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A History of Dreams:

Reading Adorno and Benjamin through Memory and Forgetting

Jacob Bard-Rosenberg

PhD

Birkbeck, University of London

DECLARATION

I declare that the work submitted in this thesis is my own.

Jacob Bard-Rosenberg

ABSTRACT

This thesis is concerned with the role of memory and forgetting in the thought and writing of Theodor W. Adorno and Walter Benjamin. While it takes as its source materials their complete works and letters, these are addressed through close readings of the smallest parts: jotted down dreams, turns of phrase, and repeated images. The introduction sets the scene: it addresses a landscape composed of language and the rubble of script. In this landscape, Adorno and Benjamin's perspectives are set against Hegelian and Nietzschean theories of memory and forgetting.

The first half of the thesis (Chapters 1 and 2) essays a pair of notions developed between the 1910s and the 1940s. In the first chapter, Benjamin's concept of remembrance [*Eingedenken*] is considered from the perspective of a number of fragments on the phenomenon of blushing, written between 1919 and 1920. The second traces Adorno's concept of regression [*Regression*] in the figure of flowers, picked from the landscape by children, and returned to the home. Following this image leads from a critique of organicism in musical works to an account of Adorno's metapsychological thought. Together, these chapters together develop an unreconciled 'natural-historical' dialectic of memory and forgetting: the first, a mode of apparently historical thought that illuminates nature; the second, a form of apparently natural thought rupturing into historical knowledge.

The second half (Chapters 3 and 4) attempts to show what happened to this dialectic after Auschwitz. Chapter 3 offers an extended reading of a single dream that Adorno noted down in November 1956, while also developing a reading of Benjamin's essay 'Goethe's Elective Affinities' from the other side of the Holocaust. The final chapter considers the memory and forgetting of Benjamin's death within Adorno's late metaphysics, albeit with a detour through Benjamin's late commentaries on Brecht's lyric poetry.

DEDICATION

In gratitude to my friends and comrades, the cleaners who work as the University of London. Throughout my years of research and writing they have struggled for better wages and working conditions, and against outsourcing, redundancy, and deportation. The belief that what is written in the university belongs only to those of us who write it has a dialectical consequence: it condemns many to work in degrading conditions, without recognition. Every word of this thesis is written with a hatred of the division of labour that fuels this ideology. Those cleaners, in struggle, have taught me more than anyone else.

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A NOTE ON REFERENCES, QUOTATIONS, AND TRANSLATIONS

All footnotes to Adorno and Benjamin give the most recent English translations. One exception to this is Benjamin's *Origin of the German Trauerspiel*. Howard Eiland's excellent new translation appeared too late in the course of drafting this thesis to be included. I have abbreviated a number of these references in the footnotes:

- ABCOR: Adorno, Theodor W.; and Benjamin, Walter, *The Complete Correspondence 1928-1940*, ed. Lonitz, Henri, trans. Walker, Nicholas, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999).
- AP: Benjamin, Walter, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Eiland, Howard; and McLaughlin, Kevin, (Cambridge: The Belknap Press, 1999).
- AT: Adorno, Theodor W., *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. Hullot-Kentor, Robert, (London: Continuum, 2004).
- BC: Benjamin, Walter, *Berlin Childhood around 1900*, trans. Eiland, Howard, (Cambridge: The Belknap Press, 2006).
- BCOR: Benjamin, Walter, *Correspondence 1910-1940*, eds. Adorno, Theodor W.; and Scholem, Gershom, trans. Jacobson, Manfred R.; and Jacobson, Evelyn M. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994)
- DoE: Adorno, Theodor W.; and Horkheimer, Max, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, ed. Schmid Noerr, Gunzelin, trans. Jephcott, Edmund, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002).
- EW: Benjamin, Walter, *Early Writings*, trans. Eiland, Howard, (Cambridge: The Belknap Press, 2011).
- K: Adorno, Theodor W., *Kierkegaard: Construction of the Aesthetic*, trans. Hullot-Kentor, Robert, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989).
- MM: Adorno, Theodor W., *Minima Moralia*, trans. Jephcott, Edmund, (London: Verso, 2005).
- ND: Adorno, Theodor W., *Negative Dialectics*, trans. Ashton, E.B., [Basch, Ernst] (London: Routledge, 1973).
- NtL1: Adorno, Theodor W., *Notes to Literature Volume 1*, trans. Weber-Nicholsen, Shierry, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991).
- NtL2: Adorno, Theodor W., *Notes to Literature Volume 2*, trans. Weber-Nicholsen, Shierry, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992).

- OT: Benjamin, Walter, *Origin of the German Tragic Drama*, trans. Osborne, John, (London: Verso, 1998).
- SW1: Benjamin, Walter, *Selected Writings Volume 1*, eds. Bullock, Marcus; and Jennings, Michael W, (Cambridge: The Belknap Press, 1996).
- SW2: Benjamin, Walter, *Selected Writings Volume 2*, eds. Jennings, Michael W.; Eiland, Howard; and Smith, Gary (Cambridge: The Belknap Press, 1999).
- SW3: Benjamin, Walter, *Selected Writings Volume 3*, eds. Eiland, Howard; and Jennings, Michael W., (Cambridge: The Belknap Press, 2002).
- SW4: Benjamin, Walter, *Selected Writings Volume 4*, eds. Jennings, Michael W., Eiland, Howard; Smith, Gary; and Bullock, Marcus, (Cambridge: The Belknap Press, 2003).

These are followed in each footnote by references to the German editions:

- AGS: Adorno, Theodor W., *Gesammelte Schriften*, eds. Tiedemann, Rolf; Adorno, Gretel; and Buck-Morss, Susan, (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1970-1986), 20 vols.
- BGS: Benjamin, Walter, *Gesammelte Schriften*, eds. Tiedemann, Rolf; and Schweppenhäuser, Hermann, (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1974-1989), 7 vols.

These are followed by the volume number and page number(s).

References to *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. Strachey, James, (London: Hogarth, 1953-1978) use the abbreviation FSE, followed by the volume number and page number(s). Full references are given in the bibliography.

Other foreign language sources simply reference the best available English translations, and are marked for amendments in the footnotes.

Translating Adorno and Benjamin is notoriously difficult, and some existing translations are notoriously bad. In many cases the strategies of translation justified across a book-length work are inadequate for the citationist intent on close reading. For these reasons I have amended many of the translations or given my own, while

referencing recent editions. All amended citations are marked as such in the footnotes. Similarly, I have marked translated quotations that are otherwise unavailable in English. With this said, translation is a hard and thankless task. Translators mostly receive only complaints about the occasional wrong choice of word. I am enormously grateful for the effort made to bring these works to anglophone readers over the last half-century, and my amendments should not be assumed to be criticism.

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PRELUDE

The Border and the Mountain

0.1 Pyrenees

Here, for the first time, the recent past becomes the *distant* past. Original history forms part of the recent past, just as mountains, seen from a great distance, appear to form part of the landscape lying before them.¹

Read no more – look!
Look no more – go!²

Soon after his fortieth birthday Walter Benjamin considered committing suicide.³ On the day before he planned to take his own life, he wrote to his friend Gershom

Scholem:

And though many – or some – of my works have been small-scale victories, they are offset by large-scale defeats. I do not want to speak of the projects that had to remain unfinished, or even untouched, but rather to name here the four books that mark off the real site of ruin or catastrophe, whose furthest border I am still unable to survey when I let my eyes wander over the next years of my life. They include *The Arcades of Paris*, *The Collected Essays on Literature*, *The Letters*, and a truly exceptional book about hashish.⁴

Throughout the 1930s, Benjamin maintained a belief that his life would soon end, perhaps by his own hand. When this thought impressed itself upon his writing, he returned to this image of a landscape composed of the ruins of words and works, surveyed by a roving gaze, visible but illegible. The image appears again in finer detail in a diary entry from March 1938 recording a dream, which begins with a

¹ AP, p.912; BGS5, p.1217.

² Paul Celan, *The Selected Poems and Prose of Paul Celan*, trans. John Felstiner, (New York: Norton, 2001), p.119.

³ Howard Eiland and Michael Jennings, *Walter Benjamin: A Critical Life*, (Cambridge: The Belknap Press, 2014), p.378-379.

⁴ Benjamin, Letter to Scholem, 26.7.1932, in *BCOR*, p.396, trans amended.

premonition that he would “probably not live much longer.” In the dream the landscape is given the contour of a mountainous terrain:

I have been suffering greatly from the noise in my room. I found myself standing in front of a map and, simultaneously, standing in the landscape which it depicted. The landscape was terrifyingly dreary and bare; I could not have said whether its desolation was that of a rocky wasteland or that of an empty grey ground populated only by capital letters. These letters writhed and curved on their terrain as if following mountain ranges. The words they formed were approximately equidistant from one another. I knew or learned that I was in the labyrinth of my auditory canal. But the map was, at the same time, a map of Hell.⁵

Where this image once seemed to illustrate a historical description his writing’s permanent interruption in metaphor, the dream emphasises a different relationship between language and image. The image delineates a figurative space of the concrete impossibility of his works’ victorious completion. In catastrophe, the unfinished and imperfectible works undergo a formal change: they are rendered as ruins. The shape of the landscape in which Benjamin finds himself is composed of the writhing wreckage of words, the rubble of script, their letters curving as rocks and mountains. Language is not embellished with illustrations but itself becomes image; image is revealed as script at the destroyed edge of reading and writing.

The dream’s unresolved perspective arises not only from the display of image, nor just from the reading of unreadable script, but from a complex construction of the two in the field of destruction. Facing the end of life, this “map of Hell” offers no grounds for interpretation as condensation, such that text and image might together be considered elements of a higher order of meaning, beyond their division and interpenetration.⁶ Instead, the splitting and doubling of reading and gazing establishes the failure of either image or text to form a totality of meaning.

⁵ *SW3*, pp.335-336; *BGS6*, p.533.

⁶ In ‘condensation’ a dream is analytically interpreted as a system of meaning, resolvable into instincts, wishes, and their repressions. see Sigmund Freud, *The*

The dream's vision is already doubled as a *mise en abyme*: the terrain and its representation are seen one inside the other, with its viewer "standing in front of a map and, simultaneously, standing in the landscape which it depicted." But in the mixing of script and image an ambiguity is introduced: as the dream ends it is unclear whether the map is a representation of the landscape, or if the landscape has become a representation of a map, littered with letters as place names shattered into geological forms. Where a *mise en abyme* might give the impression of plunging into a world of mirror-like repetitions, this radical uncertainty instead preserves an unsettling diplopia. The view into the abyss is replaced by the teetering perspective of vertigo in which the near becomes distant and the distant near.

The nature of this "Hell" is that both views remain, as though superimposed on each other. The ruins of this catastrophic landscape do not give way to an empty uniformity, nor to a crystalline simplicity of endless repetitions, however boundless the grey ground of the terrain seems. Yet, if this is writing of the mountain and not of the abyss, then at the level of form a *mise en abyme* proper occurs beneath the surface detail: Benjamin presents a text that is nothing less than an image, which in turn presents the transformation of text into image. The text of the dream strains between these two modes of repetition – on the surface and beneath it – the one complete and the other incomplete. Meanwhile, this is not just any map: its topos is "the labyrinth of my auditory canal." If this ground made of language became an image of unreadability, the gestures of ruined characters point strangely to the realm of language heard. The curves of letters might point to no place but their own resounding.

Interpretation of Dreams, FSE4, pp.279-304. Freud treated dreams as though they were always translatable into language, or were already linguistic. See p.304.

If such a complex of language and image occurred to Benjamin alongside the premonition of the end of his life, its model may have been in one of his earliest experiences. In a fragment from *Berlin Childhood* titled “The *Mummerehlen*” he described how a person may enter an image through the distortion of language. As a child, Benjamin had been told the story of the “*Muhme Rehlen* [Auntie Rehlen]”. Not recognising the word “*Muhme*”, he constructed the term “*Mummerehlen*”, which gave life to a world of fantastic images.⁷ Being drawn into this image world was founded not by considering language as merely the bearer of conceptual meaning, but by the apprehension of verbal plasticity: by disguising oneself with words, or perceiving them by way of similarity. Benjamin wrote that this is “nothing but a weak remnant of the old compulsion to behave mimetically. In me, however, this compulsion acted through words.”⁸

This infantile comportment brought to life a world of language made into things. However, the animating logic of similarity would reach a limit, in the demand that this child, now viewed from the distance of a lifespan, be *like himself*. Those words that compelled his mimesis were

not those that made me similar to models of good breeding, but those that made me similar to dwelling places, furniture, clothes. Never to my own image, though. And that explains why I was at such a loss when someone demanded of me similarity to myself. This would happen at the photographer’s studio. Wherever I looked I saw myself surrounded by folding screens, cushions, and pedestals which craved my image, as much as the shades of Hades craved the blood of the sacrificial animal. In the end, I was

⁷ Benjamin continued to be fascinated by infantile distortions of language. He collected distorted words in his son’s vocabulary, see Chapter 5 of *Walter Benjamin’s Archive: Images, Texts, Signs*, eds. Ursula Marx, Gudrun Schwarz, Michael Schwarz, Erdmut Wizisla, trans. Esther Leslie, (London: Verso, 2007).

⁸ *SW3*, pp.390-391; *BGS4*, p.261. The word “*Mummerehlen*” relates to the topic: “*mummeln*”, or its archaic form “*mummen*”, is etymologically related to mime and mimesis. *Sich ver mummen* means to disguise oneself, like the English mummied. ‘*mummeln*’ came to also mean speaking unclearly, as in the English “mumbling”. They therefore stand on the border of sound and silence, with language obscuring as much as it reveals.

offered up to a crudely painted prospect of the Alps, and my right hand, which had to brandish a kidskin hat, cast its shadow on the clouds and snowfields in the backdrop.⁹

In ‘The *Mühhrehlen*’ the distortion of the word gives way to two images of images, into which the author found himself drawn. Here, in the first, he is found posing for a photograph, dressed as a mountaineer. This world of similarities appears threatening. The forces drawing him into the image are also forces of reification, which transform him into nothing more than one of the props that surround him. But in a second vision his absorption into the image is a blessed one. No longer subject to the camera’s machinic gaze, Benjamin remembers himself painting: “The colours I mixed would colour me. Even before I applied them to the drawing, I found myself disguised by them [*vermummten sie mich selber*]”¹⁰ The child paints a world in the palette of distorted language, in which he becomes an image. With this thought Benjamin recited a Chinese story (which itself would disappear in a later draft):

An old painter [...] invited friends to see his newest picture. This picture showed a park and a narrow footpath that ran along a stream and through a grove of trees, culminating at the door of a little cottage in the background. When the painter’s friends arrived they saw that he was gone, that he was in the picture. There, he followed the little path that led to the door, paused before it quite still, turned, smiled, and disappeared through the narrow opening.¹¹

This image of an image returns to reality: within the image of a life fulfilled, image and life are reunited. If the “paths into the world’s interior”,¹² lit up by distortion of language, led once to trepidation in the face of reification, and then to a promise of happiness, the landscape of Benjamin’s letter and dream provides a third conclusion. Language is made into a ruinous image where life is cut short. The path into the

⁹ *SW3*, pp.391-392; *BGS4*, p.261.

¹⁰ *SW3*, pp.392-393; *BGS4*, p.262.

¹¹ *SW3*, p.393; *BGS4*, pp.262-263.

¹² *SW3*, p.390; *BGS4*, p.261.

world's interior is replaced by a land with no paths at all, where the image rebounds into the writhing fragments of shattered words in a desert of disconsolation, its colours drained into grey.

0.2 Languagescape and *Trauerspiel*

How narrow was that opening through which the painter disappeared. Thirty years after Benjamin's suicide in 1940, Peter Szondi commented on a figure similar to the view in his dream. Szondi developed his reading of Paul Celan's poem *Engführung* [Stretto] for a seminar that Adorno attended in Berlin in 1967. The poem takes as its topics the landscape and voices of Europe in the early 1940s: not just the time of Benjamin's death, but of Celan's parents' deportation and murder by the Nazis. Szondi's commentary was completed for a presentation in Paris in 1971, where Celan had committed suicide the previous year, throwing himself into the Seine. It became part of Szondi's own final book, *Celan Studies*, unfinished when he too took his own life half a year later, drowning himself in Hallensee outside Berlin.

Celan's poem begins, "Deported to / the land / with the unmistakable trace / Grass written asunder. The stones, white, / with the shadows of the grassblades." In these opening lines, the blades of grass and their shadows become letters written on the white page as a terrain into which one – or someone – is deported. Instead of reading this figure as a mere illustration, subservient to language, Szondi notes that "the joint actions of reading and gazing are appropriate to this ambiguous terrain, which is at once text and scene."¹³ Yet this scene is unusual: its reality is one of non-being; its time is that of those deported and murdered, as their voices uncannily sound

¹³ Peter Szondi, *Celan Studies*, trans. Susan Bernofsky (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003) p.31.

anew. While Celan's poem is entered into under duress from the very first, in the word "*verbracht*" [deported] and in the language of orders shouted, "Read no more – look! / Look no more – go!" Szondi reads the force of its reality of non-being as a compulsion to remembrance. Where looking and reading conjoin in landscape, this third movement must follow. Following the orders of the poem, both reading and gazing are renounced; the poem is ultimately traversed along a path of memory.

Szondi incorrectly invokes the Benjaminian term "*Eingedenken*": "If there is memory – *Gedächtnis*, *Eingedenken* – it is thanks to the traces that have been left behind by the victims to whom the memory is now returning."¹⁴ Yet the motion of memory that Szondi's describes – returning back to the victims – might oppose his reading to the landscape presented in Benjamin's letter and dream. Szondi's reading rests not on Benjaminian *Eingedenken* (memory with the force of actualisation), nor on *Gedächtnis* (memory as a faculty), but on the mode of memory derived from elsewhere: he takes up Hegelian dialectics and memory as "*Erinnerung*".

Celan's lines "At owl's flight, here, / the conversations, day-gray, / of the groundwater traces." register an echo of Hegel's introduction to *The Philosophy of Right*, "When philosophy paints its grey in grey, a shape of life has grown old, and it cannot be rejuvenated but only recognised, by the grey in grey of philosophy; the owl of Minerva begins its flight only with the onset of dusk."¹⁵ Thus, despite the owl now fleeing not flying, Szondi concluded that this groundwater, which fed those blades of grass, now petrified into text, "is the mediation, and thus the negation of the two opposed elements, and thus the negation of the negation."¹⁶ Water, which might have

¹⁴ Peter Szondi, *Celan Studies*, p.74.

¹⁵ G.W.F. Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, ed. Allen W. Wood, trans. H. B. Nisbet (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p.23.

¹⁶ Szondi, *Celan Studies*, p.80.

washed away traces, returns as trace itself. Szondi reads the central motion of the poem as the traversal of a border between two worlds: the one a world of non-being, the world of the murdered victims; the other the world of their remembrance. The poem is driven [*führt*] closely [*eng*] through this border, and makes “a path that traverses the memory of the death camps.”¹⁷ A poetic voice granted to those who died and are no more; the poem becomes a commemoration.

Szondi had once addressed Hegelian philosophy as a tragic mode, in which borders are posited, transcended, and then whatever transgresses them returns: “the dialectic [...] that divides itself within itself in fate but then returns to itself in love.”¹⁸ Similarly, he reads Celan’s poem as establishing a division and reconciliation, between the “bad non-being” of those who were murdered and an “unmixed” world of “crystalline purity.”¹⁹ The motion of the poem follows this path, through the “porous edifice” and the “buried wall”,²⁰ between the night and the day in the dusk of the Owl’s flight, between the grass and the stone, between text and image. Wherever the poem moves it traverses the border into non-being only to return it to a new poetic reality. This traversal does not destroy the border; the motion of negativity adheres to it, and the time of this poetry carries there.

This Hegelian dialectic knows no borderless terrain, but only an ambivalent imperial expansion, discovering what has been condemned beyond the border, only for its remains to be internalised again, remembered, *Er-innert*. This Hegelian motif might be found Celan’s lines “*Nichts, / nichts ist verloren / Hosanna*” [Nothing, / nothing is lost / Hosanna]. Something or someone has become nothing [*Nichts*], in its

¹⁷ Szondi, *Celan Studies*, p.80.

¹⁸ Peter Szondi, *An Essay on the Tragic*, trans. Paul Fleming (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), p.18.

¹⁹ Szondi, *Celan Studies*, p.64.

²⁰ Szondi, *Celan Studies*, p.71.

condemnation to non-being, and is thus lost; yet *nothing is lost*, hence all is conserved.²¹ This ambiguous movement summarises the dialectic of memory in Szondi's reading: all is rescued from non-being, because its non-being is having been lost to history; in history, as memory, it is saved, as these voices are recalled in the poem. This form of memory, adhering to the dead with love, recalling deportations by deporting the reader into the languagescape of the poem, returns them over the border through which they were lost.

Yet if this poetry could breathe sound into the voices of 1940s Europe – if the movement of expulsion beyond the border and subsequent return, might conserve the dead – then Benjamin's vision, with its prospective suicide, could not. Benjamin's landscapes lack the binding force to transfigure these voices. Where Szondi concludes. "the 'unmistakable trace' and the 'groundwater traces' are one and the same thing: language, word",²² Benjamin's vision is one in which language is never more "one and the same". Not only are his landscapes borderless but pathless too; any progress that has driven them there is suspended. To move further requires not a path but a detour, which may not lead to anywhere new.²³ The landscape of Benjamin's letter and dream stands against the tragic motion that leads from poem to prayer ("Hosanna") in the reconciliation of text and landscape as a new reality, as consciousness hails its own raising to the absolute, such that the dead might take their place. Benjamin's languagescapes are without borders, and hellish because of their immanence. Instead of prayer they hint at the sound of language itself, which might be nothing but noise, consigned to a non-place. These are not landscapes composed of

²¹ See relatedly G.W.F. Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A.V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), p.19.

²² Peter Szondi, *Celan Studies*, p.79.

²³ Benjamin notes "Method is detour", in *OT*, p.28; *BGSI*, p.208, trans. amended.

a poem completed – however much resounding from non-being – but languagescapes of the wrecked imperfect work, weathered by history. Their language is shattered in the catastrophe in which they will not be written. They refuse the reconciliation of reading and gazing in a new reality, impelled or otherwise.

0.3 Two Passions

To account in such topographical excess for a sentence from a letter to a friend, or a dream jotted down in a diary may seem extreme. Yet the figure of a field of ruins [*Trümmerfeld*] featured prominently in Benjamin's writings, especially *The Origin of the German Trauerspiel*. The book's final section addresses allegory and the rubble of language. It presents images of landscapes, albeit in a particular guise: they are confronted physiognomically, in the enchantment and decrepitude of their lines and contours, as though they were faces. In a passage that Adorno would repeatedly cite, Benjamin wrote that "in allegory the observer is confronted with the *facies hippocratica* of history as a petrified, primordial landscape"²⁴ He continues,

When, as is the case in the *Trauerspiel*, history becomes part of the theatrical setting, it does so as script. 'History' stands written on the countenance of nature [*Antlitz der Natur*] in the characters [*Zeichenschrift*] of transience. The allegorical physiognomy of natural-history, which is put on stage in the *Trauerspiel*, is present in reality in the form of the ruin. In the ruin history has sensibly warped itself into the theatrical setting. And in this guise history does not assume the form of the trial of an eternal life so much as a process of irresistible decay. Allegory thereby declares itself to be beyond beauty. Allegories are in the realm of thoughts, what ruins are in the realm of things.²⁵

Figures that combine the landscape and the face are revealed to be settings of a theatre whose medium is not just language, but script. The language of the *Trauerspiel* reflects a new thingliness through the figurative shape of words. Thus, the

²⁴ *OT*, p.166; *BGS1*, p.343.

²⁵ *OT*, pp.177-178; *BGS1*, pp.353-354. trans. amended.

performance of the baroque *Trauerspiel* presents nothing but the transformation of script towards one which is not merely read but is instead gazed at. The allegory appears as a scriptal tumour in the tendency towards the sacred, in a world in which such sacred power appears only at an infinite distance:

Alphabetical script, as a combination of atoms of writing, is the farthest removed from the script of sacred complexes. These [...] take the form of hieroglyphics. The desire to guarantee the sacred character of any script – there will always be a conflict between sacred standing and profane comprehensibility – leads to complexes, to hieroglyphics. This is what happens in the baroque. Both externally and stylistically – in the extreme character of the typographical arrangement and in the use of highly charged metaphors – the written word tends towards the visual. It is not possible to conceive of a starker opposite to the artistic symbol, the plastic symbol, the image of organic totality, than this amorphous fragment which is seen in the form of allegorical script.²⁶

A dialectical view of this languagescape would restore colour to its face, albeit only in the shards of its destruction or in the putrefaction of its decay.

The philosophical understanding of allegory, and especially the dialectical understanding of its border form [*Grenzform*], is the only background in which the image of the *Trauerspiel* stands out in living and – if one may venture to say so – beautiful colours, the only background not darkened by the grey of retouching.²⁷

This audience (however pious) enters this image through the eccentricities of the material of language itself, for the condition of this language is their worldly condition too: deprived of eschatology. Benjamin's name for this setting is "natural-history": it describes the discord of nature and history in a time of their irreconciliation; in which every organic outgrowth appears only as the part, disturbingly broken off, while historical inevitability in the shape of sovereign fate appears as an uncanny second nature. Benjamin read this secularism, implicit in modernity – this modernity, implicit in secularism – in the transmutations of

²⁶ *OT*, pp.175-176; *BGS1*, pp.351-352.

²⁷ *OT*, p.189, *BGS1*, p.366.

seventeenth century typescript, between text and image. The physiognomic convergence allows landscapes to be read as though their features are the bodies of humans, while the contours of human bodies are reduced to a type of script, becoming rubble within the setting.

Secularisation makes the world a theatre, and not merely a performance. The physiognomic comportment applies specifically to the convergence of nature and history in the matter of language; the scope of which reaches out beyond the stage, encompassing the secular world of things, and people made into things. It does this not as speech, but in figuration, configuration, and disfiguration of the elements of words. Fragmented from each other in thingliness, each points only to the next. The voices of this language do not so much resound in prayer, as petrify in the renunciation of prayer in favour of immanent worldly power. Like the capital letters that populated the landscape of his dream, both a map of Hell and his auditory canal, the language of the baroque *Trauerspiel* is found on the border of sound. This is meant both historiographically, for these forms preceded the great technological constructions of the opera; and aesthetically, as the language of the *Trauerspiel* falls silent.

Its writing does not achieve transcendence by being voiced; rather does the world of written language remain self-sufficient and intent on the display of its own substance. Written language and sound confront each other in tense polarity. [...] Only when the power of reasoned enquiry was overcome by dizziness [*Schwindel*] at the profundity of the abyss before it, could bombast become the bogey of epigonal stylistics. The division between signifying written language and intoxicating spoken language opens up a gulf in the massif of verbal language and forces the gaze into the depth of language.²⁸

The Baroque's hymns are "heavy with material display."²⁹ Where this language might have resounded, this theatre rebounds into frozen gestures, pantomime and

²⁸ *OT*, p.201; *BGS1*, pp.376-377.

²⁹ *OT*, p.200; *BGS1*, p.376.

dumbshows. It is not that the language of *Trauerspiel* is without regard for the spoken or auditory element, but that its form of linguistic expression petrifies any musical aspect into images. This is a consequence of a *quid pro quo* in which the divine relation between God the creator and humanity as God's creature is exchanged for the human mastery of the things, as mere transient, contingent sovereignty, in a world from which God seems to have retreated. The characters of baroque script play out this gesture; as much as they might tend towards onomatopoeia, they appear as thingly images, signifying in their muted medium, how languages may have sounded were they not silenced. They present not the sounding of the thing, but its motion into muteness; the creature ripped from creation speaks in an endlessly falling medium, that in its silencing announces its distance from creation.

The *Trauerspiel* book culminates with the most densely woven physiognomy of the landscape of ruins of language, in a mountainous terrain:

It is precisely in visions of the frenzy of destruction, in which all earthly things collapse into a heap of ruins, which reveal the limit [*Grenze*] of allegorical contemplation, rather than its ideal quality. The bleak confusion of Golgotha [*Schädelstätte*], which can be recognized as the schema underlying the allegorical figures in hundreds of the engravings and descriptions of the period, is not just a symbol of the desolation of human existence. In its transience [*Vergänglichkeit*] is not signified or allegorically represented, so much as, in its own significance, displayed as allegory. As the allegory of resurrection. Ultimately in the death-signs of the baroque the direction of allegorical reflection is reversed; the greatest arc is turned backwards and redeems. The seven years of its immersion are but a day. For even this time of Hell is secularised into space, and that world, which abandoned itself to the deep spirit of Satan and betrayed itself, is God's world. In God's world the allegorist awakens. 'Yea, / when the Highest comes to reap from the graveyard, / then I, a death's head, will be an angel's countenance.' This solves the riddle of the most fragmented, the most defunct, the most dispersed. Allegory, of course, thereby loses everything that was most peculiar to it: the secret, privileged knowledge, the arbitrary rule in the realm of dead objects, the supposed infinity of a world without hope. All this vanishes with this *one* about-turn, in which the immersion of allegory has to clear away the final phantasmagoria of the objective and, left entirely to its own devices, re-

discovers itself, not playfully in the earthly world of things, but seriously under the eyes of heaven.³⁰

Benjamin uses the German word *Schädelstätte*, literally the place of the skull, for this place.³¹ This mount beyond the borders of the city, itself takes the shape of a death's head.³² It is not the figure of Christ, crucified, who offers an example for humanity, but instead the landscape itself, read as the face of decay, which leaps towards redemption. It is the ground of this place, as nature petrified, that, when God comes to reap, reveals its angelic countenance. If Christ suffers there, it is as a contour of this landscape, his suffering body meaningful only when discovered as a destructive element on the heap of the destroyed, the flesh made word.

The image of Golgotha is exemplary for distinguishing Hegel's tragic philosophy from Benjamin's "natural-historical" account of secular modernity. Hegel's *Phenomenology* also culminates peculiarly with a Calvary:³³ "The aim, Absolute Spirit, or Spirit that knows itself as Spirit, has for its path the recollection of Spirits as they are in themselves and as they accomplish the organization of their realm", he qualifies this path within this specific landscape, reconciling the contingency of history and the science of phenomenal knowledge as "the memory [*Erinnerung*] and the Calvary [*Schädelstätte*] of absolute spirit."³⁴ Identically to

³⁰ *OT*, pp.232-233; *BGSI*, pp.405-406, trans. amended.

³¹ 'Golgotha', from a Persian root, has the same etymology, as does the Latin 'Calvarium'.

³² Hebrews, 13:12-14

³³ The theoretical basis of the *Phenomenology* can be found in Hegel's early writings on Christianity. As Szondi remarks, "In the years between the text on natural right and the *Phenomenology*, the dialectic ceases to be a historical-theological phenomenon (in the spirit of Christianity) and a scientific postulate (for the reestablishment of an ethical theory) and becomes the law of the world and the method of knowledge." While this law of the world is still sublated in love, the reappearance of Calvary, and hence the crucifixion, in its concluding paragraph is startling.

³⁴ G.W.F. Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, p.493.

Szondi's reading of Celan, for Hegel, if there is any landscape left of Golgotha it is one solely of the travelling of a path. The sublation of law into love, in the figure of Christ, takes the border as its fulcrum, while rendering that border infinitely porous, as each blockage is converted in the memory of spirit's own movement into the medium of its movement. As he wrote in *The Spirit of Christianity and its Fate*, "God was thus supposed to hover in the medium [*in der Mitte schweben*] between heaven's infinity, where there are no restrictions, and earth, this collection of plain restrictions."³⁵ Every border is reconceived as a path towards a humanity, which, now inwardizing its motion, returns divinely. It is Calvary because God is not merely a man, who suffers there and is killed, but on Calvary he enters entirely into humanity, just as the motion of the path of humanity, beyond the borders of itself and returning into itself, realises its infinitude in the retracing of his steps. Here alone it both maps every moment of its movement and appears in transparency to itself.

Opposed to the transparent landscape of self-movement, with its paths traversing borders (recognising them speculatively, only after transcending them), Benjamin describes Golgotha as a place of distraction or confusion [*Verworrenheit*]. This is a place of opaque languages, of allegories that jut over one another as textures, no longer as legible text. The rubble of language obscures precisely where Hegel's concept, while internally dirempt, becomes divinely transparent to itself. For Benjamin, resurrection appears in the instant of the awakening of the allegorist amid this tumult. Golgotha stands not for the apotheosis of the spirit, but as a site in which the whole of nature might be viewed a physiognomic landscape. The reified nature that surrounds the allegorist in his melancholy contemplation of a world of things is,

³⁵ G.W.F. Hegel, *Early Theological Writings*, trans. T.M. Knox, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1988), p.295, trans. amended.

in awakening, transfigured, as the ground's deathly contours appear as the face of an angel under a new heavenly gaze.

Such a view offers a quiet accusation against the culmination of the *Phenomenology*: for as long as the Hegelian conception remains (inter-)subjective it remains inadequate to the fall, insofar as it lacks nature. The Hegelian view merely sheds the ruined material of the world, while inwardising its conceptual consequences. Thus, far from presenting the relation of history to freedom, this divinely sovereign spirit only dominates once again in memory. By animating bestilled nature in internal reflection, it dancingly deceives itself that this is matter's own substantive movement. It therefore makes for itself not an account of freedom, but instead a second nature as compulsive and fateful as the first. The Hegelian recollection lacks any resurrection proper.

By the time Benjamin wrote the *Trauerspiel* book, such a criticism had already been levelled by Lukács in *Theory of the Novel*. This book begins by figuring modernity as a pathless terrain, opposed to that of "integrated civilisations" in which "the light of the stars illuminates all of the possible paths."³⁶ While integrated civilisations are bounded, modernity is considered as an age in which these borders have been transgressed, but which operates according to a totality not given in its fullness. As such, worldly immanence induces the experience of diremption, while art makes forms of this experience's imperfectible fragments:

We have invented the creation of forms: and that is why everything that falls from our weary and despairing hands must always be incomplete. We have found the only true substance within ourselves: that is why we have to place an unbridgeable chasm between cognition and action, between soul and created structure, between self and world, why all substantiality has to be dispersed in reflexivity on the far side of that chasm; that is why our essence

³⁶ Georg Lukács, *Theory of the Novel*, trans. Anna Bostock, (London: Merlin, 1971), p.29.

had to become a postulate for ourselves and thus create a still deeper, still more menacing abyss between us and our own selves.³⁷

Within this world, the attempt to resolve the problem of becoming by way of inwardising memory fails:

This second nature is not dumb, sensuous and yet senseless like the first: it is a complex of senses – meanings – which has become rigid and strange, and which no longer awakens interiority; it is a Golgotha [*Schädelstätte*] of decayed interiorities; this second nature could only be brought to life – if this were possible – by the metaphysical act of reawakening the souls which, in an early or ideal existence, created or preserved it; it can never be animated by another interiority.³⁸

Noting Hegel's deficit with regard to nature was common to theoretical lineage stretching from early Lukács, through Benjamin, to Adorno's final works. Nonetheless, to conclude merely with this lack – or to prosecute it by announcing a true resurrection of the ground itself, as at the end of the *Trauerspiel* book – misses the theological bent of Benjamin's criticism. Both *The Phenomenology of Spirit* and *The Origin of the German Trauerspiel* are passions of modernity. The *Phenomenology's* preface announces its method as a “way of doubt” or a “way of despair”.³⁹ One imagines here a reference to the Via Dolorosa, such that the path of the spirit from force and sense certainty through to absolute spirit becomes a retracing of the fateful path of Jesus out of the city to of his martyrdom, now viewed in love from within the city. Counterposed to this path, travelled in tragic time, Benjamin writes of “the heart of the allegorical way of seeing, of the baroque, secular explanation of history as the Passion of the world, [whose] importance resides solely in the stations of its decline.”⁴⁰ Where in modernity Hegel identified the movement along a path, ever

³⁷ Lukács, *Theory of the Novel*, p.34.

³⁸ Lukács, *Theory of the Novel*, p.64, trans. amended: the present translation renders ‘*Schädelstätte*’ as ‘charnal house’.

³⁹ Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, p.49.

⁴⁰ *OT*, p.166; *BGS1*, p.343.

overcoming the borders of knowledge, Benjamin looks instead to the static moments, less borders than incomprehensible markers of torment forged in reified nature. It is not the reconciliation of God and man in the body of Christ that is important, but the perpetual stalling on this road: less a way to travel than a trail of fixations. The physiognomic landscape of Golgotha is littered with these unspeakable petrifications, such that the redemption occurs in *one* about turn, in the stopping of this endless stopping. Nature might then resound.

0.4 Capitalist Dreamscapes

Flowers adorn the stations of this
Calvary, they are the flowers of evil.⁴¹

While Benjamin's notion of natural-history found its archetypal landscapes in the settings of seventeenth century plays, the vision of his study was inclined not just towards the past, but also towards a tendency in the secular modernity within which he found himself. The explosive actualisation of past material into the 1920s rested on a similarity between these times and works. In the scenes of destruction of the First World War, the failure of the Spartakist revolution, the destruction of the German economy,⁴² and especially the writings of expressionist poets and dramatists, Benjamin heard an echo.⁴³ His age of decadence was equally incapable of making fully formed works, and would reach back into the past for materials and take them to hand. This force of actualisation was founded not only on a parallel between the two ages, but on the repetitive shape of modernity's historical time. Behind this view a

⁴¹ *SW4*, p.169; *BGS1*, p.666.

⁴² See Chapter 1, 'Explosion in a Landscape' in Esther Leslie, *Walter Benjamin: Overpowering Conformism*, (London: Pluto Press, 2000), pp.1-41, particularly pp.28-31.

⁴³ *OT*, pp. 53-56. Benjamin specifically cites the poetry of George and the plays of Werfel.

Saint-Simonian historiography might be detected: one of ages oscillating between times of integration (which Benjamin termed “classicism”) and times of disintegration.⁴⁴ But unlike the Saint-Simonians, who were content to provide positive histories of the rising and falling of states, Benjamin reflected on how these epochs of decadence collided through the ruining of language into image in phantasy:

Just as a feverish invalid transforms all the words that are audible to him into the fleeting visions [*Vorstellungen*] of delirium, so it is that the spirit of the present age seizes on the testimonies from earlier or distant spiritual worlds, in order to take hold of them and to carelessly incorporate them into its own self-absorbed fantasizing. This is characteristic of our age: there is no new style, no unknown popular heritage to be discovered which would not straight away speak with the utmost clarity to the feelings of contemporaries. This fatal, pathological suggestibility, by the power of which the historian seeks through ‘substitution’, to insinuate himself into the place of the creator [...] has been called ‘empathy’, in an attempt to provide a disguise under which mere curiosity masquerades as method.⁴⁵

Benjamin never ceased to draw on motifs from the *Trauerspiel* book in describing epochs of decline, whether it was late nineteenth century Paris or his contemporary German situation. Studies of Baudelaire prompted a return to the theories of allegory; the *facies hippocratica* reappeared again in the landscapes of the First World War.⁴⁶ Yet as capitalism and its system of value spread, these allegories were no longer forged by the intellectual powers of melancholy princes who gathered material around themselves as mere things over which they could exert their power. Allegory was overcome within the world of things itself, by the forces of a materialism devoid even of sovereigns. This world in which technology appears as the prince of materialism was approached with a profound ambivalence:

The baroque writer felt bound in every particular to the ideal of the absolutist constitution, as was upheld by the Church of both confessions. The attitude of

⁴⁴ See Prosper Enfantin’s lectures, *The Doctrine of Saint-Simon: An Exposition; The First Year, 1828-29*, trans. George Iggers, (New York: Schocken, 1972).

⁴⁵ *OT*, pp.53-54; *BGS1*, p.234, trans. amended.

⁴⁶ ‘Theories of German Fascism’, in *SW2*, p.319, trans. amended: the present translation renders “Hippocratic face” as “face of Hippocrates.”; *BGS3*, p.247.

their present-day heirs, if not actually hostile to the state, that is revolutionary, is characterised by the absence of any idea of the state. [...] The twenty years of German literature that have been referred to here in order to explain the renewal of interest in the earlier epoch, represents a decline, even though it may be a decline of a fruitful and preparatory kind.⁴⁷

This transformation left its mark on dreaming too. If once the dream, with a strain of youthful Romanticism, might have painted the world, and made a place in which a child, painting himself, might enter its image in resplendent colour, these disaster-ridden decades reduced even dreams to a new desolation. Entering into the dream meant approaching the physiognomy of a new, barren landscape, cloaked in grey, which Benjamin notated in a tiny review on surrealism titled 'Dream Kitsch':

No one really dreams any longer of the Blue Flower. Whoever awakes as Heinrich von Ofterdingen today must have overslept. The history of dreams remains to be written, and opening up a perspective on this subject would mean decisively overcoming the superstitious belief in natural necessity by means of historical illumination. Dreaming has a share in history. The statistics on dreaming would stretch beyond the pleasures of the anecdotal landscape into the barrenness of a battlefield. Dreams have started wars, and wars, from the very earliest times have determined the propriety and impropriety – indeed, the borders – of dreams.

No longer does the dream reveal a blue horizon. The dream has grown grey. The grey coating of dust on things is its best part. Dreams are now a shortcut to banality. Technology consigns the outer image of things to a long farewell, like banknotes that are bound to lose their value. It is then that the hand retrieves this outer cast in dreams and, even as they are slipping away, makes contact with familiar contours.⁴⁸

0.5 Portbou: The Dream Undreamt

Eight years after Benjamin wrote to Scholem about the landscape of his unfinished work, he took his life, having trekked the Pyrenees, pursued by the Gestapo. From atop a mountain range a new perspective was impelled. In 1932 the catastrophe of unfinished books appeared within his fantastic vision as a borderless battlefield of great defeats and small victories. By 1940 the war and the fascist occupation of

⁴⁷ *OT*, p.56; *BGS1*, p.236.

⁴⁸ 'Dream Kitsch' in *SW2*, p.3; *BGS2*, p.620, trans. amended.

France had driven him to the border. Where once the real site of ruin and catastrophe had taken the form of an expansive infinitude whose bounds could be neither surveyed nor foreseen, a new site of ruin had become the border itself, all too close, and fatefully closed. As he took his life he thought again of unwritten words. He sent a note to be passed to Adorno: “I would ask you [Henny Gurland] to pass on my thoughts to my friend Adorno and to explain to him the situation in which I have now found myself. I no longer have enough time to write all those letters I would have written.”⁴⁹

0.6 The Grand Hotel Defended

In terror most of the people have lost their power to live. They lie in their thousands in the city and on the land, incapable of resisting the thought of doom [*Untergang*]. For days no sun has risen [*aufgegangen*], icy winds streaked past, and the belly of the earth gurgled. Now the final train is going into the mountains. The lights flicker dully in the black morning. The few passengers observe themselves numbly, they tremble dumbly. The final jolt may already come before the arrival in the mountains.⁵⁰

A pale echo of Benjamin’s death on the mountain might be found in Adorno’s, twenty-nine years later. Retreating from the politics of the student movement, which he described as displaying “some of the thoughtless violence that once belonged to fascism”,⁵¹ he had travelled to Mount Zermatt in Switzerland. After taking a cable car

⁴⁹ Benjamin, Letter to Henny Gurland, 25.9.1940, in *ABCOR*, p.342.

⁵⁰ Stefan George, ‘*Zeit-Ende*’, from *Tage und Täten in Gesamtausgabe: Endgültige Fassung von Georg Bondi in 18 Bänden (in einem Buch)*, (Berlin: Hofenbourg, 2014), p. 643, trans. mine.

⁵¹ Adorno, letter to Marcuse, 5.5.1969, trans. Esther Leslie, in *New Left Review*, Vol.I/233, 1999, p.128.

up the mountain he began to experience chest pains, and upon descending the mountain collapsed. He was admitted to hospital, where he died. Between the mid-1950s and the end of his life, Adorno travelled frequently to the Swiss Alps. Only in the last two years of his life did he and his wife Gretel holiday in Zermatt. More often they stayed in Sils Maria, a small resort in Engadin, once popular with the nineteenth century bourgeoisie.⁵² Its role endured throughout the twentieth century as a remnant, where too the remnants of the haute-bourgeoisie continued to holiday. Gretel had complained that she liked neither the place nor the people who stayed there. But Sils Maria was where Adorno reflected on the theoretical significance of the alpine landscape in which his life would end.

With the knowledge of Adorno's alpine sojourns, Lukács launched a scathing attack in the new preface to the 1963 republication of *The Theory of the Novel*.

Quoting from his recent book, *The Destruction of Reason*, he wrote:

A considerable part of the leading German intelligentsia, including Adorno, have taken up residence in the 'Grand Hotel Abyss' which I described in connection with my critique of Schopenhauer as 'a beautiful hotel, equipped with every comfort, on the edge of an abyss, of nothingness, of absurdity. And the daily contemplation of the abyss between excellent meals or artistic entertainments, can only heighten the enjoyment of the subtle comforts offered.'

While Lukács's accusation culminated in an image of Adorno as an unfortunate, untimely nineteenth century bourgeois, the thrust of his argument offered a history of his own theoretical development. The preface significantly disavows his own early work, drawing a line between his own immature literary-theoretical studies and a mature Marxism:

Looking for a general dialectic of the literary *genres* that was based upon the essential nature of the aesthetic categories and literary forms, and aspiring to a

⁵² Between 1955 and 1966 Adorno spent 394 nights at the Waldhaus Hotel in Sils. See Eckhart Goebel, *Jenseits des Unbehagens: "Sublimierung" von Goethe bis Lacan*, (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2019), p. 214.

more intimate connection between category and history than he found in Hegel himself; he strove towards intellectual comprehension of permanence within change and of inner change within the enduring validity of essence. But his method remained extremely abstract in many respects, including certain matters of great importance; it is cut off from concrete socio-historical realities. For that reason, as has already been pointed out, it leads only too often to arbitrary intellectual constructs. It was not until a decade and a half later (by that time, of course, on Marxist ground) that I succeeded in finding a way towards a solution.⁵³

The issue is addressed more clearly in another preface written in the same year:

If I had taken up this study again after an interruption of nearly two decades, it was as a result of the *sublation* – in the threefold Hegelian sense of the word – of continuity with the youthful tendencies of my work: although these tendencies were fundamentally changed, they were also preserved, and brought to a higher level. In the meantime, I had grappled with the methods of dialectical and historical materialism and these methods had taken hold of me. That means, for this complex of problems, that I had gradually become capable of understanding the particularity of great German poetry and philosophy not only in isolation, seizing it intuitively as I had in my youth, but also to conceive of it clearly in its social, ideal, and aesthetic determinations. Therefore, the relation of my early writings to those of my mature Marxist period is that of a unity of continuity and discontinuity.⁵⁴

Adorno had adopted a heterodox Marxism early in his career. In 1925 he wrote that the “Marxist philosopher Lukács has had a more profound intellectual influence on me than almost anyone else.”⁵⁵ In 1932, having taught successive seminars on Lukács’s *The Theory of the Novel* and Benjamin’s *The Origin of the German Trauerspiel*, he wrote a programmatic philosophical statement titled ‘The Idea of Natural-History’, founded on Lukács’s notion of “second nature” and Benjamin’s notion of “natural-history”.⁵⁶ The essay defined its “contribution to the materialist dialectic” as recognising the unreconciled interpenetration of history and

⁵³ Georg Lukács, ‘Preface (1963)’ to *Theory of the Novel*, pp.16-17.

⁵⁴ ‘Vorwort’ to *Deutsche Literatur in zwei Jahrhunderten*, (1963), in Georg Lukács, *Werke*, (Neuwied am Rhein: Luchterhand, 1968-81), Vol.7, p.7, trans. mine.

⁵⁵ Letter to Alban Berg, 21.6.1925, in Adorno and Alban Berg, *Correspondence 1925-1935*, ed. Henri Lonitz, trans. Wieland Hoban, (Cambridge: Polity, 2005), p.9.

⁵⁶ Records of Adorno’s seminar on Benjamin’s *Trauerspiel* book are given in *Frankfurter Adorno Blätter*, (Munich: Text+Kritik, 1992-2003), Vol.4, pp.52-77.

nature, in order “to understand historical being at its most specifically historical as natural being” and to grasp “nature as historical being, even where it seems most grounded in itself.”⁵⁷

If Adorno came under attack, in part it was because he refused his own implication within such a biographical break, and its concomitant historiography, in which a youthful idealism was overcome by a mature Marxism.⁵⁸ In such a narrative Adorno suspected a restored idealism similar to Hegel’s memorial reconciliation, now deceptively cloaked in Marxist jargon. The dismissal of ‘youthful idealism’ covered

⁵⁷ The Idea of Natural History’, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor, in *Things Beyond Resemblance*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), pp.252-269, pp.260; *AGSI*, pp.354-355.

⁵⁸ Similar narratives subsequently prevail in intellectual biographies of the Marxist philosophers of this period, including Bloch, Benjamin, Sohn-Rethel, Horkheimer, and Adorno. Each supposedly begin his intellectual life as a youthful idealist committed to an academic, neo-Kantian project, before, at a critical juncture, discovering Marx and producing “mature work.” With regard to Adorno, this narrative has proved contentious. Susan Buck-Morss gives its most significant version in *The Origin of Negative Dialectics*, (New York: Free Press, 1977), pp.24-42. Robert Hullot-Kentor has accused Buck-Morss of “defending Marxism against Adorno’s intellectualism.”, while falling into a renewed idealism: “If materialism and idealism are so simply opposite as Buck-Morss supposes, how is it that in this discussion, she (the Marxist) is able to make what she calls a “purely logical” (hence idealist?) distinction between the two philosophies?” *The Problem of Natural History in the Philosophy of Theodor W. Adorno*, unpublished PhD Thesis, University of Massachusetts, 1985, pp.145-146. Irving Wohlfarth suggests that Adorno’s refusal to recognise any such break in his own thought was a combination of contingent fact and a myth of his own making: “Unlike his predecessors, the young Adorno could, thanks to their writings, define himself quite early as a materialist aesthetician; but he proceeded to insert into a materialist framework the problematic of their pre-Marxist phase. Not merely did he thenceforth never know the pain and violence of intellectual self-reconstruction; he tended to distrust it. Whereas the new edition of *The Theory of the Novel* presented the later Lukács with a renewed opportunity for self-criticism, a comparable occasion prompted Adorno to voice suspicions against those who deny the works of their youth and – this from the philosopher of *das Andere* – to declare his “deep disinclination ever to begin a new life.” He could thus regularly point to the presence of his central preoccupations in his earliest works.”, ‘Hibernation: On the Tenth Anniversary of Adorno’s Death’, in, *MLN*, Vol.94, No.5, (1979), pp.956-987, p.960.

over the disposal of nature, in the guise of childhood experience, now mocked by a historical adulthood that dominated. Elsewhere he had simply accused Lukács of

misusing Hegelian motifs in the service of the Party bureaucracy, in order to accommodate his obviously indestructible intellectual powers to the dismal level of Soviet pseudo-intellectual production which had in the meantime degraded the philosophy it mouthed to a mere means to the ends of domination.⁵⁹

Yet, if Adorno criticised Lukács for his self-deceptive autobiography, his own reading of Lukács was equally deceptive. Adorno's concern was not just the application of this narrative to his own life, but to Lukács's too. In 'The Idea of Natural History' he summarises the concept of second nature:

In the *Theory of the Novel* Lukács applied a concept [...] of a second nature. The framework of the concept of second nature, as Lukács uses it, is modelled on a general historico-philosophical image of a meaningful and a meaningless world (an immediate world and an alienated world of commodities), and he attempts to present this alienated world"⁶⁰

It is easy to miss, in this glancing summary, that "commodities" are in fact never mentioned in *The Theory of the Novel*. Adorno had read the account of reification from Lukács's later *History and Class Consciousness* back into his earlier literary essay.⁶¹ Where Lukács's later work demeaned or excluded nature, this appeared, in reflection, as a diremption of historical action from formal questions bourgeois culture.⁶² Adorno insisted that such a diremption was itself evidence of an enduring idealism, that could be saved from itself only by turning again to the material constitution of forms. Yet the critique of capitalism that revealed that "second nature,

⁵⁹ 'Extorted Reconciliation' in *NtLI*, p.216; *AGSII*, p.251.

⁶⁰; 'The Idea of Natural History', p.260; *AGSI*, p.355.

⁶¹ Lukács associates second nature with the totality of commodity relations for the first time in *History and Class Consciousness*, trans. Rodney Livingstone, (London: Merlin, 1971), p.86.

⁶² For an argument against this, addressing contiguities between *The Theory of the Novel* and *History and Class Consciousness*, see J.M. Bernstein, *The Philosophy of the Novel: Lukács, Marxism and the Dialectics of Form*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).

in truth, is first nature”,⁶³ might too be suspected of illegitimately standing on the ground of an unbroken nature, rescuing an image of youth only by writing maturity into it.

If Adorno won out, it was in allegory; Lukács’s attack spoke a truth against its own intent. The image of his criticism returns to the landscape, as an allegory for a life. Its chasm is diremption in thought. Adorno and Lukács might enter into this allegory, populating its scene. From within it, Adorno recorded a response to Lukács’ criticism in a notebook, in the year of his death, preserving the vertiginous, dizzying perspective of gazing into this abyss, without falling into it:

Lukács has reproached me with a stupid joke (such stupidity belongs to the universal regression that today deems itself to be revolutionary), that I would have set myself up in a luxury hotel on edge of an abyss. That is *to be accepted*; Chaplin’s hut in *The Gold Rush* would not be the worst allegory for my thoughts. Lukács has himself toppled into the abyss and mistakes that as salvation. He is never here, rather he crawls down below, broken like one of Beckett’s figures, about whom he is so indignant. Where should I live, then? Amid the mustiness of safety? I would prefer my tottering hotel. Its luxury, though, is none other than the happiness in the enunciation of the most extreme negativity, and I’m begrudged even that.⁶⁴

0.7 Zarathustra for Children

So it was quiet, quiet, up there in the mountains. It wasn’t quiet for long, because when one Jew comes along and meets another, then it’s goodbye silence, even in the mountains. Because the Jew and Nature, that’s two very different things, as always, even today, even here.⁶⁵

⁶³ ‘The Idea of Natural History’, p.268; *AGSI*, p.365.

⁶⁴ Adorno, ‘*Graeculus (II)*’ in *Frankfurter Adorno Blätter*, Vol.8, (2003), p.36, trans. mine.

⁶⁵ Paul Celan, ‘Conversation in the Mountains’, in *Paul Celan: Collected Prose*, trans. Rosmarie Waldrop, (New York: Routledge, 2003), pp.17-22, p.18.

We have left Adorno perched atop a mountain. He is not yet the fallen one. Adorno's thought offers no bridge over the chasm between nature and history, nor any rising up that would evade the fall. Yet conscientiousness of the negativity between the two produces a perspective within this landscape, and promises a precarious happiness without safety. To he who fell, the thesis is proved too: his death is not abyssal; he is reduced to the broken nature that, in soaring revolutionary thought, he considered he had escaped.

Falling was the theme in Sils Maria. In 1959 it was the site of a failed meeting with between Adorno and Paul Celan, arranged by Peter Szondi. On returning to Paris, Celan wrote the prose piece 'Conversation in the Mountains'. In a letter to Adorno, in which he presented the piece, he wrote that it belonged "to the 'prehistory' of my Büchner Prize".⁶⁶ In the prize speech he simply noted, "And a year ago, I commemorated a missed encounter in the Engadine valley by putting a little story on paper where I had a man 'like Lenz' walk through the mountains."⁶⁷ In Büchner's fragment, to which Celan refers, Lenz's journey into the mountains is to meet with the physiognomist Johann Christian Lavater.

'Conversation in the Mountains' opens: "One evening the sun, and not only that, had gone down [*war untergegangen*]." This sentence reaches back, with a perplexing inversion, to the philosophical history of the place. Nietzsche stayed in Sils Maria in the 1880s while writing *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*; a book in which the figures of the mountain and the border are recast. The book's recurrent theme is the overcoming [*Übergang*] of the spirit of gravity. The emblem of this overcoming is the sun, which when risen casts short shadows on the noon. Zarathustra appears neither as

⁶⁶ Paul Celan, Letter to Adorno, 23.5.1960, in *Frankfurter Adorno Blätter*, Vol.8, (2003), p.179, trans. mine.

⁶⁷ Paul Celan, 'The Meridian' in *Paul Celan: Collected Prose*, pp.37-55, p. 53.

a figure of tragedy nor of *Trauerspiel*, but as one who commits to transience:

“Whoever climbs the highest mountain laughs at all the *Trauer-Spiele* and *Trauer-Ernste*.”⁶⁸ At the centre of Nietzsche’s book *Zarathustra* teaches on the spirit of gravity:

Whoever one day teaches humans to fly, will have shifted all of the borderstones [*Grenzsteine*]; for him all borderstones themselves will fly into the air, he will christen the earth anew – as “the light one.”⁶⁹

Against gravity, with holy words, *Zarathustra* ascends. Borders are granted transience as he reaches ever higher, each disappearing in its own time, fading from view, as the earth is blessed.⁷⁰ But now, as the sun, and not only that, has fallen, this world is inverted, and *Zarathustra*’s rising becomes a falling too. As Celan wrote, “a man who walks on his head sees the sky below as an abyss.”⁷¹ Turning the world upside-down does not simply reconstitute those borders, but recreates them differently, in memory. Adorno came to a similar conclusion in a set of fragments on *Sils Maria* written in the mid-1960s.

The stories that tell of dusty piles of Nietzsche’s manuscripts laying stashed in the cellar of the *Edelweiss* or the *Alpenrose Hotel* are certainly apocryphal. If they existed, then research would have tracked them down out long ago. One must simply give up the hope that such unknown material would act as a conciliator in the battle between Lama and Schlechta. But a few years ago, I learnt that while he was still a child, Mr Zuan, the senior manager of an opulent shop in the area selling colonial wares, had known Nietzsche. We went there, Herbert Marcuse and I, and we were warmly received in a sort of private office. As a matter of fact, Mr Zuan remembered well. Upon our questioning he told us that Nietzsche carried a red parasol with him, whether in rain or shine, as he hoped it would offer him protection against his headaches. A gang of children, to which Mr Zuan belonged, had made of this something to amuse themselves: they would place small stones in the folded-up umbrella so that when Nietzsche opened it the stones would fall on his head. Threateningly he would then chase after them with the parasol raised,

⁶⁸ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, trans. Adrian Del Caro (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p.28, trans. amended as Nietzsche’s wordplay here is untranslatable.

⁶⁹ Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, p. 154.

⁷⁰ Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, p.166

⁷¹ Paul Celan, ‘The Meridian’, p.55.

but he never caught them. We thought about what a difficult situation the injured party must have found himself in: that he would still have to give chase to his torturers, who in the end remained in the right because they represented Life against Spirit. That is, unless in some philosophemes he was mistaken about the experience of real mercilessness. Mr Zuan could not remember any more details, but he then happily talked to us about Queen Victoria's visit. He was quietly astonished that this was not nearly so important for us. Since then, Mr Zuan has died, at over ninety years of age.⁷²

Cruelly, Adorno makes Nietzsche the butt of a joke. Unlike Zarathustra, who, in his laughter, proclaimed a new, borderless landscape, Nietzsche becomes a grumbler. If, against the spirit of gravity, all borderstones have been flung into the air, they now return, their falling inspiring laughter of a different kind. Nietzsche too had made such an argument, yet had not expected to see it used against himself:

Oh my brother, am I perhaps cruel? But I say: if something is falling, one should also give it a push!
Everything of today – it is falling, it is failing: who would want to stop it! But I – I *want* to push it too!
Do you know the kind of lust that rolls stones down into steep depths? – These people of today; just look at how they roll into my depths!
I am a prelude of better players, my brothers! An exemplary play! *Act* according to my example!
And whomever you cannot teach to fly, him you should teach – *to fall, faster!*⁷³

Adorno twice cited this passage as an allegory for revolution in class society.⁷⁴ But in his story of Sils Maria, its actors are of a peculiar type: the untimely child, Herr Zuan, now grown old, now even dead, who remembers in distorted perspective a past and lost time. This distorted perspective became definitive for Adorno's view of the mountainous terrain:

From on high the villages appear full of movement and without foundation, as though they had been placed there from above by nimble fingers. They can be compared to toys, offering the promise of happiness of the phantasy of being a giant: that you could do whatever you like with them. But our hotel, with its

⁷² *AGS10*, pp.328-329, trans. mine.

⁷³ Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, p.168.

⁷⁴ 'Reflections on Class Theory', trans. Rodney Livingstone, in *Can One Live After Auschwitz?*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), pp.93-110; *AGS8*, p.386 and *ND*, p.301; *AGS6*, p.296.

excessive dimensions, is one of the tiniest buildings to be capped with crenelations, the sort that in childhood was embellished with tunnels through which the trainset steamed. Finally, one can enter it and discover what is inside.⁷⁵

This view offers a happy counterpart to Benjamin's memory of himself, as the young mountaineer in the photograph, fully determined by the world of props and unable to be like himself in the process of reification. Here, childhood is retrieved as a source of happiness: not because it affirms the seemingly endless continuity of life, but because its discontinuous moments are traversed. Borderstones may no longer mark out borders, but they do not simply vanish, as though abstractly negated. With them, and in the motion of their falling, nature is discovered in remembrance. In returning, perspectives are changed: what is great becomes small, and what is small great; both victories and defeats. In play – in danger – this landscape may be entered one last time.

0.8 A Vertiginous View

What is expressed here is a feeling of vertigo characteristic of the nineteenth century's conception of history. It corresponds to a viewpoint according to which the course of the world is an endless series of facts congealed in the form of things.⁷⁶

For many commentators, Adorno's death marked the death of critical theory. Some considered him "a last genius",⁷⁷ while others saw him as the final proponent of

⁷⁵ *AGS10*, p.326, trans. mine.

⁷⁶ 'Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century; Exposé <of 1939>', *AP*, p.14; *BGS5*, p.1255.

⁷⁷ Detlev Claussen, *Adorno: One Last Genius*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008).

theoretical dead ends.⁷⁸ Yet all judgments seem to confirm finality. Benjamin's reception has differed from this, seeing several renaissances in interpretation. Today, Benjamin stands as the go-to figure for every illegitimate appeal to authority across the arts, and most who brandish his name believe that what is most explosive in his writing has, in reality, been defused. This thesis attempts to write about Adorno and Benjamin maintaining an uncertainty of whether these matters are dead or alive; without indulging intellectual history's passion for autopsies or recalling past thinkers only in the name of monumentalism.

I aim to offer a vertiginous history of critical theory, adopting something of the view of the landscape sketched above: sustaining both images and language, maintaining the awareness that paths might be fatally blocked. As in vertigo – in the suspension before the fall, and in the always-falling feeling of this stillness – this view offers no blessed interplay of proximity and distance. My mode of presentation is constructive and disjunctive. Both Benjamin and Adorno defended this vertiginous perspective. Closing the prologue to the *Trauerspiel* book Benjamin wrote:

The danger of allowing oneself to plunge from the heights of knowledge into the profoundest depths of the baroque state of mind is not a negligible one. The characteristic feeling of dizziness [*Schwindelgefühl*] which is induced by the spectacle of the spiritual contradictions of this epoch is a recurrent feature in the improvised attempts to actualise its meaning.⁷⁹

This dizziness returns in book's final pages:

As those who lose their footing turn somersaults in their fall, so would the allegorical intention fall from emblem to emblem down into the dizziness [*Schwindel*] of its bottomless depths, were it not that, even in the most extreme of them, it had so to turn about that all its darkness, vainglory, and godlessness seems to be nothing but self-delusion. For it is to misunderstand the allegorical

⁷⁸ For example, Jessica Benjamin, 'The End of Internalization: Adorno's Social Psychology', in *Telos*, No.32, 1977, pp.42-64 and Jürgen Habermas, 'The Entwinement of Myth and Enlightenment: Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno' in *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, trans. Frederick Lawrence, (Cambridge: Polity, 1987) pp.106-130.

⁷⁹ *OT*, p.56; BGS1, p.237.

entirely if we make a distinction between the story of images, in which this about-turn into salvation and redemption takes place, and that grim store which signifies death and damnation.⁸⁰

Meanwhile in the introduction to *Negative Dialectics* Adorno wrote,

A dialectics no longer “affixed” to identity will provoke the charge that it is without ground – [...] the objection that it is dizzying [*schwindelerregend*]. In great modern poetry, vertigo has been the central feeling since Baudelaire; the anachronistic suggestion often made to philosophy is that it must have no part in any such thing.⁸¹

Against this charge he argued:

The knowledge that bears fruit throws itself away to the object *a fond perdu*. The dizziness [*Schwindel*] that this excites [*erregt*] is an *index veri*. The shock of the open, the negativity as that which appears necessarily in what is covered over, what is never changing, is untrue only for untruth.⁸²

Both Adorno and Benjamin play on the doubled meaning of “*Schwindel*” as dizziness and as deception. Adorno’s joke that the swindle is an index of truth is deadly serious.⁸³ For Benjamin this is the structure of allegory: allegory – *allo agoreuei*, to say something else – both says what it is and what it is not. The allegorical fall, from emblem to emblem, combines this deceptive aspect into a dizzying, redemptive *Schwindel* of *Scwhindels*. This thesis takes these arguments at their word, subjecting them to the perspective they demand.

My source materials are the complete works and letters of Adorno and Benjamin, including notes and typescripts found in their archives. Nonetheless, these complete works are addressed through the closest readings of their smallest parts: a dream, a turn of phrase, an image. This vertiginous view preserves both the minute

⁸⁰ *OT*, p.232; *BGS1*, p.405.

⁸¹ *ND*, p.31; *AGS6*, p.42, trans. amended. Adorno here refers to Baudelaire’s poem, ‘*Le Gouffre*’, which recasts Pascal’s image of an infinite abyss between man and happiness, filled by god, as an infinite nightmare.

⁸² *ND*, p.33; *AGS6*, p.43, trans. amended.

⁸³ Odysseus, the protagonist of Adorno’s “original history of subjectivity”, is also a swindler.

details of subject-matter and the proportions of the sculptural or intellectual whole without reconciling one into the other. In *The Arcades Project* Benjamin writes of the need “to discover in the analysis of the small individual moment the crystal of the total event. And, therefore, to break with vulgar historical naturalism.”⁸⁴ This thesis attempts to avoid the fate of historical naturalism in favour of adopting an unreconciled *natural-historical* view. The total event may transpire to be not a unity, but something only discovered by taking its forever broken shards to hand.

I do not comprehensively document considerations of memory and forgetting within these sources. Readers familiar with these writings will find many such discussions absent – notably Benjamin’s thinking about Proust and Tieck’s *Der Blonde Eckbert*, or Adorno’s meditations of Beckett. Yet my selection of details is not arbitrary, and relies on a view of the whole work. I have addressed points of tension in order to dialectically elucidate theories of memory and forgetting as elements of natural-history. Despite this abstraction, my readings return to the artworks, music, and philosophical and literary texts about which Benjamin and Adorno wrote. Neither Benjamin nor Adorno wrote works of pure philosophy; their reflections are deeply sunken into the material, or discover material within thought itself.⁸⁵

A note is required about what is understood by memory and forgetting. In everyday usage these words refer to elements of thought. Today they are most often invoked in the humanities alongside importations from the natural sciences, repeating the old myth of civilising the mind by treating it as a piece of nature. A significant countertendency has turned towards memory as a mode of inscribing history in the

⁸⁴ *AP*, p.461; *BGS5*, p.575, echoing *OT*, p.29; *BGS1*, pp.208-209.

