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Language and mimesis in Walter Benjamin's work

Language is the "alpha" and "omega" of Benjamin's thought, forming an elaborate, ornate mosaic that encompasses all of his writings, from the early essay "On Language as Such and on the Language of Man" (1916) to the materialist work of the mid and late thirties. Even the image-oriented, iconographic *Arcades Project*, dedicated to the exegesis of dialectical images, was to find its epistemological justification in the statement that the historian eminently chanced upon such images in language. Laboring untiringly on a comprehensive philosophy of language, in which the whole proved larger than its composite parts, Benjamin wove comments on language into almost every single essay, faithful to his early belief that it constituted the "arche," or origin, of all intellectual expression.

Like the Early Romantics, who used fragments and "mystical terminology," or Nietzsche, who wrote aphorisms as a way of developing a new, seemingly antisystematic system, Benjamin produced reflections on language that appeared to defy conventional codes of systematization. Averse to the overly abstract discourse of philosophy, he was to become one of modernity's preeminent essayists, critics, and philosophical storytellers, using a language replete with poetic and mystical images, rhapsodic figures of speech, laconic *aperçus*, literary parables, and historical allegories – a storyteller, who, toward the end of his life, hoped to resort to the method of literary montage, "the art of citing without quotation marks" (*Arcades*, 458), as a way of calling authentic historical and political experience (*Arcades*, 473) by its name. But, for all the methodological and ideological approaches Benjamin espoused over the years, his writings on language as a whole displayed a remarkable unity; they all enacted – performed – an unwavering critique of rationalistic, instrumentalist, or aestheticizing conceptions of language and rhetoric *in* the medium of language. Whether he embraced a language mysticism informed by the kabbalah and Hamann, admired Mallarmé's *poésie pure* as the illumination of language's magical side (in his early years, at least), or supported Brecht's materialist conception of a language of gestures,

Benjamin did not cease questioning the reduction of language to a handy tool, to the instrumentality of logic and discursivity, or to the technical view of linguistics.[1]

Benjamin's earliest work confidently labeled semiotic theories (including classicist theories of the sign) as bourgeois constructs that turned language into an external, referential vehicle or means for the mediation of values and (truth) contents. Early on, the stories of the Fall and Babel emerged as Benjamin's favorite parables to catch the fated dialectic of the modern condition in language. Challenging modernity as a fallen culture promoting linguistic dispersion, he deplored its departure from the origin of pure language, the creative word, and the name, as it idolized the logical proposition and the secular "magic of judging." Inspired by Kierkegaard's critique of modernity, he attacked the tyranny of its universal history of progress no less than the bourgeois information age and its sensationalist journalism, which degraded language's authentic communicative power to a difference-obliterating, idle chatter, or prattle ("On Language," *SW* I, 71; *Origin*, 233). Indeed, while Benjamin's comments on language fall into four broad categories – metaphysical, mystical, epistemological, and materialist – what distinguishes all of his language work is that, from its inception, it was guided by a large-scale theory about the changed structure of experience (*Erfahrung*)[2] and of perception. Pursuing this theory, he meant to release a more authentic existentialist way of being in the world. To be sure, in the early thirties, Benjamin hailed a destructive, antihumanist avant-gardism or "positive (artistic) barbarism" (as opposed to political barbarism), whose violent method of destruction greeted the disappearance of aura and "poverty of experience" as a "freedom from experience," the latter considered as the excess of an outworn humanist culture ("Experience and Poverty," *SW* II, 732, 734). Yet, in other work from the thirties, he resolutely returned to a negative assessment of modernity's "increasing atrophy of experience" ("Motifs," *SW* IV, 316). Baudelaire's parrying lyrical poetry exemplified the attempt to recover a world of correspondences in poetic experience (*Erfahrung*), but also displayed the traumatic signs of a time marked by shock experiences (*Erlebnisse*), which, by hardening the shield of consciousness and intellectual memory, risked losing the vast repository of tradition, aura, and lived experiences (*Erfahrung*).

