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*The “Medusan” Glance: Language and Critique
in the Early Writings of Walter Benjamin*

Ari Linden

Philosophical Foundations

In his monograph *Arresting Language: From Leibniz to Benjamin*, scholar Peter Fenves writes: “Because the model for [Walter] Benjamin’s argument of the transcategorical term ‘language’ beyond the regions of human intentionality and consciousness resembles Kant’s argument for the purely intuitive character of space, language cannot fail to appear *like* space in the course of its transcendental exposition.”¹ By thereby likening “language” in Benjamin to a transcendental condition of possibility, Fenves paves the way for my own reading of select works from Benjamin’s early period, generally understood as the years between 1916 and 1925. In what follows I will argue that Benjamin’s early essays on language and translation lay the epistemological groundwork for what evolves into a theory of tragedy, allegory, and the German mourning play. As the inflection of his thought vacillates between the poles of theology and critical philosophy, I will further argue that Benjamin develops a method of criticism designed to mediate the relationship between the language of the work of art and what he calls its philosophical “idea,” which one critic has defined as the truth that artworks “release in their own process of disintegration.”²

By identifying the primary tendencies in each of the works under consideration, I will show how their immanent relationships to one another illuminate concepts in Benjamin that may appear obscure, undefined, or unrefined in their initial iterations. The themes and terms that I will examine are thus Benjamin’s own: the relationship between human and “pure” or “divine” language, the constellation of myth, nature, truth, and knowledge, and finally, the meaning and function of allegory in modernity. To narrow the scope of this project, I have decided to omit intensive analyses of other relevant writings of Benjamin, namely *Goethe’s Wahlverwandtschaften*, *Der Begriff der Kritik in der deutschen Romantik*, and *Die Kritik der Gewalt*. It is not that these particular texts contain something that would fundamentally contradict my argument; it is simply that it is not possible to critically treat

1 See Peter Fenves, *Arrested Language: From Leibniz to Benjamin*, Stanford University Press: 2002, 203. Werner Hamacher makes a similar claim in his essay, “Intensive Sprachen.” See *Übersetzen: Walter Benjamin*, hrsg. von Christian L. Hart Nibbrig. Suhrkamp: Frankfurt, 2001, 174-235.

2 See Robert Hullot-Kentor, “Foreword,” in *Kierkegaard: Construction of the Aesthetic*, Theodor Adorno, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor, University of Minnesota: 1989, xv.

each one of these seminal texts in one article. The texts under consideration are sufficiently representative of the patterns of thinking that inform much of Benjamin's early work.

The contemporary scholars whose concerns are closest to my own—Peter Fenves, Howard Caygill, Winfried Menninghaus, Uwe Steiner, and Sam Weber—have successfully shown how Benjamin's theories of language and criticism rest, to a certain extent, on philosophical foundations. These scholars have all made explicit the crucial connections among recurring themes in Benjamin's early writings. But while it is certainly difficult to even attempt to make an intervention in Benjamin scholarship, what I believe is still missing is a more sustained analysis of how Benjamin's theory of language anticipates his theory of both criticism and the modern work of art.³ I thus intend to show how Benjamin's concept of criticism cannot be thought apart from his theory of language, and why this is such an important moment in Benjamin's pre-Marxist thought.

On Pure Language and Translation

Decisive in the essay *Über Sprache überhaupt und über die Sprache des Menschen* is Benjamin's two-fold rejection of what he curiously refers to as the "bourgeois" and "mystical" theories of language. The former understands language as a pure means, or as a conduit through which extra-linguistic meaning is somehow communicated, while the latter posits an immediate identification between word and thing, or signifier and signified, and thus views language as a pure end. Seeking a dialectical third way, Benjamin then asks himself what language can actually be said to communicate, and responds by writing:

Das geistige Wesen teilt sich in einer Sprache und nicht *durch* eine Sprache mit – das heißt: es ist nicht von außen gleich dem sprachlichen Wesen. Das geistige Wesen ist mit dem sprachlichen identisch, nur *sofern* es *mittelbar* ist. Was an einem geistigen Wesen *mittelbar* ist, das ist sein sprachliches Wesen.⁴

Language then "imparts," to borrow Sam Weber's translation of *mitteilen*, nothing

3 Michael Jennings' book *Dialectical Images: Walter Benjamin's Theory of Literary Criticism*, Cornell University Press: 1987, and Winfried Menninghaus's *Benjamins Theorie der Sprachmagie*, Suhrkamp: 1995, are two examples of scholarship that do offer this type of analysis, but Jennings's book is more concerned with connecting the early Benjamin to his later work, while Menninghaus's text offers more of an historical exposition of Benjamin's early work than an immanent critique of the texts themselves.