⁸⁵ “Philosophy refuses to capitulate to the prevailing division of labour.” *DoE*, p. 202; *AGS4*, p.280. For an earlier version of this argument, perhaps in response to Max Weber’s ‘Science as a Vocation’, see Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, p.6.

form of the subjective psyche. This thesis hopes to hold these tendencies to account: memory and forgetting are addressed within the troubled relations between individual experience and society, in a history constituted by the domination of nature.

By way of organisation, the first two chapters essay a pair of notions developed between the 1910s and the 1940s: Benjamin's remembrance [*Eingedenken*], and Adorno's regression [*Regression*]. These chapters together offer an exposition of a natural-historical theory of memory and forgetting: the first a mode of apparently historical thought that illuminates nature; the second a form of apparently natural thought rupturing into historical knowledge.

The first chapter is a reading of a number of small texts that Benjamin wrote in the late 1910s and early 1920s on the phenomenon of blushing. Despite their obscurity, these texts relate to a range of major topics in his thinking. The term *Eingedenken* [remembrance] plays a significant role in the work of both Adorno and Benjamin, operating as a (sometimes broken) medium between history and eschatology. *Eingedenken* might transform the past, undo past violences, perhaps even raise the dead. This chapter approaches the topic essayistically, demonstrating how Benjamin's ideas on colour and childhood are decisive for theoretical questions ranging from the critique of law and violence, to the theatre, to the interpenetration of image and text.

The second chapter addresses Adorno's notion of regression. This concept has often been passed over in the scholarship. Particularly within Adorno's critique of the "culture industry", the term has been considered an element of mere *Ideologiekritik*, a slur against nature by an agent of a bourgeois civilising process. But the concept of regression, which Adorno first used in his book on Kierkegaard, assumed a great importance to his thought, addressing nature under the conditions of the outward-

turned private sphere of the commodity. The chapter takes the form of a theme and variations: it opens with a reading of a fragment written on Mahler in 1936, which occasions an exposition of Adorno's thinking of interiority: the variations then follow the image of flowers plucked from the landscape, and brought back within the home, offering an account of psychoanalytic and metapsychological aspects of his thought.

The third chapter shifts to another time. It offers a reading of a single dream that Adorno noted down in November 1956, attempting to show what happened to these pre-war theories of memory and forgetting after Auschwitz. While reading the dream it also develops an account of Benjamin's essay on Goethe's *Elective Affinities*, read from the other side of the Holocaust. Auschwitz, therefore, stands at the very centre of the thesis. This natural-historical dialectic of memory of forgetting is presented not only in development, but also in disfigurement and distortion as it is dragged through the catastrophe of the twentieth century.

The final chapter considers the memory and forgetting of Benjamin's death within Adorno's late metaphysics. It returns to images of ruined and bordered landscapes, and the dialectics of image and text, as writing disappears into an image of the destruction of writing.

This thesis also has two more modest aims: In 1925 Benjamin wrote that "a history of dreams is yet to be written."⁸⁶ Ninety years on I take up this task. The role of dreams in critical theory is considered here as a partial history of dreams in the twentieth century. Meanwhile this thesis is also about some problems of reading. Short meditations on reading follow each of the first two chapters. These ought to be taken in lieu of a method. While my approach to Adorno and Benjamin is unapologetically literary, this should not be mistaken for a refusal of politics. In

⁸⁶ SW2, p.7, BGS2, p.620.

reflection on literary questions I am concerned not only with form and expression, but also with how historical materialism and the world of commodities became entangled with memory and forgetting in the twentieth century.

CHAPTER 1

Benjamin and Remembrance

At the end of the First World War, red explodes across the landscape from the East. To the West, mutinies and insurrections are crushed; their blazing promises quenched in misery and reaction. In those revolutionary years, Benjamin's concerns with the colour red were distant from the Party and political upheaval. Not yet allied to any Bolshevik thinking, he considered its smallest movement: the hue falling across people's faces in shame.

Between 1919 and 1920, Benjamin wrote a number of drafts and fragments about the phenomenon of blushing, and a set of schemata relating to these. This chapter offers an inflationary reading of these texts,¹ drawing them into relation with others written by Benjamin throughout the subsequent two decades. Scholarly approaches to questions of memory in Benjamin's writing have often centred on the concept of *Eingedenken*. Within his work, this word first occurs in his discussion of Proust.² It returned throughout the 1930s, most notably in his work on Baudelaire, through to his final works on the concept of history. My reading begins with texts

¹ In the dusty world of Hegel scholarship, those opposed to the metaphysical implications of their own thinking describe their readings as “deflationary”. Benjamin is not Hegel; the motion of his thought is not the endless raising up of *Aufhebung*, but, contrariwise, a type of falling. My reading embraces a metaphysical perspective, if only to return thought from cerebral heights to matters close at hand. Inflationary is therefore also meant in its everyday sense: a process of devaluation. Benjamin frequently reflected on how such financial processes, which became decisive in the crushing of the German revolution, found their analogues in thought. See for example ‘Imperial Panorama: A Tour of German Inflation’ in *One Way Street, SW1*, pp.450-455; *BGS4*, pp.94-101; In ‘Dream Kitsch’ he wrote, “technology consigns the outer image of things to a long farewell, like banknotes that are bound to lose their value. It is then that the hand retrieves this outer cast in dreams and, even as they are slipping away, makes contact with familiar contours.” *SW2*, p.3; *BGS2*, p.620.

² ‘On the Image of Proust’, *SW2*, pp.237-247; *BGS2*, pp.310-324.

from a time before this word had established a place in his writings.³ The following chapter essays the theoretical grounds for such a concept in the modes of remembrance implied by theorisations of colour, even where its word had not yet entered the lexicon.

On Shame⁴

The following remark by Goethe leads us to the most secret meaning of the blush that comes over people in shame: “If, in monkeys, certain naked parts appear motley with elementary colours [*Elementarfarben*], then this shows how far such a creature is from perfection: for, one can say, the nobler a creature is, the more everything merely artificial about it has been wrought. And the more essentially its surface and interior cohere, the less these elementary colours are able to appear. This is because where everything is to add up to a perfect whole, no specific thing can separate itself off here or there.” (Theory of Colours, Didactic Part, Para. 666.) The sublime indeterminability, indeed inconspicuousness, of that which appears on the human being less than on all other beings – as far as colour is concerned – as though Nature has almost retreated from the almost decoloured tones of its body, and seems to triumph here once again, more in gracefulness than in splendor: this is annihilated in the blushing of shame. But not through base violence. Because the red of blushing does not stain the skin, neither inner discord nor inner disintegration appear on the surface in it. This blushing conveys nothing at all of the interior. Were it to do so, this would be enough to again induce a new shame: that of discovering humanity in a frail soul. Instead – as is actually the case – in blushing all reasons for shame, everything internal, is extinguished. The redness of shame does not well up out of the interior (and that ascending redness of shame, of which one occasionally speaks, is not the thing that ashes), rather, the redness of shame is poured over the ashamed person from outside, from above; and just as it expunges his disgrace, so does it withdraw him from disgracefulness. For in the darkened reddening that shame pours over him he is withdrawn

³ See Stefano Marchesoni, *Walter Benjamins Konzept des Eingedenkens: über Genese und Semantik einer Denkfigur*, unpublished PhD Thesis, Università degli Studi di Trento and Technische Universität Berlin, 2013. Marchesoni gives the word’s history, pp.9-10. From the outset ‘*Eingedenken*’ is related to subjects addressed below: dreams and fantasies, lightbeams, and the motion of falling. It first appears in the fifth of Wagner’s *Wesendonck-Lieder*: “Dreams, which sink into the soul like glorious beams, painting there an eternal image: all-forgetting, remembrance [*Eingedenken*]!” From here it was adopted by Ernst Bloch, before appearing in Benjamin’s work.

⁴ ‘*Über die Scham*’, circa 1919-20, *BGS6*, pp.69-71, trans. mine.

from the gazes of people, as if under a veil. Whoever is ashamed sees nothing, and he alone is also not seen.

This wonderful power of shame shows itself visibly in colour. What differentiates it from those motley denunciatory colours of nature, which Goethe recognized in monkeys – from which the human body is so far removed, is that it is capable of a deep, secret relation: this can be read in Hogarth's pedantic *Analysis of Beauty*: "To avoid confusion and having already said enough of retiring shades, I shall now only describe the nature and effect of the prime tint of flesh, for the composition of this, when rightly understood, comprehends everything that can be said of the colouring of all other objects whatever." But what differentiates blushing in shame from the motley shame of a monkey? And what differentiates the tone of human skin from that of an animal? Goethe remarks that the colours on an organic being are an expression of its interior. This qualifies a highly remarkable, peculiar, and in a certain respect cloudy transformation of the fundamental essence of colour in the organic world. Cloudy: because it is the essence of colour not to correspond to the expression of something colourful, that is, to an expression from within something colourful. For the pure expression, the pure meaning, the pure "sensuous-ethical effect" as Goethe says, adheres to colour [*Farbe*] and not to colouration [*Färbung*]. And even more precisely, not to colouration [*Färbung*] and indeed not to colour [*Farbe*], but in its deepest basis to that which is colour-giving [*das Färbende*]. Not to the blue thing, not to the dead blue, but to the blue semblance [*Schein*], to the blue gleam [*Glanz*], to the blue lightbeam [*Strahl*]. These three hold and contain what is simply spiritual in colour. But they appear much more purely as semblance and gleam in the deep-lying world of plants than in the higher world of animals. On the other hand, the lightbeam shoots out only from the inorganic and from the highest of the organic: from the sun and from the countenance. But as a lightbeam, colour is never the expression of an interior; yet it is always its effect. And were it to be an expression as semblance or gleam, then the colour would be betrayed; the purer colour is, the less it comes from the inside (as it becomes visible in the world of plants.) However, the more the colour remains an expression of the interior, and the less it remains the light of the surface, the more cloudy it appears, and the less spiritual too. This is how it is for most animals. Nowhere though – neither on animals nor on plants, neither in clouded nor in gleaming colours – can the colour-giving light [*färbende Licht*] appear. Only on the countenances of humans, where the colour-giving light belongs entirely to lightbeams, is it gathered together with the dark blush. The colour of shame is pure: its red is not the colourful [*Farbiges*], nor the colour [*Farbe*], but the colour-giving [*Färbendes*]. It is the red of transience from the palette of phantasy. For that most properly pure colour-giving light is none other than the colourful, multicolour light of

phantasy. The colours belong to this realm, in which a being appears without being the expression of an interior. And only this colourful appearance is pure, and functions for the sake of being incomparably powerful: not over understanding, to which it betrays nothing; but rather over the soul, to which it says everything. Expressionless signifying appearance is the colour of phantasy. The expressionless signifying appearance of vanishing [*des Vergehens*] is the blushing of shame.

Reddening in Rage and Shame⁵

Rage from within – also physiologically from another system.

Colour cannot appear in forms as “colourful light.” This is related to the formless appearance of phantasy.

The mark: the surface upon which something from inside and outside can come to appear. The wall. The human countenance.

Gold and the colour of human countenances as important colours of the mark. Are the colours of the mark always and necessarily capable of radiating lightbeams (as the two named colours are)?

Highly developed sense of shame in children. That they are so often ashamed is related to the fact that they have so many phantasies, especially at the youngest ages.

Schemata⁶

Semblance Gleam Lightbeam	Elysiac Paradisiac Seraphic	} Light	Colourspace Of phantasy Motleyness	Of the mark Gold
Being coloured Paradisiac Morning sky	Colouring itself Elysiac Evening sky		The world of phantasy Sought The paths to it	Beheld Its essence
Phantastic appearance Formed Language (Shakespeare)	Pure Colour		Phantasy Deforming Plain Shame Contextual (world)	Overforming Grotesque Shamelessness Without context (individual)
Phantasy Pure Phantasy world Compatible with but invisible in them	Impure Dream world Clouded by sensuousness and concepts		Shame Natural corrective	Remorse Supernatural corrective

⁵ ‘*Erröten in Zorn und Scham*’, circa 1919-1920, *BGS6*, pp.120, trans. mine.

⁶ ‘*Schemata*’, circa 1919-1920, *BGS6*, p.121, trans. mine.

On Phantasy⁷

Autumn and Winter

In Autumn the relationship of the downfall [*Untergang*] to emerging and changing colours is laid bare. (Compare with Heine: Were I made of material, I would colour myself.) The deeper colouration accompanies the properly earthly downfall (as in the phosphorescence of rotting corpses.) Becoming [*Werden*] announces itself in configuration [*Gestaltung*] (fresh buds), passing-away [*Vergehen*] in colouration. In contrast, whatever discolours itself indicates a non-earthly – and that is to say a non-eternal – type of downfall; one which, instead, coincides with Becoming in a supramundane sphere. This is how it is for things that discolour themselves, for how humans turn pale in death. And so it is for Nature, which turns pale in winter. And this last example is indicative for those natural appearances that ended with animalistic life; those which should not go under in eternal transience [*ewige Vergängnis*].

Relationship of phantasy to shame.

“He becomes red – he would like to disappear [*vergehen*]”[.] On the other hand, the tendency towards shamelessness in fantastic literature (grotesque.)

Colourlessness of the higher light. “Colourless light of reason”

The colours of phantasy culminate in red.

In contrast: blue (colour of ideas)

***Pure phantasy* – in distinction from, for example, dream phantasy. On the mode of colourfulness of the world of dreams. Pure phantasy only outside the human. Colourfulness of ruins: merging with the landscape, overgrownness. / the colour of rust.**

1.1 Rainbow and Memory

Blushing first appears as a figure in Benjamin’s writing in the “Rainbow” dialogue, written in the first months of 1915. In this text the tension between the colours of phantasy [*Phantasie*] and those of painting [*Malerei*] is presented through a conversation between two personae: Georg the painter; and Margarethe who has come through the rain to visit him, having dreamt of a world of colour. They speak about phantasy, dreams, painting, childhood experience, and the types of colour that appear in each. The image of blushing appears at the dramatic climax of the piece, only to be immediately interrupted by the emergence of a rainbow in the sky:

⁷ ‘Zur Phantasie’, circa 1919-1920, *BGS6*, pp.121-122, trans. mine.

Margarethe: So only children dwell entirely in innocence, and in blushing [*Erröten*] they themselves relapse into the existence of color. Phantasy is so pure in them that they are capable of this. – But look: it's stopped raining. A rainbow.⁸

With the appearance of the rainbow, the colourworld of childhood and of dreams is suspended by the piece's catastrophe. This is the earliest example of Benjamin's use of this formal device – of the catastrophe in the old literary sense of the word, as the centre of gravity upon which the plot turns – that rather than resolving dialectical tension in release or resignation, suspends and interrupts its oppositions. Hence, far from being a centre of gravity that pulls the scene together, like the rainbow, it rises and is suspended in the air, as though it sprang up out of the tension, becoming visible in stillness.

A similar formal motion was used again at the close of the *Trauerspiel* book. The image presented there is not so different from the rainbow: under the allegorical gaze suddenly transformed (or transfixed), now in the “greatest arc turned backwards [*rückgewandte größte Bogen*] and redeeming”, the death's head is made visible as an angel's countenance.⁹ The *Trauerspiel* book – and especially its conclusion – is all about gravity and levity, with the great vertigo induced by the tumbling of allegorical intention from emblem to emblem. This vision of this downward falling motion relies on a certain height; Benjamin certainly emphasises this soaring in the final pages of the book, in the architecture of the baroque cathedral, and in its ruin. So too does this

⁸ ‘The Rainbow: A Conversation about the Imagination’, trans. by Howard Eiland, in *EW*, pp.214-223, here p.216; *BGS7*, pp.19-26, p.24. Eiland consistently chooses ‘imagination’ for the German ‘*Phantasie*.’ I have opted instead for to use “phantasy” throughout. The English ‘imagination’ has often stood for the German ‘*Einbildung*’ (for example in the Kantian *Einbildungskraft* – the power of imagination), and also for the German “*Imagination*” in the philosophical tradition. ‘Phantasy’ is the common rendering of “*Phantasie*” in the psychoanalytic tradition. While not only a direct cognate of the German, it avoids the implication of an image in ‘imagination’, just as *Einbildung* implies a *Bild*.

⁹ *OT*, p.232; *BGS1*, p.406.

great arc find there its counterpart in thought: “Subjectivity, like an angel plummeting into the depths, is brought back by allegories and is held fast in heaven, in God, by the *ponderación misteriosa*.”¹⁰ The significance of the vertical architecture of these final pages of the book will prove crucial to understanding Benjamin’s thoughts on blushing.

The themes of the rainbow dialogue, and in particular the depiction of colours in this text and in its two accompanying pieces ‘A Child’s view of Colour’¹¹ and ‘The Rainbow, or The Art of Paradise’,¹² continued to concern Benjamin for the rest of his life. Descriptions associated with this line of thought always emphasise liquid, moving forms and configurations of colour. But thoughts themselves are not like the liquid colours on the surface of a bubble – constantly shifting, modifying, transforming, disappearing. They are at least in part also frozen, static, fixated, and indeed fixating. As Benjamin himself wrote in ‘On the Concept of History’, “Thinking involves not only the movement of thoughts but their arrest as well.”¹³ It is not so strange to the dialectician that these most dynamic of colourful images might have become a fixation for Benjamin.

This particular fixation appears most readily as a repeated list of objects found in childhood. In late 1914 or early 1915 it includes: “soap bubbles[, ...] coloured pickup sticks, sewing kits, decals, tea games [*Teespiele*], even pull-out picture books” and as “oleographs, paintings, and the images produced by decals and magic lanterns.”¹⁴ Later that year the list appears as, “soap bubbles, tea games, the moist

¹⁰ *OT*, p.235; *BGS1*, p.408.

¹¹ *EW*, pp.211-213; *BGS6*, pp.110-112.

¹² *EW*, pp.224-227; *BGS7*, pp.563-564.

¹³ *SW4*, p. 396; *BGS1*, p.702.

¹⁴ *EW*, p. 211; *BGS6*, p.110.

colourfulness of the magic lantern, inks [*Tuschen*], decals.”¹⁵ A decade later the list appears in an article on childrens books: “Just think of the many games that are concerned with the pure phantastic contemplation: soap bubbles, tea games, the watery colour of the magic lantern, inks, decals.”¹⁶ After the 1920s this list would not be preserved in exactly the same form, but a remnant of it is found in the 1933 version of ‘The *Mummerehlen*’.¹⁷ This *Denkbild* describes the child’s inks [*Tuschen*], while perhaps, offering an expansion of the word “*Teespiele*” that appears in all these lists. This is an unusual, unfamiliar word. Citing a nineteenth century book about Royal Dresden, Esther Leslie has told me in a conversation that it refers to “colourful flowers that you throw into a cup of hot tea, and they unfurl.” But perhaps this word was chosen quite deliberately for another reason: It could be one of Benjamin’s own childhood words, for a game of mimicry he would play with the colourful Chinese porcelain of a tea set, steaming with tea. This porcelain, he says in ‘The *Mummerehlen*’, was his favourite thing to mimic: “I would resemble the porcelain which I had entered in a cloud of colours.”¹⁸ Finally, when he returned to work on *Berlin Childhood* in 1938, he wrote a fragment titled “Colours”, in which we find once again the soap bubble and the child’s watercolours. These are colours in which he might “colour himself” or within which he might “lose himself.”¹⁹ In these games of mimicry, this long-term fixation is brought into reflection. The child plays a daring game of risk: for whoever discovers him hiding as though he were an object “could hold me petrified as an idol under the table, could weave me as a ghost for all time

¹⁵ *EW*, p.220; *BGS7*, p.25.

¹⁶ ‘The World of Children’s Books’ in *SW1*, p.614; *BGS4*, p.618.

¹⁷ ‘The *Mummerehlen*’ was published in the *Vossische Zeitung* in May 1933, and was included in the first full draft of *Berlin Childhood* in 1934. The passage in question was deleted in the 1938 revised version. *SW3*, pp.390-393; *BGS4*, pp.260-263.

¹⁸ *SW3*, p.393; *BGS4*, p.263.

¹⁹ *BC*, pp.110-111; *BGS7*, p.424.

into the curtain, confine me for life within the door.”²⁰ In hiding in the cloud of colour he knows, from his own thought, that he might be held fast there forever.

This textual repetition spans across a quarter of a century. It began with a dream – one whose fictional dreamer, the character Margarethe, insists that “a dream can’t be told”²¹ – but expresses an *idée fixe* in Benjamin’s work and thought. Each time he returned to this idea, the theories upon which he was working became adhered to it. In the 1920s it was his studies of the pictures contained in his growing collection of children’s books; in the early 1930s it was theories of similarity and mimesis. The fragments on blushing belong to the earliest moments of these transformations (or rather, fixated recurrences.) These earliest reworkings of the ideas from ‘The Rainbow’ present theorisations of guilt and expiation, of annihilation and colourful transfiguration, and of the place, time, and movements of phantasy in sacred and natural history, all now adhering to a fixation on liquid colour.

What if it was not just a dream – a dream undreamt – that had become a fixation? As is so often the case for experiences we come to know as insistently dreamlike, while taking as their content something we have never experienced, something else lurked behind (or within) the image. A few months prior to writing the rainbow dialogue Benjamin’s friend, the poet Fritz Heinle, committed suicide out of despair at the beginning of the First World War. Heinle quietly appears in Benjamin’s text: where Margarethe says “A poet has written: ‘If I were made of material, I would colour myself. [*wäre ich von Stoff, ich würde mich färben*]” she is quoting him.²² Indeed, many of Benjamin’s texts on these themes include quotations from Heinle. Citations appear in the essays on children’s books. In later works these quotations

²⁰ *SW3*, p.375; *BGS7*, p.418.

²¹ *EW*, p.214; *BGS7*, p.19.

²² *EW*, p.219; *BGS7*, p.24.

sometimes appear is paraphrase: in ‘The Mummerehlen’ he writes, “The colours I mixed would colour me.”²³ Yet in each case, these allusions to Heine refer either to the line of poetry about colouring oneself, or to a single other that reads, “Already a green glimmer in the red sunset [*Grüne Schimmer schon im Abendrot*].”

Benjamin’s persistent return to this set of images, his fixation upon moist, transient, coloured semblances, might imply a complex relation. Nearly two decades before Benjamin wrote the Rainbow texts, Freud had theorised “screen memories” in an article published in the *Monatschrift für Psychiatrie und Neurologie*.²⁴ Benjamin almost certainly never read this article, although its argument was popularised in *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life*, and its metapsychological conclusions were played out in Freud’s *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious*, which Benjamin read in the late 1910s.²⁵ While it is difficult to suggest a direct lineage from Freud to Benjamin, there is a proximity of their thinking.

Much like Benjamin’s work on colour, Freud’s essay on screen memories addresses early childhood experience, and in particular the occurrence of memories of childhood experience around moments of “fear, shame, physical pain, etc.”²⁶ More rarely noted is that Freud’s essay is also about colour. The scene he sets out to analyse is one of a green field with yellow flowers, of a yellow dress that in turn matches (or does not quite match) the flowers, and of black bread. ‘On Screen Memories’ is, among Freud’s writing, the work most utterly flooded with colour. At the centre of the analysis is the appearance of what he describes as an “ultra-clear yellow [*überdeutlichen Gelb*]” within the phantasy.²⁷

²³ *BC*, p.194; *BGS4*, p.262.

²⁴ Freud, ‘On Screen Memories’, *FSE3*, pp.299-322.

²⁵ See Benjamin’s own list of books he read, *BGS7*, p.440.

²⁶ Freud, ‘On Screen Memories’, *FSE3*, p.305.

²⁷ ‘On Screen Memories’, p.313.

To gloss Freud's argument, screen memories revolve around unusual and unexpected repeated reminiscences. Most often such memories seem to lack justification, insofar as they appear not to contain anything of importance or value. They are unlike other memories which are retained precisely because they had made a deep impression on the subject, or because they hold a significance for shaping his or her life. In order to explain these memories, Freud described a process whereby a memory of something shameful or painful would be covered over by another memory – itself often imbued with some phantastic quality, and in this case phantastic colour – in order to defend against the memory of shame or pain. A memory, if not the one of the experience itself, would persist and repeatedly return, since the founding experience did in fact have importance.

While Freud does not mention it (although the vivid colours of his memory may silently allude to it), the memory of a rainbow plays an important role in the history of such mnemonic structures: the rainbow may be the screen memory's archetype, its *Urbild*. This is the reason that rainbows do not yet have a history. It may explain how these transient colours of light appearing in the sky came to be stilled, unchanging; how this transient beauty became transfixed into eternally returning. In the story of Noah, after the flood that destroys nearly all life, a rainbow appears. This is the scene of the New Covenant between God and every living creature; a legal bond guaranteeing the sanctity of life. God says to Noah,

And I will establish my covenant with you; neither shall all flesh be cut off any more by the waters of a flood; neither shall there any more be a flood to destroy the earth. And God said, this is the token of the covenant which I make between you and every living creature that is with you, for perpetual generations I do set my bow in the cloud, and it shall be a token of a covenant between me and the earth. And it shall come to pass, when I bring a cloud over the earth, that the bow shall be seen in the cloud: And I will remember my covenant, which is between me and you and every living creature of all flesh; and the waters shall no more become a flood to destroy all flesh. And

the bow shall be in the cloud; and I will look upon it, that I may remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature.²⁸

The rainbow is, as God says, just a “token”. This New Law, established in its great arc, is as thin – or at least ungraspable in relation to reality – as the screen memory. The rainbow is nothing but God’s own screen memory.²⁹ The catastrophe, the near universal destruction of life beneath the waters of the flood, is guiltily forgotten, and after the deluge all that is remembered by God is the moist play of colour in the emerging light. The New Law, far from breaking with the past, contains within it all the violence, the pain, the barbarity, the overflowing destruction of the Old Law, holding it fast. Just so, the token of the new law is fixed in the sky, to return unchanged over and again. The power of the rainbow is not so much to prevent the flood from occurring again but to freeze its waters, while phantastically allowing them to shimmer and gleam as though they were still liquid. But the fixation of the rainbow in this way does not just allow the Old Law to be enacted and revoked; nor does it transfigure the deaths of those who were judged and punished beneath it. Rather, in the motion of memory and forgetting, it expands the field of law, the landscape submerged by it, its field of action, into a new perspective and a new colourful dimension.

To read Benjamin’s fixation on the rainbow, his endless returns to the images of liquid colours on the surface of a bubble, and his evocation of childhood for a quarter of a century, as a screen memory for the suicide of Heine, might allow an

²⁸ Genesis 9:9-17

²⁹ Reading this passage as a screen memory is, admittedly, somewhat shameless. It is to guard against an overly optimistic interpretation given in Howard Caygill’s, *Benjamin: The Colour of Experience* (London: Routledge, 1998), pp.149-152, which argues that the rainbow represents an eschatological theme in Benjamin’s work, as “a new covenant between Divinity, Nature and Humanity”, p.149, promised in a “future” beyond the coming of the Messiah.

opening. For this is not just any fixation, nor just any screen memory: rather, it is *the fixation of a fixation that was by God himself established*; a peculiar explosion backward through a repetitive past. It contains repetition as the refusal of renunciation of a death in melancholy, and at the same time gives lie to that melancholy in resplendent beauty. This alone the rainbow could achieve, as it is granted levity.

Such a reading of Benjamin's rainbow, noting his fixation on an image, and how it failed to change in his work, might be all too personal. There is a threat of psychologisation in this interpretation. But what is being supposed is not simply that: rather, in the explosion of the rainbow, in the fixation of the fixation, one can imagine not merely a movement from melancholy into mourning, and a renunciation of the death of Heine, which Benjamin never came to, but more than that a potentiality for the redemption of humanity. For Benjamin proposed such a model of an explosion late in his life: this fixation, this arrest, is regarded "in order to blast a specific era out of the homogeneous course of history; thus he blasts a specific life out of the era, a specific work out of the life."³⁰

All the while Heine is silently present. His reds and greens of the crepuscular sky can be recognised in what is probably the apotheosis of colourwork in Benjamin's writings, the 1927 fragments on Moscow:

But to the children the Christmas toys, even without a Santa Claus, tell how they come from deep in the forests of Russia. It is as if only under Russian hands does wood put forth such luxuriant greenness. It turns green – and then reddens and puts on a coat of gold, flares sky-blue and petrifies black. "Red" and "beautiful" are *one* word in Russian.³¹

³⁰ 'On the Concept of History', *SW4*, p.396; *BGS1*, p.703. This idea first occurs in Benjamin's essay on Eduard Fuchs, *SW3*, p.262; *BGS2*, p.486.

³¹ 'Moscow' in *SW2*, p.33; *BGS4*, p.332.

The fragments are not to be placed back together. This red strains between the childhood phantasy, the red of Heine's evening glow, lost to the war and ever returning, and now the red of the revolution with its communistic shards, and indeed the revolutionary with whom Benjamin was now in love. Red and beauty here are "one word", as Benjamin says, but also not just one. In Russian red is красный, while beautiful is красивый. They are one word, suddenly fixed, in flux and modification, just like *Mummerehlen* and *Mühme Rehlen*, just like *Kupferstichen* and *Kopfverstich*.³² Perhaps to the children receiving these words as toys, they are the same, fixated both wrongly and in truth. Just like a *Worte* [word] that is a *Wolke* [cloud], its permanently modifying form might find itself fixated truly only by the child who hides away within it or through whom this beautiful red gives colour.³³ But these may

³² The editors of the English translation insert "[old]" before "Russian" in this sentence. Their insistence on correcting the facts renders Benjamin's thought wrongly.

³³ This thought was beautifully elucidated by Werner Hamacher in 'The word *Wolke* – if it is one', in *Benjamin's Ground*, ed. Rainer Nägele, (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1998), pp.147-175. This entire chapter should be considered a response to Hamacher's: he examines similar texts illuminated not in red, but in violet. Thus, from the perspective of a colour wheel, we find ourselves extraordinarily close, while from the perspective of a rainbow, we are at the greatest distance. This bewitched spot, on the edge between red and violet, has an important place in the history of colour, and in the differences between colours of pigment and light. In 1800 William Herschel discovered the existence of infrared by dispersing sunlight through a prism. A year later, the Romantic physicist Johann Wilhelm Ritter similarly discovered ultra-violet at the other end of the visible spectrum. Ritter demonstrated that the invisible rays of this light could blacken silver chloride (incidentally, this decomposition of silver halides in sunlight introduced photography.) The discovery of these invisible rays not only forced a cleft within demonic wheels of colour, but also troubled a crude materialism of coloured matter. The great sections through the world, of the horizontal and the vertical, which will be introduced in this chapter, operate in this realm, and pass through this gap. On Ritter's discovery see Jan Frercks, Heiko Weber, Gerhard Wiesenfeldt, 'Reception and Discovery: The Nature of Johann Wilhelm Ritter's Invisible Rays' in *Studies in History and Philosophy of Science*, 40 (2009), pp.143–156. Benjamin read Ritter's *Aus der Nachlass eines Jungen Physikers* in 1924 (see *BCOR*, p.239). It made a deep impression: the theory of *Klangfiguren* [sound figures] in Ritter's reading of Chladni appears as a decisive moment in the *Trauerspiel* book. Ritter's account of 'electric script' offered Benjamin a linguistic theory of the baroque script as the image of the sound of the word itself, and not of

well not be children of the present or the future, not later generations to be redeemed, but children of a past made heavy with death, who in childhood covered it over in colourful phantasy. Or they may be children as regarded from maturity: the childhood which would have been forever in phantasy and is, now, nevermore. In childhood it is phantastic red as beauty that is suspended in the word-cloud.

1.2 Body and Cloud

In the studies from early 1915, Benjamin approached the relationship between colours and surfaces. Contrary to the everyday view, that what appeared on a surface – in terms of painted marks – merely coloured an empty ground, the character Georg in the rainbow dialogue argued that “the surface illuminates [*erhell*t] colour, not vice versa.”³⁴ The ground of the painting was not the flat blank canvas but instead a contoured surface. As Benjamin described in the second rainbow text, colour marked the surface’s concentration, it “expresses the tension of its contour.”³⁵ In a more extreme sense too, the world of colour – a world that phantasy permits our entrance into – would be considered as an infinite surface through which configuration takes place.

the thing. Ritter’s book returns in ‘Unpacking My Library’ where Benjamin speaks about irony in the introduction, in which Ritter introduces his own work as the remains of the estate of a friend who has died. *SW2*, p.491; *BGS4*, p.394.

Hamacher strays too easily between violet and red, invoking the colours of blood and snow white’s apple. My analysis holds these two colours as far apart as is possible. From a theoretical perspective, I separate two forms of memory – one founded in history that turns out to be a piece of nature, one founded in nature that turns out to be a piece of history. Hamacher’s willingness to slip between the two is founded on the predominance of a historical view, in which regression and *Eingedenken* can be messianically – but not ultimately – identified.

³⁴ *EW*, p.216; *BGS7*, p.21.

³⁵ *EW*, p.225; *BGS7*, p.563, trans. amended.

The notion of such an infinite surface was not uncommon at the time; a similar description can be found in Bloch's *The Spirit of Utopia* written in these same years.³⁶ But unlike Bloch, who imagined endless ornamental figurations playing out on the flat plane of a carpet, Benjamin was concerned with both horizontal and vertical aspects. The page, and any surface subject to painting, marking, watercolour, and indeed phantasy, was not an infinite geometric space awaiting filling out, but a contoured realm in which colourful concentrations defined the space as such. In this sense, the cloud is a model of an infinite surface par excellence, not merely because of its constantly shifting and modifying shape, but because it is surface through and through, spinning out endlessly into wisps and waves:³⁷ the cloud has no interior that is not more of the exterior, no internal contour that is not just another external surface. To imagine the infinite surface of a cloud, as a shape of infinite contour, rather than as an infinite plane of figuration, allowed Benjamin to develop theories of meaning and signification on and through it. These would differ from notions of transcendental geometric space, which he explicitly set out to undermine through this account of

³⁶ Ernst Bloch, *The Spirit of Utopia*, trans. Anthony A. Nassar, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), p.17.

³⁷ The history of understanding the cloud as a modifying form can be traced back to Luke Howard's 1803 essay *On the Modification of Clouds* (London: John Burlington and Sons, 1865). While Linnaean taxonomy had hitherto applied scientific nominalism to those forms considered separable and eternal i.e. species, which remained constant even when the individual creature died, Howard's genius was to apply this mode to forms that modified, changed, and repeated. A similar notion is essayed by Diderot in *D'Alambert's Dream*. Unbeknownst to Howard, this marked a radical transformation in language, freeing names from the gesture of freezing the named into eternity. One could trace in this lineage the downfall of nominalism itself, not distant from Benjamin's historical account of allegory. Goethe loved Howard's essay, wrote to him, and sketched the different clouds in watercolour. He penned a poem about the names of the clouds, '*Howards Ehrengedächtnis*', (given in the above volume, pp.xi-xiii) in which each stanza opens with a name of a different cloud from Howard's taxonomy.

infinitude: it was “not the dimension but the infinity of space [that] is constructed in the painting.”³⁸

The colour of the rainbow, then, which might seem to be held aloft by the cloud, must be understood otherwise: it is a colourful contour on and through the cloud, that in its colour draws the contours of a cloud into a specific shape. In particular, the rainbow *raises itself up* through the cloud: when we see a rainbow it stands always vertically and never on the horizontal plane, and through its contour it stands suspended, opposed to gravity. This verticality is not merely a matter of geometric dimension, but aligns to an infinite section through the matter of the world that would, for Benjamin, have enormous implications for meaning and interpretation. As the rainbow draws the contours of clouds into a vertical projection, clouds appear not as sheets but as walls. As Benjamin noted in a study on coloured illustrations in children’s books,

The grey Elysium of phantasy is, for the artist, the cloud in which he rests and the wall of cloud [*Wolkenwand*] on the horizon of his vision. This wall opens up for children, and more brightly coloured ones can be glimpsed behind it.³⁹

Between the studies on the rainbow and the fragments on blushing, a number of small intermediate texts that address paintings, line and colour. Within them, this vertical aspect is considered. Two fragments from 1917, titled ‘Painting and the Graphic Arts’⁴⁰ and ‘Painting, or Signs and Marks’,⁴¹ address the history of writing, and in particular focus on the history of the fall of writing, from its early upright inscription as hieroglyphs to its horizontal appearance, as “graphic” upon the page. These texts develops the distinction between a “sign”, which appears in the horizontal

³⁸ *EW*, p.225; *BGS7*, p.563.

³⁹ *SW1*, p.265; *BGS6*, p.124.

⁴⁰ *SW1*, p.82; *BGS2*, pp.602-603.

⁴¹ *SW1*, pp.83-86; *BGS2*, pp.603-607.

plane, and a “mark”, which appears in the upright (the German word for mark, *Mal*, is directly related to the word for painting, *Malerei*.) Benjamin writes,

We might say that there are two sections through the substance of the world: the longitudinal section of a painting and the cross-section of certain pieces of graphic art. The longitudinal section seems representational; it somehow contains the objects. The cross-section seems symbolic; it contains signs.⁴²

Significantly, Benjamin also described an affinity between children’s drawings, which take place in the horizontal (“viewing them vertically usually conflicts with their inner meaning”),⁴³ and the horizontal realm of graphics, which hold within themselves a history of having fallen from the wall.⁴⁴ By introducing such questions of meaning, representation, and signification in the distinction between sign and mark, Benjamin immediately troubled any empiricism that would identify the ground of an image in the simple surface of the white sheet of paper. Unlike the plain surface, the ground of a graphic image might be “[thought] of [...] as a surge of white waves (though these might not even be distinguishable to the naked eye.)” For precisely this reason, he states that “representing clouds and the sky in drawing is a risky venture.”⁴⁵

This division of the horizontal and the vertical aspects remained a part of Benjamin’s thought throughout his life. It informed a number of important texts, including fragments from *One Way Street* discussed below. But the distinction of painting and graphics within these sections was only returned to explicitly in a single note written in 1939, in work towards a redraft of ‘The Artwork in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility’:

⁴² *SWI*, p.82; *BGS2*, p.602.

⁴³ *SWI*, p.82; *BGS2*, p.602.

⁴⁴ Benjamin repeated this idea in a letter to Scholem: “from a human perspective, the draftsman’s plane is horizontal; that of the painter is vertical.”, *BCOR*, p.110.

⁴⁵ *SWI*, p.84; *BGS2*, p.604.

**For The Artwork in the Age
Painting and Graphics**⁴⁶

It would be important to compile a register of those processes that are portentous for the decline of painting – they show themselves at the periphery, not at the centre. In other words, this has to do with processes of the technologies of exhibition and not the processes of technologies of production.

The common denominator of these two processes would be: the atrophy of the architectonic armature, upon which panel painting relies. To assume that such a reliance applies only to fresco would be an error. The functional dependence on architecture is fundamentally the same for both fresco and panel painting. There are only differences by a matter of degree. Fresco relies on a particular wall; panel painting just on a wall as such. The ways in which panel painting and fresco are united, and belong together, are made evident when comparing them to the graphic arts. The graphic is entirely emancipated from the wall. One consequence of this is that the vertical is no longer binding for the graphic arts. In this way, and in this way alone, the graphic frees itself from the house. Of course, if it is to endure, it requires just as good a shelter as any picture panel. But if it does without such durability, it need not care about the vertical; it will find a place in the sandpit, or on the asphalt road surface.

The sky, which the panel picture presents to the viewer, is always situated *in the direction* in which he would look for the real sky. The graphic arts are not bound to such a situatedness. But just as painting projects space in the vertical surface, the graphic arts project space in the horizontal surface. This constitutes a profound difference. The vertical projection of space appeals only to the viewer's power of imagination [*Einbildungskraft*]; the horizontal projection of space only to his powers of movement [*motorischen Kräfte*]. The graphic arts depict a world that a person can stride through. The eye rushes ahead of the foot. No transition [*Übergang*] and no mediation [*Vermittlung*] leads from the panel picture to a map. But virtually embedded in every drawing is the principle of the Mercator projection.

Here one may be reminded of the schemata of the oldest provenance, which children draw in chalk on the asphalt – Hell, Heaven, the Earth, and similar. The heaven in this game is situated in the plane of the graphic. The graphic arts do not deny their solidarity with these projections [*Aufrissen*].

The fundamental difference between painting and the graphic arts – the difference that all these reflections are about – cannot be accounted for under the category of exhibition value [*Ausstellungswert*]. As far as exhibition value is concerned, the differences between fresco, panel pictures, and graphic arts, are merely quantitative, with the maximum value obviously attaining to graphics. On the other hand, under the concept of cult value [*Kultwert*], what is completely fundamental to the

⁴⁶ 'Zum Kunstwerk im Zeitalter', *BGS7*, pp. 675-677, trans. mine.

differentiation of the graphic arts from painting can be properly determined. The question that arises here is one about the correspondences [*Korrespondenzen*] that painting and the graphic arts enter into in magic – that is, the question of those magical *Urphenomena*, which is mainly implicit in painting on one side and graphic arts on the other. One has to envisage [*vergegenwärtlichen*] this point in two separate ways: that it depends firstly on conceiving the sensual differences between the graphic arts and painting in the most elementary form, and secondly on where they appear on the human body [*Leib*], for the body is the central instance of the magical.

The solution to this question is not so very far from the graphic arts. The line is the magic circle [*Bannkreis*], and its magical power lies innately [*von Hause aus*] in the horizontal plane. It stands as the unsurpassable in the most original relation to the graphic arts, and indeed it delimits – virtually – the field of action. In the magic circle the cult value of the line reaches its maximum. Where does the corresponding value lie for painting? Here it is clear that we can only be dealing with a phenomenon for which colour has primacy over line. And one may therefore be able to think of a more transitory kind of phenomenon, in contrast to the graphic “black” on “white” and to the starkly delineated figure. {If one were to look for such a phenomenon in humans, then blushing would present in a very meaningful way. When blushing, a person colours himself ephemerally; a “mark” appears on his face and then disappears again. In a word:}⁴⁷ One could think of appearances in these contexts in the same way that appearances are produced by the magic lantern. One could question if, in some way, phenomena that have been magically passed down to us allow themselves to be substituted for the play of the magic lantern. One could think of Chamisso’s,

The sun twinkles from the edge of the bowl
painting shivering twirls upon the wall

and indeed, of the role played by the wall in Poe’s tale of the black cat, to say nothing of the script that becomes visible as a mark on the wall of the palace of Nebuchadnezzar. In short it would be to pursue the question of whether what fundamentally distinguishes the painterly phenomenon as cult value from the graphical one, does not lie within a phenomenon that would be able to be designated as the “mark” in the strictest sense of the word: a colourful configuration that appears on the wall (that emerges from it, or is thrown onto it) – a configuration that from a magical perspective, would be called transient, and from a profane perspective would rather be called mobile. Placed into this historico-philosophical perspective, the contemporary crisis of painting would amount to a set of transformations that would indicate the atrophy of the medium of painting, the atrophy of the medium in which the mark is at home.

⁴⁷ Bracketed section crossed out in the manuscript.

Here, the emphasis on the verticality of the mark is played out even more explicitly, and once again he comments on the “solidarity” between the horizontal plane of the graphic and the marks made by children who draw the heavens, Hell, the Earth in chalk on the asphalt.

Perhaps most importantly – at least in relation to blushing – all of these texts deal not only with painting, drawing, and the history of script, but also with the appearance of signs and marks upon the body. In particular they are concerned with blushing as a peculiar type of colourful transient mark. It appears in ‘Painting, or Signs and Marks’ alongside “Christ’s stigmata, [...], perhaps leprosy and birthmarks,”⁴⁸ as one of a number of marks that may appear on the living body. Indeed, while the rainbow texts concern the theology and perception of colour, and the texts on painting and graphics rest on the oldest histories of inscribed communication, they also imply an extraordinary philosophy and aesthetics of the living body [*Leib*], that Benjamin would develop in the fragments on blushing, and which would influence his later writings.⁴⁹

⁴⁸ *SWI*, p.84; *BGS2*, p.605.

⁴⁹ It must be noted that discussing the perception of the appearance of colours on the body, not least in relation to law and justice, presents a profound, perhaps insurmountable, problem. Such perceptions are commonly decisive in spurious, racist, and violent determinations of guilt. Far more than any red of a blush, it is black and brown people who are presumed guilty, and routinely murdered for it too, in the name of the law. Benjamin might have protested that this apparently extrajudicial police and state violence amounts to what he would call “administrative violence”: the production of law without justice. This situation of racism was also the case in Benjamin’s time – although racist policing and carceral violence had not yet become industrialised. His failure to comment on it marks a serious omission.

In one of the few scholarly commentaries on this theme in Benjamin’s thought, Peter Fenves has attempted to rescue Benjamin from this accusation, through claiming that the fragment ‘On Shame’ represents an attack on the racialism implicit in Goethe’s theory of colour: “Benjamin, for his part, does not further consider the figure of the ape. Nor does he appear to give any thought to the variety of colors appearing on the skin of human beings. But the absence of any reflection on skin colors cannot be taken as a sign of a thoughtless racialism that simply assumes that the “normal” color is the – impossible – absence thereof. For Benjamin goes after the

The convergence of blushing and of the child's entrance into the world of colour with the cloud suggests a new way of considering the body. Significantly, the infinitude of the surface of the cloud might take as its model the surfaces of the human body, which too might be considered to be infinitely contoured.⁵⁰ In certain experiences – sometimes mixed as in blushing, dreaming, or painting; and sometimes pure as in phantasy – such an endless physiognomy becomes the ground of experience. Such a notion of the body stands in direct opposition to the Kantian account of space, divorced as it is from experience in the 'Transcendental Aesthetic' at the opening of the *Critique of Pure Reason*.⁵¹ Perception [*Wahrnehmung*], for

core of Goethe's remark, which is, for its part, the fundamental premise of racist discourse: namely, the outer appearance of human beings, especially the colorations of their skin, expresses their inner disposition." *The Messianic Reduction*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011), p.68.

Fenves' exculpation is insufficient to provide either an anti-racist position, or to show that Benjamin's thinking is not enmeshed in at least a quiet racism. He reduces racism to a piece of ideology, as though its purpose is to confirm a wrongheaded theory about the ontological reality of race, and as though cops confirm this syllogistic logic by the bullet. Contrary to this, the reality of racism has few stakes in valorising arcane racist theories about its victims (although often it does this too): racist violence is less about an apparent understanding of its targets than a truncated self-understanding of its perpetrators, or otherwise the modes of organisation that dominate the social relations between the two. The reality of violence predicated on the perception of colour has less in common with an argument for a corruption deep in the heart of those recognised as black, whether by racists, state agencies, or normative systems of value, than with spectacularising race wars, and of new chemical warfares, in which the fixation on and of melanin plays the role of the aestheticisation of politics.

Benjamin's attempted separation of human from animal life, however well meaning, also ignores the *force* with which domination between racialised groups has been understood as homologous to – and therefore justified by – the human domination of nature through arguments in which all other people are figured as animalistic, set against a white civilisation.

⁵⁰ The idea of the body as an infinitely contoured surface marks the greatest distinction between the Benjaminian and Freudian thought. Psychoanalysis takes a great interest in orifices – the points of the body's opening on to and closing off from the world – and assumes that the body has, for the most part, been forced to defensively close itself off from the world. The Benjaminian body, as infinite coloured surface, is always profoundly open because it lacks any interior proper.

⁵¹ See Gershom Scholem and Julia Ng, 'Dossier: Scholem's Notes on Kant and Cohen' *MLN*, Vol.127, No.3 (2012), pp 433-461, and Julia Ng's commentary in the

Benjamin, is grounded in this infinite surface of the body, whose contours are not only suffused with colour, but are, like the surface of a painting, in fact colour-giving [*färbend*]. Such a physiognomic thought undercuts (or rather, overflows) the infinite space of experience in transcendental philosophy and its tendency towards geometric determination.⁵² This is also to say, such an approach also troubles the Kantian determination of space as the grounds for *external* cognition, separated from the internal grounds of time. Such thinking unsettles a great deal: in particular it opens the space of the body, its contours, and the time, shape, and significance of its colours to a world of historical and theological meaning that would be excluded (or at least shunted into the infinite distance) by the Kantian model of the transcendental subject. Here the surface of the body is not merely a boundary between the interior and exterior, not some tense crossing point for expressions and impressions, nor some “limit-concept” [*Grenzbegriff*], but is itself a spiritual essence illuminated. Hence, Benjamin writes in the fragment on shame, “the more the colour remains an expression of the interior, and the less it remains the light of the surface.”

This quiet account of the body, which undergirds Benjamin’s thinking, gives an explanation for that which might seem most strange, and most unassimilable, in the fragment on shame: that for Benjamin the surface of the body produces light. He goes into great detail, and in particular insists that colour-giving [*färbende*] lightbeams emanate from the body, and that the colours of the body are colours of light. The body as an infinite surface must be thought of something like those turbid media in which

same issue, ‘Kant’s Theory of Experience at the End of the War: Scholem and Benjamin Read Cohen: A Commentary’, pp.462-488.

⁵² On this critique of Kantianism see ‘On Perception’, *SWI*, pp.93-97; *BGS6*, pp 33-38. Of particular relevance is the image of a painter sitting before a landscape, p.85; *BGS6*, pp.36-37. See also ‘*Wahrnehmung und Leib*’ [‘Perception and Body’], *BGS6*, p.67. A partial translation appears in Gerhard Richter, *Benjamin and the Corpus of Autobiography*, (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2002), p.61.

Goethe imagined the colours of light. Unlike the opaque colours of painting, the colours of the surface of the human being are colours of light, much like those of the rainbow. And in this sense, the physiognomy of a person is treated just as the turbidity of the cloud might be.

To describe this, Benjamin develops, in the fragment on shame, a taxonomy of the types of coloured light that may appear: of the semblance or shine [*Schein*], the gleam [*Glanz*], and most importantly the lightbeam [*Strahl*], which radiates from the faces of people.⁵³ It is in the colours of light that people might colour themselves, or rather, in which their infinite physiognomy might be described and contoured.

Benjamin outlined these distinctions further in his set of schemata. The distinction between these types of light appears yet again in his 1926 essay ‘The World of Children’s Books’, published in *Die Literarische Welt*, where he speaks again of

⁵³ While this taxonomy appears for the first time in the late-1910s, Benjamin established a metaphysical account of radiant [*strahlend*] light in his 1914 essay ‘Metaphysics of Youth’: “When the self, devoured by yearning for itself, devoured by the will to youth, devoured by lust for power over the decades to come, devoured by the longing to pass calmly through the days kindled to dark fire by the pleasures of idleness – when this self nevertheless saw itself condemned to calendar time, clock time, and stock-exchange time, and no ray of any time of immortality filtered down to it – then it began of itself to radiate [*zu erstrahlen*]. It knew: I am myself ray [*Strahl*]. Not the murky inwardness of the one who experiences, who calls me “I” and torments me with his intimacies, but ray of that other which seemed to oppress me and which after all I myself am: ray. Trembling, an “I” that we know only from our diaries stands on the brink of immortality into which it plunges. It is indeed *time*. In that self to which events occur and which encounters human beings – friends, enemies and lovers – in that self courses immortal time. The time of its own greatness elapses in it; it is time’s radiation [*Erstrahlung*] and nothing else.” in *EW*, pp.150-151; *BGS2*, pp.97-98. ‘Metaphysics of Youth’ seeks to relate typologies of experience to a mystical-expressionist ontology. The essay also expresses a great deal of misogyny, common to similar expressionist ontologies that obsess over the essences of human types. My contention is that soon afterwards these arguments returned, but served a quite different, natural-historical philosophy, less interested in ontology, because it was rigorous with regards to experience, and not merely to its categories. For this reason Benjamin also turned to other forms of light.

“soap bubbles, parlour games, the watery colour of the magic lantern, watercolouring, decals.” He continues, “In all of these, the colour seems to hover suspended above the object. Their magic lies not in the coloured object or in the mere dead colour, but in the coloured glow [*Schein*], the coloured brilliance [*Glanz*], the ray of coloured light [*Strahl*].⁵⁴”

Yet not all colours “hover above”, and in a sense peculiar to the redness in shame, a significantly different relationship is developed between the blush and the vertical section through the world. For while it is in precisely this verticality that the blush appears, it does so not just as any “mark” does: unlike the rainbow that raises itself up, seeming to overcome gravity, the red of the blush is involved in falling. “The redness of shame is poured over the ashamed person from outside, from above.” The blush, this falling redness across the body, is thus at least partially the rainbow’s counterpart in the transient world of phantastic colour, for where one rises the other falls.

It is worth remarking here – although these ideas cannot be fully fleshed out (indeed these are reflections heretofore without flesh, they are the ghosts of ghosts) – that these models of the body, and of the histories of meaning in the horizontal and vertical sections of the world, are important to many of Benjamin’s later writings on technology, anthropological materialism, and aesthetics. There can be found, within a number of texts, a type of repetitious history of the movement between the vertical and horizontal sections: including the movement from writing in carved stone to that on a page, the rising architecture of the baroque cathedral and its falling in ruin, the shift from the fresco and panel painting to the graphic, the shift between a horizontal projection in childhood to the vertical in adulthood. Benjamin saw a new iteration of

⁵⁴ *SWI*, p.443; *BGS4*, p.614.

this in the technologies of the 1920s. He talks in *One Way Street* about how from the horizontal position, text had started to rise up again:

If centuries ago it began gradually to lie down, passing from the upright inscription to the manuscript resting on sloping desks before finally taking itself to bed in the printed book, it now begins just as slowly to rise again from the ground. The newspaper is read more in the vertical than in the horizontal plane, while film and advertisement force the printed word entirely into the dictatorial perpendicular.⁵⁵

There are both profoundly cinematic and anti-cinematic moments in Benjamin's formulations of the body too. The famous formulation of the interpenetration of body- and image-space in technology at the close of the Surrealism essay turns on such thinking. In one sense, the body in Benjamin's early texts on blushing is like the screen of the cinema (or indeed the planetarium, if what appears on it might be akin to an image of the heavens, and if the red that falls across it might also be the red of the setting sun) insofar as it is already suffused in light. But in contrast, the dry light of the cinema marks an enormous impoverishment of the surface described in these early fragments and their liquid colours: the faces of film stars are illuminated only in reflected light, their movements governed by an external apparatus. Furthermore, the cinema's surface is bounded – its two-dimensionality, as opposed to those surfaces of the cloud, the magic lantern, the bubble, offers only a ghost of the body's infinite surface. The range and contour is exchanged for the element of cinematic time. This exchange of the time of the colour of the body or the world of phantasy for the light world of the cinema can be found in another fragment in *One Way Street*, in a world clouded anew, where the rising of the text in 1920s modernity is associated with the space of capitalist circulation, under the title 'This surface [*Fläche*] is for sale':⁵⁶

The "unclouded", "innocent" eye has become a lie, perhaps the whole naïve mode of expression has become sheer incompetence. Today the most real,

⁵⁵ *SWI*, p.456; *BGS4*, p.103.

⁵⁶ The English translation, while idiomatic, obscures this reference to the "surface".

mercantile gaze into the heart of things is the advertisement. It tears down the stage upon which contemplation moved, and all but hits us between the eyes with things, just as a car, growing to gigantic proportions, careens at us out of a film screen.⁵⁷

If in this world of cinema and advertising – a world in which text has sprung up again because “the universal gesture of the book” must be overcome “in leaflets, brochures, articles and placards”,⁵⁸ and the colour of phantasy has become impoverished by capitalist exchange – then this did not occasion mere moral condemnation. Impoverishment is no pejorative, however detestable the wretchedness that such an impoverished world brings about might be. Instead, this historical effect rebounds through those two great sections that cut through the substance of the world. The technization of time implied important possibilities for Benjamin, once again in a luminous red, a red which falls and falls again. This red can be read (or no longer read), as the dry neon light is reflected in the wetted surfaces of the street: “What, in the end, makes advertisements so superior to criticism? Not what the moving red neon sign says – but the fiery pool reflecting it in the asphalt.”⁵⁹

It was not just the neon lights that were new to 1920s Germany, but the asphalt too. Berlin was a cobbled city, and unlike Paris and other large cities, its major streets had not been subject to the nineteenth century technology of macadamising. Throughout the first two decades of the twentieth century, asphalt had crept through the city, not only providing smoother ground for circulation – of people, goods, and capital – but also, by coincidence, offering a slick black surface. One upon which children might draw with chalk and play in miniature with the cosmos, now more traversable. Yet when wet, under rain that would so quickly wash away an

⁵⁷ *SWI*, p.476; *BGS4*, pp.131-132, trans. amended.

⁵⁸ *SWI*, p.444; *BGS4*, p.85.

⁵⁹ *SWI*, p.476; *BGS4*, p.132.

infant's chalk sketch of Heaven and Hell, this surface made real their dream of a world of perpetual movement, albeit in the capitalist circulation of things, at an ever greater speed. Such a speed was conditioned by the debt-structure of capitalist exchange. In capitalism, through debt, exchange takes place anywhere and everywhere, so long as it is set into the past, and commodities are forced to rush along to fulfill its meagre promises in empty homogenous time. The dream of the child who draws on the asphalt comes true as Heaven and as Hell: a universe governed by the infinite mobility of the world market reveals itself as a fiery pool that has long since washed away the drawing.

Yet this story of the world market and its fiery pool does not stand alone. If the falling red in one place might indicate the childhood phantasy has come true catastrophically, in a way that would utterly obliterate childhood, then elsewhere childhood could be preserved in the cloudy image, that coats the face, of falling into quite a different red pool. Benjamin would remember that Christmas in Moscow again, now from a distance, in a fragment about borscht, published in the *Frankfurter Zeitung* in 1930:

It starts by spreading a mask of steam over your features. Long before your tongue touches the spoon, your eyes have started to water and your nose is dripping with borscht. Long before your insides have gone on the alert and your blood has become a single wave, which with an aromatic foam has flooded over your body [*Leib*], your eyes have drunk from the red abundance in the bowl. They are now blind to everything that is not borscht, or its reflection in the eyes of your table companion. It's sour cream, you think, that gives this soup its rich texture. Perhaps. But I have eaten it in the Moscow winter, and I know one thing: it contains snow, molten red flakes, food from the clouds that is akin to the manna that also descended from above.⁶⁰

This text is quietly full of allusions, both to the history of poetry and to aspects of Benjamin's theoretical world. With its final line, which reads, "It gradually pervades

⁶⁰ SW2, p.361; BGS4, p.378.

you entirely, while with other foods a sudden cry of “Enough” causes a shudder to pass through your entire body [*Körper*]”⁶¹ one realises that this is a response to Baudelaire’s poem ‘*La Soupe et les Nuages*’ [The Soup and the Clouds] from *Paris Spleen*:

My dear little mad beloved was serving my dinner, and I was looking out of the open dining-room window contemplating those moving architectural marvels that God constructs out of mist, edifices of the impalpable. And as I looked I was saying to myself: "All those phantasmagoria are almost as beautiful as my beloved's beautiful eyes, as the green eyes of my mad monstrous little beloved."

All of a sudden I felt a terrible blow of a fist on my back, and heard a husky and charming voice, an hysterical voice, a hoarse brandy voice, the voice of my dear little beloved, saying: "Aren't you ever going to eat your soup, you damned bastard of a cloud-monger?"⁶²

Benjamin’s offers a conclusion quite the opposite from Baudelaire’s. Through the falling redness of the soup, he is to remain a damned bastard of a cloud-monger. To be suspended in the phantasmagoria: not to return out of it, returning into the beauty of his beloved’s eyes. This he can do not because the green eyes of his beloved are more beautiful than the clouds, but because the soup’s red appears reflected “in the eyes of your table companion.” And might this suspension of the both of them in the cloud – Benjamin and his companion Asja Lacis, in that Christmas of 1927 – not offer a different type of communion? Not one in which she forcibly wakes him from his phantasy to dine, but a communism in which they together eat food from heaven within the phantasy, as the red suffuses both their faces, before they disappear?⁶³ In

⁶¹ SW2, p.362; BGS4, p.378.

⁶² Charles Baudelaire, *Paris Spleen*, trans. Louise Varèse (New York: New Directions, 1970), p.91.

⁶³ For further reflections on the dialectics of soup (this time on Adorno and Brecht), see my essay ‘Thinking Need in California’, in “*Um Abschied geht es ja nun.*” *Exil und kein Ende*, eds. Herman Haarmann and Matthias Bormuth, (Berlin: Tectum Verlag, 2015), pp.115-128.

this bowl the whole world of red which once exploded across a landscape has been made small in memory.

This diminution returns us to the other allusions in the borscht text: for it tells us less about communism, than how a child may relate to this heavenly-hellish world of universal locomotion. Now, for the first time, there is more than enough space for every child in every moment to draw in chalk a dream of the universe on the asphalt that coats the city streets. So it is for the street of falling neon text: Benjamin's favourite childhood toy was a snowglobe, a world made small. And in *One Way Street* he describes how a child most loves to read:

To him, the hero's adventures can still be read in the swirling letters like figures and messages in drifting snowflakes. His breath is part of the air of the events narrated, and all the participants breathe it. He mingles with the characters far more closely than grown-ups do. He is unspeakably touched by the deeds, the words that are exchanged; and, when he gets up, he is covered over and over by the snow of his reading.⁶⁴

To a child, in the neon-bathed streets, caught in memory, those phantasmagoric snowflakes fall, as into borscht, in red.

1.3 The World of Phantasy and Natural-History

Not the fall but the falling. And then to disappear. This is the motion of red, falling within – or falling from – the vertical plane. Not just the red of the neon sign that finds itself reflected on the asphalt of a street before the puddles dry again, returning it to that place where children drew the sky and found the clouds traversable; but the red of a sunset over the world made landscape, and the red of blushing too, which falls as it is poured over the faces of the ashamed. And with the blush's disappearance

⁶⁴ *SW1*, p.463. *BGS4*, p.113.

– not so distant from the disappearance of the rainbow, or the drying of a puddle – it draws those faces into invisibility.

One consequence of the transformation of the space of the world from the Kantian model of geometry and force, to that of surfaces, signification and representation, mark-making, and meaning, is that these aspects become suffused with charges. The vertical and the horizontal are charged with history (and the fall of history), and with the meaning (and fall of meaning) of nature. In natural-history sense is revealed in the nonsensical falling of ruins, while truth hides within the ruin's cipher; expression babbles in fallen languages, while fallen nature lives on mutely. Peace, consigned to the past, appears among these ruins in puzzling reminiscences, in which ephemerality itself seems condemned to repeat itself.

But just as the Kantian dimension might be replaced by an infinite surface of the wreckage of the world, so does that surface have certain intensities; centres of gravity and levity, visible in vibrant colour. To read the meanings of these motions, appearances, and dissolutions within this vertical plane also relies on transitions between the world of things and the world of phantasy, between the world of adults and that of children, between the grey expanse and the world of colour. These motions and transitions, and the contours they physiognomically describe, rise and fall in tension with the messianic.

It is of central importance that in the fragment on shame Benjamin describes lightbeams as emanating only from two places: “only from the inorganic and from the highest of the organic: from the sun and from the countenance.” The combinations and convergences of these figures – figurations, disfigurations – of the face and the ruinous sun-lit landscape appear throughout Benjamin's work. One may think of one of the most dramatic passages, written as Benjamin is transformed into a

physiognomist through intoxication, in ‘Hashish in Marseille’. Looking at the coarse and ugly faces of the wretched, he sees “a jagged mountain with all the inner gold of beauty gleaming from the wrinkles, glances, features.”⁶⁵ It was precisely this mode of thought which led the *Trauerspiel* book to the physiognomic landscape of Golgotha. The convergence of countenance and landscape goes to the heart of world-historical questions in Benjamin’s thought, speaking to questions of the philosophy of language, to messianism, to the theatre (be it the stage or the cinema), and to law.

If this convergence of the face and the landscape appears in the scenes of the *Trauerspiel* book, then the basis and mode of its appearance is given in those texts that surround the fragments on blushing. It also provides the secret red link between the two lines of Heine’s poetry that recur in Benjamin’s writing: the one of the green shimmer appearing in the red of the sunset, and the other on the colouring of a person. Most clearly the combination of face and landscape appears again in the final lines of Benjamin’s 1926 article on ‘The World of Children’s Books.’ The closing paragraphs of this essay repeat a number of arguments about perception developed from ‘The Rainbow’: After describing pure colour as “the medium of phantasy, a home among the clouds for the spoiled child,” and after repeating the taxonomy of lightforms given in the fragment on shame – of *Schein*, and *Glanz*, and *Strahl* – he writes, “This is how Lyser once painted the landscape; in its colourful fire the eyes and cheeks of children poring over books beam back [*widerstrahlen*].”⁶⁶

At the heart of convergence or combination of the face and the landscape in the world of colour-giving lightbeams, are a set of thoughts about the world of phantasy, and its role in the sacred and natural history. The figure of blushing that

⁶⁵ *SW2*, p.675; *BGS4*, p.412.

⁶⁶ *SW1*, pp.442-443; *BGS4*, p. 615, trans. amended.

appears (and disappears) in Benjamin's work should be read within this context. The consequences of this thought are developed in two fragments written around the same time. The most important of these is simply titled 'Phantasy',⁶⁷ to which the 'Autumn and Winter'⁶⁸ fragment translated above is an addendum.

'Phantasy' is a text upon which much of the writing of the later parts of the *Trauerspiel* book seems to be based. It describes a world of phantasy as a counterpart to the world of creation.⁶⁹ For while the world of creation is concerned with forms or figures [*Gestalten*] and formations or configurations [*Gestaltungen*], and is the site too of destruction; the world of phantasy is one of appearances [*Erscheinungen*] produced through the *de-formations* [*Entstaltungen*] of that formed world. Benjamin describes these worlds combined, with the red of the setting sun taking centre stage:

The imaginative de-formation of objects is distinguishable from the destructive collapse [*Verfall*] of the empirical by two features. First, it is without compulsion; it comes from within, is free and therefore painless, and indeed induces feelings of delight. Second, it never leads to death, but makes eternal the downfall it brings about in an unending concatenation of transitions [*verewigt der Untergang den sie heraufführt in eine unendlichen Folge von Übergänge*]. The first of these features means that, through a pure act of conceiving, the objective realm of imaginative de-formation, a world of painless birth, corresponds to the subjective conception of the imagination. Thus, all de-formations of the world will imagine a world without pain that is nevertheless suffused [*durchfluten*] with the richest happenings. This de-formation shows further – as the second feature makes clear – the world caught up in unending dissolution [*unendlicher Auflösung*], or put otherwise: in eternal transience [*in ewiger Vergängnis*]. It is like the sunset [*Abendrot*] over the abandoned theatre of the world with its deciphered ruins. It is the unending dissolution of the purified beautiful semblance, freed from any seduction. However, the purity of this semblance is matched by that of its Becoming. It appears differently in the red of dawn [*im Morgenrot*] as in the red of dusk [*im Abendrot*], but not less authentic. Thus, there is a pure semblance, a burgeoning one [*werdenden*], in the epoch of the world's dawn.

⁶⁷ 'Imagination' in *SW1*, pp. 280-282; *BGS6*, pp.114-117.

⁶⁸ *BGS6*, pp.121-122.

⁶⁹ A central thesis of the earlier sections of the *Trauerspiel* book is that the world of the *Trauerspiel* is one of creation without eschatology.

