatical complexity of these three sentences themselves. The simplicity of the first expanded sentence contrasts with the complexity of the last radically contracted one. Crucially, the pronominal concord of the latter is obscure *even for the reader of German*. This is due to the sentence intervening between the pronoun *deren* (“its”) and the noun *Übersetzung* (“translation”) to which it refers as well as to the ambiguity of the pronoun *dessen* (“its”), which refers either to *das Original* (“the original”) or to *das Gesetz* (“the law”) or indeed to *both*.¹⁰⁵ Since the third sentence is presented as an explanation of why apprehending translation as a form depends on tracing back to the original, its opacity disappoints the ostensible self-evidence of the opening claim that translation is a form. The effect on the reader of this initial disappointment is to attempt to establish the reference of *deren* (“its”) and *dessen* (“its”). In this way, the passage lures the reader of German into that process of tracing back on which the ability to apprehend translation as a form is said to be predicated. The design of these lines compels the reader to investigate their object, which is precisely

¹⁰⁴ “Translation is a form. To comprehend it as a form, one must go back to the original.” (SW 1, 254)
“Translation is a form. To understand it as such means going back to the original.” Walter Benjamin, “The Task of the Translator,” trans. James Hynd and E. M. Valk, *op. cit.*, p. 76, 78

“Translation is a form. In order to grasp it as such, we have to go back to the original.” Walter Benjamin, “The Translator’s Task,” trans. Steven Rendall, *op. cit.*, p. 76

“Übersetzung ist eine Form. Sie als solche zu erfassen, gilt es zurückzugehen auf das Original.” (GS IV, 9)

¹⁰⁵ Only the forgotten translation by James Hynd and E.M. Valk succeeds in reproducing this ambiguity, without whose grasping it is impossible to understand this passage.

“[F]or the laws governing the translation lie within the original, contained in the issue of translatability.” (SW 1, 254).

“Because the original contains, in its translatability, the law that governs the translation.” Walter Benjamin, “The Task of the Translator,” trans. James Hynd and E. M. Valk, *op. cit.*, p. 76, 78

“For in it lies the principle of translation, determined by the original’s translatability.” Walter Benjamin, “The Translator’s Task,” trans. Steven Rendall, *op. cit.*, p. 76

“Denn in ihm liegt deren Gesetz als in dessen Übersetzbarkeit beschlossen.” (GS IV, 9)

the concept of an object constituted by its investigation. The result is the following expansion: “For in it [the original] lies its [translation’s] law as decided in its [the original’s / the law’s] translatability [*Denn in ihm {das Original} liegt deren {die Übersetzung} Gesetz als in dessen {das Original / das Gesetz} Übersetzbarkeit beschlossen*].” The ambiguous reference to the original *and* translation’s law indicates two registers of translatability. In other words: only those works are essentially translatable whose laws of translation are themselves translatable. But what is a translatable law?

Toward the end of “Two Poems by Friedrich Hölderlin” (1915), Benjamin endorses the following claim by Schiller in *On the Aesthetic Education of Man* (1794). “Herein,” writes Schiller, “consists the real artistic mystery of the master: *that through form he devours the material [Darin also besteht das eigentliche Kunstgeheimnis des Meisters, dass er den Stoff durch die Form vertilgt]*.”¹⁰⁶ As noted by his translators, crucial to this instance of the verb *vertilgen* (“to devour”) is the biological metaphor, which implies “a process of hierarchical organization” whereby “the forms of whatever material is consumed are broken down and assimilated to the principle of a ‘higher’ form” (p. clxxvi). The hierarchical priority of form as that alone from which “true aesthetic freedom is to be expected” is owed not just to that destruction of material whereby it escapes from the “limiting effect on the spirit” concomitant with content (*Inhalt*).¹⁰⁷ It is owed just as much to its *assimilation of material*. In the terms of “Two Poems by Friedrich Hölderlin,” the basis of the synthetic unity of spiritual and concrete order is the *transformation* of material by form into something immaterial. If, according to “On Language in general and on the Language of Man” (1916), “translation strides through [*durchmißt*] continua of transformation, not abstract areas of sameness and similarity [*abstrakte Gleichheits- und Ähnlichkeitsbezirke*],” then it is not difficult to see the connection between this early philosophy of art and the philosophy of language recorded the following year (SW 1, 262; GS II, 151).

To things the pure linguistic principle of form—sound—is denied. They can communicate with one another only by a more or less material communion. [...] The incomparable feature of human language is that its magical communion with things is immaterial and purely spiritual, and for this the sound is the symbol. (EW, 258)

Den Dingen ist das reine sprachliche Formprinzip—der Laut—versagt. Sie können sich nur durch eine mehr oder minder stoffliche Gemeinschaft einander mitteilen. [...] Das Unvergleichliche der menschlichen Sprache ist, daß ihre magische Gemeinschaft mit den Dingen immateriell und rein geistig ist, und dafür ist der Laut das Symbol. (GS II, 147)

¹⁰⁶ Friedrich Schiller, *op. cit.*, p. 154, 155.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*

By retrospectively specifying in 1933 that this communion “occurs by similitude [*erfolgt durch Ähnlichkeit*],” Benjamin not only clarifies that—if abstract areas of similarity are indeed irrelevant to the transformation on which the name is founded—*concrete* similitude is nevertheless central (SW 2, 717; GS VII, 795). He also confirms that it is not the sound, which is only its “symbol,” but *mimetic behaviour* that ultimately capacitates this immaterial and purely spiritual communion with things. Likewise, if it is through form that the master devours the material, the origin of this principle is now confirmed to be mimetic. As that which translates the material into the immaterial, the concrete into the spiritual, the law of form is the law of translation. Just like the poetised which it determines, this law resists theoretical observation because it is “at once product and object of the investigation” (EW, 172; GS II, 105). It manifests only retrospectively and on a case by case basis as that law to which the investigator will have assimilated on the basis of the mimetic faculty in tracing the particular shape of the special and unique sphere of a poetic work. Since its appearance will always be singular, since it will always have been transformed by its manifestation, this law is essentially translatable. And since it only appears where there is a translation of the concrete into the spiritual, it is only to be found in constructions whose language has “value and dignity” (SW 1, 262; GS IV, 20).

II. “THE ARTWORK IN THE AGE OF ITS TECHNICAL REPRODUCIBILITY” (1936)

The comprehensibility of “The Artwork in the Age of its Technical Reproducibility” (1936) depends on a certain grasp of the nature of that relationship after which Meyer Schapiro once asked in 1938 in conversation with Adorno who, in turn, relayed it to Benjamin in the form of the following question: “what is the relationship of your critique of the auratic to the auratic character of your own writing [*wie das Verhältnis Ihrer Kritik des Auratischen zum auratischen Charakter Ihrer eigenen Schriften sei*].”¹⁰⁸ This relationship will be determined in what follows. Although the essay retains an auratic character, it differs decisively from that of “The Task of the Translator” (1921). A concern with esoteric design develops in response to the rise of fascism in the intervening years into a concern with tactical construction. The effort is to present a text whose reading could precipitate habituation to that epistemic principle of montage alone in accordance with which clarity could be won for a Marxist understanding of history. At the same time, the concepts that it presents appear in such a way that precludes their fascistic appropriation. This is done by way of their local determination on the one hand, and the quarantining of a concept such as mystery on the other.

The Treasure Trove of Language

A few months after “The Artwork in the Age of its Technical Reproducibility” (1936) was first published, Benjamin met once more with Theodor Adorno who had been in exile in Oxford since 1934. One of the things they discussed was the role of traditional disciplinary terminology in dialectical materialist practice. It is this topic that Benjamin chose later to share with Max Horkheimer, the editor of the journal of the Institute for Social Research in which his essay had just appeared in a French translation. “I wonder,” writes Benjamin in late 1936, “to what extent the ‘dismantling [*Abbau*] of philosophical terminology’ is a side-effect of dialectical-materialist thinking” (C, 536; GB V, 451).

Materialist dialectics seems to me to diverge from school doctrines by the fact that, amongst other things, it calls for new conceptual formations from case to case; but moreover by the fact that it calls for such [conceptual formations] that are more deeply embedded into vocabulary than the neologisms of technical language. It thereby gives to thought a certain quick-wittedness and awareness thereof lends it a calm and superiority from which it cannot easily be provoked. Materialist

¹⁰⁸ Theodor Adorno and Walter Benjamin, *The Complete Correspondence: 1928-1940*, trans. Nicholas Walker. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999, p. 266; Theodor Adorno and Walter Benjamin, *Briefwechsel: 1928-1940*, ed. Henri Lonitz. Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp Verlag, 1994, p. 346.

dialectics, I mean to say, could for a certain period very well have the advantage of a procedure that for its part may be conditioned by tactics. (C, 536)

Die Materialistische Dialektik scheint mir unter anderm dadurch von den Schullehren abzuweichen, daß sie von Fall zu Fall neue Begriffsbildungen verlangt; weiterhin aber dadurch, daß sie solche verlangt, die tiefer in den Sprachschatz eingebettet sind als die Neologismen der Fachsprache. Sie gibt dem Denken damit eine gewisse Schlagfertigkeit und das Bewußtsein davon verleiht ihm eine Ruhe und Überlegenheit, aus der es sich nicht leicht provozieren läßt. Die materialistische Dialektik, so will ich sagen, könnte auf eine gewisse Frist sehr wohl den Gewinn eines Vorgehens haben, das seinerseits von der Taktik bedingt sein mag. (GB V, 451)

According to the “Epistemo-Critical Prologue” (1925) it is for metaphysical reasons that neologisms are to be avoided in philosophy. “Such terminologies,” writes Benjamin in 1925, “—a miscarried naming in which intending has more share than language—relinquish the objectivity that history has given the principal coinages of philosophical considerations” (O, 37; GS I, 217). A decade later, after witnessing the rise of fascism in Europe, Benjamin recognises the tactical advantage that attends this metaphysical demand to avoid subjective acts of designation in philosophical writing. It is not the vocabulary of a particular field (*das Vokabular*), but vocabulary in general (*der Sprachschatz*) into which the conceptual formations of materialist dialectics are more deeply embedded than neologisms. Far from a mere body of words, vocabulary is “the treasure trove of language” (*der Schatz der Sprache*): the resource on which quick-wittedness draws to develop a localised terminology provisionally determined by the context of its presentation so as to circumvent the danger of its appropriation by the political enemy. It is in accordance with this wager that the infamous “theses on the developmental tendencies of art under the present conditions of production” in “The Artwork in the Age of its technical Reproducibility” (1936) are framed (SW 3, 101; GS VII, 350). Since the dialectic of these conditions “makes itself noticeable in the superstructure no less than in the economy,” Benjamin insists in the opening section of this essay that

it would be wrong to underestimate the struggle value of such theses. They set a number of inherited concepts—like creatorship and genius, eternal value and mystery—aside—concepts whose unchecked (and at the moment hardly checkable) application leads to the reworking of factual material in a fascistic sense. *The concepts newly introduced into art theory in the following differ from more familiar concepts by the fact that they are completely unusable for the purposes of fascism.* (SW 3, 101)

wäre es falsch, den Kampfwert solcher Thesen zu unterschätzen. Sie setzen eine Anzahl überkommener Begriffe—wie Schöpfertum und Genialität, Ewigkeitswert und Geheimnis—beiseite—Begriffe, deren unkontrollierte (und augenblicklich schwer kontrollierbare) Anwendung zur Verarbeitung des Tatsachenmaterials in faschistischem Sinn führt. Die im folgenden neu in die Kunsttheorie eingeführten Begriffe unterscheiden sich von geläufigeren dadurch, daß sie für die Zwecke des Faschismus vollkommen unbrauchbar sind. (GS VII, 350)

The construction of the second sentence of this passage is unusual. At first sight it appears to contain no less than three separate parentheses, namely: “—like creatorship and genius, eternal value and mystery—,” “—aside—,” and “(and at the moment hardly checkable).” Upon closer inspection, however, if “—aside—” is a parenthesis, then its unconventionality demands it be distinguished from the other two. For the primary function of each of its dashes lies elsewhere. The first closes the parenthesis “—like creatorship and genius, eternal value and mystery—,” while the second leads into the specification of these concepts. The significance of the unconventional parenthesis “—aside—” lies in the fact that it stages the conceptual quarantine that the sentence of which it is a part discursively demands, as well as the break with tradition by way of which this quarantine is to be carried out.¹⁰⁹ The severe contraction of the phrase “—concepts whose unchecked (and at the moment hardly checkable) application [*Begriffe, deren unkontrollierte (und augenblicklich schwer kontrollierbare) Anwendung*]” involves a similar complication. The sense of the verb *kontrollieren* operative in these two instances of the word’s adjectival forms is not covered by the English cognate “to control” whose sense the former includes. At stake here is less the sense of direct maintenance of authority and determination of behaviour, than that operative in the English term “passport control.” In German, *kontrollieren* designates not only “to control” but also, and more concretely, the act whereby the validity of a travel ticket is inspected by a conductor: an act of verification that presupposes supervision. The reason for quarantining concepts such as creatorship and genius, eternal value and mystery is twofold. On the one hand, this is because checking their validity is hardly possible “at the moment [*augenblicklich*].” This difficulty is not restricted to the socio-political situation that characterised Europe in the interwar years, as the published translation implies: “(and controlling them is difficult today).” For two senses of *augenblicklich* are in fact involved, namely “currently” *as well as* “instantaneously.” It is the impossibility of instantaneously

¹⁰⁹ Indeed, the clearest evidence of the unconventionality of the parenthesis “—aside—” is the fact that the published English translation actually omits it. “They neutralise a number of traditional concepts—such as creativity and genius, eternal value and mystery—which, used in an uncontrolled way (and controlling them is difficult today), allow factual material to be manipulated in the interests of fascism” (SW 3, 101-102). By translating *setzen ... beiseite* as “neutralise,” this translation fails to observe an important distinction between the effective neutralisation of concepts on the one hand, and the provisional neutralisation of the effects of concepts on the other. It is the latter that Benjamin claims for his theses.

checking the validity of these concepts that demands their quarantine. For it is not that creatorship and genius, eternal value and mystery cannot be checked. It is just that they can only be verified retrospectively by later generations because the critique (*Kritik*) of artworks is prepared by their history.

The power (*Gewalt*) of an artwork can only be verified by posterity because, as Benjamin puts it in “Goethe’s *Elective Affinities*” (1922), it is subject to increase by historical distance (SW 1, 298; GS I, 125). In the case of a literary artwork like *Elective Affinities* (1809) in particular, this situation follows from “that basic law of literature according to which the more important a work is, the more inconspicuously and intimately its truth content [*Wahrheitsgehalt*] is bound to its factual content [*Sachgehalt*]” (SW 1, 297; GS I, 125). The passage of an artwork through history prepares its criticism because the latter seeks its truth content, which no amount of contemporary analysis could untie from the factual content to which it is bound. The discernibility of the realia (*die Realien*) in an important work is inversely proportional to their existence in the world: the more they die out in the latter, the more clearly they come into view in the former (*Ibid.*).

To the poet just as to the audience of his time it is not the existence, but the meaning of the realia in the work that is for the most part hidden. Since the eternal of the work is only silhouetted against its [this meaning’s] ground, every contemporary criticism, as elevated as it may well be, encompasses within it more moving than resting truth, more temporal working than eternal being. (SW 1, 298)

Dem Dichter wie dem Publikum seiner Zeit wird sich nicht zwar das Dasein, wohl aber die Bedeutung der Realien im Werke zumeist verbergen. Weil aber nur von ihrem Grunde das Ewige des Werkes sich abhebt, umfaßt jede zeitgenössische Kritik, so hoch sie auch stehen mag, in ihm mehr die bewegende als die ruhende Wahrheit, mehr das zeitliche Wirken als das ewige Sein. (GS I, 126)

It is only “by diverging in the work [*indem sie im Werk auseinandertreten*]” over the course of its history that truth content and factual content “decide on its immortality” (SW 1 298; GS I, 125). Consequently, if the struggle value of the “theses on the developmental tendencies of art under the present conditions of production” that Benjamin presents fourteen years later in “The Artwork in the Age of its Technical Reproducibility” (1936) lies in the fact that they set aside the concept of eternal value and its correlates in the tradition of art theory, then this is not because these concepts are vain. Rather, it is because they should be provisionally quarantined on the grounds that their “unchecked (and at the moment hardly checkable) application leads to the reworking of factual material in a fascistic sense [*unkontrollierte (und augenblicklich schwer kontrollierbare) Anwendung zur Verarbeitung des Tatsachenmaterials in faschistischem Sinn führt*]” (SW 3, 101; GS VII, 350). Its

severely contracted presentation renders this clause itself hardly checkable at the moment, which stages the reason why these inherited concepts should be quarantined. By deeply embedding this conceptual formation into the treasure trove of language (*Sprachschatz*), Benjamin provides a context of presentation in which a localised terminology is provisionally determined in such a way that it remains unable to be appropriated in any direct way.

Aura and Ornament

It is a failure to recognise how the materialist dialectics practiced in “The Artwork in the Age of its Technical Reproducibility” is tactically conditioned that has led to the criticism of its “auratic” character. This criticism has been most forcefully advanced by Robert Hullot-Kentor, according to whom the essay has stood the test of time on the basis not of rigour, but of the fact that it exploits precisely that character which is the object of its critique. “For this essay,” writes Hullot-Kentor, “is a condensed weave of non sequitur and untruth,” which “has been able to evade critical scrutiny, at any degree of closeness” only because “a force that goes beyond each particular assertion and assures that the false rings true however it may be threatened” is “lodged in its articulations.”¹¹⁰ This criticism is baseless. It follows not just from forgoing attention to the tactical construction of the essay. It is likewise a byproduct of too restricted an understanding of the concept of aura, which appears to derive not from Benjamin, but from one particular passage in a book by Adorno translated by Hullot-Kentor himself, namely *Aesthetic Theory* (1970).¹¹¹ “What is here called aura,” writes Adorno with regard to its description by Benjamin, “is known to artistic experience under the name of the atmosphere of the artwork as of that whereby the nexus of its moments points beyond the latter and allows each individual moment to point beyond itself.”¹¹² In other words: aura is the perceptual correlate of the experience of immanent transcendence in terms of which the artwork is traditionally understood. This understanding is too restricted. Aura is not just a correlate of the experience alone capacitated by the essentially beautiful as it is presented in either nature or art. It refers more generally to the appearance of unapproachability.

¹¹⁰ Robert Hullot-Kentor, “What is Mechanical Reproduction?” In *Mapping Benjamin: The Work of Art in the Digital Age*, ed. Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht and Michael Marrinan. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003, p. 145.

¹¹¹ Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997; Theodor Adorno, *Ästhetische Theorie*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1970.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, p. 275; p. 408. Here is the sentence in the original: “Was hier Aura heißt, ist der künstlerischen Erfahrung vertraut unter dem Namen der Atmosphäre des Kunstwerks als dessen, wodurch der Zusammenhang seiner Momente über diese hinausweist, und jedes einzelne Moment über sich hinausweisen läßt.”

The definition of aura as “unique appearance of a distance however near it may be” presents nothing other than the formulation of the cult value of the artwork in categories of spatiotemporal perception. Distance is the opposite of nearness. The *essentially* distant is the unapproachable. Unapproachability is in fact a primary quality of the cult image. By its very nature it remains “distant however near it may be.” The nearness one is able to gain from its matter does not derogate from the distance that it preserves by its appearance. (SW 4, 272)

Die Definition der Aura als »einmalige Erscheinung einer Ferne, so nah sie sein mag«, stellt nicht anderes dar als die Formulierung des Kultwerts des Kunstwerks in Kategorien der raumzeitlichen Wahrnehmung. Ferne ist das Gegenteil von Nähe. Das wesentlich Ferne ist das Unnahbare. In der Tat ist Unnahbarkeit eine Hauptqualität des Kultbildes. Es bleibt seiner Natur nach Ferne so nah es sein mag«. Die Nähe, die man seiner Materie abzugewinnen vermag, tut der Ferne nicht Abbruch, die es nach seiner Erscheinung bewahrt. (GS I, 480)

“Unapproachability” and “aura” are the respective epistemological and perceptual terms for the primary quality of the cult image. This quality is not only a correlate of immanent transcendence, which specifically characterises the experience of essential beauty. It is a correlate of every unique appearance of an object, which renders its nature unapproachable because no genus corresponds to the species of the unique. It thus escapes the schema of subsumption that reigns in the realm of recognition and accordingly cannot be grasped in discursive terms. This does not mean that the unique appearance is unrecognisable. Rather, it means that it is only recognisable as mystery (*Geheimnis*). It is the opacity proper to aura that is rendered transparent by the definition of its experience three years later in “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire” (1939) as endowing an appearance “with the capacity to raise its gaze” (SW 4, 338; GS I, 647).