Contemporary vitalistic philosophy, represented by Dilthey, Klages, and Jung, devalued *Erfahrung* to *Erlebnis*. This philosophical leveling of experience continued a trend that had started with (a certain) Kant and the neo-Kantian relegation of *Erfahrung* to the calculations of the positivistic, scientific mind-set. For Benjamin, language, once released from the correspondence model of truth, might provide the path to another realm of

possibilities, to the recognition of altogether different "correspondences." Set free from the nefarious effects of instrumental reason, language was to regain some of its lost aura. Once humans recognized language's unfathomed revolutionary potential, perhaps it might field a blow, issue a redemptive shock, undoing the numbing anaesthetic and aestheticized shock effects of modernity's culture of dispersal.[3]

It seems timely, therefore, to address Benjamin's complex language theory – sometimes neglected in favor of more accessible work, such as the technology essay – in order to unlock how modernity's progressive aestheticization of the cultural field occurred at the expense of an unalloyed purity of language. A reading of the 1916 essay, "On Language as Such and on the Language of Man" paired to an analysis of the 1933 "Doctrine of the Similar" and "On the Mimetic Faculty" will demonstrate how the category of mimesis emerged as one of the quintessential modes of human cultural production in Benjamin's intellectual development. Through an analysis of the mimetic faculty – the perception and production of sensuous *and* nonsensuous similarities – Benjamin hoped to forge a synthesis between his earlier language philosophy and the concerns of the cultural critic committed to historical materialism. Where Benjamin's earliest thought championed a "spiritual" language-magic, his later work posited a magical, mimetic, and corporeal phase antedating the acquisition of (verbal) language. In language's sanctuary, this mimetic impulse was to find a new abode, but perhaps – as the later essay, "On the Mimetic Faculty," in contradistinction to "Doctrine of the Similar" seemed to suggest – at the cost of blotting out an earlier stratum of magic.

Mystical language, pure language

Benjamin's earliest mystical view of language reads like a peculiar amalgam of Kantian "mysticism," Early Romanticism (Schlegel and Novalis), Hölderlin's poetry, Hamann's aphorisms, and the kabbalah. Following the Romantic critic Friedrich Schlegel, he devised an intricate "system" of "mystical terminology,"[4] which, by overcoming the antinomy between conceptual mediacy and intuitive immediacy, was to realize a language-based, "noneidetic" mysticism in the midst of philosophical discourse (*Concept of Criticism*, *SW* I, 139–40). The mystical terms that formed part of this new lexicon were *Sprachmagie* (language-magic *and* the magic of language), pure language, word, name, symbol, and, significantly, system – a term stripped of its rationalistic connotations. Writing within and at the margins of logic, as a philosophy student Benjamin crafted not a few formal, quasi-systematic essays, which in the end meant to demonstrate that all system was to be thought of

as symbol. Like the original broken symbolical ring that constituted its totality through the merger of its broken parts, so Benjamin's symbol pointed to a harmonious participatory relation among fragments and the whole of which they were a part. All languages existed in a symbolical intentionality toward pure language, which in turn shone forth through multiple languages, much as the kabbalistic *Zohar*, or book of splendor, exalted the luminous presence of the creative Word in the vessel of language-shards.[5]

Enigmatic as the term the "magic of language" at first might seem, Benjamin enlisted it to resist the degradation of language to a neo-Kantian concern with concepts and cogitation as well as the activist flaws he detected in Martin Buber's political philosophy, or what Gershom Scholem referred to as its "blood and *Erlebnis* arguments" (*Friendship*, 29). Eulogizing language's unmediated magic, or mediate immediacy (C, 80), Benjamin favored the sober, "objective writing" of the Early Romantics' journal *Athenaeum* over Buber's *The Jew*. Rather than set up a strategic, causal or instrumental link between words and political action, objective, political style pointed to a radically different sphere, whose silence was that of the intrusive, ineffable caesura, the interval between words; for, "only where this sphere of speechlessness reveals itself in unutterably pure power can the magic spark leap between the word and the motivating deed, where the unity of these two equally real entities resides" (C, 80).