It is the gleam [*Glanz*] that surrounds the objects in paradise. Finally, there is a third, pure semblance [*Schein*]: the reduced, extinguished, or muted one. It is the grey Elysium we see in the picture by Marées. These are the three worlds of pure semblance that belong to phantasy.⁷⁰

This passage is extraordinarily complex and dense, but a few remarks may suffice to explain its relevance. In this world of phantasy, the descriptions of verticality have been granted a new lexicon: that of *Untergang* and *Übergang*. These terms are difficult to translate: they relate initially to the movement of the sun as it rises and sets, but have significance far beyond this. “*Untergang*” might be doom, or the downfall of a leader (and reminds us of the sun as the emblem of the prince in the *Trauerspiel* book), or merely decay; similarly, while an “*Übergang*” might be a rising upwards and over, it is also a transition, a link. As early as 1915 Benjamin used this word to describe the colours on a soap bubble’s surface.⁷¹

As the world of phantasy prolongs the falling – the *Untergang* – into eternity, so it transforms into a series of *Übergänge* or transitions. But here this vertical rising and falling can, within this phantasic perspective, be seen differently: the falling undergoes a temporal shift revealing, in the red of the sun, a twilight; a world of *eternal transience*. Becoming in the world of creation is met by passing away in the world of phantasy. It is a world suffused, *durchflutet*, literally flooded through, with happenings and events in their timely disappearance. This red of the dusk, the downfall that transforms into transience, is the same red of the blush, which in the Benjamin describes in ‘On Shame’ as “the red of transience from the palette of phantasy.”

⁷⁰ ‘Imagination’, in *SWI*, pp.280-281; *BGS6*, pp.115-116. trans. amended.

⁷¹ *EW*, p.211; *BGS6*, p.110.

We see the description of this phantastic schema repeated once again in the ‘Autumn and Winter’ fragment. Now nature is granted colour in its downfall and decay, precisely where its other colours withdraw in pallor. But finally the link with the colour of shame is confirmed:

Relationship of phantasy to shame.

“He becomes red – he would like to disappear [*vergehen*]”

Perhaps the world of phantasy, with its endless downfalls, will grant him grace, taking him with it as it vanishes.

Yet something else has changed: in ‘Phantasy’, the world has become a theatre, albeit an “abandoned theatre of the world,” and the phantasy a play. Phantasy is always playing – like a child and like an actor too; the world of phantasy is the absolute *Spielraum*. This abandoned theatre of the world, briefly illuminated in red, presents natural-history in its ruins. As Benjamin concludes the fragment, “In the great play of the transience of nature, the resurrection [*Auferstehung*] of nature repeats itself eternally as an act. (Sunrise.) / Phantasy is in the last day of the world and the first.”⁷² Where everything is bathed in grey or red, the sunrise appears in eternal repetition, but its theatre is precisely that of the rainbow. This is that same situation, “the allegory of resurrection [*die Allegorie der Auferstehung*]” that Benjamin introduces the image of that “greatest arc”, which redeems in the *Trauerspiel* book.⁷³

This play of motion that leads from downfall [*Untergang*], through colourful illumination, to transience [*Vergängnis*] is repeated in Benjamin’s famous ‘Theological-Political Fragment’:⁷⁴

⁷² *SWI*, p.282; *BGS6*, p.117, trans. amended.

⁷³ *OT*, p.232; *BGS1*, p.404.

⁷⁴ The dating of this fragment is disputed. Adorno believed that Benjamin read it to him as new work in the mid-1930s. Scholem dated it circa 1920. Emphasising the motion of falling provides a philological argument for contextualising it amongst the fragments on shame and phantasy, providing evidence that Scholem was correct.

For in happiness all that is earthly seeks its downfall [*Untergang*], and only in happiness is its downfall destined to find it.– Whereas admittedly the immediate messianic intensity of the heart, of the inner man in isolation, passes through misfortune, as suffering. The spiritual *restitutio in integrum*, which introduces immortality, corresponds to a worldly restitution that leads to an eternity of downfall, and the rhythm of this eternally vanishing [*ewig vergehenden*] worldly existence, transient in its totality, in its spatial but also in its temporal totality, the rhythm of messianic nature, is happiness. For nature is messianic by reason of its eternal and total passing away [*Vergängnis*].

To strive for such a passing away – even the passing away of those stages of man that are nature – is the task of world politics, whose method must be called nihilism.⁷⁵

These sentences are clarified when one realises what Benjamin is essaying: this passage attempts to transpose a thought about colour and phantasy into a natural-historical account of politics, happiness, and messianism. The argument here, with its mundane and supramundane aspects, maps directly to the first paragraph of the ‘Autumn and Winter’ fragment:

In Autumn the relationship of the downfall [*Untergang*] to emerging and changing colours is laid bare. (Compare with Heine: Were I made of material, I would colour myself.) The deeper colouration accompanies the properly earthly downfall (as in the phosphorescence of rotting corpses.) Becoming [*Werden*] announces itself in configuration [*Gestaltung*] (fresh buds), passing-away [*Vergehen*] in colouration. In contrast, whatever discolours itself indicates a non-earthly – and that is to say a non-eternal – type of downfall; one which, instead, coincides with Becoming in a supramundane sphere. This is how it is for things that discolour themselves, for how humans turn pale in death. And so it is for Nature, which turns pale in winter. And this last example is indicative for those natural appearances that ended with animalistic life; those which should not go under in eternal transience [*ewige Vergängnis*].

In the final lines of this passage, where “the stages of man that are nature” in the Theological-Political Fragment are recognised as “those natural appearances which ended with animalistic life”, we might glimpse the Messiah. As we know from the fragment of shame, his colour is not like those of animals and plants, the semblance and the gleam. He is coloured in red lightbeams, always falling, then vanishing. The

⁷⁵ SW3, pp.305-306; BGS2, pp.203-204.

Messiah is red (as if we did not already know), the red of the sunset, the red of blushing, “the colour of transience from the palette of phantasy.” His face rises up above the world-theatre, only to be met by a falling red and to disappear before the crowd. But if this rising up, this endlessly repeating theatrical act of the supramundane, promising the resurrection of nature, contains the memory of immortality, then it conceals beneath it worldly downfall, death, and decay. Worldly downfall brought him here, but, like the rainbow that appears in happenstance, not out of necessity.

If this red Messiah hovers, falling or rising, strained in a tension between life on earth and that of heaven, then he does so on the grey of the cloud. Benjamin describes this sky as the “grey Elysium”, and elsewhere as “the cloud in which [the artist] rests, and the wall of cloud on the horizon of his visions.”⁷⁶ This cloud is the home of the Messiah’s ephemerality as he traverses the vertical, and his colour-giving lightbeams penetrate and transform the mere semblance of cloud by drawing them into his contoured physiognomy.

But these are the phantasies of adults, and this is a heaven made grey with age. In the fragment on the beauty of coloured illustrations in children’s books in which the “grey Elysium” is described, Benjamin makes this explicit, and comments on its meaning for the messianic. For children the colourful pictures in books coincide with the world of phantasy, and phantasy for them is “paradise” in an Edenic sense, which corresponds to “a world of painless birth.”⁷⁷ Children, he writes, “learn from the memory of their first intuition. And they learn from bright colours, because the phantastic play of colour is the home of memory without yearning [*Heimat der*

⁷⁶ *SWI*, p.265; *BGS6*, p.124.

⁷⁷ *SWI*, p.280; *BGS6*, p.115.

sehnsuchtlose Erinnerung].”⁷⁸ This is counterposed to the adult world, for whom this paradise appears transformed. Their yearning for paradise, which produces in the sky the cloudy grey semblance is “the yearning of yearnings. Not the yearning for fulfilment, but the yearning to be without yearning.”⁷⁹ The messianic is the tension that hovers between the two: it is what would have fulfilled the phantasy in childhood but did not, or what the adult world projects into the space of unfulfilled childhood phantasies. In this way it is something like a screen memory: a form of memory distorted, de-formed, disfigured, even ruined in age, as it remains young. As Benjamin writes, “It is not without yearning and regret, and this tension with the messianic is the exclusive effect of genuine art, whose recipient learns not from memory alone, but from the yearning that it satisfies too soon and therefore too slowly.”⁸⁰

1.4 Shame, Guilt, and Annihilation

What is this Messiah? And what is this landscape that he traverses, hovers above, and briefly illuminates before just as quickly disappearing? Why has all the world of natural-history become a stage, and what is left of the play upon it? And how does this relate to the convergence of the landscape and the human countenance? It is late in this reading to point to the obvious relationship between the shame that brings about a blush and *guilt*. You blush because you find yourself in the wrong amid a crowd of eyes, before a chorus who will declaim a judgement against you; because you have revealed too much; because you have been exposed to the wrong time or place; because you have broken a law or code, and yet await your fate in punishment.

⁷⁸ *SWI*, p.265; *BGS6*, p.124

⁷⁹ *SWI*, p.265; *BGS6*, p.124.

⁸⁰ *SWI*, pp.264-265; *BGS6*, p.124.

Shame belongs to this time of guilt, but this time also ushers in the phantastic world. While the grey books of the law might point towards a world in which the temporal structure of guilt treats a person just like a thing, as a mere exemplar fixed under an eternal rubric; the colour of shame points to an alternative phantastic terrain. This phantastic space appears out of the spirit of the law, but just as the law forms and configures as it demands conformity, so does this world of colour deform and disfigure. Shame, disgrace, blushing and phantasy: these are not juridical categories, but they arise (and fall) alongside the law. The world of phantasy is conjured out of the time of law that has made a mistake about itself; in it rebounds the magic through which law considers its concepts as eternal: in colourful disfiguration phantasy displays a truth to the law, that just as it passes judgement on its victims, so too will the law itself pass away.

Benjamin distinguishes between the view of the phantastic world of colour for children and for adults, and under these categories his thinking changes and develops. In his early fragment ‘A Child’s View of Colour’, from the child’s view, phantasy “never has to do with form [*Form*], which is a concern of law, but can only perceive the living world – from the human being outward – creatively [*schöpferisch*] in feeling.”⁸¹ This contrasts with the adult’s view: “Adults, productive persons find no footing in colour; for them colour is possible only in relation to law.”⁸² In 1915 this distinction could be rendered relatively firmly: the child in the world of colour was part of an image of Edenic creation [*Schöpfung*] as an element of innocence. But this perspective changed as Benjamin worked further on the *Trauerspiel* book, in which the creaturely world was re-examined from the perspective not of its innocence, but of

⁸¹ *EW*, p.212; *BGS6*, p.111.

⁸² *EW*, p.212; *BGS6*, p.111.

its bloody crimes. By around 1920, when he wrote the fragments on blushing and the fragments on the Phantasy, this childhood paradise had become a ghost, and had become hidden behind a greater image. Here, children are already subject to those same laws, and hence he remarks at the end of the fragment titled ‘Reddening in Rage and Shame’, not that children are innocent, but instead there is a “highly developed sense of shame in children. That they are so often ashamed is related to the fact that they have so many phantasies, especially at the youngest ages.” The following remarks almost entirely dispense with the childhood view of colour – but just as in a screen memory, it will not be forgotten entirely.

Benjamin noted the (de)formation of guilt in the realm of colour through blushing in ‘Painting, or Signs and Marks’:

Since the link between guilt and atonement is a temporal and magical one, this *temporal* magic appears in the mark in the sense that the resistance of the present between the past and the future is eliminated, and these, magically fused, descend together on the sinner. But the medium of the mark is not confined to this temporal meaning; also, as startlingly emerges in the case of blushing, it also tends towards dissolving [*auflösend*] the personality into certain primal elements [*Urelemente*]. This leads us back to the nexus of marks and guilt.⁸³

When Benjamin returned to the matter of blushing in the fragment on shame, he would be more forceful, describing it as capable of “annihilating” the “sublime indeterminability” and “inconspicuousness” of the normal appearance of colour on the human body. With this annihilating force blushing “quenches disgrace”; its “wonderful power” [*wunderbare Macht*] is that is “withdraws [the ashamed person] from disgracefulness.”

Benjamin’s theorisation of guilt arises with regard to the mark and the sign. The two great sections through the world that this mode of presentation implies are

⁸³ *SWI*, pp.84-85; *BGS2*, pp.603-607.

here shown to have meaning for a broader set of problems on which Benjamin was working between the mid-1910s and the mid-1920s: that of the critique and deformation of the tragic, and especially of a tragic view of history. The tragic can be briefly defined here as that mode in which the law stands eternal, and whoever falls victim, who having committed a necessary crime, dies into its eternity. As Benjamin writes in an early essay on the subject, “In tragedy the hero dies because no one can live in fulfilled time. He dies of immortality. Death is an ironic immortality; that is the origin of tragic irony. The origin of tragic guilt lies in the same sphere.”⁸⁴

But tragedy already, for Benjamin, reaches beyond itself both immanently and transcendently: firstly, in the figure of the hero humanity, albeit momentarily, seems to reach beyond the web of guilt under whose fate he is nonetheless doomed. Attic tragedy both formally instantiates the law and shows in splendid colour the ruin of that which fatally, in crime, tries to reach beyond fate. Hence tragedy as form makes visible only fate itself and never freedom, yet freedom is implied within it. Secondly it reaches beyond itself because “the tragic designates a border [*Grenze*] of the realm of art no less than of the field of history”.⁸⁵ This – as we will see in Benjamin’s critique – is to say that in each case, in marking the border, it also, through the force of its magic, deals with the land beyond the border. The border, however firm it may stand, implies already a wider terrain.

There is a cultic – or religious – aspect to tragic history too, for it is in expiation of the guilt, through the hero’s sacrifice, that the community is autonomously bound and inaugurates eternal laws as its own. The cult, the community, the nation: the foundation (the endless perpetuation and administration)

⁸⁴ ‘*Trauerspiel* and Tragedy’, in *EW*, p.242; *BGS2*, pp.134-135.

⁸⁵ *EW*, p.241; *BGS2*, p. 133.

of these are all involved in certain types of tragic views of history in order to be bound by the style of law. This self-binding is what Benjamin called mythic. But the critique of mythic law required an argument invoking sacred history. For these notions of law and guilt, belonging to the cult, the nation, or the community, are also grounded in a certain *religious* understanding of the fall of man (however much in secular modernity we might call it a *normative* one) – that is, a reinscription of the histories of sin and desecration, which must be seen as hamartiology proper, subject to tragic laws as the playing out of fate. As Benjamin noted in his contemporaneous essay ‘On Language as such and on the Language of Man’, “this judging word expels the rest of human beings from Paradise; they themselves have aroused it in accordance with the immutable law by which this judging word punishes – and expects – its own awakening as the sole and deepest guilt.”⁸⁶ Quite precisely, it is the word that inaugurates eternal laws that cause the fall in language. Benjamin supplants the static time of *mythic history*’s eternity with the dynamic, transient time of the *history of myth*, in an attempt to rescue humanity from the fate it draws down upon itself. Indeed, Benjamin’s work in these years, seen from the highest level of abstraction, was entirely devoted to developing a set of non-tragic theories of historical time, in which tragedy only plays a part – or, more precisely, his theories of non-tragic time criticise the peace made between tragic and historical time.

In an early essay on tragedy, we find a close relation to the remarks on marks and signs: “This time proper to the tragic hero – which, like historical time, cannot be further defined here – all his deeds and his entire existence are given a sign, as if with a magic circle.”⁸⁷ This magic sign defines where domain where the fatal law is

⁸⁶ *EW*, p.263; *BGS2*, p.153.

⁸⁷ ‘*Trauerspiel* and Tragedy’ in *EW*, p.242; *BGS2*, p.135.

operative: it is the border of the nation, a place where magic is used merely as a force over a community. Although Benjamin did not repeat the image of the magic circle when he drafted 'Painting, or Sign and Mark', when he returned to that text as he reworked this material in the 1939 draft 'For Artwork in the Age / Painting and Graphic Arts', the magic circle reappears as sign, in the horizontal surfaces of the world:

The line is the magic circle [*Bannkreis*], and its magical power lies innately in the horizontal plane. It stands as the unsurpassable in the most original relation to the graphic arts, and indeed it delimits – virtually – the field of action. In the magic circle the cult value of the line reaches its maximum. Where does the corresponding value lie for painting? Here it is clear that we can only be dealing with a phenomenon for which colour has primacy over line.⁸⁸

Reading the early essay on tragedy together with the late note on painting and graphics, separated as they are by over two decades, one can get a sense of the role that colour played in Benjamin's critical understanding of myth. If the world bound by mythic law, and later by 'cult values', is attached to the laws that bound the field of action in the horizontal plane, then its critique stands, falls, rises, hovers, in the colourful vertical – in the realm of phantasy (although Benjamin in this later text uses the Kantian term, "power of imagination" [*Einbildungskraft*]). If pushing together two texts from decades apart inspires philological ire, then it can be somewhat shored up by what Benjamin does next. In the late fragment, in a few sentences, which were ultimately crossed out, he returns to the image of blushing:

If one were to look for such a phenomenon in humans, then blushing would present it in a very meaningful way. When blushing, a person colours himself ephemerally; a "mark" appears on his face and then disappears again.⁸⁹

Where the maximum of a certain type of mythic boundedness appears in the line that defines the domain of the law, then in the blush another type of maximum is reached

⁸⁸ BGS7, p.676.

⁸⁹ BGS7, p.676.

– and it is the tension between these two maximums, this contour that runs from the earth upwards and down again, the red that rises and falls across a face, that Benjamin means by the messianic.

It should be noted, somewhat digressively, that during the 1920s, in the time of the fall of that red neon light on to the wet asphalt (a material returning in the 1939 fragment), a significant historical change had taken place. The locomotion of high capitalism instantiated a universal landscape assumed by a world market in which, through global systems of debt and credit, books could be balanced in an instant, resting on the surety that the future would be like the past. The asphalt is not only a new slick surface, but a synecdoche for the whole system of capitalist circulation. However, the cultic aspect of capitalism does not bind the community, but binds society as such, in newly technised laws of motion. Hence, Benjamin remarked in the fragment ‘Capitalism as Religion’:

Capitalism is probably the first instance of a cult that creates guilt, not atonement. In this respect, this religious system is caught up in the headlong rush of a larger movement. A vast sense of guilt that is unable to find relief seizes on the cult, not to atone for this guilt, but to make it universal.⁹⁰

In this fragment Benjamin explicitly notes the “demonic ambiguity” of the word ‘*Schuld*’, which means both guilt and debt – an observation made famous by Nietzsche in *The Genealogy of Morals*⁹¹ – and remarks too on “the balance sheet as a knowledge that both redeems and eliminates.” If there is no dogma to this new legal system, no community but only society, then there is still in the time of debt a type of eternal legalism reproduced in every transaction and exchange. The eternal life of the hero, sustained in the tragically ironic death has been supplanted by the eternal death

⁹⁰ *SWI*, p.287; *BGS6*, p.100.

⁹¹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Genealogy of Morals*, trans. Carol Diethe, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp.35-67

of the proletariat sustained by the *moto perpetuo*, the pseudo-liveliness, the animation beyond death, of fixed capital and its phantasmagoria. In the late fragment on painting and graphics, Benjamin depicts the child's dream of a world without borders, the dream of the traversal of Heaven and Hell as he draws them in chalk on the asphalt surface of a road. The child's dream comes true catastrophically in the world market, where Heaven and Hell – and everything in between – are suspended in a state of animated indistinction. Our cloud, however colourful in the dancing phantasmagoria, is full of guilt. In the capitalism of the early 1920s, the magic circle disappears out of sight, is washed away by the traffic of the street. Where once it gave us perspective, a sense of distance and proximity, we only see an endless, horizonless, landscape of ruins, in which childhood has disappeared.

To return, Benjamin's critical work on tragic history, historical time, and myth, culminated in the studies 'Fate and Character', 'On the Critique of Violence', the *Trauerspiel* book.⁹² Each of these three essays centre, in different ways, on the interruption of guilt under mythic law; each, in different ways, dissolves guilt from a different perspective within related juridico-theologico-theatrical schemata. While a full account of these critical writings on myth cannot be given here, each responds to the problem of myth – and the natural-history that myth instantiates – through illuminations of the paired figures of face and landscape. Benjamin's critique is played out in these physiognomic figures and disfigurements of the theatre of the world.

In its reception by critics such as Peter Szondi and Werner Hamacher, the essay 'Fate and Character' has become the *locus classicus* of Benjamin's description

⁹² His essay 'Goethe's Elective Affinities' is also part of this longer critical project. See Chapter 3 below.

of guilt and tragic history.⁹³ Yet its closing paragraphs that offer an alternate vision are rarely discussed. In this passage a counterpoint plays out between an image of the landscape and sky as theatre, and theories of physiognomy. The essay quietly invokes again the taxonomy of types of light familiar from the fragments on blushing and their associated schemata: the fatal “guilt-context of the living” is described as “the natural condition of living”, and is seen as a “semblance [*Schein*], not yet wholly dispelled, from which man is so far removed that, under its rule he was never wholly immersed in it but only invisible in his best part.”⁹⁴ This “natural condition”, the world of semblance, should be read as the very same one as “those natural appearances that ended with animalistic life” that is found in the ‘Autumn and Winter’ fragment or as “the stages of man that are nature” in the ‘Theological-Political Fragment.’ But in ‘Fate and Character’, this semblance of fatally bound animalistic life in tragedy is opposed to the character in Comedy. Benjamin takes Molière as his comic model and describes how in his dramas, “character develops in them like sun, in the gleam [*Glanz*] of its single trait.”⁹⁵ He then pushes this one step further, for the gleam is not quite correct either. Instead, “the character of the comic figure is [...] the beacon in whose lightbeam [*Strahl*] the freedom of his own actions becomes visible.” In this final form this comic character stands opposed to the motley semblances of guilt in tragedy. It is “the sun of individuality in the colourless (anonymous) sky of man, which casts the shadow of comic action.”⁹⁶

⁹³ See Szondi *An Essay on the Tragic* pp. 49-52, and Werner Hamacher, ‘Guilt History: Benjamin’s Sketch ‘Capitalism as Religion’’, trans. Kirk Wetters, in *Diacritics*, Vol.32, No.3/4, 2002, pp.81-106.

⁹⁴ ‘Fate and Character’ in *SWI*, p.204. p.175.

⁹⁵ *SWI*, p.205; *BGS2*, p.178.

⁹⁶ *SWI*, p.206. *BGS2*, p.178.

If this sky is colourless then the sun is high. It casts short shadows in this midday of history. But as it rises or sets, in a blaze of red, it must turn towards the past, and the past must turn (by dint of a secret heliotropism) towards it. As though in the sharpness of montage, Benjamin cuts this image of the sun in the colourless sky, and concludes the essay with a paragraph describing the history of facial physiognomy, claiming “the study of physiognomy, like comedy, was a manifestation of genius.”⁹⁷ If this midday the sky lacks colour, it does so knowing that it will turn red again, briefly illuminating the landscape as a face, which in turn had once illuminated the world in the colourless beams of freedom.

In the last paragraphs of ‘Fate and Character’ the landscape and the countenance appear together in montage-like disjunction. The pairing arises more subtly, with less of a jolt, in ‘On the Critique of Violence.’ Curiously ‘On the Critique of Violence’ is generally not read as an essay on “natural-history” in the sense that it is described in the *Trauerspiel* book. Nonetheless, structurally, the essay is exactly this; Benjamin essays the intertwining of “natural” and “positive” (that is, historical) law. Its critique stretches asymptotically to the annihilation of that intertwining qua myth. At the essay’s centre stands the figure of Niobe, who is described as a victim of mythic law. Mythic violence “bursts upon [her] from the uncertain, ambiguous sphere of fate.”⁹⁸

The legend of Niobe tells of how, after her children are murdered, she is transformed into a mountain that weeps for eternity – and, although Benjamin does not say so explicitly, she is associated often with Mount Sipylus in Turkey, where here crying face has become part of the landscape. Benjamin describes her fate thus:

⁹⁷ *SWI*, p.206; *BGS2*, pp.178-179.

⁹⁸ *SWI*, p.248; *BGS2*, p.197.

Although [mythic violence] brings a cruel death to Niobe's children, it stops short of claiming the life of their mother, whom it leaves behind, more guilty than before through the death of the children, both as an eternally mute bearer of guilt and as a boundary stone on the border between men and gods.⁹⁹

The figure of the border returns; its bounding of the community or nation as the immanent domain of law is central to mythic violence, and myth in general. Where, in the early essay on tragedy, Benjamin described the tragic to be a form that designates a border (in that case both the border of art and the border of history), he made a homologous claim about mythic law:

In the whole realm of violences, permitted as much by natural law as positive law, not a single one is free of the (already indicated) grave problematic of all legal violence. Since, however, every conceivable solution [*Lösung*] to human problems, not to speak of redemption from the magic circle [*Erlösung aus dem Bannkreis*] of all world-historical conditions of existence obtaining hitherto, remains impossible if violence is totally excluded in principle, the question necessarily arises as to what kinds of violence exist other than all those envisaged by legal theory.¹⁰⁰

The problematic of legal violence and of tragedy is one of border formation.

Benjamin's mode of critique is methodologically identical to that presented in the *Trauerspiel* book. The law's concept forms borders establishing the magic circle of its domain, and makes its subject into a manifestation of the border in punishment. This new manifestation is allegorically and physiognomically read as the ruin of the law. The border is made both within and of the law's work, creating the same vertigo-inducing perspective described towards the close of the *Trauerspiel* book. Where Niobe is read not as a border, but as a ruin, the eternity of her fixation gives way to transience.

In 'On the Critique of Violence' Benjamin expands on the ways that these bounds and borders work: "Where borders are decided, the adversary is not simply

⁹⁹ *SWI*, p.248; *BGS2*, p.197.

¹⁰⁰ *SWI*, p.246; *BGS2*, pp.195-196.

annihilated; indeed, he is accorded rights even when the victor's superiority in power is complete."¹⁰¹ Thus the setting of the border, while forcefully suggesting a bounded landscape, in truth implies a horizonless wasteground in which those borders – just like Niobe – appear only as ruins. For Niobe, the convergence of the landscape and the countenance appears as the remains and ruins, the matter, of mythic violence. And just as guilt or debt is described as “demonically ambiguous” in ‘Capitalism as Religion’,¹⁰² so here is the laying of boundaries – in the physiognomy of the woman condemned to eternally mark the border – called by Benjamin “demonically ambiguous” too.¹⁰³ In fact this is the force of mythic law: it binds space, and movement in the horizontal, in precisely the same way the time is bound by guilt; and it binds the two together too. One can see in capitalism a hypertrophied version of this logic, in which sovereignty is guaranteed to ever more meagre powers, and ultimately to the autonomous individual or corporation. Ruinous borders now riddle the whole horizonless landscape, while peace is kept through the universalised laws of exchange. Every exchange of commodities is at the same time a peace treaty, luminescing in phantasmagoria on this grey waste of universal locomotion.

There is an affinity – more than mere analogy – between the description of mythic violence here and the description of phantasy, particularly in the ‘Phantasy’ fragment. There Benjamin writes, “Its supreme law is that, while phantasy de-forms, it nonetheless never destroys.”¹⁰⁴ Phantasy is thus caught in its own eternity, similar to that of the mythic law. And just as every new instantiation of mythic violence might believe itself to be capable of transforming the world, while ultimately

¹⁰¹ *SWI*, p.249; *BGS2*, p.198.

¹⁰² *SWI*, p.289; *BGS6*, p.102.

¹⁰³ *SWI*, p.249; *BGS2*, p.198.

¹⁰⁴ *SWI*, p.280; *BGS6*, pp.114-115.

succumbing to it, phantasy finds itself in the same bind, at best ushering in a world of objective phantasy just as mythic violence ushers in a world of ruin:

Phantasy does not itself dissolve, for where it attempts this it becomes phantastic [*Phantastisch*]. Phantastic objects arise where the process of deformation [*Entstaltung*] does not proceed from within the heart of the form itself. (The only legitimate form of the fantastic is the grotesque, in which phantasy does not de-form in a destructive fashion but destructively over-forms [*überstaltet*]. The grotesque is a borderline form [*Grenzform*] in the realm of the imagination; it stands at the extreme border [*an ihrer äußersten Grenze*] where the latter strives once again to become form.)¹⁰⁵

This passage brings into view a third term: destruction, which rather than leaving the border as a gleaming ruin on the wasteground of history, would cut through it.

Benjamin describes this power, which would finally allow Niobe to stop weeping and disappear, in ‘On the Critique of Violence’:

Just as in all spheres God opposes myth, mythic violence is confronted by the divine. And the latter constitutes its antithesis in all respects. If mythic violence is lawmaking, divine violence is law-destroying; if the former sets the boundaries, the latter boundlessly destroys them; if mythic violence brings at once guilt and retribution, divine power only expiates.¹⁰⁶

Yet this expiation must occur in the realm of force; it cannot simply be phantasised, just as past suffering cannot simply be forgotten under a New Law.

This lesson is taught by capitalism: one must differentiate between the infantile dream of a world without borders that in maturity is fulfilled wrongly in the world market, and the *politics* that annihilates borders, which in its violence illuminates the motion of the border’s disappearance. That is, a politics illuminating itself in the lightbeams of destructive, expiating violence – now red, now invisible – that, in its final disappearance, reaches beyond phantasy and into justice. This motion of the disappearance of the border may well have its archetype in the disappearance of the rainbow, which raised great walls in the heavens only then for them to be razed in

¹⁰⁵ *SWI*, p.280; *BGS6*, pp.115-116.

¹⁰⁶ *SWI*, p.249; *BGS2*, p.199.

the rainbow's disappearance. But as a mere archetype, this motion remains powerless, condemned to the world of phantasy unrealised, just as the rainbow is doomed to repeat itself again and forever. As Benjamin gnomically remarks, "In this world, divine power is higher than divine powerlessness; in the world to come, divine powerlessness is higher than divine power."¹⁰⁷ To misrecognise the rainbow as truly redemptive is to vainly hope that divine powerlessness is today higher; when in truth the world requires a violent, destructive politics cloaked in invisible red.

If in both of these cases – 'Fate and Character' and 'On the Critique of Violence' – colour appears in the semblant ruins of mythic violence or mythic law, then in both, Benjamin describes a third term that exists in non-relation to it, that nonetheless rests on it, or draws the ruin into a contour before destroying it. In 'Fate and Character' it is called "comedy", and in 'On the Critique of Violence' it is called "divine violence". It can be found too in the closing lines of the 'Theological-Political Fragment': a "world politics, whose method we must call nihilism."¹⁰⁸ This nihilistic figure can be found too in the fragment on shame. If in 'Fate and Character' and 'On the Critique of Violence' the countenance and the landscape merge in gleaming myth, then in the lightbeam, which in its disappearance reaches beyond the realm of phantasy, we find a physiognomy illuminated by another truly destructive power, as a process of annihilation. In the wonderful power of blushing, the guilty cloud of the body's surface – however splendid or graceful it may be in comparison to the realm of mere animalistic existence – is freed from shame:

The sublime indeterminability, indeed inconspicuousness [*unscheinbarkeit*], of that which appears on the human being less than on all other beings – as far as colour is concerned – as though Nature has almost retreated from the almost decoloured tones of its body, and seems to triumph here once again, more in gracefulness than in splendour: this is annihilated in the blushing of shame.

¹⁰⁷ 'World and Time' in *SW1*, p.227; *BGS6*, p.99.

¹⁰⁸ *SW3*, p.306; *BGS2*, p.204.

While I have already detailed how the figures of countenance and landscape coalesce in the *Trauerspiel* book, under the aspect of natural-history, in that book there is no third, nihilistic term. The authors of *Trauerspiel* live in an epoch, which Benjamin describes as similar to his contemporary situation, of “the total disappearance of eschatology.”¹⁰⁹ In this world, and in the works of art it produces, ruins held in the forms of faces and landscape merely shine and gleam, but never beam out and disappear. As Benjamin notes,

In the true work of art pleasure can be fleeting, it can live in the moment, it can vanish, and it can be renewed. The baroque work of art wants only to endure, and clings with all its organs to the eternal.¹¹⁰

This explains the dramatic failure on which the final pages of the *Trauerspiel* book dwell. It is not that the closure of the *Trauerspiel* book is excessively hopeful about the rainbow-like historical arc, the *rückgewandter grösster Bogen*, and the light it can shed on the world; rather, such an image remains too baroque. At best the images of ruin at the close of the book are akin to the vision of the Angel of History, who sees the pile of rubble, would like to awaken the dead and make whole what is smashed, but cannot.¹¹¹ It remains stuck in melancholy, and thus, like the rainbow, is fixated in eternal repetition; it is like a blush which fails to disappear, and in turning the ashamed red draws ever more eyes upon him.

The final paragraphs of the book recognise this, again in the vertical projection in which gravity holds sway. Benjamin quotes at length from Borinski, describing the enormous supports and pedestals in the baroque cathedrals that, hypertrophied and

¹⁰⁹ *OT*, p.81; *BGSI*, p.259.

¹¹⁰ *OT* p.181; *BGSI*, p.356, trans. amended.

¹¹¹ *SW4*, p.392; *BGSI*, 697. Thesis IX from ‘On the Concept of History’ is the final appearance of this trope of the countenance and the landscape. The angel’s countenance [*Antlitz*] is turned towards the past, where he sees a landscape of rubble.

distorted, attempt clumsily to maintain the illusion of soaring. This becomes an analogy for the baroque subject itself:

Subjectivity, like an angel plunging downwards, is brought back by allegories and is held fast in heaven, in God, by the *ponderación misteriosa*. But with the banal equipment of the theatre – chorus, interlude, and dumb-show – it is not possible to realize the transfigured apotheosis familiar in Calderón.¹¹²

Here as in the rainbow, the fall of this angel is interrupted in catastrophe, and suspended, but just as the rainbow which does not redeem might hide something more catastrophic behind it, so can this angel not redeem. For it would do this only in the eternal fall, that transforms into transience proper. Instead it is held fast, doomed to repeat itself in each and every play. And in the final line of the book, the *lack* of a lightbeam, with endlessly changing, endlessly disappearing colour is confirmed: “In the spirit of allegory, *Trauerspiel* is conceived from the outset as rubble, as a fragment. When others beam [*erstrahlen*] resplendently as on the first day, this form holds fast the image of beauty to the very last.”¹¹³

The counterpart of this angel held fast in the subjectivity of the baroque can be found once again at Christmastime, and it is here that childhood – which I had left aside (which all of us had left aside in age) – must return. In *Berlin Childhood* Benjamin writes its story, which comes to life on Christmas morning in his youth:

But hardly had I turned away from the window, my heart now heavy as only the imminence of an assured happiness can make it, than I sensed a strange presence in the room. It was nothing but a wind, so that the words which were forming on my lips were like ripples forming on a sluggish sail that suddenly bellies in a freshening breeze: “On the day of his birth / Comes the Christ Child again / Down below to this earth / In the midst of us men.” The angel that had begun to assume a form in these words had also vanished with them.¹¹⁴

¹¹² *OT*, p.235; *BGS1*, p.409.

¹¹³ *OT*, p.235; *BGS1*, p.409.

¹¹⁴ ‘A Christmas Angel’ in *SW3*, p.378; *BGS4*, p.283.

1.5 The Remembrance of Childhood

Despite the inflated importance with which blushing has been set here, after the early 1920s the motif did not return explicitly in Benjamin's published writing. But if the motion of the hue that fell across a disgraced person would be reserved only for a single note penned in 1939, never to be published, and even in that draft crossed out – then nonetheless the effects of that movement, its falling, and the figures and physiognomies of the shameful continue to appear in Benjamin's work. In a set of *Denkbilder* about Marseille, written in the late 1920s, this colour of shame appears once again – the glowing putrefaction appearing across the bodies of the lumpenproletariat, in the rags they take as clothes.

The harbour people are a bacillus culture, the porters and whores, products of decomposition with a resemblance to human beings. But on the palate it looks pink. Here that is the colour of disgrace [*die Farbe der Schande*], of wretchedness. Hunchbacks wear it, and so do beggarwomen. And the faded women of the rue Bouterie are given their only colour by the sole pieces of clothing they wear: pink shirts.¹¹⁵

This is the only place in Benjamin's writing that a hunchback clothes himself in the colour of shame, but this paragraph points to a greater affinity between the motion of the blush, its pouring down through the vertical plane, with the figure of the little hunchback that appears in numerous places his writing – most significantly in the fragment under that name in *Berlin Childhood* and in the essay on Kafka. In her study on the First Thesis of 'On the Concept of History', Rebecca Comay briefly discussed this passage about Marseille with regard to the various other hunchbacks that appear in Benjamin's work.¹¹⁶ She relates it most closely to the discussion of the "falling addiction" from which Benjamin says the figures of expressionism can be observed as

¹¹⁵ 'Marseille', in *SW2*, p. 232; *BGS4*, p.359.

¹¹⁶ Rebecca Comay, 'Benjamin's Endgame', in *Destruction and Experience: Walter Benjamin's Philosophy*, eds. Peter Osborne and Andrew Benjamin, (London: Routledge, 1994), pp.251-291, particularly pp.258-260.

suffering in his essay on Kraus. Benjamin writes here that “the experience and the name of that nameless power toward which the backs of people bent [is] guilt.”¹¹⁷

But the little hunchback is not simply guilty, in the sense of one who is judged under the eternal law, and who has to die eternally in punishment in order to atone on behalf of the others. Rather the little hunchback is a wrecker who does his work out of sight. He appears not on the public stage, nor before the law, but withdrawn into the privacy of the home. And even there he cannot so easily be seen:

My mother gave me the hint. "Greetings from Mr. Clumsy," she would say, when I had broken something or fallen down. And now I understand what she was talking about. She was speaking of the little hunchback, who had been looking at me. Whoever is looked at by this little man pays no attention. Either to himself or to the little man. He stands dazed before a heap of fragments. "When I go up to my kitchen stove / To make a little soup, / And a little hunchback there / Has cracked my little stoup." Where the hunchback appeared, I could only look on uselessly. It was a look from which things receded – until, in a year's time, the garden had become a little garden, my room a little room, and the bench a little bench. They shrank, and it was as if they grew a hump, which made them the little man's own.¹¹⁸

This little hunchback – a criminal of sorts – stands on the threshold between law and phantasy, and does so in his appearance, and in his disappearance too. For just as soon as he appears in the vision in which he might be prosecuted, having broken or stolen something, so he disappears again. He who commits the offense [*Vergehen*] disappears [*vergeht*]. The final line of the fragment on shame might sustain this fantastic image: “The expressionless signifying appearance of vanishing (or, of the offence) [*des Vergehens*] is the blushing of shame.”

The little hunchback returns us to a different type of seeing – a type of seeing each other and not seeing too – that belongs not alone to childhood, but also conjoins

¹¹⁷ ‘Karl Kraus’, in *SW2*, p. 445; *BGS2*, p.352

¹¹⁸ *Berlin Childhood*, in *SW3*, p.385; *BGS4*, p.303.

this to the remembrance of childhood. The little hunchback looks at me and I look back at him, but neither of us see each other. This is a type of destructive looking, a childhood way of seeing through that makes things vanish, “a look from which things receded.” Both of the gazes, however much they see each other, dissolve into distraction. The pot has been broken, but ultimately the fragments do not matter. Between us lies on the floor a puddle of soup. We see each other like the eyes of communist lovers who see in each other only the reflection of some borscht, and although the rhyme does not tell you this, I know this soup is red too. This is a type of seeing that sees disappearance alone, attuned to inconspicuousness. But it does this destructively, seeing a way through, and everyone knows that both the child and the little hunchback have caused chaos. But both have disappeared into the cloudy vapours, while the fragments are left behind. When the figure of the little hunchback once again becomes visible, it is with age, a year has passed. His bowed shape appears as that childish, careless, violent destruction that has been made the subject of guilt. Only then he haunts us, returning again and again.

If Margarethe asked Georg in the dialogue on the rainbow asked if children could enter the realm of colour because they are so innocent, then the answer was interrupted by the appearance of a rainbow, and never arrived. Benjamin himself suggests elsewhere that it may be because of their innocence. But in the fragment on reddening in rage and shame the answer is conclusive that, on the contrary, it is because of their shame *in phantasy*. Childhood, however innocent it may be – and that itself is questionable – is visible to an older Benjamin only under the shroud of guilt. But this shroud is nebulous, cloudlike, and as so often in Benjamin we discover that the veil and the thing veiled were one and the same. In just this way it is age which forces the little hunchback, who disappeared once upon a time, to return.

Might we tell a story then, too, of how the rainbow got its hump? For if the rainbow is like a guilty screen memory, then this could tell us something of its shape that resembles – now on the most enormous scale – the posture of the little hunchback and of the expressionist figures plagued by guilt. Although it does not stand upright, it bends and contours through the vertical. While all the colours composing it seem to rise, might the red, tending to invisibility, that crowns it, not too be falling, straining its edges towards the earth. This bow expresses in the tension of its contour the guilt of the past, and the strain subsides only with its disappearance, in its transience. But the matter here is not just guilt, but also a problem of memory. In the Kafka essay, where the little hunchback is described again, these guilty figures appear just as though they were screen memories, and here it is not only guilt that weighs upon their backs:

Quite palpably, being loaded down is here equated with forgetting – the forgetting of a sleeping man. The same symbol occurs in the folksong "The Little Hunchback."¹¹⁹

The rainbow might – if we remember God's word to Noah – remind him each and every time of the New Covenant, which at the same time concealed the old in forgetting. And while those colours might want, at every moment, to rise up, it is weighed down by a guilt now forever forgotten behind – or clouded in – the image. In this sense to redeem would be to remember too, to free the colours and form (or deformation) of the rainbow, and from the eternal repetition that such a guilty forgetting induces. It is not the appearance of the rainbow that redeems but its disappearance, not each and every time that it appears, but in freedom from eternal repetition. So it is for the little hunchback too:

¹¹⁹ *SW2*, p.811; *BGS2*, p.432.

This little man is at home in distorted life; he will disappear with the coming of the Messiah, who (a great rabbi once said) will not wish to change the world by force but will merely make a slight adjustment in it.¹²⁰

While each time the rainbow shoots up, aligned with phantastic perception, so too it wishes to disappear forever, to reach beyond mere phantasy in destructive force; to disappear *in* the phantasmagoria. That is precisely what the little hunchback would like to do as well. Benjamin tells us this in in ‘On the Concept of History.’ There the hunchback is theology, he has become “small and ugly and has to keep out of sight.”¹²¹ The hunchback has hidden himself away inside the beaming phantasmagoric apparatus, historical materialism, a Turk who, of course, wears red. When the *Spiel* is over, the hunchback will not appear in glory, but rather the two together, the thing in its in veil, cloudlike, will disappear forever from before the crowd, like whoever blushes in shame.

Perhaps as texts in their own right these tiny fragments on blushing are of little value, although sentences such as “It is the red of transience from the palette of phantasy” or “The colours of phantasy culminate in red” might be alluring to every citationist who wants to grab a scrap. As Benjamin teaches us, those who in poverty pick up rags to put them to good use should never be condemned in the way that the bourgeoisie moralise against beggars. Benjamin writes, “As long as there is still one beggar around, there will still be myth.”¹²² Adorno would add “only with the last disappearance of the beggar would myth be reconciled.”¹²³ Nonetheless, such a scrap of phantastic red would make an excellent flag. These texts throw light on a fixated,

¹²⁰ *SW2*, p.811; *BGS2*, p.432.

¹²¹ *SW4*, p.389; *BGS1*, p.693.

¹²² *AP*, p.400; *BGS5*, p.505.

¹²³ *MM*, p.199; *AGS4*, p.225, trans. amended

always halting time, that doesn't always hit the mark – a time of danger and delusion, which may only become hopeful when it is grasped. It was in solidarity with that danger that with them Benjamin's writings have been surveyed from their most marginal perspective, if only in an attempt to bring his thinking close to hand.

Flag

How much more easily the leave-taker is loved! For the flame burns more purely for those vanishing in the distance, fuelled by the fleeting scrap of material waving from the ship or railway window. Separation penetrates the disappearing person like a pigment and steeps him in gentle radiance.¹²⁴

¹²⁴ *SWI*, p. 450; *BGS4*, p. 94.

REFLECTIONS ON READING (I)

Benjamin and Destruction

All historical knowledge can be represented in the image of balanced scales, one tray of which is weighted with what has been and the other with knowledge of what is present. Whereas on the first the facts assembled can never be too humble or too numerous, on the second there can be only a few heavy, massive weights.¹

The proliferation of fragments, oblique notes, and most significantly of unfinished work in Benjamin's work has frequently led to a reading that adheres only to seemingly endless details. To many readers, Benjamin's own writing becomes like the labyrinthine arcades, while the red thread has been lost, and the readers with it.

Reading has become an endless *flânerie*: comfortable and idle, luxuriating in the lustre of one fragment before finding itself bewitched by the next. If such an approach takes its cues from the texts themselves – or from Benjamin's own tendency to collect – then such readings have often remained blind to those aspects of his writings that struggle against this tendency. Benjamin's own Haussmannian gestures, those of an “*artiste démolliseur*”, that would cut a street through those who stroll too idly, have often been forgotten.²

¹ *AP*, p.468; *BGS5*, p.585.

² *AP*, p.12; *BGS5*, p.57;. Alongside Baron Haussmann and Mickey Mouse, destructive characters often appear in Benjamin's work as his acquaintances. ‘The Destructive Character’ opens with the reflection, “It could happen to someone looking back over his life that he realized that almost all the deeper obligations he had endured in its course originated in people who everyone agreed had the traits of a ‘destructive character.’” *SW2*, p.541; *BGS4*, p.396. Irving Wohlfarth identified Benjamin's friends who fit the bill: Asja Lacis, Bertolt Brecht, and Gustav Glück, ‘No-Man's-Land: On Walter Benjamin's “Destructive Character”’, *Diacritics*, Vol.8, No.2 (1978), pp.47-65.

This gesture was consolidated into an anonymous portrait in the *Denkbild* ‘The Destructive Character’, published on the front page of the *Frankfurter Zeitung* in November 1931.³ The destructive character constantly “clears away the traces of our own age,” and is always searching for “fresh air and open space.”⁴ Significantly, this portrait contains a second figure, with whom those idle readers of Benjamin might identify. The destructive character stands as “the enemy of the étui-person.”⁵ This étui-person “looks for comfort, and the case [*Gehäuse*] is its quintessence. The inside of the case is the velvet-lined trace that he has imprinted on the world.”

The “étui-person” might seem as anonymous and alien as the destructive character himself, were a similar figure not to have appeared in Benjamin’s review of the Erich Kästner’s poetry, ‘Left-Wing Melancholy.’⁶ There, Benjamin’s criticises the left-wing intelligentsia, accusing them of an attitude “to which there is no longer [...] any corresponding political action.”⁷ Instead, he claims, they are concerned with accounting for their feelings of sorrow, which are all too distant from action. Where they look, they find only “the empty spaces where, in dusty heart-shaped velvet trays, the feelings [...] once rested.” Like the étui-man, they take “as much pride in the traces of former spiritual goods as the bourgeois do in their material goods.”⁸ Against the intelligentsia, which might despairingly view the course of the world, finding itself unable to right it, but nonetheless adhering to its traces, the destructive character finds himself in the fray, destroying just those traces. Destruction takes things to hand: it refutes any hope derived from the withdrawn view, whether it be the lofty

³ SW2, pp.541-542; BGS4, pp.396-398.

⁴ SW2, p.541; BGS4, pp.396-397.

⁵ SW2, p.542; BGS4, pp.397-398, trans. amended.

⁶ SW2, pp.423-427; BGS3, pp.279-283.

⁷ SW2, p.425; BGS3, p.281.

⁸ SW2, p.425; BGS3, p.281.

perspective of an intelligentsia gazing at the past, the flâneur entranced by the commodity, the melancholic fixated on the wreckage of history, or even everyday academic claims to objectivity.

If 'The Destructive Character' is a miniature treatise on the powers of destruction, the same destructive gestures appear in a many of Benjamin's works. In 'The Critique of Violence' they took the form of 'divine violence', which he described in comparison to mythic violence: "if mythic violence is law-making, divine violence is law-destroying; if the former sets boundaries, the latter boundlessly destroys them." If this force [*Gewalt*] was first invoked abstractly in arguments about law and justice (to which the realities of struggle, such as the mass strike, provided only an illustration), in later writings this gesture was granted greater political concretion. In a conversation is noted down in Werner Kraft's diary a decade later, Benjamin reflected on 'The Critique of Violence':

Just law [*Gerechtes Recht*] is what helps the oppressed in class struggle. – Class struggle is the centre of all philosophical questions, even the loftiest. – What he previously named divine ('sovereign ') violence was an empty spot, a limit-concept, a regulative idea. Today he knows it *is* class struggle.⁹

In his final work, Benjamin would simply write, "The subject of historical knowledge is the struggling, oppressed class itself."¹⁰ In all cases, for Benjamin, the political decision over life and death adopts this annihilative gesture.

Reading this gesture into concept of *Eingedenken*, under which the question of life and death in history is staked, demands a polemical attitude or *Haltung*. Such a attitude, attuned to a destructive historical politics has been best described by Irving

⁹ Werner Kraft, 'Tagebucheintragungen', in *Für Walter Benjamin: Dokumente, Essays und ein Entwurf*, eds. Ingrid Scheurmann and Konrad Scheurmann (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1992), pp.40-54, p.47, trans. mine with Sami Khatib.

¹⁰ *SW4*, p.394; *BGS1*, p.700.

Wohlfarth's Benjaminian dictum, "philology without actuality is blind; actuality without philology is empty."¹¹ Thus, *Eingedenken* has not been treated as a centre of gravity around which texts gather, in order to partake in a tradition that venerates literary history. My reading feels the need to impoverish itself before this tradition, wielding even the tiniest of fragments as a weapon against it. It aims not to pile up sources, but to discover force in tradition's own discontinuities.¹² This reading is undertaken "not for the sake of the rubble but for that of the way leading through it."¹³

Such reading must take risks; the greatest being that its violence might turn out to be nothing but a repetition of past violence, trading blood for blood with the catastrophic continuum of history. Mythic violence might mistake itself for annihilative violence, ending up once again erecting boundary stones. Despite the risk of failure, this reading follows Benjamin into this moment of danger, because resignation before it commits one nonetheless to both partake and succumb to a history of violence without decision. If this reading draws on the strength of the gesture more than on the context of Benjamin's work, this does not mean that reading can blithely commit to continuing the work of destruction, this time annihilating Benjamin's own writings.¹⁴ It stands, for the moment, before their destruction. Yet some force is needed to bring them to hand, to make crude use of them, in a world in which like relics they are firmly guarded. Today, destructive reading is more difficult than ever: institutions of learning resist any reading that might destroy or cheapen

¹¹ Irving Wohlfarth, 'Die Passagenarbeit', *Benjamin Handbuch. Leben – Werk – Wirkung*, ed. Burkhardt Lindner (Stuttgart: Metzler, 2006), pp.251-274, p.269, trans. mine

¹² See *SW2*, pp.731-735. *BGS2*, pp.213-219.

¹³ *SW2*, p.542; *BGS4*, p.396.

¹⁴ Irving Wohlfarth suggests this, 'No-Man's Land', p.65.

what is read; the truly destructive tradition of the oppressed, the violence of class struggle which relentlessly takes sources to hand, is what they guard against.

CHAPTER 2

Adorno and Regression

The vertical section through the world has been essayed, with its theology of endless falling. Now we must now look to the horizon. The following theme and variations addresses the problems of memory and forgetting in such a landscape, and the shape of its traversal in the horizontal.

2.1 Theme: *Kindertotenlieder* and the Bourgeois *Intérieur*

In the winter of 1833 and 1834 Luise and Ernst Rückert died of scarlet fever. In the following months their father, Friedrich Rückert, wrote 421 poems on the subject of their deaths. Rückert, a poet, translator, and professor of oriental languages, was part of a newly expanded urban middle-class. His cycle of poems was the most extreme document of mourning of *Biedermeier* literature. In the 1860s Gustav Mahler was born into circumstances not dissimilar from those of the Rückert family. As an opera conductor, he became part of Vienna's cultural elite in the age of its precipitous decline. Between 1901 and 1904, around the time of Adorno's birth, he wrote orchestral settings of five of Rückert's poems. In 1936, living in exile in Oxford, Adorno wrote the fragments 'Marginalia on Mahler' marking the 25th anniversary of the composer's death.

Tracing the the death of children between these objects, we might approach the first of Adorno's fragments, hoping that it might speak in flaming arcs, if only for a few seconds.

When someone I loved died, I understood for the first time in my life why Mahler, following those poems by Rückert, wrote the *Kindertotenlieder*. The feeling in them, of a powerful bow bent to the breaking point, out of tenderness of the closest and loss into the greatest distance, does not find its measure in individual misfortune of the sort that consigns children to

the dead. Yet the dead may well be our children. The aura of what has not become, which encircles those who died young like a semblance of apparent happiness, does not fade for adults either. But it is not able to enclose their distracted and abandoned lives other than by making them smaller. This happens to the dead through memory. It strokes the hair of the helpless, gives sustenance to the annihilated mouth, watches over the sleep of those who will never again awaken. As they are defenseless, at the mercy of our memory, so our memory is the only help that is left to them. They pass away into it, and if every deceased person is like someone who was murdered by the living, so he is also like someone whose life they must save, without knowing whether the effort will succeed. The rescue of what is possible, but has not yet been – this is the aim of remembrance. It is the law that is given to *Das Lied von der Erde*. When the music of the fourth movement looks back on beauty with a few bars of the clarinets, it is as if through remembrance all the happiness that never was has been preserved in miniature in these bars. The dead are transfigured into children, for whom the possible would still be possible, because they have not been. In the *Kindertotenlieder*, this transfiguration is notated in full. “Often I think they have only gone out.” Not because they were children, but because uncomprehending love can only comprehend death as if the children’s final exit were a homecoming. Only as for children can we hope for the dead.¹

Reading this beautiful text demands a return to its object. Rückert’s 58th poem displays a bourgeois formalism inadequate to its poetic content. Under the stringency of its prosody the poem fractures into a moment of expression:

Wenn zur Thür herein
Tritt dein Mütterlein
Mit der Kerze Schimmer,
Ist es mir als immer,
Kämst du mit herein
Huschtest hinterdrein
Als wie sonst ins Zimmer.
Träum’ ich, bin ich wach,
Oder seh’ ich schwach
Bei dem Licht, dem matten?
Du nicht, nur ein Schatten
Folgt der Mutter nach.
Immer bist du, ach,
Noch der Mutter Schatten.

When, through the doorway
Your little mother enters
Under the glimmer of the candle
It seems to me as always,
That you would come in too,
Scurrying in behind,
As you otherwise would have, into the room.
Do I dream, or am I awake,
Or do I see weakly
In the light, the dullness?
Not you, only a shadow
Follows after the mother
You are always, alas,
Still the mother’s shadow

¹‘Marginalia on Mahler’ in *Essays on Music*, ed. Richard Leppert, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), trans. Susan Gillespie, p.612; *AGS18*, pp.235-6.

Wenn dein Mütterlein
 Tritt zur Thür herein,
 Und den Kopf ich drehe,
 Ihr entgegen sehe,
 Fällt auf ihr Gesicht
 Erst der Blick mir nicht,
 Sondern auf die Stelle
 Näher nach der Schwelle,
 Dort, wo würde dein
 Lieb Gesichtchen seyn,
 Wenn du freudenhelle
 Trätest mit herein
 Wie sonst, mein Töchterlein
 O du, der Vaterzelle
 Zu schnelle
 Erlosch'ner Freudenschein!

When your little mother
 Enters through the doorway,
 And I turn my head
 To see her
 My gaze falls first
 Not on her face
 But instead on the place
 Nearer the threshold
 There, where your dear little face
 Would have been
 Were you, in joyful brightness,
 To have entered too.
 As you otherwise would have, my little daughter
 Oh you, of the father-cell
 Too quickly
 Extinguished light of joy!²

The father of Rückert's poem addresses the empty spot where his daughter would have been with the familiar “*du*”. The familiarity of this absence cuts a rift through the familial home; the entrance of this particular absence into the home dissolves the comfort that bonded the father to the daughter he knew and loved. This address struggles for coherence, allowing an experiential disintegration to come to expression. The poem registers the experience as a fracture in its possibility of expression *within* that bourgeois interior; and in expression the bourgeois interior is revealed as no longer secure, now emptied of comfort. These broken relations of knowledge and love hold within them expectation at once denied, and hope that it could have otherwise been.

The experience is expressed in the interpenetration of changing figures of light with tense and mood. In the first stanza under the glimmer of the candle – an empirical light of the *Biedermeier* interior – a claim to permanence appears: “under

² Friedrich Rückert, *Kindertodtenlieder und andere Texte des Jahres 1834*, eds. Rudolf Kreutner and Hans Wallschläger, (Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag, 2007). p.77, trans. mine.

the shimmer of the candle, it seems to me as always”. But under this claim to permanence, the tense breaks into to the subjunctive, “that you would come in too, hurrying in behind”. Bourgeois familial love, embodied in this permanent light, as the sturdiness of the interior and the commodities within it, became habit. This claim to permanence turns love into habitual expectation; expectation, as a rigidified socialisation of familial attachment, strains to be fulfilled with the force this claim to permanence. And expectation is fulfilled, but wrongly, not by the child but by her absence.

Habit, familial love mediated by the world of the interior, draws that absence into the room just as the child had been drawn in by the father. Precisely that which the claim to permanence had hoped to exclude – the natural death of a child – is drawn inside by spirit’s own claim to permanence, with which it had attempted to secure itself from the destructive forces of nature. Admitting the arbitrary deaths of children would mean abandoning the security that the interior had apparently guaranteed. Spirit naturalised, claiming security from a destructive external nature, had masked a natural component of the space of interiority, which by spirit’s own force is catastrophically revealed. Yet here the candle’s light endures. Even under catastrophic conditions it fails to relinquish its claim to permanence; the daughter’s absence is transformed into the permanent dull shadow cast by the mother. “You are always, alas, still the mother’s shadow”.

The poem’s second strophe moves similarly, again breaking into the subjunctive as the child’s absence appears: “There, where your dear little face / Would have been / Were you, in joyful brightness, / To have entered too.” In each strophe the shift in mood is followed by the words “*wie sonst*”. This phrase is the dynamic kernel of Rückert’s poem: its meaning doubles into “how it otherwise would

be” and “how it usually is”. “*Wie sonst*” is a lamenting regret for what has passed while simultaneously claiming a permanence of spirit. But unlike the empirical light and its shadowy dull counter-image in the first strophe, the second addresses the daughter in the brightness of joy. Yet her semblance of joy – “*Freudenschein*” – is quickly extinguished too. This joyful brightness appears only in the subjunctive, and is recognised too late, as it disappears. The two forms of light – the commodity light of the interior and the joyful brightness – stand opposed. The joyful brightness of the child appears in the untimeliness of its extinguishment; it is a light of transience, refracting backwards through history, illuminating in catastrophic cognition the dullness of the light of the world of the interior. She illuminates not expectation but hope. Her image has no fixity; reification is her enemy.

The struggle for expression of this ephemeral light of joy, out of the antagonism of spirit from which it bursts, appears in Rückert’s poem prosodically. The bourgeois father’s mode of thinking endures; the poet continues with his formal lyric. But in addressing this familiar absence immediately the prosody breaks into an aposiopesis from its otherwise steady trimeter: “*O du, der Vaterzelle / zu schnelle*”. Confronting his daughter’s death directly, he confronts also the deathliness of his own habitual mode. In this moment of reflection on her death, he laments with an unusual word: ‘*der Vaterzelle*’ [of the father-cell], which claims the organic, natural status of the social situation. As this naturalisation of spirit is spoken the expression fractures, a gap enters the prosody. In claiming this natural component of the family, that same nature that destroyed the child must too be admitted. The interior is derelict. Love transformed into the fracture of expression recognises, too late, its own fate in that of the child. In that instant, the extinction of the child, is cathected as spiritual disruption. In this cathexis shines the hope that it could have been another way.

In these two forms of light as figures of expectation and hope we find two consequences: The first strophe fixes the child into the dullness of the enduring bourgeois home, as the eternal shadow of her mother. In the second she is transfigured into an illumination of hope, but only momentarily. She shines from the already-too-late, appearing joyfully in absence, radiating catastrophically through the catastrophic actuality, illuminating for an instant the room's broken walls.

Mahler must have recognised these dynamics when set the poem to music. Meanwhile, the figures of light and darkness play an important role in the cycle of songs that Mahler selected from Rückert's *Kindertodtenlieder*.³ He redrafted the poems in preparing to set them to music, and his revisions of '*Wenn dein Mütterlein*' are the most extensive of all.

Mahler's setting is deceptively simple, composed of two near-identical strophes. But in its smallest details – both in form and texture – the dialectic of Rückert's poem is developed.

³ When drafting the *Kindertodtenlieder*, Mahler first selected from 36 of Rückert's poems containing images of darkness and light. See Peter Russell, *Light in Battle with Darkness: Mahler's Kindertodtenlieder* (New York: Lang, 1991).

from his syllabic setting into melisma, straining into an expression beyond the text.

The second climax is marked “*Mit ausbrechendem Schmerz* [with an eruption of pain.]”

Singstimme 24 *steigernd, nicht eilen*
f
nach der Schwel - le dort dort, wo wür - de dein lieb' Ge - sicht - chen sein

Singstimme 55 *mit ausbrechendem Schmerz*
f
O du, o du, des Va - ters Zel - le

The placement of these musical climaxes brings the absence of the child and the interior space into close relation; the ‘*dort*’ of the empty spot is later addressed with the same melody as ‘*du*’. This relation is confirmed in the smallest of Mahler’s amendments to the text. Rückert’s unusual agglutination ‘*der Vaterzelle*’ is replaced with ‘*des Vaters Zelle*’ [of the father’s cell]. The organic nature and the bourgeois home, is recast in illumination as a prison.⁴

This equivocation between organic and the bourgeois interior was important to Adorno’s early philosophical writing about music. In 1926 he wrote,

We are accustomed to viewing music too impartially from within. We believe we are inside it in the same way as a safe house, whose windows signify our eyes, its corridors our bloodstream, and its door our sex; or that it actually grew out of us, the plant from the seed, and that even the finest offshoots are bound by law to imitate that inner cell. We posit ourselves as its subject, and, even if we dilute ourselves into the general transcendental subject in order to rescue it from the merely organic, it is still we who impose our rule upon it.⁵

⁴ Adorno indicated the importance of this moment to his thought in his 1960 radio-lectures on Mahler: “The *Kindertotenlieder* are the mystical cell of Mahler’s symphonies – the word ‘cell’ [*Zelle*] is sung once in them”, in *AGS18*, p.618, trans. mine.

⁵ ‘Night Music’ in *Night Music* ed. Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Wieland Hoban, (London: Seagull Books, 2009), p.91; *AGS17*, p.57. Although published in 1929, this essay was drafted in 1926, see *Adorno-Berg Correspondence*, p.59.

Within this complex of metaphor, Adorno provides a succinct definition of myth, and its entanglement with reason within the natural-history of the bourgeois *intérieur*. Myth is domination under the aspect of nature. Nature as myth, giving infernal repetitious laws, does not destroy but dominates. These infernal laws are brought back within the subject's interior as spirit, and set to work deceptively securing spirit from nature. As myth, spirit appears organicised; second nature crowns the sovereignty of the subject in his home, like a sovereign in a court.

Despite the expression interruption of Rückert's prosodic break and Mahler's melismata, in Mahler's song the *intérieur* stands strong. The eruption of pain does not fracture the song's form, but instead the moment of breakthrough is re-integrated. Under the final word "*Freudenschein*", the music returns to the funereal march of the opening. Yet it is slightly altered: almost unheard the gaps in the footsteps of the ostinato have finally been filled.

The image displays a musical score for Mahler's song "Freudenschein". The score is written for several instruments and a voice part. The instruments include Cor Anglais, Clarinet in Bb, Bassoon, Horn in F, Harp, Viola, and Violoncello. The voice part is also present. The score is in 3/4 time and features a key signature of two flats (Bb and Eb). The tempo and mood are indicated as "Wieder wie zu Anfang" (Again like at the beginning). The score includes dynamic markings such as *pp* (pianissimo), *p espr.* (piano espr.), and *mp espr.* (mezzo-piano espr.). The voice part has the word "schein!" written below it. The score is divided into two systems, with the first system starting at measure 1 and the second system starting at measure 11. The music is characterized by a slow, melancholic pace with a focus on the lower register of the instruments.

Despite Mahler's deletion of Rückert's lines in which the child is transformed into the eternal shadow of the mother, this thought is performed musically. The integration of the child into the endless pacing of the melancholic mother's body is archetypally mythic. It fixes her as a naturalised spirit of the bourgeois interior,

perfected, deathly, and dull. This recalls the mythic violence Benjamin had once described, with a mother in mind: “[myth] brings a cruel act of death to Niobe’s children, it stops short of the life of their mother, whom it leaves behind [...] as an eternally mute bearer of guilt.”⁶

In these mytho-organic dialectics we find a significant relationship between Rückert’s poem, Mahler’s Song, and Adorno’s fragment. Adorno had expounded a similar dialectic in his study on Kierkegaard, in which the two central two chapters addressed philosophy’s relationship to the bourgeois *intérieur*.⁷ For Adorno, the naturalisation of “mere spirit” for the sake of commanding power over nature takes the form of sacrifice. Such a thesis offered a critique of the comfort of the nineteenth century bourgeois home: in securing spirit within the *intérieur* against destructive external nature, spirit must destroy internal nature. This motion reveals spirit as self-defeating:

Power over natural life remains dedicated to its annihilation in spirit rather than to reconciliation. [...] here it is not merely natural life that is destroyed by spirit; spirit itself is annihilated natural life bound to mythology.⁸

Elsewhere he would summarise:

The forces of annihilation are scarcely tamed by [Kierkegaard’s] doctrine of love. The relapse into mythology and the lordly demonology of asceticism is enhanced by Kierkegaard’s reckless spiritualization of love. He sets out to expel nature with a pitchfork, only to become Nature’s prey himself.⁹

Adorno wrote that mythic sacrifice “occupies the innermost cell [*innerste Zelle*] of [Kierkegaard’s] thought.”¹⁰ His critique rests on salvaging the aesthetic, here

⁶; *SW1*, p.248; *BGS2*, p.197.

⁷ ‘*Intérieur*’ here connotes the combination of interiority in the epistemological and psychological sense, and the architectural interior of its setting.

⁸ *K*, p.109; *AGS2*, p.155.

⁹ ‘On Kierkegaard’s Doctrine of Love’ in *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung*, Vol.8 (1939-1940), pp.413-429, p.417.

¹⁰ *K*, p.109; *AGS2*, p.155.

imagined as an decadent allegory combining a repetitive organicism and an architectural interior. He argued that in Kierkegaard's 'logic of the spheres', the semblance of hope that appeared in the aesthetic sphere was sacrificed for a despairing inwardness, in which the individual was reduced to a mere point [*Punkt*], from which he could leap into ethical life. Against this sacrificial movement Adorno argued that "the true desire of melancholy is nourished on the idea of an eternal happiness *without sacrifice*, which it still could never adequately indicate as its object."¹¹ Only the transient semblance could provide the basis for such an idea.

Adorno wrote of his own texts that "instead of achieving something scientifically, or creating something artistically, the effort [...] reflects a childlike freedom that catches fire, without scruple, on what others have already done." His own philosophy does not "seek and filter the eternal out of the transient, [but] rather to make the transient eternal"¹² Thus he rebelled against the mythic moment of resolution in the dialectic, in the maternal shadows of the bourgeois home, instead tarrying in the Mahlerian melisma, and the Rückertian aposiopesis. Its movement is the elucidation of that transient light of joy [*Freudenschein*], against the dull commodity light of the bourgeois interior, albeit from too late. This light appears in his fragment on Mahler as "The aura of what has not become [*des nicht gewordenen*] that encircles those who died young, like a semblance of holiness"; its brightness blazes from the past subjunctive as that which could have been but was not. Hence, "The dead are transfigured into children for whom the possible would still be possible, because they have not been."