Experiencing the aura of a phenomenon means endowing it with the capacity to raise its gaze. To this correspond the findings of the *mémoire involontaire*. (Incidentally, they are unique: they escape the remembrance that seeks to incorporate them. Accordingly, they support a concept of aura that grasps in it the “unique appearance of a distance” [...].) (SW 4, 338)

Die Aura einer Erscheinung erfahren, heißt, sie mit dem Vermögen belehnen, den Blick aufzuschlagen. Die Funde der mémoire involontaire entsprechen dem. (Sie sind übrigens einmalig: der Erinnerung, die sie sich einzuverleiben sucht, entfallen sie. Damit stützen sie einen Begriff der Aura, der die »einmalige Erscheinung einer Ferne« in ihr begreift [...].) (GS I, 647)

Since there is nothing whose appearance cannot in principle be unique, the appearance of aura is not limited to “certain things as people imagine” (OH, 58; GS VI, 588). On the

contrary, as Benjamin writes in a hashish protocol from 1930, “genuine aura appears in all things” (*Ibid.*). Its distinguishing characteristic is neither a “spiritualist radiating magic [*spiritualistischer Strahlenzauber*]” nor a secular immanent transcendence in terms of which the artwork is traditionally understood (*Ibid.*). Rather, it is “an ornamental encircling [*Umzirkung*] in which the thing or being lies firmly sunken as in a sheath” (*Ibid.*). This ornamental encircling renders the object unapproachable because, as Benjamin puts it three years later in the record of his experience on opium called “Crocknotizen” (“Crock Notes”) (1933), ornament is the site of the primal phenomenon of “multifaceted interpretability [*vielfältige Interpretierbarkeit*]” (OH, 82; GS VI, 604).

There is not one [ornament] that cannot be looked at from at least two different sides: namely as planar construction or as linear configuration. But usually the individual forms that could be banded together in very different ways permit a plurality of configurations. This experience alone already refers to one of the innermost peculiarities of [opium]: namely to its indefatigable readiness to wrest from one and the same state of affairs—e.g. a decor or landscape scene—a plurality of aspects, contents, meanings. (OH, 81-82)

Es gibt keins, das sich nicht mindestens von zwei verschiedenen Seiten ansehen ließe: nämlich als Flächengebilde oder aber als lineare Konfiguration. Meist jedoch erlauben die Einzelformen, die zu sehr verschiedenen Gruppen vereinigt werden können, eine Mehrzahl von Konfigurationen. Diese Erfahrung allein verweist schon auf eine der innersten Eigentümlichkeiten des crocks: nämlich auf seine unermüdliche Bereitschaft, ein und demselben Sachverhalt—z. B. einem Dekor oder Landschaftsbilde—eine Vielzahl von Seiten, Inhalten, Bedeutungen abzugewinnen. (GS VI, 603-604)

It is not just the plurality of configurations permitted by its individual forms that determines ornament as the site of the primal phenomenon of multifaceted interpretability. Equally important is the transformability of each form itself. “[A]ura,” writes Benjamin in the 1930 protocol, “changes completely and from the ground up with each movement made by the thing whose aura it is” (OH, 58; GS VI, 588). This movement need not be spatial; movement through time likewise subjects aura to change. It is because opium heightens sensitivity to such movement by intensifying a particular form of concentrated reception that it is characterised by an “indefatigable readiness to wrest from one and the same state of affairs [...] a plurality of aspects, contents, meanings” (OH, 82; GS VI, 604). The multifaceted interpretability of this plurality ultimately precludes from the subject proximity to the ornamental object. Its nature retains an essential distance, which determines ornament as unapproachable. Hence, the definition of aura that first appeared two years before “Crock Notes” in “Kleine Geschichte der Photographie” (“Little History of Photography”) (1931): “A strange weave of space and time: unique appearance of a distance however near it may

be [*Ein sonderbares Gespinst aus Raum und Zeit: einmalige Erscheinung einer Ferne, so nah sie sein mag*]” (SW 2, 518; GS II, 378). What the intensification of the concentrated form of reception by opium reveals is that the medium of perception in which aura is alone perceptible is codetermined by the unique presentation of an object on the one hand, and its concentrated reception on the other. From here it is not far to the hypothesis that historical changes in the way that objects are presented and received *in general* leads to a change of the medium in which they are *conventionally* perceived. Hence, the basic premise of “The Artwork in the Age of its Technical Reproducibility” whose first draft was written in 1935, just two years after “Crock Notes.” The dominance of the collective reception of technically reproduced artefacts by the urban masses after what historians now call the Technological Revolution (c. 1850-1914) has led to certain “changes in the medium of perception whose contemporaries we are” which are to be grasped by the concept of a “decline of aura [*Verfall der Aura*]” (SW 3, 104; GS VII, 354).

The Good Description

In a letter to Alfred Cohn from 1936, Benjamin specifies the continuity of “The Artwork in the Age of its Technical Reproducibility” (1936) with an earlier study like “Goethe’s *Elective Affinities*” (1922) in the following terms. It is, he writes, “above all no doubt grounded in the fact that across all the years I have sought to render an ever more precise and uncompromising concept of what an artwork is” (C, 528; GB V, 325). How this increasingly precise concept is achieved is by being, as he puts it in a letter to Werner Kraft from 1935, “the first to have found some fundamental principles of the materialist theory of art” (C, 516; GB V, 193). One such principle is won by reflection on the historical constancy of architecture, which, unlike other forms of art has never fallen into disuse because “the need of man for accommodation [*Unterkunft*] is permanent” (SW 3, 120; GS VII, 380). The constancy of this art form grants *universal anthropological materialist* significance to its form of reception such that any concept of the artwork that fails to be based on the polarity disclosed by the twofold manner in which architecture is received remains an idealist concept beholden to mythology.

Architecture has never lain fallow. Its history is longer than that of every other art and realising its impact is important for any attempt to give an account of the relationship of the masses to the artwork. Buildings are received in a twofold way: by use and by perception. Or better: tactically and optically. There is no concept of such reception if one imagines it according to a kind of concentrated reception as it is familiar to, say, tourists before famous buildings. For on the tactical side there exists no counterpart to that which on the optical side is contemplation. (SW 3, 120)

Die Baukunst hat niemals brach gelegen. Ihre Geschichte ist länger als die jeder anderen Kunst und ihre Wirkung sich zu vergegenwärtigen von Bedeutung für jeden Versuch, vom Verhältnis der Massen zum Kunstwerk sich Rechenschaft abzulegen. Bauten werden auf doppelte Art rezipiert: durch Gebrauch und durch Wahrnehmung. Oder besser gesagt: taktisch und optisch. Es gibt von solcher Rezeption keinen Begriff, wenn man sie sich nach Art der gesammelten vorstellt, wie sie z. B. Reisenden vor berühmten Bauten geläufig ist. Es besteht nämlich auf der taktischen Seite keinerlei Gegenstück zu dem, was auf der optischen die Kontemplation ist. (GS VII, 381)

The reason it is better to say that buildings are received “tactically and optically [*taktisch und optisch*]” than “by use and by perception” concerns the connotations that attend each of these terms as a result of their juxtaposition. The sensory term “optically” transforms the militaristic term “tactically” into a pun by virtue of its close resemblance to the sensory term “tactile” (*taktil*). Conversely, the bodily connotation that consequently attends “tactical” brings to the term “optical” a contrasting contemplative connotation. It is accordingly better to say that buildings are received “tactically and optically” not only because this pairing is arranged such that two semantically and etymologically distinct words touch so as to double the meaning of each term. In addition, the discordance of this unusual pairing of militaristic and sensory terms interrupts the concentration of the reader so as to stage the distracted form of reception in which architecture is properly received. This form of reception “occurs less by way of attentiveness than by way of habit” and “takes place as a matter of course [*von Hause aus*] much less in an intent attending than in a casual noticing [*beiläufigen Bemerken*]” (SW 3, 120; GS VII, 381). When a building is received in a concentrated form by a tourist, it is perceived not as architecture, but as a monument: a commemorative structure to which a concentrated sort of reception is appropriate because it is designed to be contemplated. Since a building is, by contrast, a tactical construction designed to accommodate, it is perceived *as architecture* only while being used. If the details of a building are most appropriately noticed in passing, then such observations are for this reason not incidental. For they are determined by a particular habitual behaviour based on a bodily assimilation to the contours of the construction being used. Unlike a monument, therefore, the reception demanded by the genuine perception of architecture is a distracted form that is more tactile than optical, more tactical than contemplative. The observation of the twofold manner in which architecture is received is important for the materialist theory of art because it jettisons the idealist assumption that the artwork is an object that demands to be received in contemplative terms. Since concentrated reception conditions the appearance of aura, and since the latter is the “experiential ground [*Erfahrungsgrund*]” of beautiful

semblance (*Schein*), the terms in which the artwork is traditionally understood demand to be renovated in light of this materialist observation (SW 3, 127; GS VII, 10).

A key factor in the decline of aura is the rise of technical reproduction in which, as Benjamin puts it in “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire” (1939), “the beautiful has no place” (SW 4, 338; GS I, 646).

The constant readiness of deliberate, discursive memory, which is promoted by reproductive technology, restricts the play of phantasy. This can perhaps be grasped as a capacity to perform wishes of a special kind; such of which “something beautiful” can be meant as fulfilment. (SW 4, 337)

Die ständige Bereitschaft der willentlichen, diskursiven Erinnerung, die von der Reproduktionstechnik begünstigt wird, beschneidet den Spielraum der Phantasie. Diese läßt sich vielleicht als ein Vermögen fassen, Wünsche einer besonderen Art zu tun; solche, denen als Erfüllung »etwas Schönes« zgedacht werden kann. (GS I, 645)

The play of phantasy is at home in a concentrated form of reception. Its restriction by the promotion of deliberate, discursive memory diminishes the historically determined capacity of the desire for beautiful semblance. Or, as Benjamin put it three years earlier in “The Artwork in the Age of its Technical Reproducibility” (1936): “The significance [*Bedeutung*] of beautiful semblance is grounded in the age of auratic perception, which is drawing to a close” (SW 3, 127; GS VII, 10). The concept of beautiful semblance is determined in “Goethe’s *Elective Affinities*” (1922). “Neither the veil nor the veiled object,” runs the famous line, “is the beautiful; the latter is rather the object in its veil” (SW 1, 351; GS I, 195). What Benjamin comes to call “aura” is the veil of the object, which plays a consistent role in Western aesthetics from Greek antiquity until Weimar Classicism as the experiential ground of beautiful semblance. But if it is “[t]hrough [the object’s] veil, which is nothing other than aura,” that “the beautiful shines [*scheint*],” then it is nevertheless crucial not to conflate beautiful semblance (*Schein*) in particular with auratic appearance (*Erscheinung*) in general (SW 3, 137; GS VII, 667). The latter is the experiential ground of the former, and the former is distinguished by the fact that its essence is not encompassed by semblance. “This,” writes Benjamin, “rather points down deeper to that which may in the artwork be designated [*bezeichnet*] in contradistinction to semblance as the expressionless, but which outside of this opposition is neither found in art nor can clearly be named [*benannt*]” (SW 1, 350; GS I, 194). This “expressionless violence [*Gewalt*] within all artistic media” can be designated but not named because it constitutes a unity to which every particular expression remains inadequate (SW 1, 341; GS I, 182). Since it is only as

revelation that this unutterable “utters itself” [*spricht sich aus*],” outside of revelation it does not appear otherwise than as objective mystery (*Geheimnis*) (EW, 257; GS II, 147). The veil of beautiful semblance accordingly *must* stand before this expressionless violence, which specifies the latter as the “necessarily most veiled” (SW 3, 351; GS I, 195). Beautiful semblance involves the mysterious appearance of the unutterable “divine ground of being of beauty” whose unveiled pronouncing would be revelation (*Ibid.*). The distinction of beautiful semblance from auratic appearance in general lies in the capacitation by the former of an experience of immanent transcendence. This capacity is grounded in the fact that beautiful semblance is opened by its law of form to “something beyond the [artist],” namely that divine unity which betrays the lie of the claim to autonomy by any finite appearance (SW 1, 341; GS I, 182). “In the expressionless,” writes Benjamin, “the sublime violence of the true smashes what still survives in all beautiful semblance as the heritage of chaos: the false, errant totality—the absolute totality” (SW 1, 340; GS I, 181). This understanding of the expressionless follows from the following metaphysical axiom determined by Benjamin in a letter from 1919 to Ernst Schoen.

The purity of a being is *never* unconditional, or absolute; it is always subject to a condition. This condition varies according to the being whose purity is concerned; but this condition *never* lies in the being itself. In other words: the purity of every (finite) being is not dependent of itself. The two beings to which we above all ascribe purity are nature and children. For nature, the condition of its purity that lies outside of itself is human language. (C, 138)

Die Reinheit eines Wesens ist niemals unbedingt, oder absolut, sie ist stets einer Bedingung unterworfen. Diese Bedingung ist verschieden je nach dem Wesen um dessen Reinheit es sich handelt; niemals aber liegt diese Bedingung in dem Wesen selbst. Mit andern Worten: Die Reinheit jedes (endlichen) Wesens ist nicht von ihm selbst abhängig. Die beiden Wesen, denen wir vor allem Reinheit zusprechen sind die Natur und die Kinder. Für die Natur ist die außerhalb ihrer selbst liegende Bedingung ihrer Reinheit die menschliche Sprache. (GB II, 11-12)

This axiom—set long before any turn to a Marxist vocabulary—is the metaphysical basis for what Eva Geulen has described with regard to “The Artwork in the Age of its Technical Reproducibility” (1936) as a “materialism become radical [*radikal gewordener Materialismus*], which has emancipated itself from the [idealist] assumption that there is somewhere matter or material that would be given forth purely of itself.”¹¹³ Human language is the condition of the purity of nature because, in the words of “On Language in general and

¹¹³ Eva Geulen, “Under Construction: Walter Benjamin’s “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” trans. Eric Baker. In *Benjamin’s Ghosts*, ed. Gerhard Richter. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002, p. 132; Eva Geulen, “Zeit zur Darstellung: Walter Benjamins *Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit*,” *MLN* 107 (1992), p. 596.

on the Language of Man” (1916), it translates “the nameless into the name” (EW, 261; GS II, 151). The logic of the relation between the more complete language of man and the incomplete language of nature whose purity it conditions is isomorphic to that between the expressionless violence and the appearances of language in general: the condition of the purity of semblance is the sublime violence of the true. This conditionality distinguishes the concept of the artwork from its classical Schillerian understanding in the following crucial respect. It is not the artist that “devours the material through form [*den Stoff durch die Form vertilgt*],” but something beyond the artist.¹¹⁴ Only the divinely unified expressionless violence within all artistic media “completes the work” by “smash[ing] it into a patchwork, into a fragment of the true world, into the torso of a symbol” (SW 1, 340; GS I, 181). For the capacitation of an experience of immanent transcendence must itself be capacitated by something transcendent. Only the latter can deliver semblance from its spectral state in which essence and appearance are indistinguishable.

It is in terms of such spectrality that Benjamin understands the prose of the mid-nineteenth century Austrian literary realist Adalbert Stifter. “Stifter knows nature,” writes Benjamin in a note from 1917, “but what he knows most uncertainly and draws with a weak hand is the boundary between nature and destiny [*die Grenze zwischen Natur und Schicksal*]” (SW 1, 112; GS II, 608). Accordingly, although he “has provided quite wonderful portrayals of nature [*Naturschilderungen*],” he “lacks the sense for the elemental relationships between man and world in their purified justifiedness [*Rechtfertigkeit*]; in other words: the sense for justice in the highest sense of this word” (SW 1, 111; GS II, 608). As a result, “the moral world and destiny” are connected in his work in a way that is “subhuman, demonic and spectral [*untermenschlich dämonisch und gespenstisch*]” (SW 1, 112; GS II, 609). But it is not just that Stifter fails to draw the absolute line between human and divine. As Benjamin writes in the letter to Schoen in which he determines the condition of the purity of nature, Stifter “does not feel *this conditionality that first makes purity into purity*” (C, 138; GB II,12). Consequently, “the beauty of his portrayal of nature [*Naturschilderung*] is accidental or in other words: harmonically impossible [*harmonisch unmöglich*]” (*Ibid.*). Now, although Howard Caygill is correct to observe that Benjamin organised the critical strategy of “his encounter with post-Romantic German language literature [...] in terms of an experimental contrast between” Stifter and the Swiss literary realist Gottfried Keller, the contrast is not, as he claims, between the auratic prose of Stifter and the nonauratic prose of Keller.¹¹⁵ Rather, it is between the *simulated* aura of the one and the *genuine* aura of the other.

¹¹⁴ Friedrich Schiller, *op. cit.*, p. 154, 155.

¹¹⁵ Howard Caygill, *Walter Benjamin: The Colour of Experience*. London and New York: Routledge, 1998, p. 63.

The harmonic impossibility of Stifter's portrayal (*Schilderung*) contrasts with the "sweet-sounding fullness [*klingende Fülle*]" of Keller's "good description [*gute Beschreibung*]" (SW 2, 51, 56; GS II, 284, 290). Although the verbs *schildern* ("to portray," "to depict") and *beschreiben* ("to describe," "to depict") are more or less synonymous, Benjamin exploits the fact that in each word another remains discernible, namely *Schild* ("escutcheon"¹¹⁶) and *Schreiben* ("writing"). Stifter's portrayal of nature functions as a decorative shield *against* "the sublime violence of the true" that in prose written in accordance with a sense of the conditionality of purity "smashes what still survives in all beautiful semblance as the heritage of chaos: the false, errant totality—the absolute totality" (SW 1, 340; GS I, 181). The "uncanny trait [*unheimliche Zug*]" of Stifter's prose is *not* what Benjamin will eventually specify with the term "aura" (SW 1, 112; GS II, 609). Far from the experiential ground of beautiful semblance, what this "secret bastardisation [*heimliche Bastardierung*]" in Stifter in fact prefigures is the criticism in "Little History of Photography" (1931) of the gum bichromate print, a technique employed to make photographs appear painterly that was fashionable in the late nineteenth century (*Ibid.*). Instead of exploiting that new photographic technology which "completely overcame darkness and recorded appearances like a mirror," these reactionary photographers "regarded it as their task to simulate [*vorzutäuschen*] [...] aura by way of all the arts of retouching [*alle Künste der Retusche*]" (SW 2, 517; GS II, 376-77). Crucially, in photography and literature alike, Benjamin identifies a *depoliticising* tendency in such simulation.¹¹⁷ Hence the reason he gives in the opening passage of "Gottfried Keller" (1927) for why it was only Stifter and not Keller who rose to popularity in Germany around 1918. Namely, because "the Germans had just—straight after the concluded war—forsworn for a number of years the political dances with which in Keller the rhythm quietly resonates [*mitklingt*], and sought out the noble Stifterian landscape more as a sanatorium than a home [*mehr als Heilstätte denn als Heimat*]" (SW 2, 51; GS II, 284). Portrayal functions as a *Heilstätte* ("sanatorium") rather

¹¹⁶ An escutcheon is a shield bearing a coat of arms.

¹¹⁷ It is this insistence on an immediate connection between political and literary progressiveness that Benjamin attempts to demonstrate seven years later in the undelivered lecture "The Author as Producer" (1934). Here is a representative passage:

"I would like to show you that the tendency of a literary artwork can be politically consonant only if it is also literarily consonant. This means that the politically correct tendency includes a literary tendency. And immediately adding: this literary tendency which is implicitly or explicitly contained in every correct political tendency—it and nothing else makes the quality of the work. *For this reason*, the correct political tendency of a work thus includes its literary quality, because it includes its literary tendency." (SW 2, 769)

"*Zeigen möchte ich Ihnen, daß die Tendenz einer Dichtung politisch nur stimmen kann, wenn sie auch literarisch stimmt. Das heißt, daß die politisch richtige Tendenz eine literarische Tendenz einschließt. Und, um das gleich hinzuzufügen: diese literarische Tendenz, die implicit oder explicit in jeder richtigen politischen Tendenz enthalten ist—die und nichts anderes macht die Qualität des Werks. Darum also schließt die richtige politische Tendenz eines Werkes seine literarische Qualität ein, weil sie seine literarische Tendenz einschließt.*" (GS II, 684-85)

than a *Heimat* (“home”), precisely by virtue of its *unheimliche Zug* (“uncanny trait”) which ultimately stems from the fact that the being (*Wesen*) of its author “lacks that contact with the being of the world, with language, from which speaking arises [*mit dem Weltwesen, der Sprache, aus dem das Sprechen hervorgeht*]” (SW 1, 112; GS II, 610). It is on this contact that Benjamin predicates the capacity to describe rather than to portray, which is realised nowhere more fully than in Keller.

