Allegory and the Ruins Of Walter Benjamin

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June, 1991

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

Abstract

Walter Benjamin's critical and historical method addresses the problem of conceptualizing a discontinuous history. In The Origin of German Tragic Drama he proposes allegory as an appropriate form for the representation of the past because it drains images of life so that they may be re–presented with the meaning endowed by the allegorist. In a similar w. literary criticism and historical materialism are involved in the process of mortification so that, from the distance of time, truth may be glimpsed. Benjamin privileges the fragmentary form of representation in allegory over the false unity of the artistic symbol. Whereas truth may be fleetingly revealed by the symbol, allegory forces the extended contemplation of history. Benjamin's method is always negative, looking back ather than forward, and his two main preoccupations, Messianism and Marxism, reflect this desire to reclaim the past Over and above these interests, however, is his profound sense of nihilism in his study of the ruins of human history.

Résumé

La méthode historique/critique de Walter Benjamin addresse la problème de conceptualizé l'histoire qui est discontinue. Dans L'Origine du Drame Tragique Allemand Benjamin propose que l'allegorie est une forme approprié au representation du temps passé, parce que les images en l'allegorie sont dévêtissent de la vie et representé avec la signification qui est les donner par l'allegoriste. Semblablement, la critique litéraire et le matérialisme historique pratiquent la mortification, donc on peut voir la vérité à la distance du temps. Benjamin privilégié la forme fragmentaire de l'allegorie plus de l'unité faux du symbole artistique. Tandis que la vérité est révélé temporairement par le symbole, l'allegorie force la contemplation étendu de l'histoire. La méthode de Benjamin est toujours negatif, et c'est une méthode réflechie. Les deux préoccupations de Benjamin– le Marxisme et le Messianisme– réfléchissent le désir de reclamer les temps passé. Mais surtout c'est le sens profonde de nihilisme qui dominé ses études des ruines de l'histoire humaine.

A Note on Citations

The following is a list of abbreviations of the titles of Walter Benjamin's works. References to these texts will be given parenthetically. All references to texts other than Benjamin's will be given as end notes.

CB– Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism

I– Illuminations

MD– Moscow Diary

OWS– One Way Street and Other Writings

OGT– The Origin of German Tragic Drama

R– Reflections

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I wish to thank my advisor, Professor Gary Wihl, for his guidance, and for helping these fragments to remain on this side of chaos.

I am also grateful to the library of Professor David Hensley for its generous loans policy and the constant support of its proprietor.

Many thanks to my mother for her support and love throughout both nine month periods during which I must have been unbearable.

And, of course, all of my remaining gratitude is for Jamie Todd for the innumerable ways that he made this possible.

"These fragments I have shored against my ruins..."

T.S. Eliot

The Wasteland

Chapter One: Introduction

Since Walter Benjamin's death, studies of his work have proliferated both in his native Germany and in the English speaking academic world. On the parts of those who edited and republished his writings (Theodor Adorno in Germany and Hannah Arendt in America) personal motivation mingled with genuine intellectual respect in their projects to reintroduce Benjamin to a new generation of readers. The result of the publications of Adorno's *Gesammelte Schriften* and Arendt's Illuminations was virtually the rescue of Benjamin's thought from the obscurity of uncollected and aphoristic works. The recognition that was often denied him in his life was heaped upon him after his death.

The resurgence of Benjamin studies in the sixties was not incidental to the time, but a reflection of the need in academia for an infusion of new thought. Similarly, his work is now experiencing a renaissance, especially in the fields of history and literary criticism. For all the renewed attention, however, the end result has never been any kind of school of Benjamin *per se*. No one speaks of a systematic Benjaminian interpretation or attempts to trace a Benjaminian method for application to other works. Perhaps this is the source of interest consistently generated in academia, an interest in those works which refuse to be integrated into a larger literary and philosophical tradition. The inimitability of his example marks his as a truly original contribution.

These two collections aroused different concentrations in German and English scholarship. German scholarship has focussed on the interwoven theological and political elements in Benjamin's work, most probably inspired in this endeavor by the differing interpretations of Adorno and Gershom Scholem. American scholarship, on the other hand, has been concerned with Benjamin as a sociological thinker and interpreter of modern cultural phenomena. The German emphasis stems from, among other things, a need to clarify those very real elements which would have influenced the work of a German Jew during the wars. Non–German writing on Benjamin, however, is relatively free of these historical strictures, as

well as of the overwhelming traditions of Judaism and Marxism indigenous to Germany. Scholarship in English tends to focus on that which addresses its own academic and sociological concerns– namely, culture and art in a modern, mechanized society.

What is common to both emphases, and to Benjamin study as a whole, is the inclusion, to greater and lesser degrees, of biographical detail. Benjamin's texts are never entirely autonomous from his life. Perhaps this is simply because so much of his work, down to the fragmentary form itself, is directly related to circumstances in his life, or that those dark times in which he lived invariably draw his works into their context. Germany during the wars is, after all, consistently a point of concern to all modern disciplines. Interest cannot help but arise around an intellectual figure virtually extinguished by an age of barbarism.

Reading Benjamin's work, however, a less tangible explanation for this juncture of life and work makes itself apparent. Each of his works bleeds into others, and yet each also contains an essence of the whole Benjamin. The diversity of subjects which occupy his essays always leads to an explanation of himself and his own times He scans history and literature for elements which reflect his own life and circumstances; the mourning of the German baroque and the fragmented, commodified Paris of the nineteenth century find analogy in the troubled and shattered Europe of Benjamin's time. His own life invariably seeps out of his work; there is no way to divest one of the other. In this, the study of Benjamin's work provides that which he sought in his own study: a unique experience of the past.

Fragmentariness, privileged over wholeness in Benjamin, is heralded as characteristic of the modern experience, while it actually reflects his desire to experience the past through literature. The fragmentary form prepares the work of art (the text) for its own interpretation. The paradox of the fragment is to rip the work from its context and yet also to ensure it as an adequate reflection of this context. This is the paradox that Benjamin study must deal with, and it is the reason that the spectre of Benjamin's life and his death refuses to leave his work in an easy critical peace.

Part of this critical fallout is the lack of coherent positions that may be rejected or

accepted, a lack of those standardized interpretations which stimulate discussion, presumably toward an eventually "correct" interpretation. No one has been able to agree upon, for example, whether Benjamin was primarily a Marxist or theologian, nor has either camp been able to determine if Benjamin is even particularly useful to it[1]. Efforts in this critical vacuum to lay claim to Benjamin for some cause or other have invariably resulted in the neglect, even deliberate ignorance, of some aspects in favour of others. This is not to say, however, that specialized interpretation (Marxist, for example) introduces contradictions and, thus, despoils the integrity of Benjamin– the contradictions are already there, and he does not attempt to unify them.

In a sense, then, it cannot be assumed that a disservice is being done to the work by such diverse interpretations, for this presumes a Benjaminian integrity which is being violated. Benjamin probably would have been the last to preclude interpretation; indeed, he did little by way of safeguarding his work from critical scrutiny. Few of his works, save the purely academic ones, involve lengthy proofs and justifications; instead, they are usually fragmentary, often containing a series of quotations, and are virtually prepared to be taken out of context. Still, the essays and fragments which make up Benjamin's life's work somehow resist assimilation into the various structures which claim him, and this is precisely the reason his work has remained as a persistent enigma to academic study.

The fame which Benjamin's work enjoys now could only have been posthumous. While he was recognized by some in his life time as possessing true genius, the academic avenues which could have gained him wider recognition were closed to him. Ironically, though recognition is not lacking now, these same avenues remain unable to classify him. The shuffling between departments of Benjamin's post doctoral dissertation reflected the rigid classifications which had irritated Benjamin in his own academic experience, and which still keeps his work on the outside. The respect it generates as a persistent enigma also guarantees its continued, if puzzled, study.

Fortunately for literary criticism, it is with this pursuit that Benjamin most closely

allied himself. Nonetheless, his project of literary criticism intended to creep into the diverse areas of history, philosophy, religion and politics. His conception of the work of art and the role of the critic reaches more areas than categorization can handle. While the characterization of the intellectual gadfly safely holed up in a specialized compartment is common, it would have been devastating to Benjamin, who struggled to reclaim a place, one that is not of necessity utilitarian, for art and the intellectual in the world.

Constructing a role for himself is precisely what his theory of literary criticism does. The critic takes on the role of an alchemist, indispensable to the process of transforming the dross of a work of art into truth. That which is extracted is, however, not self justified as *l'art pour l'art*, nor does this alchemical process apply only to great works of art. This is where Benjamin's criticism veers into history and politics. The critics task is not to preserve and admire that which is truly beautiful, but to nullify this beauty so that, in the absence of its glare, truth may be glimpsed.

The work of art itself, then, is an aesthetically pleasing package whose beauty helps it to endure until its truth may be revealed by the literary critic. It is clear that Benjamin considers temporal and spatial distance from the creation of the work of art to be crucial. This distance creates what he calls the "aura" of the work of art, which ensures that its "material content" clings around its "truth content". The mediation of a literary critic is fundamental in separating these; only this mediation can disassemble aura in a productive way. In his essay on Goethe's Elective Affinities he introduces this critical method:

> Critique is concerned with the truth content of a work of art, the commentary with its subject matter. The relationship between the two is determined by that basic law of literature according to which the work's truth content is the more relevant the more inconspicuously and intimately it is bound up with its subject matter. If therefore precisely those works turn out to endure whose truth is most deeply embedded in their subject matter,

> the beholder who contemplates them long after their own time finds the *realia* all the more striking in the work as they have faded away in the real world. This means that subject matter and truth content, united in the work's early period, come apart during its afterlife; the subject matter becomes more striking while the truth content retains its original concealment. To an ever–increasing extent, therefore, the interpretation of the striking and the odd, that is, of the subject matter, becomes a prerequisite for any later critic...Thus the critic inquires about the truth whose living flame goes on burning over the heavy logs of the past and the light ashes of life gone by.
>
> (I, 4–5)

In "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" Benjamin stipulates that authenticity is necessary to create aura, and this requirement is the source of his ambivalence about aura. Authenticity stems from the work's "presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be" (I, 220). Of course, mechanical reproduction destroys this aura by multiplying the authentic, but Benjamin also states that "[i]n principle a work of art has always been reproducible" (I, 218). What is different is simply that non–mechanical reproduction may be more or less easily identified as forgery, whereas mechanical reproduction does not even make a claim to authenticity. While he half heartedly proposes this as a possibly liberating factor, the loss of aura through reproduction is defined essentially as an absence, a revolutionary negation of aura and authenticity.

In this essay, authenticity is a quality that once was but now is dead. Yet the definition of it as a once existent entity is spurious: if the work of art has always been reproducible, its authenticity is always in jeopardy. And what is authentic in each work as opposed to that which has been partially or wholly copped from others? Can any work be said to be wholly authentic if it arises out of tradition and owes its existence to a variety of influences?

Authenticity is a highly speculative quality, and in it Benjamin proposes a quality which is not only dead, but which quite possibly never existed.

In Benjamin's theory of literary criticism authenticity is a presupposition, something which must exist in theory but whose actuality is questionable. The authentic, or original, may be described as the moment at which the creator and the created are one in origin, the moment which is, in Benjamin's words, "an eddy in the stream of becoming" (OGT, 45). The authentic is a principle of time: in Aristotelian terms it is the "ceasing instant", in Leibni zian terms it is the monad. Origin is the point of indivisibility, and authenticity in art is a re–enactment of inseparability. In any temporal structure the quantized number must exist for time itself to exist as we understand it; in art, the authentic must exist for the structure of interpretation to exist.

Origin and its corollary, authenticity, are epistemological categories in Benjamin's interpretive scheme. The function of the critic is based around them, he or she interprets the work in their absence, cutting through the aura created by the distance of absence. Benjamin's literary criticism is always negative in this respect, for it depends upon absence (loss) and restoration. Distance is the definition of aura, and this distance is the separation between origin and goal, between authenticity in art and integration into truth. Distance is what must be mediated by the critic who initiates a constructive separation of material content and truth content, and who places truth content in a constellation of truths.

The aura of distance is a casualty of modernity. While Benjamin holds out hope that non–auratic art means the salvation of the masses it is clear that he is not, on the whole, interested in immediacy. He is fascinated by separateness and highly suspicious of claims to immediacy. Wolin argues that Benjamin's primary concern is always redemption through the restoration of unity in the Davidic kingdom, while Eagleton valiantly attempts to redeem Benjamin's negative fragments toward the cause of revolution. There is, however, an overwhelming streak of nihilism in Benjamin's thought, so great that it is reasonable to presume that his attachment to Judaism (especially Messianism) and to Marxism was a

devotion to each's potential for annihilation.

Benjamin's fascination with aura is a fascination with mystery and, in effect, with otherness. The text is the other, the mystery to be penetrated and exposed by the literary critic. Benjamin's wish to expose, however, is not a wish to impose structure or to restore unity to the now critically dismantled work. His critical desire is, rather, to smash pretensions of unity and revel in the ruins. Benjamin is, in the last analysis, profoundly negative.

Negativity and absence are qualities traditionally associated with the feminine, as is otherness. Imposing a brief psychoanalysis, Benjamin is almost perversely fascinated with these qualities and invariably associates them with death. Going even further, one might impose a castration complex on Benjamin, one so all–encompassing that it transcends pathology and becomes a philosophical position of disunity and non–wholeness so that "...the castration complex that notably structures his conceptions of modern as well as premodern forms of representation is not registered with the feeling of a wish that gestures back to a pre–Oedipal or pre–symbolic stage..."[2]. Confirming Benjamin's devotion to separateness, several of Benjamin's female companions have noted that he was not a particularly visceral man[3]. The concept of union through sexual contact was probably unacceptable to him. It is also interesting to note that the two main occupations of his thought, Judaica and Marxism, owe to women their birth, in the persons of Dora Pollack, daughter of the Zionist writer Leon Kellner and later Benjamin's wife, and Asja Lacis, Soviet theatre director and one of Benjamin's infatuations. Yet, as Gershom Scholem has pointed out, it is precisely the realized experience of these two preoccupations, which could have been fulfilling for Benjamin, which were denied him in his lifetime[4].

The concept of the Other in Benjamin is, appropriately, associated with multiplicity–the fragmentary instead of the unified. It is not surprising, then, that Benjamin favoured allegory as a mode of representation over the symbol for it, too, is a method involving brokenness. Symbol is about identity between the word and the thing, the "indivisible unity of form and content" (OGT, 160), the identity between that which is represented and the

representation. Allegory is about non–identity and the arbitrariness of representation. In this, allegory is primarily the representation of otherness and of the unknown: allegory "means precisely the non–existence of what it presents" (OGT, 233).

As far as representation that is auratic, allegory is paradoxical. If allegory is the means by which a simplified, often emblematic representation is a substituted generalization from which to draw problematical and multiple particulars, it should be a clarifying mode. Yet a primary religious function of allegory is to veil truth from unworthy eyes, and allegory is in this sense a distancing mode of representation. This is the pretense of allegory– it is obscure, yet refuses to conceal its own fictionality.

The distance of obscurity that is manufactured by allegory is a critical acknowledgement of this fictionality. All forms of representation are artificial structures, yet often make claims to immediacy with the "real" thing being represented. Allegory merely makes obvious this artificiality, and in so doing advances the cause of its own deconstruction. That the pretense and the distancing is made at all is a critical fiction of allegorical representation. In no way does allegory imply identification between the represented and the representation; allegory separates on all levels– ontologically between being and non–being (the other), epistemologically between the knower and the known, and linguistically between the signifier and the signified. No form of representation can do any more, and in stylizing the distance between these pairs allegory facilitates the eventuality of its interpretation.

Allegory's obscurity, especially that of typological allegory and the parable[5], also serves a political function. Allegories have always found their way into politics– in caricatures, emblems, or parables of warning. Because they are fictional they provide a shield against prosecution, and yet their power is increased by this shield. A community of interpreters is a much more powerful political tool than a crowd of random listeners to bald facts. Allegory uses artifice to create an overt interpretation, often a political statement, so that the community is aware of its direction.

It is clear that Benjamin was attracted to the self reflexive nature of allegory. While

symbolic representation arranges for instantaneous enlightenment, allegory operates within time, often brooding and melancholic but always contemplative. Allegory is communal, political and historical; it commemorates and re–enacts the events of history. Benjamin's love of esoteric knowledge is affirmed by allegory with its references to specialized knowledge and the intertextuality which links each text with history. Thus, it is a constructive as well as de–constructive force: allegory constructs meaning, yet its acknowledgement of the set up enables easy de–construction. In this way it is a dialectical form, sponsoring its own negation.

The impression that allegory leaves is of a lack of a unifying principle (that which the symbol attempts to embody). In the absence of this ultimate unification, allegory seems to disintegrate into pedantic details. Benjamin notes that in the baroque it is "common practice...to pile up fragments ceaselessly, without any strict idea of a goal..." (OGT, 178). Yet what allegory gives up in intellectual purity it gains in detailed study of human knowledge. Introspection is sacrificed in favour of a formal reflection upon the other: "Like a sacrament or a dream...allegory draws two worlds together: the world expressed by the fiction, and the implicit world of authoritative myth or abstract statement. If fiction holds the mirror up to nature, allegory holds the mirror up to the ordering forms of the mind– old stories and ideas. In allegory, mental experience is made concrete, and physical experience is made abstract"[6].