¹¹ *K*, p.126; *AGS2*, p.179;

¹² 'The Essay as Form' in *NtLI*, p.152 and p.159; *AGS11*, p.10 and p.18.

This attachment of potentiality to the dead child in the Mahler fragment appears to reverse a position in Adorno's critique of Kierkegaard. Kierkegaard was criticised for a wish for such potentiality, for the utopian fulfilment induced by an infinite and indeterminate wish is nothing but the absolute determination of the inwardness of the subject: "Such 'potentiality' is not so much a mirage of what has been lost as an unfulfilled, thin, prophetic, but nonetheless exact schema of what is to be."¹³ Against the infinite wish as a model of hope, Adorno defends a finite hope "that is frustrated in the factual world" which "utopianly and concretely grasps in the name what is denied to it by the world of alienated objects."¹⁴

To Adorno, this finite wish refuses to sacrifice the semblance of hope – that joyful brightness – that appears in the aesthetic, which itself is not a specification of utopia. The finite wish attaches to the transience of that shine, illuminating momentarily within the fissures of culture. "No truer image of hope can be imagined than that of ciphers, readable as traces, dissolving in history, disappearing in front of overflowing eyes, indeed confirmed in lamentation."¹⁵ In spite of the indeterminacy of the "what could have become", the child is marked determinately in death. Potential functions in this hope only where it concretely has not become.¹⁶

This broken state is described in the Mahler fragment with the image of bow: bent so far back that its ends strain together with the most explosive tension. The power of this bow, the weight of hope, is the capacity of the tenderness of the nearest to come into contact with the most distant. In this explosive moment the tenderness of

¹³ K, p.125; AGS2, p.177.

¹⁴ K, p.124; AGS2, p.177.

¹⁵ K, p.126; AGS2, p.179.

¹⁶ Daniel Chua makes a related argument in, 'Adorno's Metaphysics of Mourning: Beethoven's Farewell to Adorno', in *The Musical Quarterly*, Vol.87, No.3, (2004), pp.523-545.

the nearest, and loss into the most distant, mutually determine each other. Loss conditions the dynamic of their communion. The tenderness for the nearest, that old familial spirit, finds itself cold and full of death; that to which tenderness is most appropriate, a utopia in which love is reciprocated in its specificity, is removed to the greatest distance.

Such an auratic view might develop a negative humanism imagined by Marx in the *1844 Manuscripts*:

Assume man to be *man* and his relationship to the world to be a human one: then you can exchange love only for love, trust only for trust, etc. [...] Every one of your relations to man and to nature must be a specific expression, corresponding to the object of your will, of your *real individual* life. If you love without evoking love in return – that is, if your loving as loving does not provoke reciprocal love, if through a *living expression* of yourself as a loving person you do not make yourself a *beloved one*, then your love is impotent – a misfortune [*Unglück*].¹⁷

For Adorno this misfortune, which befell both parents and children, becomes universal in catastrophe. Adorno extends Marx's critique of an exchange society founded on abstraction into a critique of all social forms that exclude nature, in which nature returns as avenging myth. Within bourgeois forms of cognition, eternally illuminated by the *intérieur's* commodity light, the presupposition that man's relation to nature is a human one becomes the heuristic for every false claim that the mind alone provides grounds for the reciprocation of love. In Rückert's bourgeois cognition, the nature in the death of children reveals, in disruption, a reflection on the failure of the grounds of love. In the world that forever finds this absence in the spiritual sanctum of what is nearest, in which privacy has been exposed as privation,

¹⁷ Karl Marx, 'The Power of Money', in *Early Writings*, trans. Rodney Livingstone and Gregor Benton, (London: Pelican, 1975), p.379.

Adorno finds an affinity with these artworks in those bonds of love are broken. His writing lingers in the tempus of the subjunctive.

The “what could have become” – the unfulfilled potential of the child who dies – gains importance for Adorno, where hope is conjoined with remembrance. In another iteration of this *Biedermeier* dialectic, Adorno writes,

The pronouncement, probably by Jean Paul, that memories are the only possessions that no-one can take from us, belongs in the storehouse of impotently sentimental consolations [...] In setting up his own archives, the subject seizes his own stock of experiences as property, and makes it something wholly external to himself. Past inner life is turned into furniture, just as conversely, every *Biedermeier* piece was memory made wood. The *intérieur* where the soul accommodates its collection of memoirs and curios is derelict. Memories cannot be conserved in draws and pigeonholes; rather, in them, the past is indissolubly woven into the present.¹⁸

The home becomes a house of memories; the bourgeois-spiritual life is recast as the interior, which in its light glorifies a permanent script of ornamental detritus. These memories rip like shards into the spiritual body of the house-made-human, less promising hope than damning into permanent affliction. The introduction of *memory* into this critique shifts the perspective. Setting the constancy of expectation into the past reveals a view that transforms memories into mere possessions. Possession of memory, just like possession of a commodity, produces, in turn, the deceptive belief that one is the master of all of one’s misfortunes. Kierkegaard, with a vision of faith, proposed a solution to this situation through ridding oneself of these objects and their deceptive relations. Yet Adorno criticised the objectless interior of this phantasy, in which “as mere imageless spirit, memory destroys the pictorial configuration of hope.”¹⁹ Opposed to this nihilism of the objective, and adhering to the aesthetic

¹⁸ *MM*, p.166; *AGS4*, p.187.

¹⁹ *K*, p.109; *AGS2*, pp.154-155.

Adorno instead demands a destruction of the *possessive relation*. In doing so he hoped to unleash what is transient in the past, but fixated into objects, as semblance.

This radical memory-form appears in Adorno's fragment as the repeated figure of '*Verkleinerung*' [making smaller]. The light of joy "is not able to enclose their distracted and abandoned life otherwise than by making it smaller [*indem es verkleinert*]. This happens to the dead through memory." And then, "it is as if through remembrance all the happiness that never was has been preserved in miniature [*Verkleinert*] in these measures" These descriptions echo a sentence from the Kierkegaard book: "If the expansive self in its full dimension is lost in sacrifice, it is rescued as what vanishes by making itself small [*wird es als Verschwindendes gerettet durch Verkleinerung*]." ²⁰ This *Verkleinerung* is the resistance of the individual to becoming a mere point; it is the aesthetic trace of extinction into the *intérieur*. Although not notated in the Kierkegaard book, Adorno is here mobilising Kierkegaard's religious writings on love against his philosophical existentialism. This 'making smaller' is taken from Kierkegaard's own sermon, 'The Work of Love in Recollecting One Who Is Dead'. ²¹ There Kierkegaard describes death not as an intervention of nature but as something that, in love, "offers the briefest summary of life." ²² He then jokes of how in death great estates are redrawn into into the plots of graves, perhaps differing only by half a foot or the presence of a tree:

Thus in death life returns to a childlike simplicity. In childhood the big difference was also that one person had a tree, a flower, a stone. And this difference was an intimation of what would manifest itself in life on a completely different scale. Now life is over, and among the dead this little intimation of difference remains as a recollection, mitigated in jest, of how it was.

²⁰ K, p.128; AGS2, p.182

²¹ Søren Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), pp.345-358.

²² Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, p.345.

This source for the figure of ‘*Verkleinerung*’ remained hidden in the Kierkegaard book. Yet Adorno later described this sermon as “one of the most important pieces [Kierkegaard] ever wrote.”²³ Where Kierkegaard invoked this beautiful description of death, it was contingent on the idea that loving relations with the dead were clear because the dead were “no *actual* object”.²⁴ He compares the love in the recollection of the dead with the reciprocal love of parents and children, in which children as they grow repay the love their parents gave. In contrast, the dead never repay or reciprocate. Prosecuting even the exchange in reciprocal love, his sermon concludes with an image of *faithful* love of the dead that is ultimately objectless. The faithlessness, or revealed self-interest, of exchange is refuted with a nihilism towards the object.

Adorno’s criticism argues that Kierkegaard’s sacrificial logic was more dialectically committed than he had imagined: in sacrificing the objects of the world, however redemptively, he had merely objectified his own subjectivity, constructing aesthetic traces. Adorno grasps these aesthetic traces, to demonstrate their enduring, if beleaguered, actuality. Against Kierkegaard’s emptying of the house of its objectified memories, Adorno makes a claim on a mode of memory that transforms our relation to them so it is no longer possessive. Where “Kierkegaardian love applies to the farthest as well as to the nearest”²⁵ as though all were already dead, Adorno’s criticism dynamises the movement from one into the other and back, in his image of a bow, as an untimely actuality. Its transient semblances joyfully, and redemptively illuminate the catastrophic life.

²³ ‘On Kierkegaard’s Doctrine of Love’, p.417.

²⁴ Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, p.355.

²⁵ ‘On Kierkegaard’s Doctrine of Love’, p.416.

This aesthetic appears in the memory of a life matured through sacrifice. Invoking an autobiographical reflection it sustains the individual against emptying the *intérieur* of objects, instead discovering a negative actuality in what could have been but was not. This impulse appears secretly in the Mahler fragment. While the immediate context for the drafting of his ‘Marginalia on Mahler’ was the death of his teacher, Alban Berg,²⁶ its wider context was the death of his aunt Agathe, who died a year earlier. Agathe, an opera singer, was the most important musical influence on Adorno’s bourgeois youth. Writing to Krenek in mid-1935, he said,

I cannot express what her loss means for me: not the death of a relative, but rather the person who was closer to me than all others, my most faithful friend, the piece of nature from which I could always regenerate myself. I feel completely bludgeoned, and only very slowly can I begin to imagine that – or even how – I will go on living.²⁷

²⁶ Adorno’s typescript is marked with a dedication to Gretel and the date “Christmas 1935”. Berg had died on Christmas Eve.

²⁷ *Adorno-Krenek Briefwechsel* Letter 21.7.1935, p.91, trans. mine. For context, see *Adorno: Kindheit in Amorbach*, ed. Reinhard Pabst (Insel Verlag: Frankfurt, 2003). In the archive I discovered a previously unknown note scribbled on the back of one of Adorno’s letters to Krenek from this time, laying out the themes of the ‘Marginalia on Mahler’. What can be transcribed reads:

“*Marginalien zu Mahler*
Kindertotenlieder.
Variante.
Und trinke bis der Mond erglänzt
am schwarzen Firmament
Transzendenz des Schmerzes.
Verkürzung des Erinnerns.
Nachspiel Lied von der Erde
Prosatendenz
Das Banale und der Ausdruck[?]. Das
Individuum nicht mehr Träger der
Kunst. (Dazu Wedekind "Kunst-
Künstler). Marsch und Kollektiv.
[?] schreiben Beratung[?]
Wegen Am. Leo. [Löwenthal?]
B.R.W.
Leo völlig zus.
Bitte draft senden
Nicht vor Ende VII.
[???] Supply”.

This bow, whose ends strain together, is doubled: the loss of children into distance is refracted as the loss of one's own childhood in maturity. The strain of this second bow is composed from the aging of a life. But the situation is inverted: Adorno's loss of his own childhood is concretely associated with the loss of a mother-figure.

If Rückert was an urban bourgeois, and Mahler a member of a cultural elite in decline, then Adorno is a child of the *Kindertotenlieder*. His maturity is the modernity in which childhood has not just been irrevocably lost in age, but childhood in a bourgeois sense, has been objectively obliterated. Just as in Rückert and Mahler, the bourgeois home reappears at the end of Adorno's fragment. Yet a critical transformation occurs: Adorno writes, "uncomprehending love can only comprehend death as if the last farewell were that of children who would come home again." The home itself now appears in the subjunctive. Unlike the child of Rückert's poem and Mahler's song, who is mythically integrated as the perfection of the shadowy body of the mother, as she became a fateful object of the interior, here both child and mother are freed from mythic relations. Through the determinate hope of semblance, the bourgeois home is granted a new utopic form, as a realm of happiness without sacrifice. In this figure the truth of a catastrophic world, ruined and transfigured, is briefly illuminated by what could have been but was not. "We can hope for the dead only as if for children." This is

a wish that does not accommodate itself to sacrifice and rises in the collapse of existence becoming luminous as it passes away. [...] It is the cell of a materialism whose vision is focused on 'a better world' – not to forget the dreams of the present world, but to change it by the strength of an image.²⁸

²⁸ K, pp.130-131; AGS2, p.186.

2.2 Variation 1: Dried Flowers, or The Introversion of Allegory

Bury the flower, and lay the
human being on this grave.²⁹

The dialectic of the bourgeois *intérieur* expands outwards into a landscape. Closing his fragment on the *Kindertotenlieder*, Adorno drew on the words from Mahler's fourth song, 'Often I think that they had just gone out', which promises the solace of one day meeting with the children again in the sunlight on mountain peaks. This beautiful phantasy contains and conceals deathliness – that the catastrophe that befell those children has also ruined the home, to which in love they will one day be returned.

Adorno's 1928 essay on Schubert takes the shape of the traversal this landscape, out of the home, and returning into its ruin. From the age of Viennese modernism, Adorno's gaze turned back to the city's music of a century earlier. Decades later he described the essay as his "first comprehensive work [...] on the interpretation of music."³⁰ It begins by stepping out of this now unspoken home, similarly cast in death. This threshold lies "between the years of death of Beethoven and of Schubert." Adorno describes the scene:

Whoever crosses the threshold is like someone emerging into the painfully diaphanous light from a rumbling, newly formed crater, frozen in motion, as he becomes aware of the skeletal shadows of vegetation among lava shapes in these wide, exposed peaks, and finally catches sight of the eternal clouds drifting somewhere near the mountain, yet so high above his head. He steps out from the chasm into the landscape of immense depth bounded by an overwhelming quiet on its horizon absorbing the light that earlier had been seared by blazing magma.³¹

²⁹ Paul Celan, 'Backlight', in *Collected Prose*, trans. Rosemarie Waldrop (Riverdale-On-Hudson: The Sheep Meadow Press), p.12, trans. amended.

³⁰ *AGS17*, p.10. trans. mine.

³¹ 'Schubert (1928)' trans. Jonathan Dunsby and Beate Perrey, in *19th-Century Music*, Vol.29, No. 1 (2005), pp. 3-14, p.7; *AGS17*, pp.18-33, p.18.

Where Adorno's consideration of Schubert occasioned a vision of a landscape as dialectical compliment to the ruined *intérieur*, this too expands beyond the bounds of this singular essay. Schubert stands as a sign under which further texts gather, even where he is invoked obliquely.³² These texts frequently refer back to this first exit from the *intérieur*, giving shape to a constellation of death, dream, and landscape in Adorno's thought. But it is the image of flowers that is decisive. Between the landscape and the *intérieur* is a path of flowers, picked by children and returned to the home. In this image Adorno described a set of theoretical problems centring on memory's relation to the organic and the inorganic. With the memory of those landscapes, evoked by those flowers that lie drying and dying in the living room, he developed a philosophical critique of regression.

One such text in which Schubert is quietly invoked is the fragment on *Biedermeier* dialectic of memory in *Minima Moralia*, with its critique of Jean Paul's nostalgia. Its image of the derelict *intérieur*, in which the furniture appears as "memory made wood" bears the title '*Die Blümlein alle*' ['All the little flowers']. Referring to the words of Schubert's song *Trockne Blumen* [Dried Flowers] from *Die Schöne Müllerin*.³³

Ihr Blümlein alle, die sie mir gab,
 Euch soll man legen mit mir ins Grab.
 Wie seht ihr alle mich an so weh,
 Als ob ihr wüßtet wie mir gescheh?

All you little flowers, she gave to me,
 You should be laid with me in the grave,
 You all look at me so full of woe,
 As though you knew what happened to me.

Ihr Blümlein alle, wie welk, wie blaß?
 Ihr Blümlein alle, wovon so naß?
 Ach, Tränen machen nicht maiengrün,
 Machen tote Liebe nicht wieder blühn.

All you little flowers, so limp, so faded,
 All you little flowers, why are you so wet?
 O tears do not bring the green of May,
 They do not make dead love bloom again.

³² Schubert's importance in Adorno's thought has often been understated. Although he only wrote two articles solely on Schubert – the 1928 essay and a 1933 study on the *Grand-Rondo in A Major* D.951 – the figure of Schubert, and references to his works appear in many texts, often pointing to this specific constellation. Two late volumes of collected musical essays also bear Schubertian titles: *Impromptus* and *Moments Musicaux*.

³³ *MM*, pp.166-167; *AGS4*, p.187.

Und Lenz wird kommen, und Winter wird geh'n,
Und Blümlein werden im Grase stehn.
Und Blümlein liegen in meinem Grab,
Die Blümlein alle, die sie mir gab.

And Spring will come, and Winter will go,
And little flowers will stand in the grass,
And little flowers will lie in my grave,
All the little flowers she gave to me.

Und wenn sie wandelt am Hügel vorbei
Und denkt im Herzen: Der meint' es treu!
Dann, Blümlein alle, Heraus, heraus!
Der Mai ist kommen, der Winter ist aus.

And if she strolls past to the hill,
And thinks in her heart: he truly meant it!
Then all the little flowers, come out, come out
May has arrived, and the winter is done.³⁴

In his translation of *Minima Moralia*, Edmund Jephcott noted this allusion to Schubert's song, explaining that "the theme of the song is the fading of flowers and the sentiment avowed by them."³⁵ But Adorno's invocation of this song is neither sentimental, nor does it try to draw spiritual meaning from an image of a naturalised death. Instead, the power of these figures is drawn from a motion of natural-history: of how within this image nature is read as history, while history takes the form of nature. These same dried flowers stand at the very centre of the 1928 Schubert essay:

Brook, mill and black winter wasteland, sprawling without time in the crepuscule of the *Nebensonnen*, as in a dream. These are the signs of the Schubertian landscape, mournfully adorned with dried flowers [*trockne Blumen*] and ice crystal; the objective symbols of death elicit these signs and their feeling [*Gefühl*] returns back into the objective symbols of death. This is how the Schubertian dialectic is formed: it absorbs the fading images of existing objectivity with the power of subjective interiority [*Innerlichkeit*] in order to rediscover it in the smallest cells [*kleinsten Zellen*] of musical concretion. The allegorical image of *Death and the Maiden* collapses in it, not in order to be dissolved into the feeling of the individual [*Gefühl des Individuums*], but instead to raise itself up after its collapse out of the musical shape of mourning. It is therefore qualitatively transformed. But this transformation succeeds only in what is smallest. In what is large death dominates.³⁶

³⁴ Franz Schubert, *Complete Song Cycles*, (New York: Dover, 1970), pp. 46-48, trans mine.

³⁵ *MM*, p. 166; *AGS4*, p.187.

³⁶ Schubert' p.10; *AGS17*, pp.24-25, trans. amended. "*Nebensonnen*" and "*Trockne Blumen*" refer to song titles from *Winterreise* and *Die Schöne Müllerin* respectively. 'Death and the Maiden' is a song on Matthias Claudius' poem of the same name, whose melody became the theme for the second movement of Schubert's String Quartet in D minor D.810. Despite their published title, Dunsby and Perrey translate

Although this passage is the only time that the dried flowers of Schubert's song are mentioned explicitly, figures of flowers and crystals permeate Adorno's essay.

Together they establish a dialectic of organic and inorganic nature, within and against the work of art. Where flowers might have burgeoned with life, they paradoxically appear here dried and dead, while crystals grow, inorganically, as though their internal repetitions were a vegetative reproduction.

During the early twentieth century musical analysis often rested on a notion of 'organicism'³⁷ The work of art was to be considered as a living entity, whose various parts function just as organs do to the organism, maintaining the formal unitary coherence of the work. Adorno insists that Schubert's music cannot be measured by an appeal to the organic. Here the figure of the flower returns: "Schubert's music [is] immune to the idealized synopsis as much as it is to the phenomenological exploration of "coherence", no more a closed system than it is, say, a flower growing to some purpose."³⁸ This argument was founded both on the non-developmental character of Schubert's music, and on a critical account of the relation of art to life in lyric subjectivity. It criticises how, in the organicist notion of the artwork, the claim to identity out of the power of subjectivity had been absorbed into the art object; and in turn, how this formal claim reflected back, as culture, a naturalising image of the subject, implying – in reflection – a vital relation between humanity and its culture.

the 1963 version of the essay, which underwent textual amendments. They list these, but do not notice that '*und Eiskristall*' [and ice crystal] was deleted from this passage. I have reinstated it. See *Die Musik*, 1928. Heft 1, pp.1-12.

³⁷ See Ruth A. Solie, 'The Living Work: Organicism and Musical Analysis', *19th-Century Music*, Vol.4, No.2, (1980), pp.147-156, and Nicholas Cook, *The Schenker Project: Culture, Race, and Music in Fin-de-siècle Vienna*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), pp.74-77.

³⁸ 'Schubert', p.7; *AGS17*, p.19.

In the decades preceding Adorno's essay such notions of the identity of art and life predominated in German and Austrian aesthetics. There is perhaps no more important example than Wilhelm Dilthey's essay on Goethe, published in various versions between 1877 and 1910. There he wrote:

Poetry is the representation and expression of life. It expresses lived experience and represents the external reality of life. [...] The finitude of existence, bounded by birth and death and restricted by the pressure of reality, awakens in me the longing for something enduring, changeless, and withdrawn from the pressure of things, and when I look up at the stars, they become a symbol for such an eternal, untouchable world. In everything surrounding me, I re-experience that which I myself have experienced. At dusk I look down upon a quiet town at my feet; the lights appearing one after the other in the houses below are to me the expression of a secure, tranquil existence. The life I find in my own self, my situations, and the people and things around me, constitute their life-value [*Lebenswert*], in contrast to the values they receive through their effects. It is this life-value that the literary work shows first of all. Its object is not reality as discerned by the mind [*Geist*], but rather my own state, and the state of things manifested in life-relations [*Lebensbezüge*]. What a lyric poem or a story shows us – and what it fails to show us – can be explained on this basis. But life-values are related on the bases of the nexus of life itself, and those relations give meaning to persons, things, situations and events. [...] This is the fundamental relation between life and literature, upon which every historical form [*Gestalt*] of poetry defends. Surely the primary and most decisive feature of Goethe's work is that it grows out of an extraordinary energy of lived experience [*des Erlebens*]. [...] In this respect there is no distinction between his life and his literary work.³⁹

While Dilthey is not specifically referenced in the Schubert essay, his position became a foil for Adorno's critical construction of lyric. Adorno writes against "a misconception of the lyrical where, in the spirit of the nineteenth century's outrageous overestimation of art, [...] art is taken as something human, or as glimpses of a transcendental reality."⁴⁰

³⁹ Wilhelm Dilthey, *Poetry and Experience*, trans. Christophe Rodio (Princeton University Press: Princeton, 1985), pp.237-238.

⁴⁰ 'Schubert', p.7; *AGS17*, p.19.

These nineteenth century ideas represented psychological theories of art, with the work becoming inseparable from the state of its producer's mind; meanwhile, great artists were considered geniuses, such that their artworks became expressions of some mystical universal human truth. In both aspects, works were understood as powered by subjective *intention*, which would constitute the universe in which they were sensible and meaningful. Art was thus conceived of as the great reconciler of the individual and society. Yet a more forceful claim is concealed within this notion of intention: culture is meaningful insofar as it is lent vitality by the living subject, whose life in art it in turn confirms. Thus living nature, culturally reflected, becomes the ideal site of lyric. As such, culture draws its strength from nature, but only as mediated by living subjectivity. Against this, Adorno's Schubert essay announced a theory of lyric that insisted on the non-identity of life and work. This thought would ultimately develop a philosophy that undermined the claim to the very identity of the subject. Instead of the artwork being identical to the life of the artist, for Adorno the lyric in art appears only "as an image of the real":⁴¹

In this it differs from other, nonlyrical images only in that it coincides with the onset of the real itself. The subjective and the objective, forming Schubert's landscape, constitute the lyrical in a new way. The substance of the lyrical is never something that has been manufactured: it consists of the smallest cells of existing objectivity [*kleinsten Zellen der seienden Objektivität*], of which it remains an image long after the large structures of objectivity no longer hold sway. These images, however, do not strike the soul of the lyrically receptive person like sunlight falling on leaves: works of art are not actually alive.⁴²

Adorno's criticism draws on the epistemological critique of intention found in Benjamin's *Trauerspiel* book, which proclaimed that "truth is the death of intention."⁴³ But the thought also drew on Marxist theory, in which works are

⁴¹ 'Schubert', p.7; *AGS17*, p.19.

⁴² 'Schubert', p.7; *AGS17*, p.19, trans. amended.

⁴³ *OT*, p.36; *BGS1*, p.216.

understood as radically alienated from their producers. While capitalism exchanges portions of one's life as socially necessary labour time, the life of living labour is transformed, dying every working hour, into products, which only phantasmagorically appear alive.⁴⁴ This Marxist line offers a critique of any neo-Kantianism that would see culture as mere nature enchanted by humanity. It shares this critique with Hegelianisms, for which culture exists as objective spirit, produced through subjective externalisation [*Entäußerung*]. But unlike the Hegelian conclusion in which this objective moment is reinternalised through memory [*Erinnerung*] in the Absolute, because nature is assumed as nothing but an element of absolute subjectivity, Marxism would leverage the force of the dead – which marks of the failure of subjective identification, revealing its domination of nature – against the social organisation of the world. Where both Adorno and Benjamin's critique aligned with Marxism, they would criticise the mode of memory implied by Hegel, which lay close to Kant in conceiving of nature as a blind spot, either arbitrarily included in, or simply excluded from, the movement of spirit, just as the Kantian thing-in-itself marked the boundaries of theoretical cognition.⁴⁵ Against this identifying motion of externalisation in alienation and internalisation in memory, both Benjamin and Adorno developed accounts of memory as “entering and disappearing into” matter, to address the inadequacy of other theorisations of nature. These set the scene, as the landscape of ‘natural-history’.⁴⁶

⁴⁴ Adorno writes elsewhere, “He who wishes to know about life in its immediacy must scrutinise its estranged form, the objective powers that determined individual existence even in its most hidden recesses. [...] Our perspective of life has passed into an ideology which conceals the fact there is life no longer.” *MM*, p.15; *AGS4*, p.13.

⁴⁵ Whether this assessment of Hegel is justified (it would undo much of the first sections of the *Encyclopedia Logic*) is somewhat moot.

⁴⁶ See *OT*, p.47; *BGS1*, pp.227-228.

In hearing Schubert's music in the 1920s, in the light of their being taken up in the commodity world of the nineteenth century, these lyric works disclosed something wholly other than an organicist image. Schubert's music, in its fragmentary, non-developmental aspect, stood, to Adorno, in opposition to those works that developed closed forms. In contrast, his works appeared as 'potpourri'⁴⁷ The word 'potpourri', which originally referred to a pot of dried flowers in the home, that literally decay [*pourrir*], had since the eighteenth century been used to describe musical works whose form was a medley of preformed material.⁴⁸ Not only were Schubert's works sometimes constructed in this way, but their subsequent history and popularisation was determined by their construction into potpourris under the regime of nineteenth century commodity music. Adorno's critique of lyric appears under this non-developmental aspect of Schubert's music. In history the potpourri delivers up its moment of construction; in this way it undermines the principle of subjective unity, intention, and identity, precisely in and through its own spurious formal unity forged in its mere existence:

The potpourri condenses those features of a work which the downfall of subjectivity has dispersed within it, forming a new unified entity which, even if admittedly unjustified in itself, can nevertheless show how unique such features are in comparison. [...] Potpourris seek to reclaim the lost unity of works of art on the off-chance simply by putting bits of music together. They can exist only when their unity is not guaranteed subjectively – as could never be expected of a game of chance – when it arises from the configuration of ruptured images of truth. But this appears to be defending an image of Schubert that is false, both traditionally and in its concept of the lyrical: for it views Schubert's music as a plantlike organism unfolding regardless of any preconceived form, or perhaps irrespective of any kind of form at all, which grows and blooms so delightfully. Potpourri construction, on the other hand, denies the music anything to do with organicist theory. For such organic unity would have to be teleological: its every cell would necessitate the next one,

⁴⁷ 'Schubert', p.9; *AGS17*, p.22.

⁴⁸ See Andrew Lamb's entry on 'Potpourri' in *Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), Vol.20, p.220.

and the coherence would speak of the living motion of subjective intention, albeit one that died away, its revival surely not lying in the spirit of the potpourri.⁴⁹

Adorno was well aware that concealed within organicist theories of art was an attempt at a reconciliation of a rupture long known to philosophical aesthetics. In treating the artwork as though it were an organism, an attempt was made *in culture* to bridge the “great gulf [*große Kluft*]” Kant had described between the realms of freedom and nature.⁵⁰ While Kant’s own attempt in his *Critique of Judgement* had fallen into two distinct parts – as critique of aesthetic judgement and teleological judgement – the organicist approach to art attempted to short-circuit this rupture through the binding force of culture itself.⁵¹ Such culture imagined itself as utterly natural precisely where its own history of the domination of nature was expressive. Adorno’s invocation of the figures of the dried flower and the crystal offers a critique of this synthesis. The dried flower and the crystal are less adornments of Schubert’s landscape drawn from his songs than emblemata that determine the relationship of lyric to the landscape itself. The dynamics of these emblems – repetition and decay – determine a new means of reflection between humans and their artworks:

The cells that the potpourri throws together must have been interlaced according to a law different from that of a living organism. Even conceding that everything in Schubert’s music is natural rather than artificial, this growth, entirely fragmentary, and never sufficient, is not plantlike, but crystalline.⁵²

⁴⁹ ‘Schubert’, p.9; *AGS17*, p.22.

⁵⁰ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, trans. Werner Pluhar, (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987), pp.35-36. Adorno later acknowledged the Kantian backdrop to these arguments on organicism. See ‘Vers une musique informelle’ in *Quasi Una Fantasia*, trans. Rodney Livingston (London: Verso, 1992), p.319; *AGS16*, p.537.

⁵¹ In Kant no bridge can be thrown between these realms. The power of judgement may only allow the transition to be made “without too violent a leap [*ohne einen zu gewaltsamen Sprung*]”, *Critique of Judgement*, p. 230.

⁵² ‘Schubert’, p.9; *AGS17*, p.23.

Adorno thus attacked the vitality in metaphors of organic nature in describing artworks, by introducing images of death, in order to guard against the idealism of classical nature philosophy. The consequences of such a critique lie far beyond the scope of a discussion of Schubert's music. Dilthey's stars, symbols of an eternal untouchable world, perhaps the very same stars towards which Kant had once looked up, as inscrutable in their eternity as the will of God,⁵³ for Adorno became "the deceptive eternity of the stars."⁵⁴ One might remember here Lukács' quip that "Kant's starry firmament now shines only in the dark night of pure cognition, it no longer lights any solitary wanderer's path (for to be a man in the new world is to be solitary)."⁵⁵

The dried flowers and the crystal are thus announced as twin emblems of death that intrude into the artwork. The landscape into which we step, over the threshold, illuminated in the diaphanous light refracted by Schubert's song is "the landscape of death."⁵⁶ Yet for Adorno, the critique of *Lebensphilosophie* was not to simply suggest that culture was founded not only on a universality of life, but also included death. Dialectically, death is doubled in and through culture. If, contra Dilthey, the artwork was not merely an expression of life "bounded by birth and death", but itself *contains* a moment of death, then this changed how artworks were to be understood. An artwork containing death does not only refer to the death of the artist but also the death in and of artwork – or, in the language of the Schubert essay, the decay [*Zerfall*] of subjective intention within the work.⁵⁷ The truth of the artwork

⁵³ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, trans. Werner Pluhar, (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2002), p.162.

⁵⁴ 'Schubert', p.9; *AGS17*, p.20.

⁵⁵ Georg Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel*, p.36.

⁵⁶ 'Schubert', p.8; *AGS17*, p.23.

⁵⁷ 'Schubert', p.9; *AGS17*, p.20.

appears in the exposition of this decay. Death's motion – of putrefaction or freezing – appears within the work. Yet death sublated in culture and the natural aspect of the death of its author remain distinct. Reflection takes place in the distance between them.⁵⁸

Adorno would advance this argument in a consideration of the other pillar of that threshold over which the Schubertian landscape first appeared: the death of Beethoven. In his 1937 essay 'Beethoven's Late Style' the image of home and the landscape return.⁵⁹ Here, instead of flowers, Adorno described Beethoven's late work in comparison to fruit:

⁵⁸ Estaban Buch gives a related exegesis of the inorganic and the crystalline in 'Adorno's "Schubert": From the Critique of the Garden Gnome to the Defense of Atonalism', in *19th-Century Music*, Vol.29, No.1, (2005), pp.25-30. Not recognising the wider philosophical implications of Adorno's argument, he draws a homology between the metaphors of the organic artwork and contemporaneous political vitalism. Through this common metaphor, Buch argues that Adorno's critique is the expression of an antinomian politics. Despite this argument's apparent elegance, it falls short of Adorno's thought. Insofar as Buch relegates both music and politics to objects lying within some unifying ideological domain, all notions of nature are reduced to mere metaphor. Against this, Adorno's concern is not just a language of vitalism, but life and death in reality. In politics, fascism not only thought about itself in organicist terms, but rather attempted to institute a *real* vitalism paradoxically founded on the death of others. Similarly, under relations of production in which death is sovereign, death does not only occur in artworks as discursive content. Adorno accounts for the relations between nature and history, and not merely ideological concepts of nature and history. In reading the figures of the dried flowers and ice crystals allegorically, these images are revealed as more than metaphor. The critique invoked by them addresses the relation between art and life, and not just life's representation in art.

⁵⁹ "No longer does he gather the landscape, deserted now, and alienated into an image. He lights it with rays from the fire that is ignited by subjectivity, which breaks out and throws itself against the walls of the work, true to the idea of its dynamism." *Essays on Music*, trans. Susan H. Gillespie, p.567; *AGS17*, p.16. These sentences draw from the opening of the Schubert essay, which describes Schubert's music as although "not always having the power of the active will that rises from the inmost nature of Beethoven, its endemic shafts and fissures lead to the same chthonic depths where that will had its source and these landscapes bear its demonic image, which active practical reason managed to master again and again; yet the stars that burn for Schubert's music are the same as those towards whose unattainable light Beethoven's clenched fist reached out." p.7; *AGS17*, p.18.

The maturity of the late works of significant artists does not resemble the kind one finds in fruit. They are, for the most part, not round, but furrowed, even ravaged. Devoid of sweetness, bitter and spiny, they do not surrender themselves to mere delectation. They lack all the harmony that the classicist aesthetic is in the habit of demanding from works of art, and they show more traces of history than of growth.⁶⁰

In this essay Adorno meditated on how interpretation ought to respond to the relationships between the reality of death, the entrance of death into the artwork, and the notional death of the artwork,⁶¹ “Studies of the very late Beethoven,” he wrote, “seldom fail to make reference to biography and fate. It is as if, confronted with the dignity of human death, the theory of art were to divest itself of its rights and abdicate in favour of reality.”⁶² Death again is doubled: artworks must confront death in reality, or are otherwise prone to rest on, and confirm, a deceptive vitalism founded in the identity of life and work, building a cultural world that represses death in reality. Great works draw death into themselves, and refract it. They are not bounded by the end of the life of the artist, but rather are formally interrupted by it: their fragmentary form reflects a world in which death is a reality, despite the will of idealist philosophy, and despite the preponderance of forms that in perfection disguise this reality. Adorno was therefore concerned with the modes of artworks’ *internalisation* of death as “second nature”.

If, in the face of death’s reality, art’s rights lose their force, then the former will certainly not be able to be absorbed directly into the work in the guise of its ‘subject.’ Death is imposed only on created beings, not on works of art, and thus it has appeared in art only in a refracted mode, as allegory. The psychological interpretation misses this. By declaring the mortal subjectivity to be the substance of the late work, it hopes to be able to perceive death in

⁶⁰ ‘Late Style in Beethoven’, in *Essays on Music*, pp.564-567, p.564; *AGS17*, p.13.

⁶¹ Adorno’s thesis is pithily summarised in a note referenced in Rolf Tiedemann’s editor’s afterword to *AT*: “The fragment is the intrusion of death into the work. By destroying it it also removes the stain of semblance [*Makel des Scheins*].”, p.477; *AGS7*, p.537.

⁶² *Essays on Music*, p.564; *AGS17*, p.13.

unbroken form in the work of art. This is the deceptive crown of metaphysics.⁶³

In the face of the reality of death, the artwork becomes an arena of its allegorical expression under a sovereignty without force. For this reason Adorno refused attempts to draw social or political conclusions from representations of death in artworks' discursive content, as though this granted immediate access to judgment. Instead, he emphasised this doubled, mediated, figure of death, in which it appears transformed in the motion of its internalisation.

Adorno's allusion to "allegory" refers us to the theory of allegory that Benjamin developed in his *Trauerspiel* book.⁶⁴ Indeed, Benjamin's theory of allegory, replete with death and putrefaction, relates precisely to those "images" that structure Adorno's 'Schubert'. Adorno describes the reading of allegory:

The lyric creator does not pour feelings directly into forms, but rather uses feelings as a means of getting to the truth in its minutest crystallization. It is not truth itself that feeds into the structure, but the structure does indeed convey truth. The image-maker lays bare the image. Yet the image of truth is always inscribed in history. The history of the image is its decay, that is, the decay of how truth appears in detail, which the image does no more than express: and it also means the unveiling of its very transparency if the substance of truth is to be revealed; it means the truth content which comes to the fore only in its decay.⁶⁵

Although Benjamin's thesis rested on the peculiar mixedness of the baroque *Trauerspiel* as a literary form, with its unstable relation to political reality composed of a thingly world of fragments and ruins, his theory of allegory was founded on more recent thinking. He noted that the last major discussion of allegory had appeared at

⁶³ *Essays on Music*, p.566; *AGS17*, p.17.

⁶⁴ Admittedly, in an often overlooked passage, Kant regarded the inclusion of death in the artwork as allegory: "The art of sculpture [...] has permitted [ugly objects] to be presented by an allegory – e.g., death. ([by] a beautiful genius)", *Critique of Judgement*, p.180. But here the influence on Adorno's thinking is not Kant but Benjamin.

⁶⁵ 'Schubert', p.8; *AGS17*, p.20.

the turn of the nineteenth century.⁶⁶ With reference to Romantic theories of allegory Benjamin distinguished it from its counterpart, the symbol, with reference to the distinction between the organic and inorganic:

It is not possible to conceive of a starker opposite to the artistic symbol, the plastic symbol, the image of organic totality, than the amorphous fragment that is seen in the form of allegorical script.”⁶⁷

If the allegorical allows for the entry of death, as an inorganic fragment, into the work, then it does so by presenting the relation of nature and history in the figure of decay.

When, as is the case in *Trauerspiel*, history becomes part of the setting, it does so as script. The word ‘history’ stands written on the countenance of nature in the characters of transience. The allegorical physiognomy of natural-history, which is put on the stage in the *Trauerspiel* is present in the reality in the form of the ruin. In the ruin history has been physically merged into the setting. And in this guise history does not assume the form of the process of an eternal life so much as that of irresistible decay.⁶⁸

This inorganic form of expression, founded on “consciously constructed ruins,”⁶⁹ takes its cue from an approach to nature, remarkably close to Adorno’s accounts of Schubert’s dried flowers and the ravaged fruit of Beethoven’s late work.

Nature remained the great teacher for the writers of this period. However, nature was not seen by them in bud and bloom, but in the over-ripeness and decay of her creations. In nature they saw eternal transience [*ewige Vergängnis*], and here alone did the saturnine visions of this generation recognise history. [...] In the process of decay, and in it alone, the events of history shrivel up and become absorbed into the setting.⁷⁰

Benjamin notion of allegory was counterposed to the apparent natural mysticism of the hidden and *interior* aspect of the symbol’s mode of signification. Drawing on Georg Friedrich Creuzer and Joseph van Görres, he argued that in Romantic works of

⁶⁶ *OT*, p.159; *BGS1*, p.336.

⁶⁷ *OT*, p.176; *BGS1*, pp.351-352.

⁶⁸ *OT*, pp.177-178; *BGS1*, p.353.

⁶⁹ *OT*, p.182; *BGS1*, p.357.

⁷⁰ *OT*, p.179; *BGS1*, p.355.

criticism the symbol and the allegory are differentiated in their modes of disclosing meaning: while the symbol signifies a concept, something supersensible [*übersinnlich*] beyond itself, the allegory embodies the concept, bringing it into the sensible [*sinnlich*] world of things. A temporal distinction follows: while the symbol discloses its meaning in its own destruction, in the mystical instant, the allegory discloses its meaning through an enduring or eternal appearance. He quotes from a letter by Görres: “[The symbol and allegory] stand in relation to each other as does that silent, great and mighty natural world of mountains and plants to the living progression of human history.”⁷¹ Commenting on this passage, Benjamin emphasised the organic aspect of the interiority of the symbol, which assumes an image not distant from those *Biedermeier* memories made into wood: “the measure of time of the expression of the symbol is the mystical instant, in which the symbol assumes the meaning into its hidden and, if one might say so, wooded [*waldiges*] interior.”⁷²

Benjamin’s defence of the allegory, and attack on the symbol, was not merely literary-historical. It responded also to a contemporary theosophical intellectual trend. Within such thinking, itself not dissimilar in consequence from *Lebensphilosophie*, nature was imagined as a great vivid spiritual entity, which in its unity would reveal divine wisdom. For theosophists the particular would give way to the universal living whole through the symbolic relation. By discovering living nature within itself, by leaping into the interior, the artwork might resplendently illuminate the world. Such an idea had most prominently developed a century earlier by Goethe, in his morphological theories of nature, published and popularised by Rudolf Steiner in the late nineteenth century. In Goethe’s hylozoistic thought, this unity of nature was most

⁷¹ *OT*, p.165; *BGS1*, p.342.

⁷² *OT*, p.165; *BGS1*, p.342.

adequately presented by the image of a “polarity” between plantlike and crystalline nature, in which what was plantlike would represent that aspect of the spiritual whole in its motion of becoming, as a repository of potential, while the crystalline marked the moment of consummation [*Vollendung*], as the fragmentary symbol of the totality.⁷³ Applying such a doctrine to artworks saw them transformed into symbols of the whole, as though their content were an organic interior defining a form of life. The concordance of form and content as “beauty” would become an analogy for how each artwork, as a singular entity, concorded with the spiritualised natural universe, as though it were a living crystal. “As a symbolic construct,” Benjamin writes, “the beautiful is supposed to merge with the divine in an unbroken whole.”⁷⁴

If such a thought was most prevalent in what Benjamin described as “classicism”, then in Romantic philosophy, it migrated from the artwork into an account of the subject. Such symbolic thinking treated each individual, through what lay inside him- or herself, as though representing a relation to a living whole. Thus an unlimited immanence of the moral world is derived from theosophical aesthetics. For Benjamin such an image would have its literary apotheosis in the figure of the “beautiful soul.”⁷⁵ Such a figure, whose crystallinity in the Goethean sense, which Benjamin described as “harmonious interiority [*gegensatzlose Innerlichkeit*]”, when

⁷³ On the crystalline in this context see Rafael Köhler, ‘*Der Kristall als ästhetische Idee. Ein Beitrag zur Rezeptions- und Ideengeschichte der Zweiten Wiener Schule*’ in *Archiv für Musikwissenschaft*, Vol.42, No.4, (1985), pp.241-262, particularly his discussion of Steiner and Goethe, pp.243-250. On Goethe’s nature philosophy, see Alfred Schmidt’s entry on ‘*Natur*’ in *Goethe Handbuch*, eds. Bernd Witte, Theo Buck, Hans-Dietrich Dahnke, Regine Otto, and Peter Schmidt, (Stuttgart: Verlag J. B. Metzler, 1997), Vol.4/2, pp.755-776.

⁷⁴ *OT*, p.160; *BGS1*, p.337.

⁷⁵ *OT*, p.160; *BGS1*, p.337. This figure was most importantly developed by Schiller, and later described by Goethe in *Wilhelm Meister’s Wunderjahre*. A prominent criticism of this aestheticised life, not wholly dissimilar from Benjamin’s, appeared in Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit*. Another critique of the beautiful soul is given in Benjamin’s ‘Goethe’s Elective Affinities’.

deceptively seeming to lose themselves in their own interiority, in truth became legitimators for the subject's mystical, disavowed dominion over the universe.

Benjamin ferociously refused this hylozoism. For him, art was forged in a fallen, deathly nature: "If nature has always been subject to the power of death, it is also true that it has always been allegorical. Significance and death both come to fruition in historical development."⁷⁶ Against a harmonious thinking of life and work, mystically uniting internal and external nature, Benjamin's theory of allegory rested on the *historical* life of the subject, sunken into a nature whose unfreedom and hence significance was marked by death. With this thought, allegory became the basis for a theory of sensuous materiality in a modernity whose world was composed of alienated things. The saturnine vision of the allegorist offered less a mode of cognition than a changed comportment with regard to this world.

This rehearsal of Romantic accounts of the symbol and allegory led, in the *Trauerspiel* book, to a significant formulation of 'natural-history':

Whereas in the symbol destruction is idealised and the transfigured face of nature is fleetingly revealed in the light of redemption, in allegory, the observer is confronted with the *facies hippocratica* of history as a petrified original landscape.

Adorno quoted this passage in 'The Idea of Natural-History', where it was removed from its Romantic context. Nonetheless, this essay's commentary preserved traces of a thought developed in the Schubert essay, which, considering Schubert's music as a specific form of Romantic art, implicitly criticised an element of Benjamin's argument. The *Trauerspiel* book presents the symbol only negatively, as a foil for determining the stakes of the allegorical way of seeing. The symbolic mode is

⁷⁶ *OT*, p.166; *BGS1*, p.343.

subsequently set aside. Benjamin's reasons for this were twofold: firstly, he intended to demonstrate how the baroque mode of expression and was overtaken by a symbolic mode in the subsequent century. Secondly, following Görres' notion of a symbolised "vividly progressing human history [*lebendig fortschreitende Menschengeschichte*]", he imagined the interior from which the symbol draws meaning as intrinsically organic. This claim, in turn, would justify the pronounced anti-psychological and anti-subjectivist stance of the *Trauerspiel* book, such that the allegory of the baroque could, in an untimely way, be brought to bear on the prevalent symbolic structure of signification in subsequent epochs, and their investments in spurious vitalisms.

In addressing the Romantic artwork, Adorno criticised the claim that the interiority of the symbol is truly organic. While for Benjamin allegory erupted on the seventeenth century stage, Adorno theorised a nineteenth century world of alienated objects that had, through their mode of production, drawn death into their interiors. The landscapes of Schubert's music were produced by focusing on these interiors through a different type of vision: that of the dream.

While Adorno's essay addressed Schubert's music, a piece of writing by Schubert made a deep impression on this thought. In 1822 Schubert wrote a text simply titled 'My Dream'. After his death it was passed to Robert Schumann, who published it:⁷⁷

I was a brother of many brothers and sisters. Our father and our mother were good. I was devoted to them all with a deep love. Once, my father took us to a feast. There my brothers became very merry. I, however, was sad. Then my father approached me and commanded me to enjoy the delicious food. But I could not, wherefore my father, becoming angry, banished me from his sight. I turned my steps away and, my heart full of infinite love for those who disdained it, wandered into a distant land. For long years I felt torn between the greatest grief and the greatest love. Then the news of my mother's death reached me. I hastened to see her, and my father, softened by sorrow, did not

⁷⁷ For a philological history and psychoanalytic interpretation see Maynard Solomon 'Franz Schubert's 'My Dream'', *American Imago*, Vol.38, No.2, pp.137-154.

hinder my entrance. Then I saw her corpse. Tears flowed from my eyes. I saw her lying there like the happy old past, in which, according to the deceased's wish, we were to live as she herself once had.

And we followed her corpse in sorrow and the coffin sank down. – from that time on I again remained at home. Then my father took me once again into his favourite garden. He asked me if I liked it. But the garden was wholly repellent to me and I dared not say so. Then, flushing, he asked me a second time: did the garden please me? Trembling, I denied it. Then my father struck me and I fled. And for the second time I turned my steps away and, with a heart full of infinite love for those who disdained it, I again wandered into a distant land. For long, long years I sang songs. When I would sing of love, it turned to pain. And again, when I would sing of pain, it turned to love.

Thus love and pain divided me.

And once, I had news of a pious virgin who had just died. And around her tomb formed a circle in which many young and old people perpetually walked as though in bliss. They spoke softly, so as not to wake the virgin.

Heavenly thoughts seemed forever to be showered upon the youths from the virgin's tomb, like fine sparks producing a soft rustling. I, too, longed to walk there. But only a miracle, people said, leads into this circle. Nevertheless, I went to the tomb, with slow steps and lowered gaze, filled with devotion and firm belief, and, before I was aware of it, I found myself in the circle from which there arose a wondrously lovely sound; and I felt as though eternal bliss were compressed into a single moment. My father, too, I saw, reconciled and loving. He clasped me in his arms and wept. But not so much as I.⁷⁸

This extraordinarily complex text contains the motions of repetition, death and reconciliation. The dreamer departs twice, wandering in distant lands. Twice images of death are presented: in the first the passing of the mother is transfigured through tears into the “happy old days” into which the mourners are transported; in the second death is made young. As if in a rite, the dreamer enters, by way of miracle, into “eternal bliss” that has been “compressed into a single moment.” Whether this dream contains one death or two remains ambiguous. But the father's enduring presence suggests the two may be one and the same. The piece resolves doubly: once in the sorrow of transience; once in the joy of eternity. It is as though they may be one and the same if only struck differently in a changing pattern of light, within a world of repetition upon which happiness lightly rests.

⁷⁸ Maynard Solomon, ‘Franz Schubert's ‘My Dream’’, pp.137-138

This dream is not powered by the organic, but by the death of the mother, which, internalised, plays out in the twin tempi of memory and transfiguration. Adorno's essay suggests an engagement with the text in its final lines: "we cry, knowing in untold happiness, that this music is as it is in the promise of what one day we ourselves will be. This is music we cannot decipher, but it holds up to our blurred, over-brimming eyes the secret of reconciliation at last."⁷⁹ Adorno had likely read Eduard Hitschmann's interpretation of Schubert's text, which appeared in the same issue of *Internationale Zeitschrift für Ärztliche Psychoanalyse* as Freud's metapsychological essay on the unconscious.⁸⁰ Hitschmann's read Schubert's text as "a serious, visionary story", which could "rightfully be understood as an allegorical mirror-image of his inner development."⁸¹

For Benjamin, allegories, which appear frozen or petrified, turn out to have their own dynamic. Their devaluation and disintegration, as their signification passes on to further things, reveals a falling in the rhythm of eternal transience. The other side of the dialectic is ignored with his dismissal of the symbolic signification. The *Trauerspiel* offers no view on to transient eternity, or the eternity transfigured in an instant, in the grand view of a horizon. Adorno recognised this alternative figure, a horizontal complement to the fall, in Schubert's own dream, as eternal bliss is compressed into a single moment. Nonetheless this moment is overcome by falling tears. Where Adorno approaches a symbolic logic in Schubert's dreamscape, even these symbols are read as allegories. The dream's amassed symbolic images are

⁷⁹ 'Schubert', p.14; *AGS17*, p.33.

⁸⁰ Eduard Hitschmann, 'Franz Schuberts Schmerz und Liebe', *Internationale Zeitschrift für Ärztliche Psychoanalyse*, Vol.3, No.5, (1915), pp.287-292. Freud's 'The Unconscious' appears pp.257-269.

⁸¹ 'Franz Schuberts Schmerz und Liebe', p.288, trans. mine.

revealed as culture's deadened thingly detritus now absorbed into the *intérieur*. Yet the *intérieur* – and the exit from it, wandering, and return – provide a setting:

If psychoanalysis has used “journey” and “wandering” in its objective death symbolism as archaic residues, then it is with good reason that we look for them in the landscape of death. The eccentric construction of that landscape, in which every point is equally close to the centre, reveals itself to the wanderer walking round it with no actual progress: it stands in contrast to all development, the first step as close to death as the last, and the scattered features of the landscape are scanned in rotation by the wanderer, who cannot let go of them. Schubert's themes wander just like the miller does, or he whose beloved abandoned him to the winter. Those themes know of no history, but only shifts in perspective: the only way they change is through a change of light, and this explains Schubert's inclination to use the same theme two or three times in different works, and different ways.⁸²

Benjamin's book concluded with the excoriation of subjectivity and its sovereignty – “the triumph of subjective rule over thing is the origin of all allegorical contemplation.”⁸³ In Benjamin the “rule over the thing” meant political sovereignty and dominion over external nature. Adorno's Schubert essay extends this problematic by reading psychoanalytic dream symbols allegorically. The sovereignty staked in this was that of the Romantic subject over his own overgrown interiority, which in promising to be the last refuge of nature, he reflected outward into the world.

In an article on the Schubert essay Dragana Jeremic Molnar and Aleksandar Molnar recently stated that

Adorno's remark that psychoanalysis uses the “death symbolism” of traveling and wandering already indicates that he actually did not intend to stay faithful to Freud. At no point in his output [...] does Freud treat wandering as a regular symbol for death.⁸⁴

⁸² ‘Schubert’, p.10; *AGS17*, p.25, trans. amended.

⁸³ *OT*, p.233; *BGS1*, 407.

⁸⁴ Dragana Jeremic Molnar and Aleksander Molnar, ‘Adorno, Schubert, Mimesis’, in *19th-Century Music*, Vol.38, No.1, Summer 2014, pp.53-78. Molnar and Molnar's essay is a bizarre polemic. They frequently make errors and wilfully ignore texts, in order to spuriously accuse Adorno of being a crypto-Nazi proposing a project of “mythologising nature” as *Blut und Boden*.

Their assertion is incorrect. Yet this symbolism occupies an unusual place in Freud's writing. In *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud broke radically with past dream interpreters insofar as he refuted a symbolic mode of interpretation. Instead, he claimed that dreams were formed mostly of the "day's residues", unfulfilled sexual excitations, repressed material, and infantile experiences. But between the late-1900s and mid-1910s, under the influence of Wilhelm Stekel, who Freud bitterly remarked "has perhaps damaged psycho-analysis as much as he has benefitted it",⁸⁵ he accepted that some dreams contained symbolic material.

His most significant account of symbolism in dreams appeared in the *Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis* 1915-1916.⁸⁶ Here he explicitly describes journeying as a symbol of death:

Departure in dreams means dying. So, too, if a child asks where someone is who has died and whom he misses it is common nursery usage to reply that he had gone on a journey. [...] The dramatist is using the same symbolic connection when he speaks of the after-life as 'the undiscovered country from whose bourn no *traveller* returns'. Even in ordinary life it is common to speak of 'the last journey'. Everyone acquainted with ancient rituals is aware of how seriously (in the religion of Ancient Egypt, for instance) the idea is taken of a journey to the land of the dead, many copies have survived of *The Book of the Dead*, which was supplied to the mummy like a Baedeker to take with him on the journey.⁸⁷

For Freud, dream symbols differed from other dream elements through their mode of interpretation. The labour of normal interpretation involved working through

⁸⁵ Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, p. 350. This was added to the 1925 edition.

⁸⁶ In his failed *Habilitationschrift* on the unconscious in Kant and Freud, the *Introductory Lectures* are Adorno's preferred psychoanalytic source, constituting the majority of his citations of Freud. It is unsurprising to find a quiet reference to this material in 'Schubert'. It is also a likely source for the bodily image of the house in '*Nachtmusik*' cited above: "the human body is often represented in dreams by the symbol of a house. Carrying this representation further, we found that windows, doors and gates stood for openings in the body and that façades of houses were either smooth or provided with balconies and projections to hold on to." *Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis (Parts I and II)*, FSE15, p.159.

⁸⁷ Freud, *Introductory Lectures*, FSE15, p.161.

repressed memories, most often paying close attention to peculiarities, obscurities, and ambiguities, such that the dream could spin itself out into narratives of violence, guilt, and unfulfillment. For the most part the matter of dreams was found in the previous day's experiences that had not been adequately worked through in waking life (although the consequences extended beyond the previous day, and into familial, social, and historical relations.) Symbols in dream texts were drawn, instead, from archaic remnants of culture. In his lectures Freud speculated on the existence of "an ancient but extinct mode of expression, of which different pieces have survived in different fields."⁸⁸ While the normal, associative analytic work of interpretation took place in the mind and mouth of the analysand, the interpretation of dream symbols took a form in which the analyst, as a virtuoso or genius, could in a stroke undo the dream's obfuscations.⁸⁹ Unlike other dream material, these symbols and their relations were not tied primarily to experience. Instead they belonged to a realm from which the dreamer found himself alienated. Specifically, where normal interpretation led to revelations to which the analysand might energetically respond, Freud defined symbolic relations as those in which, even in clarifying meaning, the consequences made no deep or transformative impression.

Freud called these dream elements "symbolic" because, as in Benjamin's account, they could be solved and dissolved in an instant by the interpreter. They nonetheless maintained a second temporality as apparently timeless, frozen, archaic pieces of civilisation [*Kultur*]. Thus, Adorno's condemnation of subjective sovereignty became less absolute than Benjamin's. The unity of the subject had been ruptured by the discovery of frozen, archaic material within it, in its apparently most

⁸⁸ Freud, *Introductory Lectures, FSE15*, p.166.

⁸⁹ Freud, *Introductory Lectures, FSE15*, p.151.

private sphere dreaming, where it readily imagined its sovereignty was guaranteed. This allowed a shift into a symbolic mode, even where Adorno would read these psychoanalytic symbols, and their paths into the subject, as an *introversion of allegory*. Although not explicitly stated, Adorno stated this notion of reading dream symbols as allegories at the conclusion of ‘The Idea of Natural History’:

Now this discontinuity (of history), which, as I said, cannot be legitimately transformed into a structural whole, presents itself in the first place as one between the mythical archaic, natural material of history, of what has been, and that which surfaces as dialectically and emphatically new. [...] I would like to recall that psychoanalytic research presents this antithesis with full clarity in the distinction between archaic symbols, to which no associations may attach themselves, and intersubjective, dynamic, inner-historical symbols, which can all be eliminated and transformed into the psychical actuality of present knowledge. Now the first task of the philosophy of history is to distinguish these two elements, separate them and set them out in mutual opposition. Only where this antithesis is made explicit is there a chance of succeeding in the complete construction of natural-history. Pragmatic findings, which turn up when one observes the archaic-mythical and the historical-new, indicate the direction of this process. It is evident that the foundation, the mythic-archaic, the supposedly substantial and enduring mythic, is in no way a static foundation. Rather, there is an element of the historically dynamic, whose form is dialectical, in all great myths as well as in the mythical images that our consciousness still carries. The mythic fundamental elements are in themselves contradictory and move in a contradictory manner (recall the phenomenon of the ambivalence, the “antithetical sense” of primal words). The myth of Kronos is just such a myth in which the most extreme godly power of creation is coupled with the fact that he is the god who annihilates his creations, his children.⁹⁰

In Schubert’s music, the dream has become a stage in which the subject is confronted with his own objectivity in the rubble of civilisation of which he is only unconsciously part. Thus the flowers of this landscape are not granted meaning within the house of the ego, but, dead and dried, in pieces, allegorically offering a truth as they are returned within the home. In Schubert’s song the plaintive lament of the dried flowers of the opening is matched with a glorious response in the tonic major,

⁹⁰ ‘The Idea of Natural-History’, pp.122-123; *AGSI*, pp.362-363.

heralding the end of winter and the arrival of spring. Hidden within the latter is a repetition of a harmonic fragment of the lament. At the songs close, the major third is once again lowered, concluding in a certain, if sad, reconciliation. This shifting between major and minor mode illuminates the landscape of the ruins of alienated interiority. The repeated themes in Schubert's songs are not prostheses of subjectivity: rather, Adorno claims, "what is repeatable is only what is in itself unique, and never what has been created subjectively and thus over the course of time"⁹¹ and "the repeatability of Schubertian details stems not from their timelessness, but their fulfilment in material transforms them back into the temporal."⁹² Through these eternal crystals, Schubert shines, in music, his light of a new time:

Harmonic shifts replace developing transitions like changes in lighting exposing a new part in the landscape, that itself entails as little development as any earlier part; and here too, in development sections, motivic unpicking of the themes – exploiting for the sake of dynamic sparks their every little element – is renounced, and the recurrent themes are disclosed progressively; here too he takes up themes from earlier that are encountered but not consigned to the past; and the sonata covers all this like a thin, rustling husk spread over the growing crystals and ready to shatter.

Adorno identifies these shifting modes, and Schubert's non-functional harmony generally, as the sphere in which these symbols – which construct the Schubertian mind – is rendered visible. Its landscape is viewed from within, as a piece of nature brought within itself, inspected in reflection, that permeates the landscape outside.

In the dual landscape of major and minor, [the diminished] chord points both upwards and downwards, as ambivalent as mythic Nature herself; its brilliance is pale and the expression that Schubert's techniques of modulation invests in it is one of fear – fear of seeing the world's fatality and of seeing the annihilation of the merely human: this is how the mirror-image in the *Doppelgänger* proclaims the fundamental sadness of humankind. [...] Schubert's harmony, which the counterpoint follows as a three-dimensional shadow of the melody, reaches its lowest point at the pure minor mode of mourning. Just as death's effect was to be the entry to the deep, so is Mother Earth herself, when we reach her at last, the incarnation of death, and the

⁹¹ 'Schubert', p.11; *AGS17*, p.26.

⁹² 'Schubert', p.13; *AGS17*, p.32, trans. amended.

tumbling soul brought before her comes to see itself as a consort, inextricably entangled in the web of nature. The last great allegorical poem in the German language, Matthias Claudius's image of Death and of the Maiden, shows us the wanderer reaching the chthonic center of his landscape. And with this, the essence of the minor is revealed. Yet in the way that the deed of the child caught out is punished, and that the simplest proverb tells us help is always at hand after trouble, so too is consolation always there, after mourning. Salvation happens in the tiniest move, in the transformation of the minor third to the major; these are in such proximity that the minor third, once the major has appeared, turns out to have been its mere shadow.⁹³

Thus the posture of Schubert's songs is revealed as similar to those Kierkegaardian interiors and with their mirror-windows:

In the *intérieur* archaic images unfold: the image of the flower as that of organic life; the image of the orient as specifically the homeland of yearning; the image of the sea as that of eternity itself. For the semblance to which the historical hour condemns things is eternal. God-abandoned creation presents itself marked by the ambiguity of semblance until it is rescued by the actuality of judgment. The semblance of the eternity of the creation in the image of the *intérieur* is the eternity of the transience of all semblance.⁹⁴

Beyond this interior lies a landscape of myth, but only because of the interior itself.

The shifting illumination between major and minor modes gives rise to a demonic setting, not of the world beyond of nature confronted in terror, but out of the myth that is constructed as nature is dragged within the house. Nature is sacrificed in exchange for its internalised symbols, and attributed an eternity as paltry as the endurance of culture. In this demonic realm a great echo appears: between "Mother Earth herself" as an "incarnation of death", and the house of the father, who like Kronos eats those children who dared to venture out and pick flowers, only to return.⁹⁵ Adorno recognises hope of reconciliation with nature alone in the shifting light. Dream symbols become allegories, while refusing integration. Only in this

⁹³ 'Schubert', p.13; *AGS17*, pp.24-25, trans. amended.

⁹⁴ *K*, p.44; *AGS2*, pp.65-66.

⁹⁵ *K*, p.42; *AGS2*, p.63.

changing light can the task of discovering the irreconciliation between the archaic-mythic and the historically new begin.

2.3 Variation 2: Regression and the Problem of Primary Narcissism

Adorno wrote three fragments under the heading 'Regressions' in *Minima Moralia*. The meaning of 'regression' is again doubled as in the Mahler fragment: these texts take songs from Adorno's childhood as subjects, but they offer critiques of regression as a spiritual, psychical or psychoanalytic structure. The first quietly relates to the question of integration into the mythic mother's body, whether as an imago of one's own mother, or as Mother Earth:⁹⁶

My earliest memory of Brahms and certainly not only mine, is the lullaby 'Guten Abend, gut' Nacht'. Complete misunderstanding of the text: I did not know that the word 'Näglein' referred to lilac, or in some regions to carnations [Nelken], but instead imagined it to mean little nails, drawing pins, with which the curtain around my cot, my very own, was thickly studded, so that the child, shielded from every trace of light, could sleep endlessly long – until the cows come home, as they say in Hessen – without fear. How much the flowers fell short of the tenderness of that curtain. Nothing, for us, vouches for the undiminished brightness except the consciousness dark; nothing for that which we once could have been, but the dream that we were never born.⁹⁷

The psychoanalytic backdrop to this fragment is clearly indicated by its references to dreams, the consciousness dark, and the jolting reminiscence in which the meaning of a word was misunderstood. But understanding its response to psychoanalytic

⁹⁶ A significant failing of these theories is that they exclude from the outset the realities and experiences of mothers and motherhood. For a significant response to this, see Jessica Benjamin, *The Bonds of Love: Psychoanalysis, Feminism, and the Problem of Domination* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1988). Despite their diminutive stature, these fragments are of great importance to Adorno's oeuvre. He pursued their themes and images throughout the 1930s and 1940s. The second addresses the lullaby 'Schlaf in guter Ruh', variations of which appeared in the Wagner book and his libretto for *Der Schatz des Indianer-Joe*. On the third see Alexander Garcia Düttmann, 'Adorno's Rabbits; Or, against being in the right' trans. James Philips, in *New German Critique*, Vol.97, pp.179-189.

⁹⁷ *MM*, p.199; *AGS4*, pp.224-225.

conceptions of regression requires we turn to metapsychological debates from the first decades of the twentieth century.

Although Freud first proposed the notion of oedipal desire in *The Interpretation of Dreams*,⁹⁸ the book left the metapsychological significance of relations to the mother theoretically underdeveloped.⁹⁹ Freud merely claimed that the oedipal condition was an intrinsic structure of the human psyche, without subjecting the genesis and development of the child's relation to the mother to scrutiny. The psychoanalytic movement started to address these matters in the early 1910s, with a significant contribution being made by Sandor Ferenczi in his 1913 essay 'Stages in the development of the sense of reality.'¹⁰⁰ Ferenczi arrived at a theory of ontogenetic development founded on the idea that the symptoms of obsessional neurosis suggested that patients had "regressed", partially, to an earlier stage of development. In this stage no distinction existed between pleasure and reality, that is, between wishing and acting: "obsessional patients who have submitted themselves to psycho-analysis [...] admit to us that they cannot help but be convinced of the omnipotence of their thoughts."¹⁰¹ He claimed that this phantasy of omnipotence was derived from the stage of development when such feelings of omnipotence were justified, namely when the individual was a foetus; that during inter-uterine development the individual exists without any consciousness of need or necessity; its vital needs are immediately fulfilled by the body of the mother. The foetus has no access to an external reality

⁹⁸ *The Interpretation of Dreams*, FSE4, pp.255-268.

⁹⁹ As they developed, the metapsychology of mothers themselves and motherhood often remained obscured, particularly through the misogynist development of the metapsychology of the child, in which she is reduced to a mythic imago. This chapter essays this history, but not in order to excuse it.