4 Walter Benjamin, "Über Sprache überhaupt und über die Sprache des Menschen," in *Gesammelte Schriften*, Band II: 1, Suhrkamp: Frankfurt, 1991, 142.

other than its “linguistic being,” which is identical to what Benjamin calls its “spiritual being” insofar as the latter can be imparted in the former.⁵ Despite the cryptic undertone of this passage, Benjamin does not lapse into a dogmatic metaphysics of language; indeed, he is doing the exact opposite by rejecting what he perceives to be the two truly metaphysical theories of language. He simply suggests that language *as such* communicates nothing but language, and by implication, that languages alone—not speaking subjects—are capable of communicating to one another.

Interpreted in this way, Benjamin has effectively devalued the role of the subject, for it is language itself that appears to speak. And as he dissolves the speaker into language, he undermines both the bourgeois theory of language as *exclusively* a medium of communication, as well as the mystical theory that proposes an immediate unity between word and world; neither of these conceptions of language, however, completely disappears from Benjamin’s thinking. Language as such transcends the subject-object relation (the speaker and the spoken of); it is a transcendental condition of possibility: “Einen Inhalt der Sprache gibt es nicht” (II: 1, 145).

As Benjamin then moves into his reading of Genesis, we learn that what distinguishes human language from other languages is its ability to endow things with proper names. It is, indeed, the act of naming that constitutes the linguistic being of the human: “Das sprachliche Wesen des Menschen ist also, daß er die Dinge benennt” (II: 1, 143). At a crucial moment in the text, Benjamin then suggests that naming serves as the nexus between human language and what he calls “divine” or “pure” language, despite one categorical distinction between the two: divine language is, according to Benjamin, “das Schaffende, und das Vollendende, sie ist Wort und Name. In Gott ist der Name schöpferisch, weil er Wort ist, und Gottes Wort ist erkennend, weil es Name ist...Gott machte die Dinge in ihren Namen erkennbar. Der Mensch aber benennt sie maßen der Erkenntnis” (II: 1, 148). With a word, or rather, with words, God conjured the world into existence, which would explain why Benjamin calls divine language “creative,” and why only in this language can there exist immediacy between the name and absolute knowledge of the thing named. Human language is hereby barred from participating in the realm of the creative.

However similar it is, then, to God’s signature gesture, human naming always remains imitative, for it cannot divine things into existence. Human language is therefore confined to *translating* the language of nature, or the language of things, into the human language of names. In this sense, human language is always “over-naming,” for it remains ultimately ignorant of nature’s own language: “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” (II: 1, 151). As a result of this tendency to over-name, Benjamin speculates that the true language of nature has been silenced, and that nature’s speechlessness is a sign

5 See Sam Weber, *Benjamin’s -abilities*, Harvard University Press: 2008, 31.

of its mourning. And with respect to the named human: “Benannt zu sein...bleibt vielleicht immer eine Ahnung von Trauer” (II: 1, 155). From this we can deduce that in naming, the human confronts finitude, mortality, and his inability to resist the unified fate of the natural world. “Names are seen as fates,” writes one critic, for they only receive their full meaning in death (Fenves 217). Thus while naming at first brings human language into brief contact with its divine counterpart, it simultaneously serves as a reminder of the subject’s captivity in the natural world. It is in naming that the imitative finitude of human language, and of human existence as such, confronts the creative infinitude of divine language. This knowledge of the ultimate limitations of naming engenders, once again, a sense of mourning, a notion that will occupy a more central role in Benjamin’s work on the German *Trauerspiel*.

In this phenomenology, human language is now in a fallen state of mourning; in response, it attempts to transcend its own limitations by designating something *other* than itself. We thus return to what was previously termed its “bourgeois” character, the reason for this descriptor presumably being Benjamin’s identification of the modern bourgeois subject with the proliferation of idle chatter, or what he refers to as *Geschwätz* (II: 1, 154).⁶ Language can now only “judge” (*urteilen*), which leads to the creation of linguistic abstractions, for example, the concepts of good and evil. And here Benjamin hints at another distinction: in fallen language, we do not experience the *truth* of these categories, we only *know* them in their abstractions, and knowledge, as Benjamin has already stated, is not to be confused with truth, the latter of which is of divine provenance. Unlike truth, knowledge is profane and bound to the world of judgment, abstraction, communication, and what Benjamin ultimately calls myth. Pre-spatial, non-significatory, non-judgmental, and non-discursive language is thus linked with truth, while human, profane language is linked with knowledge. Understood as such, we can see why one critic has called Benjamin’s philosophy of language “anti-humanist” (Weber 59).