What completely fills Keller’s books is less the sensory pleasure of looking than of describing. Describing is sensory pleasure because in it the object returns the gaze of the beholder, and in every good description is captured the delight with which two gazes that seek each other converge. (SW 2, 56)

Was Kellers Bücher ganz und gar erfüllt, das ist die Sinnenlust nicht so des Schauens als des Beschreibens. Das Beschreiben ist nämlich Sinnenlust, weil in ihm der Gegenstand den Blick des Schauenden zurückgibt, und in jeder guten Beschreibung die Lust, mit der zwei Blicke, die sich suchen, aufeinander treffen, eingefangen ist. (GS II, 290)

The terms of this passage written in 1927 clearly anticipate those of “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire” (1938) according to which the experience of the aura of a phenomenon coincides with “endowing it with the capacity to raise its gaze” (SW 4, 338; GS I, 647). But the convergence of two gazes does not produce a “community of recognition” as Caygill suggests.¹¹⁸ Although it is a medium, it is precisely the obstacle that this “space of the gaze” places before recognition that is the source of that delight which Benjamin insists is captured in the good description.¹¹⁹ This delight is that of the failure of discursive cognition in the face of the objective mystery of the unique appearance of a thing in the experience of whose aura, as Benjamin puts it in *The Arcades Project*, “it takes possession of us [*bemächtigt sie sich unser*]” (AP, 447; GS V, 560). Far from “not auratic,” it is Keller’s prose above all that, as the following claim makes clear, capacitates this surrendering of mastery on the part of the subject.¹²⁰

The sweet, cardiotoxic skepticism that ripens under earnest looking, and like a powerful aroma from people and things takes possession of the loving observer, has never gone down in a prose like in Keller’s. (SW 2, 54)

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 64

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*

Die süße, herzstärkende Skepsis, die unter angelegentlich Schauen reift, und wie ein starkes Arom aus Menschen und Dingen des liebenden Betrachters sich bemächtigt, ist nie in eine Prosa wie in Kellers eingegangen. (GS II, 288)

In the genuine aura of beautiful semblance the interruption of mastery is *redemptive*. For it involves experience of the expressionless ground of being of beauty, which alone has the power to complete the auratic work. But to the role of the latter in its completion corresponds the following corollary: mystery is essential to the artwork of beautiful semblance. The reason for this is spelled out quite clearly toward the end of “Goethe’s *Elective Affinities*” (1922).

Mystery is that moment in the dramatic in which the latter extends out of the realm of its own language into a higher realm out of its reach. It can therefore never come to expression in words but solely in presentation; it is the “dramatic” in the strictest understanding. (SW I, 355)

Mysterium ist im Dramatischen dasjenige Moment, in dem dieses aus dem Bereiche der ihm eigenen Sprache in einen höheren und ihr nicht erreichbaren hineinragt. Es kann daher niemals in Worten, sondern einzig und allein in der Darstellung zum Ausdruck kommen, es ist das »Dramatische« im strengsten Verstande (GS I, 200-201).

The strictest understanding of the “dramatic” grasps it in terms of the meaning of its etymological root, the Greek word *dran* (“do” or “act”). The expression of mystery is restricted to those *acts* of presentation wherein the artwork of “the age of auratic perception” is perceived according to an appropriately concentrated mode of reception (SW 3, 127; GS VII, 368). Crucially, long before explicitly formulating the thesis that “[t]he modality in which human perception organises itself—the medium in which it occurs—is not only naturally but also historically conditioned,” Benjamin implicitly notes not only the contingency of this modality, but the consequences of its contingency for the philosophy of art (SW 3, 104; GS VII, 354). “A true artwork,” runs the relevant line in “Goethe’s *Elective Affinities*” (1922), “has never yet been grasped other than where it inevitably presented itself as mystery [*Niemals noch wurde ein wahres Kunstwerk erfaßt, denn wo es unausweichlich als Geheimnis sich darstellte*]” (SW 3, 351; GS I, 195). In other words: under different social conditions of its presentation and reception, how an artefact would have to be grasped for it to constitute an artwork whose truth corresponds to this different age of perception remains an open question. By 1931, Benjamin considers such conditions to have in fact already arrived.

The Technique of Miniaturisation

In “Little History of Photography” (1931), Benjamin calls for the investigation of photography to be moved “from the realm of aesthetic distinctions into that of social functions” (SW 2, 520; GS II, 381). This is not only because in technological reproduction “the beautiful has no place” (SW 4, 338; GS I, 646). It is also because the “more or less artistic design [*Gestaltung*]” of photography is of far less importance for the function of art than the impact of the newly capacitated photographic reproduction of artworks (SW 2, 520; GS II, 381).

Everyone will have been able to observe how much more easily a picture, but above all a sculpture, and now even architecture, can be grasped in a photo than in reality. It is all too tempting to blame this squarely on the decline of the understanding of art, on a failure of people today. But this is thwarted by the recognition of how, at about the same time, with the development of reproductive techniques, the conception of great works changed. (SW 2, 523)

Jeder wird die Beobachtung haben machen können, wieviel leichter ein Bild, vor allem aber eine Plastik, und nun gar Architektur, im Photo sich erfassen lassen als in der Wirklichkeit. Die Versuchung liegt nahe genug, das schlechterdings auf den Verfall des Kunstsinns, auf ein Versagen der Zeitgenossen zu schieben. Dem aber stellt sich die Erkenntnis in den Weg, wie ungefähr zu gleicher Zeit mit der Ausbildung reproduktiver Techniken die Auffassung von großen Werken sich gewandelt hat. (GS II, 381-82)

A review called “Strenge Kunstwissenschaft” (“Rigorous Art Scholarship”) (1933) specifies more precisely the change in the conception of great works alluded to in this passage from “Little History of Photography” (1931). It primarily refers to the new mode of art historical research pioneered around the turn of the century by, above all, Alois Riegl. Rather than with mere biographical anecdotes or portrayals of historical circumstances, this mode is concerned

with the correlation that founds the reciprocal illumination between the historical process and upheaval on the one hand and the accidental, external elements, indeed the curiosities of the artwork on the other. For if the works that prove themselves most meaningful are precisely those whose life has most inconspicuously gone down in their factual contents—one thinks of Giehlow’s interpretation of Dürer’s *Melancholia*—then in the course of their duration in history these factual contents come into view to an investigator all the more clearly the more they have disappeared from the world. (SW 2, 669)

mit der Bezogenheit [...], die zwischen dem historischen Prozeß und Umbruch auf der einen Seite und dem Zufälligen, Außerlichen, ja Kuriosen des Kunstwerks auf der andern die wechselseitige Erhellung stiftet. Denn wenn sich als die bedeutungsvollsten grade jene Werke erweisen, deren Leben am verborgensten in ihre Sachgehalte eingegangen ist—man denke an Giehlow's Deutung der »Melencolia« Dürers—so stehen im Verlaufe ihrer Dauer in der Geschichte diese Sachgehalte einem Forscher um so viel deutlicher vor Augen, je mehr sie aus der Welt verschwunden sind. (GS III, 367)

This description of the mode of art historical research pioneered by Riegl is almost identical to the opening passage of “Goethe’s *Elective Affinities*” (1922), which predicates the preparation of the critique of a poetic work by its history on the following “basic law of literature”: “the more important a work is, the more inconspicuously and intimately its truth content [*Wahrheitsgehalt*] is bound to its factual content [*Sachgehalt*]” (SW 1, 297; GS I, 125). This echo indicates the debt of this literary historical essay to rigorous art historical scholarship by the likes of Giehlow, which is likewise grounded not “on research of character and relation [*auf Personal- und Relationserforschung*],” but “on precise insight into the work” (SW 1, 320; GS I, 155). The corollary of this influence is crucial. For if the photographic reproduction of paintings, sculptures and architecture indeed facilitated a more rigorous conception of great *visual* artworks by making them easier to grasp than in reality, then the fact of this influence reveals that it also—however indirectly—facilitated an equivalent conception of great *literary* artworks such as *Elective Affinities* (1809). Consequently, even the conception of an art form such as literature, which had already for centuries been received in a mechanically reproduced form, changed as a result of the mid-nineteenth century development of reproductive technologies. This is why the so-called “dialectical critique of [Benjamin’s] theory” by Adorno in *Aesthetic Theory* (1970) is so misguided. Whether “the potential of the technical procedure that brings about the detachment of what is seen from the subjective act of seeing” is already contained in “the objectivation of the cave drawing with regard to what is immediately seen” is irrelevant.¹²¹ For “The Artwork in the Age of its Technical Reproducibility” (1936) is not concerned with the place of the idea of reproduction in the essence of art. Rather, it is concerned with capitalising philosophically on the epistemological possibilities opened by *mechanical* reproduction in particular. These possibilities are connected not simply with the technique of miniaturisation, but the technique of montage to which mass miniaturisation gave rise.

The more rigorous conception of great works by early-twentieth century art historiography reveals how even *the culture of the investigation of culture* is not unaffected by a radical change of the conditions of production. What is more, it reveals the fact of the delay between substructural revolution and its superstructural expression to which Benjamin

¹²¹ Theodor Adorno, *op. cit.*, p. 33; p. 56

refers in the opening section of “The Artwork in the Age of its Technical Reproducibility” (1936).

The revolution of the superstructure, which proceeds much slower than that of the substructure, has needed more than half a century in order to bring the change of the conditions of production to bear on all areas of culture. In which form this happened can only be specified today. (SW 3, 101)

Die Umwälzung des Überbaus, die viel langsamer als die des Unterbaus vor sich geht, hat mehr als ein halbes Jahrhundert gebraucht, um auf allen Kulturgebieten die Veränderung der Produktionsbedingungen zur Geltung zu bringen. In welcher Gestalt das geschah, läßt sich erst heute angeben. (GS VII, 350)

Since the dialectic of the present conditions of production “makes itself noticeable in the superstructure no less than in the economy,” the superstructural expression of the substructural revolution is no less epistemological than ontological (SW 3, 101; GS VII, 350). It is not only the form of cultural products that the Technological Revolution impacted, but the no less cultural *forms of its recognition*. Crucially, the latter take longer to change than the former. For example, although the urban masses did not suddenly arise in the 1920s in ontological terms, in epistemological terms they did. For it was only by having masses of images of the masses placed before these masses that the self-identification of the urban masses become possible. A new reality was rendered belatedly recognisable by the very technologies whose development brought it about. It is precisely this principle that informs the elaboration in “A Little History of Photography” (1931) of “how at about the same time as the development of reproductive techniques the conception of great works changed” (SW 2, 523; GS II, 382).

One can no longer regard them as products of individuals; they have become collective constructions so mighty that assimilating them is directly tied to the condition of miniaturising them. Methods of mechanical reproduction are in the final analysis a technique of miniaturisation and help man toward that degree of mastery over works without which they no longer come into use. (SW 2, 523)

Man kann sie nicht mehr als Hervorbringungen Einzelner ansehen; sie sind kollektive Gebilde geworden, so mächtig, daß, sie zu assimilieren, geradezu an die Bedingung geknüpft ist, sie zu verkleinern. Im Endeffekt sind die mechanischen Reproduktionsmethoden eine Verkleinerungstechnik und verhelfen dem Menschen zu jenem Grad von Herrschaft über die Werke, ohne welchen sie gar nicht mehr zur Verwendung kommen. (GS II, 382)

The break with the traditional conception of the great work as a product of an individual by the materialist art historiography pioneered by Riegl was facilitated by the photographic reproduction of great works. A problematic corollary of the more rigorous conception of the artwork as a collective construction, however, is a certain loss of clarity with regard to the contours of this object whose conception in terms of a total social process renders it less concrete. For this loss of clarity Benjamin identifies the following tactical compensation: to use *actively* the very technique of miniaturisation on which its loss is *passively* predicated. The mastery of works of photography and the photography of works displayed by “*Little History of Photography*” (1931) is capacitated by a technique of miniaturisation applied not only to its objects, but to *itself*. Such cultural scholarship is distinguished from “*Goethe’s Elective Affinities*” (1922) by the fact that its epistemological framework is *actively* informed by the mid-nineteenth century change of the conditions of production whose superstructural expression Benjamin now considers in terms of a tactical resource for philosophical scholarship. It is the establishment of such active correspondence that informs the task undertaken by *The Arcades Project* “to carry the principle of montage over into history” so as to erect a great construction “out of tiny, sharp and cutting prefabricated structural elements [*aus kleinsten, scharf und schneidend konfektionierten Baugliedern*]” (AP, 461; GS V, 575). If, as Benjamin puts it in a letter to Werner Kraft from 1935, the object of this construction is “the fate of art in the nineteenth century (in the concave mirror of Paris),” then the contours of *this* object are likewise rendered unclear by the more rigorous Marxist understanding of history (C, 517; GB V, 209). Only by miniaturising relevant texts of this period through critical citation and juxtaposing these miniatures according to a structure of commentary will it be “possible to combine enhanced clarity [*Anschaulichkeit*] with the implementation of the Marxist method” (AP, 461; GS V, 575). But any such historical materialist study will still have no claim to objectivity unless it is “preceded by an exact fixing of the standpoint of the present in the things whose history is to be presented” (C, 517; GB V, 209). In order to present the fate of art in the nineteenth century objectively, it is therefore necessary to first fix “the present standard of art” (*Ibid.*). The study in which this is attempted is, of course, “*The Artwork in the Age of its Technical Reproducibility*” (1936). But the latter will not be without its own peculiar structure for a reason that Benjamin spells out in an untranslated note.

Identification of the peculiar structure of the study: it brings the method of materialist dialectics to bear not on *any* historically given object, but rather unfolds it on that object which—in the domain of the arts—is *contemporaneous* with it.

Kennzeichnung der besondern Struktur der Arbeit: sie trägt die Methode der materialistischen Dialektik nicht an irgendein geschichtlich gegebenes Objekt heran, sondern entfaltet sie an demjenigen Objekt, das—im Gebiet die Künste—ihr gleichzeitig ist. (GS 1, 1049)

The historically given object is not the technology of film, which was invented around 1896, but the *filmic artwork*, which only emerged during and after the Great War in North America and Europe respectively. Over half a century separates the emergence of Marxist dialectical materialism around 1850 and the filmic artwork around 1920. How, then, is this philosophical method “contemporaneous [*gleichzeitig*]” with that historical object? The key to the claim is the parenthesis “—in the domain of the arts—.” The art of film is the outcome of a superstructural revolution that objectively corresponds to the mid-nineteenth century development of reproductive technologies. To conceive film along with Eva Geulen as “by no means [*keineswegs*] contemporaneous with the ‘discovery’ of the materialist method” is to indulge an idealist conception of time that has no place in materialist historiography.¹²² Time, as Benjamin writes in “On the Concept of History” (1940), cannot be assumed to be “homogenous and empty” (SW 4, 396; GS I, 702). The distinction of materialist historiography from less rigorous, idealist modes of historical investigation is owed to the “constructive principle” by which it is informed (*Ibid.*). On the basis of this principle, a tactical construction is presented, which corrects a distortion based on an idealist projection onto time of the form of an empty continuum. Only by virtue of this projection do two products of that superstructural revolution which objectively corresponds to one and the same substructural revolution appear noncontemporaneous. It is for this reason inaccurate to claim “that contemporaneity can only be an effect of presentation [*ein Effekt der Darstellung*].”¹²³ If “it falls to presentation to produce such contemporaneity in the first place [*solche Gleichzeitigkeit allererst herzustellen*],” then it is crucial to emphasise the epistemological, not ontological, nature of this production.¹²⁴ In other words: it is not “in the first place as representation [*Repräsentation*]” that “history becomes history.”¹²⁵ Rather, it is only as the presentation afforded by tactical construction that the truth of history is recognisable *for us*.

The Double Cut

The presentation of the contemporaneity of materialist dialectics and the filmic artwork in “The Artwork in the Age of its Technical Reproducibility” (1936) is produced by a text

¹²² Eva Geulen, *op. cit.*, p. 127; p. 588

¹²³ *Ibid.*, p. 127; p. 588

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 128; p. 589

whose montage principle of construction is *shared* by its object.¹²⁶ It is for this reason that Benjamin opens the study by specifying the role of tactical construction in the work of Marx himself.

When Marx undertook the analysis of the capitalist mode of production, this mode was in its infancy. Marx *arranged his investigations in such a way* that they gained prognostic value. He traced back to the basic conditions of capitalist production and *presented them in such a way* that from them arose what one could expect from capitalism in the future. (SW 3, 101; emphasis added)

Als Marx die Analyse der kapitalistischen Produktionsweise unternahm, war diese Produktionsweise in den Anfängen. Marx richtete seine Untersuchungen so ein, daß sie prognostischen Wert bekamen. Er ging auf die Grundverhältnisse der kapitalistischen Produktion zurück und stellte sie so dar, daß sich aus ihnen ergab, was man künftighin dem Kapitalismus noch zutrauen könne. (GS VII, 350; emphasis added)

Crucially, Benjamin is by no means claiming that Marx was *consciously* arranging his investigations according to a principle of montage. This would be to indulge in anachronism since its epistemic value was only specifiable after the rise of the filmic artwork in the 1920s, which is to say: once “the change of the conditions of production” has been brought to bear “on all areas of culture” (SW 3, 101; GS VII, 350). But this does not mean that this principle was not already informing the development of materialist dialectics by Marx. For it is inherent to those products produced on the basis of mid-nineteenth century reproductive technologies that comprised the environment in which he worked. Hence the twofold importance of *The Arcades Project* for Marxism as specified in an entry found in its section on epistemology.

¹²⁶ To have the principle of montage *in common* is not the quite same as how Geulen presents the matter: “The form of the text [*Textgestalt*] is the effect of a procedure that has adopted the laws of production of film as its own [*zu eigen gemacht hat*]” (*Ibid.*, p. 123; p. 583). For all these issues taken with Geulen’s essay, it remains a pioneering study that offers a more rigorous approach to the problem of the presentation of “The Artwork in the Age of its Technical Reproducibility” than that provided by other critics. The principle of montage penetrates far deeper into its structure, for example, than the discrete nature of its sections, which Miriam Hansen has recently suggested “are arranged to suggest alternating camera setups” that present “master shots taken from the larger perspectives” the essay surveys (p. 88, 89). This interpretation fails to maintain the distinction long since drawn by Geulen between a text that “has adopted the laws of production of film as its own [*zu eigen gemacht hat*]” and concluding from this that the text is “assembled [*montiert*] in the same way as a film” (*Ibid.*, p. 123, 125; p. 583, 585) For the similitude between film and the essay is a matter not of any direct reference between these two objects, “but of the uniformity [*Gleichartigkeit*] of the relation that in text as in film prevails between object and method” (*Ibid.*, 125; p. 585). See: Miriam Hansen, *Cinema and Experience: Siegfried Kracauer, Walter Benjamin, and Theodor W. Adorno*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012, pp. 75-206.