¹⁰⁰ Sandor Ferenczi, 'Stages in the development of the sense of reality', trans. by Ernest Jones, in *Contributions to Psycho-analysis*, (Boston: Richard G. Badger, 1916), pp.181-203

¹⁰¹ Ferenczi, 'Stages', p.182.

other than the reality of the mother's body, which is known only as a context in which all wishes are immediately fulfilled. Such a situation in fact precludes even a distinction between internality and externality from structuring thought.

According to Ferenczi, while in this state the individual feels no unpleasure:¹⁰²

What is omnipotence? The feeling that one has all that one wants, and that one has nothing left to wish for. The foetus [...] could maintain this for itself, for it always has what is necessary for the satisfaction of its instincts, and so has nothing to wish for; it is without wants.¹⁰³

Without any frustration instinctual desires by reality (Freud's definition of 'unpleasure'), the foetus requires no 'reality principle'. It has no need to restrain its instinctual demands for pleasure, in order that presently unobtainable gratification may be deferred until it is available, or ultimately with which it might alter reality such that those gratifications become available. Therefore, the Ferenczian foetus has no perception of the world of external things that he does not master, nor even which he can identify as external to his own psyche. In short, for the foetus there is no theoretical or practical division between subject and object.

Ferenczi argued that this context of gratification continues, albeit imperfectly, after birth: in earliest stages of life, parents attempt to maintain a condition in which the child's instincts are immediately gratified.

Nurses instinctively recognise this wish of the child and as soon as he has given vent to his discomfort by struggling and crying they deliberately bring him into a situation that resembles as closely as possible the one he has just left. They lay him down by the warm body of the mother, or wrap him up in soft warm coverings, evidently so as to give him the illusion of his mother's warm protection. They guard his eye from light stimuli, and his ears from noise, and give him the possibility of further enjoying the inter-uterine absence of irritation, or, by rocking the child and crooning to him monotonously rhythmical lullabies, they reproduce the slight and monotonously rhythmical stimuli that the child is not spared even *in utero*.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰² 'Unlust' in German implies both something unpleasurable and a sense of aversion.

¹⁰³ Ferenczi, 'Stages', p.186.

¹⁰⁴ Ferenczi, 'Stages', pp.187-188.

Ferenczi made two significant claims about this state that challenged the boundaries of psychoanalysis as a science: firstly, while a psychic life begins before birth, in the womb, it is at this stage an “unconscious one.”¹⁰⁵ Secondly, in connection with the unconscious memory of this feeling of omnipotence, alongside the fulfilment of individual instinctual desires there exists a regressive aspect of the pleasure principle, which manifests as the desire to return to the womb. Alongside each particular experience of unpleasure, of energy bound to particular objects, there exists a desire to exit reality *in toto*, returning to a state in which all wishes are immediately gratified, or rather, to a state of energetic nadir in which the wish is no longer even a wish:

If, however, one observes the remaining behaviour of the new born child one gets the impression that he is far from pleased at the rude disturbance of the wish-less tranquillity he had enjoyed in the womb, and indeed he longs to regain this situation.¹⁰⁶

Freud later theorised this regressive aspect as “the conservative nature of instincts”.¹⁰⁷ Ferenczi argued that the feeling of omnipotence extends beyond birth not only externally, as a result of the nursing of carers, but also internally: the feeling is maintained by hallucinatory means, through phantasy. The child imagines his wishes are gratified through an efficacious thaumaturgy emanating from his own psyche.¹⁰⁸ Even after this phantasy has been persistently frustrated by the unpleasures of external reality, the developmental situation of justified feelings of omnipotence would continue to exert a regressive force on the developing and then mature psyche. Under the pleasure principle’s functioning one might psychically withdraw from

¹⁰⁵ Ferenczi, ‘Stages’, p.186.

¹⁰⁶ Ferenczi, ‘Stages’, p.188.

¹⁰⁷ Freud, ‘Beyond the Pleasure Principle’, *FSE18*, pp.1-64, p.40

¹⁰⁸ Ferenczi, ‘Stages’, p.188.

reality through sleep and dreaming. Within this is not only a withdrawal from the world, but an attempt at regression to regain omnipotence:

The first sleep, however, is nothing else than the successful reproduction of the womb situation (which shelters as far as possible from external stimuli.)[...] Now it seems to me that that sleep and dreams are [...] remains of the hallucinatory omnipotence of the small child that survive into adult life. The pathological counterpart to this regression is the hallucinatory wish-fulfilment of the psychoses [obsessional neuroses.].¹⁰⁹

Freud took up Ferenczi's arguments in his 1914 article 'On Narcissism'.¹¹⁰ He renamed the situation of the feeling of omnipotence "primary narcissism". But adopting Ferenczi's position required an important change in his metapsychological ideas. Until this essay, Freud had developed a dualistic taxonomy of instincts, dividing them into ego- and libido-instincts. In primary narcissism this distinction became untenable, since the individual was not capable of distinguishing subject from object:¹¹¹

With regard to the differentiation of psychical energies, we are led to the conclusion that to begin with, during the state of narcissism, they exist together and that our analysis is too coarse to distinguish between them; not until there is object-cathexis is it possible to discriminate a sexual energy – the libido – from an energy of the ego-instincts.¹¹²

Just as in Ferenczi's description, before the distinction of ego and libido, an energetics is at work in primary narcissism; this singular store of energy cathects the ego and its egoic world. Significantly this thought implied an energetics without economy.¹¹³

¹⁰⁹ Ferenczi, 'Stages', p.189.

¹¹⁰ Sigmund Freud, 'On Narcissism: An Introduction', *FSE14*, pp.67-102. For his adoption of Ferenczi's position, see p.77.

¹¹¹ See Daniel E. Greenberg, 'Instinct and Primary Narcissism in Freud's Later Theory: An Interpretation and Reformulation of 'Beyond the Pleasure Principle'', in *International Journal of Psycho-Analysis*, 71 (1990), pp.271-283.

¹¹² Freud, 'On Narcissism', *FSE14*, p.76.

¹¹³ This implication is the strangest and most severe in all metapsychology. This boundless reservoir of energy, however much preserved in the past, unsettles the relations of potentiality and actuality. It becomes the source of drawing meaning from discontinuous correspondences that constitute the material of psychoanalytic insight. Many disputes within metapsychology hinge on embracing or refusing this idea (this

Freud and Ferenczi's interaction had a complicating factor: while Ferenczi was writing his article, a major change took place in Freud's thought. A year earlier he had written *Totem and Taboo*, in which he argued that a *parallelism* existed between phylogenetic and ontogenetic development (that is, the development of the human species and that of the individual.)¹¹⁴ Freud based this claim on psychoanalytic conjecture: he did not argue from a purely biological point of view that the maturing organism passed through evolutionary developmental stages to humanity (although such an opinion was not excluded), but rather that a parallel existed between the psychological maturation of the individual and the development of human civilisation. On the strength of this parallelism, the psychoanalyst could claim to find archaic traces of culture in the psychic lives of children, and in processes of maturation,

This argument left an imprint on Ferenczi's study. For Ferenczi, the phantasies of children immediately after birth echo the early stages of civilisation; the child's belief in his magical omnipotence echoes an animism in which a singular life-force powers both the individual and the world. This is followed by the development of myth in which civilisation deals with the confounding of omnipotence by reality, just as the child must, in his formation, divide egoic from libidinal instincts. Eventually, in

chapter focuses on Adorno's profound ambivalence towards it.) For example, Herbert Marcuse's conviction that primary narcissism held a radical potential in *Eros and Civilisation: A Philosophical Inquiry into Freud* (Boston: Beacon, 1966) was challenged by Janine Chasseguet-Smirgel and Béla Grunberger *Freud or Reich: Psychoanalysis and Illusion* trans. Claire Pajaczkowska (Newhaven: Yale University Press, 1986) who met his destructive and utopian conclusions with a measured Aristotelianism, that hoped to restore an order to the disorderly idea of energy without economy.

¹¹⁴ A similar argument had previously been popularised by Ernst Haeckel's dictum "ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny" from his *Generelle Morphologie der Organismen* (Berlin: Georg Reimer, 1866). Haeckel's intellectual project sought to combine Goethean morphology with Darwinian evolutionary theory.

the mature psyche, regressive impulses are constrained to works of art, dreams, and fairy-tales, which find their parallels in the developing history of culture.¹¹⁵

Freud's analytic observations concurred with Ferenczi's notion of a regressive aspect of neurosis. He also claimed that access was granted to the earliest moments of human civilisation, by way of this parallelism, in mature dreams of childhood. In 1918 he added this argument to the chapter on regression in *The Interpretation of*

Dreams:

Behind this childhood of the individual we are promised a picture of a phylogenetic childhood – a picture of the development of the human race, of which the individual's development is in fact an abbreviated recapitulation influenced by the chance circumstances of life. We can guess how much of the point is Nietzsche's assertion that in dreams 'some primaevial relic of humanity is at work which we can now scarcely reach any longer by a direct path'; and we may expect that the analysis of dreams will lead us to a knowledge of man's archaic heritage, of what is psychically innate to him. Dreams and neuroses seem to have preserved more mental antiquities than we could have imagined possible; so that psycho-analysis may claim a high place among the sciences which are concerned with the reconstruction of the earliest and most obscure periods of the beginnings of the human race.¹¹⁶

Freud believed the parallelism could be traced not only in the earliest stages of childhood, but also in the process of social and sexual maturation. The period of animism would correspond to the auto-erotic stage of childhood. Here, libidinal attachment takes place through introjection, in an oral stage. Those things from which pleasure can be derived are psychically introjected into the undifferentiated psychic body of the child: the mother from whose breast he feeds is imagined to be an element of his own egoic lifeworld. It is only once the omnipotent feelings have been thoroughly shaken by external reality that the child's relationship with the world much change, and the combination of the avoidance of unpleasure with the

¹¹⁵ Ferenczi, 'Stages', pp.202-203.

¹¹⁶ Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, FSE5, pp.548-549.

recognition of an unmastered external reality conditions new modes of libidinal attachment, now to objects and other people.

If the story of primary narcissism appeared to be a happy one – with the possibility of universal narcissistic wish-gratification, devoid of need, in which the individual and the human race find themselves together powered by an immense surplus of libidinal energy without economy – its denouement, revealing something of its origin, was terrifying. Beneath the apparent vitalism of the childhood universe Ferenczi proposed an extraordinary historiography of civilisation: a world-history of perpetual catastrophe and consequent repression:

It is perhaps allowable to venture the surmise that it was the geological changes in the surface of the earth, with their catastrophic consequences for primitive man, that compelled repression of favourite habits and thus “development.” Such catastrophes may have been the sites of repression in the history of racial development.¹¹⁷

Meanwhile, in *Totem and Taboo*, the story behind the endurance of feelings of omnipotence deals in self-mutilation:

Man’s first theoretical achievement – the creation of spirits – seems to have arisen from the same source as the first moral restrictions to which he was subject – our observances of taboo. The fact that they had the same origin need not imply, however, that they arose simultaneously. If the survivors’ position in relation to the dead was really what caused the first primitive man to reflect, and compelled him to hand over some of his omnipotence to the spirits and to sacrifice some of his freedom of action, then these cultural products would constitute a first acknowledgment of *Ananke* [Necessity], which opposes human narcissism. Primitive man would thus be submitting to the supremacy of death with the same gesture with which he seemed to be denying it.¹¹⁸

Following Freud and Ferenczi’s postulated parallelism we discover this moment that Freud describes – the invention of myth – in the moment of determination of the subject from the object. In this moment the individual must finally succumb to reality

¹¹⁷ Ferenczi, ‘Stages’, p.201.

¹¹⁸ Sigmund Freud, *Totem and Taboo*, *FSE13*, pp.1-164, p.93.

and relinquish the universality of his feeling of omnipotence, but nonetheless he lives on in reality as though he were able to legislate with the full universality of the power of the concept. The strength of this mythic contradiction led Freud to continue to consider this as an unresolved problem.

While Freud followed Ferenczi's position on primary narcissism during the 1910s, in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* his views changed significantly. His discussion there drew deeply on this passage from *Totem and Taboo*.¹¹⁹ Yet the problem of primary narcissism would be transformed with the "discovery" of the nirvana principle and its underlying death drive.

It would be in contradiction to the conservative nature of the instincts if the goal of life were a state of things which had never been attained. On the contrary, it must be an *old* state of things, an initial state from which the living entity has at one time or other departed and to which it is striving to return by the circuitous paths along which its development leads. If we are to take it as a truth that knows no exception that everything living dies for *internal* reasons – becomes inorganic once again – then we shall be compelled to say that '*the aim of all life is death*' and, looking backwards, that '*inanimate things existed before living ones*'.¹²⁰

Beyond the Pleasure Principle moves 'beyond' the pleasure principle only in one specific respect: that of regression. It moves even beyond the relative peace of the womb situation (which nonetheless remains energetic, however much it lacks economy). Freud suggests one may regress further, back to the inorganic stuff from which life once emerged. If death itself is not properly a psychological state, it is an image of total energetic reduction, through which one once passed, to which the mind can wish to return. The introduction of the death drive destroys any implicit harmony in the parallelism of ontogenesis and phylogenesis.¹²¹ The individual, with his death drive,

¹¹⁹ Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, FSE18, p.45.

¹²⁰ Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, FSE18, p.38.

¹²¹ For Haeckel this relationship was harmonic; the repetition in ontogeny perfected the phylogenetic morphological processes.

stands opposed to the life instincts of the human species: his individual death stands facing a process of enduring life, which continues to mythically regulate vitality even when confronted with his death. Instead of a unity of species and individual in life, from very origin of life out of an inorganic unity we find an antagonism.

Where *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* exposed a metapsychological contradiction, from an analytic point of view it perhaps merely codified the mortal danger of regression (despite its allure) that had arisen as a principle of therapeutic work. Freud's psychoanalytic practice had already understood the danger of regression as deadly; the return to the mother's womb would mean the disintegration of the unity of the ego, formed in and through its relation to reality. In both children and obsessional cases it was necessary, in order to live a mature life, for the ego to be *strengthened*, however painfully.

While Freud's theory of the death drive attempted to resolve the problems of a deceptive vitalism posed by the earlier theory of primary narcissism, Ferenczi's research went in another direction. Unlike Freud, he attempted to follow the paths of regression through later stages of sexual maturity, resulting in his book *Thalassa: A Theory of Genitality*.¹²² This book proposed a decidedly oedipal account of coitus, in which the mature male identifies his ego not only with his penis, but also with his ejaculate. In this way, heterosexual coitus would fantastically fulfil the wish to return to a womb.¹²³ By means of perigenetic identification in coitus, in the service of the life instincts, the individual might avoid the disintegrating effects of regression on the ego while fulfilling the regressive aspects of the wishes attached to the pleasure principle. Nonetheless, Ferenczi, more than any other psychoanalyst, emphasised the

¹²² Sandor Ferenczi, *Thalassa: A Theory of Genitality*, trans. Henry Alden Bunker, (Karnac: London, 1989).

¹²³ Ferenczi, *Thalassa*, p.46.

real pull of regression. In *Thalassa* he eventually recapitulates to Freud's discovery of the death drive, even speculating that the death drive might provide a possible moment of ontogenetic and phylogenetic synthesis, in which the history of human civilisation and individual life are unified in catastrophe.

Even the organism scarcely any longer capable of life usually makes its exitus with a death struggle; perhaps only in our wishful conceptions, themselves governed by the death instinct, is there such a thing as a "natural", gentle death, an untroubled manifestation of the death instinct, for in reality it seems as though life always had to end catastrophically, even as it began in birth, with a catastrophe.¹²⁴

Ferenczi's nihilistic conclusion to the development of primary narcissism through maturity, was reached through a transformation of his underlying catastrophic historiography. No longer was birth into the external world, and the differentiation of subject and object, one of many catastrophes in the course of human existence; instead it became the archetypal catastrophe.¹²⁵ This was that same catastrophe that Freud identified in the destruction of loved ones, in which the individual, forced into myth by necessity, must both recognise death and go on living, finding his individual life insuperably separated from the life of the species of which he remains a part. Because of this transformed historiography, much of Ferenczi's book focused on mythical symbolism surrounding birth. Of particular interest was the role of "Thalassic Regression", of a return to the sea as a symbol for the womb, as a mytho-psychic response to a catastrophic actuality. Consequently, he offered a psychoanalytic reinterpretation of origin myths:

The interpretation of being rescued from water or of swimming in water as a representation of birth and as a representation of coitus [...] demands, therefore a phylogenetic interpretation in addition: falling into the water would again be the more archaic symbol, that of the return to the uterus, while in rescue from water the birth motif or that of exile to a land existence seems to

¹²⁴ Ferenczi, *Thalassa*, p.95.

¹²⁵ This thesis was consolidated a year later in Otto Rank's *The Trauma of Birth* (New York: Robert Brunner, 1952).

be emphasized. One is also tempted to explain the various deluge myths as a reversal, of a sort familiar to psychoanalysis, of the true state of affairs. The first and foremost danger encountered by organisms which were all originally water-inhabiting was not that of inundation but of desiccation. The raising of Mount Ararat out of the waters of the flood would thus be not only a deliverance, as told in the Bible, but at the same time the original catastrophe which may have only later on be recast from the standpoint of land-dwellers.¹²⁶

Ferenczi's reinterpretation of the the relation of catastrophe to development

influenced Adorno.¹²⁷ A great similarity can be seen, albeit metaphorically, in a

passage from *Dialectic of Enlightenment*:

Book XII of the Odyssey tells how Odysseus sailed past the Sirens. Their allurements is that of losing oneself in the past. But the hero exposed to it has reached maturity through suffering. In the multitude of mortal dangers that he has had to endure, the unity of his own life, the identity of the individual, has been hardened. The regions of time have separated for him as water, earth, and air. The flood of what has been has retreated from the rock of the present, and the future lies veiled in cloud on the horizon. What Odysseus left behind him entered into the realm of shades; for the self is still so close to prehistoric myth, from whose womb [*Schoß*] it tore itself, that its very own experienced past becomes prehistory.¹²⁸

The sexually mature regressions discussed by Ferenczi are similar to the mythic threat faced by Odysseus. Who “has reached maturity through suffering”, and is tempted to death by the sexual allure of songs that transfigure his own history in music. He must nonetheless resist and survive, strengthening his ego in repressive self-bondage.¹²⁹

¹²⁶ Ferenczi, *Thalassa*, pp. 48-49.

¹²⁷ Adorno's familiarity with Ferenczi's book is confirmed by his use of the term ‘Thalassal regression’ in chapter 7 of the *In Search of Wagner*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (London: Verso, 2005), drafted in the late 1930s.

¹²⁸ *DoE*, p.25; AGS3, p.49, trans. amended.

¹²⁹ Rebecca Comay's ‘Adorno's Siren Songs’, *New German Critique*, 81, (2000), pp.21-48, criticised Adorno's inadequate, misogynist approach to the psychodynamics of this story, implicating primary narcissism: “And thus we find Adorno, finally, chiming in with the nineteenth-century male imaginary – mass culture as woman – the fantasy of a lethal lassitude or an oceanic engulfment, the fantasy of a watery grave. Andreas Huyssen has outlined the issue well. From Nietzsche's polemic against Wagner's hypnotic effeminacies through Le Bon's description of the sphinxlike crowd to Eliot's depiction of the lure of mass society as a return to an encompassing womb, little is left to the imagination.” p.42. This echoes Joel Whitebook's ‘The *Urgeschichte* of subjectivity reconsidered’, *New German Critique*, 81, (2000),

But the catastrophe of Odysseus in maturity might truly be found in the cloudiness of the future on the horizon. Odysseus's resistance in Adorno can be compared to the moment of desiccation in the story of Noah with which Ferenczi was concerned. Within a Ferenczian schema, the rainbow stands over a reversal, not from ubiquitous death to surviving life, but from the catastrophe of inundation to the catastrophe of desiccation. God's new law is once again nothing but a screen memory of the flood, now seen in a new dimension: the meaning of the regression is falsely inverted, such that the catastrophic history of civilisation (a wrathful god) becomes one who perpetually blesses a precarious life. The rainbow becomes a consolatory device for regression that in itself represses the genetic trauma of maturation.

The clouds that appear to Odysseus do not rise up. They spread along the horizon, for there is no rainbow. For Adorno and Horkheimer the Odyssey is a story of the birth of reason in the shape of a legislative man who lives in a world from which God has withdrawn. To bless and sanctify his own wounds, as God might, would only be to bring his self-binding, masochistic impulses to consciousness. As God departs the colours dissipate. Odysseus cannot create with his law a universality of blessed life, as his law is one that divides: *for him* "the water, earth, and air" separate. If Adorno and Horkheimer offer a catastrophic history, this is a modern

pp.125-141: "it would follow from [Adorno and Horkheimer's] argument that nothing short of remaining in or recapturing the original state and fulfilling "the instinct for complete, universal, and undivided happiness" could prevent the dialect[ic] of enlightenment from unfolding. *This is the tacit omnipotent requirement that constitutes the psychoanalytically formulated bad utopianism on which the entire construction rests.* Horkheimer and Adorno would have undoubtedly rejected this crude, or hyperbolic, thesis had it been put to them directly. For unlike Marcuse, who actually tried to construe "primary narcissism" as "the archetype of another existential relation to *reality*", they refused to make the utopian move. It is, nevertheless, an undeniable consequence of their position." pp.129-130. This chapter attempts to show that consequence is indeed deniable. While Comay catches Adorno's ambivalence, this is understood only attitudinally or analytically, not as metapsychological argument.

catastrophe of diremption, forged in the splitting of a person, the division of every labour, the world dominated under the analytic of reason.

This passage from *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, with its threat of regression led by a mythic song, is extremely close to the fragment from *Minima Moralia*. But unlike the “original history of subjectivity”, our fragment returns us to the ontogenesis of a bourgeois man, in the bourgeois *intérieur* of Adorno’s own childhood. The fragment reiterates much of Ferenczi’s description of the situation of the post-natal child. The young Adorno’s eyes are guarded from light, as his mother sings him Brahms’s lullaby. Musically the lullaby conforms to Ferenczi’s description too, with its regular syncopated accompaniment, matched to a vocal line that sways repetitively in contrary motion.

The image shows a musical score for a lullaby. It consists of two staves: a vocal line and a piano accompaniment. The key signature has two flats (B-flat major), and the time signature is 3/4. The tempo/mood is marked 'zart bewegt'. The lyrics under the vocal line are: 'Gu - ten A - bend, gut' Nacht, mit -'. The piano accompaniment features a syncopated, repetitive rhythmic pattern.

The song’s text is unusual: its first strophe is taken from *Des Knaben Wunderhorn*, the collection of folk poetry edited by Clemens Brentano and Ludwig Achim. The second strophe is a later addition, composed by the *Biedermeier* poet Georg Scherer.

Guten Abend, gute Nacht,
mit Rosen bedacht,
mit Näglein besteckt,
schlupf’ unter die Deck!
Morgen früh, wenn Gott will,
wirst du wieder geweckt.

Good evening, good night,
With roses covered,
Studded with lilac,
Slip under the cover!
Early tomorrow, if God wills,
You will awaken again.

Guten Abend, gute Nacht,
von Englein bewacht,
die zeigen im Traum
dir Christkindleins Baum.
Schlaf nun selig und süß,
schau im Traums Paradies.

Good evening, good night,
Watched over by angels,
Who show you in a dream
The child Christ’s tree.
Sleep now, blessed and sweet,
See Paradise in the dream.

The two strophes represent an antagonism in their final lines: the first suggests an awakening into the next day, a movement out of the unconscious darkness of sleep into the next day; the second stanza suggests to the child that in sleep, in submitting to that unconscious darkness, he might find himself in Paradise. Adorno's text fixes on this tension in order to comment on primary narcissism.

Certainly, the room Adorno describes maintains the mythic complexity of the home that is also an imago of the mother's body. It is dark and filled with the gentle undulations of the mother's song. Even Adorno's word for his cot, "*Himmelbettchen*",¹³⁰ connotes something of the paradisiac aspect of regression within the body of the mother. The sentence that introduces this setting is an extraordinary construction:

Complete misunderstanding of the text: I did not know that the word '*Näglein*' referred to lilac, or in some regions to carnations [*Nelken*], but instead imagined it to mean little nails, drawing pins, with which the curtain around my cot, my very own, was thickly studded, so that the child, shielded from every trace of light, could sleep endlessly long – until the cows come home, as they say in Hessen – without fear. [*Vollkommenes Mißverständnis des Textes: ich wußte nicht, daß Näglein ein Wort für Flieder oder in manchen Gegenden für Nelken ist, sondern stellte mir kleine Nägel, Reißnägel darunter vor, mit denen die Gardine vorm Himmelbettchen, meinem eigenen, ganz dicht zugesteckt sei, so daß das Kind, in seinem Dunkel vor jeder Lichtspur geschützt, unendlich lange – »bis die Kuh ein' Batzen gilt«, sagt man in Hessen – ohne Angst schlafen könne.*]

This sentence undulates with each additional movement, drifting from the cot towards the non-place of the dream. Syntactically it gives an impression, in its own terms, of being endlessly long. A regression to primary narcissism is staked here in the seemingly irrelevant phrase "*meinem eigenen* [of my own]", in which the young Adorno identifies this womb-like bed with himself. His bed at once both belongs to him and appears to his infant consciousness out of his own existence.

¹³⁰ A '*Himmelbettchen*' is a crib with a fabric canopy; "*Himmel*" literally means "Heaven".

Something is not right: within this symbolic womb there are drawing pins. Little nails pierce its walls to support it. In the misunderstanding the word “*Näglein*” the womb-like room is recognised not as organically grown, but instead constructed. The radical recognition is confirmed in the exchange of symbols. The organic flower, the carnation [*Nelken*] or the lilac, a symbol for the female genital, becomes inorganic pin, another genital symbol, albeit now a male one, that is pushed into this curtain. With this inorganic masculine technology, the darkness of the bed is held together: it is the young Adorno’s own not through the immature omnipotence, and regression into the encompassing body of the mother, but through the power of his sexually maturity. This genital does not bring life, but instead constructs the environment inorganically, even when he might dream of immersion within the mother’s body.

Adorno continues, “How much the flowers fell short of the tenderness of that curtain.” Again there is wordplay: “To fall short [*zurückbleiben hinter*]” is not just a judgment of the insufficiently fulfilled desire, but the phrase implies a falling behind. This is confirmed in the word for curtains [*Vorhänge*] which literally hang in front [*hängen vor*] of something. The inadequacy of these flowers projects an architecture, as this room’s tender, curtained walls are transformed into veils. This phrase therefore approaches the oedipal question. “How short those flowers fell behind those walls”, becomes a reflection on the competition between mature sexual love and the comfort of regressive omnipotence.

Adorno meets this question with profound ambivalence: at once he recognises the necessity of surpassing oedipal desires in mature sexuality; but he insists that no love can ever be as great as the feeling of omnipotence offered by the mother’s body. Nonetheless, the mother’s womb is understood as something concealing and illusory,

and holds one inside away from more appropriate but less fulfilling objects of desire in a world beyond the darkness that these curtains cast.

The final sentence of the fragment offers a response, if not a solution, to the theoretical debates over primary narcissism. “Nothing, for us, vouches for the undiminished brightness except the consciousless dark; nothing for that which we once could have been, but the dream that we were never born.” For Freud, the bourgeois life was to be a forever troubled; the regressive annihilation of the ego through the psychic regression into womb had to be rejected, but reconciling oneself to a painful reality offered little solace. Culture, as sublimation, would provide an endless account and reaccounting for this process in place of the omnipresent vitalism that once existed, creating an image of a second nature, albeit a less vital one. For Ferenczi the outlook was bleaker: a regression would (and must) take place, as a catastrophe upon a catastrophe. Ultimately Thanatos would triumph over Eros; those who survived one catastrophe were doomed to perish, struggling, in the next. These two positions might relate to the two strophes of Brahms’s lullaby: with Freud’s child awoken by God into the next morning of civilisation, while Ferenczi’s regresses deep into the paradise, which is at once the final catastrophe for the ego.

Adorno’s text, in miniature, suggests a critique of both positions. This critique derives from how Brahms’ song enters his text. For Adorno, both Ferenczi and Freud take the proposition of regression too literally, and are unable to distinguish between the child’s omnipotent thoughts and the adult regresses to this infantile stage. For both Freud and Ferenczi the work and pains of maturation can, in regression, literally be effaced from the mature psyche. Regression means the annihilation proper of individual-historical ontogenesis in nature. As a psychic dynamic it offers no opportunity for reflection. Adorno launches his critique of both positions by

registering, through reflection, the *non-identity* of regression and childhood experience. This non-identity of regression and the endurance of primary narcissism is established in the form of misunderstanding at the centre of his text. To the omnipotent child, the misrecognition of the word for a flower in the lullaby means nothing. Whether the womb is organic or inorganic, whether it belongs to a mother or a house, is irrelevant so long as his wishes are immediately fulfilled. Only to the adult who regresses, who reflects once again on his childhood, is this misunderstanding a source of embarrassment. To him it implies an out of place sexuality, a strange untimely mature genitality. It also introduces something inorganic, cast in metal, and violent, bearing the hallmarks of the death drive, into the construction of that most intimate environment in which it ought never to appear. These pins, or at least their discomfort, have been dragged from adult life back into the womb.

Despite the pain of such an image, the discomfort of registering the misunderstanding offers Adorno an image of hope. He would refuse the position of the Ferenczi, who like Kierkegaard would disappear forever into the objectless *intérieur* of the mother, as though it were the drowning of the world; but he also rejects the endless wanderings of an ego proposed by Freud, like an Odysseus for whom there is no prospect of homecoming, producing a world of mythic spirits who must be perpetually outwitted in endless self-sacrifice.

In regression Adorno instead discovers an image of a child who no longer exists, because he matured through suffering. Hope is what he could have been, but is not. A dream “that we were never born” sheds light on this promise. To know that this child is *not*, to see the misunderstanding he never sees, to reveal hope in what does not exist, is to recognise the non-identity of primary narcissism and regression. The regressing Adorno is one who has, like Odysseus, “reached maturity through

suffering”. But he must move beyond the oedipal phantasy; the cot’s curtains must be ripped back. Perhaps behind them is not the bright sun of morning nor a rainbow, each a blessing from God, but the dazzling grey on grey of clouds on the horizon, a sign that thinking, with him, has also grown old.¹³¹ If the future holds a promise of happiness, it would not erase the suffering of maturity, but carrying within that suffering with it all that did not come to pass, and would do justice to it.

A single text has been ripped from a series of fragments; one childhood song extracted from the medley of regressions. A history of metapsychological debates has been loaded into the interpretation of just a few sentences – even where those sentences appeared simply to describe the smallest of movements in the realm of experience. Yet this text too might be revealed as something made small, *verkleinert*, and therefore in regression salvaged. The careful reader of *Minima Moralia* will recognise it as a repetition and miniaturisation of a set of apothegmatic fragments written under the title ‘Second Harvest’. This text’s surface indicates that each aphorism stands alone, with the movement of reading perpetually interrupted by the spaces left between propositions. Its miniaturisation might cast its light backwards, bringing these thoughts into a new shape, catching together moments that seem discontinuous, just as unconscious thoughts might seem. This light exposes the construction of thought, and experience caught within it. With this in sight, four paragraphs of ‘Second Harvest’, might now be read continually, from one moment to the next, the gaps between its paragraphs at last filled.

¹³¹ “When philosophy paints its grey in grey, a shape of life has grown old, and it cannot be rejuvenated but only recognised, by the grey in grey of philosophy” Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, p.23.

Waking in the middle of a dream, even the worst, one feels disappointed, cheated of the best in life. But pleasant, fulfilled dreams are actually as rare, to use Schubert's words, as happy music. Even the loveliest dream bears, like a blemish, its difference from reality, the awareness that what it grants is mere illusion. That is why precisely the loveliest dreams are as if blighted. Such an impression is captured superlatively in the description of the Nature Theatre of Oklahoma in Kafka's America.

To happiness the same applies as to truth: one does not have it, but is in it. Indeed, happiness is nothing other than being encompassed, an after-image of the original shelter within the mother. But for this reason no-one who is happy can know that he is so. To see happiness, he would have to pass out of it: to be as if already born. He who says he is happy lies, and in invoking happiness sins against it. He alone keeps faith who says: I was happy. The only relation of consciousness to happiness is gratitude: in which lies its incomparable dignity.

To a child returning from a holiday, home seems new, fresh, festive. Yet nothing has changed there since he left. Only because duty has now been forgotten, of which each piece of furniture, window, lamp, was otherwise a reminder, is the house given back its sabbath peace, and for minutes one is at home in a never-returning world of rooms, nooks and corridors in a way that makes the rest of life there a lie. No differently will the world one day appear, almost unchanged, in its constant feast-day light, when it stands no longer under the law of labour, and when for home-comers duty has the lightness of holiday play.

Now that we can no longer pluck flowers to adorn our beloved – a sacrifice that adoration for the one atones by freely taking on itself the wrong it does all others – picking flowers has become something evil. It serves only to perpetuate the transient by fixing it. But nothing is more ruinous: the scentless bouquet, the institutionalised remembrance, kills what still lingers by the very act of preserving it. The fleeting moment can live in the murmur of forgetfulness, that the ray will one day touch to brightness; the moment we want to possess is lost already. The luxurious blooms that the child struggles home with at the mother's command, might be stuck behind the mirror as artificial ones were sixty years ago, and in the end they become the greedily seized holiday snapshot, in which the landscape is littered with those who saw nothing of it, and who grab as a souvenir something that sank unremembered into nothingness. But he who in rapture sends flowers, will reach instinctively for the ones that look mortal.¹³²

¹³² *MM*, pp.111-113; *AGS4*, pp.124-126.

REFLECTIONS ON READING (2)

Adorno and Construction

It is important for the materialist historian, in the most rigorous way possible, to differentiate the construction of a historical state of affairs from what one customarily calls “reconstruction.” The “reconstruction” in empathy is one-dimensional. “Construction” presupposes “destruction.”¹

Snow White expresses melancholy more perfectly than any other fairy-tale²

The labour of reading Adorno demands reflection. This reflection does not find itself free from the exigencies of philology and actuality demanded by the works themselves. Nonetheless, the secondary literature has predominantly engaged in philosophical reconstruction. Where reconstruction attempts to clarify the meaning of thought by appealing to a philosophy’s autonomous logic, expressions of the labour of reading as a site of reflection have been forcibly stifled as though they were merely external contingent obscurities, to be banished in the name of internal philosophical necessity.³

On 22 April 1969, during the height of the student movement in West Germany, a banner was unfurled during one of Adorno’s lectures on dialectical

¹ *AP*, p.470; *BGS5*, p.587

² *MM*, p.121; *AGS4*, p.134. trans. amended.

³ Alongside the major secondary literature of reconstruction, a minor secondary literature addresses Adorno’s style, language, and forms theoretically. Early studies include chapter 2 of Gillian Rose’s *The Melancholy Science* (London: Macmillan, 1978), pp.11-26, and chapter 1 of Frederic Jameson’s *Marxism and Form*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971), pp.3-59. Recent contributions include Stephen Helmling’s *Adorno’s Poetics of Critique* (London: Continuum, 2009) and James Harding’s *Adorno and a Writing of the Ruins* (New York: SUNY Press, 1997).

thinking. It read, “Adorno as an institution is dead”⁴ The reconstructive secondary literature has ironically confirmed the truth of the banner’s slogan: the dialectical force in his thinking and writing has been sacrificed for apparently clear explanation and the perpetual production of academic commodities; difficulties within texts are themselves obscured. The awkwardness and artifice of the wrong place or the wrong time is eliminated. Under this reconstructive aspect Adorno has become an institution, held lifeless like Snow White in her glass coffin: made absolutely visible and yet confined and powerless. Meanwhile, the labour of working with or struggling against – of living and dying with – this writing, is silenced. Reading cannot be reflected upon in this reconstructive mode; nor are reconstructions able to discuss how the social situation of these texts intersect or interfere with that labour.

The systematic element of philosophical reconstruction is found where Adorno’s writings are interpreted as though they offered mere examples of a limited number of methodological propositions: “myth is already enlightenment; and enlightenment reverts to myth;”⁵ “The whole is the false;” or “Second nature is, in truth, first nature.”⁶ Although each of these statements is emphasised by Adorno’s forms and expression, treating his writing as a repository of illustrations of apparently purely philosophical claims makes a fundamental mistake about both material and the meaning. Accounts of Adorno’s writing that seek, in this way, to foreground only its internal logic runs three distinct risks: firstly, these “central” philosophical arguments

⁴ Wolfgang Kraushaar, *Frankfurter Schule und Studentenbewegung: Von der Flaschenpost zum Molotowcocktail, 1946 bis 1995*, (Hamburg: Rogner und Bernhard, 1998), Vol.1, p.418.

⁵ See Simon Jarvis, *Adorno: A Critical Introduction* (London: Routledge, 1998).

⁶ See various works by Alfred Schmidt, particularly, *The Concept of Nature in Marx*, trans. Ben Fowkes (London: NLB, 1971). On the ‘centrality’ of this claim to critical theory, see ‘Zum Erkenntnisbegriff der Kritik der politischen Ökonomie’, in *Kritik der politischen Ökonomie Heute: 100 Jahre “Kapital”*, ed. Walter Euchner, (Frankfurt: Europäische Verlagsanstalt, 1968), pp.30-43.

appear free-floating, lacking in binding force or relation to reality. Secondly, the claim to truth of such philosophical arguments as they exist in reconstructions comes into contradiction with the texts' own materialist claims to truth. Thirdly, any writing that does not fit so easily into the developed autonomous logic of thought is passed over, such that identification across Adorno's oeuvre becomes the measure of explicability. While the reconstructive literature is often both accurate and fastidious, these theoretical productions undercut the thinking and writing that they hope to elucidate.

Adorno's own explicit rejection of the reconstructive impulse is given in

Minima Moralia under the title 'Gaps':

The injunction to practice intellectual honesty usually amounts to sabotage of thought. The writer is urged to show explicitly all the steps that have led him to his conclusion, so enabling every reader to follow the process through and, where possible – in the academic industry – to duplicate it. [...] Even if we were for once to comply with the questionable directive that the expositions should exactly reproduce the process of thought, this process would be no more a discursive progression from stage to stage as though if it were inverted the insights of the knower would have fallen from Heaven. Rather, knowledge comes to us through a network of prejudices, opinions, innervations, self-corrections, presuppositions, and exaggerations, in short through the dense, firmly-founded but by no means uniformly transparent medium of experience.⁷

Knowledge arrives from the opacities of social life. Even the attempt to make them clear, in following the Cartesian injunction, deceives itself both about the nature of thought's social situatedness and its own capability of extracting thought from this social situation. Indeed, attempts to render thoughts transparent, as though their logic existed independently, itself becomes a mystificatory, ideological process. The autonomy of thought is revealed ironically as a myth.

⁷ *MM*, p.80; *AGS4*, pp.88-89.

Reconstruction threatens interpretation not only by imposing the demand of a coherent unity under the spell of identity, but also by assuming that truth might be drawn from texts through mere analysis. The reconstruction of Adorno's work has meant dissection: text has been ripped from his corpus only to be labelled as specimens and rebuilt into a new, ideal, transparent body, according to function in a system of thought. It is as though Aragon's sentences, which he took as an epigraph to his Schubert essay, had returned to prey upon him:

The whole futile body was suffused with transparency. Little by little the body turned into light. Its blood a beam. Its limbs froze in an unintelligible gesture. And the man was no more than a sign among the constellations.⁸

Even writing that rebels most obviously against systematisation – not only the explicit proclamations of this work as 'anti-system',⁹ but also the moments of extreme tenderness, and intimate personal reflections, and incursions of darkness – are subjected indiscriminately to the logic of reconstruction, as though examined in the blinding light of an eternal, artificial lamp. Life was exchanged for clarity. The banner's critique of the deathliness of institutions owed more to their teacher than the student protestors would admit.

These moments of resistance are not mere stylistic appendages to a core of philosophical thought. Adorno's writing works through the interplay of determinative conceptual thought and expressive elements forged by that determination that point beyond it: expression is produced through the unreconciled antagonism between the concept and the material trace, which in turn negates the concept's claim to universality. This does not mean abstractly negating conceptual claims in favour of the material poetry of damage it leaves behind. Nor does abstract negation of

⁸ Louis Aragon, *Le Paysan de Paris* (Paris: Gallimard, 1956), p.230; cited in 'Schubert (1928)', p.7; *AGS18*, p.18, trans. amended.

⁹ *ND*, p.xx; *AGS6*, p.10.

conceptual thought offer immediate access to the need that original drove conceptual thinking. No path leads from need to expression without traversing the social mediation of conceptuality. Adorno's texts are therefore not collections of whatever was not absorbed into deathly institutions, but instead are the attempt to at once give expression to what is non-identical under the conditions of conceptual subsumption. The aesthetic arises not from avoiding subsumption but from the negativity in *resisting* it. In resistance his writings assert a true, albeit damaged, freedom under those conditions of domination that falsely proclaim freedom as their element. As he states in *Negative Dialectics*,

Contradiction is non-identity under the aspect of identity; the dialectical primary principle of contradiction makes the thought of unity the measure of heterogeneity. As the heterogeneous collides with its limit it exceeds itself. Dialectics is the consistent consciousness of non-identity.¹⁰

Adorno proposed no pure, transcendent vitality in response to the culture constructed out of an immense accumulation of death in which his thought was situated. Instead, he developed an immanent critique: not to proclaim a brightly illuminated life untouched by mortification, but to reflect from inside it, from the position of mortality, internalised, within a catastrophic culture. Adorno's consistent gesture reflects on mortification either through submission to a deadly cultural institutionalisation, or, mimetically, through self-mortification in the course of defending oneself against it. In this reflection alone there is still life, but it is damaged. Such reflection speaks uncannily; as Robert Hullot-Kentor observed, "the style of [Adorno's] mature work [...] is emphatically artificial."¹¹

¹⁰ *ND*, p.5; *AGS6*, p.17.

¹¹ Robert Hullot-Kentor, *Things Beyond Resemblance*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), p.234.

The gestures of this writing offer no generic response to a general descent of culture into deathly artificiality. Instead, its expression dwells in material particularity, absorbing the excrescences of culture into itself, drastically showing what experience has become in a world of artificial administration. It does not merely excoriate culture conceptually; its language is shaped where concept and material meet in contradiction. Just as it would be inadequate to describe the worker pulverised in a factory machine as having been murdered by an abstract idea of capital without reference to the material world such an abstraction constructs, so Adorno's thinking adheres to the material details out of which concepts are constructed. This accounts for unpredictability and occasionality: while the commodity form legislates the endless transformation of the living into the dead, granting its own abstractness a myth of permanence, this alienated writing implies a history in which through the mortality of both subject and object, what is transient is recognised. In the very matter of thought it points beyond abstraction.

If something still lives in reflection – if Adorno's writing is not resigned, and does not succumb without resistance to death – this does not imply an alternative vital eternity. The resistance expressed in one moment cannot be lifted from its context to be performed again, instantiating the performer with a new lease of life. The power of critique is allied to its transience. The reader of these texts, who may remain a critic of a deathly culture, must also deal with the death of these texts, with their own transience, and the history in which they themselves were mortified, hardened, and left lifeless. Against this, the reconstructive literature is founded on the conviction of the work's praeternatural vitality, and the concomitant belief that Adorno's radicalism could be rendered permanent. The secondary literature unintentionally presents a response to the question of death in and of Adorno's writings by proposing perpetual

preservation in a form of repetition. It passes over aspects of his writings that already, in mimesis, elicit the force of deathly repetition as resistance, or those which have subsequently lost their power to fixation.

With the resigned gesture of reconstruction, the particularity of critique is exchanged for a hollow, frozen process performed no longer by any human, but by an anonymous system of thought. Just as Adorno's meaningful opacity becomes inscrutable when the textures of his texts are rendered transparent, so too are his objects of reflection, each with its own historical tempo of mortification, which he brought into relation with the transient life of his thinking, turned into mere objects of cognition now internalised by a system. Reconstruction resembles a politics of public remembrance that serves the public at the expense of the deceased. It might remind of Vadim Zakharov's monument to Adorno erected in Frankfurt in 2003. Under a bulletproof glass case stand Adorno's desk and chair; on the desk lies a copy of *Negative Dialektik* and a metronome.¹² Within this institution Adorno is to be remembered, yet has gone missing. We are left only with a glass case, impenetrable yet transparent; a book, unreadable; and a metronome, still, as if musical time had ended.

Instead of reconstructing a system of Adorno's thought, the previous chapter was constructed as a developing variation. This form strains between abstraction and concretion: to vary is to abstract, pushing dialectical positions to extremes, developing closed forms once again, which are then exploded or superseded, or leaving traces which strain into new constellations. Its construction did not intend on a general

¹² For a critical discussion see Eric Jarosinski, 'Of Stones and Glass Houses: Minima Moralia and the Critique of Transparency' in *Language Without Soil: Adorno & Late Philosophical Modernity*, ed. Gerhard Richter, (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), pp.157-171.

legislation of material, but instead presented the process of abstraction as a concrete illumination of the dynamics of Adorno's thought. It refuses both withdrawal into an interior unity of the subject, and also to let that subject become a mere example among many for a society whose conceptual logic dominates history. It attempts to create an image of disintegration under the legislation of conceptuality. Despite presenting Adorno's conceptual work in its disintegration, his work has not been treated as poetry, although a type of poetry plays a part. Reading Adorno aesthetically does not preclude conceptual work, but rather presupposes it. As Adorno himself wrote, "All attempts to comprehend the writings of philosophers as poetry have missed their truth content. Philosophical form requires the interpretation of the real as a binding nexus of concepts."¹³

Reading conceptual disintegration aesthetically points to the movement of Adorno's thought through metaphor, its tempi and form, its dynamics and closures. His texts are treated simultaneously as aesthetic and philosophical objects: metaphors, especially flowers here, are traces of thought left in material, brought back from the landscape into the ruined house of the mind. The penetration of reality into the text is its motor both of coherence and of disintegration, mediating poles of truth and expression, between the individual life and the generalising processes of death.

The developing variation attempts to treat Adorno's writing with tenderness. Such tenderness without doubt fails: attempts to converse closely with these texts often results in a hardening of their expressions. Therefore, reading must account for moments of crystallisation into clearer but more deathly meaning. Reading intimately means reflecting on the death one's reading imposes on its material; but not allying oneself with the clarity achieved in the expiration of the text's life.

¹³ *K*, p.3; *AGS2*, p.9

Like all labour, this reading is alienated; the means of its alienation are contemporary social relations. Reflection within alienated reading means is not only subjective but addresses the objects of this world as they are alienated under their domination by subjective rationality. Where reading the reflects on its alienation from its objects – and its tendency towards the further alienation of its objects – it does not hope to describe just an alienated feeling of the reader, but rather, hopes to impart, in its own shape, the truth of its broken relations with its material, as they are constituted by reality. This can only be achieved in the revelation of construction, as the principle of production in thought.

What appears from this work is an Adorno somewhat unfamiliar to contemporary scholarship. My aim is not to excavate a bourgeois Adorno *in situ*, proclaiming his death natural and absolute, as though his thinking no longer strays into our present, and remains nothing but a curio for positivist philologists or historians of philosophy. But nor do I hope to vouchsafe his thinking by proclaiming its contemporary relevance as a positive ground.¹⁴ Under such a rubric many have instrumentalised Adorno's thinking in writing a critique of contemporary society. Few have offered reflections on the damage that such instrumentalisation has done to Adorno's writing itself. The complicating gesture of an alienated reading hopes to illuminate the damage that has been done to his thought – the persistent transformation of its own history into myth – by such mobilisations.

A reflection on alienated reading might give an Adornian twist to Croce's question: not "what is alive and what is dead in Hegel's writings?", but instead "what relation ought we to have to death in and of Adorno's writings?" This constructive

¹⁴ For a recent example see Andrew Bowie, *Adorno and the Ends of Philosophy* (Cambridge: Polity, 2014), pp.vii-viii.

alternative to reconstruction refutes Adorno's continuing life, and considers his revivification neither possible nor desirable. Critically, it recognises stashed in reconstruction's claim to vitality a perpetual return to what is dead. It sees in this an unconscious melancholia all too assured that it is on the secure route to mourning.¹⁵ Against this it proposes a labour of reading and reflection that whilst melancholic, might give this pain of this melancholia its due. Despite the life of the work being past, reading Adorno today remains a humane concern, freed from the wishful thinking that its labour alone is enough to guarantee a happier, or less painful, future.

One charge that may be levelled against this way of reading is that it is fundamentally irrationalist, or accentuates irrational aspects of Adorno's thought. On the contrary, the underpinning conviction of this reading is that human social relations, as well as human relations with nature, still require rationalisation. But such a transformation requires the recognition of the falsity of all those forms that prematurely proclaim a fully autonomous rationality, leaving no aesthetic trace in the unreconciled world. It is this world that needs transforming.

¹⁵ See Sigmund Freud, 'Mourning and Melancholia' *FSE14*, pp.243-258, particularly p.257.

CHAPTER 3

Reading Adorno's Dream: Interpretation after Auschwitz

Only angels could make music
immaculately.¹

Philology consists in an examination of
texts which proceeds by details and thus
magically fixates the reader.²

Severed are the wings of thought that spread at dusk and fly the night. Flights of fancy are interrupted as their elements are returned to earth. If “the history of dreams is still to be written”,³ this is because dreams have suffered from the history of dream interpretation. Hermeneuts of the imagination, from Daniel and Artemidorus to Jung and Freud equipped themselves with techniques used to understand dreams insofar as they could be rendered un-dreamlike. The dream is granted intelligibility only as its ruined parts are made significant beyond the dream, in a different world of meaning: waking life.⁴ The violence of interpretation against the dream is displayed in the apparently clear sight of consciousness. The interpreter both destroys the dream's form in order to wrest significant elements from it, and perfects its form, separating it absolutely from the reality in which the meanings of his interpretations are legislative. The fruit of this labour is to be rescued from the dream's wrecked corpus, while the dream *qua* dream disappears in meaning, just as it might in waking. Thus the dream is like a puzzle, which in its solution loses any power of enchantment; as the puzzle is

¹ Adorno, *Beethoven: The Philosophy of Music*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Cambridge: Polity, 1998), p.173, trans. amended.

² Benjamin, Letter to Adorno, 9.12.1938, in *ABCOR*, p.292.

³ *SW2*, p.3; *BGS2*, p.620, trans. amended.

⁴ Even in the theoretical statements of early interpreters, such as Joseph's “do not interpretations belong to God?”, Genesis 40:8, the meanings of dreams – such as the fates of the baker and butler – are ultimately earthly and profane. Where interpretations are prophetic, their significance lies in the present, of which the prophesied future is not yet a part.

solved so too is it dissolved.⁵ There is therefore a wager in interpretation – applying not only to dreams, but to hermeneutics generally: what is won as meaning is worth the ruin of the object, rendering it unlike what it was.

There is a similarity here to all bourgeois metaphysics, in which illusory semblances are disenchanting and disregarded in order to get at what is supposedly true. Just as the essential, by virtue of its claim to be so, rids itself of the illusoriness of appearance, so must the reality rid itself of the illusoriness of the dream. In its domain the violence of interpretation against the dream seems justified by the character of the dream itself. As Adorno wrote in *Minima Moralia*, “conjoined to even the loveliest dream, like a blemish, is its difference from reality, the consciousness that what it grants is mere semblance [*blosser Schein*]. In this way, even the most beautiful dreams seem as though they are damaged.”⁶ Interpretation, then, finds itself in a concatenation of betrayals:⁷ the betrayal of the dreamer by the world that leaves his wishes unfulfilled and psychic residues unreconciled; the betrayal within the dream itself, in which even the happiest is marked by illusoriness of unreality; and the betrayal of the dream in awakening and interpretation, as it is granted meaning in the light of the next day.

This metacritique of the interpretation of dreams brings to mind a violence that remains implicit in other interpretative labours. Yet dreams do not usually face the sort of judgments we make of other texts: dreams are perhaps good or bad,

⁵ On the ‘puzzle-like character’ of philosophical interpretation see Adorno’s ‘the Actuality of Philosophy’, trans. Benjamin Snow [Susan Buck-Morss] in *Telos*, 31, (1977), pp.120-133, particularly pp.126-129; *AGS1*, pp.325-344, pp.334-339. For a later version of this thought see *AT*, pp.118-134; *AGS7*, pp.179-205. See also Benjamin’s fragment, ‘Riddle and Mystery’, *SWI*, pp.267-268; *BGS6*, pp.17-18.

⁶ *MM*, p.111; *AGS4*, p.124, trans. mine.

⁷ On the “betrayal” of the dream, see Jacques Derrida, ‘Fichus’, in *Paper Machine*, trans. Rachel Bowlby, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), pp.164-181, particularly p.168, where he discusses this sentence.

frightening or arousing, dense, subtle or beautiful, but such considerations fade into the following everyday. In reading texts that were dreams, we return to this violence of interpretation; we find ourselves alert to how the text betrays itself, in order to sanction our violence – now borne in mind – against it.

While psychoanalysis spurred new interests in dreams as texts,⁸ dream texts themselves remained relatively peripheral within twentieth century literature.⁹ Although dreams play an important role in Adorno's theoretical output, commentaries have considered his discussions of dreams as marginal.¹⁰ Adorno intended to publish a book of his own dreams.¹¹ Although it never appeared during his lifetime, Gretel Adorno prepared a selection for publication.¹² This chapter responds to these questions through a digressive reading of one of Adorno's shortest texts, a dream noted down on 18 November 1956:

⁸ That dreams are *texts* was the central thesis of Freud's *The Interpretation of Dreams*.

⁹ The most important collection of dream texts preserved from Nazi Germany was made by Charlotte Beradt. She collected dreams from those oppressed by and opposing Nazi rule, and smuggled these to America before outbreak of war in 1939. She published a selection in 1966 under the title *Das Dritte Reich des Traums* [The Third Reich of Dreams], (München: Nymphenburger 1966). By the time of their publication, Beradt had come under the sway of her friend Hannah Arendt's theories of totalitarianism. The book is edited such that the dreams appear often as mere illustrations of Arendt's theories. The following chapter is dedicated as much to the history of critical theory as this minor tradition of the interpretation of dream texts written in relation to Nazi rule.

¹⁰ The most substantial discussion of Adorno's theorisation of dreams is Jan Phillip Reemtsma's afterword to Theodor W. Adorno, *Dream Notes*, eds. Christoph Gödde and Henri Lonitz, trans. Rodney Livingstone, (Cambridge: Polity, 2007), pp.79-107. Jacques Derrida's essay 'Fichus', written as an acceptance speech for the *Adorno-Preis* in 2001, discusses the place of dreams in Adorno's work, albeit essayistically. Derrida's reading of Adorno is deeply idiosyncratic, and where it is most general (in the essay's opening) includes theoretical errors. The publication of Adorno's collected dream protocols has spurred some interest in Adorno's own dreams, such as Ulrich Plass's essay 'Dialectic of Regression: Theodor W. Adorno and Fritz Lang' in *Telos*, Winter 2009, pp.127-150.

¹¹ "So müßte ich ein Engel und kein Autor sein": Adorno und seine Verleger – Der Briefwechsel mit Peter Suhrkamp und Siegfried Unseld, (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp 2003), p.653.

¹² AGS20, pp.572-582.

I dreamt of a terrifying blazing catastrophe: In the cosmic inferno all of the dead flared up once again in their former shape for a few seconds, and I knew: only now are they completely dead.

*[Ich träumte von einer fürchterlichen Hitzekatastrophe: In der Glut – einer kosmischen – flammten in ihrer ehemaligen Gestalt sekundenlang alle Toten nochmals auf, und ich wusste: Jetzt erst sind sie ganz tod.]*¹³

Assuming a dream as central to a body of thought might indicate a relation to history, through sustained or eccentric reflections on interpretation's violence, the dialectic of semblance and truth, and the condition or degradation of meaning implied. This chapter considers how these conditions changed during the course of a twentieth century with Auschwitz at its centre, while returning *experience* to the centre of Adorno's thought. Where previous chapters elucidated certain ways Benjamin and Adorno approached the natural history of memory and forgetting, this chapter outlines some consequences as these theoretical views were dragged through the mid-century. The reading of the dream that follows remains an experimentation in interpretative violence and betrayal.

Bearing this violence in mind, and more generally addressing this unusual text is in one sense polemical. Commentaries on Adorno have mostly focused on describing a logic abstracted from his writings.¹⁴ In the struggle between concept and expression, the concept has never ceased to be victorious. The "non-identical" has itself been raised to the level of a concept, but remains a peculiar concept, possessing the power to undermine conceptuality itself. The commentators perform the labour of

¹³ *Dream Notes*, p.59; AGS20, p.579, trans. amended.

¹⁴ For the most extreme example of this method see Brian O'Connor, *Adorno's Negative Dialectic: Philosophy and the Possibility of Critical Rationality*, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2004). Other recent examples are Andrew Bowie, *Adorno and the Ends of Philosophy* (London: Routledge, 2013) and Fabian Freyenhagen, *Adorno's Practical Philosophy: Living Less Wrongly*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

the negative demanded by this newly re-conceptualised “non-identical” over and over again. Each time idealism is reconstructed, only to be blasted apart by a logic of disintegration, as though each performance of this wrecking motion would vouchsafe the validity and vitality of negative dialectic; each performance wants to show that unlike all it leaves in ruins, the logic of disintegration itself endures. But each repetition of this procedure leaves us farther from Adorno’s writing: criticism is exchanged for blind mimesis. What the text is, was, could have been but is not, and what it will become, no longer matters; instead, blind philosophers merely do as it does, maintaining a faith that this would grant us the surety of its eternal possession.

Reconstruction founded on treating the “non-identical” as though it were a concept instantiates precisely the *metabasis eis allo genos* against which Adorno’s presentation of the non-identical was aimed. Meanwhile, insisting on the vitality of Adorno’s thinking as an abstract conceptual schema mythically demands an eternal servitude in the same old labour of the negative in order to constantly reproduce it, to assure ourselves that the logic of disintegration has not itself disintegrated. These commentaries falsely presume an overcoming of the violence of interpretation by means of *empathy*.¹⁵ They are therefore ultimately unreflective with regard to their own necessary betrayals, in order to grant the work meaning in the name of philosophical vitality and validity.

This criticism of the methodology of the Adorno-commentators takes its cue from Benjamin’s essay ‘Goethe’s Elective Affinities,’ which opens with a discussion of interpretation. Benjamin develops the distinction between commentary and critique:

¹⁵ See also Benjamin’s critique of methodological empathy in ‘What is Epic Theatre (II)’, *Understanding Brecht*, p.18; *BGS2*, p.535, which develops from *OT*, pp.53-54; *BGS1*, p.234.

Critique seeks the truth-content [*Wahrheitsgehalt*] of a work of art; commentary its subject matter [*Sachgehalt*]. The relation between the two is determined by that basic law of literature according to which the more significant the work, the more inconspicuously [*unscheinbar*] and intimately its truth content is bound up with its subject matter. If, therefore, the works that prove enduring are precisely those whose truth is most deeply sunken in their subject matter, then, in the course of this duration, the concrete realities rise up before the eyes of the beholder all the more distinctly the more they die out in the world.¹⁶

Benjamin illuminates this meditation with a pair of metaphors [*Gleichnisse*],¹⁷ closing the discussion with an extraordinary image:

If, to use a metaphor, one views the growing work as a burning pyre, then the commentator stands before it like a chemist and the critic like an alchemist. Whereas for the former, wood and ash remain the sole objects of his analysis, for the latter only the living flame itself preserves a puzzle [*Rätsel*]: one of that which lives [*Das des Lebendigen*]. Thus the critic inquires into the truth, whose living flame continues to burn over the heavy logs of what has been [*das Gewesenen*] and the light ashes of lived experience [*leichte Asche des Erlebten*].¹⁸

If a means of reading Adorno's dream is to be developed from this thought, then it will be without the benefit of finding a method at remove from the object. An aspect of that dream, in which transient dying out figures rise up, exists in the very mode by which we will consider it. So too does its fiery vision. Doing justice to a dream otherwise than in its wreckage through analytic interpretation, might "preserve a puzzle: of what is living." Yet what lives in this flame is the reappearance of "all of the dead in their previous form." In this dialectic Goethe's writings are entwined with Adorno's dream, its history, and the problem of its interpretation. It enlists a tension such that we cannot be certain at any moment whether the dream is the object of study and critique is mere method, or whether the method itself has become the object of critique. As such, the two together, Adorno's dream and Benjamin's essay on Goethe,

¹⁶ *SWI*, p.297; *BGS1*, p.125.

¹⁷ Throughout this chapter, "metaphor" should be taken as a translation of "*Gleichnis*", implying a more substantial comparison than a passing association.

¹⁸ *SWI*, p.298; *BGS1*, pp.125-126.

will be bound together as object and method. What was merely a metaphor in 1922 would not remain so. Pyres of the dead will find themselves realised in the course of this reading, while semblances will be rescued from the accusation that they are mere illusion.

Meanwhile Goethe's works will play a significant role in the reading of this dream: this reading's *icon* is Otilie, with whose astonishing semblance Benjamin's study culminated. To understand her position, a brief *précis* of the novel's plot is necessary. Goethe depicts an aristocrat, Eduard, and his wife Charlotte living on their estate. They invite Charlotte's young niece Otilie, and Eduard's friend Otto, the Captain, to live with them. They decide to build a new house on their land. In an early scene they discuss the chemistry of elective affinities, in which a molecule splits and each part forms a new molecule with a new partner. They consider how this might work as a metaphor for social life. Eduard falls in love with Otilie, and Charlotte with the Captain. But even after declaring these new loves, Charlotte refuses a divorce, and Eduard leaves the estate, willing to die in war. In his absence Charlotte discovers she is pregnant. When she gives birth the child strangely looks like the Captain but has Otilie's eyes. Eventually Eduard returns from the war, and an agreement of the two new couples getting married seems to be made. Otilie accepts Eduard's proposal. As they embrace, "hope shot across the sky above their heads like a falling star." But immediately afterwards, baby Otto, who is in Otilie's care, drowns as she rows him across a lake. From this point onward Otilie has a change of heart, refuses to engage with Eduard, or with society in general. She stops eating and dies soon after. Her coffin is placed, with a glass lid in the estate's chapel. After Otilie's death Eduard's life takes the same course, and he is buried alongside her.

Benjamin's essay itself marks the centre of a set of essays concerning the dialectic of fate and character.¹⁹ These texts develop a critique in which guilt is shown to structure an inauthentic historical time as myth.²⁰ The mythic time of guilt implies that any moment may be exchanged with any other, "knowing past and future only in curious variations,"²¹ as though the time of history were homogenous and unidirectional. This conclusion is no mere technical aspect of the metaphysics of time; under the concept of fate both life and semblance are implicated. In 'Fate and Character' Benjamin writes,

Fate is the guilt-context of the living [*der Schuldzusammenhang des Lebendigen*]. It corresponds to the natural condition of the living – that semblance, not yet wholly dispelled, from which man is so far removed that, under its rule, he was never wholly immersed in it but only invisible in his best part.

He continues,

It is never man, but only the life in him that [fate] strikes – the part involved in natural guilt and misfortune by virtue of semblance.²²

That Benjamin would examine Goethe's novel for his central study of these matters is no surprise: the ill-fated characters play out their immersion in nature as myth: a metaphor of inorganic chemistry becomes the map of their lives, while aesthetic questions attend to the suffusion of pictures, *tableaux vivants*, murals, and portraits throughout the text. As Benjamin writes, "the mythic is the real subject matter of this book; its content appears as a mythic shadowplay staged in the costumes of the age of Goethe."²³ Of the fated characters, Otilie plays a particular role. Her death at the end of the novel is

¹⁹ See 'Fate and Character', 'Capitalism as Religion', and the 'Critique of Violence'.

²⁰ See Werner Hamacher, 'Guilt-History: Benjamin's Sketch: "Capitalism as Religion"'.
²¹ *SWI*, p.204; *BGS2*, p.176.

²² *SWI*, p. 204; *BGS2*, p.175. This thought reappears verbatim in the Goethe essay, *SWI*, p.307; *BGS1*, p.138.

²³ *SWI*, p.309; *BGS1*, p.138.

the sacrifice for the expiation of the guilty ones. For atonement, in the mythic world that the author conjures, has always meant the death of the innocent. That is why, despite her suicide, Otilie dies as a martyr, leaving behind her miraculous remains.²⁴

3.1 “I dreamt of a blazing catastrophe”: Towards a Mass Metapsychology

Freud’s *The Interpretation of Dreams* presents hundreds of dreams as illustrations. Meanwhile, his theses about how dreams function arise from the interpretation of a few, very particular dreams. The most famous of these is Irma’s injection.²⁵ These dreams play a different role in Freud’s thinking, drawing him down a path of investigation and interpretative experiment. Irma’s injection is significant to Freud because it seems to elude any total interpretation. What is dreamlike in the dream can never be fully converted into a meaning beyond the dream. In the effort of interpretation the dream behaves strangely: precisely in resistance to any perfect interpretation it offers up no consequences for, nor correspondences to, waking life. Instead, the interpretation provides a set of techniques by which dreams more generally might be interpreted. Each attempt to complete the analysis delivers just another concept for interpretative use: from wish-fulfilment and the repression of the wish, to distortion, condensation, overdetermination, and secondary processes. But the hermeneutic arsenal must always fall short: the completion of the dream’s interpretation would rid Freud of his guilt for his inattentiveness as a medic, an expiation transforming the world and the past.²⁶ Instead, its interpretation instantiates a practical labour without end, establishing ever greater means of interpretation and the progressive improvement of the science of analysis.

²⁴ *SWI*, p.309; *BGS1*, pp.140-141.

²⁵ *The Interpretation of Dreams*, *FSE4*, p.107.

²⁶ In his first discussion of the dream Freud concludes that its source is his wish to find himself innocent of Irma’s illness, p.120.

Of these two possible ends to interpretation – either the final transformation of the past and the expiation of guilt, or the establishment of an eternal labour under a relation of guilt – the imposition of the latter was the origin of the psychoanalytic movement. Beginning from a dream that refused the interpreter access to expiation; that is, starting from the interpreter’s own guilty dream, psychoanalysis set a course of resignation, of an eternally guilty labour of self-improvement. Its course of finding apparently scientific means to probe dreams, as if the guilty situation were a piece of nature, led Freud into a guilty *Kultur*. Significantly this arose not from some methodological decision, but from the object of interpretation and its relation to Freud as its dreamer and interpreter.²⁷ Completing the first interpretation of the dream (which never was a true completion), with the discovery that a dream is a fulfilment of a wish, Freud nonetheless felt an achievement had been made. He wrote in 1900 to Fließ, “Do you suppose that some day a marble tablet will be placed on the house, inscribed with these words? –”²⁸

<p><i>Hier enthüllte sich am 24. Juli 1895</i> <i>dem Dr.Sigmund Freud</i> <i>das Geheimnis des Traums</i></p>	<p><i>Here, On 24th. July 1895</i> <i>The Secret of the Dream Revealed</i> <i>Itself to Dr.Sigmund Freud</i></p>
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Would this stone memorialise of a true revelation, rending a veil behind which a secret had lain hidden in the night’s depths? Or would it become the cornerstone of a new house, the house of the psychoanalytic movement, trapping analysts within an eternal labour wresting meaning from dreams into a guilty waking reality? If anything, it marks a great ambiguity, at once pronouncing freedom from a mystery,

²⁷ In Freud’s ‘Analysis Terminable and Interminable’, *FSE23*, pp.209-254, a similar question is posed subjectively rather than objectively.