In this description of language's magic spark, the core of Benjamin's early mystical language philosophy shone forth. He would subsequently capture the essence of this philosophy in one of his beloved tropes, a chiasm of sorts: if the Absolute inhabited pure language, then pure language in turn was the immediate medium of the Absolute. Pure language existed as immediate mediality, as a language movement encompassing different centers, stadia of being or existence, which were infinitely completed and consummated in the Absolute. Benjamin identified the workings of this immediate mediacy in the Early Romantics' theory of "I-less" reflection, whose interlocking reflective centers "[hung] together infinitely (exactly)," as Hölderlin's gloss of his *Pindar* translation had put it (*Concept of Criticism*, *SW* I, 126). Holding the middle between philosophy and poetry, Benjamin's language at the time aimed at a Hölderlinian balance between sobriety and ecstasy (*mania*), a non-subjective ecstatic language, in which the cadence of discursive language was interrupted by the caesura. Borrowed from Hölderlin's annotations to Sophocles, this prosodic figure signaled the silent, forceful, potentially terrific and sublime incursion of divine power – the expressionless – in the midst of language. As it disclosed the sphere of the ineffable, the caesura at once prompted the dissolution of the mythical layer of information, meaning, and subjective intention (see, "Task," *SW* I, 261).[6]

Neither scientific, political, nor ordinary linguistic communication captured Benjamin's imagination but an entirely different magical communicability, which manifested itself in an organic language movement that transpired among God and humans, humans and things, nature and God. The name of this magical communication among various layers, registers, realms, states of existence, and levels of intentionality, was translation, or translatability, a term that was to receive its earliest account not, as is commonly assumed in Benjamin's 1921 translation essay, but in the 1916 "On Language as Such and on the Language of Man." As this title already indicates, the essay is concerned with language "as such" and with human language, denoting that the two were not necessarily identical. Where the essay's first part focused on language-magic, that is, language's immediate mediacy and infinity, the second, longer half disclosed the tremendous task that lay encapsulated in human language, namely, the task of (Adamic) naming. In the name – or "the language of language" – pure language came to word ("On Language," *SW* I, 65). In it, the divine, infinite spirit spoke, a spirit very much like the *eyn sof*, the pure Infinite of the *Zohar*, whose splendor radiated through the words, the texture, of the Torah, at once creation and revelation in and "through" language.

Taking on secular humanism, Benjamin's language theory corrected the common view that only humans, unlike animals or plants, were endowed with language. Language communicated spiritual contents but in such a way that the latter communicated themselves reflexively, that is, not *through* language but *in* language.[7] Resisting, moreover, a *rationalistic* logocentrism, Benjamin questioned the predominance of human reason, the privileged organ of the *animal rationale*, as he stretched the notion of *Geist* (spirit) to everything, including mere objects. Yet, to extend the "existence of language" to all things animate and inanimate did not mean to turn language into an inauthentic metaphor.[8] "This use of the word 'language,'" Benjamin cautioned, "is in no way metaphorical" ("On Language," *SW* I, 62). For, regardless of the level of consciousness (or even lack of consciousness) that a being or thing possessed, each communicated spiritual content, in keeping with the Scholastic model of gradation among levels of spiritual being ("On Language," *SW* I, 66). Allied, moreover, to Jacob Boehme's natural philosophy, such reflexive self-communication resembled the mystical theory of Revelation at the core of his *De signatura rerum* [Of the Signature of Things, 1682], according to which all things great and small revealed themselves in an original natural language, thus participating in the language-spirit of Revelation (*Origin*, 202).