Benjamin studies the allegorical method in The Origin of German Tragic Drama and later in his study on Baudelaire. He actually utilizes an allegorical aesthetic in his autobiographical writings. "A Berlin Chronicle" is a rather curious autobiographical account of Benjamin's childhood, and he notes the difference between his and the usual form: "Autobiography has to do with time, with sequence and what makes up the continuous flow of life. Here, I am talking of space, of moments and discontinuities" (R, 28). Allegory, too, is about discontinuities, and about juxtaposing the disparate. Moreover, "A Berlin Chronicle" is an exercise in making physical experience abstract while the mental constructions are concretized.

"The more frequently I return to these memories", Benjamin muses, "the less fortuitous it seems to me how slight a role is played in them by people." (R, 30). He speaks of an afternoon in Paris when his most intimate personal relationships gelled into an image. His memory, however, associates this intertwined image with the "walls and quays...the railings and the squares, the arcades and the kiosks" of Paris (R, 30). Architecture becomes the site of memory-- that which is lifeless and concrete becomes analogous to the mental structures which order physical experience. The Chronicle reads very much like allegory, with Benjamin as the allegorist wandering through the ruinous landscape of memory, searching for isolated words and discontinuous images which go to make up a life image.

"I have long, indeed for years, played with the idea of setting out the sphere of life–bios– graphically on a map" (R, 5). Benjamin carries this mapping function into all of his pursuits, coining the term "constellation" to denote the construction of an image out of disparate elements. This also describes Benjamin's practice of historical materialism. Modern historical study could no longer pretend to a continuous and hierarchical structure of events; modernity had cut itself off from the past through rapid changes in technology and class structure. Historical materialism addresses the problem of conceptualizing a discontinuous history in the modern age. Instead of perpetuating the notion of the continuous flow of history through "homogeneous, empty time" (I, 261), historical materialism retrieves those events in history which have "crystallize[d] into a monad" (R, 262–3) of historical truth.

The fragment emerges from Benjamin's work as the site of the truth of human experience. His studies of allegory in The Origin of German Tragic Drama and in Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism, and of the Judaic emphasis on tradition and re–enactment of those crystallized moments of historical and religious truths, of Marxism's struggle to reclaim the present and justice for the working classes, all of these lead back to the destruction of falsely imposed structures of wholeness.

Habermas usefully distinguished between two types of critique that set Benjamin apart from his contemporary thinkers. Ideology critique, as practiced by Adorno and the Frankfurt

Institute, judges the present by a "promesse de bonheur" and the distance from it (though in actuality it can never exist). Conservative critique, as practiced by Benjamin, looks to the past for redress in the present[7]. Through the distance of time and the mediation of the critic/historian a constellated image is formed. Both critiques are dialectical, but Benjamin's utopia lies in the "standstill" of dialectic in an image, and these standstill moments, fragments drawn from the continuum, are the "organ[s] of historical awakening" (R, 162).

In those rare moments when Benjamin decided to express hope, he placed it in Messianism and in Marxism. In those more frequent moments of nihilistic feeling, Benjamin's work disintegrates into orgiastic musings on death, ruins, and all that is non– present. The tangibility of revolution and/or annihilation moves closer in the modern world; it was probable that the situation of conflict between the ruling and working classes could not maintain itself for long. Benjamin speaks of "recogniz[ing] the monuments of the bourgeoisie as ruins even before they have crumbled" (R, 162). The moribund world is one of negativity, of non–being in which things are *not* almost as soon as they *are*. The site of Benjamin's meagre hope is in an "eternal present", the after-effect of the annihilation of false consciousness. It is toward this end, if toward any at all, that Benjamin's work strives.

Chapter Two: Benjamin as Literary Critic

To speak of Benjamin as a literary critic is to choose the most easily identifiable of many labels that could apply to his diverse work. Most of his essays focus on literary figures in order to illuminate his own philosophy. In his philosophical scheme, however, the figure of the literary critic bears little resemblance to the most common definitions. Benjamin's critic deciphers neither authorial intention nor reader reception, yet he or she does not interpret the work in a vacuum. His critic is a half scientific, half mystical figure transforming the subject matter of a work of art into an enduring truth. As these two elements begin to come apart in the face of time, the work is either doomed to oblivion or rescued by the critic. Benjamin takes the role of the critic beyond commentary, which he likens to chemistry, and into alchemical critique (I, 5). That which survives critique is the truth of a work of art, and this is the subject of Benjamin's literary criticism.

The task of the literary critic is similar to that of the historian, that of providing a genuine experience of the past and the work of art, and for Benjamin the home of human experience is language itself. "[Not] Plato...but Adam [is] the father of philosophy" (OGT, 37). The namer and not the thinker is the origin of philosophical thought, for what can be more essential than the pure, unadulterated, ungrammatical naming word that Adam bestowed upon the creatures of the earth? Benjamin's theory of language is reductive (and deductive) to basic elements, for when stripped of layers of interpretations and transmutations they are the purest conveyors of truth.

Benjamin's essay "On Language as Such and the Language of Man" is an early contemplation on the role of human language and its essentiality to experience. He begins the essay by stating that "every expression of human mental life can be understood as a kind of language" (R, 314). Communication through words is unique to human beings, but "language" can also describe any communication of "mental meanings", and this quality extends to the nature of all things. This, Benjamin claims, is not anthropomorphic; it is exemplified in our

knowledge of things. Because we have knowledge of them they must have communicated themselves. There is a distinction, then, between the linguistic being of things and the mental being, and human beings communicate their mental being in language. We communicate *ourselves* by naming *things*.

Because it is the essence of all communication, language is part of everything. However, language must be distinguished from the "mental meaning" it communicates. For Benjamin, these two are in no way identical, and it is the great pitfall of any linguistic theory to assert that they are. Mental meanings communicate themselves *in*, and not *through*, language:

> Language communicates the linguistic being of things. The clearest manifestation of this being, however, is language itself. The answer to the question "What does language communicate?" is therefore "All language communicates itself". The language of this lamp, for example, does not communicate the lamp... but the language–lamp, the lamp in communication, the lamp in expression. For in language the situation is this: the linguistic being of all things is their language.
>
> (R, 316)

What distinguishes humankind is that our linguistic being is to name things (R, 317). We have seen that things communicate themselves to us and that we communicate ourselves in naming things. The question that Benjamin poses elevates the argument to a theological level. To whom, then, if it is our linguistical nature to communicate ourselves, is this communication addressed? It is certainly not directed at things, for this would reverse the process in which things communicate to us. The communication of facts to others cannot be the answer, for to Benjamin this is the "bourgeois conception of language" (R, 318). While this remains a factual account of the mechanics of language, a grander conception of language sees that "in

naming the mental being of man communicates itself to God" (R, 318).

However, in what Benjamin claims is not tautology, the mental being that humankind communicates is language as such, and it is communicated, above the language of things, without residue. Thus, we are at the top of a chain of language carriers as the namer: "God's creation is completed when things receive their names from man [sic], from whom in name language alone speaks" (R, 319). Naming is the alpha and omega of language, insofar as it is universal naming and is expressed by the wholly linguistic mind (i.e. the human mind).

What it is that language expresses is, precisely, language; to look beyond this into the "meaning" of language is, claims Benjamin, to look to the wrong question. It is in the context of revelation , which continually comes to the fore in linguistic theory, that the conflict between the expressible and inexpressible is addressed. Benjamin refutes the well-known hypothesis that the most "real", the deepest existence in the mind, is inexpressible, and proposes the opposite: that which is most linguistically existent is also the purely mental:

> Within all linguistic formulation a conflict is waged between what is expressed an expressible and what is inexpressible and unexpressed. On considering this conflict one sees, in the perspective of the inexpressible, at the same time the last mental entity. Now it is clear that in the equation of mental and linguistic being the notion of an inverse proportionality between the two is disputed. For this latter thesis runs: the deeper, i.e., the more existent and real the mind, the more it is inexpressible and unexpressed. Whereas it is consistent with the equation proposed above to make the relation between mind and language thoroughly unambiguous, so that the expression that is linguistically most existent (i.e., the most fixed) is linguistically the most rounded and definitive; in a word, the most expressed is at the same time the purely mental. Exactly this, however, is meant by the concept of revelation, it it takes the inviolability of the word as the only

> and sufficient condition and characteristic of the divinity of the mental being that is expressed in it...In this...only the highest mental being, as it appears in religion, rests solely on man and on the language in him"
>
> (R, 321)

The purely mental in humankind is expressed in distinction from things in the "pure formal principle of language– sound" (R, 321), We are, therefore, language users and not language subjects. God created all other things from word, yet in both stories of creation from the Bible, God created humans in his own image: the rhythm of "Let there be" and "He named" is clearly interrupted. In the creation stories, God elevates humankind above nature by not subjecting us to language, but rather giving us the gift of language (R, 322).

Language, which is a creative force for God, is a medium of knowledge in humans; we name things through knowledge. This is not to say, however, that human language is divine language; it has only a reflective relationship with the divine word. Benjamin gives one example of the closest reflection of the pure word– the given name. Because the given name is bestowed before any concrete knowledge of the receiver can be had, it is closest to the self–contained creative word of God. In naming, human language is not, however, creative– it is receptive and cognizing (R, 325). The transliteration of the divine word to human language to named things is a process by which things are re–dedicated to God, and the divine word is emanated.

Benjamin's wide conception of language is reflected in his far–reaching idea of translation. Translation here is the conversion of any language, even that of things, into any other language. This is the transition of the mute into sound, the nameless into name (R, 321): "God gives each beast in turn a sign, whereupon they step before man to be named. In an almost sublime way the linguistic community of mute creation with God is thus conveyed in the image of the sign" (R, 326).

Because human language manifests the separation of knower and known, of creator and

created, it must occur in the Post–Fall state of humanity, and this is the multi– language state. God had named the paradisiac world and saw that it was good. The knowledge of good and evil, however, is nameless: "It is vain in the deepest sense, and this very knowledge is itself the only evil known to the paradisiac state" (R, 327). At this point, name is no longer intact, no longer identical. This is the essence of human language, and in our fallen state it is our nature and our duty to strive again toward the pure word.

Benjamin cites Kierkegaard's description of "prattle" as the nameless knowledge of good and evil, the essence of the sinner. The sole purification of prattle comes from the judging word, which also has knowledge of good and evil, but which retains the "magic" of the pure naming word. It is aroused by sin and replaces the "eternal purity of names" with "the sterner purity of the judging word" (R, 328).

This essay constructs a hierarchy of languages that permeate the world. All things in nature are imbued with language and lingeringly reflect God's creative word. Humankind completes this creation in naming, and the judging word completes the human cycle from fall to redemption. While the profoundly traditional theologism of this structure would seem to indicate a patriarchal, teleological theory of language, there are glimpses of the later Benjamin's concerns. The translation of all languages into others is less a climbing toward the ultimate clarity of word than it is the essence of language itself. As such, the entire process is a reflection of the word of God, residual emanation of the initial and final state of language.

Benjamin devotes this complicated essay to language not merely to outline a utilitarian method for linguistic analysis, but to more closely glimpse the truth of human essence. Language is more than simple communication– it is a way of thinking that Benjamin analyses in its fragmentary deconstructions. What resides in the fragment of language is the essence of pure language, the crystallized "monads" of truth that, in theological terms, are the clearest reflections of the divine

The critical process of uncovering truth is indirectly, but distinctly related to divine revelation. It is also clear that Benjamin was influenced in this relation by his contact with the

Kabbalah, the sacred text of Jewish mysticism. The Origin of German Tragic Drama, Benjamin's most exhaustive work on any subject, is indebted to its influence. In fact, on more than one occasion Benjamin states that, in order to understand the full import of the prologue to the *Trauerspiel* study, one must be conversant with the Kabbalah. His enigmatic inscription in the text which he gave to his friend and Kabbalah expert, Gershom Scholem, indicates that its proper place would be in a library devoted to Jewish mystical texts[1]. There is more than Benjamin's eccentric love of the arcane, which will be discussed in this chapter, at the root of this allusion; it is the entirely linguistic foundation of the Kabbalah which fascinated Benjamin and provides the source for his own language theory and an analogue for his conception of the literary critic.

There is no question for Benjamin that the languages human beings now use bear little resemblance to the First, the pure language. He was not of the schools that traced the origin of German back to Hebrew or, more radically, posited German as pre–Hebraic; the process of returning to a pure language involves more than etymological histories. The language which we use is fundamentally flawed because it is mediated; it manifests the fall from immediacy to knowledge. It does, however, retain some vestige of the pure language, and critical–philosophical exegesis seeks after the key in our language to its origins.

The concept of origin as the goal is essentially Kabbalistic, and refers to the theological ideas of the pre– and post–Fallen worlds. The undifferentiated, unified state is the beginning and end point of all Judeo–Christian theology. It is conceived as the goal, whether through restoration or Messianic utopia, of all human life. Accordingly, Eden contains both the origin and our deviation from it. The Tree of Life represents the original state of humankind, while the Tree of Knowledge represents our state after the fall. They are unity and separateness, respectively.

The role of human activity in restoration of the original state is consistently problematical in Judeo–Christian theology. If historical time and Messianic time are antithetical to one another, how could our actions possibly affect salvation? The duality of

human history and salvation is reflected in the two opposing texts: the Torah of Exile and the Torah of Redemption. Richard Wolin illustrates the relationship of these texts:

> Corresponding to the Tree of Knowledge is the Torah of the Exile, which guides life in the unredeemed state in which it exists at present. It takes on a proscriptive and admonitory character insofar as the forces of evil permeate the world after the fall...The Torah of Redemption presides over [the redeemed] state: in it the restrictions and prohibitions of the Torah of the Exile dissolve, and its allegorical, esoteric content, unable to show itself in an redeemed world, is finally revealed.[2]

It is clear that Benjamin did not advocate a rejection of human history as the means to redemption. Rather, his entire philosophical *oeuvre* revolves around the necessity of submergence within human history, the scrupulous detailing of unredeemed life in order to both annihilate and resurrect the human condition. In Kabbalah Scholem explains the relationship of the surviving Torah to the original divine word:

> The main basis of the Kabbalistic attitude toward the Torah is...the fundamental Kabbalistic belief in the correspondence between creation and revelation. The divine emanation can be described...in terms of...symbols drawn from the sphere of language and composed of letters and names. In [this] case the process of creation can be symbolized as the word of God, the development of the fundamentals of divine speech...In essence, the Torah contains in a concentrated form all that was allowed to develop more expansively in the creation itself.[3]

The Torah of the Exile, as well as its secular counterpart, allegory, exemplify this relationship: because they are profoundly earthly and proscriptive they emphasize the

moribund and finite nature of humankind.

The effect that human activity may have upon redemption is only apparent in its literary output or, more specifically, in our language. The theological quest for glimpses of divinity in the real world consistently rests in language. The word of God is there, in the texts of the Bible, waiting for our intuition through linguistic analysis. Central to Kabbalistic thought is the certainty that everything was created through the divine word of God; therefore, we have our most divine origins in language, of which human language is merely a reflection. Nonetheless, it is the medium by which we may most clearly transcend our human state and contemplate the divine.

Language is central for Benjamin because it is the *a priori* source of human knowledge, and it follows that any philosophical inquiry, whether critical or historical, theological or political, must direct itself to the question of language. Benjamin declares in an early letter the importance of linguistic theory to his work: "The conviction which guides my literary attempts...[is] that each truth has its home, its ancestral palace, in language, that this palace was built by the oldest *logoi*..." (I, 47). This *logoi*, in early essays couched in theological terms, is nevertheless consistently the point of return in Benjamin's thought, and is the justification for his critical scheme of recovering origins:

> With Benjamin the notion of the "name" was not merely polemical. It retained, even after his move to Marxism, traces of its theological origin. Utopia, the return of the lost Paradise, implied the re–establishment of the divine language of names. Benjamin's focus on the overlooked art form of Baroque tragic drama, or in the seemingly insignificant historical details which come alive in his Passagenarbeit, reflected the hope for rescuing the phenomena from temporal extinction by redeeming them within the name...[4]

It is evident that Benjamin was profoundly influenced by Kabbalistic thought. Nothing

that he proposes makes any sense without first taking for granted the idea of redemption, the idea that something that is now fragmented once was and will be again whole. This takes on a materialist element that is, like theology, in opposition to empty mythologizing: " 'Origin is the goal' should not necessarily be understood as meaning a desire to return to a Platonic...Ur–form. Origin (*Ursprung*) can also mean newness. And to Benjamin, one of the primary aspects of myth was its repetitive, uncreative sameness; the *Immergleiche* (always the same) was one of the salient characteristics of that mythic sensibility produced by an alienated capitalist society"[5]. The goal of once and future unity is a structural necessity of both Benjamin's theologism and materialism, but the lack of its present realization does not affect the intensity of the fragments gathered toward it.

As for the role that humanity plays in the divine origin, or in its own salvation, Benjamin determines that it is indirect and reflective. The human (profane) is not divine, but a "category of its quietest approach" (R, 312). Human language as it is used for theological purposes usually results in allegory or, more strictly denying the fictional aspect, in parable, which shields divine truth from the unworthy. Similarly, language and human history are shields for divine origins, gleaned only through extended contemplation. The actual effect of human activity on the hereafter is an irrelevant consideration: the answers are always already there, to be glimpsed peripherally in reflective contemplation.

Benjamin's conception of the role of the literary critic becomes clear only in light of his theological premises. As with the religious text, the work of art is not sufficient to the knowledge of it. Indeed, the material content of a work of art acts as a shield against the immediate intuition of its truth content. In Benjamin's scheme, the critic penetrates the work and elevates it from beauty to knowledge.