²⁸ Footnote by Ernest Jones, *FSE4*, trans. amended.

while initiating the demonic toil in which that mystery remains both the motor and limit of interpretation.²⁹

A motion of resignation, of awakening, of eternally wresting meaning from the dream, of progress through accumulating technical instruments, can be seen in Freud's interpretation of Irma's injection. We discover in another dream a type of psychoanalytic thinking moving in contrary motion. This dream will lead towards sleep, entwining us in regression; it asks not how elements of the dream are wrested into reality, but how some piece of reality found itself lodged in a dream. Here a piece of the past may be undone, the dead resurrected, if only within the bounds of the dream itself. Adorno hinted at the need for such a motion in interpretation, against Freudian resignation, in his book on Wagner, writing: "to interpret the dream one must be both weak and strong enough to surrender oneself to the dream without reserve."³⁰

Chapter VII of *The Interpretation of Dreams* begins with a discussion of such a dream, which has striking similarities to Adorno's. It was told to Freud by a patient, who had heard it in a lecture:

A father had been waiting beside his child's sickbed for days and nights on end. After the child had died, he went into the next room to lie down, but left the door open so he could see from his bedroom into the room in which the child's body had been laid out, with tall candles standing round it. An old man had been engaged to keep watch over it, and sat beside the body murmuring prayers. After a few hours' sleep the father had a dream that his child was standing beside his bed, caught him by the arm [*ihm am Arme faßt*], and whispered to him reproachfully, "Father, don't you see I'm burning?" [*Vater, siehst du denn nicht, daß ich verbrenne?*"] He woke up, noticed a bright glare of light [*Lichtschein*] from the next room, hurried into it, and found that the old watchman had dropped off to sleep and that the wrappings [*Hüllen*] and one of the arms of his beloved child's dead body had been burned by a lighted candle that had fallen on them.³¹

²⁹ In 'Guilt-History', Hamacher argued that for Benjamin the endless labour founded on this demonic, mythic guilt to be the motion of psychoanalysis, p.98.

³⁰ *In Search of Wagner*, p.144; *AGS13*, p.145.

³¹ Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, p.509.

Where Irma's injection sets a course of endlessly laborious interpretation, this dream admits none. Not only is the dream unanalysable because the dreamer is unknown,³² but because it poses a different problem. The interpretation is clear: amid catastrophe, in phantasy, the burning child's life is extended if only for a moment. Yet it remains puzzling. Freud wrote,

The problems of dream interpretation have hitherto occupied the centre of the picture. And now we come upon a dream which raises no problem of interpretation and the meaning of which is obvious, but which, as we see, nevertheless retains the essential characteristics that differentiate dreams so strikingly from waking life and consequently call for explanation.³³

He remained resistant to admitting any interpretation working *away* from waking life, since this would upset the nature worked upon by the tools won from other interpretations. Freud also remained peculiarly silent about an aspect of this dream that is already profoundly undreamlike, being drawn from another world. Much about the dream "*daß das Kind an seinem Bette steht, ihn am Arme faßt und ihm vorwurfsvoll zuraunt: Vater, siehst du denn nicht, daß ich verbrenne?*" suggests a relationship to Goethe's poem '*Der Erlkönig*', which also takes as its theme the relation of father and son at the moment of the son's death. While psychoanalytic literature has noted that the son's complaint to his father is closely related to the line from Goethe's poem, "*Siehst, Vater, du den Erlkönig nicht?*" [Father, don't you see the Erl-King?],³⁴ it has not considered how the full interpenetration of these two texts reveals a field of correspondences and fateful repetitions.

³² Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, p.571.

³³ Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, p.654.

³⁴ See Serge Léclaire's *A Child Is Being Killed: Primary Narcissism and the Death Drive*, trans. Marie-Claude Hays, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), p.2. and James Simpson, 'Freud and the Erl King', *Oxford German Studies*, Vol. 27, 1, (1998), pp.30-63, p.33. Neither Léclaire nor Simpson draw insights into the history of metapsychology from this comparison: Léclaire develops an allegory about the holy mother and child, while Simpson relates literary problems posed by Goethe to a range

Der Erlkönig

Wer reitet so spät durch Nacht und Wind?
Es ist der Vater mit seinem Kind;
Er hat den Knaben wohl in dem Arm,
Er faßt ihn sicher, er hält ihn warm.

Mein Sohn, was birgst du so bang dein Gesicht? –
Siehst, Vater, du den Erlkönig nicht?
Den Erlenkönig mit Kron und Schweif? –
Mein Sohn, es ist ein Nebelstreif. –

"Du liebes Kind, komm, geh mit mir!
Gar schöne Spiele spiel ich mit dir;
Manch bunte Blumen sind an dem Strand,
Meine Mutter hat manch gülden Gewand."

Mein Vater, mein Vater, und hörest du nicht,
Was Erlenkönig mir leise verspricht? –
Sei ruhig, bleibe ruhig, mein Kind;
In dürren Blättern säuselt der Wind. –

"Willst, feiner Knabe, du mit mir gehn?
Meine Töchter sollen dich warten schön;
Meine Töchter führen den nächtlichen Reihn,
Und wiegen und tanzen und singen dich ein."

Mein Vater, mein Vater, und siehst du nicht dort
Erlkönigs Töchter am düstern Ort? –
Mein Sohn, mein Sohn, ich seh es genau:
Es scheinen die alten Weiden so grau. –

"Ich liebe dich, mich reizt deine schöne Gestalt;
Und bist du nicht willig, so brauch ich Gewalt."
Mein Vater, mein Vater, jetzt faßt er mich an!
Erlkönig hat mir ein Leids getan! –

Dem Vater grauset, er reitet geschwind,
Er hält in Armen das ächzende Kind,
Erreicht den Hof mit Mühe und Not;
In seinen Armen das Kind war tot.

The Erl-King

Who rides, so late, through night and wind?
It is the father with his child.
He has the boy well in his arm
He holds him safely, he keeps him warm

"My son, why do you hide your face in fear?"
"Father, do you not see the Erl-king?
The Erl-king with crown and cape?"
"My son, it's a streak of fog."

"You dear child, come, go with me!
Beautiful games I play with you;
many a colourful flower is on the beach,
My mother has many a golden robe."

"My father, my father, and hear you not,
What the Erl-king quietly promises me?"
"Be calm, stay calm, my child;
Through scrawny leaves the wind is sighing."

"Do you, fine boy, want to go with me?
My daughters shall wait on you finely;
My daughters lead the nightly dance,
And rock and dance and sing to bring you in."

"My father, my father, and don't you see there
The Erl-king's daughters in the gloomy place?"
"My son, my son, I see it clearly:
There shimmer the old willows so grey."

"I love you, your beautiful form entices me;
And if you're not willing, then I will use force."
"My father, my father, he's grabbing me now!
The Erl-king has done me harm!"

It horrifies the father; he swiftly rides on,
He holds the moaning child in his arms,
Reaches the yard with great difficulty;
In his arms, the child was dead.

In Freud's text a vivid relation between father and son emerges between the architecture of the home's two connected rooms and the dream itself. Within the dream, the father's arm is caught or grabbed [*ihn am Arme faßt*] by the child; when the father awakens it is the child's arm that has been burnt. This echo may indicate a mere coincidence, but it might too mark some enchantment. The child tells the father

of sources in Freud, concluding only that Freud's psychoanalytic approaches to literature were not yet developed Chapter VII of *The Interpretation of Dreams* was written, explaining Freud's reticence. p.63.

of what has befallen him with a flaming grasp; the father, phantastically wanting to assume the place of his son, reanimates the child. This unusual augury, in which the correspondence of *arms* allows the dream to disclose what has already happened but is not yet known, seems to have little place in psychoanalysis. But the relationship of arms, itself echoing between the dream and its real scene, echoes another aspect from Goethe's poem. In the poem a father rides through the night, his arm warmly gripping his ailing son [*Er hat den Knaben wohl in dem Arm, Er fasst ihn sicher, er hält ihn warm*]. As they ride the son sees the Erlkönig: a figure who first tempts him and asks him to play, then promises the son the services of his daughters. Finally, when the boy resists the Erlkönig's advances, the Erlkönig says that he loves the boy and his beautiful form, but admonishes him that should the child not be willing he will have to use violence [*Und bist du nicht willig, so brauch' ich Gewalt*]. After each appearance of the Erlkönig the son cries out, eventually screaming "Now he's grabbing me" [*Jetzt fasst er mich an*]. After each cry the father dismisses the son's claim. Each appearance of the Erlkönig is explained away as a natural element of the forest through which they ride: a streak of mist; the rustle of wind through the trees; or the semblance of an old willow. The father rides on still holding the child, but when their frantic journey ends the child is dead in his arms [*in seinen Armen das Kind war tot*]. Goethe's poem also contains an echo of arms, not between the father and son, but instead between the father and the Erlkönig. In gripping the child the two converge, yet they belong to separate realms: the father to the naturalised, sensuous darkness of the forest in the night; the Erlkönig to a supersensuous world of unnatural colour.

The relationship between Freud's Burning Child and Goethe's '*Der Erlkönig*' is an inversion: No longer is it the child gripped by a fantastic vision, but instead his

father. The sentence that most closely relates the two texts – “*Vater, siehst du denn nicht, dass ich verbrenne?* [Father, don’t you see that I’m burning?]” – stands transformed. The emphatic particle “*denn*” might not be what it seems. Could it not be a rendering of another word, its homophone, the definite article “*den*”? The object of this article – the Erlkönig – has, in the dream, disappeared. “*Siehst, Vater, du den Erlkönig nicht?*” [Father, don’t you see the Erlkönig] becomes “*Vater, siehst du den(n) [...] nicht...*” [Father don’t you see...]. No longer does some supernatural beast appear in the phantasy, but instead the lost child himself, as an apparition unable to pronounce his own name. No longer does the father’s grip keep the child warm, nor the sexual heat of the Erlkönig’s grasp, nor even the grip of a fever, but rather the heat of being caught by the child’s flaming arm.

Freud’s text therefore forms a sequel proper to Goethe’s poem. Its characters, the father and son, are the very same. Having arrived home the child is dead, but the phantasy – itself already suspended within family relations – is relived by the father, as the child reappears to him in phantasy from the Erlkönig’s deathly kingdom. The “*Hof*” to which the riders finally arrive is the most demonically ambiguous word in Goethe’s poem. A “*Hof*” may well be just a farmyard or the courtyard, but it is also a court in terms of a monarch’s entourage and house. The word introduces an ambiguity such that while the father arrives home, in death the son might arrive at the Erlkönig’s court.³⁵ The poem’s many voices collide in this ambiguous realm. Can we not imagine the child’s movement of phantasy in which the father himself is the Erlkönig, whose arms that grasp the child securely become the grasping of the fearsome creature?³⁶ Or the father who deliberately confuses the tenderness in holding his child

³⁵ This is also James Simpson’s interpretation, p.56.

³⁶ Such a combination of father and fantastic creature appeared fifteen years later in Freud’s study of Hoffman’s *The Sand-man*, ‘The Uncanny’, *FSE17*, pp.217-256.

tightly with the sexual love of the child, as they *ride* through the night – to make the most violent suggestion of the poem’s opening line transparent: the father who rapes his son, assuming that in the morning it will be forgotten. “Quick! Don’t let me perish helplessly!” cries the the neurotic adult, like the poem’s child, to his analyst, Sandor Ferenczi, who in theorising psychoanalysis in a culture in which child rape is ubiquitous – the culture of Europe – described a strange confusion of tongues between adult and child.³⁷ We see this violent relation mediated here phantasmagorically.

We can pose this same question in another way: Does the child die into the realm of the supersensuous, the apparently artificial world of brightly coloured semblances disguising violence, or does he die in the dark forest of the father, the world of nature? No-one could know, but the naturalising impulse of the father – his conviction that the Erlkönig’s semblance is merely part of the forest – allows the entrance of the natural death of the child into the house. The house, itself naturalised, is ruined by the entry of this natural death, and thus the father must awaken for fear that in facing devastating nature to which without consciousness he too would succumb. Where the child’s phantasies are dispelled by a claim to sensuous realism, so the phantasy in turn returns to he who dispelled it. Thus the child is resurrected only for an instant, until the father truly must awaken, and lose the child once again forever.

This literary context exposes the limits of Freud’s hermeneutics, which, discovering tools of a supposedly natural science, finds itself allied with the father’s perspective. It justifies Freud’s reticence in interpreting this dream, exposing the reality in which those natural scientific tools are deployed as historical, and insofar as

³⁷ Sandor Ferenczi, ‘A Confusion of Tongues between the Adults and the Children (The Language of Tenderness and of Passion)’, trans. Michael Balint, in *The International Journal of Psycho-analysis*, 30, (1949), pp.225-230.

it is historical is as full of delusion and illusion as the dream, laying the ground for a necessary phantasy. This history cannot be confined to a house, rather it has a doubled character: it is at once the regression towards sleep as a likeness of a womb, expressing a personal history of individuation, and at the same time it is a regression into a culture of dreams that are already poems. In the dereliction of the bourgeois household, regression rebounds into the birth of mass literary culture of Goethe's poem from a century earlier. This dream, if we may still call it that, stands on a threshold between a private experience and a mass-consumed text.

Here we might recognise some relation to Otilie: as with the father in Freud's text, throughout Goethe's *Elective Affinities* her distant loved ones appear by night as semblances offering promises of continuing life. Each time, they appear under the permanent artificial light of a lamp. When Otilie dies, enshrined in her glass-topped coffin, Eduard requests that an eternal lamp be placed in the chapel. Otilie is a wholly modern martyr of an industrialising age. In death she lives on in phantasmagoria – a word originally describing a lamp projecting artificial images for the masses – on display within the artificial eternity of technology.

History is marked in the architecture of these dreams and texts. Certainly there is a long tradition to which Goethe's child's phantasy, Freud's father's awakening, and Adorno's dream belong. As far back as Artemidorus Daldianus's *Oneirocritica*, a similar dream is discussed, in which

someone imagined that he saw his father being incinerated. It came to pass that the viewer himself died, so that the father, being, so to speak, burnt up by his suffering in the manner of a fire, was destroyed.³⁸

³⁸ Artemidorus, *Oneirocritica*, trans. Daniel E. Harris-McCoy (Oxford: OUP, 2012), p.51.

Only in the nineteenth century does the architectural trace become decisive, and in tracing architectural forms Adorno's dream implies something new. For Goethe the home and the kingly court are doubled in the aftermath of the French revolution; for Freud the architecture is one of the bourgeois *intérieur* at the moment of its dereliction, its division between father and son internalised and ruined, while mass culture spreads through cities; the unspoken architecture of Adorno's dream is the camp, Auschwitz, and its crematorium. Here all of the dead were burnt *en masse*. Adorno's dream is removed from the structure of the bourgeois family, but nonetheless poses a problem similar to Freud's. He dreams in a world in which the corpses of a generation were systematically burnt after their murders. In *Minima Moralia* he sketched this historical trajectory:

With the family there passes away, while the system lasts, not only the most effective agency of the bourgeoisie, but also the resistance which, though repressing the individual, also strengthened, perhaps even produced him. The end of the family paralyses the forces of opposition. The rising collectivist order is a mockery of a classless one: together with the bourgeois it liquidates the Utopia that once drew sustenance from motherly love.³⁹

Adorno had already described this movement to Benjamin in 1935, with regard to the subject of the dream:

Who precisely is the subject of this dream? In the nineteenth century it was nothing but the individual; but in the individual's dream no direct depiction of the fetish character or of its monuments is to be found. That is why the collective consciousness is then invoked, but I fear that in its present form this concept cannot be distinguished from Jung's conception of the same. It is open to criticism from both sides; from the perspective of the social process because it hypostatizes archaic images, where in fact dialectical images are generated by the commodity character, not in some archaic collective ego but amongst alienated bourgeois individuals and from the perspective of psychology because, as Horkheimer puts it, a mass ego only properly exists in earthquakes and catastrophes, while objective surplus value otherwise prevails only through and against individual subjects.⁴⁰

³⁹ *MM*, pp.22-23; *AGS4*, p.23.

⁴⁰ *ABCOR*, p.107.

As the collectivised order breaks old family bonds, the weakened ego retreats not towards motherly love, but into a culture that catastrophically assumes her place. Where this process is absolute, in fascism, a *mass* subject of the dream is born, and here too a fire in which “*all the dead*” appear. This burning is not just a dream: the fire, just as in Freud’s text, is what prompts the dream too.

These dreams traverse a passage in history: arriving home, entering the bourgeois *intérieur*; spreading through the city, and finally into the camp that instantiates a world of necessary, universal phantasy, which Adorno and Horkheimer described as a “total context of delusion”:

The regression of the masses [...] is a new form of delusion which supersedes that of vanquished myth. Through the mediation of the total society, which encompasses all relationships and impulses, human being are being turned back into precisely what the developmental law of society, the principle of the self, had opposed: mere specimens, identical to one another through isolation within the compulsively controlled collectivity. [...] The powerlessness of the workers is not merely a ruse of the rulers but a logical consequence of industrial society, into which the efforts to escape it have finally transformed into the ancient concept of fate.⁴¹

This is a history of a means of producing semblance: phantasmagorias first occur for the brutalised child as the internally dirempt family unit rides through a forest. The father attempts to evade fear, explaining away the danger as mere nature. The phantasmagorias of the nineteenth century *intérieur* inflect this image: now nature must be banished from the family in its fortress of a home, yet the home becomes a second nature. Nature visits in the form of the child’s death, confirming this second nature as the first, and the child appears phantasmagorically to the father. This dream the confirms the need to sleep, which the artificial interior induces. With the termination of this passage, out of the bourgeois *intérieur*, into the absolutely privatised, yet absolutely collectivised mass society, into the camp’s crematorium, we

⁴¹ *DoE*, pp.28-29; *AGS3*, pp.53-54; trans. amended.

are at once presented with an architecture and with none: the absolute image of the fascist state, which is itself eventually burnt. The dream it produces in the mind of one of that generation who survived returns those who died to life only for the instant in which their deaths are confirmed and made absolute.

3.2 “Only now are they completely dead”: Historical Materialism and Phantasmagoria

“My father, my father, don’t you see, the Erlkönig standing on its head, evolving out of its brains grotesque ideas more wonderful than his dancing?” –

“My son, it’s just a piece of wood.”

“My father, my father, don’t you see the Erlkönig, he’s a piece of wood in the shape of a table” –

“My son, it’s just a commodity.”

“My father, my father, don’t you see the Erlkönig, he’s a commodity, demanding consumption with his beautiful semblance” –

“My son, it’s just the death of living labour, everything is natural here, if only cold and grey.”

The suggestion of these Marxian parodies on Goethe can be found in *Capital*:

Commodities cannot themselves go to market and perform exchanges in their own right. We must, therefore, have recourse to their guardians, who are the possessors of commodities. Commodities are things, and therefore lack the power to resist man. If they are unwilling, he can use force [*Wenn sie nicht willig, kann er Gewalt brauchen*]; in other words, he can take possession of them.⁴²

Describing exchange Marx quotes the line from Goethe’s poem in which the Erlkönig threatens violence against the child. The opening chapters of *Capital* consistently refer to Goethe’s phantoms, for example Marx’s description of the commodity as a

⁴² Karl Marx, *Capital Volume 1*, trans. Ben Fowkes, (London: Penguin, 1976), p.179.

“sensuous-supersensuous thing” [*Sinnlich übersinnliches Ding*] alludes to a line spoken by Mephisto in *Faust*.⁴³ Goethe’s writings become archetypal for describing the “*phantasmagoric* form” of the relation between things that the social relation between people assumes, such that “the products of the human brain appear [*scheinen*] as autonomous figures endowed with a life of their own.”⁴⁴

Marx’s opening remark on exchange turns dialectically: it is not we who take commodities like raped and murdered children (although humans in this social form rape and murder children too), but instead commodities, which, in their phantastic forms, take our lives from us. Part of us is taken into their colourful world of culture undergirded by violence; the other part is given over to the chaotic suffering of nature.

If Marx deferred to Mephisto as the master of the Goethean phantasmagoria, his attention may have been better turned to *Elective Affinities*. In a fragment from the *Paris Manuscripts* containing further lines from Mephisto, Marx describes money:

If *money* is the bond binding me to *human* life, binding society to me, connecting me with nature and man, is not money the bond of all *bonds*? Can it not dissolve and bind all ties? Is it not, therefore, also the universal *agent of separation*? It is the coin that really *separates* as well as the real *binding agent* – the [...] *chemical* power of society.⁴⁵

⁴³ “*Du übersinnlicher sinnlicher Freier*”, line 3534, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Faust 1 and 2*, trans. Stuart Atkins (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), p.91. In *Marx and World Literature*, (Oxford: OUP, 1978) S.S. Praver details Marx’s relationship to Goethe in literary-technical terms. He also transcribes Wilhelm Liebknecht’s memory that Marx enjoyed doing impressions of Mephisto, p.327. *Faust* too, is a tale of exchange, from the perspective of the legal contract. On law and the exchange abstraction to law see Evgeny B. Pashukanis, ‘The General Theory of Law and Marxism’, eds. P. Beirne and R. Sharlet, in *Selected Writings on Marxism and Law*, (New York, Academic Press, 1980), pp.37-131, and Alfred Sohn-Rethel, *Intellectual and Manual Labour* (Atlantic Highlands: Humanities Press, 1978). Adorno subsequently interpreted Marx’s theory of phantasmagoria as offering a speculative critique of juridical formalism in neo-Kantian metaphysics.

⁴⁴ Marx, *Capital Volume 1*, p.165. The English translations render the word “*Phantasmagorische*” as “fantastic”. For a criticism of this translation see Gillian Rose, *The Melancholy Science*, p.31.

⁴⁵ Karl Marx, *Early Writings*, trans. T.B. Bottomore, (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964), p.191

Marx's use of the word "*chemical*" precisely describes an elective affinity.⁴⁶ And what else is *Elective Affinities* than a novel that plays out a single microscopic exchange, albeit of partners, on a cosmic scale? The metaphysics of Marx's commodity and Goethe's novel share a mythic ground which establishes terrible echoes between the smallest and largest: for Marx the exchange is not just repeatable, but the basis of repetition is illuminated by the semblance of each commodity; for Goethe the exchange of partners projects a world of equivalence that appears as fate. Marx pointed to the speculation that instantiates this view in the first Preface to capital, "In the analysis of economic forms, moreover, neither microscopes nor chemical reagents are of use. The force of abstraction must replace both."⁴⁷

Within exchange – produced by and reproducing myth – things are animated.

Benjamin noted this in his essay on Goethe:

When once man has sunk to this level, even the life of seemingly [*Scheinbar*] dead things acquire power. [...] The incorporation of the totality of material things into life is indeed a criterion of the mythic world. Among them the first has always been the house. Thus, to the extent that the house approaches completion, fate closes in.⁴⁸

It is not just the building of the house that gives myth duration. In Charlotte Goethe introduces an enchantress as dangerous as Mephisto, a bourgeoisie holding accounts and investing for profit.⁴⁹ The house's construction is founded on an act of enclosure and a new rental scheme for the villagers.⁵⁰ Charlotte sees clearly that her epoch is not founded on the marital exchange in courtly love, but on a broader social myth. She enchants the land of the novel, drawing everyone toward it; even the aristocracy falls

⁴⁶ See Michael Löwy, *Redemption and Utopia* (Cambridge: Athlone, 1992), pp.6-13.

⁴⁷ Marx, *Capital Volume 1*, p.90.

⁴⁸ *SWI*, p.308; *BGS1*, p.139.

⁴⁹ Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Elective Affinities*, trans. David Constantine, in *Selected Works* ed. Nicolas Boyle, (London: Random House, 2000), pp.121-382, p.171.

⁵⁰ Goethe, *Elective Affinities*, p.176.

victim to her bourgeois logic. She responds differently from the others to the chemical metaphor for social life: “It would not take much,” she says,

to see people of one’s own acquaintance in these simple forms; and I am particularly reminded of the social circles in which people live. But what these inanimate substances [*seelenlosen Wesen*] most resemble are the masses, who confront each other in the world: the classes [*Stände*], the different occupations, the nobility and the third estate, the soldier and the civilian.⁵¹

If an analogy between personal relations and class relations in bourgeois society exists, then this dialectical formulation is founded on the specific character of a society in which the public sphere is composed of private interests, while private interests are forced into a public sphere of competition. Charlotte’s ideological ensnarement in her own conjuration is revealed by her description of the masses, who confront each other like inanimate substances, or differently translated, soulless beings. This dialectical interplay of public and private produces the phantasmagoric aspect of the commodity: its sensuous and supersensuous aspects; its essence and its appearance; its seeming alienation from other commodities; and the blind contingency of commodities on one another in exchange, and hence their reproduction myth. In the social metaphor the naturalising voice of the father in ‘The Erlkönig’ returns.

What was merely a metaphor in Marx comes true as the world of things is animated. Fifteen years after ‘Goethe’s Elective Affinities’ Benjamin’s figure of the alchemist reappears, concluding his essay on Eduard Fuchs:

The alchemist connects his “base” desire for making gold with a complete examination of the chemicals in which planets and elements come together in images of spiritual man. Similarly in satisfying the “base” desire for possession, Fuchs searches through an art in whose products the productive forces and the masses come together in image of historical man.⁵²

⁵¹ Goethe, *Elective Affinities*, p.154

⁵² *SW4*, p.284; *BGS2*, p.505. The allusion to “historical man” refers back to, ‘Capitalism as Religion’, written contemporaneously with the Goethe essay.

Historical materialism transforms our alchemist: no longer does he care for the living flame of the work, but instead for the affinities of gold – something both synthetic of the earth and cosmos, while also dead and elemental. As money, gold slips as a piece of dead matter through spirit, in the process of spiritualising dead matter, deadening the matter that in life might resist. This alchemist recognises life in its disappearance. The baseness [*Niedrigkeit*] of his chemical materialism drags everything back to earth; while life appears as a fatal cosmic interplay of elements, all earthly things are enlivened in new relations.

Elective Affinities can be conceived of as the story of a single exchange that illuminates the world in colours that grant all things and people the semblance of commensurability. But in the novel this exchange is broken, incomplete, and failed. After Otilie recognises her enmeshment in this mythic world she withdraws; Charlotte and the Captain cannot get married as Otilie dies; and with Otilie's withdrawal, there is only the hope of a future when she, and Eduard, as angels among angels, will "on some future day awaken together."⁵³ As Benjamin writes,

In the tremendous ultimate experience of the mythic powers – in the knowledge that reconciliation with them cannot be obtained except through the constancy of sacrifice – Goethe revolted against them.⁵⁴

The specific mode by which Goethe, and later Benjamin, imagined that the exchange was broken can be best described in comparing Charlotte and Otilie, and their respective relations to death and memory. In Charlotte's attitude to death her bourgeois sentiments are most extreme, and in seeing death Otilie learns the mythic grounds of her world's relations. Charlotte transforms a graveyard, removing gravestones, and levelling the ground. She considers any attachment to any particular

⁵³ Goethe, *Elective Affinities*, p.382.

⁵⁴ *SWI*, p.327; *BGS1*, pp.164-165.

piece of land to be mere sentimentality, arguing: “The pure sense of a final and general equality, at least after death, seems to me more solace than this selfish and stubborn continuation of our personalities, allegiance, and material circumstances.”⁵⁵ For Charlotte the dialectics of the public and private conclude with a formal equality in death, establishing universal conditions for individuals. Each is made equal and commensurate by the myth through which they die. Otilie’s own death is different: as Benjamin writes, she dies for the expiation of all of the guilty.⁵⁶ Her suicide marks a transformation of the relations of individual and collective, for they, all of them, not merely as individuals gathered, but as a mass of people all living and dead under a myth, as soulless beings, are granted a soul which is saved. Otilie recognises her own entanglement with fate in seeing herself in the death of baby Otto. She recognises in correspondence not the fungibility of all, but the “eternal return of the same” as a “sign of fate”.⁵⁷ In her suicide Otilie establishes a new mode of memory: one that would not endlessly pile up corpses, each as guilty as the next. Her death in which myth is broken works upon all those who have died, rescuing them by breaking the logic of the enchanted earth in which they lie. This radical form of remembrance causes her to make of the dead semblances of the living, and to transform herself into a pure semblance that passes away. She discovers the total profanity, in disenchanted nature, of the apparently spiritual relations that held the characters together: she is an alchemist who would create a transient golden semblance out of other elements to show that exchange was false, leaving behind the darkness of a piece of nature finally disenchanted, lying lifeless in a glass-topped coffin.

⁵⁵ Goethe, *Elective Affinities*, p.251.

⁵⁶ *SWI*, p.309, *BGS1*, p.170.

⁵⁷ *SWI*, p.307; *BGS1*, p.137.

Such a mode of memory became would become contentious in critical theory. In a letter about Benjamin's essay on Fuchs, in which the alchemist reappeared, Horkheimer criticised of the notion of an incomplete history implied by the remembrance that, recognising the past in itself as myth, might blast that past open to redeem what has befallen everyone:

I have reflected for a long time on the question of the extent to which the work of the past is completed. Your formulation may just quietly remain. Personally, though, I would assert the reservation, that here it must be dealt with as a dialectically comprehended relation. The determination of incompleteness is idealistic if completeness is not contained within it. Past injustice has occurred and is completed. The slain are really slain. In the end, your proposition is theological. If one takes the lack of closure entirely seriously one must believe in the Final Judgement. But my thinking is too much contaminated with materialism for this. Perhaps, with regard to the incompleteness there is a difference between the positive and the negative, so that only the injustice, the horror, the sufferings of the past are irreparable. The justice practiced, the joys, the works, have a different relation to time, for their positive character is largely negated by the transience of things. This holds first and foremost for individual existence, in which it is not the happiness but the unhappiness that is sealed by death.⁵⁸

Benjamin responded gnomically:

The corrective to this line of thinking may be found in the consideration that history is not simply a science but also and not least a form of remembrance [*Eingedenken*]. What science has "determined", remembrance can modify. Such mindfulness can make the incomplete (happiness) into something complete, and the complete (suffering) into something incomplete. That is theology, but in remembrance we have an experience that forbids us to conceive of history as fundamentally atheological, little as it may be granted us to try to write it with immediately theological concepts.⁵⁹

Adorno's dream, in which all the dead appear as flaming transient semblances composes a third position, and offers a resolution to this significant dispute. As with Horkheimer, the slain are really slain, but this judgment does not rest on a "contamination" of materialism, or the abstract knowledge that the dead continue to

⁵⁸ Horkheimer, *Gesammelte Schriften*, Vol.16, pp.181-191; partially translated in *AP*, p.471, the rest mine.

⁵⁹ *AP*, p. 471; *BGS5*, p.589.

dominate the living. His dream is also close to Benjamin's position, for here pure semblance, no longer serving illusion, finally grants knowledge of how semblances animated in concealing the dreadful truth are forced to work continually for the dead, as in commodities. The dead, reappearing in their former shapes, and not merely expunged, might be laid to rest by way of the dream.

Such a resolution had an antecedent in another fragment on historical violence that Adorno had written ten years earlier. Quoting from the *Arcades Project*,⁶⁰ Adorno set his thinking within a lullaby remembered from his childhood, in which a beggar, who in the songbook "looks like a Jew", is chased away:

So long as there is still a single beggar, Benjamin writes in a fragment, there is still myth; only with the last beggar's disappearance would myth be reconciled. But would not violence then be forgotten as in the child's drowsiness? Would not, in the end, the disappearance of the beggar make good everything that was ever done to him that can never be made good?⁶¹

Adorno's asks not whether the beggar disappears, and past violence is undone – for in this world it cannot be – but *how* the beggar disappears. Would he be forgotten in sleep, or remembered in a dream? Would he be granted a semblance beyond instrumentality, only for this to allow him the blessing of disappearance, or would his memory be repressed as oblivion? Adorno's analysis closes unanswered: "Would not the beggar, who was driven out of the gates of civilization, be saved in his homeland, freed from the spell of the Earth?"⁶²

Later Adorno and Horkheimer would write that

No matter what makeup of the Jews may be in reality, their image, that of the defeated, has characteristics which must make totalitarian rule their mortal enemy: happiness without power, a homeland without border stones, religion without myth.⁶³

⁶⁰ *AP*, p.400; *BGS5*, p.505, trans. amended.

⁶¹ *MM*, pp.199-200; *AGS4*, p.225, trans. amended.

⁶² *MM*, p. 200; *AGS4*, p.225, trans. amended.

⁶³ *DoE*, pp. 164-165; *AGS3*, p.196, trans. amended.

Yet on visiting Auschwitz, Gillian Rose noted the irony realised: “the Jews are not *harboured*, but expelled into the borderless cemetery in the air.”⁶⁴

3.3 “The dead flared up in their former shape for a few seconds”: Between the Incinerator and the Metaphysics of Musical Time

Benjamin’s essay on Goethe concludes with another tablet marking a house: drawn from a poem by Stefan George, and pointing towards an eternity not of this earth. The house it marks is Beethoven’s.

Eh ihr zum kampf erstarkt auf eurem sterne
Sing ich euch streit und sieg von oberen sternem.
Eh ihr den leib ergreift auf diesem sterne
Erfind ich euch den traum bei ewigen sternem.

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

Perhaps with a thought of Leonore’s aria in *Fidelio*, “*Komm, Hoffnung, lass den letzten Stern der Müden nicht erbleichen*. [Come, hope, do not extinguish the last star of the weary]” Beethoven intrudes into the essay’s closure alongside the twinned themes of hope and star, occasioning Benjamin’s reflection on the earth’s muteness in Goethe’s novel: “If music encloses genuine mysteries, this world of course remains a mute world from which music will never ring out.”⁶⁵ Redemption transcends this mute world’s language. “The mystery of a work”, he writes, is “that moment in which it juts out of the domain of language proper to it into a higher one unattainable for it.”⁶⁶ This echoes ‘Fate and Character’, where he wrote, “the guilt context is temporal in a totally inauthentic way, very different in its kind and measure from the time of redemption, or of music, or of truth.”⁶⁷ Benjamin identifies this moment in Goethe’s

⁶⁴ Gillian Rose, *Love’s Work*, (New York: NYRB, 2011), p. 13.

⁶⁵ *SWI*, p.355; *BGS1*, p.201.

⁶⁶ *SWI*, p.355; *BGS1*, p.200.

⁶⁷ *SWI*, p.204; *BGS2*, p.176.

line “hope shot across the sky above their heads like a falling star.” Above the lovers’ embrace the shooting star dramatically crowns the novel with the mystery of hope for the hopeless. Music’s analogue is a star falling, free and unfixed from eternity. It provides a dramatic symbol of hope beyond and against fate’s mundanity. This star is of a different time, ripped from eternity, or from any instrumentality that might use its fixedness to steer a course: as the star moves the world itself is exposed as frozen.

Benjamin’s departure from Goethe’s language into Beethoven’s music initiated a critical project never to be completed. As early as the 1930s Adorno planned to write a book on Beethoven with the title “The Philosophy of Music”.⁶⁸ Over the course of his lifetime fragments jotted down towards this book accrued. A particular set of fragments dating from the 1940s address this musical moment at the close of Benjamin’s essay, under an epigram suggested from Goethe’s *Sketch of Faust Part 1*, “*Und Freude schwebt wie Sternenklang / Uns nur im Traume vor*” [And joy, like the sound of stars, hovers before us only in a dream].⁶⁹ Some of Adorno’s fragments are marked “hope and star”, in direct reference to Benjamin’s essay, while others refer to the same select passages of Beethoven’s music: the *Adagio* from the Piano Sonata Op.31, 2, the *Adagio* from String Quartet Op.59, 1, and the *Arietta* from the Piano Sonata Op.111. Within these fragments, one image corresponds directly to Adorno’s dream:

On the metaphysics of musical time. Relate the end of my study to the teaching in Jewish mysticism about the grass angels, who are created for an instant only to perish in the sacred fire. Music – modelled on the glorification of God, even, and especially, when it opposes the world – resembles these angels. Their very transience, their ephemerality, is glorification. That is, the incessant destruction of nature. Beethoven raised this figure to musical self-consciousness. His truth is the destruction of the particular. He composed to its end the absolute transience of music. The fire which, according to his

⁶⁸ Rolf Tiedemann, ‘Introduction’ in *Beethoven*, pp.vii-xii.

⁶⁹ *Beethoven*, p.162, trans. amended.

stricture against weeping, is to be struck from a man's soul, is 'the fire which consumes [nature].'⁷⁰

This image of the grass angels, a Kabbalistic reading of a line from psalm 104,⁷¹ had a critical history already when Adorno transcribed it from Scholem's translation of the Zohar.⁷² Benjamin concluded his 'Announcement of the Journal *Angelus Novus*' with this same image, while working on the Goethe essay. In that text, this figure of grass angels represented an ephemerality that was "the fair price exacted by the journal's call for contemporary relevance."⁷³ The grass angels would appear numerous times in Benjamin's work.⁷⁴ and while they are not mentioned in the Goethe essay, quoting Bachofen, he furnishes Otilie's death with a similar image: "the life of the cicada, which, without food or drink, sings until it dies."⁷⁵

These angels of the New, already musical, singing a hymn to God, interrupt mythic time. Adorno quotes Scholem's text almost faithfully, yet he made an alteration that requires explication: "the fire that consumes fire" becomes, for Beethoven, "the fire that consumes nature." In Kabbalistic theology, fire plays a

⁷⁰ *Beethoven*, pp. 176-177.

⁷¹ Psalms 104:14: "You cause the grass to grow for cattle." Traditional kabbalistic readings relate this to the earlier line: "you make the wind your messenger, and fire and flame your minister", 104:4, alongside Genesis 1:11: "Let the earth put forth vegetation"

⁷² Scholem sent Adorno his translation in 1939. Adorno responded: "the notion of the instantly transient angels touched me in the deepest and most curious way. And one last thing: the connection between your concerns and Benjamin's has never been so clear to me as in this reading.", quoted from Tiedemann's extensive footnote *Beethoven*, p.245. Tiedemann addresses only the immediate textual history, but not the wider history of the image in theology or in Benjamin). Another translation appears in *Gershom Scholem: A Life in Letters*, ed. and trans. Anthony David Skinner, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002). For recent kabbalistic philology, see *The Zohar: Pritzker Edition*, trans. and ed. Daniel C. Matt, (Stanford: Stanford University Press: 2003), Vol.1, p.142.

⁷³ *SW1*, p.296.

⁷⁴ See 'Karl Kraus' *SW2*, p.457; *BGS2*, p.367, and 'Agisileus Santander (First Version)', *SW2*, pp.712-713; *BGS6*, p.520.

⁷⁵ *SW1*, p.349; *BGS1*, p.192

central role. In the beginning a single white flame issues forth from God.⁷⁶ As time goes by more flames appear in many colours. The *Zohar* teaches that these coloured flames are supported by the material world, but cleave to the higher flame. The coloured flames illuminate our world, but are, by nature, instruments of destruction and death, devouring whatever comes near. From our earthly perspective, the white light does not consume, but instead is eternal and constant. Only by its own light would it too be seen to consume, and it consumes the flames of other colours.⁷⁷

These Jewish motifs are presented schematically in the final section of Benjamin's essay as a typology of semblances. The world illuminated by the white light is that of the inconspicuous; the world of colours is the world of appearance under the fateful spell of myth. But where the *Zohar* develops a theology of fire, Benjamin transposes flames into veils [*Hüllen*]. The beautiful semblance, he writes, is "neither the veil nor the veiled object, but rather the object in its veil. Unveiled, however, it would prove to be infinitely inconspicuous." He continues, "Such veiling is divinely necessary at times, just as it is also divinely determined that, unveiled at the wrong time, what is inconspicuous evaporated into nothing, whereupon revelation takes over from secrets."⁷⁸

Goethe writes a mythic world, in colours springing from an enchanted earth. "[His] literary composition remains turned towards the interior in the veiled light refracted through multicoloured panes."⁷⁹ Beethoven's "nature" like Goethe's earth is mythic; Adorno describes it as demonic. Thus nature is destroyed in the light of coloured flames, not the white light in which destruction would be redeemed as fire

⁷⁶ Gershom Scholem, *Zohar: Book of Splendor*, (New York: Schocken, 1994), p.3

⁷⁷ Scholem, *Zohar*, pp.14-15.

⁷⁸ *SWI*, p. 351; *BGSI*, p.195

⁷⁹ *SWI*, p. 352; *BGSI*, p.197

consuming fire. This nature is not merely the vegetation of grass, but the mythic nature of a world without revelation from which the divine mystery is excluded. Yet against this mythic schema beauty nonetheless appears, disappearingly, in Beethoven's music just as Otilie's beautiful semblance had done in *Elective Affinities*, partaking in and breaking the spell: "the veil of Otilie remains as her living body. [...] the more life disappears, the more disappears all beauty having the character of semblance – that beauty which is able to adhere uniquely to the living, until with the complete end of one, the other, too, must vanish."⁸⁰

Adorno returned to the unpublished fragments relating to the end of Benjamin's essay in a 1965 radio broadcast titled "*Schöne Stellen* [Beautiful Passages]".⁸¹ Here he addressed "passages like the sentence from Goethe's *Elective Affinities*: 'Hope descended from the heavens like a star'",⁸² giving as an example the second theme of the Adagio of the Piano Sonata Op.31, 2.



Adorno focused on the slightest alteration in the repetition of the theme: the introduction of the appoggiature in bars 35 and 36 (marked above). In a fragment he had written that this change "causes the theme to 'speak', in just the same way as

⁸⁰ *SWI*, p. 353; *BGSI*, p.197.

⁸¹ *AGS18*, pp.695-718; on Beethoven pp.707-709.

⁸² *Beethoven*, p.184, trans. amended.

something extra-human – starlight – seems to bend, as solace, towards humanity.”⁸³

This idiosyncratic approach to Beethoven’s music may be familiar. During the 1940s Adorno collaborated with Thomas Mann on the novel *Doktor Faustus*. Mann portrayed him within the novel as Wendell Kretzschmar, who lectures the young composer Adrian Leverkühn on Beethoven. In Kretzschmar’s lectures a similar argument is made about another beautiful passage: the opening theme of the Arietta of Op.111. In his lecture, Kretzschmar sets the head-motif of the theme to words: “*Himmelsblau* [the blue sky]”; “*Lie-besleid* [love’s sorrow]”; “*Der-maleinst* [some day]”; and finally “*Wie-sengrund*”, a meadow, but also Adorno’s own name.⁸⁴

“Here – language – is – no – longer – purged of flourishes – rather flourishes – of the semblance – of their subjective – domination – the semblance – of art is thrown off – for ultimately – art always throws off – the semblance of art.”⁸⁵ Mann’s novel captures Adorno’s extraordinary staccato voice.⁸⁶ In the sonata’s final variation, amid the starlight of trills, the motif, now slightly changed with the addition of two leading notes, is again set to words: “*O – du Himmelsblau* [O you blue sky]”, “*Grüner Wiesengrund* [green meadow]”; “*Groß war – Gott in uns* [God was great in us]”; “*Alles – war nur Traum* [it was all just a dream]”.⁸⁷

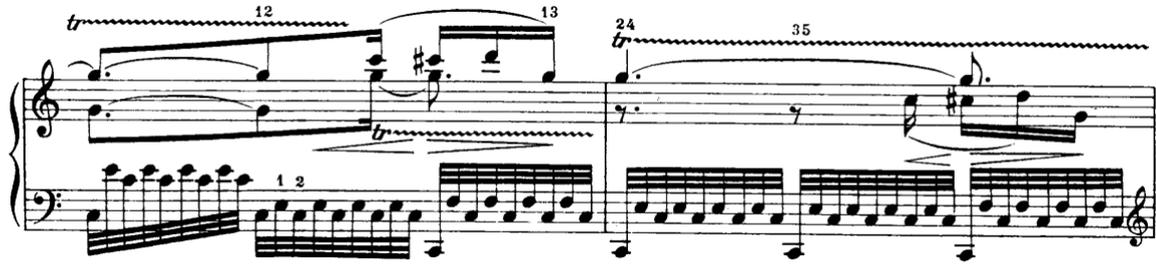
⁸³ *Beethoven*, p.185.

⁸⁴ Thomas Mann, *Doctor Faustus*, trans. John E. Woods, (New York: Vintage Books, 1997), p.58. A facsimile of Adorno’s annotated transcription of the theme for Thomas Mann, with the two versions of the motif, appears in *Adorno-Mann Correspondence*, p.120.

⁸⁵ Thomas Mann, *Doctor Faustus*, pp.58-59, trans. amended.

⁸⁶ On the musicality of Adorno’s language, see Dieter Schnebel, ‘*Komposition von Sprache – sprachliche Gestaltung von Musik in Adornos Werk*’ in *Theodor W. Adorno zum Gedächtnis*, ed. Hermann Schweppenhäuser, (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1971), pp.129-145. Adorno’s ‘*Schöne Stellen*’ was dedicated to Schnebel.

⁸⁷ Thomas Mann, *Doctor Faustus* p.59, trans. amended.



This is Beethoven's final farewell;⁸⁸ like Otilie the beautiful passage is absolutely transformed, yet almost unchanged, disappearing.

In 'Beautiful Passages' Adorno again described the transformation of the theme in Op.31, 2: "Through the addition of a song-like second step downwards from C to B flat the seemingly extra-human theme is humanized, answered by the tears of one whom the earth has reclaimed." Here Adorno is quoting Goethe again, but these lines are not drawn from *Elective Affinities*; rather they are from *Faust Part 1*.⁸⁹ This is the Faust of the night who finds himself rescued from suicidal sentiment, surrounded by a choir of angels. Nonetheless this theme of tears presents a relationship to Benjamin's reading of *Elective Affinities*. Amid his typology of coloured and inconspicuous illuminations and veils, Benjamin discussed "the semblance of reconciliation":

Reconciliation, however, which remained in the domain of the worldly, had already thereby to unveil itself as semblance, and presumably to the passionate ones for whom it finally grew dim.⁹⁰

He quotes from Goethe's poem '*Aussöhnung*' ['Conciliation']: "The higher world – how it fades away before the senses!" "There music hovers on angelic wings"⁹¹ And continues,

⁸⁸ For an excellent critical discussion of these passages see Daniel Chua, 'The Metaphysics of Mourning: Adorno's Farewell to Beethoven', in *Musical Quarterly*, Vol.87, No.3, (2004), pp.523-545.

⁸⁹ Goethe, *Faust*, p.22.

⁹⁰ *SWI*, p.348; *BGS1*, p.191.

⁹¹ *SWI*, p.348; *BGS1*, p.191.

Affection, like the veiling of the image through tears in music, thus summons forth in conciliation the ruin of semblance through emotion. For emotion, is precisely this transition in which the semblance – the semblance of beauty as the semblance of reconciliation – once again dawns sweetest before its vanishing. Neither humour nor tragedy can verbally grasp beauty; beauty cannot appear in an aura of transparent clarity. Its most exact opposite is emotion. Neither guilt nor innocence, neither nature nor the beyond, can be strictly differentiated for beauty. In this sphere Otilie appears; this veil must lie over her beauty.⁹²

These thoughts deeply influenced Adorno: tears appear as the semblance of reconciliation in his Kierkegaard study:

No truer image of hope can be imagined than that of ciphers, readable as traces, dissolving in history disappearing in front of overflowing eyes, indeed confirmed in lamentation. In these tears of despair the ciphers appear as incandescent figures, dialectically, as compassion, comfort and hope.⁹³

They return also the end of his Schubert essay: “This is music we cannot decipher, but it holds up to our blurred, over-brimming eyes the secret of reconciliation at long last.”⁹⁴ But if, like Adorno, we are attentive to the smallest, most inconspicuous of transformations, then there is one we had overlooked, to which his citation of Faust marks the way. In the broadcast Adorno misquoted *Elective Affinities*: Benjamin’s essay rests on Goethe’s line “*Die Hoffnung fuhr wie ein Stern, der vom Himmel fällt, über ihre Häupter weg* [hope shot across the sky above their heads like a falling star.]” Adorno instead writes “*Wie ein Stern fuhr die Hoffnung vom Himmel hernieder* [hope descended from heaven like a star]”. In this smallest transformation between a star that shoots off and one that descends like tears, Adorno differentiates his position and Benjamin’s. Otilie, who redeems through her suicidal martyrdom has been replaced by Faust of the night, who at the moment of his wish to die is saved in life by an angelic choir. Unlike the Beethovenian beautiful passage, or Otilie, which in their

⁹² *SWI*, p.348; *BGSI*, p.191.

⁹³ *K*, p.126; *AGS2*, p.179.

⁹⁴ ‘Schubert’, p.14; *AGS17*, p.33.

transformations might bid a last farewell, freed from the spell of earth, Adorno's philosophy descends, remaining in a worldly domain. In another fragment on Beethoven he writes, "Today, the experience of *leavetaking* no longer exists."⁹⁵ Where Beethoven "composed to its end the absolute transience of music" Adorno carries as a piece of myth this fire will too destroy. *Verweile doch, du bist so schön.*

This distinction determines Adorno's syncretic response to Horkheimer and Benjamin's disagreement on materialism and the Final Judgment. Adorno came closest to addressing this problem in his collaboration with Thomas Mann. In the novel the composer Adrian Leverkühn writes an oratorio on the Apocalypse. Mann asked Adorno, "Would you consider, with me, how such a work – and I mean Leverkühn's work – could more or less be practically realized, and how you would compose music if you yourself were in league with the devil?"⁹⁶ Adorno's utterly musical answer might define his thought: "The most significant and useful tip he gave me", Mann writes, "concerned the effective identity between the sounds of infernal laughter and the angelic children's choir."⁹⁷

Adorno's dream could be nothing but the image of grass angels ambivalently transposed through such theology. The grass angels might be an image of reconciliation, the promise of what we may one day be in music – indeed, precisely what Adorno might one day be: millions upon millions of *grass* angels, demythologised prayer, rid of efficacious magic,⁹⁸ attempting to name as human its own name, a meadow, a *Wiesengrund*, transfigured in transience. But so too might these grass angels be the green that covers Charlotte's permanently levelled

⁹⁵ *Beethoven* p.175.

⁹⁶ *Adorno-Mann Correspondence*, p.13.

⁹⁷ *Adorno-Mann Correspondence*, p.16.

⁹⁸ 'Music and Language', *Quasi Una Fantasia*, p.2; *AGS16*, p.252.

graveyard; a topography death without remembrance, each day destroyed. This ambivalence is heightened after Auschwitz, which provided an earthly image of counter-angels, of humanity reduced to soulless beings: “an anonymous mass, constantly renewed and always identical, of non-men who march and labour in silence, the divine spark is dead in them, already too empty to really suffer.”⁹⁹

3.4 “– of a cosmic inferno –”: A Conclusion Suspended

Who has built the house so badly
with shovels and with spades?¹⁰⁰

In place of Otilie, whose suicide broke the mythic exchange, we are left by Adorno with Faust, saved from suicide by a choir of angels announcing Easter. We have been returned to the comfort of a house, and a study which a poodle would enter, where another contract over life would be signed in blood. Once again this *intérieur* will be ruined; for the angels came to Faust not once but twice. While they saved him from the fatal draught during his youthful torment, they would reappear in another age.

The tears of reconciliation that in Benjamin’s essay veil the image, in their liquid flow quickening semblance, also closed Adorno’s book on Kierkegaard and his essay on Schubert. They appear again in *The Philosophy of New Music*. Adorno quotes the same line from *Faust Part 1* as in ‘Beautiful Passages’:

The man who surrenders to tears in music that no longer resembles him at the same time allows the stream of what he himself is not – what was dammed up back in the world of things – to flow back into him. In tears and in singing, the alienated world is entered. “Tears pour, the earth has taken me back” – this is the gesture of music. Thus, the earth reclaims Eurydice. The gesture of

⁹⁹ Primo Levi, *Survival in Auschwitz and The Reawakening: Two Memoirs*, trans. Stuart Woolf, p.90 (New York: Summit Books, 1986), cited in Giorgio Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazan, (New York: Zone Books, 1999), p.44.

¹⁰⁰ Goethe, *Faust*, p.293.

returning, not the feeling of waiting, describes the expression of all music, even in a world worthy of death.¹⁰¹

Adorno supplements Faust with the image of Eurydice's interment in the underworld. Such an image has forever been the counterpart of music, which resounds as Orpheus's consequent lament. The figure also belongs to Goethe's Faust, albeit in a new world: that of *Faust Part 2*, where the closeness of the study has been replaced with the great open cosmos. There the myth is played out once again by Faust and Helena.¹⁰²

Faust, like *Elective Affinities*, is founded on the mythic exchange of life. But the similarities do not end there. Where in *Part 1* Faust cried as he was returned to earth, in *Part 2* this earth itself is transformed. Just as in *Elective Affinities* the earth itself is enchanted by the bourgeois spirit: Faust plans its laborious reclamation and protection from the sea, echoing the theme of Charlotte. Amid proliferating classical allusions Helena is interred in this same enchanted land, as they replay the old story of Orpheus and Eurydice, leaving Faust with only her veil, and preparing the ground where he too will be buried.

“Who has built this house so badly / with shovels and with spades?” cry the Lemures.¹⁰³ Faust becomes a landlord of dereliction, as Charlotte had too. With the phantasy of overcoming of the land's enchantment the contract over his life is both fulfilled and broken. In ecstatic rapture, blinded by Care, Faust imagines the land transformed: no longer as his property, but as the common estate of a free humanity.

¹⁰¹ Adorno, *Philosophy of New Music*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), p.99; *AGS12*, p.122. See also Yannick Thiem, ‘Adorno's Tears: Textures of Philosophical Emotionality’ in *MLN*, Vol.124, No.3, (2009), pp.592-613.

¹⁰² Goethe, *Faust*, pp.250-251. Benjamin also compares Helena to Otilie, *SWI*, pp.352-353; *BGS1*, p.197.

¹⁰³ Goethe, *Faust*, p.293.

“Standing on the free ground with free people, I could say to that moment, ‘Tarry a while, you are so beautiful.’”¹⁰⁴ This communistic rapture is his doom, and he dies. As Faust is to be interred in this still-enchanted, ruined land, on which no free humanity yet stands, a choir of fiery angels appears again, to intervene against the contract’s fulfilment.

Turn towards clarity
you lovely flames,
those who damned themselves
hail the truth,
that you will be happily
redeemed from evil,
to be blessed
in the unity of all.¹⁰⁵

Beyond the closed-in interior of *Faust Part I*, these angels appear on a world-stage. Unlike Otilie, who in death escapes mythic fate and breaks the enchantment of the earth, Faust’s rapture has only the powerlessness of phantasy; his death remains earthly. As Adorno noted, “The wager is lost. In the world in which “things are done properly”, in which equivalents are exchanged – and the wager is itself a mythical image of exchange – Faust has played a losing hand.”¹⁰⁶ At that moment the angels appear, transforming his tragic fate, albeit only with the unbinding force of a dream.

In an essay on Faust’s final scene, Adorno considers this transformation in juridical terms: “law itself is suspended. A higher court ordains a stay to the eternal equivalence of credit and debit. This is the mercy [...] which takes precedence over the law.”¹⁰⁷ The judgement over the world – which continually sacrifices the present to the past in order to ensure a consistent future – is suspended. The interminable

¹⁰⁴ Goethe, *Faust*, p.292, trans. amended.

¹⁰⁵ Goethe, *Faust*, pp.297-298, trans. amended.

¹⁰⁶ *NtL*, p.118; *AGSII*, p.136.

¹⁰⁷ *NtL*, p.119; *AGSII*, p.136

court case between nature and history is brought to a close by a statute of limitations;¹⁰⁸ not a piece of law but something *new*:

That mercy which takes precedence over law, that mercy through which the cycle of cause and effect breaks down. The dark force of nature assists it but is not quite the same. Mercy's response to the condition of nature, however much it may be anticipated in the latter, nevertheless emerges as something qualitatively new and marks a caesura in the continuity of events.¹⁰⁹

If for Benjamin divine violence might annihilate the law, for Adorno law is brought to an end by something approximating the spirit of music. The image of the grass angels, now bedecked with flowers, blazes forth again as they ascend with Faust's immortal part. This caesura instantiated by these angels has a *tempus* precisely as Adorno described music: adhering to formal laws out of which something new is produced, thereby introducing an incommensurable time. Against the false eternity undergirding the identity in equivalence invoked by the law of exchange, these angels give truth to transience.

Mercy draws its force from the falsity inherent in the contract that governs the movement out of the interiors of *Faust Part 1* and into the cosmos of *Part 2*. Adorno shows that this movement, governed by the wager promising exchange, is founded not on the continuity of striving – as Faust himself imagined – but on the supervenient discontinuity of forgetting.¹¹⁰ Between the two appearances of the angels a journey takes place through a world apparently subject to constant progression, in which at every moment everything – all murders, all loves, all lovers – are left behind. This apparition of movement in which there is no returning is legislated by the contract's eternal condition against tarrying. All transience thus partakes in this eternity: in

¹⁰⁸ See 'Idee eines Mysteriums', *BGS2*, pp.1153-1154.

¹⁰⁹ *NtL*, p.119; *AGS11*, pp.136-137.

¹¹⁰ See Paul Fleming 'Forgetting – *Faust*: Adorno and Kommerell', in *Adorno and Literature*, eds. Nigel Mapp and David Cunningham, (London: Continuum, 2003), pp.133-144.

Faust everything remains in motion just long enough for it to be fixed in place, returned to the earth, or deadened by Faust and Mephisto's mythic acts. Yet a chasm yawns beneath the mythic eternity of the contract's law: this is not merely the chasm that opens as the interior is exited, a gulf through which the pair fly illuminated in the colourful refraction of a rainbow; it is the chasm of a life grown old, in which all past moments have been laid to rest. Faust's motion of perpetual striving conceals another within it: that of aging; of becoming non-identical to who he once was. This perpetual forgetting eventually consigns even the contract's eternal conditions to oblivion.

Perhaps the wager is forgotten in Faust's "extreme old age," along with all the crimes that Faust in his entanglement perpetrated or permitted, even the last, monstrous crime against Philemon and Baucis, whose hut the master of the piece of ground newly subjected to human domination can no more tolerate than a reason that dominates nature can tolerate anything.¹¹¹

Adorno's thought that "the gesture of returning, not the feeling of waiting, describes the expression of all music" returns, inflected, in his reflections on *Faust*. Benjamin's essay on Goethe closed with the line, "hope is granted to us only for the sake of the hopeless."¹¹² Adorno once gave this sentence a twist, describing a world of enduring myth: "In the *Ring* for the sake of fate mankind abandons all hope,"¹¹³ In *Faust* a third conclusion is reached: "hope is not memory held fast but the return of what has been forgotten."¹¹⁴ Forgetting's losses induce a caesura in the form of waiting, as Faust's tarrying that both fulfils and breaks the contract. If music had been reduced to silence under myth, in *Faust* the angels give hope its transient shape:

The power of life, as a power of continued life, is equated with forgetting. It is only in being forgotten and thereby transformed that anything survives at all. This is why *Faust Part Two* has as its prelude the restless sleep of forgetting. The man who awakens, for whom "life's pulses beat fresh and lively" and who "looks back to earth again", can do so only because he no longer knows

¹¹¹ *NtL*, p.119; *AGS11*, p.137.

¹¹² *SW1*, p.356; *BGS1*, p.201, trans. amended.

¹¹³ *In Search of Wagner*, p.131; *AGS12*, p.133. trans. amended

¹¹⁴ *NtL*, p.120; *AGS11*, p.138.

anything about the horrors that went on before. “That was long ago”. At the beginning of the second act, which shows him once more in the narrow Gothic room, which was “once Faust’s, unchanged”, he approaches his own prehistory only as a man asleep, laid low by the phantasmagoria of what is to come: that of Helena.¹¹⁵

Music is changed by mercy too. Just as there is no more leavetaking, there are no homecomings either, except through the dreamlike phantasmagoric act of self-forgetting, returning to what one truly never was.

Adorno’s reflections on the final scene of *Faust* are adorned with flames. “A run-down expression” he writes “that has been eroded to the status of metaphor catches fire again when it is taken literally. The moment [of catching fire] holds within it the eternity of language of the concluding scene of *Faust*.”¹¹⁶ Here the fire is not merely a metaphor. The essay ends with a meditation not on *Faust* but on Goethe’s tiny lyric poem *Wandrer’s Nachtlied*. Goethe himself is now placed within the poetics of a life grown old, and in the writing of his poem he becomes like Faust, returning to what he never was in a life transformed by age. In his youth, while he began to draft *Faust Part 1*, Goethe engraved this poem onto a cabin on the Kikelhahn Mountain. He returned there in 1831, just as *Faust Part 2* was finished. Adorno remarks on the experience in which he returned to his poem:

In the invocation of the Mater Gloriosa as the incomparable, there speaks from it, in boundless joy, the feeling that must have seized the poet when, shortly before his death, he read on the boards of the cabin on the Kikelhahn the poem, “*Wandrer’s Nachtlied*”, which he had inscribed there a lifetime before. That hut too has burned down.

This poem, whose final couplet commands waiting, reconfigures a life in the blessed shape of forgetting. Adorno described this profound stilling elsewhere:

In the line “*Warte nur, balde* [Just wait, soon]” the whole of life, with an enigmatic smile of sorrow, turns into the brief moment before one falls asleep. The tone of peacefulness attests to the fact that peace cannot be achieved

¹¹⁵ *NtL*, pp.41-42; *AGSII*, pp.137-138.

¹¹⁶ *NtL*, p.112; *AGSII*, p.130.

without the dream disintegrating. The shadow has no power over the image of life turned back on itself, but as a last memory of life's deformations it gives the dream its weighty depths beneath the weightlessness of the song. In the face of nature at rest, a nature from which all traces of anything resembling the human have been eradicated, the subject becomes aware of its own nullity. Imperceptibly, silently, irony tinges the poem's consolation: the seconds before the bliss of sleep are the same seconds that separate our brief life from death.¹¹⁷

3.5 Afterglow

After Auschwitz, this reading of Adorno's dream has sought refuge in some texts.¹¹⁸

Yet it has discovered that each metaphor, with which it sought protection, had in history become real, and has now burnt down. Cosmic literature and phantasmagoria have become earthly and chemical, while the earthly and chemical have become literary and phantasmagoric. The alchemist is now indistinguishable from the chemist. This crossing thought, in Auschwitz, is not a limit from which we must shrink.¹¹⁹ Rather, it appears in this absurd world, as the wager of interpretative violence. Yet little conclusion to this wager can be reached. After Auschwitz, which instantiates a world overcome by delusion, we can never know whether our interpretation, and hence the destruction of the dream, was worth the effort. Nonetheless, like Faust we continue, our motion carrying within it the growing hope that one day it may pause, granting death finally and truly, in the flaming dreams, shaped by mercy, to all of the dead.

¹¹⁷ 'Lyric Poetry and Society' in *NtL*, pp.41-42; *AGSII*, p.54, trans. amended

¹¹⁸ *NtL*, p.111; *AGSII*, p.129.

¹¹⁹ Adorno's remarks that his opponents that see Auschwitz as a "limit situation" in *NtL*, p. 111; *AGSII*, p.129. This has often been misread as Adorno's own sentiment. See Alexander Garcia Düttmann's criticism of Helmut Mörchen's *Adorno und Heidegger: Untersuchung einer philosophischen Kommunikationsverwigerung* (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1981) in *The Memory of a Thought: An Essay on Heidegger and Adorno*, trans. Nicholas Walker, (London: Continuum, 2002), pp.4-10.

The wager's sublime indeterminability might be otherwise be arrived at from the pair of enigmatic remarks Adorno wrote in a notebook months before his dream:

Certain dream experiences lead me to believe that the individual experiences his own death as a cosmic catastrophe.

Our dreams are linked with each other not just because they are "ours", but because they form a continuum, they belong to a unified world, just as, for example, all of Kafka's stories inhabit "the same world". The more dreams hang together or are repeated, the greater the danger that we shall be unable to distinguish between them and reality.¹²⁰

Despite seeming related to this particular dream, these two fragments offer no simple conclusion. Between them lies the tension of falling asleep and awakening. In the first, in a society in which all individuals had been radically dissolved the last remnant of individual experience is to experience his own death as cosmic. In the second the integration of dream experiences into such unified world is considered a danger. In the world of diremption, the delusion of a continuous, integrated world is both the last promise, and what most threatens the return of individual experience to a reality that will always stifle it. The boundary between sleeping and waking solidifies and simultaneously is rendered absolutely transparent, the ghost of a once blessed inconspicuousness, in the motion of nightmares coming true.

Otilie has left in her place the image of Faust. Adorno's philosophy after Auschwitz continues after her disappearance. Here all death must be cosmic, taking refuge in an absurd culture formed of myth that grants false meaning to the meaningless, and makes meaningless that which was most meant. Yet death remains completely earthly; that same Earth that expelled the Jews remains infernally enchanted. What substance as semblance endured in Otilie's "miraculous remains"

¹²⁰ *Dream Notes*, p.vi.

become the insubstantiality of Fausts “immortal part”, while Faust lies dead and is buried once again.

Adorno dreamt a year later: “I was in a concentration camp. I heard a group of Jewish children singing a song with the text ‘Our good Mamme has not yet been hanged.’”¹²¹ Perhaps they sing in a language without earth; *eine Sprache ohne Erde; a loshn on erd*. We might complete Adorno’s dream: suddenly in German they sing, “*Alles Vergängliche ist nur ein Gleichnis.*”¹²² The Mater Gloriosa hovers above, suspended from a gallows.

¹²¹ *Dream Notes*, p.60

¹²² Goethe, *Faust*, p.305, trans. amended.

CHAPTER 4

Philosophy's *Trauerspiel*: On a Disappearing Figure in Adorno's Late Metaphysics

The concept of *Lebenswerk* [a life's work], as the nineteenth century knew it, does not fit Benjamin; indeed, it is doubtful whether anyone today is granted a *Lebenswerk*, which requires a life brought to fruition on its own presuppositions, without discontinuity. But it is certain that the historical catastrophes of Benjamin's time denied his work a finished unity, and condemned his whole philosophy, and not only the great project of his later years, on which he staked everything, to be fragmentary.¹

4.1 A Final Dream

Beautiful passages, which once with the solace of starlight seemed to bend toward humanity, have become ugly. Stars have fallen to earth. To write in a world in which "Auschwitz has irrefutably proven that culture has failed"² is to traverse the landscape of this night, illuminated only by a pale afterglow. In this darkness, the journey has recourse neither to the steadfastness of tradition, which in every instance has proved deceptive, nor to promise, whose time for fulfilment has passed. The last pages of *Negative Dialectics* contain such a beautiful passage turned ugly, invoking a dream occupying this tempus. Within his meditation on metaphysics after Auschwitz, Adorno's writing expresses a rupture:

It may have been wrong to say that after Auschwitz you could no longer write poems. But it is not wrong to raise the less cultural question

¹ 'Introduction to Benjamin's *Schriften*' in *NtL2*, p.220; *AGS11*, p.567, trans. amended.