At the core of Genesis 1 lay an original covenant between God and humans, a symbolical contract forged in language. For, if divine Revelation transpired in the "creative omnipotence of language," then in humans God "set language, which had served *him* as medium of creation, free" ("On Language," *SW* I, 68). Through the name, "the frontier between the finite and infinite," human language participated "most intimately in the divine infinity of the pure word" ("On Language," *SW* I, 69); conversely, all the finite (secular) human word could render was second-order knowledge. Saturated with the divine language-spirit, the name furthermore connected to the world of mute things, ruled by the magic of matter. The bond among these various levels of existence was ensured through intercommunication in translation ("On Language," *SW* I, 69), a harmonious process of spiritual transposition in non-mediate mediation. In the dynamic movement of language, human naming acted as the medium – not vehicle or means – of translation between God's infinite creative word and unspoken, nameless things. Just as the human name remained deficient unless it was the echo of, or response to the divine word, so things – distinguished by a mute "magic of matter" ("On Language," *SW* I, 67, 69) – remained incomplete, unless they were named by humans. Thus, though Benjamin sought to resist anthropocentric philosophies of language, he still held fast to *Genesis* according to which Adam was "the lord of nature" ("On Language," *SW* I, 64, 65), whose naming language amounted to the medium in which "*the [spiritual] being of man communicates itself to God*" (*SW* I, 65). As the interplay between reception and spontaneity, the name bound humans to things, exposing both bourgeois linguistic and most mystical theories to be wrong, the former for turning language into an arbitrary referential sign system, the latter for identifying the word with the essence of the thing (see "On Language," *SW* I, 69). Humans' magical community and communication with things was immaterial and purely spiritual, a pneumatic contract or covenant of which the sound was the spiritual symbol. This, Benjamin averred, was the "symbolic fact" that *Genesis*'s second account of creation rendered in God's breathing his breath into Adam, a breath "at once life and spirit and language" ("On Language," *SW* I, 67).

Spurning rationalism's reverence of the *logos* as the seat of human reason, Benjamin paid tribute to the "language spirit," a mystical term dear to Jacob Boehme (see *Origin*, 201–02). Benjamin's persistent use of the sonorous word "echo" reverberated with Boehme's conception of the Spirit as a divine, polyphonically tuned organ, in which every voice and every pipe, in piping out its own tone, echoed the eternal Word. If creation through language preeminently entailed the foundation of language community, then it followed that the polyphonic and harmonious translation among several strata in the great chain of language defied "abstract areas of identity and similarity"[9] ("On Language," *SW* I, 70), including the figurative similarity

brokered by metaphor. To be understood neither figuratively nor metaphorically, harmonious translation among languages transpired as a transformative process among "media of varying densities," involving the "transportation of one language into another through a continuum of transformations" ("On Language," *SW* I, 70; trans. modified). Translation did not express unbridgeable difference, nor the bridging of separate registers in metaphoric transposition; instead, language's "secret password" was deciphered as it gradually passed into the singular language of the sentry standing at the gates of a higher sphere of creation. Yet again, Benjamin here appeared inspired by Hamann, whose rhapsodic *Aesthetica in Nuce* had described creation as "speech to the created (*die Kreatur*) by the created; for one day tells it to another day, and one night to another; the password of creation runs through every climate until the end of the world, and in each one hears the voice of creation."[10]