Firstly, it will hit upon the way in which the theory of Marx was influenced by the expressive character of the environment in which it emerged, thus not only by its causal connections; secondly, however, it will also show the traits in which even Marxism shares the expressive character of the material products contemporaneous with it. (AP, 460)

Erstens wird sie darauf stoßen, in welcher Weise die Umwelt, in der die Lehre von Marx entstand, durch ihren Ausdruckscharakter, also nicht nur durch ihre Kausalzusammenhänge, auf diese einwirkte, zweitens aber auch zeigen, in welchen Zügen auch der Marxismus den Ausdruckscharakter der ihm gleichzeitigen materiellen Erzeugnisse teilt. (GS V, 574)

If “Marx presents the causal connection between economy and culture,” the concern of Benjamin is to present “not the economic emergence of culture, but the expression of the economy in its culture” (AP, 460; GS V, 573-74). Since philosophy is itself an aspect of culture and will for this reason always share “the expressive character of the material products contemporaneous with it,” the only question is whether this character has been capitalised on by philosophical presentation. In the case of rigorous historiographical presentation under the conditions of industrial capitalism, only by carrying “the principle of montage over into history” will “the Marxist understanding of history” avoid being “paid for by its clarity [*Anschaulichkeit*]” (AP, 461; GS V, 575). The exploitation of the principle of montage in historiographical presentation reaches its limit when the objective expression of the economy in the domain of philosophy meets the objective expression of the economy in the domain of art. For the principle common to materialist dialectics and the filmic artwork once again leads to a certain loss of clarity. This clarity pertains not, however, to the distinction between the filmic artwork and other cultural artefacts, but to the distinction between this work and a work of philosophy. Hence the peculiar structure of “The Artwork in the Age of its Technical Reproducibility” (1936), which unfolds the method of materialist dialectics “on that object which—in the domain of the arts—is *contemporaneous* with it” (GS 1, 1049). The mark of this contemporaneity is the fact that the works of both only emerge on the basis of montage. Unlike in the production of a photograph of a painting where “the reproduced is an artwork and its production is not,” in the production of a “recording [*Aufnahme*] in the film studio,”

the reproduced is already no artwork and the reproduction is for its part one just as little as in the first case. The artwork emerges here only on the basis of montage. Of a montage of which every single piece of inventory is the reproduction of an action that is neither an artwork in itself, nor becomes one in photography. (SW 3, 110)

das Reproduzierte [ist schon] kein Kunstwerk und die Reproduktion ihrerseits ist es ebensowenig wie in dem ersten Fall. Das Kunstwerk entsteht hier erst auf Grund der Montage. Einer Montage, von der jedes einzelne Bestandteil die Reproduktion eines Vorgangs ist, der ein Kunstwerk weder an sich ist, noch in der Photographie ein solches ergibt. (GS VII, 364)

The significance of this distinction is predicated on maintaining another, namely that between the artwork and the document. The former, like philosophy, is defined by the purification of reality capacitated by the reception of its presentation. The fundamental principle that informs the presentation of Benjamin's philosophy from early to late and which the filmic object achieves on purely technical grounds is not that "objects are not given in themselves, but unfold only in presentation [*die Gegenstände sind nicht an sich gegeben, sondern ergeben sich erst in der Darstellung*]." ¹²⁷ Rather, it is that objects are not given *purely* in themselves and that their *purity* only unfolds in their presentation. ¹²⁸ Just as the purity of nature is not concomitant with its creation, but only arises with the naming of things, so too the filmic artwork is not concomitant with its production. For it too is subject to an external condition, which is not the language of man, but that of montage. Unlike the artwork of older media, the film does not exist *as an artwork* at any point before its postproduction. Hence the following distinction Benjamin draws between film and theatre.

Theatre is in principle familiar with the position from which the action is not readily to be grasped as illusory. This position is not given with regard to the scene of the take in film. Its illusory nature is a nature of the second degree; it is a result of the cut. This means: *In the film studio the apparatus has penetrated so deeply into actuality that its pure aspect, free of the foreign body of the apparatus, is the result of a special procedure, namely of the take by a specifically adjusted photographic apparatus and its assembly with other takes of the same kind. (SW 3, 115)*

Das Theater kennt prinzipiell die Stelle, von der aus das Geschehen nicht ohne weiteres als illusionär zu durchschauen ist. Der Aufnahmeszene im Film gegenüber gibt es diese Stelle nicht. Dessen illusionäre Natur ist eine Natur zweiten Grades; sie ist ein Ergebnis des Schnitts. Das heißt: Im Filmatelier ist die Apparatur derart tief in die Wirklichkeit eingedrungen, daß deren reiner, vom Fremdkörper der Apparatur freier Aspekt das Ergebnis einer besonderen Prozedur, nämlich der

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 125; p. 585

¹²⁸ Curiously, at a later point in the essay Geulen says much the same thing in describing Benjamin's philosophy as a "materialism become radical [*radikal gewordener Materialismus*], which has emancipated itself from the assumption that there is somewhere matter or material that would be given forth *purely* of itself" (*Ibid.*, p. 132; 596; emphasis added). But there is no mention anywhere of the metaphysical nature of the axiom on which this materialism is grounded, nor of the special epistemological status that Benjamin accords the artwork. This is likely to do with the influence on her thought of the tradition of deconstruction, according to which all metaphysics is identifiable as a metaphysics of presence on the one hand, and to which any strict distinction between the artwork and the artefact is anathema precisely because such a distinction is ultimately metaphysical on the other.

Aufnahme durch den eigens eingestellten photographischen Apparat und ihrer Montierung mit anderen Aufnahmen von der gleichen Art ist. (GS VII, 373)

The cut on which the illusory nature of film is based is in fact double. The term refers not only to the method of splicing whereby parts of certain takes are assembled during postproduction to form the film. It refers also to the end of each take between which the apparatus is adjusted to keep the sound and lighting equipment out of frame in a subsequent take that requires a different framing. It is only as a result of this double cut that “the apparatus-free aspect of reality [*Realität*]” is produced (SW 3, 115; GS VII, 373). If the filmic view of reality uncontaminated by the apparatus employed to attain it is consequently possible only by *enhancing artifice*, then this does not reduce the epistemic value of the filmic presentation of reality. Just as in materialist historiography informed by a constructive principle of montage, such enhanced artificiality opens new possibilities for the penetration of actuality presupposed by every presentation of purified reality. Hence the distinction that Benjamin also draws between the images of film and painting respectively.

The painter observes in his work a natural distance to the given; the cinematographer, by contrast, penetrates deeply into the fabric of givenness. The images they each carry away are vastly different. That of the painter is a total image; that of the cinematographer is a multifaceted, fragmented image whose parts come together according to a new law. (SW 3, 116)

Der Maler beobachtet in seiner Arbeit eine natürliche Distanz zum Gegebenen, der Kameramann dagegen dringt tief ins Gewebe der Gegebenheit ein. Die Bilder, die beide davontragen, sind ungeheuer verschieden. Das des Malers ist ein totales, das des Kameramanns ein vielfältig zerstückeltes, dessen Teile sich nach einem neuen Gesetz zusammenfinden. (GS VII, 374)

The fabric of givenness (*Gegebenheit*) is penetrated by virtue of the double cut. Specially framed takes cut actuality (*Wirklichkeit*) into given fragments, which are then arranged in such a way that allows for the penetration of their facticity. It is precisely this capacity of the double cut that informs the attempt “to carry the principle of montage over into history” (AP, 461; GS V, 575).

Thus to erect great constructions out of tiny, sharp and cutting prefabricated structural elements. Indeed, to discover in the analysis of the small single moment the crystal of the total event. Thus to break with historical vulgar naturalism. To grasp the construction of history as such. In a structure of commentary. (AP, 461)

Also die großen Konstruktionen aus kleinsten, scharf und schneidend konfektionierten Baugliedern zu errichten. Ja in der Analyse des kleinen Einzelmoments den Kristall des Totalgeschehens zu entdecken. Also mit dem historischen Vulgärnaturalismus zu brechen. Die Konstruktion der Geschichte als solche zu erfassen. In Kommentarstruktur. (GS V, 575)

The crystal of the total event is what in “On the Concept of History” (1940) Benjamin infamously terms that “monad” as which “an historical object solely and exclusively” confronts the historical materialist (SW, 396; GS I, 703). The constructive principle on which materialist historiography is based allows “a constellation saturated with tensions [*einer von Spannungen gesättigten Konstellation*]” to be presented in which the movement of thoughts can suddenly be brought to a halt (*Ibid.*). The halting of thought has a freezing effect on this constellation; “it gives the latter a shock,” as Benjamin puts it, “by which it is crystallised as monad” (SW 4, 396; GS I, 703). Crucially, the claim to totality of the monad makes of it a theological concept. Hence why Benjamin insists in *The Arcades Project* that

commentary on an actuality (for here it is a matter of commentary, of interpretation in details) calls for a method completely different from commentary on a text. In the one case theology is the basic science, in the other case it is philology. (AP, 460)

der Kommentar zu einer Wirklichkeit (denn hier handelt es sich um den Kommentar, Ausdeutung in den Einzelheiten) eine ganz andere Methode verlangt als der zu einem Text. Im einen Fall ist Theologie, im andern Philologie die Grundwissenschaft. (GS V, 574)

Philological commentary on a text is informed by the constructive principle, which allows citations to appear in juxtaposition with a structure of commentary to form a constellation. This presentation induces in the reader what in a letter to Adorno from 1938 Benjamin calls “the genuine philological stance [*die echt philologische Haltung*]” (C, 587; GB VI, 184). It is in this stance that the theological method takes over from its philological preparation. For it is only in a *Haltung* that thought is brought to a *halt* in a philological constellation, which shocks the latter and crystallises the monad. In other words: the philological stance constitutes a medium in which the resistance otherwise posed to the unification of the whole may be provisionally overcome in an act of reading. This is why the criticism by Adorno of the form of presentation of “The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire” (1938) leaves Benjamin unmoved.

When you speak of a “astonishing presentation of facticity,” then you characterise the genuine philological stance. This had to be sunk into the construction precisely as such and not only for the sake of its results. The indifference between magic and positivism, as you aptly formulate it, is in fact

to be liquidated. In other words: the philological interpretation of the author is to be sublated in Hegelian fashion by dialectical materialists. [...] The semblance of closed facticity that adheres to philological investigation and casts a spell on the investigator diminishes to the degree that the object is constructed in historical perspective. The vanishing lines of this construction converge in our own historical experience. The object thereby constitutes itself as monad. In the monad everything that lay in mythical rigidity as textual findings comes alive. (C, 587, 588)

Wenn Sie von einer "staunenden Darstellung der Faktizität" sprechen, so charakterisieren Sie die echt philologische Haltung. Diese mußte nicht allein um ihrer Resultate willen, sondern eben als solche in die Konstruktion eingesenkt werden. In der Tat ist die Indifferenz zwischen Magie und Positivismus, wie Sie es treffend formulieren, zu liquidieren. Mit anderen Worten: die philologische Interpretation des Autors ist von dialektischen Materialisten auf hegelsche Art aufzuheben. [...] Der Schein der geschlossen Faktizität, der an der philologischen Untersuchung haftet und den Forscher in den Bann schlägt, schwindet in dem Grade, in dem der Gegenstand in der historischen Perspektive konstruiert wird. Die Fluchtlinien dieser Konstruktion laufen in unserer eigenen historischen Erfahrung zusammen. Damit konstituiert sich der Gegenstand als Monade. In der Monade wird alles das lebendig, was als Textbefund in mythischer Starre lag (GB VI, 184, 185)

The presentation of truth, in other words, is ultimately executed not by the philosophical text, but by those acts of its reading based on a bodily assimilation to its constructive principle. "Philology," writes Benjamin, "is that inspection of a text which, advancing on its details [*diejenige an den Einzelheiten vorrückende Beaugenscheinigung eines Textes*], magically fixes the reader to it" (C, 587; GB, VI, 184-85). This fixation occurs by the production of nonsensuous similitude on the basis of mimetic behaviour whose fleeting perception *generates* historical experience. This experience anchors the vanishing lines of the historical object such that it is able to constitute itself as a particular view of the whole. It is the coincidence of this view with bodily praxis that explains why, in a letter to Horkheimer from 1937, Benjamin writes that although "a certain transparency in detail" is no doubt the distinguishing characteristic of "concrete dialectical analysis," it is nevertheless to be acknowledged that "universal comprehensibility of the whole is of course another story [*steht freilich auf einem andern Blatt*]" (C, 537; GB V, 458). The reason for this is intimated by a literal reading of the idiom *auf einem anderen Blatt stehen* ("to stand on another page"). The whole is another story because it stands on a page to which bodily praxis alone can turn. For this page is found in what in "Surrealism: The Latest Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia" (1929) Benjamin terms "image-space" (*Bildraum*) (SW 2, 217; GS II, 309). Or what, in a note associated with "On the Concept of History" (1940), he calls "the messianic world," which is "the world of all-sided and integral actuality [*die allseitiger und integraler Aktualität*]" (SW 4, 404; GS I, 1235). Access to this world is predicated on a

materialist stance (*Haltung*) in which the resistance to the unification between subject and object is fleetingly overcome.

The historical method is a philological method informed by the book of life. “To read what was never written” as Hofmannsthal puts it. The reader to be thought of here is the true historian. (SW 4, 405)

Die historische Methode ist eine philologische, der das Buch des Lebens zugrunde liegt. »Was nie geschrieben wurde, lesen« heißt es bei Hofmannsthal. Der Leser, an den hier zu denken ist, ist der wahre Historiker. (GS I, 1238)

This historian is a *function* of reading what was never written. As such, the true historian is strictly coextensive with this act of reading. The comprehension of the whole is not the comprehension of an object by a subject. It is a fleeting arrival at that “sphere of recognition” which in “On the Programme of the Coming Philosophy” (1918) Benjamin describes as a state of “total neutrality with regard to the terms object and subject” (SW 1, 104; GS II, 162). What secures this neutrality is “a temporal kernel tucked at the same time in the recognised and the one recognising [*einen Zeitkern, welcher im Erkannten und Erkennenden zugleich steckt*]” (AP, 463; GS V, 578). This simultaneity of subject and object is produced by mimetic behaviour and manifests as similitude whose perception is “bound to a moment of time” (SW 2, 696; GS II, 206-207).

It offers itself to the eye as fleetingly and temporarily as a star constellation. [...] It is like the arrival of the third, the astrologer, to the conjunction of two stars, which is to be grasped in an instant. Otherwise, despite all the sharpness of his observational tools, the astronomer here loses his reward. (SW 2, 696)

Sie bietet sich dem Auge ebenso flüchtig, vorübergehend wie eine Gestirnskonstellation. [...] Es ist wie das Dazukommen des Dritten, des Astrologen zu der Konjunktion von zwei Gestirnen, die im Augenblick erfaßt sein will. Im andern Fall kommt der Astronom trotz aller Schärfe seiner Beobachtungswerkzeuge hier um seinen Lohn. (GS II, 206, 207)

Just as the philologist must abruptly turn into the theologian for the whole to be grasped, the astronomer must abruptly turn into the astrologer. Hence, the endorsement by Benjamin in a letter to Scholem from 1926 of the attitude of proceeding “always radically, never consistently in the most important things [*Immer radikal, niemals konsequent in den wichtigsten Dingen*]” (C, 300; GB III, 158-59). Crucially, the shock of the textual constellation by thought brought to a halt in the genuine philological stance cuts both ways.

It not only crystallises the constellation as monad. It also and at the same constitutes the historical materialist. If “the philological interpretation of the author is to be sublated in Hegelian fashion by dialectical materialists,” then the latter are to be understood not as instances of empirical consciousness (C, 587; GB VI, 184). Neither the monad *nor the historical materialist* are there to be confronted outside of their reciprocal constitution because this “subject” is a *function* of the act of reading what was never written. “The historical materialist,” writes Benjamin, “approaches an historical object solely and exclusively there where it confronts him as monad” (SW, 396; GS I, 703). The location of this confrontation is “the now of a particular recognisability” in which “truth is charged with time until bursting” (AP, 463; GS V, 578). “This bursting,” continues this entry in *The Arcades Project*, “is nothing other than the death of *intentio* which therefore coincides [*zusammenfällt*] with the birth of genuine historical time, the time of truth” (AP, 463; GS V, 578). The experience of this death is predicated on the medium of the genuine philological stance, which must be induced in the reader by a text constructed according to a constructive principle. Hence why Benjamin declares in the same letter to Adorno from 1938 that

speculation sets out on its necessarily daring flight with some prospect of success only if, instead of attaching the waxen wings of esotericism, it seeks its source of power in construction alone. (C, 587)

die Spekulation ihren notwendig kühnen Flug nur dann mit einiger Aussicht auf Gelingen antritt, wenn sie, statt die wächsernen Schwingen der Esoterik anzulegen ihre Kraftquelle allein in der Konstruktion sucht. (GB VI, 184)

If this clearly repudiates the claim in the “Epistemo-Critical Prologue” that “an esotericism belongs to [philosophical designs],” then this repudiation does not extend to metaphysical speculation in general (O, 28; GS I, 207). Nor for that matter does it extend to the esotericism of the imagistic whole from which *universal* comprehensibility is precluded because predicated on acts of bodily praxis. The problem is less the flight or the height of this Icarian endeavour than the technique of esoteric design that Benjamin once insisted must capacitate its journey. There are both pragmatic and theoretical reasons for its subsequent repudiation. If Hans Heinz Schaeder is justified in describing the “Epistemo-Critical Prologue” as a “highly individual scholasticism darkened to the point of incomprehensibility [*ganz individuelle und bis zur Unverständlichkeit verdunkelte Scholastik*],” the problem with such a text is the vulnerability to co-option that attends such a combination of authoritative presentation and discursive obscurity.¹²⁹ On the other hand,

¹²⁹ Cited in: Gershom Scholem, *op. cit.*, p. 148; p. 184

Benjamin no longer simply assumes from his readers the capacity to read his esoteric designs in such a way that they would, as he puts it in letter from 1916 to Martin Buber, be led “into the divine [*ins Göttliche zu führen*]” (C, 80; GB I, 327). For the path does not follow a course of contemplation alone. It is only by way of a manipulation of the body-space of text and reader alike that similitude is to be lived in such a way that the imagistic whole is recognisable. If the medium in which the resistance to such magical communion is overcome is stance (*Haltung*), then the onus on philosophy is not just to exercise the law of its form as “a presentation of truth [*Darstellung der Wahrheit*],” but to induce that stance in the reader alone in which its presentation could prove effective (O, 28; GS I, 208). In other words: producing *the reader of truth* is as much the task of philosophy as producing *its presentation*.

Underhanded Control

The reader of truth is produced by a form of writing that demands to be read otherwise than according to an habituated practice of reading. Its style of interruption is designed not to escape habits of reading altogether, but to halt thought in the philological stance alone in which what was never written can be read. This form of presentation is esoteric design, which would likely have a place in every technological age. For the “prosaic sobriety” of the offset consideration that it induces in the reader “remains the single style of writing this side of the commanding sermon that befits philosophical investigation” (O, 29; GS I, 209). Tactical construction, by contrast, is the form of presentation best suited to historical turning points during which time traditional epistemological frameworks no longer correspond to the conditions of production.

For: *The tasks that confront the human perceptual apparatus at historical turning points are not to be solved by way of mere optics, thus by contemplation. They are mastered gradually according to the guidance of tactical reception, by habit.* (SW 3, 120)

Denn: Die Aufgaben, welche in geschichtlichen Wendezeiten dem menschlichen Wahrnehmungsapparat gestellt werden, sind auf dem Wege der bloßen Optik, also der Kontemplation, gar nicht zu lösen. Sie werden allmählich nach Anleitung der taktischen Rezeption, durch Gewöhnung, bewältigt. (GS VII, 381)

Accordingly, here it is not merely isolated acts of reception that philosophical writing must interrupt, but *habituation* itself. An intervention against the historically dominant form of reception must be staged on behalf of another form more appropriate to the new medium

of perception emerging on the basis of the different conditions of production of the current technological age. Hence the “canonical value” to be attributed “under certain circumstances” to the “reception formed with regard to architecture [*an der Architektur gebildete Rezeption*]” in which habit “determines even optical reception” (SW 3, 120; GS VII, 381). In the case of the first half of the twentieth century, the concentrated reception of auratic perception must give way to the distracted reception of the new medium.¹³⁰ Hence the following passage in the penultimate section of “The Artwork in the Age of its Technical Reproducibility” (1936).