What I would suggest is that in this essay, Benjamin is working through the problematic of how language can serve as the source of confusion between truth and knowledge. He is not propagating the more dubious notion that we return to any sort of pre-lapsarian condition of being, but, conversely, the idea that human language exists in a perpetual state of *fallenness*, of *Geschwätz*. That it is conditioned is its condition. And yet, as will soon be made evident, there are ways in which vestiges of this pure language can be retrieved or recalled within the very profane language from which it is distinguished.

One of these ways is through the translation of literary texts, as Benjamin alludes to in the concluding passage of the essay: “Alle höhere Sprache ist Überset-

6 *Geschwätz*, for Benjamin, realizes itself in modernity most emphatically in the language of journalism. For a recent account of Benjamin’s complicated relationship to the press, see Uwe Steiner, *Walter Benjamin: An Introduction to his Work and Thought*, trans. Michael Winkler, University of Chicago: 2010, 80-104.

zung der niederen, bis in der letzten Klarheit sich das Wort Gottes entfaltet, das die Einheit dieser Sprachbewegung ist" (II: 1, 157). The theological and quasi-Romantic inflections of this quotation are unmistakable, but what is equally important to note is that Benjamin insists on a "unity of this *movement* of language." The focus has then slightly shifted from language as such, or from the difference between profane and divine language, to how language functions vis-à-vis other languages. Triggering this movement within the territory of language becomes, as the title of this next essay suggests, the "Aufgabe des Übersetzers." Initially composed as a prologue to his translation of Baudelaire, this text makes it clear that if translation is a form, then translatability—the condition of a work that makes translation possible—is an immanent property of any true work of literature: "Wenn Übersetzung eine Form ist, so muß Übersetzbarkeit gewissen Werken wesentlich sein" (IV: 1, 10).

A true work of art is translatable, Benjamin suggests. Though we are not yet privy to what exactly constitutes a translatable work on the level of content, we can surmise from this premise that no work in its initial instantiation is complete; such theoretical completeness would, according to this logic, foreclose the possibility of its translatability, which Benjamin states is a condition for its being a work. With this emerges an ostensible paradox in Benjamin's thinking: if human language is always already a translation of nature's unknown language, resulting in an over-naming that reveals its non-identity with the divine language of creation, then how does the act of literary translation effect a movement back to this pure language, or to the "unfolding of the divine word," as it is expressed in the formulation above? Benjamin would appear to describe an arbitrary shift in directionality when he enters the realm of the translatable artwork, from the movement *away* to a movement *toward* pure language. To resolve this tension, however, I suggest that the act of translation from one human language into another reveals—in its very movement—the incompleteness of the first language and therefore of the work into which it has been shaped. Just as human language is not creative in the theological sense of the word, neither is the artist a creator nor the work of art a creation, but this particular revelation is made apparent only in the process of translation.

Benjamin therefore states with authority, "kein Gedicht gilt dem Leser, kein Bild dem Beschauer, keine Symphonie der Hörerschaft" (IV: 1, 9), repeating his earlier claim, albeit in different terms, that language in its communicative function is subordinate to language as such. In this iteration, however, no poem is made for a reader because the language of a poem cannot be understood as communicating some sort of trans-linguistic meaning, which Benjamin soon identifies with authorial intention.⁷ Hence, a deficit cannot result from a Benjaminian translation, for it is not the work's intended meaning that Benjamin deems translatable,

7 For a recent account of this essay, see Andrew Benjamin, "The Absolute as Translatability," in *Walter Benjamin and Romanticism*, eds. Andrew Benjamin and Beatrice Hanssen, Continuum: 2002, 109-122.

whose status Benjamin places radically into question. Rather, Benjamin's translator is concerned with illuminating the relationship between the distinct but interrelated *languages* in question: "So ist die Übersetzung zuletzt zweckmäßig für den Ausdruck des innersten Verhältnisses der Sprachen zueinander" (IV: 1, 12). Rather than communicating the intended meaning of the original, the act of translation reveals the incomplete and thus fragmented nature of all languages, whose anticipated unity sounds the "echo" of the tertiary pure language (IV: 1, 16). Recalling the earlier essay, I would read pure language in this context as the *true* (not intended) meaning of a work as it manifests itself in the movement from one language into another.