In this way, the work of art is connected with the truth content of language. Since, as was dealt with in the discussion of "On Language as such and the Language of Man", truth lies concealed within language, the work of art must be the highest form of language and, thus, a key element in uncovering truth. By devising the role of the philosopher/ critic Benjamin

attempts to secure for literary criticism the role that philosophy in the modern age had lost. That is, the epistemology of fragmented experience and the chronicling of discontinuous history.

Platonic theory postulates that everything beautiful is somehow connected with truth, an idea which recurs throughout the history of art and criticism. Benjamin, however, takes this in a different direction to propose that it is precisely beauty which conceals truth, and that it must necessarily do so. The task of the critic, then, is to annul the beauty of works of art, to direct itself below the surface of beauty and into truth. Essential to this process, however, is distance, both critical and temporal. Beauty, then, is necessary to dazzle and deflect until enough critical distance is achieved so that it becomes obsolete to the question of truth.

The process of literary criticism involves two essential components: commentary and critique (I, 4). Together, they mimic the twin pairs of thought that dominate Benjamin's critical work, that of annihilation and resurrection. Commentary reduces the work to its basic elements, robs it of its uniqueness and simplifies its directive. In short, commentary annihilates what makes the work unique and integral, and therefore what makes it art. Critique, on the other hand, re–elevates the work by rescuing from the ruins of commentary the truth content of the original work. Having smashed the edifice that houses truth, the critic then reveals the glowing contents. Both halves of this dichotomy are essential to the other; commentary without critique is unrevealing, and critique without commentary reveals nothing.

Precisely what the truth content of works of art is reflects Benjamin's emphasis on literary criticism over philosophy. The "enigma of the flame" of truth is the subject of critical inquiry– it is the "enigma of being alive" (I, 5) that survives, over and above the ruins of human activity. Unlike philosophy, however, criticism encourages, even produces, fragments, knowing this to be the nature of human experience, whereas philosophy tries to construct an essentially artificial wholeness. The "shining truth content" (I, 5) of a work of art is only revealed after the fragmentation of the critical process; it escapes the traps set for it by falsely imposed philosophical "unity".

The figure of the alchemist is one that Benjamin often cites as analogous to the critic. In "The Task of the Translator" he elaborates on the scientific/artistic function of the translator. If all human language is in some way interrelated *a priori*, then "conveying the form and meaning of the original as accurately as possible" (I, 72) is necessary to reflect this relationship. At the same time, however, the translator must remain true to the artistic value of the work being translated by providing illuminating insights. This situation is similar to commentary and critique in that it involves the reduction to the literal and then the restoration of illuminating fragments. The critic transforms the leaden material content of the work of art (which had been smashed into fragments) into golden images of truth. Benjamin elaborates on the corrosive quality of criticism in a letter to a friend: "True critique does not go against its object: it is like a chemical substance that attacks another only in the sense that in decomposing it, it reveals its inner nature and does not destroy it"[6].

Benjamin's study of Baudelaire and the story of its publication exemplify his insistence on the science of literary criticism. He began the study as part of his proposed study of the Paris Arcades, but the Baudelaire project soon appeared to be a book of its own. The section "Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire" Benjamin conceived of as the central, material part of the Baudelaire study. Benjamin was persuaded under pressure from the Frankfurt Institute, however, to publish this chapter first (CB, 7).

This coercion, though representative of the Institute's characteristic disregard for the integrity of Benjamin's work (it was known to have changed and de–radicalized elements of his essays)[7], was also problematical for Benjamin's as a literary critic. He struggled against writing this central portion first; the study he had envisioned comprised three parts: "Baudelaire as Allegorist" was to be the expository first part, and "Commodity as a Poetic Object", the closing chapter, would be a Marxist interpretive solution to the Baudelairian problem of representation. "Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire" would provide the material content for these surrounding chapters:[8]

> The function of the second part is, generally speaking, that of an antithesis. It turns its back decisively on the methodological questions concerning the theory of art raised in the first part and undertakes the socially critical interpretation of the poet. This interpretation is a pre–requisite for the Marxist interpretation of the poet, however, it does not fulfill this aim on its own. This task is reserved for the third part...It is by all means important to emphasize that the philosophical foundations of the book as a whole can not be comprehended, nor should they be, from the second part.[9]

As a result of this reversed effort, the first and final chapters fell into disarray, and remain only partially fulfilled. The rest of Benjamin's time was filled in writing "Some Motifs in Baudelaire" as a response to the criticism of the chapter he wrote under duress. "Paris– the Capital of the Nineteenth Century" was an early sketch of the project as a whole, with no formal relationship to Benjamin's conceived three chapters. The result of these publishing travails is the loss of Benjamin's commentary/critique method on a full literary scale, and, indirectly, the lack of the complete Arcades project. The fragmentary nature of Benjamin's work is overemphasized in this regard; his use of the fragment as a representational device was calculated, and by no means a result of incoherent thought. Benjamin pays a great deal of attention to the form and integrity of Baudelaire's work, and the neglect of these two chapters is a literary loss.

The Baudelaire study represents, to a certain extent, a resolution in Benjamin's thought between literary and political concerns. As a "Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism" Baudelaire provides a unique study of literary rituals in a modern, fragmented society. His use of allegory confirms Benjamin's assertion that it is a valid rhetorical device for the modern experience, and Baudelaire's conception of the commodity provides a literary analogue for a politico–economic entity. The poet, the *flâneur*, is the commodity, for he or she partakes of whatever subject encountered: "The *flâneur* is someone abandoned in the crowd. He is not

aware of this special situation, but this does not diminish its effect on him and it permeates him blissfully like a narcotic that can compensate him for many humiliations. The intoxication to which the *flâneur* surrenders is the intoxication of the commodity around which surges the stream of customers" (CB, 55). Baudelaire's work represents for Benjamin, through the wandering empathy of the poet, a truly post–auratic art.

After the baroque, Baudelaire is the next major writer to use allegory to best represent his social and historical circumstance. The figure of the *flâneur* becomes like the allegorist, both distant and attached, clinging and contemptuous. The *flâneur* wanders through the crowd, having intense, poetic contact with one pair of eyes, and just as instantly, having contempt for another. Like the allegorist, the *flâneur* selectively gathers images for his/her own use: "far from experiencing the crowd as an opposed, antagonistic element, this very crowd brings to the city dweller the figure that fascinates. The delight of the urban poet is love– not love at first sight, but at last sight. It is a farewell forever which coincides in the poem with the moment of enchantment" (CB, 125). It should be noted that Benjamin disagreed with Baudelaire's equation of the "man of the crowd" and the "*flâneur*". The *flâneur* possesses the poetic quality which sets his or her commentary apart from the "manic behavior" of the "man of the crowd" (CB, 128). The urban poet, as the *flâneur*, wrenches images from their original contexts, endowing them with new meaning. Baudelaire as poetic allegorist is the *flâneur* feeding upon diverse images, but with a distinctive intention: to shock.

By introducing allegory, Baudelaire succeeds in jarring any complacency in poetics by making certain that standard "symbols" do not go unchallenged, and that non-aesthetic phenomena are also given new meaning. Allegory devalues the worldly phenomenon by making it subject to arbitrary interpretations, but at the same time redeems it toward a higher level of meaning. Baudelaire's modern allegory treats the commodity in this way, simultaneously devaluing and elevating it. Richard Wolin expands on this analogy: "Just as the commodity turns objects (and persons) into lifeless abstractions (into exchange values) so too does allegory devalue the intrinsic meaning of things for the sake of its own arbitrary

meanings. As such, allegory...embodies the perfect technique for the poetic representation of a capitalist society"[10].

Baudelaire's use of allegory is distinctly modern, in that the emphasis is on urban and inner decay. "Baroque allegory saw the corpse from the outside only. Baudelaire sees it from within"[11]. The Paris of Baudelaire's poetry is a topography of images of the modern experience, infused with a profound sense of melancholy: "Baudelaire's genius, which draws its nourishment from melancholy, was an allegorical one with Baudelaire, Paris for the first time became the subject of lyric poetry. This poetry is no local folklore; the allegorist gaze which falls upon the city is rather the gaze of the alienated man. It is the gaze of the *flâneur*..." (CB, 170).

The importance of Baudelaire for Benjamin's theory of allegory can be similarly applied to Benjamin's theory of literary criticism. Baudelaire's allegory sees as its object the wresting of images from their normal contexts. The resulting "shock" image forces renewed perception of the accepted and unquestioned. Allegorical representation is, then, an attempt to restore authenticity to human experience, a quality lost in mechanized society. Benjamin's theory of literary criticism also necessitates that the work itself be lifted from its original context before it may be analyzed. This is not, however, ahistorical, merely a critical historiography that is non–chronological.

Fundamental to the Baudelaire study as well as to Benjamin's whole project of literary criticism is his concept of "aura". Most often associated with his vastly popular essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction", the term actually first appears in the 1929 essay "A Small History of Photography" : "What is aura, actually? A strange weave of space and time: the unique appearance or semblance of distance, no matter how close the object may be..." (OWS, 250). The association of auratic distance with psychological authority is clear: to bring things closer to us, that is to destroy their aura, is to divest the object of uniqueness. Photography brings art to the masses, and, thus, destroys its otherness, its authority.

Benjamin's judgement of the aura of a work of art is difficult to assess. He associates aura with bourgeois power and oppression, thus condemning it. Yet he also associates aura with the mystification of art, which is a necessary step before the critic demystifies the work and extracts truth. This dichotomy represents a split that runs through Benjamin's thinking: he both yearns for the structure of the old art and advocates the revolution which would crush it.

Benjamin's critique of symbolism is largely derived from this concept of aura. Because symbolism emphasizes the wholeness and integrity of the work of art, an "aura" of inviolability and self–sufficiency surrounds art. Its truth is always bound up with the beauty and integrity of the text. In the Origin Benjamin cites Creuzer's terms of the symbol which are meant to distance it from allegory as "the momentary, the total, the inscrutability of its origin..." (OGT, 63). However, what the critic necessarily must accomplish is the careful extraction of truth, and an "inscrutable origin" would make this impossible. All that symbolic "totality" achieves, in this respect, is resistance and evasion of the critical analysis that must be done.

Benjamin also attacks symbolism as bad theology because it proposes a relationship of appearance vs. essentiality between the signifier and the signified. In theological terms this denies the symbolic unity of the word and thing that is divine language. The artistic symbol "insists on the indivisible unity of form and content" which illegitimately mimics the divine symbol: "For this abuse occurs wherever in the work of art the 'manifestation' of an 'idea' is declared a symbol. The unity of the material and the transcendental object, which constitutes the paradox of the theological symbol, is distorted into a relationship between appearance and essence. The introduction of this distorted conception of the symbol into aesthetics was a romantic and destructive extravagance..." (OGT, 160).

Julian Roberts outlines the four tenets of symbolism that form the foundation of Benjamin's critique:

1) the panaesthetic notion of meaning, in which sensory attributes count for

more than linguistic formulations;

2) epistemological spontaneity of the object, in which the object is active and achieves meaning with a receptive soul

3) unity, or metaphysical monism, in which the teleological significance of the world is immanent

4) natural, or non–intellectual understanding; anti–rationalism [12]

The elements of this symbolist structure left no room for ethical decision making, and this is crucial to Benjamin's scheme. The requirements of his theologism demanded that any epistemological system leave room for an outside realm (i.e. the divine) from which the ethical decision would transcend the "naturalism" of the symbolist scheme. The aura of totality which is created by symbolism is a false one, since it does not allow for the ultimate totality, which is achieved only outside the human experience in the divine.

The fundamental problem of symbolism, for Benjamin, is that it attempts to replace the decline of theologism and the accompanying secularization (demystification) of art with a purely artistic theology. Works of art are to be worshipped simply because they are works of art; the noumenal becomes the phenomenal and, therefore, immediately perceptible to the reader. Immediacy, however, is not a possible function of human understanding. Indicating the falseness of the claims of symbolic totality is this very dichotomy between immediacy of perception and authoritative distance. The auratic text relies upon distance to achieve its artistic effect; the immediate flash of perception can never be true or complete if this integral distance is to be maintained.

Benjamin contrasts symbolism with both the allegorical and the modern as the contrast of wholeness (or purported wholeness) and brokenness. The allegorical text revels in the fragmentary and virtually offers itself up for critical scrutiny, whereas the symbolic text, by virtue of its totalizing nature, denies the essentiality of criticism. Romantic symbolism elevates the critical text to the level of the artistic text, but this does not mean that criticism is

in any way seen as necessary to art. In fact, neither may have an effect on the other at all, being organically complete. Works of art, in the symbolic scheme, are distinct entities bearing no resemblance to each other or, indeed, to anything. This, then, denies the function of art as a reflection of the interrelatedness of human experience and human history.

This kind of comparison would seem to pit allegory against symbol. However, this was a position rejected by Benjamin. A large part of his critique of symbolism derives from the distinction between allegory and symbol. Julian Roberts elaborates: "Conventionally, this distinction was one of semantic value, with the symbol substantially integrated as both Being and sign, while allegory was sign alone"[13]. Benjamin criticizes this position for attributing to the artistic symbol a theological dimension it does not possess. Unity of Being and sign is a property of divine language alone, and human language can be only a reflection of or a pointing toward this and not an embodiment of it. Symbol and allegory are merely different rhetorical categories, and do not manifest the difference between truth and arbitrary representation.

The differing functions of allegory and symbol cannot be seen in an aesthetic hierarchy[14], but rather as tropes for differing circumstances. They are used in the artistic service of rendering human experience, which is incessantly shifting throughout history. Both auratic (symbolic) and non–auratic (allegorical) texts are invariably subject to the dismantling critical view. "Criticism means the mortification of the works" (OGT, 182), and while the symbolic text resists this process, the allegorical text prepares its own grave.

The fragmentariness of allegory, then, lends itself to critical interpretation. The shards of truth content that are recovered from the work are those which most accurately inscribe "the structure and proper experience of an epoch"[15]. Truth content, then, is that which may be considered a microcosm, or to use Benjamin's borrowed term, a monad, of a particular historical experience. Unlike the factual rendering of historical events, these isolated images bear testament to the whole scope of human experience in history.

Because human experience is discontinuous, these images join together in a

discontinuous structure to form a larger image of our lives in the world and in history. Similarly, the structure of ideas is discontinuous, formed out of a constellation of concepts. The fragmentary images, or concepts, which go to make up the idea must each contain an image of, or potential for, the whole. This structure of "monads" pervades all orders of ideas.

The "Epistemo–Critical Prologue" to The Origin of German Tragic Drama goes into great detail to outline Benjamin's conceptions of the idea and of origin. The idea is essentially noumenal, in that it is not created by the human mind but acquires "that supreme metaphysical significance expressly attributed to the Platonic system" (OGT, 30). The idea is, however, formed as an image of a host of phenomena and individual experiences. The structure of the idea is, then, inherently historical such that we may only see the image after the fact. The scope of the idea is determined by its unlimited extension into the past and future. The fact that we see any image at all, through representation, is a testament to the idea's monadological structure: "The idea is a monad– that means briefly: every idea contains the image of the world. The purpose of the representation of the idea is nothing less than an abbreviated outline of this image of the world" (OGT, 48).

Ideas, then, are "origins" in the entirely linguistic sense that Benjamin outlines in his language theory, in that they are condensations of the historical truth of human experience. The term "origin" (*Ursprung*) in Benjamin's work is descriptive of a specific characteristic of being and becoming; it is both a source and a process by which an idea is both revealed and determined: "Origin [*Ursprung*], although an entirely historical category, has, nevertheless, nothing to do with genesis [*Entstehung*]. The term origin is not intended to describe the process by which the existent came into being, but rather to describe that which emerges from the process of becoming and disappearance. Origin is an eddy in the stream of becoming, and in its current it swallows the material involved in the process of genesis" (OGT, 45).

Origin is the highest order of idea, in that it contains an image not only of the world, but of its source. Origin carries with it a vestige of the paradisiac state and its first language, and as origin works its way into ideas and representations, intuition of the primal language

may be gained. It is this characteristic which makes origin both "a process of restoration" and "something imperfect and incomplete" (OGT, 45), for it both points toward wholeness and comprises the fragmentary. Benjamin traces the function of origin through ideas and representation: "There takes place in every original phenomenon a determination of the form in which an idea will constantly confront the historical world until it is revealed fulfilled, in the totality of its history" (OGT, 45–6).

The relevance of origin to Benjamin's theory of literary criticism is paramount, though hardly clear. We have seen that recovery of the primordial language is a fundamental theological concern, and it is also a concern of literary criticism. The *Trauerspiel* study is the culmination of this literary desire to reconcile the study of a genre, German tragic drama, with philosophical idealism. By establishing the tragic as an idea, Benjamin allows for both the close reading of texts within a literary genre as well as an analysis of its origins.

Benjamin's critique of symbolism in the Origin attempts to rescue Romantic criticism from itself. The transcendental unity which he had criticized when applied to the work of art in Romantic (symbolic) criticism, he now appropriates in the ideas of Form and Origin. In obvious reference to Socratic theory, Benjamin places origin within a kind of primordial memory, so that it is not created by the artistic mind, but remembered, or re– cognized, under the guidance of the literary critic.