Even the distracted can habituate. Further: coping with certain tasks in distraction alone proves that solving them has become a habit for someone. *By distraction, as art has to offer it, how far new tasks of apperception have become solvable, is underhandedly controlled.* Since the temptation incidentally exists for individuals to evade such tasks, art will tackle their most difficult and most important tasks there where it can mobilise masses. This it does presently in film. (SW 3, 120; emphasis added)

Gewöhnen kann sich auch der Zerstreute. Mehr: gewisse Aufgaben in der Zerstreung bewältigen zu können, erweist erst, daß sie zu lösen einem zur Gewohnheit geworden ist. Durch die Zerstreung, wie die Kunst sie zu bieten hat, wird unter der Hand kontrolliert, wieweit neue Aufgaben

¹³⁰ It is by no means curious that the nature of the new medium of perception is nowhere directly specified by Benjamin. For the perceptibility of perception itself is predicated on perceiving it from the standpoint of another mode of perception. The medium of perception to which distracted reception corresponds will therefore remain imperceptible before its own eventual decline after a substructural revolution comparably radical to the development of reproductive technologies in the second half of the nineteenth century. It is unlikely that the late-twentieth century development of digital reproductive technologies constitutes such an equivalent. For a distinguishing characteristic of modernity is the ceaselessness of that Technological Revolution which began in the nineteenth century. Accordingly, a substructural revolution of an equivalently radical nature would probably only be provided by the halting of technological development altogether. It is unlikely that this would come about other than by either a political or an environmental disaster on a global scale in the form of nuclear war or climate change respectively. Be that as it may, one characteristic of the current medium of perception does seem increasingly certain, namely the extreme provisionality of its organisation. Even this Benjamin predicted in his analysis of the significance of the filmic artwork for aesthetics in general.

“To produce *A Woman in Paris*, which is 3000m long, Chaplin shot 125000m. Film is thus the artwork most capable of improvement. And this, its capacity for improvement is connected with its radical renunciation of eternal value. This emerges from the countercheck: at the pinnacle of the arts for the Greeks, whose art depended on the production of eternal values, stood the art least capable of improvement, namely sculpture, whose creations are literally from *one piece*. The decline of sculpture in the age of the editable artwork is inevitable.” (SW 3, 109)

“*Um seine »Opinion publique«, die 3000m lang ist, herzustellen, hat Chaplin 125000m drehen lassen. Der Film ist also das verbesserungsfähigste Kunstwerk. Und diese seine Verbesserungsfähigkeit hängt mit seinem radikalen Verzicht auf den Ewigkeitswert zusammen. Das geht aus der Gegenprobe hervor: für die Griechen, deren Kunst auf die Produktion von Ewigkeitswerten angewiesen war, stand an der Spitze der Künste die am allerwenigsten verbesserungsfähige Kunst, nämlich die Plastik, deren Schöpfungen buchstäblich aus einem Stück sind. Der Niedergang der Plastik im Zeitalter des montierbaren Kunstwerks ist unvermeidlich.*” (GS VII, 362)

der Apperzeption lösbar geworden sind. *Da im übrigen für den Einzelnen die Versuchung besteht, sich solchen Aufgaben zu entziehen, so wird die Kunst deren schwerste und wichtigste da angreifen, wo sie Massen mobilisieren kann. Sie tut es gegenwärtig im Film.* (GS VII, 381; emphasis added)

The italicised sentence is not quite as ungainly in the German as it is in this translation, which reproduces as far as possible the quality of its construction for the reason that it stages what is here at stake. It is neither merely that its unconventional word order and four juxtaposed phrasal components interrupt the act of its reading. Nor is it merely that the following two components are ambiguous: *wie die Kunst sie zu bieten hat* (“as art has it to offer” or “as art *has* to offer it”) and *wird unter der Hand kontrolliert* (“is underhandedly checked” or “is underhandedly controlled”). It is also that an additional idiom comes into play by virtue of the proximity of *hat* and *unter der Hand*, namely *etwas unter der Hand haben* (“to be working on something”). Understood according to the first options of the two ambiguities, the distraction art merely happens to offer provides, as the published translation puts it, “a covert measure of the extent to which it has become possible to perform new tasks of apperception” (SW 3, 120). The agent in this instance is the human subject who recognises the artwork as a useful resource to exploit toward learning the extent to which apperception is historically contingent. In this instance, nature and the human subject have the upper hand. Understood according to the second two options, however, the agent is no longer the human subject, but the distraction that art *must* offer. This necessary distraction controls *in defiance of existing rules* how far new tasks of apperception have become solvable. Since the artwork is an objective superstructural expression of the new conditions of production, the solution of new tasks of apperception *has to be worked on by art*. For this reason, it is no longer *nature* and the *human subject* that have the upper hand, but *history* and the *artwork*. Only on the basis of this dialectic is the struggle value of the following thesis “on the developmental tendencies of art under the present conditions of production” to be recognised and the comment that follows it to be understood (SW 3, 101; GS VII, 350).

Reception in distraction, which with growing emphasis makes itself noticeable in all areas of art and is the symptom of far-reaching changes of apperception, has in film its true training instrument. In its shock impact film favours this form of reception. Thus from here too film proves itself currently the most important object of that theory of perception which was called aesthetics among the Greeks. (SW 3, 120)

Die Rezeption in der Zerstreung, die sich mit wachsendem Nachdruck auf allen Gebieten der Kunst bemerkbar macht und das Symptom von tiefgreifenden Veränderungen der Apperzeption ist, hat am Film ihr eigentliches Übungsinstrument. *In seiner Schockwirkung kommt der Film dieser*

Rezeptionsform entgegen. So erweist er sich auch von hier aus als der derzeitig wichtigste Gegenstand jener Lehre von der Wahrnehmung, die bei den Griechen Ästhetik hieß. (GS VII, 381)

Although tactical reception is as old as architecture itself, it is not architecture but film that is “its true training instrument [*ihr eigentliches Übungsinstrument*]” on account of its “shock impact [*Schockwirkung*],” which is based on the constructive principle of its technical structure. For the shock impact of filmic montage precludes the perception of the filmic artwork in the concentrated terms of a monument by derailing the trains of association on which contemplation is based. Crucially, this shock impact is not new in the history of art. It finds its precedent in Dadaism, which “attempted to produce the effects that the public today seeks in film with the means of painting (or literature)” (SW 3, 118; GS VII, 378). But the distinction of its effects from these attempts is crucial.

From an alluring graphic appearance or a persuasive phonic construction the artwork became with the Dadaists a projectile. It befell the contemplator. It won a tactical quality. Thus it fostered the market for film whose distracting element is likewise in the first place a tactical element, based namely on the change of settings and scenes that fitfully crowd in on the spectator. *Film has freed the physical shock impact that Dadaism kept packaged as it were in the moral shock impact from this packing material. (SW 3, 119)*

Aus einem lockenden Augenschein oder einem überredenden Klanggebilde wurde das Kunstwerk bei den Dadaisten zu einem Geschöß. Es stieß dem Betrachter zu. Es gewann eine taktische Qualität. Damit hat es die Nachfrage nach dem Film begünstigt, dessen ablenkendes Element ebenfalls in erster Linie ein taktisches ist, nämlich auf dem Wechsel der Schauplätze und Einstellungen beruht, welche stoßweise auf den Beschauer eindringen. Der Film hat die physische Chockwirkung, welche der Dadaismus gleichsam in der moralischen noch verpackt hielt, aus dieser Emballage befreit. (GS VII, 379-80)

The term *Emballage* (“packaging”) specifically refers to packing material whose cost is not included in the price of the product; it is an extra paid for by its purchaser. The contemplator of the Dadaist artwork pays the price of the moral packaging in which the physical shock is received because the experience remains bound to the bourgeois morality merely negated but not sublated by such works. Its art historical significance accordingly lies less in its artistic merit than in its ballistic technique, which anticipates the technical structure of film. The Dadaist artwork befell the contemplator like a projectile, the shock of which interrupted concentration and thereby “fostered the market for film whose distracting element is likewise in the first place a tactical element [*ein taktisches*].” What distinguishes the latter from the tactical quality of the Dadaist artwork is the *immediacy* of its physical

effect on the one hand, and the *mediacy* of its militaristic application on the other. The technical structure of film produces a “change of settings and scenes that fitfully crowd in on the spectator” such that distracted reception is induced without necessarily launching an explicit offensive. Now, if film is for this reason a covert training instrument of reception in distraction, then much the same can be said of “The Artwork in the Age of its Technical Reproducibility” (1936) itself. For it is likewise calculated to produce certain shock impacts that determine its reception. This has already been demonstrated positively by documenting certain moments of its tactical construction. But its most efficient demonstration is negative. This demonstration concerns the decision of its English translators to translate each of its six decisive instances of the word *taktisch* (“tactical”) as “tactile.” This mistranslation is clearly intentional: it is informed by the emphasis on the physical nature of the shock impact of cinematic montage, which causes the specification of the distracting element of film as “tactical” (*taktisch*) to take on—by virtue of the resemblance of these two words—the meaning of “tactile” (*taktil*). Whereas the latter derives from the Latin verb *tangere* (“to touch”), the former derives from the Greek verb *tassein* (“to arrange”). The arrangement of the part of the text in which the word “tactical” appears is itself a tactical one designed to produce a semantic montage in which two distinct meanings touch to form an audiovisual pun. But since the resemblance of the English words “tactical” and “tactile” is even closer than their German cognates *taktisch* and *taktil*, the decision to mistranslate *taktisch* as “tactile” is not a necessary compromise in the face of an untranslatable pun. It is an infelicitous attempt to parry the shock of this training instrument of reception in distraction designed to stage the unity that materialist dialectics and filmic technique find in the epistemic principle of montage.¹³¹

The Strongbox of Truth

The stakes of the training provided by “The Artwork in the Age of its Technical Reproducibility” (1936) are not small. For the failure of cultural praxis to master the forces of its economy will ultimately lead to destruction. “Imperialist war,” writes Benjamin, “is in its most gruesome traits determined by the discrepancy between the immense means of

¹³¹ This is something very much more specific and philosophically significant than the following observation by Miriam Hansen: “the whole essay could be considered an example of modernist literary and artistic practices predicated on cinematic montage. But above and beyond a New Objectivist desire to let “the facts” speak for themselves, the model of cinematic montage offered Benjamin a mode of representation or, more precisely, presentation that would yield meanings the individual ‘views’ did not have in themselves, that would allow him to project a different, virtual reality.” This criticism of Hansen is not polemical. It is included in the interests of clarity and with the following proviso that she states at the outset of her chapter. “The point of my discussion is not a matter of getting the artwork ‘right’ as against oversimplified readings and appropriations, but of clearing a space for more productive ways of reading it.” Miriam Hansen, *op. cit.*, p. 89, 84.

production and their inadequate exploitation [*unzulänglichen Verwertung*] in the process of production (in other words, by unemployment and the lack of means of selling [*Absatzmitteln*])” (SW 3, 121; GS VII, 383). The recognisability of *how* to adequately exploit this means is predicated on an epistemic technique that objectively corresponds to the current state of technology. It is accordingly only on the basis of a “technique [*Technik*] ... trained enough [*ausgebildet genug*] to master social elemental forces” that society will be “mature enough to make technology [*Technik*] into its *organ*” rather than its *cancer* (*Ibid.*; emphasis added).¹³² Just three years after writing these words this cancer arrived, of course, in the form of World War II. It is crucial to note that Benjamin was not naïve enough to believe that a mere essay could provide the training necessary to prevent a war whose eventual outbreak was by 1936 already all but confirmed when Mussolini declared the poles of the axis on which Europe would soon turn to be National Fascist Rome and National Socialist Berlin. What he did believe, however, was that the tactical construction of an essay could successfully protect its concepts from fascistic appropriation no matter what the outcome of the war so as to ensure their availability for use by later dialectical materialists. This he says quite clearly in a letter to Horkheimer from early 1937, just months after the declaration by Mussolini.

Small groups will for a long time be decisive for the rescue and bequeathal of science and art. It is in fact not the time to parade in kiosks what we, probably not wholly unjustly, believe to hold in our hands; rather, it seems the time to think of its bombproof housing. Perhaps herein lies the dialectic

¹³² It is no doubt this passage from “The Artwork in the Age of its Technical Reproducibility” (1936) that prompted the following observation with which Adorno introduces its critique in *Aesthetic Theory* (1970).

“At times, productive forces unleashed aesthetically represent that real unleashing that is hindered by the relations of production. Artworks organised by the subject capacitate *tant bien que mal* [as best they can] what subjectlessly organised society does not allow; city planning already lags necessarily far behind that of a great purpose-free construction.”

“Zuzeiten vertreten ästhetisch entfesselte Produktivkräfte jene reale Entfesselung, die von den Produktionsverhältnissen verhindert wird. Vom Subjekt organisierte Kunstwerke vermögen, *tant bien que mal*, was die subjektlos organisierte Gesellschaft nicht zuläßt; die Stadtplanung bereits hinkt notwendig hinter der eines großen zweckfreien Gebildes her.”

Theodor Adorno, *op. cit.*, p. 33; p. 46. If this is indeed the case in city planning, it is by no means the case in the planning of a great filmic construction. And it is precisely because the filmic artwork is not purpose-free that it bears comparison with city planning. For the optical reception of film is likewise determined by habit only because it is received in a state of distraction while in use. But it is used less for accommodation than for distraction from the unaccommodating nature of modern urban space. It is, however, not only a *tactile* advantage for technical perceptual and epistemic training at the historical turning point of the first half of the twentieth century that is offered by film. In addition, it has a *tactical* advantage that distinguishes it from every older medium. For its products are relatively quick to produce, radically provisional, in principle infinitely reproducible, and easily transportable. By virtue of these qualities filmic artworks have the power to capacitate far more of “what subjectlessly organised society does not allow” than artworks of older media. Obviously this power is corruptible by “its capitalist exploitation” (SW 113; GS VII, 370). But since this is no different in the case of music, painting or literature it does nothing to counter a claim for its tactile and tactical advantage at the historical turning point in which it emerged.

of the matter: To give to the nothing less than smoothly joined truth a cover that is smoothly joined like a strongbox. (C, 537)

[{K}leine Gruppen werden] auf lange maßgeblich für die Bergung und Überlieferung der Wissenschaft und der Kunst sein. Es ist in der Tat nicht an der Zeit, das was wir, wohl nicht ganz mit Unrecht, in Händen zu halten glauben, in Kiosken zur Schau zu stellen; vielmehr scheint es an der Zeit, an seine bombensichere Unterbringung zu denken. Vielleicht liegt die Dialektik der Sache darin: Der nichts weniger als glatt gefügten Wahrheit ein Gewahrsam zu geben, das glatt gefügt ist wie ein Stahlkassette. (GB V, 458)

The Allied victory of World War II did not bring an end to the decisiveness of small groups for the rescue and bequeathal of science and art. For their bequeathal in fact depends on their rescue by individuals who make tradition communicable by encompassing it in their *own* way. The idiosyncrasy alone in terms of which knowledge is bequeathable does not *preclude* from it universal comprehensibility, but it certainly makes it unlikely. In the context of fascism the decisiveness of small groups only intensifies. For now it is not only the *past* from which tradition need be rescued but the *present*. What is demanded, therefore, is a cover that protects the truth of tradition from its fascistic exploitation in the present for the sake of the future. Such is the cover of “The Artwork in the Age of its Technical Reproducibility” (1936), which provisionally quarantines not only the concept of mystery (*Geheimnis*), but this symbolically charged term itself. It locks it away as a resource best tapped by a posterity of times less precarious. Crucially, this “smoothly joined” cover is not quite the same as that “sheath” in which those things in which aura appears “lies firmly sunken”; it is not identical to that “ornamental encircling” which characterises genuine aura as it “appears in all things”(OH, 58; GS VI, 588). Yet this is not to say that such a cover has *nothing* in common with “that most hidden, generally most inaccessible world of surfaces that ornament presents” (OH, 81; GS VI, 604). For there are two sides to the philosophical strategy served by this tactical construction. The first is to present concepts in such a way that they “are completely unusable for the purposes of fascism” (SW 3, 101; GS VII, 350). The second is to habituate in its readers a stance that capacitates that genuine recognition which coincides with the production and perception of similitude. It is precisely here where its tactically constructed *auratic* character comes into play. For what “presents a training for the production of similitude [*stellt einen Lehrgang zur Erzeugung von Ähnlichkeit dar*]” is—according to an untranslated note from 1935—nothing other than “ornament” (GS II, 957). This strongbox of truth provides its own esoteric key in the form of an ornamental design that awakens the mimetic faculty of its readers. Such, then, is the basis of the relationship into which Meyer Schapiro was in 1938 the first to inquire in conversation with Adorno

who, in turn, relayed it to Benjamin in the form of the following question: “what is the relationship of your critique of the auratic to the auratic character of your own writing [*wie das Verhältnis Ihrer Kritik des Auratischen zum auratischen Charakter Ihrer eigenen Schriften sei*].”¹³³

¹³³ Theodor Adorno and Walter Benjamin, *op. cit.*, p. 266; p. 346.

PART III: WAITING IN THE WINGS

The Redemption of Discontinuity

“The symbol,” writes Benjamin in a note from 1933, “is definable as a sign in which no similitude whatsoever can appear” (SW 2, 717; GS VII, 795). Since “[t]he communication of matter in its magical communion occurs by similitude,” the discontinuity between the communicating and symbolising characters of language in general must be absolute (*Ibid.*). The failure to observe this discontinuity has radical consequences for the interpretation of Benjamin’s philosophy in general. A clear demonstration of this is provided by Brendan Moran’s analysis in *Wild, Unforgettable Philosophy* (2005). Although Moran by no means neglects Benjamin’s commitment to the symbolising character of language, he nevertheless fails to maintain its distinction from the communicating character. “The word,” he writes, “communicates—symbolises—‘incommunicability’.”¹³⁴ This projects onto the note a paradox that it does not in fact present. Incommunicability is not communicated for the simple reason that it is incommunicable. Rather, incommunicability is *symbolised*. The reason it *must* be symbolised is that were it not for the symbolising character of the word, the particular noncommunicability of which only a communicability is communicated would fail to be determined. In other words: that tension toward the particular meant on which every finite linguistic construction is based would not exist. This collapse by Moran of the tension constitutive of language as it is understood by Benjamin leads to the collapse of the distinction between the spiritual being and linguistic being of the thing. “The originary spiritual being,” he writes, “is linguistic being. The word [...] communicates symbolic, incommunicable, linguistic being.”¹³⁵ But it is not linguistic being that is incommunicable. Linguistic being *is* the communicability of the thing, its substantial style. If it were not communicable then it could not serve as the medium of that ecstatic praxis of genuine recognition back to which all factual knowledge is to be traced. “Only through the linguistic being of things [*durch das sprachliche Wesen der Dinge*],” writes Benjamin with regard to man, “does he arrive out of himself at their recognition—in the name [*gelangt er aus sich selbst zu deren Erkenntnis—im Namen*]” (EW, 255; GS II, 144). It is the mysterious symbolic intention of the name, which is a translation of a communication of the linguistic being of the thing, that allows the incommunicable aspect of its spiritual being to be encountered in the necessary and immediate symbolic intention of the name.

The discontinuity between symbolic and communicating character does not exhaust the discontinuities to be observed in the word. Another discontinuity exists between the

¹³⁴ Brendan Moran, *op. cit.*, p. 50

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*

components of name and sign. “Everything mimetic of language,” writes Benjamin in “On the Mimetic Faculty” (1933), “can, similarly to the flame, only appear in a kind of bearer. This bearer is the semiotic. Thus the complex of sense of words or sentences [*Sinnzusammenhang der Wörter oder Sätze*] is the bearer alone in which, in a flash, similitude appears” (SW 2, 722; GS II, 213). It is the generation of similitude on the basis of the mimetic faculty of man that capacitates “the fusion [*Verschmelzung*] of the semiotic and the mimetic in the realm of language” (*Ibid.*). Only thus are insights to be so loaded “with symbolic intention,” as Benjamin puts it in the untranslated note from 1918, “that they lose themselves in truth or lore, merge into it [*daß sie sich in Wahrheit oder Lehre verlieren, in ihr aufgehen*]” (GS VI, 39). But this fusion does not persist beyond its generation by mimetic praxis in the purified reality of the messianic world. In other words: it is by way of mimetic praxis *on the parts of Kant and Benjamin alike* that “[t]he most profound typology of the thinking of lore [*des Denkens der Lehre*]” had, to Benjamin, “always merged into [Kant’s] words and thoughts [*in seinen Worten und Gedanken aufgegangen*]” (C, 97; GB I, 389). Crucially, the fusion of the semiotic and the mimetic by these two practitioners is executed *on the basis of the discontinuity that prevails in impure actuality (Wirklichkeit)*. The latter is not a hindrance to the concretisation of similitude; it is precisely what capacitates it. The polarities of reality are a source of power to be harnessed in an embodied dialectical praxis so as to produce the spark of genuine recognition. It is the redemptive discontinuity within the mystical terms of Kant *themselves* that is the basis for the following claim in the “Epistemo-Critical Prologue” (1925).