In Benjamin's ontotheology, the original act of foundation or positing was that of the divine Word, a position most succinctly voiced in "The Task of the Translator," which cites the opening words of St. John's gospel from the New Testament: *en archēi ēn ho logos* (*In the beginning was the Word*) ("Task," *SW* I, 260). For Benjamin, this was an original gift whose extraordinary "giving" humans could only realize by reciprocating through naming language. Fundamentally, he thus dismissed both rationalistic and poetic theories of human spontaneity in language, as neither the concept (Kant and neo-Kantianism) nor the metaphor (Nietzsche) constituted humans' most creative act. Language could never find its determination and fulfillment in the aesthetic, productive force of human creation through metaphor, whose relativism Nietzsche had made transparent when he interpreted truth as a maneuverable army of tropes (see Nietzsche's "On Truth and Lies in an Extramoral Sense"). Long before Nietzsche, Hölderlin's poetry had already unraveled the hubristic, aestheticizing claims of German idealism to such thetic positing. However, at this early stage of his work, Benjamin did not dwell on how idealism's positing of meaning had found its response in Nietzsche's post-Hegelian philosophy, which replaced "meaning" with the positing of pluralist "values." Only later, in *The Origin of the German Tragic Drama*, would Benjamin address the consequences of such relativistic, nominalistic pluralist values in the context of his new theory of allegory. In the 1916 essay on language, by contrast, he framed the spontaneity of the human mind by making it subservient to a more original receptivity to the divine Word, whose soundings echoed in human names. Rather than signaling the exchange of meanings, semantics, or a contingent economy of values – all philosophical equivalents of the Fall – pure language escaped such mundane circuits of distribution and exchange, initiating an altogether different economy of the gift and restitution. Thus, the human act of naming did not proceed *ex nihilo* but required a receptive (though hardly passive) attitude, consummated in the response to the divine Word. Human creativity itself was restricted to the proper name, the act of naming one's offspring ("On Language," *SW* I, 69), in light of which the mechanics of metaphor merely corresponded to inauthentic analogy or bad mimetic similarity. To engage in the act of naming – including the gift of a second, secret name ("Agesilaus Santander," *SW* II, 712–16) – meant to accept one's duty as a human. To do so did not amount to reproducing the divine Word mimetically; rather, it meant to listen to, to echo, and hence to activate divine creation through the acoustics of the spoken (not yet written) word which alighted upon things like a tender breath. In these "spirited" speech acts, each and every word seemed to stream from the divine "Sprachgeist" or "spirit of language" – a word that also alludes to the Hebrew concept of *ruah* ("divine breath").[11] Indeed, what else but this breath accorded humans and objects their "aura" (Latin, "breath of air"). For though the word "auratic" never expressly appeared in the language essay, it would pour forth from the later (iconographic) work, as if the latter were still suffused with the breath of the language-spirit.

Just as creation transpired through pure language, so the fall occurred in language, affecting its purity as well as the language-spirit. Now removed from its root origin, the power of the name hardly survived in the mundane everydayness characterizing the merely finite *human word* ("On Language," *SW* I, 71). As the playing field of an "infinitely differentiated" and dispersed knowledge, this word simply expressed an inferior degree of "external magic." In its wake arose another form of translation, more precisely, the postlapsarian multiplication of translations among various languages and registers of knowledge.[12] Again, it was Hamann who had grasped the operations of this "mediate" mode of translation, when he likened the transposition of angelic language into human language to the reverse side of a carpet, showing "the stuff, but not the workman's skill," and to an eclipse of the sun that is perceived mediately, in a vessel of water (Hamann, Aesthetica, 142). Charting the same transition from "one language" and "perfect knowledge" ("On Language," *SW* I, 71) to the imperfections of mere mediacy, Benjamin posited that the name made way for the external communications of the human word and a derivative realm of judgment (rendered in Genesis by the snake's "nameless" knowledge). This inferior "knowledge of good and evil" – of the level of Kierkegaard's "chatter" – had found its just response in God's judging, purifying word, driving the first humans out of paradise ("On Language," *SW* I, 72). At bottom, Benjamin concluded, the Fall initiated an idolatrous practice of mimesis (here: inauthentic similarity), the spectacle of

parody, in which fallen, mediate language imitated original immediacy. Abstraction now ruled in logical and philosophical propositions no less than in the judgments and sentences dispensed in the name of the secular law whose "mythic origin" Benjamin was to pursue with a tenacity rivaled only by Kafka's allegories and parables about the Law. Years later, in the 1931 Kraus essay, Benjamin would write the postscript to this narrative, setting Kraus up as the latter-day judge, who, in taking on the platitudes and otiose phrases of modernity's information technology, not only proved that "justice and language remain founded in each other" but thus also consecrated his Jewishness ("Karl Kraus," *SW* II, 444).