Benjamin's debt to Leibni zian monadology is clear again in the idea of origin. He adapts monadology to the critical problem of form and classification. In introducing monadology to ideas and origins, the distinctness, or authenticity, of the phenomenon is reconciled with pre–existent forms, for origins are constantly being and becoming themselves. determining and unfolding. It is also through origin that phenomena are redeemed from their broken and meaningless state into a larger conception of truth. The critic is essential to this redemption, in deciphering that which is ripe for redemption and that which is not:

> The authentic– the hallmark of origin in phenomena– is the object of

> discovery, a discovery which is connected in a unique way with the process of recognition. And the act of discovery can reveal it in the most singular and eccentric of phenomena, in both the weakest and clumsiest experiments and in the overripe fruits of a period of decadence. When the idea absorbs a sequence of historical formulations, it does not do so in order to construct a unity out of them, let alone to abstract something common to them all. There is no analogy between the relationship of the individual to the idea, and its relationship to the concept; in the latter case it falls under the aegis of the concept and remains what it was: an individuality; in the former, it stands in the idea, and becomes something different: a totality. That is its Platonic "redemption".
>
> (OGT, 46)

Exactly how it is that phenomena are redeemed is the function of literary criticism. Precisely because the work of art is in the simplest sense a formal construction, it is a lesser prefiguration of the ideal form and, thus, provides the material through which this higher order may be intuited. It is, however, fallacious to presume that all phenomena, that is, all the elements of a work of art, are participants in this higher order. The dross that is left over from the process of literary criticism is the material content, and only that which is recovered is the truth content.

This, of course, begs the question of why such inessential material content is necessary at all. Could the artist not simply present the valuable truth content, thus eliminating the need for its critical extraction? Predictably, Benjamin's response would be firmly negative. The artist cannot presuppose the truth content, and the material content of the work is necessary to body forth an as yet unknown truth content. The critic has the privilege of penetrating the work after the mediation of time. Time is necessary to dull the beauty of the work, which masks its truth content, and the critic is necessary to ensure that this distance of time does not

become auratic. That is, that the work does not become inviolable as a "classic".

The mortification of works to which Benjamin refers in the Origin is central. The negativity of Benjamin's criticism becomes more and more apparent as his work progresses, and is increasingly the key to "redemption" both in a theological and later revolutionary political sense. Benjamin is characteristically critical in the retroactive sense; redemption for him is looking backward. His critique of the modern in all its aspects is, to a debatable but undeniable extent, based in nostalgia for a lost art which he also condemns. "The redemptive need in Benjamin's critique of the modern condemns that critique to a kind of mystified morbidity; it always has to be a question of truth breaking in upon, or being made to emerge from, degraded phenomena– degraded by virtue of their very phenomenality"[16]. All reading (or misreading) is toward this recovery of a lost truth, and, in art, this redemption is only achieved through its remystification and critical promotion to knowledge. Remystification is aura, and aura is something which his criticism both needs and rejects.

Oddly enough, considering Benjamin's emphasis on commentary in the process of literary criticism, there is relatively little close reading in his work and mostly quotations. The scholarly work in the Origin is perhaps an exception, but digression and liberal interpretation is still predominant. Benjamin scans the work of art, as he scans history, for only those elements which fit his scheme of redemption. In this sense, he is the embodiment of his own critical virtue; he reconstructs chosen fragments into an image of truth. The etiology of this image, however, remai unclear.

The dialectical image emerges from Benjamin's literary theory as the site of the Utopian image of redeemed life. The image of truth that is constructed, then, is the static image of the dialectic rather than the end point, or resolution, of the dialectic. Richard Wolin relates this to Baudelaire and the *correspondances* of historical elements: "...in Baudelaire's poetry the ruins of modernity ultimately transform themselves into allegories of utopia by virtue of the interrelation of prehistoric and modern elements on which Benjamin comes to base his theory of Dialectical Images"[17]. Furthermore, Benjamin's own project is that of

constructing a kind of prehistory to a redeemed humankind, of collecting the "data of remembrance– not historical data, but data of prehistory." (CB, 141). The intention is that the Utopian image will be merely seen rather than created; the "standstill" of the dialectic "is Utopia, and the dialectical image therefore a dream image" (CB, 171).

Chapter Three:

Allegory and Criticism in The Origin of German Tragic Drama

Benjamin's only scholarly work, his *Habilitationsschrift*, also represents his only complete, full length book. Under increasing pressure from his family to secure an income after years of support through university, Benjamin undertook this post–doctoral work to obtain an invitation to lecture at the university. Benjamin's other career prospects, freelance writer and bookseller, did not appear feasible at the time, nor did they grant him the academic recognition he desired. However, the position of *Privatdozent* at the university carried no guarantee of a salary, and Benjamin seemed determined to avoid financial responsibility.

The work itself is focussed on the neglected area of German baroque drama, the *Trauerspiel*– literally, mourning–play. This book was not his first contemplation on the melancholic drama of the baroque; in 1916 he wrote two essays (unpublished) on the *Trauerspiel* entitled "*Trauerspiel und Tragodie*" and "*Die Bedeutung der Sprache in Trauerspiel und Tragodie*"[1]. This choice of subject matter reflected Benjamin's ardent love of the esoteric, and also underscores a tendency that plagued his professional life. The *Trauerspiel* itself was a difficult, though not impossible, subject of study, but it was Benjamin's methodology that guaranteed the work's rejection. His repeated, zealous denunciations of previous academic work on the subject did not, for obvious reasons, endear him to the university, and represented an arrogance frowned upon in academic candidates. Moreover, the impulse in Benjamin's thought to "free itself of all impulse to classify"[2] attacked the classification methods advocated at the university for study and teaching.

Benjamin was fully aware of his book's incompatibility with university requirements and yet refused to alter it. Friends advised him not to submit in order to avoid the embarrassment of rejection. Finally, after a condemning assessment by the head of the department of aesthetics (at the time this was Hans Cornelius, a great influence on Benjamin's friend, Adorno), Benjamin withdrew the application and thus was denied a position at the

university.

Despite his unorthodoxy, Benjamin was crushed by the rejection. He greatly admired all the intricacies of academia. He and Gershom Scholem had set up their own mock university, the "University of Muri" in 1918, and Benjamin delighted in the statutes and catalogues of university administration, playing the role of "rector". Their game of "ridicule of academic activities found an appropriate outlet"[3], but it also reveals a devotion to the idea of academe as is also evident in Benjamin's attempts to live by it. It was, however, the second current in his attitude, that of ridicule and derision, that won out in the end. He could not stifle his criticism of academic functioning, nor could he control the arbitrariness of the committees, for which acceptance could be merely a matter of luck[4]. Hannah Arendt's characterization of Benjamin's life plagued by the "little hunchback", the paragon of bad luck, is a tempting one to make. (I, 6).

By necessity, then, Benjamin's work became fragmentary as he was forced to make a living through commissions and brief submissions to journals. His friends, like Scholem and Bloch, encouraged him in several pursuits, including his emigration to Palestine. Most of the projects that would have garnered Benjamin security never came to fruition, largely because of Benjamin's own incompetence. Still convinced, however, of the validity and importance of his work, he began to write for an audience which would, at some time in the future, presumably posthumously, appreciate his work.

The Origin of German Tragic Drama has since found the audience it was initially denied. Inaccessible and esoteric, it has established Benjamin in academic circles as more than a clever creator of aphorisms and cultural truisms. His close reading and intricate theory of allegory occupy a respected position in literary criticism and aesthetics, if a strangely inimitable one. The work which limited his career in life has ensured it for posterity.

In the lengthy introduction to the work, the "Epistemo–Critical Prologue", Benjamin outlines the philosophical bases of the study, simultaneously describing and displaying his method. He unfolds his list of influences– Hegel, Croce, Leibniz, while at the same time

appropriating them for his own use. Though his references to them are cursory, even pedantic, this is deceptive. It soon becomes apparent that at least Hegel is a major influence on Benjamin's own methodology and dialectic, and this presence is far more pervasive than the few times he mentions Hegel's name. Benjamin is training us to be critical readers, to look beyond the stated concerns to the constellation of influences that go to make up any work.

More directly, the Prologue deals with the problem of representation, and the re–establishment of a theology of art. Benjamin outlines an epistemological premise, thereby confronting the inevitability of representation. The classic form of philosophical writing, according to Benjamin, has been didactic, which type of system claims that eliminating the problem of representation is the key to true knowledge. Benjamin counters that this is not, obviously, the aim of language. Language is humanity's method of knowing, and representation is, therefore, essential to both knowledge and truth.

Systematic, that is, classical, philosophy has at its core the intent to ensnare an external truth, to trap this elusive object in the fine mesh of the system's rigid logic. Language and, thus, representation are merely the clothes that we wrap around an essentially unrepresentable truth. The object, then, of philosophical systems is, in effect, to possess truth and place it within knowledge. Benjamin asserts that truth resists this process of acquisition. A devised system ensnaring an external truth implies a subject/object relationship, one that truth does not enter into. Revelation of truth must be through self–representation and is, therefore, immanent in the form of an idea, not created by a philosophical structure.

It is easy to understand how such a work could be dismissed as both pseudo– Platonism and incomprehensible by Benjamin's reviewers. However, as is always true with Benjamin, his source is cleverly concealed in the rhetoric. Messianic idealism, especially in the Kabbalah, is the true source of Benjamin's theory of the revelation of truth. Here again, Benjamin both describes and displays his method. Just as truth content is to be grasped in immersion, in contemplation, so Benjamin's ideas resonate beyond pedestrian arguments and deep into history and culture.

To establish this process, Benjamin abandons the philosophical system, with its rigid demands for proof, and turns to the treatise. Treatises "may be didactic in tone, but essentially they lack the conclusiveness of an instruction which could be asserted, like doctrine, by virtue of its own authority...Its method is essentially representation. Method is a digression" (OGT, 28). The treatise is in the form of a contemplation, a slow, steady revelation bound by the image of truth.

In short, Benjamin sets out to demonstrate that "systematic coherence is no more related to truth than any other method or form of representation" (OGT, 33). Indeed, the more scrupulous a system purports to be, the more incoherent it necessarily becomes. The philosophical system, as scientific method, creates its own discontinuities, which it then ignores as a problem in pursuit of a unified goal. For Benjamin, these discontinuities could provide the dialectical advancement of knowledge if properly addressed, though, of course, they can have nothing to do with truth.

Because systems attempt to impose their own order, they inherently avoid truth. The scientific attempt to divide and classify knowledge is applied to its pursuit of truth and, therefore, fails. Truth is an indivisible entity, and the participation of knowable phenomena in it is fundamentally mediated. Our role as interpreters of phenomena is not to be minimized and displaced by rigid systems. We create concepts which "enable phenomena to participate in the existence of ideas" (OGT, 34). Thus phenomena are "divested of their false unity" of appearance so that they may "partake of the genuine unity of truth" (OGT, 33).

Benjamin employs here an analogy that becomes important for many of his concerns: "Ideas are to objects as constellations are to stars" (OGT, 34). Phenomena are formed into concepts through the mediating role of human understanding and, in turn, concepts are arranged into ideas. On their own, phenomena are meaningless, but, through their subordination in concepts and subsequent participation in the realm of ideas, they are reduced to their basic elements and then redeemed.

Benjamin brings us back to the basic question of where these ideas originate, if they

are not "among the given elements of the world of phenomena" (OGT, 35). Divine or secular Platonic sources are problematical, as is "intellectual vision", since truth, as we have already seen, cannot be an object of knowledge, nor can it be the object of intention, for "[t]ruth is the death of intention" (OGT, 36). To understand Benjamin's answer, that the "idea is something linguistic" (OGT, 36), it is necessary to refer back to his theory of language as symbol. Symbol here does not mean the arbitrary something standing for something else, rather it denotes something in itself– a piece, that when joined with other pieces, becomes something whole. The idea belongs to this Adamic, pre–lapsarian kind of language of naming without intention. The task of philosophy, through constellating concepts, is to recall this primordial form of language and perception. Benjamin expresses this as a theological concern:

> Thus the task of the coming philosophy can be conceived as the discovery of creation of that concept of knowledge which, by relating the concept of experience *exclusively* to the transcendental consciousness makes not only mechanical but also religious experience logically possible. This should definitely not be taken to mean that knowledge makes God possible, but that it definitely does make the experience and doctrine of him possible in the first place.[5]

It is not surprising that this prologue dismayed Benjamin's early readers, appearing as it does to be an erratic and irrelevant introduction to German baroque drama. Benjamin directly mentions the *Trauerspiel* only toward the end of the prologue. In fact, the prologue is less an introduction to the text *per se* than a framework for the practice of literary criticism itself. Most likely written after the main body of the text on *Trauerspiel*, the prologue must be viewed alongside the study as a companion to the process of reflective interpretation.

Benjamin follows his own prescription for literary criticism in the study. The first chapter, "*Trauerspiel* and Tragedy", is a detailed outline of the material content of the typical German baroque drama, the commentary which reduces the *Trauerspiel* to its basic elements.

The second part of the book, "Allegory and *Trauerspiel*", is an analysis of the truth content of German baroque drama, while the Prologue is a reflection on the process of criticism itself.

Benjamin addresses his proscription against genre study by asserting that "tragic" and "comic" are not merely sets of rules, but structures in themselves; they are ideas rather than genres and therefore merit philosophical consideration. His statement that "[a] major work will either establish the genre or abolish it; and the perfect work will do both" (OGT, 44) does not prohibit the study of works within the genre of *Trauerspiel*. German tragic drama had been misinterpreted as bad tragedy under the strict rules of genre study. Both major works and minor works must be included in critical scrutiny to replace the rules of classical tragedy with the Idea of the tragic.

The subject matter of the *Trauerspiel* is invariably historical, reflecting an emphasis on the immanence of everyday life in contrast with the transcendence of faith. For this era, history itself was a kind of *Trauerspiel*, an accumulation of wretched human events left for dead in retrospect. History was a chronicle of humankind's creaturely estate; the moral imperative that informed classical and medieval historicism is absent because it would imply that a particular event or action could cause the catastrophe of human ruin. As hapless subjects of our own nature we are allowed no such power; our catastrophe is inevitable, and the depiction of history in drama serves no purpose other than that of lamentation of the human estate.

Dramatically, the court provides an appropriate microcosm for human history, and is, therefore, the most common setting of the *Trauerspiel*. The monarchical figure is the central character, then, not by virtue of absolute rank (as in classical tragedy), but simply as the principal exponent of history as the age knew it: "The sovereign is representative of history. He holds the course of history in his hand like a sceptre" (OGT, 65). The monarch represents an effective instrument for the catastrophe that preoccupied the age.

The powerful position of the king figure, both in history and in the drama itself, is radically juxtaposed with his capacity, or incapacity, to rule. He is both principal exponent of

history and principal victim of nature. The antithesis of these positions results in the characteristic indecisiveness of the baroque leading man: "Just as compositions with restful lighting are virtually unknown in mannerist painting, so that the theatrical figures of this epoch always appear in the harsh light of their changing resolve. What is conspicuous about them is not so much the sovereignty evident in the stoic turns of phrase, as the sheer arbitrariness of a constantly shifting emotional storm..." (OGT, 71)

The indecision of the ruler is a quality unique to baroque drama, though it achieves its ultimate representation outside of Germany, in the figure of Hamlet. The *Trauerspiel* focuses on far more violent subject matter; Herod is a favorite figure, and ancient Oriental tales of villainy are often revised. Hamlet, the proto–Renaissance man, strains toward order, wholeness and truth, and his fall to chaotic madness, depravity and death is all the more tragic. Hallman's Herod, however, is consistently depraved and vicious; his befuddled reason and changing resolve combined with his raging passions produce the tragic result– the death of his wife Mariamne[6]. In the *Trauerspiel* the ruler is the height of depravity, yet also the height of power, ironically occupying a sacrosanct position. His capacity for destruction is paramount; therefore its implications are far reaching: "For if the tyrant falls, not simply in his own name, as an individual, but as a ruler and in the name of mankind and history, then his fall has the quality of a judgement, in which the subject, too, is implicated" (OGT, 72).

Contrast with the classical tragic hero proves fruitful in determining the nature of the tyrant of German tragic drama, a critical point lost when the latter is considered as a poor imitation of the former. Benjamin draws from his observation a fundamental distinction between the two types based upon their linguistic qualities and positions with respect to their communities. The tragic hero of Greek proportions is condemned to silence; he is defined in defiance of the social order from which he springs. Speech is communal, and because the tragic hero is denied articulation within the realm of the disapproving community, the resulting silence causes him to withdraw into himself. The purgative element of classical tragedy occurs because "the content of the hero's achievements belongs to the community, as does

speech. Since the community of the nation denies these achievements they remain unarticulated in the hero" (OGT, 108). The timeless guilt and curse (incest, patricide, etc.) are driven into the hero; they become his alone, so that with the ultimate sacrifice of his body in death, the curse, too, is extinguished from the community.

In the *Trauerspiel*, however, the curse is worked out in the community, extended into the very stage and setting. There is no single hero bearing physically and in silence the burden of a communal guilt. Tragedy is tied to legend and myth and, therefore demands retelling– the hero exchanges his life for the immortality of his name in legend. *Trauerspiel*, on the other hand, has history as its basis, and this classically tragic element is not appropriate. Whereas in tragedy the hero saves only his name for immortality, the characters of the *Trauerspiel* lose this "name–bearing individuality" so that "the vitality of their role" may survive in the "spirit–world" (OGT, 136). It is not the actions and motives of the characters that constitute the drama; Herod does not kill his wife out of purely tragic, individual jealousy, rather these motives are the instruments of fate. This is the real drama, the drama of fate, that constitutes the German baroque tragedy.

The curse that dominates the *Trauerspiel* is not a cardinal sin to be expiated, rather it is the curse of fate itself. Mortality through our subjection to nature weighs heavily upon the human condition. In baroque drama, the whole of nature, down to the inanimate objects in the setting, reflects the power of fate– Hamlet's dagger virtually *becomes* passion and guilt. The allegorical significance of these objects reflects the profound melancholy of the age.