Only there where the system is inspired in its ground plan by the constitution of the world of ideas itself does it have validity. The great divisions, which determine not only systems, but philosophical terminology—the most general: logic, ethics and aesthetics—, consequently have their meaning not as names of specialist disciplines, but as monuments of a discontinuous structure of the world of ideas. (O, 33)

Nur dort, wo das System in seinem Grundriß von der Verfassung der Ideenwelt selbst inspiriert ist, hat es Geltung. Die großen Gliederungen, welche nicht allein die Systeme, sondern die philosophische Terminologie bestimmen—die allgemeinsten: Logik, Ethik und Ästhetik—, haben denn auch nicht als Namen von Fachdisziplinen, sondern als Denkmale einer diskontinuierlichen Struktur der Ideenwelt ihre Bedeutung. (GS I, 213)

The discontinuity specified here with regard to the most general philosophical terms is not between the disciplines that they name. *It is internal to the terms themselves*. For in each there is a discontinuity not only between the symbolising and communicating characters of the name, but also between this mimetic flame of language and its semiotic bearer. If

Benjamin writes in “On the Programme of the Coming Philosophy” (1918) that the “historical continuity that will be guaranteed by the connection to the Kantian system is at the same time the sole continuity of decisive systematic importance,” then this is not only because “Kant is the most recent of those philosophers, and besides Plato probably also the only one, to whom it was a matter not directly of the scope and depth, but above all and first and foremost of the justification of recognition” (SW 1, 100; GS II, 157). It is because concomitant to its justification is “the symbolic charge” of those terms *in the names of which it will alone have been achieved* (GS VI, 39). It is for no other reason than this that Benjamin describes the symbolic charge of Kantian terminology as “the inconspicuously glorifying dimension of genuine recognition [*die unscheinbar verherrlichende Dimension der echten Erkenntnis*]” (*Ibid.*). The conflation of the symbolising and communicating character of the word by Moran, not to mention the total neglect of the role of mimesis in Benjamin’s thought, leads to a failure to grasp the significance of the crucial correspondence between this passage from the “Epistemo-Critical Prologue” (1925) and the opening section of “On the Programme of the Coming Philosophy” (1918). What founds the historical continuity guaranteed by connection to Kant’s system is not, according to Moran, the redemptive gap internal to those symbolically charged terms into which the thinking of lore has merged in mimetic praxis. Rather, this continuity

is sustained insofar as Kant releases principal coinages of philosophy from speculative metaphysics by keeping open gaps *between these coinages*. [...] [T]he higher experience of what might be considered a Hamannian-Platonic moment [...] and Kant’s basic divisions—epistemology, ethics, and aesthetics—complement one another. [...] In their symbolic intention toward one another, the fundamental divisions in the discipline of philosophy recall that justification is unrealised in recognition.¹³⁶

Justification is unrealised in recognition because the justification of those insights so loaded with symbolic intention that they merge into truth or lore “is revelation, language” (GS VI, 39). But the historical continuity offered by the connection to the Kantian system is not primarily based on the gaps that Kant opens *between* the principal coinages of philosophy. These gaps are epiphenomenal; the terms they distinguish are “monuments of a discontinuous structure of the world of ideas,” which is condensed in each symbolically charged term itself (O, 33; GS I, 213). The “great trichotomy must be maintained for the division of philosophy,” writes Benjamin, “even while [*auch solange*] these divisions themselves are still misidentified” (SW 1, 106; GS II, 166). “It may well be questioned,” he writes at another point, “whether the second part of the system (not to mention the difficulty

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 76-77; emphasis added

of the third) must still relate to ethics or whether the category of causality through freedom may have perhaps have another meaning” (SW 1, 106; GS II, 165). In what then does “the trichotomy of the Kantian system” have “its decisive grounding”? (*Ibid.*). The answer is clear: “in the trinity of the relational categories,” which comprises categorical, hypothetical and disjunctive relation (*Ibid.*). On the basis of this grounding Benjamin develops a practice of dialectics that recognises the possibility of disjunctive synthesis in such a way that does not lead to “a quartet of relational categories” (*Ibid.*). For “aside from synthesis another relation between thesis and antithesis remains possible,” namely “that of a certain nonsynthesis of two concepts in one another” (*Ibid.*). Such a possibility is obviously of interest to a critic writing from a linguistico-philosophical standpoint concerned with deconstructing Hegelian dialectics. And, sure enough, decisive use of this passage is made in “Intensive Languages” (2001), an essay by a critic at the forefront of the deconstructive appropriation of Benjamin, namely Werner Hamacher. How is it employed in the context of a total neglect of the reciprocal roles in Benjamin’s thought of symbolic character and mimetic praxis?

Benjamin’s further remark that this nonsynthesis could “hardly lead to a quartet of relational categories” makes it likely that he conceived it not as an equally ranked addendum to these categories, thus not as a further, fourth category, but as the ground—actually the abyss—of all the others, namely as a nonsynthesis by virtue of which there can be thesis, antithesis and synthesis in the first place, and as a nonsynthesis that can never allow these three to come to an unrestricted fulfilment. It is this structure of nonsynthesis and of the nonthesis concealed in it that renders itself more precisely in the structure of translation as a priori anticipation of a nonpropositional, nonintentional language. Like the nonsynthesis of every thesis, the translating language also holds and suspends every language of positing.¹³⁷

*Benjamins weitergehende Bemerkung, daß diese Nicht-Synthesis »kaum zu einer Vierheit der Relationskategorien führen« könne, macht es wahrscheinlich, daß er sie nicht als ein gleichrangiges Addendum zu diesen Kategorien, also nicht als eine weitere, vierte Kategorie, sondern als den Grund—tatsächlich den Abgrund—aller anderen gedacht hat, nämlich als eine Nicht-Synthesis, vermöge deren es allererst Thesis, Antithesis und Synthesis geben kann, und als eine Nicht-Synthesis, die es niemals zu einer uneingeschränkten Erfüllung dieser drei kommen lassen kann. Es ist diese Struktur der Nicht-Synthesis und der in ihr verborgenen Nicht-Thesis, die sich in der Struktur der Übersetzung als apriorischen Vorgriff auf eine nicht-propositionale, nicht-intentionale Sprache weiter präzisiert. Wie die Nicht-Synthesis jede Thesis, so hält und suspendiert die übersetzende Sprache jede Sprache der Setzung.*¹³⁸

¹³⁷ Werner Hamacher, “Intensive Languages,” *op. cit.*, p. 536-57

¹³⁸ Werner Hamacher, “Intensive Sprachen,” *op. cit.*, p. 230

Those redemptive gaps constitutive of language are replaced by the abyss that—far from *capacitating* genuine recognition in which the nonsynthesis of two concepts in one another is retained—simply precludes thesis, antithesis and synthesis from coming “to an unrestricted fulfilment [*zu einer uneingeschränkten Erfüllung*].” While that monad confronted by the historical materialist is indeed restricted insofar as historical time is provisional condensed so as to render a finite, intensive presentation of infinity, it nevertheless constitutes a moment of fulfilment. For the location of this confrontation is “the now of a particular recognisability” in which “truth is charged with time until bursting” (AP, 463; GS V, 578). “This bursting,” writes Benjamin in *The Arcades Project*, “is nothing other than the death of *intentio* which therefore coincides [*zusammenfällt*] with the birth of genuine historical time, the time of truth” (AP, 463; GS V, 578). *But there is no such death outside the medium of the genuine philological stance.* And this must be induced in the reader of what was never written *by an act of assimilating to some constructive principle.* Hamacher does not get to this point because he does not himself assimilate to the constructive principle of “The Task of the Translator” (1921). More precisely, he does not assimilate to the principle according to which the explanation of how it is alone possible to apprehend translation as a form is presented.

Translation is a form. To apprehend it as such, it is necessary to trace back to the original. For in it lies its [translation’s] law as decided in its [the original’s *and* the law’s] translatability. (SW 1, 254)

Übersetzung ist eine Form. Sie als solche zu erfassen, gilt es zurückzugehen auf das Original. Denn in ihm liegt deren Gesetz als in dessen Übersetzbarkeit beschlossen. (GS IV, 9)

Instead he projects onto the surface of this design the foregone conclusion of a linguistico-philosophical standpoint “caught up [*befangen*],” as Benjamin himself would have put it, “in that view of the sign character of language which imprints the irresponsible arbitrariness of its terminology” (C, 229; GB II, 409). With the coinage *Allokategorie* (“allocategory”) in sight rather than the esotericism of this construction, the praxis of reading that it effectuates, and the symbolic character of language that Benjamin insists *must* exist in tension with its allegorical character, Hamacher *categorically* apprehends translation as a form. “Translation,” he states, “is the a priori form of outliving and living on [*des Über- und Fortlebens*] of one language in another.”¹³⁹ Crucially, this is just an extreme example of a general misapprehension of “The Task of the Translator” (1921). For there have been no interpretations of it *in terms of* rather than *despite* its esotericism on the one hand, and in

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 508, 494; p. 199, 183

terms of the concept of staging on the other. Why has this been the case? The following claim from a review written by Benjamin in early 1939 not only confirms his continued commitment to the symbolic character of language and the *redemptive* nature of its discontinuity from the semiotic bearer of the mimetic flame. It also indicates a reason why the stakes of his philosophy of language have gone unnoticed for so long.

Denomination and designation present the poles between which leaps the spark that the philosophy of language seeks to salvage. This is what its history since the *Cratylus* teaches. (SW 4, 141)

Benennung und Bezeichnung stellen die Pole dar, zwischen denen der Funke überspringt, den die Philosophie der Sprache zu bergen trachtet. Das lehrt ihre Geschichte seit dem "Kratylos." (GS III, 567)

By encompassing tradition in his own way, Benjamin made the lesson of the *Cratylus* instructively communicable (C, 94; GB I, 382). But the communication has fallen on deaf ears deadened by nothing more decisively than the direct or indirect influence of the seminal essay "Plato's Pharmacy" (1968) by Jacques Derrida.¹⁴⁰ For what above all characterises this essay is the total neglect of the role of the dialogue form in Plato's *Phaedrus* of whose critique the following passage from "Plato's Pharmacy" is representative.

As a living thing, *logos* issues from a father. There is thus for Plato no such thing as a written thing. There is only a *logos* more or less alive, more or less distant from itself. Writing is not an independent order of signification; it is weakened speech, something not completely dead: a living-dead, a reprieved corpse, a deferred life, a semblance of breath.¹⁴¹

The basis of this interpretation are some remarks Socrates makes concerning the ignorance of writing with regard to "how to address the right people, and not address the wrong" on the one hand, and its incapacity to defend itself "when it is ill-treated and unfairly abused," always needing "its parent to come to its aid" on the other (275e).¹⁴² What Derrida fails to consider, however, is the illegitimacy of conflating the views of Socrates with those of Plato who, it cannot be denied, *does not speak*.

¹⁴⁰ Jacques Derrida, "Plato's Pharmacy." In *Dissemination*, trans. Barbara Johnson. London: The Athlone Press, 1981, pp. 61-172.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 143

¹⁴² Plato, *Phaedrus*, trans. Alexander Nehamas and Paul Woodruff. In *A Plato Reader: Eight Essential Dialogues*, ed. C.D.C. Reeve. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2012, p. 263.

The Role of Dialogue

In *Self-Knowledge in Plato's Phaedrus* (1986), Charles Griswold resists the reduction of this dialogue to the thematic in an attempt to reveal the philosophical significance of its particular dramatic form.¹⁴³ Griswold understands the latter as a practical solution by Plato to what Socrates fears from the written word, namely that it “can easily take on an authority, inviolability and finality it does not possess” and that it “lets us *persuade* ourselves too easily that we are in irrefutable possession of the truth, while in fact we are not.”¹⁴⁴ Unlike the written word in general according to Socrates, Plato's dialogues manage “to seduce the reader into undertaking the lifelong search that is the love of wisdom” as opposed to the pretence of its possession.¹⁴⁵ For Griswold, then, Plato wrote dialogues on account of the priority they grant to “the power of questioning to arouse the mind to look beyond what it is persuaded to be true,” which they do “[b]y raising the issue of *self-knowledge* on the level of the individual, and by deepening rather than transcending that level.”¹⁴⁶ Consequently, by preventing “readers from becoming absorbed in them in the way that Phaedrus does in Lysia's text [...], Plato's dialogical pharmakon is the antidote for the sorts of consequences that, as Derrida rightly detects, the *Phaedrus* itself confronts us with.”¹⁴⁷

Griswold supplements this answer to the question he charges Derrida with neglecting in a subsequent essay, “Plato's Metaphilosophy: Why Plato Wrote Dialogues” (1988).¹⁴⁸ Here his concern is to demonstrate the correlation between the dramatic form of Plato's dialogues and their “most comprehensive theme,” namely “[t]he origination of philosophy itself out of the medium of opinion.”¹⁴⁹ It is “Plato's overriding concern,” Griswold argues, “with the problem of the genesis of philosophy” that explains the absence in his oeuvre of any “discussion between two mature philosophers.”¹⁵⁰ The dispute between philosophy and skepticism is perennial because opinion is a starting point for philosophising that can never be left behind. Hence, the genesis of philosophy is something that happens not once and for all, but strictly provisionally in the staging of a dialogue with that “*already intelligible*, but nonmethodological, ‘beginning’ for our philosophising,” which is opinion.¹⁵¹ A commitment to the provisionality of philosophy's genesis accounts for the “‘empirical,’ unscientific, a

¹⁴³ Charles L. Griswold, Jr., *Self-Knowledge in Plato's Phaedrus*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 207

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 223

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 239

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁸ Charles L. Griswold, Jr., “Plato's Metaphilosophy: Why Plato Wrote Dialogues.” In *Platonic Writings/Platonic Readings*, ed. Charles L. Griswold, Jr. New York: Routledge, 1988, pp. 143–70.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 153

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 165

posteriori, occasional, and rhetorical” character of these dialogues with the critics of philosophy, which are designed to avoid begging the question of philosophy by assigning to the skeptic a position the possibility of which the latter denies.¹⁵² Instead, the dialogue must be “occasional, empirical, and contingent” because the refutation of the skeptic is “the deed that *there is learning* (in a sense other than memorisation),” whose performance by the skeptic the protreptic is designed to induce.¹⁵³

Until Socrates can yoke his critic into the activity of philosophising, then, he lacks his most potent weapon against him, namely, the deed of philosophising itself. The inference from this experience is the proposition that there are philosophical questions, and understanding of which brings one closer to what is.¹⁵⁴

For these reasons, Griswold questions the deconstruction in “Plato’s Pharmacy” on the grounds that it approaches the *Phaedrus* as a collection of thematic claims, rather than as an interplay between the thematic and dramatic aspects of the dialogue form. Because Derrida pays no attention to this form, he conflates the views expressed by a character within the dialogue with those of its author. Consequently, it is less Plato that is deconstructed in “Plato’s Pharmacy” than Socrates, a character whose express views demand to be distinguished from those of Plato *who nowhere expresses these views explicitly*. Griswold insists that this silence on Plato’s part be taken seriously enough to recognise that “since *Plato* does not say anything in his own name in the dialogues, there are no statements by *Plato* to be attacked or defended.”¹⁵⁵ But if Plato absents his authorial voice from his work, this does not make the latter beyond reproach. Rather, it makes it irreducible to a collection of thematic claims issuing from an author dissociable from the text itself. The criticism of Plato depends on approaching his works in terms of their status as dialogue, a form that has been described as “the only form of book that seems to suspend the book form itself.”¹⁵⁶ It is this suspension that the absence of authorial voice capacitates because the preexistent supervisory signified that conditions the idea of the book is thereby jettisoned. Or, as Derrida puts it in *Of Grammatology* (1967):

The idea of the book is the idea of a totality, finite or infinite, of the signifier; this totality of the signifier cannot be a totality, unless a totality constituted by the signified preexists it, supervises its

¹⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 156

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 159

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 160

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 222

¹⁵⁶ P. Friedlander. *Plato: An Introduction*. Vol. 1 of *Plato*. trans. H. Meyerhoff. Princeton University Press, 1973 (1958), p.166. Cited in Charles L. Griswold, Jr., *Self-Knowledge in Plato’s Phaedrus*, *op. cit.* p. 289 n. 30.

inscriptions and its signs, and is independent of it in its ideality. This idea of the book, which always refers to a natural totality, is profoundly alien to the sense of writing. [...] The end of linear writing is indeed the end of the book, even if, even today, it is within the form of a book that new writings—literary or theoretical—allow themselves to be, for better or worse, encased. It is less a question of confiding new writings to the envelope of a book than of finally reading what wrote itself between the lines in the volumes. That is why, beginning to write without the line, one begins also to reread past writing according to a different organisation of space.¹⁵⁷

This text appeared the year before the publication of “Plato’s Pharmacy,” an essay in which Derrida indeed attempts to read Plato according to a different organisation of space. From Griswold’s perspective, however, the space organised by Plato in his dialogues was not linear to begin with. And, of course, much the same can be said of the perspective of Benjamin as it is condensed in the following claim in the note from 1918.

The role of system, whose necessity is evident only to those philosophers who know that truth is not a complex of recognition, but a symbolic intention (that of its system-constituents to one another), is played in Plato precisely by DIALOGUE.

Die Rolle des Systems, dessen Notwendigkeit nur denjenigen Philosophen evident ist, die wissen daß die Wahrheit nicht ein Erkenntniszusammenhang, sondern eine symbolische Intention ist (die ihrer Systemglieder aufeinander), spielt bei Platon genau der DIALOG. (GS VI, 39)

Since there is no recognition of the symbolic character of language in the neostructuralist linguistico-philosophical standpoint of Derrida, there can be no recognition of this role played in Plato by dialogue. It is therefore not surprising to find this actor confined to the wings in the particular staging of the *Phaedrus* that Derrida directs.

Against Imitation

The understanding that the dramatic form of Plato’s dialogues is designed to stage a point of contact between the word of philosophy and the deed of philosophising is argued in a different way in *Of Art and Wisdom: Plato’s Understanding of Techne* (1996) by David Roochnik.¹⁵⁸ Despite thematic appearances to the contrary, attention to the dramatic form of his early dialogues reveals that Plato ultimately “rejects *techne* as a model of moral

¹⁵⁷ Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997 (1974), p. 18, 86.

¹⁵⁸ David Roochnik, *Of Art and Wisdom: Plato’s Understanding of Techne*. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996.

knowledge.”¹⁵⁹ “*Techne* is ordinary knowledge attained by the recognisable expert; it is determinate, methodical, teachable, noncontroversial, authoritative, purposive, and generally issues in a useful result.”¹⁶⁰ The precondition for the determinacy and teachability of such knowledge, however, is that it allows “for a gap, a disharmony, between *logos* [word] and *ergon* [deed].”¹⁶¹ It is on this score that moral is to be distinguished from technical knowledge, for the former “cannot suffer a gap between *logos* and *ergon*. The possession of it as a *logos* must entail its rightful actualisation.”¹⁶² In other words: the “possession” of moral knowledge is restricted to its performance, which means that its “epistemic content ... is indeterminate and cannot be systematically divided and then taught.”¹⁶³ “Instead,” writes Roochnik, “this is knowledge alive in the moment of dialogue.”¹⁶⁴ Now, this last comment demands to be tempered in light of Derrida’s work, which warns against a conception of the true as “the presence of the *eidos* signified.”¹⁶⁵ But once this has been done, the dubiousness of Derrida’s attribution of this conception of the true to Plato himself will become clear. For the momentary living of moral knowledge in dialogue does not imply full presence *as long as the tendency to regard Plato’s dialogues as imitations of living dialogue is resisted*. The elimination of this tendency is crucial to gaining a purchase from which to defend Plato against those of his critics who remain blind to the dramatic stakes of his writing.