² *ND*, p. 366, *AGS6*, p.359; trans. amended

whether after Auschwitz you can go on living – especially whether one who escaped by accident, one who by rights should have been killed, may go on living. His living on calls for coldness, the basic principle of bourgeois subjectivity, without which there could have been no Auschwitz; the drastic guilt of he who was spared. And as retribution he will be visited by dreams such as that he is no longer living at all, that he was gassed in 1944, and his whole existence since has been imaginary, an emanation of the insane wish of a man killed twenty years earlier.³

The shape of Adorno's thought is riven: philosophical reflection breaks off within the form of the writing, interrupted by a lyric mode that exceeds it. The experience expressed by this rupture is not just incommensurable with any philosophy proclaiming purity, as mere critique defining limits from which it shrinks. Philosophy itself merges into this new setting, operating within the terrible dream that has interrupted it, becoming an element of the phantasy. This most extraordinary passage from Adorno's late work is not philosophy that, transforming itself into a poem, reveals the labour of thought heroically as the expression of a life, nor does it fleetingly transfigure the soul into music. Its contour is of a ruin; its time one of a dream that refuses to part. Philosophy, fracturing into lyric, draws this fracture back into itself, doubly as momentum and blemish, just as the most personal lyric moment becomes its strangely enveloping scene. The work expresses a breakthrough within a philosophy that comes to know its incompleteness, and a poetry that, if it is lyric, has suffocated. The fracture between the two marks, in backward illumination, the instant through which the world might have been transformed but was not. Thus, in the shape of a nightmare, it continues on.

Recognising this writing's contour means seeing both the strait gate of past possibility, perpetually missed, and also the wide gate through which the course of historical progress entered: a great march leading to destruction. The most abstract of

³ *ND*, p.363; *AGS6*, pp.355-356.

metaphysical questions (and the metaphysical question of abstraction) is cut through by the experience that ruins metaphysical reflection, and which is nonetheless still subject to it, and in fact grounds it. Reading these sentences means performing the drama of Adorno's late metaphysics; they invite us to play out in phantastic theatre the course of thought as it reaches beyond itself into the neurosis of a dream, and to find in the "insane wish of a man killed twenty years earlier" the crude reality of the world that metaphysics confronts, and of which it remains a part.

This final dream, "that he is no longer living at all, that he was sent to the ovens in 1944 and his whole existence since has been imaginary," marks the absurdity both world and dream. The wish that the dream fulfils no longer even belongs to the dreamer: it is the wish of the dead, inflicted as a torture upon those who lived on. If the faint knowledge that those who had died "were truly dead" once granted solace, the inverse has also become true: "living on" was experienced as nothing but the crazed, frozen actualisation of the dream of someone who died decades earlier. The substance of life had been reduced to mere imagination. Metaphysics strains between the consequences of these two phantasies, the first confirming death in the beautiful fleeting semblance; the second an ugly proof that life – if it still lives – is but a dream, and thus a nightmare too. Where once the subject stood, as the lyric protagonist of the dream, now only alienation resounds in ruinous echoes.

If Adorno's repetitive dreams – no longer even his own – were conditioned by the "drastic guilt" of survival, then the lyric moment he voiced was also not his alone. An early draft of these sentences, given in a lecture series on Metaphysics, is significantly more personal:

It is [...] curious how all questions which negate and evade metaphysics take on, precisely thereby, a curiously metaphysical character. It is the question whether one can *live* after Auschwitz. This question has appeared to me, for example, in the recurring dreams which plague me, in which I have the feeling

that I am no longer really alive, but am just the emanation of a wish of some victim of Auschwitz. [...] But as long as I can express what I am trying to express, and as long as I believe I am finding words for what otherwise would find none, I shall not, unless under compulsion, yield to that hope, that wish.⁴

In the later version the first-person pronoun and the wilful refusal of the dream's wish are removed, invoking a radical depersonalisation. Once, the moment of highest individuation in lyric poetry had given a negative voice to the collective undercurrent [*Unterstrom*] of society;⁵ yet the collective that streamed through *this* fracture into a lyric mode were dead. Their great streaming march is viewed by one who, deserting them in continuing to live, is nonetheless overcome by their motion.⁶ The undercurrent now overflows he who had once listened for its distant brontide.

The dream that interposes into thought is neurotic in this precise sense: it lacks the autonomy and egoism that traditionally characterised the lyric (however much the history of lyric is the one of this idea's betrayal.) As Adorno wrote elsewhere in *Negative Dialectics*, the "truth content of neuroses is that the I has its unfreedom demonstrated to it, within itself, by something alien to it – by the feeling that 'this isn't me at all.'"⁷ Where philosophic prose breaks off into a disjunctive lyric moment, this lyric has emptied the "I" that might poetically mediate its relation to nature through its oppositional stance towards the collective. Instead, the collective has overcome the ego; the lyric's retained momentary subjectivism merely registers the heteronomy of that overcoming. Adorno is attentive to such a reversal, his sentences

⁴ Adorno, *Metaphysics: Concept and Problems*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Edmund Jephcott, (Cambridge: Polity, 2001), pp.110-111; *Metaphysik: Begriff und Probleme*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1998), p.173.

⁵ *NtLI*, p.45; *AGS11*, p.58.

⁶ Adorno's *Mahler: A Musical Physiognomy*, trans. Edmund Jephcott, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), closes with this image, pp.166-167; *AGS13*, p.309.

⁷ *ND*, p.222; *AGS6*, pp.221-222.

are dedicated less to the individual's poetic semblance than to writing his disappearance into a cosmos of torment

The appearance of the individual in lyric resurfaces as a negative lyric of the dead unspoken, whose death enveloped the world, and with it philosophy, as if in a fatal totality. Expressing this fracture minimally frees philosophy to proclaim its desertion from the heteronomous march of historical progress, adhering instead to fleeting appearances of what could have been. Thinking appears in disappearance: perhaps as that gate through which what could have been would have entered; perhaps only as the past promise that would have blocked the path through the other wider gate.

The gesture of this ugly-beautiful passage, fracturing into dream, renders in microcosm the thesis and temporality of Adorno's late writings on metaphysics. The "drastic guilt" of the spared afflicts all of *Negative Dialectics*: its introduction states, "dialectics is the consistent sense of non-identity. It does not begin by taking a standpoint. My thought is driven to it by its own inevitable insufficiency by my guilt of what I am thinking."⁸ Survival is meant not just as self-preservation, invoking defence mechanisms to perpetuate the ego, but in a stronger sense of living on beyond death. This became the condition of an enduring metaphysics, voiced in this fracture between incomplete philosophy and suffocated lyric. "Philosophy, which once seemed obsolete, survives [*überlebt*], because the moment of its realization was missed [*weil der Augenblick ihrer Verwirklichung versäumt ward*]."⁹ The *über* in *überleben* attests not just to a living *over* the border of life and death, but an uncanny

⁸ *ND*, p.5; *AGS6*, p.17.

⁹ *ND*, p.3; *AGS6*, p.15.

excess of life within a world whose absurdity had destroyed that boundary. The earth becomes a hellish desert of unresurrection; the grasp on the past needed to transform the distinction of life and death unclasps in a catastrophe of abstraction in the stream of history. This catastrophe rips the dead from the living, while hiding their distinction from view, and is naturalised into the inevitability of a social process. The alienated dead serve endlessly in the murder of the living: this mystery is named progress. Salvation lies alone in a figure of distance from what could have been but was not; that the process may have been interrupted; an awful wish – a wish nonetheless as full of promise as any – in dreams beyond death afflicting the living. The dead’s wishes repetitively demand a return to where the course of history might have been stopped. In stopping, salvation too is allied, paradoxically, to the refusal even to yield to that wish.

Such an interpretation recognises that the opening sentence of *Negative Dialectics*, in which “philosophy lives on because the moment of its realisation was missed”, were modelled on an argument Adorno had made in his 1953 essay on Kafka, which speaks of “the liquidation of the dream through its ubiquity.”¹⁰

Referring to ‘The Hunter Gracchus’ he wrote:

Perhaps this is what is meant by the tale of Gracchus, the once wild hunter, a man of force who was unable to die. Just as the bourgeoisie failed to die. History becomes Hell in Kafka because what could salvage it was missed [*weil das Rettende versäumt ward*]. This Hell was inaugurated by the late bourgeoisie itself. In the concentration camps, the line of demarcation between life and death was eradicated.¹¹

In Kafka’s story, Gracchus had been hunting chamois in the mountains and fell from a rock. “Since then I’ve been dead” he says.

¹⁰ *Prisms*, p.261; *AGS10*, p.274.

¹¹ These sentences share the verbal formulation with archaic declension, “*weil...versäumt ward*”, *Prisms*, p.260; *AGS10*, p.273 trans. amended.

“But you’re also alive,” said the burgomaster.

“To a certain extent,” said the hunter, “to a certain extent I am also alive. My death ship lost its way – a wrong turn of the helm, a moment when the helmsman was not paying attention, a distraction from my wonderful homeland – I don’t know what it was. I only know that I remain on the earth and that since that time my ship has journeyed over earthly waters. So I – who only wanted to live in my own mountains – travel on after my death through all the countries of the earth.”¹²

Unable to die, the hunter is preserved in his fall. Suspended (awaiting the suspension of the suspension) he traverses the world forever, in the hellish peregrinations not dissimilar to Schubert’s wanderers’ dreamscape perambulations. While held in intramundane survival, the motion of his fall transforms the world: heaven is ripped away from the earth to which the fall tends. In the undead life of the survivor, the mountain landscape is recomposed as a world without borders: a great ocean, over which he forever travels in torment, always falling and never arriving, his homeland the nowhere of all the countries of the Earth.

This lecture course in which the beautiful-ugly passage on the dream first appeared had a riven form.¹³ Within the first thirteen lectures, Adorno expounded on Aristotelian metaphysics. He addressed the labour of the concept, developing commentaries on the history of philosophy in order to demonstrate the historical course of a Hellenistic enlightenment and the preponderance of a positive concept of metaphysics. At the end of the thirteenth lecture his commentary on Aristotle breaks off. Athens is supplanted by Auschwitz.¹⁴ Auschwitz denotes a rupture in

¹² Franz Kafka, *The Complete Stories*, ed. Nahum N. Glatzer, (New York: Schocken, 1995), p.228.

¹³ Much of *ND* was developed in the lecture series *Ontology and Dialectic* (1960/61), *Metaphysics: Concept and Problems* (1965), *History and Freedom* (1964/65), *Lectures on Negative Dialectic* (1965/66). The passage appears in *Metaphysics: Concept and Problems*, pp.110-11; *Metaphysik: Begriff und Probleme*, p.173.

¹⁴ The thirteenth lecture was titled “Athens and Auschwitz”. For a more recent reflection on metaphysics between Athens and Auschwitz, see Gillian Rose, ‘Athens and Jerusalem: A Tale of Three Cities’ in *Mourning Becomes the Law*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1996), pp.5-40.

metaphysics' own concept, such that the positive concept of metaphysics becomes nothing but the prescription and justification of barbarism:

Through Auschwitz – and by that I mean not only Auschwitz but the world of torture which has continued to exist after Auschwitz and of which we are receiving the most horrifying reports from Vietnam – through all this the concept of metaphysics has been changed to its innermost core. Those who continue to engage in the old-style metaphysics, without concerning themselves with what has happened, keeping it at arms length and regarding it as beneath metaphysics, like everything merely earthly and human, thereby prove themselves inhumane. [...] The affirmative character which metaphysics has in Aristotle, and which it first took in Plato's teaching, has become impossible.¹⁵

Beyond this break in the lecture series, Adorno meditated on a completely changed concept of metaphysics, against one that, were it to continue, would constitute “a pure mockery of the victims and the infinitude of their torture [*Qual*].”¹⁶ Where Auschwitz stood as “integration of death into civilization,”¹⁷ it marked the failed endpoint of civilization's own attempt to derive metaphysical truth from death, or to make death meaningful. Adorno's criticism excoriates all Heideggerian Hellenism, which would heroise each death as authentic; it unmasks any doctrine of being-toward-death as nothing but a confirmation, affirmation, and celebration of the catastrophic course of the world.¹⁸ Adorno specifically refuses the tragic irony, which would immortalise the victim as a hero in death. His late metaphysics repudiates tragic philosophies, which through conceiving of a meaningful death reconcile

¹⁵ *Metaphysics*, p.101; *Metaphysik*, p.160.

¹⁶ *Metaphysics*, pp.101-102; *Metaphysik*, p.160

¹⁷ *ND*, p.370; *AGS6*, p.363.

¹⁸ That this theoretical manoeuvre was a barb directed against Heidegger is explicit in the lectures. Adorno claimed that the jargon of authenticity “is perhaps nowhere more ideological than when *Being and Time*'s author tries to understand death on the basis of ‘Dasein's possibility of Being-a-Whole’, in which attempt he suppresses the absolutely irreconcilability of living experience with death, which has become apparent with the definitive decline of positive religions.” *Metaphysics*, p.107; *Metaphysik*, pp.166-167.

necessity and freedom.¹⁹ After Auschwitz, he would develop a metaphysics founded not on death, under whose sign the catastrophe might too easily be recast positively, but instead on the perpetuation of torture or torment.²⁰

4.2 A Secret Body

He who has known the world has found a corpse; and he who has found a corpse, the world is not worthy of him.²¹

The tormenting dream of one who had been murdered in the camps appeared shocking in the final version of *Negative Dialectics*. Yet Adorno's breakthrough into a lyric mode, in which the history of the concept was admixed with both the most personal experience and the most impersonal, was prepared elsewhere. A fugitive body was smuggled in, written almost silently, distorted, and nameless into his lectures on metaphysics:

What meets its end in the camps, therefore, is no longer the ego or the self, but – as Horkheimer and I called it almost a generation ago in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* – only the *specimen* [*Exemplar*]; it is, almost as in vivisection, only the individual entity reducible to the body [*Körper*] or, as Brecht put it, the torturable individual, which can only be happy if it has time to escape through suicide.²²

¹⁹ Peter Szondi's *An Essay on the Tragic* charts this metaphysical tradition, from Schelling, Hölderlin, and Hegel through to Benjamin.

²⁰ J. M. Bernstein's *Torture and Dignity: An Essay on Moral Injury*, (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2015) takes up this problem, but attempts to integrate experience into a normative solution, in contrast to my drastic-dramatic reading of Adorno's late metaphysics.

²¹ 'The Coptic Gospel of Thomas', trans. R. McL. Wilson, in *New Testament Apocrypha*, ed. Thomas W. Schneemelcher, Vol.1, (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1991), pp.110-133, p.124.

²² *Metaphysics*, p.108; *Metaphysik*, p.167, trans. amended.

This unnamed “torturable individual” harbours a secret: the figure drawn from Brecht’s poem is none other than Walter Benjamin. Adorno’s citation refers to a poem Brecht wrote in 1941 on learning of Benjamin’s death on the mountains above Portbou.²³

Zum Freitod des Flüchtlings W. B.

*Ich höre, dass du die Hand gegen dich erhoben hast
Dem Schlächter zuvorkommend.
Acht Jahre verbannt, den Aufstieg des Feindes beobachtend
Zuletzt an eine unüberschreitbare Grenze getrieben
Hast du, heisst es, eine überschreitbare überschritten.*

*Reiche stürzen. Die Bandenführer
Schreiten daher wie Staatsmänner. Die Völker
Sieht man nicht mehr unter den Rüstungen.*

*So liegt die Zukunft in Finsternis, und die guten Kräfte
Sind schwach. All das sahst du
Als du den quälbaren Leib zerstörtest.*

On the suicide of the refugee W.B.

I hear that you raised your hand against yourself
Preempting the butchers
Eight years exiled, watching the rise of the enemy
Finally driven to an impassable border
You have passed, they say, over a passable one.

Empires collapse. Gang leaders
Strut about like statesmen. The people
Are no longer visible beneath the armaments

So the future lies in darkness and the forces of good
Are weak. You saw all of that
When you destroyed your torturable body²⁴

In lyric, Brecht offered a tribute to the last moment of destructive power (weak as it was) wielded by his friend. The poem works up Benjamin’s free and freeing destruction of himself into a fierce monument of mourning. Adorno turns to this figure twice in his lectures on metaphysics, and once in *Negative Dialectics*, each time mentioning that he is citing Brecht. Yet on each occasion his words are different, transforming the Benjamin of the poem; never are they true to Brecht’s lyric.

In his lecture, Adorno speaks about the “torturable individual” [*quälbare Einzelwesen*]. If a figure of Benjamin appears in this passage he is almost entirely

²³ Erdmut Wizisla, *Walter Benjamin and Bertolt Brecht: The Story of a Friendship*, trans. Christine Shuttleworth, (London: Libris, 2009), p.80. See also Brecht’s *Arbeitsjournal*, in Bertolt Brecht, *Große kommentierte Berliner und Frankfurter Ausgabe der Werke Bertolt Brechts*, (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1988-2000), Vol.27, p.12. On Brecht’s reaction to the news, see Erhard Bahr, ‘*Der Tod in Hollywood: Todesthematik in Bertolt Brechts kalifornischer Lyrik*’ in *Ende, Grenze, Schluss? Brecht und der Tod*, eds. Stephen Brockmann, Mathias Mayer, and Jürgen Hillesheim, (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2008) pp.198-209.

²⁴ Bertolt Brecht, *Berliner und Frankfurter Ausgabe*, Vol.15, p.48, trans. mine.

dehumanised. The language effaces any trace of his character, as he becomes a mere “specimen” [*Exemplar*], reducible to cut up corporeal substance [*Körper*].

“*Einzelwesen*” might refer to an individual, but may also mean an individual thing; in the subsequent clause, he refers simply to “*es*.” [it.]²⁵ In the following lecture Adorno spoke of “what Brecht once called, the torturable body of some person [*des quälbaren Körpers, der irgendeinem Menschen*].”²⁶ And in *Negative Dialectics* the wording was changed once again:

The impulse – naked physical fear, and the feeling of solidarity with what Brecht called torturable bodies [*quälbaren Körpern*] – is immanent in moral conduct and would be denied in attempts at ruthless rationalisation.²⁷

One misquotation could be mere error; Adorno’s persistent transformation of Brecht’s words leads us to recognise a problem. Brecht’s tribute to his friend instantiated a moment of mourning to grant his death meaning, freeing his memory from fate. Adorno’s transformed citations of this poem mark a different and new relation to Benjamin’s death. In each case the knowledge that this body is Benjamin’s is silenced. He is reduced to “an individual”, to “the body of some person”, and finally becomes one of many “torturable bodies.” Adorno’s alterations in citation imply a doubled motion: Firstly, they make Benjamin a poetic figure of abberated mourning – the model of one whose death was meaningless, finally dissolving even individuality into a crowd of meaningless deaths on the slaughterbench of history, a body among bodies, a mere specimen of the many, both abstracted and abstraction. But secondly this philosophy which does not shrink from death – even deaths *en masse* – returns to the lyric, sublating poetry as a work of inaugurated mourning, both fracturing into it, and expressing itself as other than through making positive poetry

²⁵ It is grammatically possible to personalise the clause by gendering this pronoun.

²⁶ *Metaphysics*, p.116; *Metaphysik*, p.182, trans. amended.

²⁷ *ND*, p.286; *AGS6*, p.281 trans. amended.

from the very self-destruction which constituted this fracture.²⁸ If poetry after Auschwitz is impossible, then philosophy must now traverse this impossibility too as it lives on beyond this fracture, addressing now the discontinuous shape of thought. Where Brecht's poem is cited, altered in the slightest way, philosophy allies itself with the past, to which it cleaves, refracting solace through the simultaneous diremption and union of philosophy and poetry, in order to show that no poetry alone could deliver justice. Philosophy, surviving, returns to the site of poetry, albeit neither as panegyric nor as hymn. Its negativity supplements Brecht's monumental poem with the faint promise of a civilisation freed from monuments.

²⁸ Gillian Rose develops the terms "aberrated" and "inaugurated" mourning from Laurence A. Rickels, *Aberrations of Mourning*, (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1988) in 'Walter Benjamin – Out of the Sources of Modern Judaism', in *Judaism and Modernity*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), pp.175-210. In a subsequent essay on Derrida's reading of Hegel she decries Benjamin's messianism and his notion of divine violence: "*This is no work of mourning*: it remains baroque melancholia immersed in the world of soulless and unredeemed bodies [...]. For if all human law is sheer violence, if there is no positive or symbolic law to be acknowledged – the law that decrees the absence of the other, the necessity of relinquishing the dead one, returning from devastating inner grief to the law of the everyday and of relationships, old and new, with those who live – then there can be *no work*, no exploring the legacy of ambivalence, working through the contradictory emotions aroused by bereavement. Instead, the remains of the dead one will be incorporated into the soul of one who cannot mourn and will manifest themselves in some all too physical symptom, the allegory of incomplete mourning in its desolate hyper-reality. This is *aberrated*, not *inaugurated* mourning: it suits the case of Heidegger, who never mourned, who never spoke about his Nazism or about the Nazi genocide of six million Jews. [...] It is a counsel of hopelessness which extols Messianic hope." *Mourning Becomes the Law*, pp.69-70. Rose's dichotomy must be challenged by inquiring after the form of "the law that decrees the absence of the other": for this law lays a boundary between the living and dead. For Rose, custom (relations, old and new) and law freely constitute one another; "work" is their mutual, dialectical negotiation. The operability of this dialectic is grounded in a view of history that offers a continuous present offers a site of action. Adorno challenges this insofar as he suggests that such grounds may, in truth, be mere semblances of the continuity, laid upon a world in which history no longer continues, but merely endures. Thus aberrated and inaugurated mourning are conjoined elements in Adorno's late work.

In each of Adorno's miscitations, Benjamin's "*Leib*" has been transformed into a "*Körper*". Something of Benjamin's own thought might be discovered in such a change. In a fragment – one of the first in which the concept of 'natural-history' [*Naturgeschichte*] was invoked – Benjamin dwelt on the distinction between these two words for the body. He described how the body [*Leib*] is established by the knowledge of one's own limitation and form. Meanwhile, the corporeal substance [*Körper*] is the site of the experience of pleasure and of pain, in which "no form of any sort, and hence no limitation, is perceived."²⁹ Pleasure and pain have no outside, but are experiences of a world of infinite surfaces. He continued schematically: "Man's body [*Leib*] and his corporeal substance [*Körper*] place him in universal contexts. But a different context for each: with his body [*Leib*], man belongs to mankind; with his corporeal substance, to God," and with this, "*Leib* tends towards dissolution, while the *Körper* towards resurrection." These, he says, are the "two great processes" that natural-history [*Naturgeschichte*] contains.³⁰

This schematism found its consequence in the *Trauerspiel* book, where Benjamin addressed the transformation from modes of expression that rest on

²⁹ 'On the psycho-physical problem', SW1, p.394; BGS6, p.80. Benjamin's distinction between *Leib* and *Körper* here has been contentious in secondary scholarship. Excellent studies of this text can be found in Frederic J. Schwarz, *Blind Spots*, (Newhaven: Yale University Press, 2005), pp.210-218, following from Uwe Steiner's 'The True Politician: Walter Benjamin's Concept of the Political' *New German Critique*, No.83, (2001), pp.43-48. Meanwhile, in *Body- and Image-Space: Re-Reading Walter Benjamin*, trans. Georgina Paul, Rachel McNicholl, and Jeremy Gaines, (London: Routledge, 1996), Sigrid Weigel considers the two terms as if not coterminous certainly continuous, p.23. Gerhard Richter's *Benjamin and the Corpus of Autobiography*, (Detroit, Wayne State University Press, 2002) takes a skeptical position: he "[chose] not to pursue this distinction [because it] threatens to obscure the more productive and subtle insights into Benjamin's conception of the body", and argues Benjamin did not sustain the distinction schematically, p.250. While Richter is correct that the distinction is not strictly sustained, Benjamin maintains preferences in certain contexts, such as using *Leib* for discussions of a revolutionary collective body and *Körper* for the suffering bodies of martyrs.

³⁰ SW1, p.385; BGS6, pp.80-81.

distinguishing life and death, to those founded perennial suffering in a world in which any boundaries had become indeterminate. This was most clearly demonstrated in the literary figure of the martyr, presented in opposition to the tragic hero:³¹ Martyr-dramas, he wrote, “are not so much concerned with the deeds of the hero as with what he suffers, and more frequently not so much his spiritual torments [*Seelenqualen*] as his agony of the bodily [*körperlichen*] agony that befalls him.”³² Unlike the hero of tragedy, who in death establishes the immortality of his name, the martyr-drama presents a world in which any such eternity remains out of reach. The *Trauerspiel*, through the immanence implicit in its presentation of worldly suffering, becomes a theatre of mixture on the ruined boundary of life and death: as much form as deformation. Or, as Benjamin tersely remarked in an early draft towards the *Trauerspiel* book, “the *Trauerspiel* is in every respect interstitial form [*Zwischenform*]”.³³ This opposition occurs similarly in Adorno’s transformations of Brecht’s poem: Benjamin’s name, or the “W.B.,” which appeared in lapidary abbreviating in the title of Brecht’s poem, seemingly standing frozen, like ominous tombstones heading the page – even these marks that still the name, and silence its resounding, are expunged, and replaced by the image of anonymous tormented bodies.

4.3 Aposiopesis: An Interruption into Prehistory

A final diversion is required on this path: it may be blocked. To recognise Benjamin, disappeared within the texts of Adorno’s final works, alongside the peculiar graven

³¹ See Ilit Ferber, *Philosophy and Melancholy: Benjamin’s Early Reflections on Theater and Language*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013), p.74.

³² *OT*, p.72; *BGS1*, p.252, trans amended.

³³ ‘Trauerspiel and Tragedy’ in *EW*, p.243; *BGS2*, p.136.

characters that head Brecht's poem, sheds light – if only an afterglow – on a fugitive philological history. This history is written by outlaws, for outlaws, in permanent exile in this wilderness of abstraction amid the violence that attends it. It is a history in which Benjamin himself, not simply as a figure, image, or character, played a part; a history into which he wrote himself, albeit not as ideal, but as the part-author of the text into which he would disappear.

In assuming Brecht as a foil for Adorno, taking him as a monumentaliser *par excellence*, and hence making Adorno an ideal iconoclast, it is easy to stride quickly past something that haunts about the grave inscriptions that head Brecht's poem. Perhaps instead of marking a spot with the initials 'W.B', and affixing for eternity in a poem the place where a human being once took his life and vanished, Brecht's poem contains another dynamic – a motion of text – and another historical movement in which Benjamin himself was implicated.

While staying with Brecht in Denmark in 1938, Benjamin set to work on a series of commentaries on Brecht's poetic oeuvre.³⁴ Benjamin's essay is deceptive: its conceit is outlined in an opening reflection on the nature of 'commentary', which notes that the form is usually reserved for classical texts, for which the appraisal of the enduring quality of the work is assured. Commentary is thus considered both "archaic" and "authoritarian". Yet here he would apply this form to a set of texts that "not only has nothing archaic about [them] but [which defy] what is recognised as authority today."³⁵ The approach might seem like a misapplication of apologia, but it culminated in a view that cut through the very apologetic grounds of commentary.

³⁴ These remained unpublished in Benjamin's lifetime, except for the commentary on Brecht's Lao-Tzu poem, published in the *Schweizer Zeitung* in April 1939. The commentaries were completed in the first half of 1939. A copy was sent to Brecht via Margarete Steffin. Adorno later published the entire text.

³⁵ *SW4*, p.215; *BGS2*, p.539.

Benjamin founded his effort on “the knowledge that tomorrow could bring destruction on a scale such that yesterday’s texts and creations might seem as distant from us as centuries-old artifacts.”³⁶ His essay, though, refused the service of vouchsafing these works for eternity; in the face of this coming destruction, he would defend a particular mode of destruction within the field. Where commentary once perched on greatness, holding heroes aloft as stars in fame, Benjamin’s untimely commentaries set their gaze on a world in which all stars had fallen. It was not the stars that they attacked, but their civilised counterparts: monuments of stone inscribed, whose permanence in shape spoke to an enduring future; the texture of gravestones, confirming that the dead would not return.

Instead of viewing Brecht’s poetry from the perspective of continuities between his collections, implying a historical dynamic of the progression, Benjamin’s commentaries draw poems into relation by way of a common dialectical image. The image is one of engraving words in stone, the wearing or yielding of this stone by liquid, and the effacement of the text. This image slips through the commentaries, under the shadow of borders and amid regimes of exile, appearing in variation, viewed from shifting and often partial perspectives. In some cases it is drawn from a poem’s thematic content; in others, the image determines work of commentary, with poems entering into the image as words engraved in stone, which disappear. Here a new image is forged: one of their disappearance. Some poems command this effacement; others teach its lesson. Through the imagistic transmutation of the poems, from graven text into fleeting image, Benjamin would argue for a specifically fugitive and destructive art amid the catastrophe.

This dialectical image also proposes a space in which image and body

³⁶ *SW4*, pp.215-216; *BGS2*, p.540.

interpenetrate. The liquid that effaces the stone appears, poetically, as a catalogue of bodily fluids. Just as a poem might disappear into the image of its disappearance, so too might it do so on the inscribed surface of the body, upon which script physiognomically becomes image. Meanwhile, Benjamin's variations on the image are conjoined, albeit almost silently, in every instance, with a retrospective glance over his own body of work. If an image of watery colour swirling across bubbles once affixed itself to each new aspect of his thought, this image is its counterpart: an image from the end of a life, refiguring past insights. The following tour of this image in Benjamin's commentaries describes an origin of the motion through which Benjamin's own name and body disappear in Adorno's late work.

Benjamin's introduction to the commentaries states that his intent: "to demonstrate the political content of the very passages that are purely lyrical in tone."³⁷ Yet in those poems he selected Brecht often appears not as a lyric ego, but rather as a figure inscribed into the poem, as if from the outside. This mode of alienated self-inscription becomes the fulcrum for Benjamin's presentation of the dialectical image. In the poem 'On the Sinners in Hell' Brecht describes friends and acquaintances – all sinners – who have found themselves in Hell. In the flames they yearn for someone to cry on them, and for the tears to alleviate their suffering: "For sinners in Hell / It's hotter than you think. / Yet if someone weeps for them / The tears fall soothingly on their heads."³⁸ After presenting his friends, all unlamented, because of poverty, insignificance, and exile, Brecht wrote himself into the poem's final stanzas:

Und dort im Lichte steht Bert Brecht

³⁷ *SW4*, p.216; *BGS2*, p.540.

³⁸ *SW4*, pp.225-226; *BGS2*, p.549.

*An einem Hundestein
Der kriegt kein Wasser, weil man glaubt
Der müßt im Himmel sein.*

*Jetzt brennt er in der Höllen
Oh, weint, ihr Brüder mein!
Sonst steht er am Sonntagnachmittag
Immer wieder dort an seinem Hundestein*

[And in the light, there stands Bert Brecht / Next to the dogstone / He'll get no water, since people think / He must be in heaven. He's burning now in Hell / Oh, weep, my brothers! / Or else on Sundays he will stand / Forever by that dogstone.]³⁹

Benjamin's commentary draws images from the poem, and returns the commentary into this image. He reads the poem as a peculiar form of inscription for the unredeemed:

The poem names the friends in the enduring flames of Hell, the way certain Bavarian roadside markers list people who had died unshriven and request passers by to intercede. Yet despite its local origin, the poem really does point back a long way. Its lineage is the lament, one of the greatest forms of medieval literature. We might say that it harks back to old lament [*Klage*] in order to bring proceedings [*Klage zu erheben*] against the newest: that lamentation no longer even exists.⁴⁰

The poem's inscription becomes that of markers on a road: part graves; part demand that those who pass by halt to aid redemption; part threat that should they travel on, they too might suffer this fate. Furthermore, this road doubles upon itself. The view down it induces a vertiginous diplopia that forces one to constantly stop: Not only is it the road of lamentation, a *via dolorosa*, in which every station is marked with friendship, but a road whose waystations point back "a long way" (and what better archetype for lamentation than a road leading toward death, on which the traffic's movement is perpetually punctuated by stops.)

This road might be history, albeit one travelled in tragic time; or rather it is a

³⁹ *SW4*, pp.226-227; *BGS2*, p.550.

⁴⁰ *SW4*, p.227; *BGS2*, p.550, trans. amended.

street in which all that was not properly tragic was left at the wayside, unredeemed, forcing those who pass also to halt. The commentary implies a persistent shifting between the damned, held still as the traffic passes, and the traffic held still by the unredeemed admonishing them in graven script: locomotion in freeze-frame. This road along which lament [*Klage*] (a constant stopping of intercession) brings a proceeding [*eine Klage erhebt*] – all that is left of language – that there is no more lament, and hence no more stopping either, precisely where it stops, sets the scene of the image sunken into itself through its traversal into commentary and back. Where Brecht recognised the names of friends, and even himself, Benjamin saw a distant perspective ranging beyond them. In another late text on Brecht, Benjamin described this same road as “an image of tradition”:

In the secular drama of the West, too, the search for the untragic hero has never ceased. Often in conflict with its theoreticians, such drama has deviated time and again, always in new ways, from the authentic form of tragedy – that is, from Greek tragedy. This important but badly marked road (which may serve here as the image of a tradition) ran, in the Middle Ages, via Hroswitha and the Mysteries; in the age of the baroque, via Gryphius and Calderón. Later we find it in Lenz and Grabbe, and finally in Strindberg. Shakespearian scenes stand as monuments at its edge, and Goethe crossed it in the second part of *Faust*. It is a European road, but it is a German one too. If, that is, one can speak of a road rather than a stalking-path along which the legacy [*Vermächtnis*] of medieval and baroque drama has crept down to us. This stalking-path, rough and overgrown though it may be, is visible again today in the plays of Brecht.⁴¹

Benjamin read Brecht’s entire poem as inscription, but his commentary concludes by returning the image into the poem. The stone upon which words are inscribed appears there alienated, in an image that condenses together Brecht’s lyric moment with Benjamin’s long historical view. Where Bert Brecht himself wrote himself in the poem, he does not yet appear as the stone, but beside it. He stands “by a

⁴¹ ‘What is Epic Theatre [Second Version]’, in *Understanding Brecht*, pp.17-18; *BGS2*, p.534 Benjamin’s commentaries share themes with his essays on Brecht’s Epic Theatre – criminality, fable, the sage, and the non-tragic – and should be read as developments of their heuristics dragged beyond the theatre.

dogstone” where he will “stand forever.” This “dogstone” becomes the centre of Benjamin’s reflection on Brecht’s poor soul:

It is standing – in broad daylight, on a Sunday afternoon – by a “dogstone”. What exactly that is, we do not know; perhaps a stone on which dogs urinate. To the poor soul, this is something as familiar as the damp patch on the wall of a prisoner’s cell. The game ends when the poet, who, after displaying so much callousness, asks – callously – for tears.

It is unclear what will be wetted: the head of Brecht from tears, or merely the stone he stands beside with the urine of a dog. But Benjamin’s claim that “we do not know” the *Hundestein* proves deceptive. We know this stone from a backward glance down the road leading from the Medieval mystery plays, through the Baroque *Trauerspiel*, to Brecht; we also know the posture, which stands beside. Benjamin’s gaze stretches back not only through literary history, but also through his own body of work. This familiar yet inscrutable ‘dogstone’ in the final image of Brecht’s poem prompted an inconspicuous reworking of his study on an earlier graven image.

The topic of lamentation had consumed Benjamin’s intellectual energies in the late 1910s and early 1920s.⁴² This work culminated in a commentary on Dürer’s engraving *Melancholia I*, “the genius of winged melancholy” to which he claimed the German *Trauerspiel* dedicated its images and figures.⁴³ With this image Benjamin first conceived of an alienated mode of lyric, in which, similarly, Brecht might stand beside the dogstone. He describes the *Melancholia* thus:

⁴² See *Lament in Jewish Thought*, eds. Ilit Ferber and Paula Schwebel, (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2014). Much recent scholarship centres on Benjamin’s essay, ‘On Language as Such and the Language of Man’ and Scholem’s 1916 response to this, ‘On Lament and Lamentation’, trans. Paula Schwebel and Lina Barouch, pp.313-320 in the above volume. At the farthest extent, these studies address the *Trauerspiel* book, such as Rebecca Comay’s ‘The Paradoxes of Lament: Benjamin and Hamlet’, pp.257-276; his late return to the problem in the Brecht commentaries has been overlooked.

⁴³ *OT*, p.158; *BGS1*, p.335. Benjamin’s discussion of Dürer’s engraving brought him into conversation with the Warburg circle, especially the work of Panofsky and Saxl. See Beatrice Hanssen, ‘Portrait of Melancholy (Benjamin, Warburg, Panofsky)’, *MLN*, Vol.114, No.5, (December 1999), pp.991-1013, particularly, pp.998-102.

The deadening of the emotions, and the ebbing away of the waves of life which are the source of these emotions in the body, can increase the distance between the self and the surrounding world to the point of the alienation from the body. As soon as this symptom of depersonalisation was seen as an intense degree of mournfulness, the concept of the pathological state, in which the most simple object appears to be a symbol of some enigmatic wisdom because it lacks any natural, creative relationship to us, was set in an incomparably productive context. It accords with this that in the proximity of Albrecht Dürer's figure, *Melencolia*, the utensils of active life are lying around unused on the floor, as objects of contemplation.⁴⁴

Brecht's dogstone's origins are found in these "utensils of active life", lying around.

Out of Dürer's engraved image, Benjamin draws symbols-cum-objects as emblems of this new untragic mode:

The theory of melancholy became crystallized around a number of ancient emblems, [...] One of the properties assembled around Dürer's figure of Melancholy is the dog. The similarity between the condition of the melancholic, as described by Aegidius Albertinus, and the state of rabies, is not accidental. According to the ancient tradition 'the spleen is dominant in the organism of the dog.' This he has in common with the melancholic.⁴⁵

And further,

One symbol [...] seems to have been passed over in the rediscovery of the older symbols of melancholy embodied in this engraving and in contemporary speculation [...]. This is the stone. Its place in the inventory of emblems is assured.⁴⁶

Benjamin surely recognised the paraphernalia of melancholy recast in Brecht's unusual agglutination "*Hundestein*". Where an angel once sat writing, surrounded by the utensils of active life, which lay about him on the floor, now Brecht stands by the dogstone in the blazing daylight of a hellish Sunday afternoon. Where in the *Trauerspiel* book the stone was associated with the "cold, dry constitution of the earth" and of an "icy Hell",⁴⁷ this dogstone in Hell demands a balm for unassailable heat in which it is baked. As Benjamin reads Brecht's poem, the old emblems of the

⁴⁴ *OT*, p.140; *BGS1*, p.319.

⁴⁵ *OT*, p.152; *BGS1*, p.329.

⁴⁶ *OT*, p.154; *BGS1*, p.332.

⁴⁷ *OT*, p.155; *BGS1*, p.332.

engraving are raucously refunctioned for newer, darker times. Dürer's famously cryptic rhombohedron – a stone which truly nobody knows what it is – is reimagined devalued as just a spot for the dog to urinate.

In the melancholic imagery of the Renaissance and the Baroque, the posture of “standing beside” the object signalled, for Benjamin, a new mode of knowledge. Freed from eschatology, the great contemplator sank, in melancholy, into creaturely life.

His unfaithfulness to man is matched by a loyalty to these things to the point of being absorbed in contemplative devotion to them. [...] Loyalty is completely appropriate only to the relationship of man to the world of things. The latter knows no higher law, and loyalty knows no object to which it might belong more exclusively than the world of things. And indeed this world is constantly calling upon it; and every loyal vow or memory surrounds itself with the fragments of the world of things as its very own, not-too-demanding objects.[...] 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.⁴⁸

A history of devaluation can be found in the thingly forms of what has been discarded by the wayside of this street. Benjamin saw as much in his late studies on Baudelaire, gnomically remarking, “the devaluation of the world of things in allegory is surpassed within the world of things itself by the commodity.”⁴⁹ For both Brecht and Baudelaire this devaluation in the world of things is illuminated as alienation becomes lyric. Thus Aegidius Albertinus's cool image of the melancholic quoted in the *Trauerspiel* book is repeated in the Brecht commentary with roles reversed. Unlike the melancholic whose “tears do not fall into his heart and soften its hardness, but he resembles a stone which, when the weather is damp, only sweats outwardly,”⁵⁰ Brecht, inscribes himself into the poem just as he does the dogstone at his side, or

⁴⁸ *OT*, pp.156-157; *BGSI*, pp.333-334.

⁴⁹ ‘Central Park’ in *SW4*, p. 164; *BGSI*, p.660.

⁵⁰ *OT*, p. 154; *BGSI*, p.331.

inscribes the dogstone he stands beside just as he would inscribe himself, as a sinner requiring liquid redemption.

Yet Benjamin does not see the historical lineage of non-tragic detritus as itself constituting a *Trauerspiel*, forming a historical image within an image, a gathering of fragments, piling rubble upon rubble. A street runs through here in tragic time, even if the historical wayside, rough and overgrown, is increasingly crowded by the junk of the unredeemed, works unworked. Traffic travels along at increasing speed towards catastrophe, less and less waiting in contemplation, as passers-by forego knowledge on their way to truth. With this perspective, in which no-one is left to wait and contemplate, Benjamin's remark that "one does not know what the dogstone is" might be read differently. If in one sense the dogstone is a rebus to be scholastically solved, might we not imagine another dissolution in devaluation, just as the allegorical emblems – themselves engravings – fall away before each other in the closing pages of the *Trauerspiel* book. It is not so much that this stone is inscrutable, but that the correct relation to it, when even the melancholics have been moved along, becomes a divine mystery. Such a thought had already occurred to Benjamin:

If melancholy emerges from the depths of the creaturely realm to which the speculative thought of the age felt itself bound by the bonds of the church itself, then this explained its omnipotence. In fact it is the most genuinely creaturely of the contemplative impulses, and it has always been noticed that its power need be no less in the gaze of a dog than in the attitude of a pensive genius.⁵¹

In answer to such a divine mystery we can glimpse the Messiah in a dog. This creature strides down the road of history, unaware of tragic time of the traffic, stopping not to intercede on behalf of the unredeemed, but because a post engraved with their names is simply a convenient place to urinate. As he relieves himself, he brings relief to those burning in Hell. Perhaps the urine effaces the names marked on

⁵¹ *OT*, p.146; *BGS1*, p.324.

the post, annihilating, instead of fulfilling, the callous demands of the damned. The urine falls as a surprising blessing upon the heads of Brecht and friends. In a time in which “there is no more lamentation,” those in Hell will have to take what they can get. The Messiah arrives as the redeemer.⁵²

The commentary on this early poem contains an entire movement of the disappearance of text into the image of textual destruction. The remainder of the commentaries do not render the fully. Nonetheless, the image of stone yielding to water returns in each of them, albeit in fragmentary, glancing fashions. Alongside the fragments of this motion arrive a catalogue of body parts and bodily movements, shifting locations of image and text, opening vistas onto physiognomic languagescapes.

Those graven letters that head Brecht’s poem on Benjamin’s suicide come closest to Benjamin’s commentary on the poem ‘On poor B.B.’. Here the architecture of the street is exchanged for another: Benjamin notes that Brecht writes himself into the poem with an abbreviated “B.B.” – the same form Brecht would later use to denote Benjamin himself in the suicide poem.⁵³ Brecht’s name appears as it might inscribed in stone, invoking him in sharp abbreviation. Benjamin extends the image of self-inscription into the architecture on which these letters are carved:

Anyone who has read this poem has passed through the poet as if through a gate bearing the weather-worn inscription “B.B.”. Like the gate, the poet does not want to hold up the person passing through. The arch of the gateway may have

⁵² A sharp rejoinder to such a reading might be found in *DoE*: “A large dog stands beside the highway. If he walks trustfully onto it he will be run over. His peaceful expression indicates that normally he is better looked after – a pet which no one harms. But do the sons of the upper bourgeoisie, whom no one harms, have peaceful expressions on their faces? They have not been worse looked after than the dog, which is now run over.” p.180; *AGS3*, p.246.

⁵³ Similarly see the poem ‘After the death of my colleague M.S.’ for Margarethe Steffin.

been built centuries ago. It remains standing because it hasn't been in anyone's way. B.B., who has never stood in anyone's way would honour the epithet "poor B.B.". For those who have never stood in the way, and who do not count, the future contains nothing important, except the decision to put themselves in the way, and make themselves matter. The later poem-cycles bear witness to that decision. Their cause is the class struggle. Those who will stand firmest in this cause are those who started by letting themselves fall.⁵⁴

The poet, imagined as an inscribed feature of the architecture in the landscape, through inscription becomes the architecture through which the reader passes. The sign of his presence is "weather-worn", but his historical import depends only on the architecture collapsing. This description of passing through the poet as though through a gate might remind us of Benjamin's beautiful dedication of *One Way Street*: "This street is named Asja Lācis Street, after she who as an engineer cut it through the author."⁵⁵ But this gate named Brecht instead must fall, blocking the traffic. Where the street had once been a sublime site of destruction – allied with the long gaze of Baron Haussmann, who cut roads through arcades, disinterring bourgeois life – this poetry sides with destruction beyond even that: annihilating its own text and texture the body of self-inscription reduced to rubble, effacing its lyric inscription in the service of class struggle, the road closed. This new moment in the history of destruction has no intention to make space, in order to find a way through; it simply interrupts the flow of traffic that idled through in tragic time.

The street has been exchanged for a gate, now ruined, that is to fall in its way. This gate might variously form a threshold between one world and the next, or a border between territories. Once again Benjamin reflects this image of engraved stone through both the body of his own earlier work, and locates in it the destructive power of a corporeal body. He sets alongside the stone arch collapsing an image of a mouth.

⁵⁴ *SW4*, p.231; *BGS2*, p.554.

⁵⁵ *SW1*, p.444; *BGS4*, p.83.

With Brecht's line, "The house makes glad the eater: he empties it" Benjamin remarks,

Here the eater stands for the destroyer. To eat means not only to feed oneself but to bite and destroy. The world is immensely simplified if it is tested less for the enjoyment it gives than for the destruction it deserves. This is the bond that harmoniously holds together all that exists. The spectacle of this harmony makes the poet glad. He, the eater with the iron jaw, empties the house of the world.⁵⁶

This passage draws together ideas drawn from texts Benjamin composed in the early 1930s, and repeats almost verbatim a thesis from 'The Destructive Character':

Really only the insight into how radically the world is simplified when tested for its worthiness for destruction leads to such an Apollonian image of the destroyer. This is the great bond embracing and unifying all that exists. It is a sight that affords the destructive character a spectacle of the deepest harmony.⁵⁷

Yet in imagining the falling gate converging with a crushing jaw, Benjamin quietly returned to another earlier work. His *Denkbild* 'Fresh Figs' from the collection 'On Food', had considered destruction specifically with regard to textual transmission. It described a scenario in which "I had to make a very difficult decision. A letter either had to be sent or to be torn up."⁵⁸ The decision is suspended by the gluttonous devouring of fresh figs bought from a streetside vendor, at whose stand he had stopped.

I couldn't stop eating them and was forced to get rid of the mass of plump fruits as quickly as possible. But that could not be described as eating; it was more like a bath, so powerful was the smell of resin that penetrated all my belongings, clung to my hands and impregnated the air through which I carried my burden. And then, after satiety and revulsion – the final bends in the path – had been surmounted, came the ultimate mountain peak of taste. A vista over an unsuspected landscape of the palate spread out before my eyes – an insipid, undifferentiated, greenish flood of greed that could distinguish nothing but the stringy, fibrous waves of flesh of the open fruit, the utter transformation of enjoyment into habit, of habit into vice. A hatred of those figs welled up inside me. I was desperate to finish with them, to liberate myself, to rid myself of all

⁵⁶ *SW4*, pp.230-231; *BGS2*, pp.553-554. A quiet reference to Exodus 12:23 might be assumed here: "The destroyer [הַמְשִׁחִית] goes into the houses."

⁵⁷ *SW2*, p.541; *BGS4*, p.397.

⁵⁸ *SW2*, p.358; *BGS4*, p.374.

this overripe, bursting fruit. I ate it to destroy it. Biting had rediscovered its most ancient purpose. When I pulled the last fig from the depths of my pocket, the letter was stuck to it. Its fate was sealed. It too had to succumb to the great purification. I took it and tore it into a thousand pieces.⁵⁹

The text of the unsent letter is ultimately destroyed by the liberatory gesture of the biting mouth. The letter is drawn into a mountainous landscape – the colour, taste, and smell of figs transfigured – whose vistas too succumb to the mouth’s work of great purification. Benjamin’s commentary on ‘On Poor B.B.’ employs a similar motion. He produces a landscape in which the engraved gate of the poet is imagined to fall. Yet here the text that is to be destroyed is the lyric evocation of the poet himself. This glad poet with the iron jaw might empty the house of the world, but what he bites on so destructively is himself – or rather his lyric inscription of himself (and this distinction remains ambiguous): His own mouth is the gate that falls shut, the poem a lyric destroying lyric, making itself matter.

Neither ‘The Destructive Character’ nor ‘Fresh Figs’ simply counsel destruction; in both, destruction is constructed within a formal framing. The text destroyed in ‘Fresh Figs’ is specifically a letter to be sent; destruction is invoked as a counterproposal to transmission, transmissibility, or indeed tradition. Where ‘Fresh Figs’ thematises the interruption of transmission, ‘The Destructive Character’ is its counterpart: its body is composed in light of the jolt felt by one who, looking back over his life, discovers the deep impressions made on him destructive characters. It is not a manifesto, but a text written in the memory of destruction.⁶⁰ These two elements – forward-projecting transmission, and backward-looking memory – fuse in Benjamin’s commentary on Brecht’s poem, which is not just a lyric that takes pleasure in emptying the house of the world (although, wickedly, it might do that too.)

⁵⁹ *SW2*, p.359; *BGS4*, pp.374-375.

⁶⁰ *SW2*, p.541; *BGS4*, p.397.

Its arch stands and falls on the border between transmission and memory. In self-destruction, as the poet effaces his lyric insignia, these two aspects collide at the blockage. This mouth neither speaks nor swallows.

Similarly to the commentary on ‘On the Sinners in Hell’ this motion rests on a sublime indeterminability of whether the object of effacement is the poet himself or merely his memory. If Brecht has become as a weather-worn inscription, then it is not only he who disappears in the image, but the memory of him, or his sign left for some approaching reader. Meanwhile, his bequeathal to the class struggle is not a transmissible message, but the very blocking of transmission, as the poet writing himself into the poem reduces his own image to rubble.

Where Benjamin’s commentary appears to counsel suicidal destruction (or something more than suicide, eliminating the soul and memory as well as the life), where self-inscription appears only for the sake of its annihilation, this is not without ambivalence. These destructive acts do not occur as singular events within a stable, durable world; nor are they for everyone. Brecht’s poetry is, instead, set into a destructive world, described in Benjamin’s commentaries on *The Reader for City-Dwellers*. Addressing the collection’s first poem, with its famous refrain, ‘Efface the traces!’, he claims these traces (and their effacement) belong to fugitives. “Efface the traces: a rule for those who are illegal.” If these poetic engravings had a message, it was only for those living outside the law; the message that they were to receive, if they were to receive one at all, was that of the message’s own disappearance. This marks and unmarks a certain promise: effacing the traces means going underground, but also not leaving a mark where you went under.

Yet Benjamin continues,

“Make sure when you turn your thought to dying that no gravestone divulges where you lie.” This is the only rule that might be obsolete. Thanks to Hitler

and his people, members of illegal parties have been relieved of this worry.⁶¹

The self-destructive lyric finds itself surrounded by a superior, ubiquitous destruction.

‘The Destructive Character’ had already described such a scenario, but there Nature’s destructive power was supreme:

It is Nature that dictates [the destructive character’s] tempo, indirectly at least.
For he must forestall her, otherwise she will take over the destruction herself.⁶²

In this later work, Nature’s rhythm has been supplanted by that of Nazi troops. Only in such a context might the image of the blocked road offer promise, indicating at this point of no crossing, the place where transmission and memory meet. Nonetheless, such destruction cannot be counselled immediately without being caught on itself; such counsel would forge the rubble of destruction into an instruction to destroy further, and this sign would be granted the very durability that the motion of destruction served to annihilate. This poetry effaces even such an instruction.

This context of destruction is elucidated in Benjamin’s commentary on the third poem from the *Reader*, regarding the stanza

We do not want to leave your house
We do not want to smash the stove
We want to put the pot on the stove
House, stove, and pot can remain
And you must disappear like smoke in the sky
That no-one holds back.⁶³

Benjamin comments:

The attitude expressed [...] is the one that motivated the expulsion of the Jews from Germany prior to the pogroms of 1938. The Jews were not killed where they were found. They were dealt with on the following principle: “We do not want to smash the stove / we want to put the pot on the stove / House, stove, and pot can remain / and you must disappear.”⁶⁴

⁶¹ *SW4*, p.233; *BGS4*, p.556.

⁶² *SW2*, p.541; *BGS4*, p.397.

⁶³ *SW4*, p.234; *BGS2*, p.558.

⁶⁴ *SW4*, p.234; *BGS2*, p.558.

And in his commentary on the ninth poem of the cycle, where he again claims this book “contains object lessons in exile and living outside the law,” he glibly notes “the rule in the first poem, ‘efface the traces’ can be completed by the reader of the ninth: it’s better than having them erased for you.”⁶⁵

These brief lines of commentary again rework thoughts from elsewhere. In this case, the theme is a story from his own childhood, to which Benjamin repeatedly returned. The counterpart to the disappearance and expulsion of the Jews is another destructive character, ‘The Little Hunchback’, the wrecker who appears in *Berlin Childhood* and his essay on Kafka. The childhood rhyme from the *Deutsches Kinderbuch* that introduced him to Benjamin includes the verse,

When I go up to my kitchen stove,
to make a little soup,
I find a little hunchback there
Has cracked my little stoup.⁶⁶

In this tale the little hunchback would disappear before his work of destruction was discovered and judged. By the late 1930s things have truly gone awry: the little hunchback, whose talent was for not being seen, is no more; the pot and stove remain unbroken. He who as a child looked on towards the disappearing little man is himself, now as an adult, forced by fascism to disappear. Yet a lesson had been learnt: in *Berlin Childhood* Benjamin described the little hunchback as “[t]he little man [who] preceded me everywhere. Coming before, he barred the way.”⁶⁷ Brecht follows in this style, as one who comes before. Where the pot and stove remain intact, all he can do is disappear, perhaps leaving something of a body – ruining itself in falling – barring the way for those who come after. This obscure allusion is confirmed when Benjamin

⁶⁵ *SW4*, p.236; *BGS2*, p.560.

⁶⁶ *BC*, p.121; *BGS4*, p.303.

⁶⁷ *BC*, p.121; *BGS4*, p.303.

writes about the poem ‘The child who didn’t want to wash’, in which the image of the stone, now made the body of a child, threatened by the water that would wash him clean, appears only in passing. In passing, the child who will not let them pass is described as one who “wishes to be in the way. A stumbling block [*Stein des Anstoßes*]”,⁶⁸ an admonition against the established order.

Benjamin’s commentaries on the *Deutsche Kriegsfibel* explore the temporality of carved inscription in rock, and yielding to water, in new times. The tempo of destruction once dictated by nature has been radically overtaken by the time of history. The time and motion of engraving and effacing is common to both the anti-fascist poet and his enemies.

Noting the “lapidary style” in which these poems are written, Benjamin explains that “the word arises from the Latin word for stone, and is characterised by brevity, and that its purpose was to address subsequent generations.”⁶⁹ The lapidary style arcs between contradictory tempi: what speaks briefly in its own time speaks on through the ages; media in which it takes longest to write can carry only the briefest messages.⁷⁰ Yet, he notes, “since the natural material conditions of lapidary style do not apply to today’s poets, one is entitled to ask what corresponding factors are present.”⁷¹ How can the lapidary style be explained in a situation of ubiquitous destruction, where even the dead have been relieved of marking the place where they died, for future generations to remember them? Benjamin’s answer elaborates the motion of transmission outside the law. Brecht’s inscriptions are fugitive; they do not

⁶⁸ *SW4*, p.242; *BGS2*, p.565.

⁶⁹ *SW4*, p.240; *BGS2*, p.563.

⁷⁰ On the tempo of the lapidary style, see Denise Riley, ‘On The Lapidary Style’ in *Differences*, Vol.28, No.1, (2017), pp.17-36.

⁷¹ *SW4*, p.240; *BGS2*, p.563

speak through history's eternal laws of the motion, but instead cut across those laws. Against historical time's mainstream, they transiently mark and block its limit, disappearing into exile. The *Kriegsfibel* poems are "not made for stone." They are made for their disappearance. Their motion is that invisible transmission, which intensively and explosively composes an historical underground, counter to that which marks its bounds by monumentalising forever its victorious heroes. This book is thus a *Fibel*, a book to learn from as children learn in school: a lesson in reading at the moment of writing's disappearance, and of apprehending the past in a time of new times, beyond the deception of progress.

In this context, Benjamin offers a new view of the image of the effacement of engraving by water. He reads from one of the poems

On the wall was written in chalk:
They want war.
The man who wrote it
Has already fallen.⁷²

In this time of new times a proletarian has not carved his words in stone, but instead has scribbled some words on a wall in chalk, a stone so soft that it immediately yields.

Benjamin comments:

The character of the '*Kriegsfibel*' can be seen as arising from a unique contradiction: words which through their poetic form will conceivably survive the coming apocalypse preserve the gesture of a message hastily scrawled on a fence by someone fleeing his enemies. The extraordinary artistic achievement of these sentences composed of primitive words resides in this contradiction. At the mercy of the rain and of the Gestapo agents, a proletarian scribbles some words on a wall with chalk, and the poet invests them with Horace's *aere perennius*.⁷³

The fascist had always banked on the text washing away, hoping that the proletarian

⁷² *SW4*, p.240; *BGS2*, p.563.

⁷³ *SW4*, p.240 *BGS2*, p.564, trans. amended. An important counterpart to this poem and to Benjamin's reading of it is the poem 'The Invincible Inscription' from Brecht's *Svendborg Poems*.

would be washed away with it too, dissolving into history's anonymous torrent.

Destruction, or the effacement of inscribed words alone, guarantees no radicalism. Rather, the nature of the combination of both elements into a new tempo – inscription and effacement – proves politically decisive for Benjamin. The solace of effacement must be transmitted in the inscription of a new image. Brecht's proletarian chose chalk of all the stones in solidarity with this insight. Meanwhile, Brecht's lapidary lyric responds not by holding off the rain, nor holding back the fascist, but in its specific preservation of the text. It does not preserve the text as such, but only its gesture: the gesture of transmission itself, in the moment of its disappearance, falling and going under, becomes like a lament sung out, in which the time of music is formed out of the realisation that the lament itself must pass just as its subject passed. Without the mercy of the rain, without the mercilessness of the fascist, he holds it still in display: a text as wound beyond the law, transmitting to all those others beyond, before, and to come; a warning, a signal, a primer.

Dry, without the mercy of effacement, this lapidary writing both presages and survives the coming apocalypse. Brecht's poem preserving not the message, but a gesture in flight. Like for poor old Brecht in Hell, its message rings clearest in unredemption. Nature – in rain – is held back, by a new resounding transient eternity in the shape of a fall; the image preserves he who wrote it, as he who has “already fallen.”

Falling again, the rain returns. If the gesture of the message is to be preserved, it poses the question of life as a natural-historical theatre of language that usurps the apocalypse. Life's transformation into language (or the image of language) does not represent a reduction in this context; that the word and image might be the very matter

of life reveals the history of language as the scenery of the landscape of effacement.⁷⁴

The dialectical image of the inscribed stone yielding to water is evoked again, marginally, in Benjamin's remarks on Brecht's '*Studien*' ['Studies'] – poems on the history of poetry. Describing the sonnet 'On Dante's poems to Beatrice' Benjamin considered the relation of the poet to the memory of Beatrice, who, Brecht remarks, Dante "could never fuck". She thus became to him the object of memory *par excellence*: her fleeting appearance met with the endurance of his desire. Brecht remarks, "he sang after just a glimpse / whatever looks pretty and crosses the street without getting wet / passes for something to be coveted."⁷⁵

Wetness doubles between the rain of the street and sexual arousal and intercourse. Beatrice is made an archetype of the remembered unworn by water (as she is made an image possessed by Dante.) Her enduring dryness forges a shape of memory in which the moment, preserved, can never be just a moment. Because she did not dissolve – into the rain, or into sexual consummation – the poet held her image for eternity as a promise unfulfilled. Yet Dante's poems of endless praise betray the poet, just as they betray Beatrice's passing: she who passed by, glimpsed while crossing the street, is never truly allowed to pass, but must forever be recalled. In unwetted memory, longing is transformed into haunting (of whom and by whom remains unclear); the eye of the lover is drawn from the fleeting image of what was desired into the eternal abyss of what was lost.

Addressing the '*Studien*', Benjamin gives his dialectical image a twist. Where once the image had transformed text into a landscape; here, this landscape is returned

⁷⁴ See Samuel Weber, 'Between a Human Life and a Word. Walter Benjamin and the Citability of Gesture' in *Perception and Experience in Modernity*, eds. Helga Geyer-Ryan, Paul Koopman, Klaas Yntema, (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2002), pp.25-45.

⁷⁵ *SWI*, p.237; *BGS2*, p.561.

to the poem's page. The page holds a landscape of language, and Benjamin's reading of the *Studien* locates a borderzone:

Just as even at rest the graphic artist's hand casually makes little sketches on the border of the plate, here images from earlier times are recorded in the margins of Brecht's work. Looking up from his work the poet finds himself gazing beyond the present into the past."⁷⁶

These margins reflect a site of prospective exile or emigration, with the edge of the page as a historical limit. Benjamin's own commentary might give instruction on how to interpret the border where those graven letters "W.B." would later stand in Brecht's poem. These letters stand not for the transmission of Benjamin's memory in language, but on and in the page as a pictogram at the border, which Benjamin haunts, waiting finally – by his own destructive powers – to be effaced, no longer paperless but freed from the page.

The image of the stone inscribed and yielding to water has heretofore appeared as various and motile, transforming the body, alluding to bodies of past works, forming and deforming relations between poem and commentary, shifting between text and image. Benjamin reveals its significance – if not its absolute meaning – in reading Brecht's poem 'Legend of the Origin of the book *Tao-te-Ching* on Lao-Tzu's Road into Emigration'. This poem was of great importance to Benjamin in the final years of his life. He took a copy to Hannah Arendt and Heinrich Blücher in Paris, and during his internment in Nevers recited it and discussed its meaning with other internees.⁷⁷ The ballad's narrative takes place at a border "in rocky hills". Brecht tells of the aging sage, Lao-Tzu, who travels with a boy, from a land where "wickedness

⁷⁶ *SW4*, p. 238; *BGS2*, p.562.

⁷⁷ Erdmut Wizisla, *Benjamin and Brecht*, p.139.

was gathering its strength again.”⁷⁸ Brecht rewrites this ancient story in new times: the border guard becomes a lowly “customs official”; Lao-Tzu’s exile becomes “emigration.” The customs official stops the sage and asks if he has anything to declare. The boy explains that the sage has “nothing” because “he taught.” The customs official then begins to draw wisdom from the sage: he invites him to wait a while and share his teaching. Benjamin remarks, “Once Lao-Tzu has established the customs man’s right to ask, he resolves to take some time from his journey to oblige him, and places these world-historical days under the motto: “good, a brief stop.”⁷⁹ In the poem, the sage offers up his wisdom: “That the soft water, as it moves / Vanquishes in time the mighty stone. / You understand – what is hard must yield.”⁸⁰

Benjamin’s commentary transforms Brecht’s ballad into a fable with a lesson on friendship. The friendliness between the customs official, the sage, and the boy becomes the grounds on which “the *Tao-te-Ching* was passed down through the ages.”⁸¹ Yet this wisdom is adduced not in the *motion* of traversing a border, but by he who at its gate stands still. Benjamin then explains the wisdom’s image, which he grants a political meaning:

Kindness is displayed at the hardest points in life: at birth; at the first step into life; and at the last step, which leads out of life. This is a minimum programme for humaneness. We find it again in the Lao-Tzu poem, where it takes the form of the statement, “what is hard must yield.”

The poem was written at a time when this statement rang in the ears like a promise nothing short of Messianic. And for the present-day reader it contains not only a promise but a lesson: “That the soft water, as it moves / Vanquishes in time the mighty stone.” This teaches us that we should not lose sight of the inconstant, mutable aspect of things, and that we should make common cause with whatever is inconspicuous [*unscheinbar*] and sober but relentless like water. Here the materialist dialectician will think of the cause of the oppressed. (For those in power, this is an unobtrusive [*unscheinbar*] matter; for the oppressed it is a plain and sober circumstance; as far as its consequences go, it

⁷⁸ *SW4*, p.246; *BGS2*, p.568.

⁷⁹ *SW4*, p.248; *BGS2*, p.571

⁸⁰ *SW4*, p.246; *BGS2*, p.568

⁸¹ *SW4*, p.247; *BGS2*, p.570.

is a most relentless fact.) Third and last, in addition to the promise at the theory, there is a moral to be drawn from the poem. Anyone who wishes to see hardness yield should not let slip any opportunity for displaying friendliness.⁸²

As a culmination of a set of fragments, surrounded by ruined bodies, Benjamin offers the most beautifully illumination of the sage's wisdom. The image of the stone and water is at a stroke transfigured into political meaning, by way of parable with the class struggle: the water is "the cause of the oppressed": inconspicuous, sober, and relentless. The opportunity for friendliness is the bed of this stream.

Yet Benjamin's undoing of the image in a fierce and wonderful parable is troubling. He does not, as it may seem, draw the sage's wisdom out of its poetic context; rather, in reaching for immediate translations of the stone and water, he enters into the poem himself. His apprehension is akin to the mystic, who, reading cryptic hieroglyphs in the book of nature, stumbles upon their meaning, only in that moment to have lost himself entirely in the eternity of the text. Accepting the parable means disappearing entirely into the world of the image, as though it were a mystical symbol that solves in an instant the riddle of the world. The broken ground between text and image is no longer available, since in parable the two are made absolutely translatable and transparent. Whoever reads in this way has awoken in the image as though his distance from redemption had been surmounted, but has also rid himself of every dream.

Such fulfilled mysticism is in essence opposed to any "messianic" reading of wisdom. With alacrity it exchanges out its "promise" and its "lesson" for a truth separated from the world by the border of art itself. To enter into this world, as Kafka put it, is to have won in parable but to have lost in reality.⁸³ Benjamin's beautiful

⁸² *SW4*, pp.248-249; *BGS2*, pp.571-572.

⁸³ Franz Kafka, 'On Parables' in *The Complete Stories*, p.457.

parable lacks all reflection; its instantaneous symbolic logic supplants the dynamic of the image – the text that writes itself into the image of its own disappearance, and the poet too who disappears within it – with its telos, of having merely disappeared.

To disappear into a text in this way, just as a Chinese painter had walked into his painting and disappeared, had been a temptation for Benjamin throughout his life. As early as his ‘Metaphysics of Youth’ he describes a diary in just this way, under an epigraph from Lao-Tzu about how near the “next place” may stand:

He who thus despairs recalls his childhood, when there was still time without flight and an “I” without death. He gazes down and down into the current whence he had emerged and slowly, finally, redemptively loses his understanding. In the midst of such oblivion – in which he no longer knows what he intends, although his intention is redeemed – the diary begins: this unfathomable book of a life never lived, book of a life in whose time everything we experienced inadequately is transformed and perfected.⁸⁴

Reading the image of the stone and water by entering entirely into the image of the text of a life never lived is a devil’s bargain. The virtuosic parabolist might take the sage’s wisdom’s truth to be as eternal as the rock itself, and therefore despite his apparent alliance with the effacing motion of the water, might preclude his own criticism. This problem throws into relief the relationship between Benjamin’s parable and the other commentaries on Brecht’s poetry. It resolves into a formal problem of whether the truth adduced in a parabolic interpretation of the wisdom adequately encompasses the peculiar scene of its own transmission. The success of Benjamin’s parabolic interpretation would mean finding ourselves removed far beyond the border, in a new world, forgetting even the memory of exile. Its failure means returning endlessly to a border where the determinations of mythic law ruin its victims into eternal boundary stones.