Indeed, mourning is the definitive element of German tragic drama. The melancholy produced by the Lutheran doctrine of salvation by grace was reflected most adequately in the emblems which dominate the *Trauerspiel*. Dürer's *Melencolia*, Benjamin determines, is the seed of genius that occupies this "crude theatre" (OGT, 158). Melancholy concentrates upon its own condition; it is the black bile that causes hypochondria and the disposition capable of intensification. Melancholy, therefore, as the emblematic equivalent of mourning, is the only form of drama appropriate to the depiction of history, since it forces the unrelenting

contemplation of ourselves: "Melancholy betrays the world for the sake of knowledge. But in its tenacious self–absorption it embraces dead objects in its contemplation in order to redeem them" (OGT, 157)

Classical tragedy does not mourn, it purges. It does not, however, require an audience, for it would still be complete without this incidental cathartic effect. *Trauerspiel*, however, is a public spectacle; its mourning is in the form of a lamentation that requires communal, ceremonial acknowledgement. The "lightning flash of intuition" (OGT. 153) that characterizes both the tragic hero's apprehension of his own guilt and our apprehension of its significance is unknown to the characters of the *Trauerspiel*. It is only the extended contemplation of a whole community of posterity that elements of this world are redeemed for human understanding at all.

If symbol is representative of the "lightning flash of intuition" then it is allegory which is the steadier contemplation. Benjamin's analysis of the allegorical code in the *Trauerspiel* affirms its necessity to baroque artistic representation; it is the "dominant mode of expression of a world in which things have been, for whatever reason, sundered from meanings, from spirit, from genuine human existence"[7]. It is the plodding attempt, fully aware of its own shortcomings, to reconcile the past with the present, to provide genuine links in the continuum of history:

> Benjamin uses traditionally dramatic terms to describe historical categories: he draws a distinction between "historical" and "tragic" time. Historical time is infinite in every direction and unfulfilled in every moment; tragic time is fulfilled time. However, the two temporalities are not mutually exclusive. In the actions of great individuals, historical time and tragic time are tangent; i.e., historical time necessarily becomes tragic time, and any representation of these great individuals must be tragic. Because tragedy deals only with great individuals rather than with humanity in general, its fulfilled time is merely symbolic; its time represents an intermediary between

historically unfulfilled time and truly fulfilled messianic time.[8]

It is clear that Benjamin's understanding of allegory differs from the classical and critical judgements passed upon allegory. Commonly dispensed with as a crude, polemical form of metaphor, it has been displaced by symbol in the highest ranks of literary criticism. Allegory and its correlative, the emblem, lend themselves to easy manipulation; rhetoricians viewed with dismay allegory's unrefined, highly artificial method of advancing a particular argument. For Benjamin's intellectual generation, and still, to a certain extent, our own, allegory occupied a position in rhetoric undeserving of any serious critical attention.

The distaste for allegory would have been particularly strong in the venerable tradition of German Romanticism from which Benjamin emerged. The Romantics primarily concerned themselves with a radical break from literary traditions, which were seen as oppressive to the genius of the individual artist. Allegory was a fundamental tool for the perpetuation of literary and moral norms; it was a prescriptive device intended to control and inhibit. Obviously, then, the Promethean hero of Romantic literature could only struggle against the bonds of allegory's rigid structure.

The focus of Romanticism had shifted away from anything traditional, trusted and time–honoured, and to the individual, the moment, the here and now. An appropriate form of representation could no longer, to paraphrase Goethe's famous dictum, draw the particular from the general, as in allegory, rather the general from the particular. The experience of that individual, the particular, became more valuable than years of established tradition. As Edwin Honig summarizes:

> For the social hierarchy under God, the Romantics substituted an esthetic hierarchy based on the prerogatives of the man of feeling, the immoralist, the artist, the confidence trickster. The Romantics could easily dismiss the Lord of Creation for a God of Love, Sympathetic Nature, or the Demon of the

> Absolute...It did not matter in which class the hero had been born; it only mattered that in order to act he must be conscious of having been declassed by temperament.[9]

That this Romantic figure could exist entirely outside any moral structure was, for obvious reasons, anathema to the allegorical vision. Though, as we have seen, Benjamin was greatly influenced by Romantic thought. perhaps even substituting the critic figure in a neo–Romantic scheme, his understanding of allegory was a marked deviation from this influence. For Benjamin, allegory had little to do with the pejorative sense of a narrative function that had been dismissed as aesthetically invalid. Allegory could, indeed, be periodically useful, even indispensable, as a form of representation appropriate to certain historical circumstances, even in the modern era: "The allegorical mode of portraying truth was meaningful only in times of historical decay; hence its greater relevance for the present...The similarity between baroque allegory and modern expressionism was not lost on Benjamin, for as he noted, both were expressions of the collapse of a historical era"[10].

Allegory in the baroque had become useful as a method of redefining that society's relationship to God. The baroque period represents the first in Christian history where the status of Christianity as a faith, aside from its interior differences, went unquestioned. The struggle to be free of persecution and the stoical endurance of that persecution ceased to define the Christian martyr and his or her imitator. The advent of Lutheranism, however, was by far the greatest single element to radically change the Christian faith of the time. Luther's denunciation of the excesses of the Catholic church engendered a Protestant ethic that was rigorous, pious and anti–idolatrous. The vestments of the new church were no longer rich references to a glorious heaven, rather they were moribund reminders of the human condition on earth.

The transience of this earthly condition was all the more pressing in light of now uncertain salvation. When deeds could ensure one a place in heaven, satisfaction and comfort

could be taken in the activities of life. The doctrine of salvation by grace alone destroyed the direct relevance of worldly deeds. Crucial to Lutheranism, antinomianism wrested control of salvation away from the high priests and, thus, from abuses, such as the practice of granting indulgences. It also, however, imbued a profound melancholia upon the age. Baroque art began to focus on the imperfections of this world in ornate and decadent detail, in glaring contrast with the now impenetrable afterworld.

The baroque *Trauerspiel*, then, does not contain the dramatic conflict between this world and higher judgement. There is no eschatology, no "mechanism by which all earthly things are gathered in together and exalted before being consigned to their end". The baroque method is to completely empty the hereafter of any remnants of this world, and from the hereafter "the baroque extracts a profusion of things which customarily escaped the grasp of artistic formulation and, at its high point, brings them violently into the light of day, in order to clear an ultimate heaven". As a vacuum, then, the ultimate, the hereafter, is empowered with the destruction of this world, and the baroque was weighted heavily with this premonition of doom: "the religious man of the baroque era clings so tightly to this world because of the feeling that he is being driven along to a cataract with it" (OGT,).

The melancholy which characterizes the baroque manifests itself naturally in allegorical representation. "Mourning is the state of mind in which feeling revives the empty world, in the form of a mask, and derives an enigmatic satisfaction in contemplating it. Every feeling is bound to an a priori object, and the representation of this object is its phenomenology" (OGT, 139). The melancholic is profoundly aware of mortality, and painfully uncertain of salvation. Allegory is appropriate to the ironic view of this life, concentrating morbidly upon its end, while offering no alternative.

Allegory as a representational mode indicates a dialectical relationship between the signifier and the signified. Just as nominalism had shaped the debate over medieval language theory, so did the baroque experience a renewed distrust in the ability of language to adequately convey its worldly objects. The truth content of language is held up to question in

both cases. However, it is not language that is devalued (both eras believed in a purer, primal language) but, rather, the object of linguistic representation, the thing, that is robbed of its richer significance.

Allegorical representation embodies this antinomy. The sheer arbitrariness of allegorical codification debases the profane world by surrendering its immediacy through language to stagnant functionality in the allegorical cause. Simultaneously, though, the aim of allegory is to elevate the profane world, through this process of mediation, to the realm of ideas. Here, then is the antinomy: allegory both debases and elevates; it is artistic intention and theology together, and only dialectical thought can grasp this synthesis.

Benjamin resurrects the ruins of allegory from his Romantic critical training, yet in the Prologue he had praised Croce for destroying the concept of "genre". He also states that a perfect work of art both creates and destroys a genre. Critically, then, Benjamin is exercising the antinomy that dominates allegory and is central to his own critical scheme. The ruin is paramount in this scheme; it is the *via negativa* that both advances toward and retreats into origin.

Benjamin's fascination with the baroque stems from this unique process of giving form through circumlocutious layering of images. Baroque apotheosis is contemplative and extensive, always beginning in the profane. The emblem is favored as a stagnant, incomplete image ripe for redemption into truth, in contrast with the humanistic veneration of symbolic totality in the human figure. Emblems, as allegorical personifications, seem to focus on things rather than souls. If they are often confused with the afore–mentioned human figure, it is because of the misinterpretation of the function of the human form in the emblem. "Allegorical personification has always concealed the fact that its function is not the personification of things, but rather to give the concrete a more imposing form by getting it up as a person" (OGT, 187)

There is something imperfect, therefore, about the allegorical emblem, something that overtly proclaims its incomplete and fragmentary nature. Whereas classicism condemns, or

does not even recognize, imperfection, the baroque revels in it. Beauty, through totality, is not a primary consideration, for allegory declares itself to be above beauty. Allegory works in the aftermath of beauty, sweeping up the shards of its destroyed attempt at totality, and preserving them as *memento mori*.

Baroque apotheosis became convinced that this process was as essential and, indeed, magical as the goal of truth and redemption. Images are piled indiscriminately together in relentless repetition toward the final Miracle. Allegory is this layering of images, of meanings extended through history. In symbol, destruction is suddenly transfigured by redemption; nothing remains unresolved. Allegory, in contrast, becomes a landscape of destruction, a litany of our doomed creaturely estate. Divine redemption is not within its structure, it is an entirely different time scheme. The allegorical process is to divest history of the Eternal, leaving only an image to be interpreted. When the Messianic becomes manifest, then, it will collide with the matter of human history in one final redemptive miracle.

The allegorical movement is from history to nature. In the *Trauerspiel*, history is the ruin and decay resulting from its subjection to nature. The images of fallen nature piled together bear the imprint of history, and allegory parallels nature's production of its own fallen, shattered images. Benjamin cites the example of baroque paintings in which Christ wanders through ruined temples, part god, part man, both mourning and transcending history.

Allegory functions as a representation of the dualistic nature of history as both suffering and salvation. Bainard Cowan's essay on Benjamin's theory of allegory points out that the divine presence in fallen nature is consistent with Biblical images:

> Appropriation of natural objects has been the hallmark of God's action in history: the burning bush, the parting sea, the gushing rock are all natural objects trans–nurtured, marking the stages along the way of sacred history. As objects they are made into images for the collective memory, emblems of moments at which nature was interrupted and something truly historic

happened.[11]

Allegory employs this dual time scheme of historical time and Messianic, or divine time. In the Christian *Trauerspiel*, the dual presence of Christ, as both god and man, is the source of allegorical representation. The royal purple of the tyrant is the divine blood of Christ, the martyr. Legally and morally, the baroque struggled to establish divine descendence for the king, so that the parallel would be drawn regardless of the malevolence of the royal personage. The tyrant/Christ figure, then, is both divine will and its victim, both king and crucifixion.

The *Trauerspiel* functions fundamentally as a dialectic. The action and the chorus are different and opposing worlds; the dramatic character's vision counters the profane perception of the spectator; the real world of events is separated from the ideal world of meanings. Even the title of the *Trauerspiel* is dualistic– one title refers to the subject matter and the other to its allegorical content (OGT, 195). At each level, oppositions confront each other, from earthly vs. heavenly down into the functions of language and sound.

We have seen how silent profundity defined the classical hero, and it is loquacity that, conversely, defines the baroque character. Jacob Böhme had praised the value of sound as the essence of language, and in the baroque "the tension between the spoken and the written word is immeasurable" (OGT, 201). The spoken word reflects our rash, creaturely nature– it is the ecstasy and madness of the tyrant and the pain and torment of his victim. The written word is composure and reflection– it is our position as reader and historian.

Drama was the ultimate form for expression of baroque language theory, for it encompasses both the "spontaneous utterance of the creature" and the "written language of allegory" which "enslaves objects in the eccentric embrace of meaning" (OGT, 202). The *Trauerspiel* alexandrine performs the same function as the "colossal proportions of baroque architecture and baroque painting" (OGT, 206), which is to expand itself fully and violently into the space of perception. The maxim, a common device in the *Trauerspiel*, tends to express

stock sentiments with common imagery, so that it is the phonetic aspect that is noteworthy above its profundity. Sound compresses words into the forceful emphasis which is lacking in the written form of language.

The use of the maxim in *Trauerspiel* is a source of much critical derision. Because of its authoritative and well–worn nature, the maxim most often derived from classical and scholarly work, and was, thus, probably foreign to the contemporary interests of the audience. Benjamin proposes, though, that the sheer energy and bombast of the visual and aural spectacle would have catered to the enjoyment of the audience. Even had they not understood the language at all, the authority of an ancient maximal truth would have been increased by this obscurity.

The writers of the baroque, in using language with such bizarre virtuosity in sound and style, accomplish an interesting feat for the allegorical approach. The reduction of the importance of meaning, in contrast with the emphasis on bombastic style, released words from their traditional meaning. The authority of the maxim is deadened because it would now have been no more than an empty vaunting of sound. The onomatopoeic phrases and flourishing descriptions flaunt words as "objects which can be exploited for allegorical purposes" (OGT, 207).

Allegory both utilizes and reflects the breakdown of language when its relationship to an absolute signified is uncertain. The production of meaning through language breaks down, and its absence is filled by a "natural history of meaning" (OGT, 166). Allegory is the accurate representation of this broken process, for in it "language is broken up to acquire a changed and intensified meaning in its fragments" (OGT, 208). Allegory is not mimetic, and the arbitrary relationship it proposes between signifier and signified is by no means disguised or veiled. Because allegorical representation is overtly disjunctive, it immediately dispenses with any false claims to the *logos*.

The enormous artificiality of allegory emphasizes its use of language as more than a means of communication. It becomes an object itself. The atomizing of words through their

characteristic capitalization and position as emblems gives each fragment of language an individual dignity equal to any other object appropriated for the cause of allegory. Arbitrariness and chaos, the properties of allegory, are edifying properties which replace the dignity that they also rob language of.

Benjamin is attracted to this dualistic, incessantly negative function of allegory that allows for simultaneous degradation and edification. He inevitably brings his study, then, to the most contentious, yet central, issue of baroque allegory when he demands, "What is the significance of those scenes of cruelty and anguish in which the baroque drama revels?" (OGT, 216). Emblematics and allegory have at their very core in the baroque the depiction of decay, and most notably human decay. Allegory, through its dissection, allows us to see our own cruel history and fragmented, incomplete selves.

The baroque obsession with death is of a far too particular nature in these works to be mere reflection upon the eventuality of death. Lohenstein describes throughout nine entire strophes the putrefaction of the body. Gryphius was a student of anatomy, and this scientific detail makes its presence felt in his emblematic writing. Quite simply, Benjamin concludes, "in the *Trauerspiel* of the seventeenth century the corpse becomes...the pre– eminent emblematic property" (OGT, 218).

We have seen how baroque apotheosis seeks to clear the afterworld of all worldly elements. The *Trauerspiel* tends to look backward into this world, rather than projecting forward into the next. From this altered perspective which is "from the point of view of death, the product of the corpse is life. It is not only in the loss of limbs, not only the changes of the aging body, but in all the processes of elimination and purification that everything corpse–like falls away from the body piece by piece. It is no accident that precisely nails and hair, which are cut away as dead matter from the living body, continue to grow on the corpse" (OGT, 218).

It becomes clearer, in the light of this point of view, why the tyrant occupies a central position in the *Trauerspiel*. In opposition to the sacrificial tragic hero, the tyrant functions to

provide corpses for the play, thus facilitating the apotheosis that is distinctly baroque. The "*Todtenmahlzeit*", the banquet of death, is a common dramatic fixture in the *Trauerspiel.* The conclusion of the play, in a *coup de théatre*, shows in gruesome detail the fatal results of the tyrant's villainy. Scenes of the final feast, in which bodies are ceremoniously served up in place of food, are either shown or described.

The most well–known example of the eminent death's head symbol occurs, once again, outside of German drama, and again in Hamlet . The resplendent decay of the graveyard scene and Hamlet's soliloquy above Yorrick's skull establish this as the ultimate baroque *memento mori.* Yet it is more than as a reminder of death that the dismembered and dead body makes its appearance so consistently in the *Trauerspiel.* It is the destruction of the organic, of this–worldliness, that can lead to true meaning. However, since the baroque rejected classical symbolic totality, only fragments and images of this destruction may be lumped together toward meaning: "the whole human body cannot enter a symbolic icon, but it is not inappropriate for part of the body to constitute it" (OGT, 216).

Benjamin leaves his discussion of the theatre of cruelty and returns to comparisons of medieval allegory. He cites several examples of translations and influences of medieval works, but soon begins to concentrate on affinities between the ages rather than lineages of influence. He posits three points of affinity between medieval and baroque Christianity: both struggled against pagan gods, used allegory as a primary form, and were fascinated by the torments of the flesh. The Middle Ages had both regional pagan threats and the powerful ancient gods to contend with. The methods used by medieval Christians to quell paganism are still powerfully present, though long severed from their propagandistic origins: horned, Pan–like devils consort with pagan witches in our lasting conception of evil. Similarly, seventeenth century Christianity struggled against the rise of the occult in Rosicrucianism, alchemy, and astrology. The Renaissance age, with its neo–Platonic studies, resurrected interest in these pagan cults, and the teachings of gnosticism once again brought antiquity in conflict with Christianity.