Roochnik interprets “the interpretative indeterminacy [that] infects the *Euthydemus*” concerning whether “the Socratic protreptic [has] been effective” as an incorporation of “dramatic tension,” which allows this dialogue to express moral knowledge.¹⁶⁶ Since Socrates “fails to give good reasons why we should pursue philosophy rather than sophistry” his “arguments end in an *aporia* from which he needs rescue.”¹⁶⁷

His is not, however, a failure, because these very arguments provide guidance in how to perform the rescue operation. Cleinas and, more important, we readers are being called upon to respond to the *aporia* that Socrates has created for us. We are being called on to philosophise.¹⁶⁸

The power of this argument issues from the dissolution it catalyses of the distinction between the characters of the dialogue and its readers. It is not just a fictional character who is being called on to philosophise, but the reader to whose reading *this particular staging of*

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 6

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 151

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 97

¹⁶² *Ibid.*

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 175

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁵ Jacques Derrida, “Plato’s Pharmacy,” *op. cit.*, p. 111

¹⁶⁶ David Roochnik, *op. cit.* p. 175

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 171

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

the dialogue is ultimately owed. But this argument is in need of its own rescue from the diminishment of its force by Roochnik's understanding of the dialogue as an "imitation" of living dialogue. Because the question whether Cleinas will become a philosopher "is left open," Roochnik claims that "the dialogue imitates, rather than abstractly describes, the protreptic moment."¹⁶⁹ This reiterates another claim made earlier that "Plato's writings are imitations" of "living dialogue," which best exemplifies the moral knowledge that Plato recommends.¹⁷⁰ "As written works," he continues, "they attempt to reflect or exhibit or reveal the nontechnical knowledge that is *arete* [virtue]."¹⁷¹ On the contrary, the efficacy of the dialogues consists in neither reflection, nor exhibition, nor revelation of moral knowledge, but in *its staging via the transformation of the reader into a function of its performance.*

Charles Griswold's understanding of the status of the dialogue in Plato is more complex. Although he writes that "Plato presents us with dramatic *imitations* of the practice of philosophising," in a subsequent footnote he specifies his claim that "Plato does not construct *doxa* (opinion), he 'imitates' it" with the acknowledgement that "this is not the same as just copying or mirroring it."¹⁷² Thus although he understands the dialogues as imitations, he does so as imitations *of a peculiar sort:*

The dialogues not only *encourage* the search, and even *defend* the view that philosophy *is* a search [...], they also *portray* this very activity. By being imitations of a peculiar sort, they *show* rather than *tell* us that philosophy has this character.¹⁷³

That the dialogues themselves constitute the *demonstration* of the character of philosophy rather than its mere imitations is less misleading than the claim that they are imitations of living dialogue. Despite this, however, Griswold maintains a view that the dialogues not only aim to "represent" a reality external to them, but also constitute "distortions of the reality (such as that of philosophical conversation) they ostensibly represent."¹⁷⁴ Interestingly, he predicates this distortion not on imperfect representation, but the the opposite: "Thanks to the absolute control the author of a text can exert over the conversation present in it, such a conversation is far more perfect than one taking place in real life."¹⁷⁵ The assumption of *absolute* authorial control and the conclusion that "in a

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 175

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 107

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁷² Charles L. Griswold, Jr., *Self-Knowledge in Plato's Phaedrus*, *op. cit.*, p. 160, 291 n. 33

¹⁷³ *Ibid.*, p. 223

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 225

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

written Platonic dialogue, there are no accidents” is nothing short of mythic.¹⁷⁶ It presupposes that language is a means for communication simply available for use by a human subject, rather than the medium *in* which that subject—to whom it must thus remain not entirely masterable—is shaped. But this does not simply preclude all mastery. The “gift of the good writer” remains the ability “to grant with his style to thinking the spectacle [*das Schauspiel*] offered by a spirited sinewy body” such that “his writing benefits not himself but that alone which he wants to say” (SW 2, 724; GS IV, 429). It is just that part of what this writer wants to say is something in such a way that it opens its readers to what is truly unmasterable rather than merely parodies its power by simply letting language loose. Now, this faith in absolute authorial control on the part of this otherwise rigorous commentator is curious, not least because he previously underwrites the claim by Friedlander that “[t]he dialogue is the only form of book that seems to suspend the book form itself.”¹⁷⁷ For such suspension would have to extend to the assumption of an absence of accidents from dramatic form; only in the absence of absolute authorial control would the totality according to which the book form has traditionally been understood be interrupted and the form itself suspended.

If the fact that “*Plato* does not say anything in his own name in the dialogues” does indeed mean that “there are no statements *by Plato* to be attacked or defended,” then this silence on Plato’s part implies no absolute control, but precisely giving up its pretence.¹⁷⁸ *The author gives up his stage for the reader to be drawn onto it.* These dialogues suspend the book form itself because Plato allows *language* to speak over himself. Indeed, the sobriety of Plato’s dialogues with regard to myth is owed to a use of language that addresses itself, as Brendan Moran puts it, “as this side of something greater than itself to which it nevertheless belongs” such that the “mystery that does indeed unite all and everything” is provided no mythic answer.¹⁷⁹ From Benjamin’s perspective the basis of such philosophical praxis is clear: it follows from a commitment to the redemptive gap between the symbolic and the semiotic within every finite linguistic construction. In other words: it bespeaks what the *Cratylus* itself is designed to teach, namely that “[d]enomination and designation present the poles between which leaps the spark that the philosophy of language seeks to salvage” (SW 4, 141; GS III, 567). How it stages this lesson is provisionally determined in what follows, the tentative nature of which must be stressed given the fact that it is based solely on an English translation rather than the original Greek. As such, it is offered merely as a gesture in the direction of the way in which Plato demands to be read.

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁷ Cited in *Ibid.*, p. 289 n. 30.

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 222

¹⁷⁹ Brendan Moran, p. 167

The Truth of Primary Names

Primary names are the names of an hypothesised ancient language from which modern names derive, and which, unlike modern language, “expresses clearly what they mean” (418b6).¹⁸⁰ Over time these first names have been embellished by “people who think nothing of the truth, but only of the sounds their mouths make” such that merely “sound[ing] good in the mouth” eventually won priority over what was once clear expression (414d1-2). Arbitrary preference unwarrantedly elevates the articulatory act above the appropriation of the thing in speaking, which mitigates its naturalness and, in turn, its correctness. The letter *r* is an absurd addition to the word *katoptron* (“mirror”), for example, because it obscures what was once the clear expression of the act of seeing in the sequence of letters contained therein, namely *opto* (414c10). The clarity of expression in primary names is predicated on the ease with which they are resolvable into elemental names not “composed out of other names,” which cannot therefore “be carried back to other names” (422b1-3). Such clear expression, if not based on other names, must then have been based on gesture because “the only way to express anything by means of our body is to have our body imitate whatever we want to express” (423a8-9). However, naming is not for this reason to be understood as onomatopoeic. The imitation in play in naming is strictly distinguishable from that in, say, music and painting. The latter crafts are, according to Socrates, concerned with imitating the qualities of things, their sound, shape, or their colour.¹⁸¹ The craft of naming, by contrast, imitates the being or essence of things, including the being or essence of sound, or colour, which is itself neither necessarily audible or visible. Onomatopoeic names are therefore *incorrect* because they imitate the thing and not its being or essence, and thus fail to express what the “thing itself is” (423e9).¹⁸² Although naming is indeed a mimetic procedure, then, the object of this mimesis is nonsensuous.

Just as the being of thing is distinguished from the thing, so too the name is distinguished from the sign in which it lies concealed. As name rather than sign, the

¹⁸⁰ Plato, *Cratylus*, trans. with intro. and notes C.D.C. Reeve. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1998. As per convention, the line number will be given in parentheses.

¹⁸¹ Benjamin disagrees. As he puts it in a letter to Scholem from 1917:

“On the other hand it is likely that painting has nothing to do with the “essence” of something, for then it could collide with philosophy. [...] I believe [...] that here it is a matter neither of imitation nor of recognition of essence.” (C, 101)

“*Andrerseits ist es wahrscheinlich daß die Malerei auch nicht eigentlich es mit dem »Wesen« von etwas zu tun hat, denn dann könnte sie mit der Philosophie kollidieren. [...] ich glaube [...] daß es sich da weder um Nachbildung noch um Wesenserkenntnis handelt.*”(GB I, 395)

¹⁸² This is why, later in the dialogue, Socrates distinguishes between the assignment at stake in names and paintings respectively. If the assignment of a painting of a man to that man is simply correct, the assignment of a name to what it names is “both correct and *true*” (430d1-3). Conversely, the assignment of the same painting to a different man is incorrect, whereas in the case of names it is not only incorrect but “*false* as well” (430d4-6).

respective English, Greek, German and French words “bread,” “*artos*,” “*Brot*,” and “*pain*” are identical. Each word for the same thing in every language is, despite appearances, actually the same name. As the natural tool for naming, the name bears comparison with the shuttle, the natural tool for weaving. Just “what a shuttle itself is” is not the empirical object subject to deterioration, but the form or idea (*eidōs*) that determines the making of every shuttle worthy of the name (389b1-6). Similarly, just “what a name itself is” is not the empirical phonic or graphic realisation but “the form [*eidōs*] of name suited to” each thing (390a5). While individual shuttles “may be *in flux*, the shuttle itself is always such as it is.”¹⁸³ Likewise, the name itself.¹⁸⁴ But if in naming we “divide [*diakrinomen*] things according to their natures,” then on what grounds does this amount, as Socrates insists it does, to an act whereby “we instruct [*didaskomen*] each other” (388b10-11)? Or again: what is the basis for his claim that “just as a shuttle is a tool for dividing warp and woof, a name is a tool for giving instruction [*didaskomen*], that is to say, for dividing being [*diakritikon tes ousias*]” (388b13-c1)? Answer: the *immediacy* of the expression of the being or essence of the nominatum by correct names, which, as C.D.C. Reeve puts it, “owe their very significance, their very expressive capacity, to their natural correctness.”¹⁸⁵

We make names for all the other vowels and consonants, as you know, by uttering additional letters together with them. But as long as we include the force or power of the letter, we may correctly call it by that name, and it will express it for us. (393d7-e4)

¹⁸³ C.D.C. Reeve, “Introduction.” In Plato, *Cratylus*, *op. cit.*, p. xxii

¹⁸⁴ Neither shuttles nor names are simply generic, but in each case of a particular type suited to its object. In much the same way that a carpenter embodies “in wood the type of shuttle naturally suited for each type of weaving” (389c10), “the name naturally suited to each thing” must be embodied in “sounds and syllables” (389d5) or indeed in “letters and syllables” (390e3). This shift from sounds to letters constitutes no equivocation on Socrates’ part. It is warranted by the rigour of the ancient Greek alphabet, the letters of which each constitute a phoneme whose realisation always contributes to a distinction of meaning. Since ancient Greek knows no allophones (phonic realisations of phonemes that do not contribute to distinctions of meaning.), the claim that the essence of the thing is imitated by letters and syllables simply means that it is imitated, as Gérard Genette explains, “solely through phonemes.” Gérard Genette, *Mimologics*, trans. Thais E. Morgan. Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska, 1994, p. 21. This book by Genette was first published in French under the title *Mimologiques: Voyage en Cratylie* in 1976, just four years after “Plato’s Pharmacy” (1972) by Derrida. It traces the history of mimetic theories of language from Plato up to twentieth century French literary figures such as Marcel Proust and Francis Ponge. For good reason it does not include the philosophy of language of Walter Benjamin. For it was written before the publication of the relevant volumes of the *Gesammelte Schriften*, namely II and VI published in 1977 and 1985 respectively. Were it to be revised accordingly, however, the narrative it tells would be radically different. As it stands, it is an account highly comforting to structuralists and neostructuralists alike: once upon a time, when people were naïve, they believed that mimesis played a role in the founding of language. Since the late nineteenth century, however, it is only a poetic mind such as that of Proust that indulges with any seriousness in such reverie. Needless to say, the book is written from the standpoint of a reified concept of mimesis.

¹⁸⁵ C.D.C. Reeve, “Introduction,” *op. cit.*, p. xviii

The truth of the name of a letter is owed to its participation in the letter itself. The letter itself is not the empirical letter, but its *eidos*. The name thus includes the *force* of the letter by participating in the letter's *eidos*. This force is absent from the letter on its own unless—as in all five vowels in English—the letter happens to coincide with the word in which its name is expressed.¹⁸⁶ Rather than a matter of *correspondence* with reality, the truth of the name is grounded in its share in the force of the nature of the nominatum. As *immediate* expression of this force, unmitigated conventionalism is precluded from naming; mimesis must somehow be involved. Using correct names instructs irrespective of whether either speaker or listener are conscious of being so instructed.¹⁸⁷ Any instance of instrumental communication is founded on a more fundamental communication, namely the immediate expression of the being or essence of the nominatum. The fact that this instruction need not be intended on the part of the speaker, nor indeed recognised on either of the parts of speaker or listener, demands reconsideration of what constitutes a true statement. A true statement says of the things that are that they are. It does so by using correct names truthfully. Each name must not, however, “exactly resemble the thing it names” (432e1). For achieving exact resemblance would amount to cloning. The thing “would then be duplicated, and no one would be able to say which was the thing and which was the name” (432d6-7). Such duplication would take place at the deepest ontological level. It is not a matter of the name and the thing becoming mere “identical twins.” Rather, they would be clones in the strict ontological sense because the mimesis on which correct naming is predicated is a mimesis of the being or essence of the thing.

The significance of this, at first sight rather curious, point won concerns its corollary. A ban on exact resemblance secures the variability of the word in which the identical name may nevertheless be expressed. This variability is of fundamental importance for the theory of the gestural foundation of primary names. For it permits modern derivative names to remain true despite the historical variation of words. This point is won by Socrates against Cratylus for whom addition or subtraction of letters constitutes an absolute change in name, just as in mathematics an addition or subtraction of numbers constitutes a change in number. This understanding fails to distinguish between the different sorts of correctness that belong to numbers and names respectively. In the latter, correctness is analogous to that which “belongs to things with sensory qualities, such as images in general” (432b1). This does not

¹⁸⁶ Whereas the word “gee” is the name of the consonant *g*, the word “o” is the name of the vowel *o*. The basis for this coincidence is the syllabic nature of English vowels. If all names must be sayable and hence composed of “sounds and syllables” (389d5), in the case of English vowels the letter alone is sufficient to constitute a name qua smallest truthful unit of language.

¹⁸⁷ Or as Reeve puts it: “in employing a name for any communicative purpose whatever, we are overtly or covertly using it to instruct, to teach or tell the truth about the world; for communication presupposes significance or expressivity, and these presuppose truth.” C.D.C. Reeve, “Introduction,” *op. cit.*, p. xviii.

mean that it is in fact *sensuous* mimesis that is in play in naming. The analogy pertains, rather, to the fact that, like in images, inexact resemblance in names is not just permitted but *demanded*. Consequently, a name may include “an inappropriate letter” as is the case in the names of English consonants (423e2).

But if an inappropriate letter may be included in a name, an inappropriate name may be included in a phrase. And if an inappropriate name may be included in a phrase, a phrase which is inappropriate to the things may be employed in a statement. Things are still named and described when this happens, provided the phrases include the pattern [*tupos*] of the things they’re about. (423e2-8)

The identical name is accordingly expressible in different variations of letters and syllables “so long as the being or essence of the thing is in control and is expressed in its name” (393d2-4). The mark of the control of the thing is the inclusion of its pattern in the name. The expression of its pattern is predicated on the divisibility of the thing. It thus becomes clear that the division constitutive of naming whereby “we divide things according to their natures” (388a22) and use the name as a tool for “dividing being” (388c1) involves not just distinguishing things from other things, but distinguishing the essence of the things themselves. Correct naming divides the warp and woof of the thing itself such that nothing but the essential pattern of its being remains woven into the otherwise variable fabric of letters or sounds and syllables.

The extreme instance of this variation are the words for the same thing in different languages. However, there are nevertheless limits to this variation. Although a name may include inappropriate letters, “it will describe the thing well, if it includes all the appropriate letters, and badly, if it includes few of them” (433a4-6). “[A]ppropriate letters are the ones that are like the things” (433b11)—or more precisely, like their nonphenomenal natures. For just as a painting must be “composed of pigments that [are] by nature like the things that the art of painting imitates” for it to be “made like any of the things that are,” so too must names be “composed out of” letters or elements that “have some kind of likeness to the things they imitate” (434a5-b7). The way the ancients constructed “something important, beautiful, and whole” by combining letters and syllables to form names and verbs is accordingly analogous to the way a “painter painted an animal” (425a1-7). For the process by which “a thing’s being or essence” came in ancient times to be appropriately imitated by letters and syllables is analogous to that by which appropriate colours are mixed for painting a particular animal (424b8-9). But since investigating whether names are given in accord with nature is not a matter of phenomenal correspondence, empirical observation is precluded from the investigation. “Our job,” therefore, —“if indeed we are to examine all these things with

scientific knowledge—is to divide where they put together, so as to see whether or not both the primary and derivative names are given in accord with nature” (425a7-b2). For such analysis, which undoes the primal work of weaving by which the ancients, in naming, divided the warp and woof of otherwise undifferentiated being (388a13), is, Socrates insists, the *sole* foundation available “on which to base the truth of primary names” whose perfectly clear explanation is a prerequisite for someone “to have a scientific understanding [*technikon*] of derivative names” (425d4-426b1).¹⁸⁸

Another Approach to Scientific Knowledge

Despite its nonsensuousness, every true name nevertheless owes itself to the repetition of a particular primal gesture. The embodiment of the form (*eidos*) of the thing in sounds or letters and syllables is ultimately capacitated by gesture. However, neither correct speaking nor correct naming is thereby simply reducible to this. Correct speaking demands that things be said not only in the natural way to say them (by, for example, using the letter *r* as a tool for imitating motion), but also in the natural way for them to be said. Gesture alone is insufficient to fulfil the latter task. The natural way for things to be said presupposes the division of both particular from general and essential force or pattern from inessential. The tool for such division is, of course, the name. Hence, the problem: if knowledge presupposes particular naming and naming presupposes particular knowledge, then how is the division that both constitutes and is constituted by the name to be carried out? Socrates is well aware of this circularity, which is no doubt why he says not once but *twice* of the imitation suggested to be involved in primary names that it must “seem absurd” (425d1, 426b6). The truth of names is not ultimately verifiable without recourse to “something other than names” (438d6), because there is no way of knowing whether or not the primary names themselves were given correctly. Perhaps some of the foundational gestures were misguided. Perhaps all of them were. Either way, insofar as empirical practice presupposes thinking, and thinking presupposes naming, the verification of this is not simply empirically demonstrable. Hence, the “something other than names” on which their verifiability must rest turns out to be not a wholesale avoidance of names—which would be impossible for thinking—but *another way of approaching scientific knowledge*.

¹⁸⁸ Two examples of such analysis pertain to the letter *r* and *t* respectively. The ancients saw, Socrates supposes, “that the tongue was most agitated and least at rest in pronouncing the letter” (426e4-5), and for this reason used it as “a tool for copying every sort of motion” (426e1). The letter *r* is appropriately involved in saying motion because its utterance is based on a gesture that mimetically embodies the latter. The letter *t*, by contrast, is appropriately involved in saying stasis because “the compression and stopping power of the tongue involved in pronouncing” it is likewise “appropriately imitative” (426e16).

A clue to the nature of this approach is given in Socrates' response to Hermogenes' request to be shown "just what this natural correctness of names [he's] talking about consists in" (391a2-3). Hermogenes, says Socrates, is "to learn from Homer and the other poets" (391c8-9). Since the gods must, as a matter of course, "call things by their naturally correct names," particular attention is to be paid to those places where Homer "distinguishes between the names humans call things and those the gods call them" (391d4-9). Later, however, Socrates insists that "we admit that we know nothing about the gods themselves or about the names they call themselves—although it is clear that they call themselves by true ones" (400d6-8). All that can be investigated, then, is "human beings, and the beliefs they had in giving the gods their names" (401a4-6). Homer, of course, is no exception from divine ignorance. The exemplarity of Homeric naming, therefore, concerns the awareness of the absolute separation between human and divine naming with which naming in Homer is carried out. Still later, Socrates develops the point by implicitly specifying his explanations of the names of certain divinities as merely human explanations: "there is not only a serious way of explaining the names of these divinities," he says, "but a playful one as well. You'll have to ask others for the serious one, but there's nothing to prevent us from going through the playful one—even the gods love play" (406b10-13). Socrates knows that he knows nothing of the gods. For this reason, serious explanations of their names are unavailable to him. The playful way, however, is not merely the only available option. At stake here is no mere process of elimination. Rather, the playful way of *profane* explanation is authorised by the *belief* in love of play as a distinguishing characteristic of the gods.