How are we, then, to better understand this particular movement between languages? It would seem that translations do not progressively accumulate toward infinity: "Denn es gibt ein Halten," foreclosing the possibility of reading in Benjamin the intimation of an infinite deferral of meaning (IV: 1, 21).⁸ What I would suggest is that Benjamin implicitly locates in the process of translation a destructive moment that dialectically points to pure language, even if he has not yet determined the exact content of this pure language. Once a work has been translated into another language, its original instantiation has been effectively *negated*—this is why the translated text participates in what Benjamin calls the original's "Fortleben," which will be an important term to remember when we arrive at the critique of the German *Trauerspiel* (IV: 1, 11). Taken together, we can come to a preliminary conclusion: if all non-creative languages are mired in the world of myth, which encompasses the falsity of knowledge, the subjectivity of intention, and the abstraction of judgment, then all works of art, which ultimately consist in and of a kind of language, are equally bound to this world.⁹ An artwork cannot communicate anything more than its own language, which does not, however, prevent the work from containing a truth—a pure language—of some sort.

It then falls to the task of the criticism to liberate the work from its ensnarement in myth, or to distinguish between the work's truth and its intended meaning. Benjamin's first critic has assumed the form of the translator, who inaugurates the task by freezing the work's allegedly fixed, communicative meaning, i.e., subjective authorial intention, in order to save the truth of the work in its translation. What I will next show is how in his *Habilitation* on Attic tragedy and the Baroque German mourning play, Benjamin revives this theory of language and translation, this time adding to it an explicitly historical dimension, which sheds significant light on the

8 For a more deconstructive reading of Benjamin's theory of language, see Bettine Menke, *Sprachfiguren: Name-Allegorie-Bild nach Walter Benjamin*, München: Fink Verlag, 1991.

9 Here we see the first intimations of Benjamin as a materialist philosopher—though not yet a historical materialist—who sees the artwork as embedded in nature, but who finds traces of truth inscribed within the natural world, not residing somehow outside of it.

quasi-phenomenological journey of pure language as it was originally conceived. By doing this, he is able to arrive at his theory of allegory.

Tragedy contra *Trauerspiel*

“Es ist das reine Wort das unmittelbar tragisch ist... Das Wort in der Verwandlung ist das sprachliche Prinzip des Trauerspiels.”

“Indem unser gantzes Vatterland sich nunmehr in seine eigene Aschen verscharret / und in einen Schauplatz der Eitelkeit verwandelt; bin ich geflissen dir die vergänglichkeit menschlicher sachen in gegenwertigem / und etlich folgenden Trauerspielen vorzustellen.”¹⁰

In his philosophical prelude to *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels*, Benjamin claims that “es ist dem philosophischen Schriftum eigen, mit jeder Wendung von neuem vor der Frage der Darstellung zu stehen” (I: 1, 207). Unlike, for example, mathematics, philosophy is required to confront the problem of representation if it is to come to the full realization of its task, which is the presentation of truth. For this reason, Benjamin rejects the philosophical systems of the nineteenth century, whose form, he believes, betrays their subordination to the domain of mathematics. In other words, this philosophy (namely, German Idealism) has not quite learned to speak its own language, and by relying on the language of mathematics—which avoids the problem of representation altogether—it falls victim to the drive toward totality, anathema to Benjamin’s thinking. These systems have produced knowledge, Benjamin concedes, but not truth: “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” (I: 1, 207-208). To recall, in Benjamin’s earlier text on language he opposes mythical knowledge to divine truth, suggesting a relation of indifference between the two. Here we see that the discursive knowledge produced by these systems of philosophy resonates with what Benjamin had previously termed the “mystical” theory of language, which posits an immediate link between word and essence, or between language and truth, without the need for mediation. The mystical, it seems, has become the metaphysical; Benjamin is suspicious of both. His philosophy consists, rather, of postulates and pauses, and assumes the method of digression, or *Umweg*, if it is not to congeal into reified knowledge nor repress the problem of its own language, that is, of *how* it is to represent truth (I: 1, 208). The task of the translator has here become the task of the philosopher-critic.

“Ideen,” writes Benjamin, are the “Gegenstand dieser Forschung” because

10 Andreas Gryphius, *Leo Armenius*, Reclam: 1971, 4.

they are the vehicles of truth (I: 1, 209). But unlike their use in German Idealism, ideas, according to Benjamin, are not particulars contained within the universal, nor are they phenomena subsumed under a concept, but rather the meticulous arrangement of related historical or aesthetic phenomena, described, at one point, as monads in the Leibnizian sense (I: 1, 228). This arrangement is the proper form for the presentation of truth, which, unlike knowledge, is not “intentional”: “Die Wahrheit ist der Tod der Intention” (I: 1, 216). A link has already been forged to the translation essay in Benjamin’s rejection of intention, understood within the context of a work as any alleged meaning that attempts to transcend its linguistic constitution. As we have seen, the truth of a phenomenon does not anticipate its material realization, which is why for Benjamin, truth does not fly in, as it were, from the outside, as older systems of philosophy have led us to believe (I: 1, 207). Rather, much in the same way that the echo of pure language in a work can only be perceived in the work’s destructive translation into another language, so here is truth grasped in the smallest details of phenomena that flash up the instant they pass away, that is, in what Benjamin calls their historical “Ursprung” (I: 1, 226). With Benjamin’s notion of *Ursprung*, the question of history is firmly brought into the fold as a criterion of truth, which is deemed contingent upon its unfolding through time.¹¹

The description of truth as emerging from within the representation of ideas also shares similarities to Benjamin’s earlier description of the act of naming, and he makes this connection explicit:

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. Wie die Ideen intentionslos im Benennen sich geben, so haben sie in philosophischer Kontemplation sich zu erneuern (I: 1, 217).