Allegorical exegesis was essential to both eras, as it served to diminish threats of paganism while still utilizing its powerful imagery. The Middle Ages saw the power of subjugating evil in emblematics. The ancient gods were always depicted naked, as a sign of their impurity but also as a reminder that only in Christian theology could the faithful enjoy uncorrupted corporeality, and only in heaven. Similarly, the baroque allegorists sought to contain powerful pagan concepts in boxed images so that "their demonic power might be at least visually contained" (OGT, 221),

Benjamin asserts that, for both eras, "allegorical exegesis tended above all in two directions: it was designed to establish, from a Christian point of view, the true demonic nature of the ancient gods, and it also served the pious mortification of the flesh" (OGT, 222). Allegory both subsumed and preserved the ancient world as an essential bolstering of contemporary Christianity. For the Middle Ages the drive to preserve the ancients arose out of their tremendous reverence for ancient knowledge, as well as a theological need to extend Christianity, first by adopting Jewish history and also by accepting the antique as prefigurational of Christian events and doctrine. For the baroque, preservation was a means of securing for eternity that which was transient. The sixteenth and seventeenth centuries had seen rapid and sweeping changes in legal norms which, for the first time, announced the transience of secular law and life. "Allegory established itself most permanently where transitoriness and eternity confronted each other most closely" (OGT, 224).

In both eras allegory serves the purpose of preservation as well as of mortification. This direction is also the source of the allegorical confrontation between flesh and purity. The material and the physis become increasingly associated with evil in allegory. Nakedness (impurity) attributed to images from antiquity necessitated allegorical interpretation in order to salvage the eternal from the material, for it allowed for the subjugation of evil (material) into a simplified emblem: "the concentration of the numerous pagan powers into *one*, theologically rigorously defined, Antichrist" (OGT, 227). One demon, the Satan, is an unambiguous manifestation of evil, and a testament to the power of allegorical interpretation.

Benjamin concludes his exploration of allegory in the *Trauerspiel* with an apprehension of the profound sense of evil in the baroque outlook. He has shown how Lutheranism instilled in the age an abysmal, melancholic view of life, death and uncertain salvation/damnation. The most pertinent fear in the baroque audience, then, was the fear of the unknown. Allegory attempts to quell this fear: because of its arbitrariness, it deadens the certainty of manifest substance, making it unreal in itself. The subjection of phenomena to allegorical interpretation makes bearable the apprehension of the infernal, which was as real to the baroque Christian as fire and pain.

Allegory seeks to make knowable and acceptable that which is uncertain. What saves allegory from tumbling into endless arbitrary re–interpretations is precisely this intention. Allegory limits the possibility of this type of inertia for the very reason that it is arbitrary– it reminds us of our own futility and finitude, comparing it with the divine infinite. Through allegorical prefiguration, virtue again has the end which it was deprived of by antinomianism, that of God.

Clinging to this world, the Christian community looks to allegory to restore the necessity of human virtue. Good works became, not an insurance policy, but an integral relationship with an allegorical understanding of God. Evil, conversely, has no concrete relationships; it is knowledge with no object, only empty depths. The temptation of evil is "the illusion of freedom– in the exploration of what is forbidden; the illusion of independence– in the secession from the community of the pious; the illusion of infinity– in the empty abyss of evil" (OGT, 230). Allegory makes certain our lack of freedom, emphasizing our subjection to nature and our limited estate.

In the end, allegory loses its privileged status as arbitrary code secreting knowledge; the direction of its reflection is, and has to be, reversed. It begins in the detailing of our own destruction and ends pointing toward our redemption. That which is vile and worldly becomes itself an allegory of resurrection: the melancholy contemplation will not rest on the ruins– the dry bones reconnect themselves from the desert floor and dance toward redemption: "Yea,

when the Highest comes to reap the harvest from the graveyard, then I, a death's head, will be an angel's countenance" (OGT, 232).

Chapter Four: Benjamin and Historical Materialism

As a literary critic Benjamin often chooses upon subjects neglected or misread by traditional literary studies. The *Trauerspiel*, erroneously classed with classical tragedy, occupies the study central to Benjamin's early academic *oeuvre*, while Baudelaire, the popular but critically misplaced French lyric poet, provides the impetus behind Benjamin's massive socio–political project on the Paris Arcades. These choices in subject matter reflect more than Benjamin's celebrated love of the arcane; they also reflect his desire as a literary critic and historian to wrest these moments past from the irretrievable depths of oblivion.

Benjamin's conscious decision to discuss neglected works is expedient, even necessary, to elaborate his philosophy of history and the role played in it by art. The grand works of literary tradition– the "classics"– have been removed by standardized interpretation from their origins as well as from their unique historical circumstances. The study of minor works not only emphasizes Benjamin's rejection of the traditional hierarchy of beauty, but provide an opportunity for relatively untainted exploration of history through the work of art. This is a conception of literary history that is non–hierarchical and leads into Benjamin's theory of historical materialism.

The monadological structure that characterizes Benjamin's theory of literary criticism similarly applies to his conception of history. Just as the task of the literary critic is to ferret out the ideas (as monads) inherent in the work of art, so is it the task of the historian to seek out ideas and truths embedded in history: "In such investigations, the historical perspective can be extended into the past or future, without being subject to any limits of principle. This gives the idea its total scope. And its structure is a monadological one, imposed by totality in contrast to its own inalienable isolation. The idea is a monad. The being that enters into it, with its past and subsequent history, brings– concealed in its own form– an indistinct abbreviation of the rest of the world of ideas..." (OGT, 47). The structure of history, then, is not a flow of causalities to be accurately traced by the diligent historian, but rather a series of

singular events, occurring randomly, from which the historical materialist may extract significant monads: "A historical materialist approaches a historical subject only where he encounters it as a monad" (I, 263).

Benjamin's historical materialism is dependent upon an alternative conception of time. He does not see "homogeneous, empty time" as the subject of history, but "time filled by the presence of the now [*Jetztzeit*]" (I, 261). These now–times are historical monads, times at which the truth of an era is crystallized in a singular event. Historical materialism is constructive, rather than de–constructive of a historical chain of events. It is the task of the historical materialist to "blast open the continuum of history" (I, 262) to find the materials for construction.

It is necessary to trace again the Judaic and mystical elements that inform Benjamin's historical materialism. His ideas of historical time and Messianic time are by no means analogous; indeed, they are antithetical to one another. Messianism is "[f]rom the standpoint of history...not the goal, but the end" (R, 312). In his "Theologico– Political Fragment" Benjamin proposes a figurative representation of the relationship between Messianic and historical time:

> If one arrow points to the goal toward which the profane dynamic acts, and another marks the direction of Messianic intensity, then certainly the quest of free humanity for happiness runs counter to the Messianic direction; but just as a force can, through acting, increase another that is acting in the opposite direction, so the order of the profane assists, through being profane, the coming of the Messianic Kingdom.
>
> (R, 312)

Though these two directions of time are not parallel, Benjamin tries to establish some kind of affective relationship. Human happiness, the goal of history, may not have a divine

end in the Kingdom, but it is "a decisive category of its quietest approach" (R, 312). The documentation of history is to discover those elements upon which the Messianic has been inscribed: "For Benjamin, the philosophy of history becomes...the history of salvation, and the task of the critic– or later, that of the historical materialist– is that of rescuing the few unique visions of transcendence that grace the continuum of history...from the fate of oblivion which incessantly threatens to consume them"[1].

The oblivion of which Richard Wolin writes is not the termination of Messianic realization, but the oblivion of historicism. Because of historicism's emphasis on causality, historical events which may not be direct germinations of others are lost. Also, the concept of progress, by definition, forces the obsolescence of the past. Historicism leads to universal history, a totalizing, additive history which has as its *telos* a core understanding of the truth of all history. However, "nothing that has ever happened should be regarded as lost for history" (I, 254), and the historical materialist must restore these lost moments, to retrain the human memory in the direction of salvation.

Benjamin borrows heavily from Freud in his theory of memory and its bearing on history though, as one comes to expect from Benjamin, he acknowledges Freud's influence in a limited context in the Baudelaire study. The true character of historical time, and of memory, is not adequately addressed by historicism, which obscures it with cumulative interpretations. Like memory, history must be an experience of the past. History must concern itself with the same function as memory– that of re–experiencing and understanding the past, rather than blindly progressing beyond it. Indeed, the formation of society is exactly that: repetition and habit are the foundations of sociological structure. Historicism makes these repetitions part of an empty kind of tradition which infuses them with the distance of time and negates the experiential emphasis that characterizes tradition as it is fully integrated by the members of a society. The capacity for unique experience of the past is lost in the mass of data that constitutes historicism. For Benjamin, "history" as such, "is the theatre in which we cease to live authentically"[2].

In introducing this distinction between types of experience and memory, Benjamin infers from Proust the ideas of *mémoire voluntaire* and *mémoire involuntaire* (CB, 111), which he compares with *Erlebnis* and *Erfahrung* (CB, 117). These two categories of experience Benjamin adds to his list of thought–pairs which describe the modern and the past. If historicism is inauthentic, it is because it presents the historical event as "a passing moment [*Erlebnis*] that struts about in the borrowed garb of experience" (CB, 145). As such, *Erlebnis* represents the curse of the modern– the inability to integrate experience.

The figure of Freud is again visible here in Benjamin's conception of the mind's economy in modernity. The *Erlebnis* of modern experience is the means by which the consciousness assimilates the deluge of incidents encountered by the modern city dweller. Because the mind is, in Freudian terms, in a constant battle between the unconscious and the conscious mind, a multitude of incidents will pass through the conscious mind (*Erlebnis*) without ever being incorporated into the structure of memory and history which is the unconscious mind (*Erfahrung*).

The loss of *Erfahrung* is the loss of our ability to have any experience of the past, or even of the present. The quickened pace and multiplicity of modern life experience necessitates that the mind will subdivide experience, isolating each incident from the other in order to prevent *Erfahrung* from becoming bloated with masses of unnecessary experiential data. It is also a function of protection to prevent traumatic experience from entering the permanent memory base. Here Benjamin refers to Freud's modification of his early dream theory by the repetition principle in which traumatic dreams are the mind's attempt "to master the stimulus retroactively by developing the anxiety whose omission was the cause of the traumatic neurosis" (CB, 115). Traumatic dreams, then, must be endemic to the modern experience, for our inability to master shocking stimulus in more than the passing moment is characteristic.

Erlebnis provides a potent metaphor for the problems of historicism. The rapid and radical shifts in the modern age elicited a break with tradition, and modernism's valorization of

the new cemented the rejection of the past. Isolated memory fragments similarly resist integration into a larger memory structure, that of history and tradition. The loss of *Erfahrung* is exemplified by the modern experience of death. The modern city dweller may pass an entire lifetime without ever seeing a corpse; death is not real to him or her. Furthermore, the ever increasing thirst for more violent and graphic images of death reflects this *un*reality. Freud's encounters with victims of war trauma neurosis inspired him to propose the death instinct as a powerful counterpart to the life instinct embodied in the sex drive and desire for pleasure. War trauma caused these men to relive their horrific experiences of death in order to assimilate them as well as to deal with the guilt of their own continuing lives. The modern person also strives after an adequate experience of death, and its absence produces an incessant lust for images of it. The experience of death is the understanding of history and of tradition. To know death is to know the continuum of human existence, and the modern, having disavowed its unity with the past, is robbed of this experience. In "The Storyteller" Benjamin elaborates on this loss and its effect:

> It has been observable for a number of centuries how in the general consciousness the thought of death has declined in omnipresence and vividness. In its last stages this process is accelerated. And in the course of the nineteenth century bourgeois society has, by means of hygienic and social, private and public institutions, realized a secondary effect which may have been its subconscious main purpose: to make it possible for people to avoid the sight of the dying. Dying was once a public process in the life of the individual and a most exemplary one...In the course of modern times dying has been pushed further and further out of the perceptual world of the living...It is, however, characteristic that not only a man's knowledge or wisdom, but above all his real life...first assumes transmissible form at the moment of death.

(I, 93–94)

In his "Theses on the Philosophy of History" Benjamin traces a historical method by which this connection with the past may be rescued. Its fragmented style marks it clearly as a working hypothesis; even Benjamin did not think it suitable for publication[3]. It does, however, contain his clearest distinction between historicism and historical materialism. At the core of this distinction is Benjamin's critique of progress, which pitted him against Adorno and against the Hegelianized Marxism of the Frankfurt Institute, which supported him at this time: "History is for the members of the Frankfurt School the integrated process through which the subject of history realizes itself...By contrast, the salient feature of Benjamin's philosophy of history is his rejection of any notion of progress"[4]. Adorno construed Benjamin's criticism of progress as primarily a criticism of Social Democracy which confused the progress of skills and knowledge with the progress of humankind, but refused to accept that Benjamin rejected the notion of progress in philosophical reflection[5]. The dispute about progress was at the heart of Benjamin's difficulties with his intellectual and political Marxist allies, for it exemplifies his nihilistic distrust of the future in sharp contrast with a Marxist faith in human reason and progress.

The idea of progress in historical thinking arises out of a conception of time which Benjamin regards as invalid. "Progress" is portrayed by historicism as something inevitable and, therefore, something over which we may have little control, and to which we must only submit. This gives rise to inauthentic experience, in which the present must be in constant transition. "A historical materialist", however, "cannot do without the notion of a present which is not a transition, but in which time stands still and has come to a stop" (I, 262).

The "cessation of happening" (I, 263) in the present, which historical materialism strives after, refers again to Benjamin's conception of time as non–homogeneous. Historicism and its correlative, progress, presumes a continuous flow of events. Progressive thinking, then, virtually ensures the continuation of the status quo, having identified a structure of time that is

predictive. If one has seen the sun rise every day, one plans that it must continue to do so. Historicism applies this structure to the random events of history in an attempt to guarantee the future for the present.

Benjamin construes progress as a bourgeois conception of time, and identifies it with Social Democracy. In fact, the "Theses" were written largely in response to the Hitler– Stalin pact, which shook to its foundations Benjamin's Marxist beliefs[6]. Benjamin had clung to the hope of the Bolshevik state after the war began, almost blind in the desperate hope that all of Europe had not gone mad. His final disillusionment produced the "Theses" and its attack upon Social Democracy in Germany for its complicity with the war. This time, Benjamin proposes no political alternative to the false consciousness embodied in Social Democracy and bourgeois socialism (though he does mention Rosa Luxemburg's Sparticist group, a sadly short–lived response to the German Socialist party) (I, 260).

The hope that Benjamin does hold out is placed in two areas: in the possibility of Messianic intervention and the termination of history, or in a renewed revolutionary spirit of the proletariat. The latter possibility Benjamin felt was being squelched by Social Democracy and its ideal of progress: "Nothing has corrupted the German working class so much as the notion that it was moving with the current" (I, 258). Social Democracy attempted to placate the proletariat with promises of power through the vote and through complicity with what had been its oppressors.

Social Democracy was the great corrupter of the proletarian hope, and in subduing its revolutionary force it also robbed intellectual Marxists of the embodiment of the revolution they theorized. Social Democracy's greatest corruption of the proletariat, however, lay again in its valorization of progress and the role it gives to the working class: "Social democracy thought fit to assign to the working class the role of the redeemer of future generations, in this way cutting the sinews of its greatest strength. This training made the working class forget both its hatred and its spirit of sacrifice, for both are nourished by the image of enslaved ancestors rather than that of liberated grandchildren" (I, 260).

The absorption of the working class into the notion of progress did little to improve its actual situation but went a long way toward reaffirming the status quo and pre– empting revolution. The natural flow of history as a stream of time drains the present of its import, and pacifies with the idea that things have been and would be better. It is for this reason that the notion of an eternal present, an arrest of the flow of time, is central to historical materialism. Without it, true experience becomes an impossibility; it is all *Erlebnis*, the unintegrated passing moment.

The modern condition of the working class is directly related to a notion of time and the historical progression through it. Benjamin contrasts calendar time and clock time to illustrate the difference between an historical materialist's understanding of time and a historicist's understanding. The "days of remembrance" that mark calendar time serve to punctuate time with days that are pregnant with historical consciousness. Benjamin points out that the French Revolution introduced its own calendar in a gesture of reclaiming time for the working class. This consciousness of its own historical import is "characteristic of the revolutionary classes at the moment of their action" (I, 261). The days of remembrance in calendar time are recognitions of these monads of historical time. Benjamin recounts the rhyme attributed to an eye witness in Paris during the revolution which exemplifies the revolutionary spirit of reclaiming time:

> Qui le croirait! on dit, qu'irrités contre l'heure
> De nouveaux Josués au pied de chaque tour
> Tiraient sur les cadrans pour arrêter le jour
>
> (I, 262)

The loss of this revolutionary consciousness is evident in the prevalence of clock time in the modern world. The subdivision of clock time into smaller and smaller segments is characteristic of the modern age; the minute hand only came into wide usage during the

Industrial Revolution period, and the second hand not until well into the nineteenth century. The smaller the increment of time, the greater the emphasis upon its transience. Clock time rolls mechanically on, unpunctuated by moments of remembrance. Each instant of time is exactly the same, and none contain the crystallization of understanding.