Nowhere is this playfulness more concentrated than in Socrates' explanation of *technē*,¹⁸⁹ an explanation in demand of special attention given the number of analogies drawn between naming and various *technai*, such as weaving, carpentry, music, and painting. The context is his explanation of the names of virtues, a topic from which Socrates acknowledges having gone off course because, as Reeve explains in a translator's note, his investigation of *andreia* ("courage") had segued into that of, amongst other names, *arren* ("male") and *thēlus* ("female"), before arriving at *thallein* ("blooming").

SOC.: Yes, *thallein* itself seems to me to be like the sudden and rapid growth of the young, for the name-giver has imitated something like this in the name, which he put together from *thein* ("to run") and *hallesthai* ("to jump"). Notice how I go off course, when I get on the flat. But there are plenty of names left that seem important.

HER.: That's true.

SOC.: And one of them is to see what the name *technē* ("craft") means.

HER.: Certainly.

¹⁸⁹ "skill," "art," "craft," "expertise," "profession," "science," "knowledge," "technical knowledge"

SOC.: If you remove the *t* and insert an *o* between the *ch* and the *n* and the *n* and the *ê*, doesn't it signify the possession of understanding (*hexis nou*)?

HER.: Yes Socrates, but getting it to do so is like trying to haul a boat up a very sticky ramp! (414a8-c2)

This is one of the only instances in which Hermogenes displays any wit, or indeed any criticism of Socrates' views. Initially, Socrates responds defensively. Yet, much later, in his exchange with Cratylus, he accepts the point. The defence appeals to the hypothesis that primary names have over time been arbitrarily embellished "resulting in distortions and ornamentations of every kind" (414c7-8). Such distortion consequently calls for further distortion so as to effect a return to the original form. The subsequent acceptance of Hermogenes's criticism occurs in the context of a demonstration of the impossibility of sheer denomination on the grounds that "the chance of usage and convention [...] makes both like and unlike letters express things" (435a9-10). Irrespective of the correctness of a name, convention is necessary to establish the consistency of its usage. But for Socrates this admission does not demand acceptance of sheer conventionalism.

I myself prefer the view that names should be as much like things as possible, but I fear that defending this view is like hauling a ship up a sticky ramp, as Hermogenes suggested, and that we have to make use of this worthless thing, convention, in the correctness of names. For probably the best possible way to speak consists in using names all (or most) of which are like the things they name (that is, are appropriate to them), while the worst is to use the opposite kind of names. (435b6-d1)

Despite the necessity of using convention in the correctness of names, it is nevertheless possible, insists Socrates, to speak using names that are appropriate to the things they name. And this is the best possible way to speak. If it had seemed that correct speaking presupposed correct naming, what follows from the acknowledgement that convention must be used in the correctness of names is a shift in focus from the correctness of names to that of their usage. Just as the use of a carved piece of wood by a ship-captain constitutes a test of its usability as a rudder, so too the use of a word by a dialectician constitutes a test of its usability as a name. Such tests inform the shape of subsequently carved rudders and names, respectively. Once again, it is crucial not to confound the shape of the name with that of the word. The former is strictly nonsensuous. It is not a matter of altering the word so as to make it look like the thing. Rather, it is a matter of revealing the gesture of the thing hidden in the name by demonstrating whether a particular word is usable as a name. The crucial question is: does Socrates himself speak in the best possible way? For his explanation of

technē to conform to the relevant criteria, it would have to make use of “names all (or most) of which are like the things they name (that is, are appropriate to them).”

The crux of the explanation is the procedure by which *technē* is shaped into *hexis nou* (“possession of understanding”). The procedure—which requires that one “remove the *t* and insert an *o* between the *ch* and the *n* and the *n* and the *ē*”—could, of course, scarcely be more contrived. This is why Socrates must eventually admit that defending the view “that names should be as much like things as possible” is indeed “like hauling a ship up a sticky ramp.” But this admission, which ostensibly repeats Hermogenes’ earlier claim, departs in one crucial respect from what he in fact said. The explanation of the correctness of a name should not be “like *trying* to haul a boat up a very sticky ramp,” but, more precisely, like *succeeding* in this task. The difference between the two similes concerns the status of the practical knowhow necessary for the fulfilment of the sticky task. In the first simile, whether this knowhow is possessed remains uncertain. In the second, this knowhow is retrospectively demonstrated to have indeed been possessed—or at the very least to have been gained *during* the execution of the task. In other words: the second simile presupposes an operation of *technē* (“skill,” “art,” “craft,” “expertise,” “science,” “technical knowledge”). It is therefore appropriate to *technē* that its explanation involve an operation (removing and inserting letters) that is like another operation that involves *technē* (hauling a boat up a ramp). What is more, it is appropriate that it be so blatantly contrived. For what signifies *hexis nou* is not the word *technē* but the particular operation contrived so as to stage what is essential to what *technē* names. In other words: the pattern of the thing named by *technē* is repeated in the performance of its explanation.

The Bipolar Construction of Socrates

A sensitivity toward the contingency of his explanations runs throughout Socrates’ contributions, the clearest expression of which is the doubt he admits about his own wisdom. Initially, he dissociates himself from the particular wisdom he displays in the dialogue by attributing it to inspiration from which it will be necessary to be purified in consultation with a “priest or wise man” the following day when they can “exorcise it” together (396d4-397a1). Later, he generalises this doubt by admitting to Cratylus that he has “long been surprised at my own wisdom—and doubtful of it, too” (428d1-2). Socrates consequently thinks that “we have to turn back frequently to what we’ve already said, in order to test it by looking at it ‘backwards and forwards simultaneously,’ as the aforementioned poet [Homer] puts it” (428d1-9). Reeve argues that this reference to the dual insight of Homer “suggests

that it is dialectical examination that will provide the needed exorcism.”¹⁹⁰ But the character of the gesture by way of which Plato appears here to indicate such examination invites a more precise specification of its nature.

Noteworthy is that the *manner* of the dialectical optic on which scientific progress depends is prescribed for Socrates by a poet. The salient point seems to be that looking backwards and forwards simultaneously is not possible outside of a particular mode of presentation. In other words, and as Benjamin himself might have put it: *dual insight depends on a constructive principle*. The detail that the exorcism Socrates demands of his inspiration is possible only in *tandem* with a priest or wise man hints at the basic form required of such construction. What distinguishes the purifying consultation is the *polarity* concomitant with its dialogic form. The reference here not only to the mode of presentation of the *Cratylus* itself but to the Platonic dialogue in general is obvious. More important for interpreting the *Cratylus* in particular, however, is recognising the condition of polarity in the purifying consultation as a reference to the stipulation on which Socrates—in his very first contribution to this dialogue—predicates his involvement in the discussion. “Hermogenes, son of Hipponicus,” declares Socrates, “there is an ancient proverb that ‘fine things are very difficult’ to know about, and it certainly isn’t easy to get to know about names [...] so we’ll have to conduct a joint investigation to see who is right, you or Cratylus” (384a9-b1, 384c8). The joint investigation will, for the most part, not have been a three-way conversation. Socrates first defends denomination against sheer designation in his exchange with Hermogenes, before defending designation against sheer denomination in his comparatively brief exchange with Cratylus. That the polarity of the investigation is indeed granted the force of a *stipulation* by Socrates is demonstrated later by his frustrated response to the request of Hermogenes to be shown “just what this natural correctness of names [...] consists in” (391a2-3). Socrates replies:

My dear Hermogenes, I don’t have a position on this. You have forgotten what I told you a while ago, namely that I didn’t know about names but that I would investigate them with you. And now that we *are* investigating them, you and I, at least this much is clearer than before, that names do possess some sort of natural correctness and that it isn’t every man who knows how to name things well. (391a4-b1)

Socrates does not have a position on this because he knows that an *absolute* position on just what the natural correctness of names consists in is impossible because of the conditionality of names for thinking. On this only the gods may have an absolute position. Or to put the matter in Benjaminian terms: the justification of the symbolically charged

¹⁹⁰ C.D.C. Reeve, “Introduction,” *op. cit.*, p. xxxv

insights of ontology *is revelation*. What makes getting to know names so difficult is that thinking their origin necessarily begs the question of the name. But if the ideal “of an origin for language in genuine, non-name-mediated knowledge of the natures of things ... is not [...] humanly achievable,” then it is crucial to see, as Reeve does, “that the ideal *described* in the *Cratylus* is not the one *dramatised* in it.”¹⁹¹ Yet the generality of the understanding of drama that seems to inform the observation with which Reeve substantiates this claim leaves unrealised the extent of its perspicacity. For it is not simply that “in the dialogue there are no contemplators of unmediated being, only dialectical investigators, so to speak, of the verb ‘to be’—and this for two related reasons.”¹⁹² First, the number of roles in the dialogue is not restricted to those *three* ostensibly assigned to Hermogenes, Cratylus, and Socrates respectively. If Hermogenes plays the role of designation, and Cratylus that of denomination, the role that Socrates plays is strictly *bipolar*. There are accordingly at least four roles played in the staging of the *Cratylus* because that of the dialectical investigator is itself *always double*. Indeed, its bipolarity is conditional for such investigation. Hence, the second reason for refusing Reeve’s claim: there is only *one* dialectical investigator in the *Cratylus*, namely Socrates.

If Socrates is one character, his definitive decision in the *Cratylus* is to play two roles. But the efficacy of such play depends not just on decision, but on a particular mode of presentation. One mode suited to looking at what is said backwards and forwards simultaneously is, of course, the dialogue. For this setting constitutes the habitat in which the nature of the Platonic dialectician is most naturally staged. What is this nature? Nothing communicable in a single proposition, but stageable, perhaps, in the following excerpted scene.

SOC.: And who can best supervise the work of a rule-setter, whether here or abroad, and judge its products? Isn’t it whoever will use them?

HER.: Yes.

SOC.: And isn’t that person who knows how to ask questions?

HER.: Certainly.

SOC.: And he also knows how to answer them?

HER.: Yes.

SOC. And what would you call someone who knows how to ask and answer questions? Wouldn’t you call him a dialectician?

HER.: Yes, I would.

SOC.: So it’s the work of a carpenter to make a rudder. And if the rudder is to be a fine one, a ship-captain must supervise him.

¹⁹¹ *Ibid.*, p. lii

¹⁹² *Ibid.*

HER.: Evidently.

SOC.: But it's the work of a rule-setter, it seems, to make a name. And if names are to be given well, a dialectician must supervise him. (390c2-d6)

A statement that the dialectician knows how to ask and answer questions is, strictly speaking, false. This is why Plato has Socrates avoid stating it. There is a crucial difference between having such knowledge and staging it. In other words: the existence of the dialectical investigator is restricted to being a function of dialectical investigation. Socrates remains a dialectical investigator only so long as he performs such investigation. This scene from the *Cratylus* defies reduction to a proposition because its essence obtains in its *staging*. Saying that a dialectician is someone who knows how to ask and answer questions in any format other than the question and answer one would preclude what is said from itself being dialectical. The statement would consequently fail to participate in the nature of what is stated and would therefore, in turn, fail to fulfil the second condition of correct speaking: the natural appropriation of the thing. The understanding of correct speaking may now be specified more precisely. Correct speaking *stages what is essential to that of which is spoken*. Such staging may employ “a phrase which is inappropriate to the things” as long as “the phrases include the pattern [*tupos*] of the things they're about” (423e2-8). If it was already clear that this pattern is not to be sought in the empirical phrases, now it is possible to specify where it is to be sought: in the performance according to which speaking stages what is essential to the thing. For this reason, the demonstration of the correctness of names is inseparable from the staging proper to correct speaking at home in the question and answer format of the Platonic dialogue, but strictly foreign to the proposition. Hence, Socrates' stipulation that he would be prepared only to investigate names *together* with first Hermogenes and then Cratylus. Only thus could the pattern woven on the basis of the division of the warp and woof of the thing by the name find expression in the variable fabric of dialogic discourse.

A Slight Deviation from the Regular Course (II)

It was suggested above that the reason Socrates acknowledges having gone off course is that his explanations of *arren* (“male”), *thēlus* (“female”), and *thallein* (“blooming”) depart from the ostensible topic, namely the names of virtues. But the preceding analysis of the *staging* of *technē* capacitates a more convincing interpretation of this acknowledgment as not so much of illegitimate *thematic* drift, but of illegitimate drift from the *dramatic*. Some 122 lines before saying that he has gone off course, Socrates exclaims:

By the dog, I think that's a pretty good inspiration—what popped into my mind just now! Most of our wise men nowadays get so dizzy going around and around in search for the nature of the things that are, that the things themselves appear to them to be turning around and moving every which way. Well, I think that the people who gave things their names in very ancient times are exactly like these wise men. (411b3-c1)

Socrates proposes that primary names were given on the possibly misguided assumption of the Heraclitian principle that “the things they name are moving, flowing, and coming into being” (411c8-10). Between this proposal and the admission that he has gone off course, Socrates speaks 115 lines and asks one question. Hermogenes, by contrast, speaks 7 lines and asks two questions. Instead of asking and answering questions, Socrates explains some twelve different names in a section that includes a 65 line speech, the longest in the *Cratylus* by some measure. It is this departure from the practice definitive of the dialectician that culminates in the remark: “Notice how I go off course, when I get on the flat” (414b2-3). Socrates directs attention to the fact that his investigation has become rudderless; and not simply because he has strayed off topic. Of far greater significance than any departure from the *theme* of his dialectical investigation, is the departure from its definitive *format*. For the usability of a word as a name is able to be tested analogously to the usability of a piece of wood as a rudder by a ship-captain *only by a dialectician*. If the existence of the dialectician is restricted to being a function of dialectical investigation, then all those tests carried out in these 122 lines are not done so by a dialectician. And indeed, how could they have been given the possibility that the Heraclitian assumption to which each tested name is traced back is mistaken? Perhaps, as Socrates suggests much later to Cratylus, “things aren't really [in constant flux] at all, but the name-givers themselves have fallen into a kind of vortex and are whirled around in it, dragging us with them” (439c4-6). The question is: were this vortex to have been fallen into in this way, would this Socratic investigation succeed in avoiding being dragged into it? Would such success depend on *steering clear* of the vortex? Or is the appropriate dialectical course simply that of *circling* it without *succumbing* to it?

Whatever the answers to these questions, Socrates seems to think that the staging of *technē* returns the wayward investigation to its proper course. “Now that *technē* is out of the way,” he says, “I'm about to come to the summit of our inquiries” (415a3-4).¹⁹³ Before reaching this point, however, the explanations of a further 23 names are to be weathered,

¹⁹³ But first I'll investigate *mēchanē* (“device”). It seems to me that *mēchanē* signifies great accomplishment (*anein eli poll*); for *mēkos* signifies some sort of greatness, and these two, *mēkos* and *anein* make up the name *mēchanē*. But, as I was saying just now, we must go on to the summit of our inquiries, and investigate the names *aretē* (“virtue”) and *kakia* (“vice”). (415a3-10)

Before arriving at this summit, however, Socrates resorts to a “device [*mēchanē*]” he had introduced earlier to explain the name *kakon* (“bad”), namely “[t]hat of attributing a foreign origin to it” (415e5-8).

each guided by the Heraclitian assumption that grants kinesis priority over stasis, and each accordingly at risk of succumbing to the possible vortex. Eventually, Hermogenes at last thinks to ask about the correctness of some of the names on which the Heraclitian explanations are based, such as *ion* (“going”), *rheon* (“flowing”), and *doun* (“shackling”) (421c2-4). This leads to the discussion of those primary names that “make the things that are as clear as possible to us” by “expressing the nature of one of” them, without being “based on other names” (422d1-12). The only alternative basis to other names, insists Socrates, is the body of the speaker; and “the only way to express anything by means of our body is to have our body imitate whatever we want to express” (423a8-10). But what is imitated here is not the appearance of the thing, but its being or essence, which rules out onomatopoeia as a legitimate basis for primary names. The letters and syllables of a primary name must grasp the being or essence of the nominatum not merely by sounding or looking like it, but by *becoming* like it. Finally, what Socrates presents as the summit of the investigation has been reached:

Our job—if indeed we are to examine all these things with scientific knowledge—is to divide where they [the ancients] put together, so as to see whether or not both the primary and derivative names are given in accord with nature. For, any other way of connecting names to things, Hermogenes, is inferior and unsystematic. (425a9-b3)

But to this task corresponds a caveat similar to that applied to the investigation of the names of the gods. Just as the latter must be guided merely by human beliefs in the gods rather than any knowledge of the gods themselves the truth of which man must remain “wholly ignorant,” so too in dividing names scientifically all we can do, says Socrates, is “follow the proverb and ‘do the best we can’ to work at them” (425c7-8). The summit of the investigation, it turns out, consists of acknowledging not just its necessary contingency and provisionality, but also its apparent absurdity.

Perhaps it will seem absurd [*geloia*], Hermogenes, to think that things become clear by being imitated in letters and syllables, but it is absolutely unavoidable. For we have nothing better on which to base the truth of primary names. (425d1-426b3)

A touch of absurdity is necessary to the scientific investigation of names. Indeed, the efficacy of Socrates’ bipolar role is predicated not simply on recognisable sense, but on its interplay with absurdity—which explains why Plato has Socrates take such consistent recourse to the absurd. On at least four occasions Socrates emphasises the apparent nonsensicality or absurdity of his position, which *nevertheless* somehow retains its

plausibility (393b1, 397d5-6, 401e3-10, 422c2-3 425d1, 426b6). The absurd refrain of the Platonic orchestration may merely emphasise what had from the start been acknowledged as the question begging nature of any investigation into names. But its reduction to this discursive theme fails to do justice to the emphasis that Plato has been shown to give to the *presentational* demand of dialectical investigation, the efficacy of which depends on a *constructive principle*. This refrain of the absurd may for this reason itself be read as a significant *gesture*, one that embodies the touch of absurdity *necessary* to the scientific investigation of naming

Truth presupposes names whose participation in things secures their ontological grounding. Denomination winnows essence from appearance. The particularity of this act is secured by designation, which—however provisionally—distinguishes between appearances. The interdependency of denomination and designation, however, in no way mitigates their absolute discrepancy. If the theory that the bipolar character of Socrates stages is “a true synthesis of the opposed theories of his interlocutors,”¹⁹⁴ then this is only so if “true synthesis” is distinguished by the absolute intransigence to sublation of the interdependent roles it brings together. For the tension between the roles of Hermogenes and Cratylus is not *relieved* in the role of Socrates. The contradiction between denomination and designation remains such that these two poles find expression in Socrates not as synthesis, but precisely as *nonsynthesis*. Thus has been demonstrated not only how the *Cratylus* itself presents those poles of denomination and designation “between which leaps the spark that the philosophy of language seeks to salvage” (SW 4, 141; GS III, 567). What has likewise been demonstrated is the philosophical basis of “Geheimzeichnen” (“Secret Signs”) (1933), an instance of that form which plays in the philosopher of modernity a role equivalent to dialogue in the philosopher of antiquity. This form is the no less symbolically charged *Denkbild* (“thought-image”) as it was developed by Benjamin and which is exemplified by this piece in which a radical Jewish intellectual publicly endorses an insight he attributes to an openly anti-Semitic German mystic. It appeared in the *Kölnische Zeitung* (“Cologne Gazette”) on February 25, 1933—less than a month after the appointment of Adolf Hitler as Chancellor of Germany. The task of staging its spark has at last been left to the hands of *this* reader.

Secret Signs. Orally one bequeathes an adage by Schuler. In every recognition, so he said, a touch of absurdity must be included, just as ancient carpet designs or ornamental friezes always betrayed somewhere a slight deviation from their regular course. In other words: it is not the progress from recognition to recognition that is decisive, but the leap in every single recognition itself. It is the

¹⁹⁴ C.D.C. Reeve, “Introduction,” *op. cit.*, p. lii

inconspicuous marker of genuineness that distinguishes it from all serial goods manufactured according to a template. (SW 2, 699)

Geheimzeichen. Man überliefert mündlich ein Wort von Schuler. In jeder Erkenntnis müsse, so sagte er, ein Quentchen Widersinn enthalten sein, wie die antiken Teppichmuster oder Ornamentfriese von ihrem regelmäßigen Verlauf immer irgendwo eine geringfügige Abweichung erkennen ließen. Mit andern Worten: Nicht der Fortgang von Erkenntnis zu Erkenntnis ist entscheidend, sondern der Sprung in jeder einzelnen Erkenntnis selbst. Er ist die unscheinbare Echtheitsmarke, die sie von aller Serienware unterscheidet, die nach Schablone angefertigt ist. (GS IV, 425)

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