Adam is thus identified as the father of philosophy—not Plato—as Benjamin revisits his earlier reading of Genesis. Here, however, Benjamin suggests that it is philosophy’s task to renew the act of name-giving, which, in slight contradistinction to the argument proposed in the essay on language, exists ontologically *prior* to the word’s entanglement in communication (read: after the fall), and arrives at the “intentionless” essence of the idea. The notion is thus akin to a singular name, which means it cannot be treated as a speculative, ahistorical, metaphysical concept. Benjamin returns the focus, once again, to the landscape of language, more specifically, to the linguistic essence of an idea, where he believes truth finds its first and last home.

11 There is a clear parallel here to what Theodor Adorno writes about how the passage of time converts an *a posteriori* historical fact into an *a priori* element of truth. See Adorno, “The Essay as Form,” in *Notes to Literature Volume 1*, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholsen, Columbia: 1991, 10.

Ideas, as one critic puts it, stand on the threshold to truth/God (Jennings 197).

The prologue harks back to one more significant moment in Benjamin's essay on translation. Following the work of Italian critic Benedetto Croce, Benjamin admits to the need to classify works of art according to genre, but he rejects the way this classification has been historically approached.

Kritik, sowie Kriterien einer Terminologie, das Problemstück der philosophischen Ideenlehre von der Kunst, bilden sich nicht unter dem äußeren Maßstab des Vergleiches, sondern immanent, in einer Entwicklung der Formensprache des Werks, die deren Gehalt auf Kosten ihrer Wirkung herausschleibt (I: 1, 224-225).

Genres, it would follow, cannot be deduced from anything except the immanent content of the individual work, from its *form of language*. In principle, then, there are an infinite number of genres to be named, for a good artwork, according to Benjamin, either abolishes the genre of which it is thought to be a part, or establishes a new one, and a perfect work does both (I: 1, 225). To determine a genre according to any other criterion, say, its effect (i.e., tragedy arouses pity and fear in its audience) and then raise this criterion to the standard against which every subsequent artwork allegedly deriving from this genre is measured, would be to both subordinate critique to the caprice of the affective human subject and to foreclose the possibility of the emergence of new genres and thus of new ideas.¹² In a word, this would be to ignore the singular truth evinced by the work's "origin," its coming to be and its passing away. To repeat: for Benjamin, no text is intended for a reader, and thus the truth of the work of art is to be exclusively derived from the work itself and from its relationship to the constellation of ideas that constitute other related, though not identical, works of art.

As such, one of the central arguments in Benjamin's failed *Habilitation* is that *Trauerspiel* is not to be confused with tragedy. The subsumption of the former under the latter is a testament to the false type of criticism that has informed the general reception of these seventeenth-century Baroque mourning plays, a criticism for which the Romantics are principally to blame. To simply measure the aesthetic achievements of the Baroque *Trauerspiel* against those of the Attic tragedy is then to fail to see the categorically distinct ways that these forms negotiate history, nature, time, and, most importantly, language—but it is also to fail to see exactly how they are, indeed, related.

To arrive at the *Ursprung* of tragedy, Benjamin first distances himself from the dominant aestheticians that have preceded him. The German Idealists, he argues, are responsible for interpreting tragedy in almost exclusively moral terms. The "tragic" as the conflict between two orders of right (Hegel), or as a testament to the

12 Thus Benjamin's anti-Aristotelian position.

materiality of freedom even in its dissolution (Schelling), are two such examples. Benjamin insists, however, that this reading of tragedy merges two distinct languages, those of aesthetics and morality, without properly mediating between them: “Der Wahrheitsgehalt dieses Ganzen, der niemals in dem abgezogenen Lehrsatz, geschweige im moralischen, sondern allein in der kritischen, kommentierten Entfaltung des Werkes selbst begegnet, schließt gerade moralische Verweise nur höchst vermittelt ein” (I: 1, 284). An *Umweg*, never a direct path, can point to a work’s ethical content. Nietzsche, Benjamin continues, nearly broke the spell of the idealists by concluding that the interpretation of tragedy must be stripped of its moralizing doctrine. But by consequently advocating that tragedy should be understood as a purely “aesthetic phenomenon” and that life ought to adopt its ethos, Nietzsche committed the same error as did his predecessors: he tried to conceive the “tragic” speculatively and failed isolate the singular phenomenon of Attic tragedy (which we can understand as the sum total of all of these tragedies).