Historical materialism recognizes that anything historicism considers to be a cause is not necessarily historical. This quality is only attached after the fact, and to presume that causal connections produce an understanding of the causing moment is false. Benjamin quotes Goethe to this effect: "Nothing that has had a major effect can actually any longer be understood for what it is" (OWS, 351). The historical materialist, on the other hand, knows that the process of historical understanding involves constructing a "constellation" of events from different eras.

The constructive principle of historical materialism obviously comes in conflict with traditional historicism, which seeks to mask its own participation in history. Benjamin cites Fustel de Coulanges' recommendation that the historian blot out the course of history after the era of study in order to truly understand it (I, 254). This method is anathema to historical materialists, for it denies the truly random nature of the historical event and negates the possibility of achieving a constellated image of historical understanding.

Benjamin had criticized symbolism for its intention to establish the integrity of the symbol and the totality of the work of art. He also attacks historicism for its similar pretension to historical totality. Benjamin's profound suspicion of totalizing schemes is evident in the Prologue to the *Trauerspiel* study, but it is especially pronounced in the "Theses". Realizations of the brutality of totalizing ideologies (i.e. National Socialism) served to cement this distrust.

The historical event as singular disallows its integration into a larger historical structure. The totalizing structures proposed by historians and philosophers alike are always falsely imposed. The danger is that, in the interests of maintaining a logical teleological conclusion to history, the random event, which may contain historical truth, will be lost, and

dissolved into an imposed and oppressive totality. However, Benjamin does not propose that the historical event has no larger meaning; indeed, his intention is to ensure that it does, in and of itself, not merely as a pointer beyond itself. The significance of a historical event in a larger structure can be grasped only as an image in a constellation of monads. This is the proper task of the historical materialist: to identify, retroactively, those events upon which history has been inscribed. To surrender these glimpses to a false totality is the fate of understanding under historicism's authority.

In his attack on totality Benjamin is not alone, and it is interesting to note that other thinkers who share Benjamin's distrust were also German Jews, notably Franz Rosenzweig, whose "Star of Redemption" was profoundly influential to a generation of German Jewish thinkers, and Gershom Scholem, who noted totalizing tendencies in Soviet Marxism long before Benjamin did. Even Marx struggled against fetishized interpretations of his work which produced a stagnation of the class struggle.

The rejection of totalizing structures necessarily involved a critique of identity theory. The identity of subject and object as a goal indicates a teleological unity and completeness that constitutes a falsely totalized view. Benjamin criticized Hegel on this point and denied that the identity of subject and object is a humanly realizable goal. The result of Benjamin's refutation is a fundamental distrust of the function of reason as an instrument in achieving this identity. In this respect Benjamin is closer to Kant than to Hegel, and neo–Kantianism was probably his most important philosophical influence[7]. Kant had succeeded in restoring, in terms of reason, a system of our relationship to the supersensuous, but identical knowledge of the thing–in–itself was impossible. The limitations Kant places on human reason splits the real and ideal apart, and this is similar to Benjamin's opposition of the human and divine realms. Meaningful interaction of the human and divine could be had peripherally, as images of the divine are revealed in the phenomenal world.

This interaction, which Kant had similarly proposed, was not enough for Hegel, who proposed that Kantian "reason" was really what Hegel called "understanding" and, hence, only

a stage, and not the eternal state, of consciousness. Dualism, the separation of subject and object which arose out of Kant's reason, was in Hegel's philosophy merely a facet of human consciousness, just as their re-unification would be. Hegel elevates the faculty of human reason to that of a unifying force, requiring no validation from without its own logic.

The ultimate import of Hegel's identity theory is the purported dissolution of the antinomy of idealism and realism. If the real and the rational were one, we have the identity between Being and Reason. In this, Hegel introduces the concept of the Ultimate Mind reaching its potential in history. Benjamin's break with Hegelian unification is due to his refutation of totalization as it is embodied in the unification scheme. Accepting that Benjamin may have been dissatisfied with Kantian dualism as a permanent structure, he looks to the recovery of original unity rather than to Hegelian realization within history as a resolution: "It is the task of the coming theory of knowledge to find the sphere of total neutrality in relation to the concepts of object and subject; in other words, to ascertain the autonomous, original sphere in which this concept in no way signified the relationship between two metaphysical entities"[8].

Benjamin's historical scepticism causes him to regard it as the task of the historical materialist to "brush history against the grain" (I, 257). This is the process of simultaneously combing history for glimpses of understanding, and of rescuing it from the dissolution of historicism's analysis. In this Benjamin emphasizes the historical fragment over historical continuity, the "blasting out" of events from their historical confines. Benjamin links this with the revolutionary struggle, thus lending it an aura of urgency:

> To articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it "the way it really was"...It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger. Historical materialism wishes to retain that image of the past which unexpectedly appears to man singled out by history at a moment of danger...In every era the attempt must be made to wrest tradition away from

the conformism which is about to overpower it.

(I, 255)

Terry Eagleton justly identifies a Bloomian anxiety in Benjamin's distaste for the notion of a continuum of history, and indicates the sexual component of blasting out of homogeneous time:

> Homogeneous history– history that has expelled the trace of rupture and revolution– is whorelike both in its instant availability and its barren emptiness. The ease with which it can be penetrated is the very sign of its sterility. It is also whorelike in its endless repeatability, since for sexist mythology all whores are essentially one...The duplicity of the mythological whore, however, is that she is always penetrated but never ravished, ceaselessly filled but continually empty; the openness of homogeneous history is both seductive invitation and frustrating refusal, since in entering its gaping void you are entering precisely nothing.[9]

Benjamin's historical materialist is "man enough" to "blast open" the whore of homogeneous, ruling class history, but Eagleton points out that it is "women, not men, who are the most exact image of the oppressed...Woman...is not the whore of history but the ultimate image of violation"[10]. Benjamin's fantastical sexual associations betray in his theory a perverse fascination with the whore as a figure, both mythological and as the embodiment of a commodity in Baudelaire. Benjamin's ambivalence toward female associations with death and otherness prevents him from properly identifying a powerful figure of oppression.

Benjamin's confusion about gender associations with the fragment and the unified recedes before the political threat of the ruling class. The historical materialist understands that history is, indeed, written by the victors. As a historical materialist in the Marxist tradition, however, Benjamin also accepted that the course of history as it comes down to us is

not really human history. It is driven, of course, by human activity, but it demonstrates no collective will. It is a processional tale of ruler after ruler accumulating cultural treasures and attempting to dictate our understanding of ourselves. True human history, however, involves collective human intent, and that entails a revolution in the class struggle. Until such time as a redeemed humankind experiences its own history fully, however, the historical materialist must evoke the "retroactive force" of the oppressed class in order to "constantly call into question every victory, past and present, of the rulers" (I, 255).

Nonetheless, Benjamin does not view human history as the sole property of the ruling class and its intent; only the documentation of history may fall into its hands. Indeed, Benjamin regards the "struggling, oppressed class" as the "depository of historical knowledge" (I, 260). Its courage and awareness properly make it capable of understanding, and not the oblivious heirs of the ruling class. Oppression itself keeps pungent the rottenness of ancestral injustice, and ensures the survival of an alternative historical account.

Oppression as a source of knowledge would seem to be an almost affirmative proposition, amounting to a disturbing doublespeak conclusion that oppression equals liberation. This is precisely, however, what Benjamin's particular kind of historical materialism seeks to avoid. The revolutionary imperative is what justifies the struggle of the oppressed class: "In Marx it appears as the last enslaved class, as the avenger that completes the task of liberation in the name of generations of the downtrodden" (I, 260). Social democracy (and all the forms of vulgar Marxism in state practice) nullifies this imperative by separating the oppressed from their history.

The possibility that a post–revolutionary state would return again to the system it overthrew was an unavoidable conclusion, given Benjamin's pessimism. Utopias are a fundamental feature of German–Jewish thought at the time, and Benjamin is no exception. However, utopia is but a necessary fiction which drives the revolutionary forces, and its realization is its cessation. Adorno was committed to the incessant dialectic between the present as it is and a *promesse de bonheur* which fuels the critique of the present, though he

understood that utopia was not a realizable goal. Benjamin, however, being conservative rather than progressive in this respect, looks elsewhere than politics for his utopian strain. Tiedemann remarks that Benjamin not only observes Jewish law in his refusal to clearly speculate on the future, but that this also echoes Marx's refusal to describe a working Communist society in detail[11].

Benjamin's emphasis on the revolution is, therefore, by no means teleological. He did not believe in the "infinite perfectibility" of humankind even if this perfect end was a victory for the working class. Revolution in human terms is preparation, or prefiguration, of the final revolution in which history comes to an end. For Benjamin, history can guarantee no *promesse de bonheur*, only an increased pile of oppressive historical debris. Paul Klee's "Angelus Novus", the title of which inspired that of Benjamin's own proposed journal, is also the subject of Benjamin's most poetic Thesis on history:

> A Klee painting named "Angelus Novus" shows an angel looking as though he is about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating. His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in from of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress.
>
> (I, 257–8)

Benjamin's historical pessimism is not confined to the "Theses on the Philosophy of

History", written as it was in an atmosphere of disillusionment and growing fear. Benjamin also chooses the baroque, an era of great mourning and pessimism, as the subject of his *Habilitationsschrift*. Pessimism is an unwavering constant in Benjamin's work and his life. His career is marked by a series of disappointments which dog his attempts at embracing any movement or group. Benjamin eventually abandoned the German Youth Movement, an intellectual/political organization that turned ugly and Fascist rather quickly. His desire to sequester himself in the embrace of academia was also doomed to failure due to, among other reasons, his distaste for the university system. Benjamin was also periodically interested in Zionism, and considered emigrating to Palestine, but remained unable to immerse himself in the whole German–Jewish phenomenon. Scholem remembers Benjamin being physically repulsed by the person of Oskar Goldberg, around whom an impressive circle of Jewish adherents had formed: "Benjamin felt such a strong antipathy toward him that on one occasion he was physically incapable of grasping the hand Goldberg had extended in greeting; he told me that Goldberg had been surrounded by such an impure aura that he had simply been unable to manage it"[12].

Benjamin's rejection of the Youth Movement was a rejection of an *organization* which came to hold uniform, fascist beliefs. His rejection of the Goldberg circle was a rejection of the theocracy which Goldberg saw himself at the head of. As if to complete this series of disappointments, the realization of a Marxist state under Stalin necessitated that Benjamin reject his final hope for faith in any organization. The pessimism that characterizes both his early and late works has a very real basis in Benjamin's acquired distrust of all organizations and their reductive systems.

Benjamin's fascination with the pessimistic German baroque affirms his affinity with ages of melancholy. Lutheranism in the baroque era, which revoked the right to salvation, induced its adherents with their characteristic melancholy. In light of this now uncertain salvation, the spectre of death loomed large in its finality. As a result, the baroque "clings to this world", counting and recounting that which it knows– history. The subject of the

Trauerspiel is, then, invariably history. What must have been primarily attractive to Benjamin, over and above historicity, is that the baroque account is always negative. The baroque sees history, like the Angelus Novus, as ruin piled upon ruin driven toward a future whose only certainty is greater ruin and death. It is in this compul..on to face up to the incessant negativity of the events of this world that Benjamin finds strength– the strength of the working class, of historical materialism, of his own life.

For the baroque, history itself is a mourning play: "Like the term tragic in present– day usage...the word *Trauerspiel* was applied in the seventeenth century to dramas and to historical events alike" (OGT, 63). Historical understanding in the baroque is not fused with morality; there would be no reason to draw moral conclusions from historical events, for whom and what would it benefit? Positive progress toward grand moral schemes was a quality unknown to the baroque. In contrast, it is a moral standard which gives form itself to classical tragedy: an as yet unappreciated moral truth is embodied in the tragic hero, and a moral curse is inflicted upon him. The tragic hero does not fit; both his triumphs and his sins are greater than can be allowed. His extinction is on moral grounds, as a tragic deviation from a scheme that must be maintained at all costs.

The extinction of the tragic hero is symbolic of innate human corruption and the salvation which negates it. The symbolic character breathes life into history, where allegory, especially in the baroque play, celebrates its morbidity:

> Whereas in the symbol destruction is idealized and the transfigured face of nature is fleetingly revealed in the light of redemption, in allegory the observer is confronted with the *faces hippocratica* of history as a petrified, primordial landscape. Everything about history that, from the very beginning, has been untimely, sorrowful, unsuccessful, is expressed in a face– or rather, in a death's head...this is the form in which man's subjection to nature is most obvious...This is the heart of the allegorical way of seeing, of

the baroque, secular explanation of history as the Passion of the world.

(OGT, 166)

Baroque allegory participates fully in the breakdown of history into discrete parcels of ruinous chaos. Historicism takes on symbol as the mechanism of imposing structure on this chaos. Symbol is the medium of transformation, of the present always slipping into an eternal past or an eternal future. The allegorical method sees history as a ruin which "does not assume the form of the process of an eternal life so much as that of irresistible decay" (OGT, 178). History in decay is something that can be understood by humanity, given its own irresistible decay. Our representation of history in art is, in the allegorical mode, a deadening factor. Representation fixes the historical event, ripping it from its context and pinning it down. In the "process of decay" which is allegorical representation, "the events of history shrivel up and become absorbed in the setting" of the work of art (OGT, 179).

History, then, is the stage upon which the creaturely estate of humankind plays out its inevitable role. In the *Trauerspiel* the court is the "natural decor" of the historical process. The monarch is not a central figure by virtue of any moral, religious, or political hierarchy (as in classical tragedy), but simply because he is invariably the "representative of history" (OGT, 65). Similarly, it is not his moral transgression which is the cause of catastrophe; destruction is simply the natural course of human history. The character of the intriguer embodies this non–causal nature of the historical event. In the microcosm of the court, the intriguer is the random element which nurtures the action of destruction. Iago is the classic intriguer– he is spilling over with evil intentions, and his victims are irrelevant to his need to disrupt. He is not part of the community; like Cain, the original intriguer who is left homeless by his deeds, he remains wayward, without roots (OGT, 18). Like a foreign object lancing a boil, the intriguer disrupts the illusion of court integrity.

The intriguer in the *Trauerspiel* is not necessarily a catalyst to corruption. The corruption is already there, at work, and the intriguer merely forces the dramatic action. The

intriguer is evil feeding upon evil, the corrupt consorting to fulfill more corruption. "Baroque drama knows no other historical activity than the corrupt energy of schemers...Discontent is the classic motive" (OGT, 88). Discontent is not the stuff of which great classical tragedy is made, but, more importantly for allegorical representation, in the *Trauerspiel* it is the most accurate reflection of an age embroiled in melancholy.

The most curious aspect of baroque pessimism is that it flourished in a Christian society. The only Christian characteristic that stands out in baroque sensibility is stoicism, but it is a stoicism that expects no redress. Baroque melancholy "hears nothing of the voice of revelation...[but] points down into the depths of the earth" (OGT, 152). In contemplation it gazes into the past to observe the ruins of history. The baroque is, thus, definitive of decadence. In contemplating its own destruction, the baroque intensifies its own melancholy almost to the exclusion of redemption.

One might conclude that Benjamin felt that the baroque embodied the failure of a Christian notion of history. The lost promise of salvation was the final step toward total internalization of faith which is the Christian imperative. If ecclesiastical knowledge was stable in the baroque, and salvation was the wild card of faith, the baroque Christian had no outside source to which to look for answers– the questions were either already answered or unanswerable. The kingdom of God had to be within; there was nowhere else to look.

Christian faith at this time, then, did not require a community of believers. The baroque responded by constructing a secular community; the concept of ordinary human morality emerged and survives in the idea of upright living. Deprived of the community rituals around salvation and damnation, daily life plodded on. The realization of the Messiah within human history was supposed to provide each individual with the necessary spiritual consolation to continue life. Does the melancholic baroque age constitute a failure of this idea? Benjamin points to only one example wherein Christian providence blesses the mournful– in the figure of Hamlet: "Only in a princely life such as this is melancholy redeemed by being confronted with itself. The rest is silence." (OGT, 158).

The contrast of a Christian notion of history and a Jewish one provides a fruitful analysis of Benjamin's own historical materialism. Scholem begins his study The Messianic Idea in Judaism with just such a comparison:

> A totally different concept of redemption determines the attitude to Messianism in Judaism and in Christianity; what appears to the one as a proud indication of its understanding and a positive achievement of its message is most unequivocally belittled and disputed by the other. Judaism, in all of its forms and manifestations, has always maintained a concept of redemption as an event which takes place publicly, on the stage of history and within the community. It is an occurrence which takes place in the visible world and which cannot be conceived apart from such a visible appearance. In contrast, Christianity conceives of redemption as an event in the spiritual and unseen realm, an event which is reflected in the soul, in the private world of each individual, and which effects an inner transformation which need not correspond to anything outside.[13]

The infusion of Messianic elements in his theory of history is a point of contention between Benjamin's Marxist and Judaic supporters. Scholem, for example, argues that the Messianic character of Benjamin's work is a constant and driving theme, a point which cannot be denied. It is not, however, to the exclusion of his Marxist tendencies: the parable of the chess game in the first "Thesis" reconciles these two concerns in a fairly clear, though symbolic, way:

> The story is told of an automaton constructed in such a way that it could play a winning game of chess, answering each move of an opponent with a countermove. A puppet in Turkish attire and with a hookah in its mouth sat before a chessboard placed on a large table. A system of mirrors created the

> illusion that this table was transparent from all sides. Actually, a little hunchback who was an expert chess player sat inside and guided the puppet's hand by means of strings. One can imagine a philosophical counterpart to this device. The puppet called "historical materialism" is to win all the time. It can easily be a match for anyone if it enlists the services of theology, which today, as we know, is wizened and has to keep out of sight.
>
> (I, 253)

Benjamin espouses an overall nihilism, whose negativity places it over and above the various influences which appear in his work.