The glorious, messianic illumination by parable contrasts with the citation of the

⁸⁴ *EW*, p.150; *BGS2*, p.97.

body as an index of historical legibility, which is illuminated less by the light of redemption than by the blaze of destruction. The latter registers not the coming of the Messiah, but the distortions and deformations of the world into which he enters. Such distortions can never be understood under the logic of parable alone, but only where that same parable points, obliquely, back to the various settings of the image of the stone and water, in which the dismembered body remembered returns, despite the hope of the wisdom that these too might be washed away.

This returning, wrecked, corporeal border holds between the living and the dead marking between them the shape of fate. In this world of unshriveled bodies the task of “friendship”, which Benjamin regards messianically as the moral to the, becomes the medium of a “tradition of the oppressed.”⁸⁵ This friendship, in which esoteric knowledge is passed down through the ages, is the destructive counterpart to all classicism and authority, and to the old lapidary style with which, in few words, the author might address “subsequent generations” by setting them in stone forever.⁸⁶

Benjamin’s parable might cast the image of the water alone as a weapon, always ready to be taken to hand in the struggle against fascism. But the border on which this wisdom was imparted did not merely separate the blessed drowned from the damned saved, in a deluge of freedom. If this effacing water is taken up as a weapon, its promise lacks constancy, even if it remains ready for a confrontation with the enemy. The tradition of the oppressed is the motion that whets this weapon’s blade. But if this tradition is always ready to be taken to hand, then it does so just as the Messiah does: perpetually undressing one wound at a time and redressing the others, hunched amid

⁸⁵ Benjamin’s paradoxical considerations on “tradition” and its medium originated as far as 1917, when he wrote to Scholem, “I am convinced that tradition is the medium in which the person who is learning continually transforms himself into the person who is teaching.” *BCOR*, p.94.

⁸⁶ *SW4*, p.240; *BGS2*, p.563.

the anonymous crowd at the border gate of the great city.

Those wounds, the dead, fix him at the border. Thus even Benjamin's reading of the wisdom is not an apotheosis, in which in a stroke the image itself is dissolved. Instead, even this parabolic reading returns us to each moment of his commentaries on Brecht, now in the tempo of allegory. Taken together, the commentaries address not only those stones standing as fugitive messages between partisans, as liberatory wisdom spreading between outlaws, but also as markers on the border of life protesting on behalf of the unredeemed. Every constancy in their message cries out for the stream of transience that might soothe their memory with the power of effacement.

What is taken to hand in struggle is the medium of the relation to the dead, to those who did not escape, to the *discontinuous* course of historical failure. If the "cause of the oppressed" is like the relentless stream that wears away the stone, then this stream is not the continuous flow of events, but instead a concatenation of interruptions, an eddy, the endless coming to rest with the sage's words, "good, a brief stop", and of those days of pause which Benjamin calls "world-historical."⁸⁷ Indeed, the encompassing image that combines the eternity of the stone and the transience of the water might illustrate nothing less than the rhythm of this perpetual stopping, as an emblem of "eternal transience" found in the "eternity of downfall"⁸⁸ The two figures together must be read intensively in both their dynamic and static relations. The emblem itself, however, threatens either to become permanent, as a site of melancholic repetition, or, as symbol, to dissolve entirely into the stream of transience.

⁸⁷ *SW4*, p.248; *BGS2*, p.571.

⁸⁸ 'Theologico-Political Fragment', in *SW3*, p.306; *BGS2*, p.204.

When drafting 'On the Concept of History' soon after the Brecht commentaries, Benjamin turned again to this problem of tradition. In a note he wrote,

{ Problem of Tradition I }

Dialectic at a standstill

(Fundamental aporia: 'Tradition as the discontinuum of the past in contradiction to history as the continuum of events.' – 'It may be that the continuum of tradition is semblance. But then precisely the persistence of this semblance of persistence provides it with continuity.')

(Fundamental aporia: 'The history of the oppressed is a discontinuum.' – 'The task of history is to get hold of the tradition of the oppressed.')

More on these aporias: 'The continuum of history is the one of the oppressors. Whereas the idea [*Vorstellung*] of the continuum levels everything to the ground, the idea of the discontinuum is the foundation of real tradition.' —

{ What characterizes revolutionary classes at the moment of their action is the consciousness of historical discontinuity. On the other hand, however, the class's revolutionary action is most closely related to the class's concept (not only of coming history but also) of past history. This is only an apparent contradiction: bridging the gap of two millennia the French Revolution drew on the Roman Republic. }⁸⁹

The "tradition of the oppressed", which brings the living into relation with the dead, is comprehended as the discontinuous medium of messianic revolutionary action. Thus the dissolving centre of the remarkable parable in the Lao Tzu poem gives way to a backward glance that recognises, in the motion of dissolution, splinters of the wreckage of the past. Beneath the seeming continuity of its liquid flow is a reality of the broken down, and of past interruptions. The border in this landscape, the site of the transmission of wisdom, is at once given shape and reduced to rubble: it is the wrecked border, traversed, between life and death. If this border might have marked their distinction, in its ruin – in the blocking of this crossing, where one is forced to stop – it provides the site of salvation conjoining the living and the dead in a new totality.

⁸⁹ *BGS1*, p.1236, trans. mine with Sami Khatib.

Only the gaze turned backward can apprehend it. Parabolic interpretation gives way to a saturnine vision.⁹⁰ The beautifully illumination of the class struggle with the image of a stream, is overtaken by the landscape streaming and stilled with unshriven bodies amid the dereliction of historical failure. Meanwhile all that was lyrical in Brecht's lyric poetry is revealed as all that has not partaken in the miraculous exchange, under which the image of stone and water could finally be parsed, and passed on, as though as a mere *idea* of the "cause of the oppressed". Where in parable, the image is reduced to a symbol whose meaning might shine forth in the mystical instant, under an allegorical view, this poetry becomes a different type of language: its lyric becomes lamentation proper, and the lyric subject transformed into one of the many who, unnamed, and finally unnamng himself, takes his place as a discontinuous moment among the ranks of the classes defeated in the continuum of history.

It is therefore not in the fabulous tale of the sage that Benjamin's commentaries reach a verdict on the historical situation. The stream returns us to the landscape of the poorly marked street. The wisdom of the sage is neither the moral nor a lesson; rather, what can truly be learned from him is a gesture, found in his stopping to teach. To pause, to adopt this discontinuity in the journey, is the hope of the oppressed. The Messiah is returned to a Via Dolorosa in which his wisdom appears not as a promise, but as the rhythm of attending each station. Surely, if the wisdom of the sage "rang in the ears like the promise of something Messianic",⁹¹ it did so as a cosmic lamentation straining between this intercession for the unredeemed,

⁹⁰ *OT*, p.179; *BGS1*, p.355.

⁹¹ *SW4*, p.248; *BGS2*, p.572.

and in its own discontinuous shape, in its own coming to silence, in its own realisation of its transience, reaching to a future by not reaching.

The sound of this cosmic lamentation, heard and unheard, returns us to the problems of historical registration in the commentary on *‘Die Sünden in der Hölle’*, with its locating of Brecht’s lyric in the lineage of lament. The combination of discontinuous lineage, the sound of lamentation, and the problem of tradition is founded again in Benjamin’s earlier body of work. In the early essay ‘On Language as Such and On The Language of Man’ Benjamin wrote his first theory of lamentation, marking a paradox in language. Rebecca Comay summarises,

Once it is necessary to lament, there can be no possibility of doing so; by this very token it is always necessary, and thus impossible, and therefore all the more necessary, to lament, [...] Lament is either superfluous (were it possible to lament, there would be no need to) or impossible (the very need to lament is precisely the obstacle to being able to), and this double bind is in itself sufficient to merit lamentation. What is most to be lamented is the impossibility of lamentation. What is lamentable, in other words, is strictly unlamentable; what demands lament is simultaneously what precludes it.⁹²

For Benjamin this was not merely a paradox of a linguistic concept. Rather, lamentation staged a scene in the history of language, between the language of God and the language of nature, in the motion of its fall. Nature would lament, if she were not mute, and her lament would point back to the mourning of the first day of her language in which she fell mute. That she may not lament is nature’s melancholy, for she endlessly mourns her muteness. Benjamin concludes, “In all mourning there is the deepest inclination to speechlessness, which is infinitely more than the inability or the disinclination to communicate.”⁹³ Despite its theological setting, and despite Nature being its character, this was a *history* of language.

⁹² Rebecca Comay, ‘Paradoxes of Lament: Benjamin and Hamlet’, p.262.

⁹³ *SWI*, p.73; *BGS2*, p.151.

Benjamin's early thesis concerned language as a medium of communication, yet it culminated with an image of the language of names, and the disappearance of names, as language as pure medium was communicated along the border in secret tongues between humanity and fallen nature. Benjamin quietly grants the linguistic history a topography:

Man communicates himself to God through name, which he gives to nature (in proper names) to his own kind; and to nature he gives names according to the communication that he receives from her, for the whole of nature, too, is imbued with a nameless, unspoken language, the residue of the creative word of God, which is preserved in man as the cognizing name and above man as the judgement hovering over him. The language of nature is comparable to a secret password that each sentry [*Posten*] passes to the next in his own language, but the meaning of the password is the sentry's language itself.⁹⁴

The silent transmission of language, corresponding to nature's muteness, operates on a border, along which sentries who pass on the medium of language as their password. Language does not grant entry beyond the border, but defines its shape. For as long as this language extends horizontally, a judgement hovers, suspended, above it. Between the languages of the sentries, who, as elements of nature, pass this password between them in their own tongues – and quite literally only between them, as medium – this “uninterrupted flow” of the language of nature promises to conjoin with divine judgment, through the translation of “lower” languages to “higher ones”. This occurs at the most inconspicuous point of infinite clarity, where the horizon of this border meets the heavens.

Benjamin's early sacred-history turned natural-history of language concluded with an account of communication. His friend, Scholem, responded by writing ‘On Lament and Lamentation’, intended as a “true continuation” of Benjamin's work.⁹⁵

⁹⁴ *SWI*, p.74; *BGS2*, p.157, trans. amended.

⁹⁵ Paula Schwebel, *The Tradition in Ruins: Walter Benjamin and Gershom Scholem on Lament and Language* in *Lament in Jewish Thought*, eds. Ilit Ferber and Paula Schwebel, (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2014), pp.277-301, p.277. On Scholem's early essays

Scholem recast Benjamin's theory of communication in the lamentation as nature as a problem of tradition and transmission between generations. Taking up the topography of Benjamin's final sentences, he described the language of God as a border between two great territories: the revealed and the silenced. Lament, he considered, was "nothing other than a language on the border, language of the border."⁹⁶ Yet Scholem's essay lacked any account nature. Lamentation had migrated from a fallen natural history into the religious history of a people:

That lament can be transmitted belongs to the great, truly mystical laws of the peoplehood [*Volkstum*]. Not to everybody, but only to the children of one's own people can lament be passed down. What unheard-of [*unerhörte*] revolutions must a people undergo to make its lament transmissible: that an entire people speaks in the language of silence can only be surmised.⁹⁷

This shift in domain from a theological account of the history of nature with language as its communicative medium, to a history of communal life in which the medium of tradition is composed of a language that annihilates itself in transmission as each generation's lament falls into silence, certainly made an impression on Benjamin. The history of fallen language is transformed into a social history of language, founded on a past "revolution of silence".⁹⁸ The linguistic properties of such a tradition, which annihilates itself in the motion of its transmission, is homologous to Benjamin's later theorisation of the discontinuity of the past whose historical medium is the "tradition of the oppressed."

If Scholem's development of this idea provided a model for Benjamin, he nonetheless retained a natural-history in the paradox of lament. He recognised that such a tradition as Scholem described might become the binding force in a mythic,

in relation to Benjamin's philosophy, see Eric Jacobson, *Metaphysics of the Profane*, (New York, Columbia University Press, 2003).

⁹⁶ Scholem, 'On Lament and Lamentation', p.313.

⁹⁷ 'On Lament and Lamentation', p.317.

⁹⁸ 'On Lament and Lamentation', p.313.

national community, which presented the greatest threat to a tradition of the silenced. In the name of tradition, mythic national communities would invoke nature, not with respect to its silence and its annihilative force, but by naming it, bestilling it, for the cause of their own mythic preservation. Nazi politics could never avoid invoking it by name. Nature's naming drew it into ever more mythic languages, and moved it not so much into the muteness of its disappearance, but into mythic silence, from *schweigen* to *stillen*. For those national communities, nature became as a condemned statue whose name must speak forever through the engraving at its foot, a monument to its own unfreedom.

Rejecting both the old story of nature's mourning at the fall, and the translation of the story of such a genesis into the myth of a national community, Benjamin explains the historical stakes of Brecht's lyric amid this profound new mythic silence. Hidden within the commentaries, announcing the time of the end of lyric, is Benjamin's final account of lamentation, grounding the discontinuous history that provides the material setting in which the class struggle might newly – that is to say messianically – be construed in the sage's wisdom. Brecht's poems “hark back to old laments in order to lament something new: that lamentation no longer exists”⁹⁹ This is a pronouncement of world-historical proportions. The great transformation underlying Benjamin's final words on lamentation views the paradox of lament inverted through historical catastrophe. Where once lament was paradoxically present in the fall, amid the mute language of nature; now, lament is paradoxically absent in the terrible actuality of history, as a silencing of the silenced. Nature has been supplanted by fascism, which claimed to master nature fully in asserting the endurance of its name. Fascism dictates the pace of all destruction in the name of its permanent self-

⁹⁹ *SW4*, p.227; *BGS2*, p.550.

preservation. Unlike Nature, whose destructive processes, caught on its own falling, appearing messianically in the tempo of eternal transience, in which its mute language spoke, fascist destruction is apocalyptic and fixative. Lamentation's status required retheorisation: not with regard to the reconciliation of nature and history, where the border touches transparently upon the heavens, but instead with regard to the apocalyptic and destructive end of all things, in which the two are absolutely rent. The fascistic context of Brecht's biting, newly destructive, anti-fascist poetry – the absolute continuity to which the discontinuity of the tradition of the oppressed corresponds – is not the first day and its wound, its fall into muteness, to which language forever returns, but instead the perennial very last day, which will not cease. The judgement, the word of God, which once hovered over man, has fallen, fallen silent, fallen into man's own mouth as the judging word, and with a final gesture of defiance, into the anti-fascist's mouth too, speaking the lyric of the end of lyric, falls shut.

4.4 A Distant View

The chessboard lies orphaned, and every half hour a tremor of remembrance runs through it: that was when you made your moves.¹⁰⁰

Catching sight of the haunting, lapidary style with which Brecht marked his friend's death in the title of his poem has led back through a survey of Benjamin's own commentaries on Brecht. These commentaries have been studied as if viewing the play of motions between image and text in close-up. Poetry and commentary conjoined in a dynamic in which each lyric text is drawn into an image, which in turn

¹⁰⁰ Letter to Benjamin, in Bertolt Brecht, *Letters*, ed. John Willett, trans. Ralph Mannheim (London: Methuen, 1990), p.238.

had been drawn from the text. These images invariably show the destruction of text, and as images they form new text of a sort. Both the poet and commentator follow these motions, entering into the image themselves, if only to inscribe marks of their own lyric existences that are to be effaced. Perspectives on this traversal of text through image and into text again have opened on to memoryscapes through streets, providing long views of history; they have closed across borders, evoking landscapes strewn with body parts. Body parts have, in turn, evoked a body of work remembered, while the very best have undergone salvific dissolution into a catalogue of fluids. These fluids became not the lyric mark of the author, but took on the messianic power of effacement of his own inscription, such that what was lyrical in the lyric was no more.

Leaping out of this digressive prehistory into Adorno's metaphysics, in which Benjamin's body has finally disappeared, a new perspective must be fashioned. Filmically, the close-up play of the lyric and its commentary is cut short, and thus our diversion too, where the street was blocked by the falling within the image of the inscribed lyricist, who has already fallen. A more distant view takes its place: out of artifice we might forge a stage into which our protagonists, the lyric poet and commentator, the lyric poem and commentary, entered, as their bodies become words, and these words were destroyed.

The lyricist and the commentator become players of a political drama. Where once the lyric author and the commentator were caught disappearing into the image, this new perspective becomes the theatrical text (and the textual theatre) of the world into which they have entered. This shift in view establishes the relationship between this prehistory and the disappearance of Benjamin's identifying marks in Adorno's final meditations on metaphysics. Our protagonists, Brecht and Benjamin, might,

under such a gaze, become as small as pieces on a chessboard. There is a Brechtian salvo here: if lyric and commentary was the content of this dialectic, it gives way to a theatre piece, in which the disappearance or non-disappearance, salvation or damnation, lyric and the end of lyric, becomes a drama played out in distance and proximity, or alienation and sympathy. Unlike in tragedy, in which the chorus as absolute *choris* marks a diremption of the staged action from reality produced in abstraction, this metaphysical stage is entered and exited by both its author and audience.

This metaphysical theatre is yet another in the discontinuous tradition of the “untragic hero”, of which both the baroque *Trauerspiel* and Brecht’s own epic theatre were part. Just as the audience, as bodies among thingly bodies, found themselves implicated in the natural-historical material of the drama that “knows no eschatology”,¹⁰¹ so too is Brecht’s political theatre little but a political platform upon which, one day, the audience might stand, or from which they might be ripped by a fascistic horde. Where lyric has ceased to be lyric, amid the bloodbath of the defamed, resounding with the propagandistic truth declaimed by the outlaw, the author and the commentator have entered through the permeable boundary of the artwork, and stand facing an audience who too may enter its artifice. Benjamin described this entrance when, in describing Brecht’s political dramas, he wrote of the filling in of the orchestra pit:

The abyss which separates the actors from the audience like the dead from the living, the abyss whose silence heightens the sublime in drama, whose resonance heightens the intoxication of opera, this abyss which, of all elements of the stage, most indelibly bears the traces of its sacral origins, has lost its function. The stage is still elevated, but it no longer rises from an immeasurable depth; it has become a public platform. Upon this platform the theatre now has

¹⁰¹ *OT*, p.66; *BGSI*, p.246.

to install itself. That is the situation.¹⁰²

Giving the play of lyric and commentary a theatrical setting, such that it becomes an image or text of a second order, entails certain reversals. Where a stream flowed through the image, effacing the names of those who stood within it, the stage stands as a fixation of this stream. This theatre is not so different from the phantasmagoria of the commodity world, with its common language of things that the baroque world inaugurated: a world in which the dead and undead must enter, fixated, into the inside of the semblant objects; of a society that, through fixation into value, inculcates us in its flowing laws of motion. Every messianism promises nothing but relief in the cessation of these movements.¹⁰³ Under the new fixation of its stage, the wisdom of the sage might too be reversed: he no longer stops to impart the moral lesson of friendship, but the moral of friendship offers the opportunity to impart the importance of stopping. The weight of the “tradition of the oppressed” rests, not in the flow of a liquid that constantly effaces the traces of what has been, but now, theatrically, in becoming a *second rock* of a stage, offering a high vantage point over the rubblefield of the world. Benjamin already knew this second rock from his surveys of Brecht’s theatre:

The damming of the stream of real life, the moment when its flow comes to a standstill, makes itself felt as reflux: this reflux is astonishment. The dialectic at a standstill is its real object. It is the rock from which we gaze down into the stream of things which, in the city of Jehoo ‘that’s always full and where nobody says’, they have a song about:

Rest not on the wave which breaks against your foot
So long as it stands in the water, new waves will break against it.

But if the stream of things breaks against this rock of astonishment, then there is no difference between a human life and a word. In epic theatre both are only the

¹⁰² ‘What is Epic Theatre? [First Version]’, in *Understanding Brecht*, p. 1; *BGS2*, p.519.

¹⁰³ Benjamin refers to this as a “Messianic arrest [*Stillstellung*] of happening” in ‘On the Concept of History’, *SW4*, p.396; *BGS1*, p.703.

crest of the wave. Epic theatre makes life spurt up high from the bed of time, and for an instant [*Nu*], hovers iridescent in empty space. Then puts it back to bed.¹⁰⁴

What is the action of this drama, appearing as we gaze into its stream of happenings, between Brecht's lyric and Benjamin's commentaries? Benjamin's examination of the lyric moments in Brecht's poetry discovered self-inscription, which in every instance were allied to the promise of effacement. Despite this promise, Brecht's poems stand in that dry spot, before destruction, from which they still cry out for intercession, in some diabolical language of unredemption, less as a signal between outlaws than as laughter shared by the damned.

More significantly, though, what Benjamin truly found in these lyric moments was not Brecht at all. Wherever he sought Brecht, he found himself and his past work instead. Unredemption is the setting of the drama of this peculiar exchange of bodies. The promise of a final disappearance, in the true shape of transience, is revealed as a repetition. In Brecht's alienated lyric each person, as they are inscribed, can become nothing but an empty spot of the nameless unrecognised; the adept reader finds himself inserted, as though as a fateful echo, into the place of the lyric subject, as another no-one.

For Benjamin, every lyric moment in Brecht's poetry cues the reexamination of his own body of work, deformed. Each commentary contains a backwards-looking self-citation, approached from the standpoint of the catastrophic end of the world. It is not Brecht's body, furiously holding the line against fascism, that he finds inscribed, but his own corpus, now in pieces. Brecht's lyrical moments act as the fulcrum for the self-undoing of Benjamin's earlier thought: his portrait of Dürer's *Melancholia* is

¹⁰⁴ 'What is Epic Theatre? [First Version]', in *Understanding Brecht*, p.13; *BGS2*, p.531.

recast in bitter satire; the little hunchback – that criminal messiah of his childhood gaze – has prematurely disappeared, driven off, and the promise of the chaos he would cause has been replaced by a new order; even the destructive character no longer has the tempo of his work dictated by destructive nature, but by the tempo of fascist destruction that has outstripped it.

Brecht's own poems offer evidence for this uncanny exchange of bodies between our players. While Benjamin's commentaries conclude with a messianic promise of friendship, in the transmission of the wisdom of the sage, as the redemptive work of the tradition of the oppressed, Brecht explicitly rejected this medium of wisdom. In his commentary on 'On Poor B.B.' Benjamin briefly addresses Brecht's inscrutability regarding transmission and tradition – an inscrutability allied with an empty spot where the future may once have stood:

“We know that we're only stop-gaps / And after us will come nothing worth mentioning.” “Stop-gaps” [*Vorläufige*] – perhaps they were forerunners [*Vorläufer*]. But how could they be, since nothing worth mentioning comes after them? It isn't really their concern if they pass anonymously and unsung into history. (Ten years afterward, the series of poems 'To Those Born Later' would take up a similar idea.)¹⁰⁵

Brecht, who Benjamin described as valuing friendliness highly, was not so capable of it himself, as long as his energies were utterly absorbed in the fight against fascism. In 'To Those Born Later', which Benjamin cites, he pithily notes, “Oh we, / we who wanted to lay the ground for friendliness / could not ourselves be friendly.”¹⁰⁶ As for Brecht's own self-inscription in lyric: despite commands to “efface the traces”, Brecht could never comply: his name and initials, and the initials of those who died around him, became a residuum-cum-refrain in his confrontation with the world's fate.

¹⁰⁵ *SW4*, p.231; *BGS2*, p.554.

¹⁰⁶ Bertolt Brecht, *The Collected Poems of Bertolt Brecht*, eds. and trans. Tom Kuhn and David Constantine (New York: Norton, 2019), p.736.

These remains – B.B., W.B., M.S. – strewn across Brecht’s poems, might allow us recall Benjamin’s description of the dismemberment of language in the baroque

Trauerspiel:

In this way language is broken up so as to acquire a changed and intensified expressiveness within its fragments. With the baroque the place of the capital letter was established in German orthography. It is not only the aspiration to pomp, but at the same time the dismembering, dissociative principle of the allegorical approach which is asserted here. Without any doubt many of the words written with an initial capital at first acquired for the reader an element of the allegorical. In its individual parts, shattered language [*zertrümmerte Sprache*] has ceased merely to serve the process of communication, and as a new-born object acquires a dignity equal to that of gods, rivers, virtues, and similar natural forms which fuse into the allegorical.¹⁰⁷

The verdict that this special capacity for effacement in lyric might not have been Brecht’s own, as he clung to the wreckage of shattered language – that it was Benjamin’s instead – is confirmed in a second poem on Benjamin’s suicide:

To Walter Benjamin who, while fleeing from Hitler, took his own life
Tactics of attrition [*Ermattungstaktik*] are what you enjoyed
Sitting at the chessboard, in the pear tree’s shade
The enemy who drove you from your books
Will not be worn down by the likes of us.¹⁰⁸

Critics have frequently read this poem with regard to the sage’s wisdom in the Lao Tzu poem:¹⁰⁹ for Sami Khatib, “the tactics of attrition of the Messianic, which is typified by Benjamin with Brecht in the abrasive power of the soft water, did not save his own vulnerable life as it was brought down in flight from the ‘mighty stone’ of fascism.”¹¹⁰ Crucially Brecht attributes these tactics of attrition not to himself, but to Benjamin.

The theatrical perspective, in which we view Benjamin and Brecht as though in

¹⁰⁷ *OT*, p.208; *BGSI*, p.382, trans. amended.

¹⁰⁸ *The Collected Poems of Bertolt Brecht*, p.834, trans. amended.

¹⁰⁹ Stanley Mitchell first suggested this interpretation in his introduction to *Understanding Brecht* (London: Verso, 1998), pp.viii-xix, pp. xviii-xix.

¹¹⁰ Sami Khatib, *Teleologie ohne Endzweck: Walter Benjamins Ent-stellung des Messianischen*, (Berlin: Tectum Verlag, 2014), p. 464, trans. mine.

miniature, asserts itself as though they played out the dialectic of lyric and commentary on the stage of a chessboard standing beside them. On this board, conceived as a stage, these two antagonists entered, and one rehearsed his tactics of attrition. Benjamin frequently played with Brecht.¹¹¹ Brecht's assistant, Margarete Steffin, remarked in a letter to Benjamin, "As far as your chess-playing is concerned, I still remember your "exhaustion tactics" [*Ermüdungstaktik*]. Do you still practise them?"¹¹² Brecht's poem agrees with Steffin's verdict on Benjamin's play, but alters her words. Stashed within Brecht's poem is a linguistic complex beyond the tiredness the tactics induced to which Steffin referred. Brecht's word, *Ermattungstaktik*, has a doubled etymology when viewed upon this board: in one sense *ermatten* simply means to exhaust, to make languid, to wear out. In this meaning, its root comes from the Latin *madere*; a word with a long history relating to wetness, soddenness, and drunkenness, dripping and trickling of liquids. Yet in the context of chess, the syllable "matt", as in the English "mate", means to kill. The word "checkmate" arises from the Persian "*šāh māt*", meaning "the king is dead", which vulgarised into German had become "*Schach und Matt*". This sense of "matt" as killing left traces in the Occident too, as in the Latin *mactare*, or the Spanish *matador*. Brecht's precisely chosen word, with its doubled etymology, places Benjamin once again at the board beneath the pear tree. The collision of two Benjaminian themes can be detected: firstly, the eternal transience, represented by the image of the wearing away of the hard stone; and secondly the presentation of the death of the king in the *Trauerspiel*, or in the *Haupt-*

¹¹¹ Andrew McGettigan demonstrated Benjamin's interest in chess tactics designed to wear down his opponent, 'Benjamin and Brecht: Attrition in Friendship' in *Radical Philosophy*, Issue 161, May/June 2010, pp.62-64. McGettigan follows Mitchell interpretation of this verse, but mistranslates the poem's final line, suggesting that it is "the likes of us" who are "ground down", as opposed to "the enemies" who are not.

¹¹² Erdmut Wizisla, *Benjamin and Brecht: The Story of a Friendship*, p.189.

und Staatsaktion. ‘*Ermattung*’, combining the two, might comprise a situation in which this king has been stripped not only of his power but also of the fame and notoriety that vouchsafed for him a tragic fate. Nameless, his fate is confirmed as the mating of the anonymous “*Er*” [He], in a silent joke about every loser of the game.

If this game – and hence the situation of ruined bodies played out by the relations of lyric and commentary in the light of fascism – were tragic, then the loss would be granted meaning, however ambiguously. In tragedy, everything is leveraged on the punishment arising from the necessary crime, which is fulfilled and redeemed in the catastrophe. Within its dialectic, death confers on the hero an immortality – decidedly undecided, struck between fame and infamy. In *this* game another conclusion is reached: that there is no longer an immortal part to speak of. The dialectics of the tragic, which turned on its social catharsis, is distorted into a dialectics of *Trauerspiel*: an antisocial hamartiology of a world of universal criminality, where outlaws speak to one another in fallen tongues, in which there is no fame but the promise of taking part – utterly inconspicuously – in the stream of history that wears down all that exists.

Who wins and who loses is not all that counts. In his final work, ‘On the Concept of History’, Benjamin described a chess-playing apparatus, controlled from the inside by a dwarf. By way of parable, this puppet who is “called ‘historical materialism’ is to win all the time. It can easily be a match for anyone...”¹¹³ Meanwhile it was confronted with the reality in which “even the dead will not be safe from the enemy should he be victorious. And this enemy has not ceased to be victorious.”¹¹⁴ Even here, the class struggle can “call into question every victory, past

¹¹³ *SW4*, p.389; *BGS1*, p.693.

¹¹⁴ *SW4*, p.391; *BGS1*, p.695.

and present of the rulers.”¹¹⁵ Taken together, these statements appear incoherent, committed at once to an optimistic determinism, a pessimistic miserabilism, and a dialectical opportunism. Their apparent contradiction can be reconciled only when the question of who wins and who loses is supplanted by the more powerful question: how the victory or the loss enters into history, and whether its time is true. The chess-playing puppet may “always” win, but as with the sage’s wisdom, perhaps is doomed to win only in a parable, its eternity marked by a separation from the time of history. The enemy never ceases to be victorious, but only in a mythic history governed by the continuity from which the loser is excluded, giving lie to this continuity. This mythic history’s demythologising counterpart is a dialectical opportunism, which calls every victory into question, standing for the “tradition of the oppressed”, in which “what characterizes revolutionary classes at the moment of their action is the consciousness of the explosion of the continuum of history.”¹¹⁶

Brecht’s chessboard poem, struck with the simple question of who wins and who loses, of who is ground down and who is not, sees none of this theatrical complex. Brecht becomes the player absorbed in a world composed of tactical battles. He who “could not be friendly” ultimately confirms only the summary judgement of the drunken demiurge of the final scene of *The Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny*, who joins the streaming nameless crowds, pronouncing that “you cannot help a dead man.”¹¹⁷

Brecht’s memorial lyric was incapable of the friendship necessary to offer

¹¹⁵ *SW4*, p.390; *BGSI*, p.694.

¹¹⁶ *SW4*, p.402; *BGSI*, p.701, trans. amended.

¹¹⁷ Bertolt Brecht and Kurt Weill, *Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagonny Klavierauszug*, (Vienna: Universal Edition, 1969), p.317, trans. mine. A lyric version of this final scene also appears in poetic subjects Benjamin’s commentaries.

salvation to Benjamin through dissolution: instead, like the sage, he required someone in friendship to draw wisdom from him. Brecht lays the ground for friendliness, marking the bodies of the unredeemed in the lapidary inscriptions B.B., W.B., and M.S.¹¹⁸ The friend (another of Benjamin's friends, with whom Brecht was rarely on friendly terms) who would transform his wisdom into tradition was Adorno. For in Adorno's faltering citations of 'On the suicide of the the refugee W.B.' in the late metaphysics, Benjamin's name, inscribed in his initials, finally disappears as though effaced.

Brecht, who could not be friendly, held no hope beyond solidary engagement in the immediate struggle. He therefore became an author of a *Trauerspiel*: his lyric poems portray people as the wreckage of the world, inscribing corpses in the sigils of dismembered language. To Adorno it is left to remember them, if only by transfiguring them into blessed inconspicuousness, and thus to forget them too. Brecht's work of destruction is alloyed to a type of visibility; the tactical engagement is associated with the gaze of the melancholic who knows that someone (or everyone) will have to lose. He gathers together the signs of those losses. For Brecht this practice of making visible through dismemberment was theatrical. What would otherwise not be noticed is presented through being broken from its context: citation brings the inconspicuous [*unscheinbar*] into a new light. The rending motion of citation makes politics of the discontinuities that rip through the bodies of the cited, forging weapons out of the gestural wreckage.

Benjamin, too, adopted this citational practice, founded in the theatre, and developed from it a mode of history, in which the shape of writing, once invisible, becomes legible in its drastic disjunction:

¹¹⁸ Margarete Steffin died soon after, and was thus memorialised in a poem.

The events surrounding the historian, and in which he himself takes part, will underlie his presentation in the form of a text written in invisible ink [*sympathetische Tinte*]. The history which he lays before the reader comprises, as it were, the citations occurring in this text, and it is only these citations that occur in a manner legible to all. To write history thus means to *cite* history. It belongs to the concept of citation, however, that the historical object in each case is torn from its context.¹¹⁹

Beyond a world of tactics played out on the stage-set of the chessboard a shift has taken place. Where in chess, a player plays out the action with figures in miniature, the long, theatrical gaze reduces the players to this scale too, offering both an echo and a fulcrum of reflection. At the outset of his commentary, Benjamin troubled both his own task as commentator and that of the lyric poetry, posing the question, “How in this day and age can one read lyric poetry at all?”¹²⁰ The question presaged Adorno’s dictum: “to write lyric poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric”, and ultimately his conclusions in *Negative Dialectics* on the screams of the oppressed to which he considered the suffocated lyric impulse to have been reduced in the camps. Brecht, even when counselling destruction, holds fast to those screams, citing them as evidence that a struggle took place, such that the struggle might continue. Adorno plays the role of a citationist of a second order, who cites the gesture of Brecht’s citations, capturing, in the fracture between philosophic prose and lyric, the expressive disappearance of even these screams.

In the title of the chess poem, Brecht describes Benjamin’s suicide with the term “*sich entleiben*”: literally to disembody oneself. Adorno may have held this in mind in his late citations of Brecht. His misquotations take Brecht at his word, citing him, albeit in a fashion in which each citation is slightly altered. Benjamin’s body as

¹¹⁹ *AP*, p.476; *BGS5*, p.595.

¹²⁰ *SW4*, p.215; *BGS2*, p.540.

Leib disappears, leaving behind a world of mere corporeality. Yet in its expressive disappearance, he grants Benjamin's body the time of transience. If Brecht's citations dismembered the body of text, thus preserving them, then for Adorno is reserved a special role: he draws wisdom from Brecht, albeit after the battle against fascism was decisively lost.¹²¹ What lives on are the dreams of what could have been but was not, which take their shape in a task of redemption. These new citations, in which Benjamin's wrecked body are glimpsed, caught in the moment of their disappearance, make of Benjamin a model of a messianic sign, albeit viewed from the already-too-late. The initials of his name disappear from Adorno's text, as an element of the judgement whose light annihilates judgement.

Writing this disappearance, as the citation of a citation, fulfils what Benjamin himself had written:

The historical materialist who investigates the structure of history performs, in his way, a sort of spectrum analysis. Just as the physicist determines the presence of ultraviolet light in the solar spectrum, so the historical materialist determines the presence of a messianic force in history. Whoever wishes to know what the situation of a "redeemed humanity" might actually be, what conditions are required for such a development of such a situation, and when this development can be expected to occur, poses questions to which there are no answers. He might just as well seek to know the colour of ultraviolet rays.¹²²

This dedication to seeing the invisible colour of ultraviolet rays is not lost in paradox, but is found in memory. Adorno's late metaphysics operates like a photographic plate that is exposed in the light of judgement, only to overexpose itself, rendering its object, in the darkness of its overflowing light, finally invisible. It works as Benjamin himself had predicted (in a text about prediction):

¹²¹ A strict analogy may be drawn to Adorno's judgment on Faust. Europe never stopped proclaiming its defeat of fascism, just as it endlessly clung to Faust's immortal soul. Adorno knew that in Auschwitz fascism was victorious, just as Faust, despite the angels, was dead. The task of redemption is the suspension of the judgement from beyond defeat.

¹²² *SW4*, p.402; *BGS1*, p.1232

Didn't the dead person's name, the last time you uttered it, sound differently in your mouth? Don't you see in the flames a sign from yesterday evening in a language you only now understand? And if an object dear to you has been lost, wasn't there – hours, days before – an aura of mockery or mourning about it that gave the secret away? Like ultraviolet rays, memory shows to each man in the book of life a script that invisibly and prophetically glosses the text.¹²³

Considered from the point of view of the stage, Brecht, in portraying Benjamin's suicide, takes on the role of a dramatist of the new German *Trauerspiel*, such that "there is no difference between a human life and a word."¹²⁴ The capital letters that initial the memories of his dead friends continue to writhe as wreckage in his poetic landscape. Adorno, whose philosophical task allows those ruins to finally disappear into a new shape of thought, might appear by comparison a new Calderón. If Brecht – German still – maintains an image of Benjamin's destroyed body on the mountainous border, Adorno, in a metaphysics reflecting through the riven shape of judgement, and drawing from a special promise within Calderón's work, might allow his friend to cross this border, invisibly, into a new world into Spain.

Benjamin had written a comparison between the German *Trauerspiel* and Calderón's baroque drama. To associate the relationship of Brecht to Adorno as they interpolated the figure of Benjamin, such that Brecht stands to the German *Trauerspiel* as Adorno does to the Spanish drama, is a tight fit. For Benjamin, in contrast to the German drama, and its bloody, ruined ends, which led to dramatic failure, the Spanish drama holds the "transfigured apotheosis" fast, exposing the mastery of construction in the stage's architecture.¹²⁵ He describes the distinction in an extraordinary passage, bringing together the stations on this long road to salvation, the construction of a theatre within a theatre, and the dream:

Whereas the Middle Ages present the futility of world events and the transience

¹²³ *SWI*, p.483; *BGS4*, p.142.

¹²⁴ 'What is Epic Theatre? [First Version]', p.13; *BGS2*, p.531.

¹²⁵ *OT*, *BGS1*, p.453.

of the creature as stations on the road to salvation, the German *Trauerspiel* is taken up entirely with the hopelessness of the earthly condition. Such redemption as it knows resides in the depths of this destiny itself rather than in the fulfilment of a divine plan of salvation. The rejection of eschatology in the religious dramas is characteristic of the new drama throughout Europe; nevertheless, the rash flight into a nature deprived of grace is specifically German. For in the supreme form of this European theatre, the drama of Spain, a land of Catholic culture in which the baroque features unfold much more brilliantly, clearly, and successfully, the conflicts of a state of creation without grace are resolved, by a kind of playful miniaturisation [*spielerisch verkleinert*] within the sphere of the court [*Hof*], whose king proves to be a secularized redemptive power. The *stretta* of the third act, with its indirect inclusion of transcendence – as it were mirrored, crystallized, or in marionette-form – guarantees the drama of Calderón a conclusion which is superior to that of the German *Trauerspiel*. It cannot renounce its claim to touch on the substance of existence. But if the secular drama must stop short on the borders of transcendence, it seeks, nevertheless, to assure itself of this indirectly, in play. Nowhere is this clearer than in *Life is a Dream*, where we have a totality worthy of the mystery-play, in which the dream stands over waking life like the vault of heaven. Morality is valid within it: “but, waking or sleeping, one thing only / matters: to act rightly; if awake, because acts are real, / if dreaming, to win friends for the time of awakening.” Nowhere but in Calderón could the perfect form of the baroque *Trauerspiel* be studied. The very precision with which the ‘mourning’ [*Trauer*] and the ‘play’ [*Spiel*] can harmonize with one another gives it its exemplary validity – the validity of the word and the thing alike.¹²⁶

The constructive aspect that is illuminated in the soteriological apotheosis, in which the drama’s architecture lies exposed, appears both in Calderón’s plays and in Adorno’s metaphysics as miniaturisation. The construction of the theatre of the world is reflected through a theatre within a theatre, such that the play is revealed as playful, as characters play out their ends. Transcendence is included only in this repetitive, “mirrored, crystallized” reflection. Such transcendence is a stroke of luck fulfilling the fate of the world, if only playfully, and in a small scale. As Benjamin continued,

The German drama of the seventeenth century had not yet mastered that exemplary artistic means which enabled the romantic drama from Calderón to Tieck to employ the techniques of enclosure by a framework, and miniaturization [*verkleinern*]: reflection. [...] In the drama of Calderón it corresponds to the volute in the architecture of its time. It repeats itself infinitely, and reduces to immeasurability the circle which it encloses. Both these aspects of reflection are equally essential: the playful miniaturization of reality and the introduction of a reflective infinity of thought into the finite

¹²⁶ *OT*, p.81; *BGSI*, p.260, trans. amended.

space of a profane fate.¹²⁷

Adorno salvaged the embattled, persecuted Benjamin of Brecht's lyric, in memory and forgetting, through just such a construction. In citing Brecht, and silently implying this figure of Benjamin as the internal fracture between philosophy and lyric, salvation is performed in miniature, bringing the disappearance of a life within the form and deformation of synthetic judgement. Philosophy's perspective is revealed as not a distant gaze, but the sight of a world made small, and therefore blessed with happiness. It is a view removed and relieved from the field of action; its smallest act of mercy, finally effacing the name of its protagonist, powerlessly offers him grace.

Benjamin too might have imagined such a scenario when he wrote that theology itself has become small and must be kept out of sight within the play of the chess game, while inconspicuously acting in the service of historical materialism. The promise of this image might be found not only in the dwarf's disappearance, but in his stature. Revealing the struggles of historical materialism as nothing but a game, staged within the phantasmagoric theatre of the world, the setting prompts the reflection through which the transcendent might ultimately illuminate the setting. In this moment fate itself is transformed, interrupted by infinitude, which is transformed too. Benjamin recognised exactly this motion in the dramas of Calderón, as fate was both played out and played with as though it were a game:

[What] attracted even the theoreticians among the romantics so irresistibly to Calderón [...] is the unparalleled virtuosity of the reflection, thanks to which his heroes are always able to turn the order of fate around like a ball in their hands.

Not all blessings remain; nor so grace. Benjamin touches on the closed-in and fatal construction of Calderón's *Life is a Dream*, even where this interior might be

¹²⁷ *OT*, p.83; *BGSI*, p.262

illuminated with the starlight of salvation, as infinitude emerges glorious within the finitude of the court. The play's hero, Segismundo, is born under a fateful star. His superstitious father, King Basilio, claims the star is evil, and acts to ward off its effects, while proclaiming, "for man ultimately has mastery over the stars."¹²⁸ Segismundo, who under Basilio's astrological premonition will bring doom to the King, is banished and locked away in a tower (the solitude of the tower in the first act provides the echo for the conviviality of the court in the third.) This fateful punishment makes of him the monster that his father feared. When Segismundo is given the chance to return, he is drugged; his sovereignty appears to him as though it were just a dream. The enduring uncertainty of whether his new life is real or mere phantasy grants him the grace of doing good, since every sovereign act appears as revocable, as though it would dissipate upon awakening. Thus the transcendent enters the drama: in this new dreamt undreamt world Segismundo marries Estrella, namesake of the star under which he was born, and in resplendent illumination – the reflection of a dream within a play – a reconciliation with fate is achieved.

The revelation that life had the revocability of phantasy offered a grace that reconciled sovereignty with fate. For Adorno the reverse was true: enduring in a world with as little substantiality as an endless dream marked the fatefulness of life without reconciliation. In Adorno's late metaphysics this dream belongs to one who was never released, who instead was murdered, but whose dreams lived on. Living on has been reduced to nothing but an endless dream of a madman who perished, whose wishes torture the living; resplendent illumination is available only as an afterglow, in the smallest movement, when its lyric moment – as merely a discontinuous moment –

¹²⁸ Pedro Calderón de la Barca, *Life is a Dream*, trans. Michael Kidd, (Boulder: University of Colorado Press, 2004), p.110.

is brought into the shape of philosophy's drama. This dream is neither sorrow nor play, but affliction. Revocability holds no promise; all contingency is weighed down by the past. Where Segismundo found a world in which his creatureliness is reconciled with fateful creation, Adorno's philosophy is one in which, being nothing but the enduring reality of a nightmare, even "all subsequent happiness seemed borrowed and revocable."¹²⁹

4.5 A Bequeathal Beyond Tradition

Benjamin's *Trauerspiel* book described suffering bodies displayed [*dargestellt*] on theatrical stages. Dismembered corpses found themselves among the ruins of allegory as "history merges into the setting."¹³⁰ Adorno's historical circumstance reveals a new setting. The construction of the stage of the final section of *Negative Dialectics* is metaphysics itself, its setting is experience, and judgement is its act. In experience alone, which has become so slight that it might be considered insubstantial, this play redeems its untragic hero, returning him in blessed inconspicuousness, as his life is viewed in miniature, only to confirm his fate.

Revealing the anonymised figure of Benjamin in Adorno's late metaphysics opens a view of this work through the problematic of the philosophy of the tragic,¹³¹ which assumed the greatest importance to accounts of dialectic since Hegel and Schelling. Every bourgeois metaphysics attempted to reconcile freedom and necessity through identification, bound as if by the motion of tragic law. In bourgeois society it was not this identification that turned out to be false (it was made true by force), but

¹²⁹ *MM*, p.192; *AGS4*, p.217, trans. amended. In *ND*, Adorno writes, "all happiness is distorted by its revocability." p.404; *AGS6*, p.396, trans. amended.

¹³⁰ *OT*, p.92; *BGS1*, p. 271.

¹³¹ See Peter Szondi, *An Essay on the Tragic*.

rather its bindingness that proved deceptive. With every attempt to make identity binding, society conjured and embraced further deceptions and self-deceptions. Critical philosophy teaches that the bourgeoisie attempted to resolve this problem in literature: for Lukács bourgeois literature regressed from tragedy back into the newest epopoeia, in the form of the novel; for Benjamin the *Trauerspiel* became a tragedy of tragedies, in which, without binding force, necessary criminality became a dislocated emblem of freedom in the shape of the evil sovereignty of subjective, and hence all political theatre becomes a hamartiology of the world. In all cases, within modernity's preponderant fictions, the distinction between life and work begins to collapse into the fiction. Life and work do not become self-identical, as under the divine laws of Hellenic tragedy, which under a judgment give life form. Nor is a corresponding metaphysics, that would read the history of the world as tragic, with its sovereign subject salvaging a positive concept of metaphysics out of the confirmation of a meaningful death, validated. Instead, literature discovered itself embedded in life, dislocated, alienated, and dismembered, as a fragment, in dying and falling, awaiting rescue, while metaphysics found itself set in fiction.

Any metaphysics adequate to such a world must, like the *Trauerspiel*, become a mixed or interstitial form. But the drama of metaphysics – the dialectic – resolves neither into lyric poetry as an endless orphic swansong, nor into a positive proclamation of its separation from such poetry. Instead, it combines the two, expressing in judgment both synthesis and scission. Nonetheless, philosophy maintains the risk that it may not contain the poetry that it sets apart as a fragment of itself, and that instead what remains as metaphysics is nothing but a fragment of lyric alienated from its own body.

This new metaphysics quietly levels an accusation against a transfigurative lyricism of Brecht's lines on Benjamin, "Finally driven to an impassable border / You have passed, they say, over a passable one", that hoped to vouchsafe meaning in Benjamin's death as transfiguration. Against this, Adorno imagines the bloody landscape of ruin might be salvaged in the moment of the disappearance of the wreckage, such that the passable border itself is transformed into something other than a border. Against Brecht's lyric monument, Benjamin is remembered – or forgotten – in *Negative Dialectics* in the most anti-monumental sense. He is remembered and forgotten in lyric ripped from poetry, as one whose death meant nothing in a civilisation that has integrated death entirely. He is remembered in a world in which remembering means nothing but to sense that something individual and meaningful has been effaced, while the steady course of history not only murders, but forgets its victims.

Adorno would defend another poetry:

Perennial suffering has as much right to expression as a tortured man has to scream; hence it may have been wrong to say that after Auschwitz you could no longer write poems. But it is not wrong to raise the less cultural question whether after Auschwitz you can go on living – especially whether one who escaped by accident, one who by rights should have been killed, may go on living.¹³²

"After Auschwitz" refers not to poetry "about Auschwitz" (that critics from Enzensberger to Szondi had defended against Adorno's earlier line.)¹³³ In this late work, Adorno defends the screaming expression of a tortured man, a poetry from Auschwitz which has therefore ceased to be poetry.¹³⁴ This poetry resounds from

¹³² *ND*, pp.362-363; *AGS6*, p.355.

¹³³ See *Lyrrik nach Auschwitz? Adorno und die Dichter*, ed. Petra Kiedaisch, (Ditzingen: Reclam, 2005).

¹³⁴ Adorno complains recognised poetry from the camps displays little but positive thinking compelled under duress, and decries any metaphysics seizing this positivity as grounds. *ND*, pp.367-368; *AGS6*, pp.360-361. This thought arose in conversation

Auschwitz into an afterwards, which it composes in its sounding and the dying even of this sound. This poetry, if it is poetry at all, envelops the future, just as the dream of the victim composed the frail and torturous reality of he who survived. “After Auschwitz” does not designate that Auschwitz is over, but rather that the world is over and Auschwitz has taken its place. If such screams are lyric, then they are akin to the deformation of language in the creaturely cries of the martyr on the stage. Poetic mourning that seeks to rescue the life for eternity beyond this suffering are, in its sounding, rendered meaningless. In the world-theatre of experience even these lamenting voices are muted by history.

The interpolation of this lyric history into metaphysics is double-edged. Just as it raises transcendence, as reflection on the fatal course of the world, into the realm of experience, its precondition is a world as closed in, finite, predetermined, and fateful as Calderón’s theatre pieces. Every judgement stands abroad from the field of action, where every battle has already been lost. No longer does there even appear the promise of interruption, for the tradition of the oppressed has been perverted. In the light of failure, philosophy draws what would have been that interruption into itself. This is expressed by Adorno not in philosophy, nor in poetry, but in the shape of a breakthrough of one to the other, and the setting of philosophy into a new artificial world.

Reading the final sections of *Negative Dialectics*, finding W.B. effaced as the secret figure in its argument, attempts to offer grace to its disjunctive lyric moment in philosophy. It thinks with Benjamin and without. Even amid failure, it is allied to happiness in the moment of the eventual disappearance of his inscription, which with

with H.G. Adler, who wrote a psychohistory of Theresienstadt. See *Metaphysics*, p.181; *Metaphysik*, p.282.

his remembrance within these metaphysical movements might cast a new light on those processes of abstraction in the grand stream of history that would otherwise merely dismember and anonymise him. From the standpoint of the onward rush of this stream and its abstractions, Benjamin's body does not disappear but remains as "the *specimen*; it is, almost as in vivisection, only the individual entity reducible to the body."¹³⁵ Recognising his disappearance within it means finding the eddy in this stream – the interruption – and taking hold of the moment in which, in its motion, this stream stands still.

Negative Dialectics' final paragraphs return to the "the specimen", into which the figure of Benjamin had been turned, through the citation of a citation, as one of many "torturable bodies." This evil doctrine of abstraction guarantees the exchange of one lifeless body for the next, such that everybody becomes nobody. Preserved within the abstraction is Benjamin's final disappearance, and a view achieved in love revealed in miniaturisation.

Enlightenment leaves practically nothing of the metaphysical content of truth – *presque rien* [almost nothing] to use a modern musical term. That which recedes gets ever smaller, as Goethe describes it in the parable of New Melusine's box, designating an extremity. Ever more inconspicuous [*unscheinbarer*]; this is why, in the critique of cognition as well as in the philosophy of history, metaphysics immigrates into micrology. Micrology is the place where metaphysics finds refuge from the total.¹³⁶

Adorno seeks in the form of the judgement a specific type of seeing as a counterpoint to knowledge. The title character of Goethe's tale, *The New Melusine*, is a dwarf, who using a magical ring assumes a human scale to find a knight as her husband. Her palace appears as a box that she asks him to carry with him on his travels. One night he discovers a light coming from inside the box, and watching through a chink, sees

¹³⁵ *Metaphysics*, p.108; *Metaphysik*, p.167, trans. amended.

¹³⁶ *ND*, p.407; *AGS6*, pp.399-400, trans. amended.

her appear before him in her diminutive form. Elsewhere, Adorno describes this realm as “a phantasmagoria of blessed smallness.”¹³⁷ Later she explains that she is of a race of dwarves, whose fate is transience through diminution. “Since nothing on earth can exist forever, but everything that was once great must become small and fading, we, too, are in the situation that since the creation of the world we have been constantly growing smaller and fading”¹³⁸ With a view holding to miniaturisation in the motion of disappearance, Adorno hopes to restore transience to what had become fixed under the spell of enlightenment reason. This mode of salvage was best described in a way of thinking that he attributed to Goethe:

The little chest in the Melusine story, one of the most enigmatic works Goethe produced, is the counterauthority to myth; it does not attack myth but rather undercuts it through nonviolence. In these terms it would be hope, one of Goethe’s ur-words and one of the watchwords of *Iphigenie*: the hope that the element of violence contained in progress, the point where enlightenment mimics myth, would fade away; that it would diminish, or, in the words from a line from a verse of *Iphigenie*, would be ‘worn down [*ermattet*]’. Hope is humaneness’ having escaped the curse, the pacification of nature as opposed to the sullen domination of nature that perpetuates fate.¹³⁹

He continues with a sentence that could describe the last paragraphs of his own

Negative Dialectics as well:

At its highest peak, Goethe’s work attains the null point between enlightenment and a heterodox theology in which enlightenment recollects itself, a theology which is rescued by vanishing within enlightenment. Iphigenie’s metaphor of exhaustion [*Gleichnis von Ermatten*] stands apart

¹³⁷ ‘Classicism in Goethe’s *Iphigenia*’ in *NtL2*, p.169; *AGS11*, p.513. ‘The New Melusine’ plays a significant role in the history of critical theory, almost always indicating the presence of Benjamin, who planned to write an essay on the story. See *BCOR*, pp.387-388. The tale is also discussed in Benjamin’s ‘Goethe’s Elective Affinities’, and appeared frequently in his writing and letters. It appears often in Adorno’s writings in relation to constellations surrounding *Elective Affinities*.

¹³⁸ Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Wilhelm Meister’s Journeyman Years*, trans. Krishna Winston, in *The Collected Works*, Vol.10, ed. Jane K. Brown (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), p.352, trans. amended.

¹³⁹ *NtL2*, p.169; *AGS11*, p.513

from nature. It refers to a gesture that yields instead of insisting on its rights, but also without renouncing them.¹⁴⁰

Where these Goethean models rest on images from fairy-tales, plays, and poems, the image to which they obtain in *Negative Dialectics* is that of Benjamin. Where once, in citation, Benjamin was transformed into an anonymous body amongst bodies, transformed into a specimen under the spell of abstraction, the final paragraph attempts to find salvation in displaying his disappearance that was a moment of this process, his inscription, as it is worn down, glossed momentarily with the light of redemption.

The smallest intramundane traits would be of relevance to the absolute, for the micrological gaze reduces to rubble the shells of what, measured by the subsuming cover-concept, is helplessly isolated and explodes its identity, the delusion that it is merely a specimen. There is solidarity between such thinking and metaphysics at the moment of its fall [*ihres Sturzes*].¹⁴¹

The figure of Benjamin, his name now effaced, appears here as the model for all transformations into specimens, under the dominion of abstraction. Benjamin's own destructive work is preserved beyond destruction, as a promise of salvation, in diminution.¹⁴² The positive logic of the concept is struck not merely by the material that it fails to subsume, but is met by a gaze. This gaze turns the material of the world, conceptualised, into ruins, exposing in its wreckage that the concept was more than mere thought. This gaze demonstrates that thought was already a mixed thing, a theoretical praxis, proving its claim to intellectual purity deceptive. It focuses on the smallest things, shatters [*zertrümmert*] the formal bounds of the concept, in a demolition beyond that which merely effaces.

¹⁴⁰ *NtL2*, p.170; *AGS11*, pp.513-514, trans amended.

¹⁴¹ *ND*, p.408; *AGS6*, p.400. trans. amended.

¹⁴² For a related reading, see Josh Cohen, *Interrupting Auschwitz*, (London: Continuum, 2003) pp.59-63.

If in Brecht's poem the last of Benjamin's destructive power was used, and used up, against himself, then for Adorno this weak power, like philosophy itself, lives on. No longer does it stand as a secret message between outlaws, but as a signal of hope for the destruction of all law, by demonstrating that the victim of the law is more than a sacrifice. Against tragic philosophy, Adorno wrote philosophy's own *Trauerspiel* with the intrusion of Benjamin's body into the work. Therein lies the moment of metaphysics' downfall, its tumbling motion, suspended like Gracchus' death on the mountain, dead but travelling on, and always falling. In the disappearance of this body, within philosophy, the suspension promises finally to be suspended. If the camps reduced the border between life and death to rubble, opening a field of suffering without end, this suspension of a suspension stands for the end of this suffering.

Metaphysics must pay for its migration into the material world. The new metaphysics after Auschwitz has moved, alongside the transformation of the Benjamin's living body, into corporeal substance, from thought into material.¹⁴³ Just as Gracchus must traverse every country in the world, philosophy migrates into a world of things in which all tortured bodies simply point to another, just as in baroque allegory each dismembered limb points to the next. For Benjamin the allegories of *Trauerspiel* operated in this regard as a deformation of tragedy. Unlike concepts established in the performance of the tragic law, against a tragic backdrop the *Trauerspiel* could not proclaim the immediate reality in language of fixed or fixated words.

¹⁴³ "The metaphysical principle of the injunction that 'Thou shalt not inflict pain' [...] can find its justification only in recourse to material reality, to corporeal, physical reality, and not to its opposite pole, the pure idea. Metaphysics, I say, has slipped into material existence." *Metaphysics*, p.117; *Metaphysik*, pp.182-183.

In tragedy, words and the tragic arise together, simultaneously, in the same place each time. Every speech in the tragedy is tragically decisive. It is the pure word that is immediately tragic.¹⁴⁴

By contrast, “The word in transformation is the linguistic principle of the *Trauerspiel*.”¹⁴⁵ In its motion – in the principle of resounding – the *Trauerspiel* plays out in the difference from reality, as a theatre of theatres. But after Auschwitz these spaces of play prove too to be barbaric, such that the nightmare is the conclusion of reality, and reality is nothing but the endurance of a nightmare. In Adorno’s late metaphysics, materialism itself is revealed as the catastrophe of a tragic judgement over the world. This world in which philosophy’s *Trauerspiel* might play out, perhaps without a spectator left, is one in which even phantasy is determined by the stringency of the tragic law, and dreams contain only the wishes of the dead.

Those last lines of *Negative Dialectics*, which dwell on the specimen and the destructive gaze, develop a variation on a thought first written at the outset of Adorno’s career. Defending “exact phantasy” he wrote,

The mind is indeed not capable of producing or grasping the totality of the real, but it may be possible to penetrate the detail, to explode in miniature the mass of merely existing reality.¹⁴⁶

But after Auschwitz, the delusions of a total reality produced by the mind were matched by the unconsciousness of the violence with which brought a total reality into being. Against this, the *ars inveniendi* once proffered by Adorno stood no ground. Instead, philosophy could reflect only in failure, reproducing at the slightest distance, in gesture, the abstractions that destroyed the individual, while rehearsing its distance from him, gracing him in diminution. Meanwhile, the philosopher’s own

¹⁴⁴ ‘The Role of Language in Tragedy and *Trauerspiel*’, *EW*, p.247; *BGS2*, p.138.

¹⁴⁵ *EW*, p.247; *BGS2*, p.138.

¹⁴⁶ ‘The Actuality of Philosophy’, p.133; *AGS1*, p.344.

disappearance within the text becomes, at best, a puppet-play performed in miniature, blessed with the happiness of a view of life receding, in a place that is no more.

Philosophy, in its commitment to phantasy, would not become like poetry or a dream, but could only register its relation to poetry at the point where poetry's own power of memory offered the slightest promise that it had been more than an element of the tragic course of the world. The last refuge of reflection stood between philosophy and poetry, in that smallest of transitions, amid the rubble of their border: a site in which a disappearance itself might be illuminated. If such a thought belonged to Adorno, he would ascribe it also to Mahler in the opening pages of his monograph:

[T]he image corresponding to breakthrough is damaged because the breakthrough has failed, like the Messiah has failed to come into the world. To realize it musically would be at the same time to attest to its failure in reality. It is in music's nature to overreach itself. Utopia is salvaged in its no man's land.¹⁴⁷

Where once the landscape of phantasy turned from colour into a monochrome, as dust settled upon the phantasmagoria of the nineteenth century, as Romantic dreams realised became the kitsch of outmoded things,¹⁴⁸ in these last dreams, the horizon displays neither the brightness of a rainbow, nor the greyness of a cloud. In his poem on W.B., Brecht writes, "so the future lies in darkness." This line probably inspired Adorno's introduction of the figure of Benjamin into *Negative Dialectics*:

The horizon of a state of freedom shrouds itself in black. Within, neither repression nor morality would be needed anymore, because the drive would no longer have to express itself in destruction.¹⁴⁹

In this darkness one can wonder if the night of the world has descended, the mind having stepped out beyond the world of gazing, having taken possession of images,

¹⁴⁷ *Mahler: A Musical Physiognomy*, p.6; AGS13, p.154, trans. amended

¹⁴⁸ See SW2, p.3; BGS2, p.620.

¹⁴⁹ ND, p.285; AGS6, p.281

and repressed them into an encompassing unconscious, which it is now doomed to inhabit.¹⁵⁰ Dreams that once separated themselves from reality are forced to renounce that separation, enveloping the world as though it were the product of a terrible demiurge's unruly mind, while reality reveals itself, and thus conceals itself too, as identical to the nightmares of the dead. In this philosophical night, Adorno unstintingly commits to this darkness, with no stars left to guide him. His thinking attempts to step beyond its own legitimacy. In his very last sentences of the final lecture on metaphysics, he said:

For thought there is really no other possibility, no other opportunity, than to do what the miner's adage forbids: to work one's way through the darkness without a lamp, without possessing the positive through the higher concept of the negation of the negation, and to immerse oneself in the darkness as deeply as one possibly can. For one thing is undoubtedly true: I told you that, where there is no longer life, the temptation to mistake its remnants for the absolute, for flashes of meaning, is extremely great – and I do not wish to take that

¹⁵⁰ See G.W.F. Hegel, *Hegel and the Human Spirit: A Translation of the Jena Lectures on the Philosophy of Spirit (1805-6)*, trans. Leo Rauch, (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1983), pp.85-86: "This image belongs to Spirit. Spirit is in possession of the image, is master of it. It is stored in the Spirit's treasury, in its Night. The image is unconscious, i.e., it is not displayed as an object for representation. The human being is this Night, this empty nothing which contains everything in its simplicity – a wealth of infinitely many representations, images, none of which occur to it directly, and none of which are not present. This [is] the Night, the interior of [human] nature, existing here – pure Self – [and] in phantasmagoric representations it is night everywhere: here a bloody head suddenly shoots up and there another white shape, only to disappear as suddenly. We see this Night when we look a human being in the eye, looking into a Night which turns terrifying. [For from his eyes] the night of the world hangs out toward us. Into this Night the being has returned. Yet the movement of this power is posited likewise." This passage corresponds to a moment in the final paragraph of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, p.492 While the latter might imply a terrible psychological solipsism in phenomenology, the former, seeing the Night that hangs towards us in the eye of the other, sets it in the social relation. For Adorno's interpretation of this passage from the *Phenomenology*, see Adorno, *Hegel: Three Studies*, trans. Shierry Weber-Nicholson, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1993), pp.115-117; *AGS5*, p.347-249. For a related commentary on Hegel's *Differenzschrift*, see p.90-92; *AGS5*, pp.327-329 Adorno made a similar critique of phantasmagoria in the Wagnerian night in *Wagner*, pp.139-140; *AGS13* p.140.

back. Nevertheless, nothing can even be experienced as living if it does not contain a promise of something transcending life. This transcendence therefore *is*, and at the same time *is not* – and beyond that contradiction it is no doubt very difficult, and probably impossible, for thought to go.

In saying that, Ladies and Gentlemen, I have the feeling that I have reached the point where the insufficiency of my own reflections converges with the impossibility of thinking that which must nevertheless be thought. And all I hope is that I may have given you at least an idea of that convergence.¹⁵¹

The darkness of this night is the realm of history after tradition has reached its conclusion. It is caught, suspended, in the endurance of Auschwitz after Auschwitz, as an endless uninterrupted interruption. The motion that Adorno reaches – or never reaches – in this thinking, returns to one of Adorno’s earliest reflections on Benjamin after his death, which without recourse to a tradition of the oppressed is titled “Bequeathal” [*Vermächtnis*]:

Benjamin’s writings are an attempt in ever new ways to make philosophically fruitful what has not yet been foreclosed by great intentions. The task he bequeathed was not to abandon such an attempt to the estranging enigmas of thought alone, but to bring the intentionless within the realm of concepts: the obligation to think at the same time dialectically and undialectically.¹⁵²

Adorno’s elucidation of this task – or better its tenebration – demands a thought both dialectical and undialectical, thus ruining thought, and reducing its bounds to rubble. Such a thought registers the *need* for the reconciliation of practice; its disappearing figures are a sign of a world finally freed of destruction. Meanwhile the course of the world, its night, is one in which the relation between the dialectical and the undialectical has never ceased to be dialectical. This night of the world, full of gruesome phantasmagorias, of infernal dreams that can neither gain true substance nor dissipate, condemns precisely what it deports – its “waste products” and “blind spots” – to be bound by the dialectic’s tragic motion, as material detritus.

¹⁵¹ Adorno, *Metaphysics*, pp.144-145; *Metaphysik*, pp.225-226.

¹⁵² *MM*, pp.151-152; *AGS4*, p.171.

Where Adorno wrote that “dialectics is the ontology of the wrong state of things, the right way would be free of it”,¹⁵³ so might we read Benjamin’s bequeathal as a task to recognise this right way within thought itself; to hold thought fast in that moment; to explode the concept and its endlessly eddying stream of phantasmagoria from within, and with a jolt to awaken into a redeemed world.¹⁵⁴ As Benjamin wrote in a note, “In the awakening, the dream stands still.”¹⁵⁵ And in that awakening those semblances might be deepened, freeing themselves of the spell of mere appearance, a figure disappearing, blessed, transcending life, and beaming in resplendent invisible ultraviolet, as humanity’s last new day begins.¹⁵⁶

As flowers turn toward the sun, what has been strives to turn – by dint of a secret heliotropism – toward the sun which is rising in the sky of history. The historical materialist must be aware of this most inconspicuous [*unscheinbarste*] of all transformations.¹⁵⁷

Singstimme

zart *P*

Wir ho - len sie ein auf je - nen Höh'n im

espr. warm

steigernd

Son - - - nen - schein! Der Tag ist schön auf je - nen Höh'n!

¹⁵³ *ND*, p.11; *AGS6*, p.23.

¹⁵⁴ “The allegorist awakens in God’s world”, *OT*, p. 232; *BGS1*, p.406, trans. amended. He awakens not as *Leib* but as *Körper* alone.

¹⁵⁵ *AP*, p. 912; *BGS5*, p.1217.

¹⁵⁶ “Others may shine resplendently as on the first day; this form adheres to the image of beauty on the very last.”, *OT*, p.235; *BGS1*, p.409, trans. amended.

¹⁵⁷ ‘On the Concept of History’, in *SW4*, p.390; *BGS1*, pp.694-695.

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