Rather than grasping the tragic speculatively, Benjamin attempts to grasp the historical singularity of tragedy in its materiality. For him, its “idea” can be located in tragic silence: “Der tragische Held hat nur eine Sprache, die ihm vollkommen entspricht: eben das Schweigen” (I: 1, 286). The defiant silence of the tragic hero—his “pure word” to recall this section’s epigraph—elevates him above even the gods who challenge him (I: 1, 289). His silence thus indicates that he has, if only for a brief moment, defied the mythical world of fate and guilt. The tragic hero thereby inaugurates a new legal order while an old one sinks into oblivion, forming a curious parallel to Benjamin’s notion of *Ursprung* as well as his claim that the perfect work of art abolishes a pre-established genre as well as initiates a new one. For Benjamin, this formal symmetry between the content of tragedy and his theory of origin then raises the critical question as to what type of relationship tragedy has to the modern artwork in general, and to the *Trauerspiel* in particular. What I would suggest is that as an almost pre-artistic figure, the tragic hero anticipates, for Benjamin, the central problem of the modern artwork by displaying, in its content, the conflict between myth and truth, between subjective meaning and objective *Ursprung*. Only by properly situating it in relation to tragedy can we now begin to understand the “origin” of *Trauerspiel*.

Trauerspiel does not, as was commonly assumed (according to Benjamin), simply evolve from tragedy as its historical offspring, but rather emerges, dialectically, in a struggle against it, and its incipient form develops not on stage but in the Platonic dialogue (I: 1, 297).¹³ In a convoluted passage, Benjamin argues that this language consists of purely “dramatic dialogue,” which means that the pure

13 The notion that *Trauerspiel* was born in the womb of philosophy is very suggestive, for it opens up a discussion about the teleology of art forms and the complex relationship among the various media. To address this question, however, would necessitate another article altogether.

word, the “caesura” that constitutes the idea of tragedy, is neither recognized nor recognizable in this new form. As with Nietzsche, Socratic rationalism may have defeated the tragic spirit, but Benjamin suggests that this Pyrrhic victory affected “den Herausforderer entscheidender...als die Geforderte” (I: 1, 297). In other words, Socratic rationalism left tragedy intact as a historical idea, for, as one critic writes, this particular struggle was already immanent to tragedy itself (Fenves 243).¹⁴ The defiant silence of the tragic hero, the caesura, or the pure word against the mythical order is what constitutes tragedy. Without the interruption that emancipates the tragic hero from the world of myth, dramatic language falls back into this very world and sets the stage, as it were, for *Trauerspiel*.

In distinguishing the two forms, Benjamin then writes that “Trauerspiel ist pantomimisch denkbar, die Tragödie nicht” (I: 1, 297), alluding to the subordination of language to gesture in the mourning play and to the idea that its language, like the bourgeois language we encountered in *Über die Sprache*, now expresses something *other* than itself. Benjamin had thus identified an empirical work whose language has descended into subjectivity, signification, and communication. *Trauerspiel* mourns precisely because it is not tragedy, which in turn, is what makes it *Trauerspiel*. The differences, for Benjamin, are monumental. Tragic time is always in anticipation of its quasi-Messianic fulfillment, hence Benjamin’s term “prophetic” (I: 1, 297); in *Trauerspiel*, time and space, history and nature, stage and life collapse into one another, forming what Benjamin famously calls *Naturgeschichte*, a condition in which transcendence is sealed off and humanity is denied a redemptive eschatology. The profane world of things and unfulfilled history becomes the world of the *Trauerspiel*, which contains no tragic heroes, only guilty characters with ambiguous fates who wander around the stage plotting and murdering (I: 1, 310). In this description of the genre, Benjamin has not yet, however, arrived at its idea.