The "Theologico– Political Fragment", recovered from Benjamin's papers, appropriately enough, only after his death, contains a fairly concise link between the theological and political strains in his thought. Because the date of its composition is unknown (Scholem places it as an early work while Adorno courts it among his notes to the "Theses")[14], the Fragment is problematical in tracing Benjamin's so called turn to politics. Regardless of its dating, however, its overall theme of nihilism is a constant. The cautionary tone against theocracy can also be applied to fascism, and to any political scheme which seeks to restore humankind to an ideal state in a political context. The separation between divine and secular is clear, and their relationship is indirect. Tiedemann describes this relationship: "Just as theology points toward materialism, so it is only true materialism that first brings theology home. At times historical materialism has to learn from theology that there is no redemption, unless it is complete"[15].

Benjamin is obviously sceptical about the possibility for human happiness in unredeemed humankind. Indeed, he seems to waver upon the point of whether or not human life could continue at all after redemption. He speaks of a "redeemed mankind" receiving the "fullness of its past" (I, 254), but his Messianic interpretation of history must equate redemption with the apocalypse. It is most likely that Benjamin did fluctuate between the

hope that happiness and justice was possible in this world, and the conviction that annihilation was inevitable and necessary.

Throughout Benjamin's sketches on historical materialism nihilism lurks– his own suicide confirms a lack of faith in the future. Leaving aside the personal decision of a sick and bitter man, however, even Benjamin's most pessimistic works, like the "Theses", celebrate the purely human courage of living almost without hope. He attempts in his work to redirect our search for knowledge and re–orient our sense of time to allow for the experience of the present. The last Thesis on history observes that the Jews were prohibited from speculating on the future and instructed instead in remembrance, which "stripped the future of its magic". There is no better way to describe Benjamin's historical materialism. Like the Jewish prohibition as well, his method does not replace the future with "homogeneous, empty time" but with a unique capacity to experience the present and the past. Most importantly in both conceptions of time, "every second" becomes the "strait gate through which the Messiah might enter" (I, 264).

Chapter Five: Conclusion

Those who would claim Walter Benjamin for the revolution (whichever kind that may be) always refer to the subversiveness which marks his work. Benjamin's sidelong glances at history and culture lead to the overthrow of that which is dominant and unquestioned, whether politically or theoretically. Digression is his method; his texts skirt around "central" issues, yet along this round about way something essential is discovered about the periphery, so essential that the centre, that which is dominant and unified, is forgotten and the fragments of multiplicity emerge.

The figures with whom Benjamin identifies reflect his devotion to the straying digression as a philosophical method. The *flâneur* aimlessly wanders the city, alternating between contempt and desire but always on the outside; the tyrant/martyr of the baroque *Trauerspiel* is marked primarily by his indecision; the Angelus Novus of history watches the ruins pile up in detached helplessness. Benjamin's method as a historian and critic is also that of the wandering eye; he searches history and art for forms in which his own intention may take shape, as a spirit visiting and then vacating the ruins of the past.

That Benjamin eventually lit upon Marxism as a method should not be surprising, as it provided a unique opportunity to revisit the old haunts of history with renewed interpretations. The Marxist is able to sift through the fragments of shattered traditions to identify their falseness and, as with all of Benjamin's pursuits, the work of art is the most potent indication of social consciousness. In his later aesthetics, the situation of art as it stood became more pressing, as the situation had narrowed to a choice between two extremes: when politics determined art, there was peaceful Communism; when art determined politics, there could be nothing other than Fascism.

Communism subjects art to the demands of politics and, though it tends toward propaganda, it preserves the interests of the masses and prevents war. Fascism, however, refuses to be subjected to the demands of the masses and, consequently, responds by

aestheticizing politics. Thus subjugated to the demands of aesthetics, the masses lose their own identity. Only the violent and grim "beauty" of war can satisfy an insatiable aesthetic sensibility of a mass alienated from the needs of its own experience. "Mankind, which in Homer's time was an object of contemplation for the Olympian Gods, now is one for itself. Its self–alienation has reached such a degree that it can experience its own destruction as an aesthetic pleasure of the first order. This is the situation of politics which Fascism is rendering aesthetic. Communism responds by politicizing art." (I, 242).

Benjamin felt a responsibility to examine mass culture and search for positive elements through which Fascism may be averted. Mechanical reproduction, which Adorno had so thoroughly repudiated, became for Benjamin the possible means by which art may be democratized, instead of withheld from the masses or used to subjugate.

"The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" is an attempt to address the immediate concerns of a world rapidly approaching a most heinous brand of Fascism. He optimistically writes that "for the first time in world history, mechanical reproduction emancipates the work of art from its parasitical dependence on ritual... Instead...it begins to be based on another practice– politics" (I, 224).

The ability to reproduce works of art replaced its ritual function with a function closer to documentation. The printing press, though by no means new, was enabled by late capitalism to reproduce in vast quantities on cheap paper– hence the proliferation of the newspaper. Photography, though originally a novelty for portraiture, began to document world events to satisfy the growing hunger for information. Reproduction on a large scale necessarily gave new political meaning to traditionally ritual representation.

Where Adorno had scorned mechanical reproduction as the culprit in the loss of individuality and the resulting soullessness of modern art, Benjamin sought refuge in the structure of mass culture itself. With art newly freed of its ritual function, mechanical reproduction ensured extensive access to previously aristocratic art. The boundaries of art were now called into question, for to what degree is art manifest in a reproduction? For

Benjamin the masses became the new ground rule for art– its needs and political will were paramount.

The idea of subversion comes into play again in Benjamin's scenario of the modern art consumer, whose fickleness and lack of concentration he transvalues into a positive force: "Distraction and concentration form polar opposites which may be stated as follows: A man who concentrates before a work of art is absorbed by it...In contrast, the distracted mass absorbs the work of art" (I, 239). Distraction is the subversion to a political end of an apolitical malaise of the masses by allowing it to maintain a social awareness instead of absorption by an artistic fetish.

Benjamin's politicized aesthetics appear most clearly in "The Author as Producer" written at the height of Benjamin's association with Bertolt Brecht. The goal of the essay is not to criticize the manifestations of mass alienation, but to direct itself toward addressing this alienation. This particular essay is seen by some (particularly Adorno and Scholem) as a direct result of Brecht's "disastrous" influence which carried Benjamin into a kind of "vulgar Marxism". Leaving aside these criticisms for the moment, however, the essay is an interestingly concretized elaboration of Benjamin's subversiveness.

If the author of a work wishes to operate within a politicized climate, he or she must be committed to a politically correct tendency, though this does not necessarily imply propaganda. For Benjamin, truly good art can only be politically correct, that is "the tendency of a literary work can only be politically correct if it is also literarily correct...the politically correct tendency includes a literary tendency" (R, 221). The politically and literarily correct author, then, must subvert his or her position as an elite supplier to the productive machine by adapting his or her position to the needs of the proletariat.

It is fair to say that at the time Benjamin wrote "The Author as Producer" his concern with Fascism overshadowed any nostalgia for lost aesthetic sensibilities, and he seemed willing enough to put up with a little vulgar materialism for the cause of avoiding Fascism: "The spirit that holds forth in the name of Fascism must disappear. The spirit which, in opposing it, trusts

in its own miraculous powers, will disappear. For the revolutionary struggle is not between capitalism and spirit, but between capitalism and the proletariat" (R, 238).

Can we, then, justly categorize Benjamin's turn to Marxism an errant phenomenon owing to the influences of Brecht, Asja Lacis and the immediate fascist threat? It is certain that these influences were profoundly personal and, perhaps, too emotionally infused to be rational reflections of a philosophical position. Psychological motivation must be a factor here; apparently, Benjamin was in some measure afraid of Brecht[1] and possibly unduly influenced in this respect; he was in love with Asja Lacis and also intimidated by her formidable achievements; finally, he must have been increasingly frightened by the manifestations of fascism. Yet despite fear and intimidation, Benjamin's shift to politics is by no means incongruous with his early aesthetics. Indeed, several major concerns remain unchanged throughout his diverse work.

In Marxism Benjamin found a political method of addressing alienation. The Paris Arcades exemplified this alienation in the context of production; the arcade is "a city, indeed a world in miniature" (R, 147) and is a powerful metaphor for the entirety of the material world, which had been constructed by "enslaved ancestors", and yet belongs not to its builders. This situation is indicative of the alienation felt by both the working and ruling classes: the working ass is denied its own cultural heritage, and the ruling class is denied the connection with the production of culture.

From his earliest essays Benjamin's concern with reclaiming the past is evident, and it is here that his theological and Marxist tendencies merge most clearly. Both require a revolutionary re–evaluation of time. Theological observance imbues with significance those events which prefigure and reflect the divine. These "days of remembrance" mark the arrest of time, rather than its flow, and their repetition is a re–enactment of history which is allegorical rather than mythical. Marxism also involves reclaiming for the working class its own history. Benjamin refers to the historical understanding of a redeemed humankind in both Marxist and theological terms:

> A chronicler who recites events without distinguishing between major and minor ones acts in accordance with the following truth: nothing that has ever happened should be regarded as lost for history. To be sure, only a redeemed mankind receives the fullness of its past– which is to say, only for a redeemed mankind has the past become citable in all its moments. Each moment it has lived becomes a *citation a l'ordre du jour*– and that day is Judgment Day.
>
> (I, 254)

Benjamin's method in all respects is to put the world in all of its aspects under a microscope. That the world is not always present in all its moments to human experience is the shortcoming of an unredeemed human state. Critically and historically, then, Benjamin's method is immanent and mediated, though its justification may be transcendent. Constellating moments of history and mediating between the material content and the truth content of a work of art are exercises in recovering prefigurations of a greater truth. Adorno comments that "[h]e is driven not merely to awaken congealed life in petrified objects– as in allegory– but also to scrutinize living things so that they present themselves as being ancient...and abruptly release their significance"[2].

The pose of subjectivity is one that must be dismantled if redemption is to occur. This drive is behind Benjamin's emphasis on the thing in itself instead of imposed significances. This is reflective of Benjamin's resistance to classification of phenomena, as well as of his increased use of the quotation, uninterpreted, as a critical device. Allowing quotations to stand for themselves is not the same as allowing an entire work to stand alone, for the image of a complete, self–sufficient text is highly auratic and indicative of the greatest subjectivity. Again, we see that fragmentation and multiplicity are important elements in allowing things to speak for themselves.

This is a central component in understanding Benjamin's complicated use of

subjectivity, objectivity, and critical mediation. In his understanding, there are no keys to the kingdom, that is, there can be no interpretive trick or philosophical position which can guarantee the clarity of what is being studied. Until such time as things can speak for themselves fully and we can intuit them fully (and this is only in a redeemed state), however, our knowledge is mediated. This is where the critic and the historian are crucial in ensuring that objectivity remains a clearly outlined priority.

"In all his phases, Benjamin conceived the downfall of the subject and the salvation of man as inseparable"[3]. Nonetheless, the unredeemed state must confront the separation between subject and object. In allegory Benjamin finds a representational form that most clearly acknowledges this separation. The lamentation of the *Trauerspiel* is highly self–reflexive, as is the poetry of Baudelaire. Reflection is not the ideal state of humankind, but it is the state of consciousness of the modern (and the baroque) mind. This is, of course, analogous to the distinction between *Erlebnis* and *Erfahrung*, which now becomes clear as a distinction between the pre–modern (unreflective) capacity for experience and the modern (reflective) incapacity. Benjamin accepts this situation and stresses that the paramount need is for the reflective intellect to be fully aware of its distance from true experience. In this, Benjamin exercises subversion of *Erlebnis* toward a possible reconciliation with *Erfahrung*.

Exactly this is the situation which Benjamin addresses in both his theological and Marxist writing. The working person in the modern age lives this separation in every aspect of his or her life. However, the wider the gap grows between producer and consumer the more for each side the lack of the other becomes apparent. Similarly, the gap between the present and history makes clearer our alienation from experience. Finally, in the modern age, as in the baroque, life is drained away from experience: stories become unintegrated information, images become petrified allegory, and monuments become ruins. All of this makes painfully apparent the lack of Messianic intervention and Benjamin places hope in this lack as a potential for destruction.

The possibility of redemption, while a logical conclusion, is not necessary *per se* to

Benjamin's scheme. While it is clear that lost unity, which may be restored through redemption, is the beginning and end point, what is most important is the study of human life in the interim. Benjamin points to Kafka as an example of how the structure of redemption remains even when its realization is doubtful: "Benjamin knew that in Kafka we possess the *theologia negativa* of a Judaism not a whit less intense for having lost the Revelation as a positive message"[4]. Benjamin's focus is always on the destructive side of creation as it is embodied in redemption and the end of human history, or in revolution and the end of history as we know it.

Benjamin's almost necrophiliac emphasis finds its way into all of his work, as well as into his life. Benjamin planned his own suicide with meticulous detail many times[5] before he actually took his own life in a manner necessarily devoid of ceremony. His works always revolve around dead subjects: the ruins of allegory, the ruins of capitalism, the loss of aura, the ruins of his own childhood. Benjamin's world is one in which the final and only remaining gesture of heroism is death: "It is understandable if a person grows tired and takes refuge in death. Modernism must be under the sign of suicide, an act which seals a heroic will that makes no concessions to a mentality inimical towards this will. This suicide is not resignation, but a heroic passion" (CB, 75).

Notes to Chapter One

1. Wolin, Richard, "From Messianism to Materialism: The Later Aesthetics of Walter Benjamin", pg. 82
2. Chow, Rey, "Walter Benjamin's Love Affair with Death", pg. 78
3. Scholem, Gershom, Walter Benjamin: The Story of a Friendship, pg. 95
4. Scholem, Gershom, On Jews and Judaism in Crisis, pg. 191
5. Barney, Stephen, Allegories of History, Allegories of Love, pg. 30
6. Ibid, pg. 49
7. Roberts, Julian, Walter Benjamin, pg. 217

Notes to Chapter Two

1. Scholem, Gershom, Walter Benjamin: The Story of a Friendship, pg. 125
2. Wolin, Richard, Walter Benjamin: An Aesthetic of Redemption, pg. 38
3. Scholem, Gershom, Kabbalah, pg. 169
4. Buck–Morss, Susan, The Origin of Negative Dialectics, pg. 89
5. Jay, Martin, The Dialectical Imagination, pg. 209
6. Nagele, Rainer, Benjamin's Ground, pg. 25
7. Jay, Martin, The Dialectical Imagination, pg. 205
8. Ibid, pg. 209
9. Wolin, Richard, Walter Benjamin: An Aesthetic of Redemption, pg. 199
10. Ibid, pg. 231
11. Jameson, Fredric, Marxism and Form, pg. 73
12. Roberts, Julian, Walter Benjamin, pg. 106–7

13. Ibid, pg. 142
14. Ibid, pg. 142
15. Jennings, Michael, Dialectical Images: Walter Benjamin's Theory of Literary Criticism, pg. 139
16. Bersani, Leo, The Culture of Redemption, pg. 54
17. Wolin, Richard, "From Messianism to Materialism: The Later Aesthetics of Walter Benjamin", pg. 99

Notes to Chapter Three

1. Helfer, Martha, "The *Trauerspiel* Essays", pg. 179
2. Adorno, Theodor, Prisms, pg. 231
3. Scholem, Gershom, Walter Benjamin: The Story of a Friendship, pg. 58
4. Ibid, pg. 129
5. Smith, Benjamin: Philosophy, History, and Aesthetics, pg. 6
6. Aiken, Judith, German Baroque Drama, pg. 72
7. Jameson, Fredric, Marxism and Form, pg. 71
8. Helfer, Martha,"The *Trauerspiel* Essays", pg. 183
9. Honig, Edwin, The Dark Conceit: The Making of Allegory, pg. 40
10. Buck–Morss, Susan, The Origin of Negative Dialectics, pg. 56
11. Cowan, Bainard, "Walter Benjamin's Theory of Allegory", pg. 116

Notes to Chapter Four

1. Wolin, Richard, Walter Benjamin: An Aesthetic of Redemption, pg. 48

2. Bersani, Leo, The Culture of Redemption, pg. 53
3. Roberts, Julian, Walter Benjamin, pg. 197
4. Jennings, Michael, Dialectical Images, pg. 43
5. Smith, Gary, Benjamin: Philosophy, History, Aesthetics, pg. 85
6. Roberts, Julian, Walter Benjamin, pg. 196
7. Jay, Martin, The Dialectical Imagination, pg. 202
8. Ibid, pg. 202
9. Eagleton, Terry, Walter Benjamin, or Towards a Revolutionary Criticism, pg. 46
10. Ibid, pg. 47
11. Smith, Gary, Benjamin: Philosophy, History and Aesthetics, pg. 179
12. Scholem, Gershom, Walter Benjamin: The Story of a Friendship, pg. 97
13. Scholem, Gershom, The Messianic Idea in Judaism and Other Essays, pg. 1
14. Jennings, Michael, Dialectical Images, pg. 59
15. Smith, Gary, Benjamin: Philosophy, History and Aesthetics, pg. 204

Notes to Chapter Five

1. Jay, Martin, The Dialectical Imagination, pg. 201
2. Adorno, Theodor, Prisms, pg. 233
3. Ibid, pg. 231
4. Scholem, Gershom, On Jews and Judaism in Crisis, pg. 196
5. Scholem, Gershom, Walter Benjamin: The Story of a Friendship, pg. 178–9

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