What he has determined is that death and finitude are the ruling principles of these plays, and that the heightened awareness of the decay of traditional structures of religion and power fills the consciousness of these characters. This leads to a critical moment in Benjamin’s critique: with the decay of these structures, once thought to be eternal, so must the status of the imagistic correlate of eternity—the symbol—be undermined as an adequate form of aesthetic expression. The language of the *Trauerspiel* is decidedly not symbolic. In Hegelian fashion, Benjamin then suggests that the modern artwork necessarily produces another form of expression in order to extricate itself completely from its dependence on symbolism, whose inscription of the infinite into the finite has its proper home in the domain of theology, not art. Benjamin thus identifies the language of the *Trauerspiel* as allegorical, a category that emerges out of the vain struggle to maintain this notion of eternity even in the full awareness of the transitory nature of all things: “Ist doch die Einsicht

14 Intrinsic because tragedy is *agonal* by nature: it stages the battle between fate and freedom, or myth and truth.

ins Vergängliche der Dinge und jene Sorge, sie ins Ewige zu retten, im Allegorischen eins der stärksten Motive" (I: 1, 397). It is thus in the decay of the symbol, or rather, in the decay of language that is read symbolically, that allegory is practically forced into existence (I: 1, 336-338).¹⁵

Within this context, Benjamin invokes the image of the fall as he relates allegory to mourning. The melancholic Lutheranism out of which the German mourning play developed, Benjamin argues, imprinted itself on all of what he posits as the formal aspects of the *Trauerspiel*: the ostentatious speech,¹⁶ the material-pictorial quality of the printed language, the repetition of themes, and the obsession with death and the corpse. Viewed collectively, Benjamin classifies these elements as allegorical, for in allegory, death, sealed off from eternity, is inscribed into signification. And as a literary category, allegory turns the work into a ruin—a fragment—thereby performing an act of internal criticism and adding another layer to the argument presented in the essay on translation: "Im allegorischen Aufbau des barocken Trauerspiels zeichnen solch trümmerhafte Formen des geretteten Kunstwerks von jeher deutlich sich ab" (I: 1, 358).

The work of critique is still not over. Thus in analyzing the content of the *Trauerspiel*, Benjamin further points out that the action of these plays tends to oscillate between two competing figures: the sovereign and the intriguer. In the sovereign we are confronted, once again, with the symbol, or a symbol of the symbol, as it were. Yet this sovereign repeatedly fails to perform his duties, the primary of which is to make a decision which would thereby create a caesura in the action of the play. The inability to make this decision robs him of the power he once had, for now he runs amok on stage, unable to control the locus of signification. His pathetic decline and inability to maintain the structure of power that he allegedly represents turns into what one critic calls a "passive nihilism," in which all meaning has been negated, and which engenders, in turn, a melancholic state of contemplation: an image of allegory (I: 1, 406).¹⁷ Out of this predicament arises the intriguer, who intervenes in the action of the play as a counterpart to the sovereign. If the sovereign represents the stability of order, even in its illusoriness, the intriguer enthusiastically embraces this nihilism through "irony and dissemblance" (Caygill 60). The intriguer therefore mocks the vanity of the sovereign and spoils his every plan. In his most developed form, he allegorizes allegory in his negation of the symbolic order, as well as serves as

15 This is why Benjamin believes that the struggle waged between the paganism of antiquity and the rise of Christianity, with its notion of a guilt-laden nature, saw the first emergence of allegory, and why the second major revival of the form arose in the struggle between the Renaissance and the Reformation, when Lutheranism, the most melancholic version of Christianity, began to assert itself (I: 1, 401).

16 An example of this is the combining of abstractions with concrete terms to form strange compounds, such as in the word "Verleumbdungs-Blitz" (I: 1, 374).

17 See Howard Caygill, *Walter Benjamin: The Colour of Experience*, Routledge: 1998, 59.

the image of allegory in his assimilation into the transient world of things, a world whose proper stage is that of the mourning play.

The problem, however, is that in most of these plays, the intriguer is conspicuously underdeveloped: “Die mangelnde Entwicklung der Intrige...macht die Insuffizienz des deutschen Trauerspiels” (I: 1, 409). The *Trauerspiel* does not then fail for Benjamin because it never achieved the suppleness in form of Attic tragedy, as critics prior to Benjamin had often argued; this would imply that the mourning play was simply a second-class derivative of its more worthy parentage. For even if the resurrection of the tragic were the stated intention of the dramatists Benjamin examines—above all Lohenstein and Gryphius—intention, as we have established, is irrelevant to the truth of the artwork, its idea. But if the *Trauerspiel* is, indeed, “insufficient,” then what does Benjamin stand to gain through its interpretation? What makes it still criticize-able? What I would suggest is that it is precisely because the mourning play does not fully carry out the implications of its own budding form of expression, namely allegory, that Benjamin selects it as the object of his critique. And so he concludes:

Der gewaltige Entwurf dieser Form ist zu Ende zu denken; von der Idee des deutschen Trauerspiels kann einzig unter dieser Bedingung gehandelt werden. Weil aus den Trümmern großer Bauten die Idee von ihrem Bauplan eindrucksvoller spricht als aus geringen noch so wohl erhaltenen, hat das deutsche Trauerspiel des Barock den Anspruch auf Deutung (I: 1, 409).

The intriguer, in whom the struggling mode of allegory finds its most precise articulation, is rarely able to assert his supremacy on stage and is often reduced to a subordinate role vis-à-vis his more established opponent, the sovereign. As a result, an asymmetry emerges between the allegorical language of the *Trauerspiel*, which indexes a fallen, transient world of death and decay, and its symbolic characters that still cling to some idea of transcendence and eternity. Hence, the work becomes a fragment of itself through its own deficiency. This is why the “powerful form” of the *Trauerspiel* needs to be “thought through to its end,” and why Benjamin insists that only in its historical ruin—which came about because of this internal insufficiency and not due to the mere passage of time—can we discern its idea. These plays are not to be dismissed, Benjamin suggests, for their failure to live up to a standard falsely imposed on them (that of tragedy), nor for their inability to be as fine-tuned as other cotemporaneous works (such as the plays of Calderón). Rather, they are to be preserved in their ruin (perhaps as an image of the dialectic) as they stage the conflict between symbol and allegory and thereby register the objective historical consciousness—the pure language—of the world whence they emerged. Their idea thus emerges as a product of their relationship to tragedy, to the spirit of

the Baroque, and to the modernity they prefigure.

To return to an earlier point, these plays also anticipate, for Benjamin, how this burgeoning modality of experience creates the necessity for reading the work of art in modernity allegorically. For in its tearing asunder of the artwork from within, allegory, like translation, functions as a form of criticism, which, for Benjamin, “mortifies” the work by inscribing it into history (rather than reading it as a mere document of its time), dialectically preserving the work’s idea. For this reason, Adorno once called the glance of Benjamin’s philosophical critique “Medusan.”¹⁸

The Disintegrating Artwork

In the prologue to the *Ursprung*, it becomes clear that criticism requires the necessary detours, reformulations, revisions, and intensifications that Benjamin himself undergoes in his own thinking, which is always in a process of self-transformation. In the early essay on language, Benjamin’s concern is with what language is capable of communicating. His conclusion is that language as such communicates nothing but itself, and that meaning imposed “from the outside,” as it were, is the result of language’s “fall” into a state of communication in which subjective, trans-linguistic intention gains the upper hand over objective, linguistic truth. To recover this linguistic truth (which was not, to be sure, lost in any historical sense), Benjamin next turns to the task of translation, a form of critique in which the negative relation between the two languages in question necessarily suggests the possibility of a retrievable pure language. That is, it is in the revelation of the incompleteness and insufficiency of all individual languages that Benjamin comes to the implicit conclusion that the truth of any particular instantiation of language is made evident precisely in the moment of its disappearance: the text points to something else in its translation.

In my final analysis I turned to a very specific object of critique, the German *Trauerspiel*, whose linguistic embryo Benjamin identifies in the Platonic dialogue, and whose *Fortleben*, I would add, Benjamin sees in the Expressionist movement of the early twentieth century (I: 1, 235). In one sense, each historical iteration of this linguistic order serves as a translation of that which preceded it. But the term missing from the two previous texts, and that which Benjamin ultimately provides in his *Habilitation*, is allegory. To be sure, allegory is not, for Benjamin, merely a rhetorical device. It is, rather, a mode of expression that most accurately embodies a particular experience of modernity. The truth of these mourning plays, then, can only be discerned in their ruination, a process that has, quite revealingly, conditioned their very conception: “Im Geiste der Allegorie ist es als Trümmer, als Bruchstück konzipiert von Anfang an” (I: 1, 409). What thus began in a theological register

18 See Adorno, “A Portrait of Walter Benjamin,” in *Prisms*, ed. Thomas McCarthy, MIT Press: 1983, 233.

with the necessary incompleteness of languages in relation to a pure language, ends in a philosophical-aesthetic register with the necessary incompleteness of a work in relation to its idea.

Finally, Benjamin seems to proffer a notion of truth that cannot be thought apart from his concept of critique. This is not a subjective, intended truth proposed by the artwork and thus represented symbolically, and not a truth about “how things really were” that can only be registered generations after the work’s inception, but an objective, historical truth that “takes shape as its thematic content dissolves” (Hullot-Kentor xv). That tragedy could not simply be reproduced under the cultural, social, and religious conditions of the seventeenth century is of great significance for Benjamin, who rejects the erstwhile criticism that reads the mourning plays as failed incarnations thereof. This type of criticism does not consider the crucial distinctions between the linguistic orders that constitute the two forms; it is not sufficiently destructive. Within Benjamin’s schematic, criticism is a decree not only to read the modern artwork as an allegory but also to turn it into one and thus to continue the task that the work has already set in motion. The critic’s gesture is to read the work from within, not to impose something from outside, and to determine the contours of its own particular language.

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