Whether Benjamin invoked the Romantics' model of reflection, the acoustic register of the echo, or translation as a work's "afterlife" ("Task," *SW* I, 254), language never amounted to a monolithic flux of words, articulations or signs; rather, it disclosed an intricate texture of "communication," in which different strands, reflection centers or texts (original and translation), interacted polyphonically. Much as criticism, especially art criticism, brought the work to reflective completion, so translation did the same to the original, so "naming language" returned the gift of Revelation in communicative receptivity, an order altogether different from the trafficking in linguistic coins or the Babel-like accumulation of inauthentic translations. Thus, while it is not impossible or necessarily ill-advised to do a rhetorical reading of Benjamin's early writings illustrating how the work of language undoes the text's overt organic claims, from a historico-philosophical perspective it seems important to acknowledge that the early Benjamin unambiguously embraced an organic, pure language that claimed to be neither metaphorical nor allegorical but if anything was symbolical.

Everything depends here, then, on the status of the fragment, much as it did in the Early Romantics' aesthetics and epistemology. In Benjamin's early thought, the fragment never existed in and by itself, but always was the shard that helped complete symbolical intentionality. Thus, while his acclaimed "The Task of the Translator" (1921) stood in dialogue with (secular) discussions of a translation's "fidelity" to or "freedom" from the original, the essay proffered the hope of a *symbolic* approximation of pure language, evoked in the interlinear, or word-by-word, translation of Holy Writ. The "hallmark" of bad translations was external communication ("Task," *SW* I, 253), the transmission of inessential contents, which assumed that a translation's telos was the reproduction or imitation of the original's meaning. Dismissing a purely philological theory based on external family relations among languages, Benjamin posited a "suprahistorical kinship," a common purposiveness among all languages, which were "interrelated in what they express" ("Task," *SW* I, 257, 255), that is, in their common intentionality

toward pure language. If languages existed in a "constant state of flux," then pure language would emerge, in Revelation, at "the Messianic end of their history," "from the harmony of all the various ways of meaning" ("Task," *SW* I, 257). The translation, as a form, ensured the afterlife, the survival of the original work, by transporting it into "a more definitive language realm" ("Task," *SW* I, 258; trans. modified), rebounding with the original's echo. Consequently, the translator's task consisted in the integration of "many tongues into one true language," thus "ripening the seed of pure language in translation" ("Task," *SW* I, 259) – an organic image that recalled the *Zohar*'s "garden of nuts," the multiple layers and shells around the innermost kernel, whose essence Hamann hoped to render when he set out to compose an aesthetics *in nuce*. Rather than relating to one another as production did to (mimetic) reproduction, original, and translation participated in a model of incorporation, making them "recognizable as fragments of a greater language, just as fragments are part of a vessel" ("Task," *SW* I, 260). Shunning once again the realm of metaphor and inauthentic analogy, Benjamin embraced the technique of *Wörtlichkeit* – in truth an untranslatable term that meant "literalness" but (when taken literally) also spelled fidelity to the Word. Enacted in Hölderlin's all too literal Sophocles translations, such literalness emanated from a higher truth, the higher awareness that "in the beginning was the Word." Complementing the original in sonorous harmony, the real translation was transparent, for "it does not cover the original, does not block its light, but allows the pure language, as though reinforced by its own medium, to shine upon the original all the more fully" ("Task," *SW* I, 260). Through a literal rendition of syntax, authentic translation managed to bring the word to the foreground. "For if the sentence is the wall before the language of the original, literalness (*Wörtlichkeit*) is the arcade" ("Task," *SW* I, 260). For all their uncanny strangeness, Hölderlin's translations uncovered the profundity of "the harmony of languages," to the point where in stooping to the abyss, they risked losing (external) meaning "in the bottomless depths of language" ("Task," *SW* I, 262). Translations, then, assisted in turning language's symbolizing force into the symbolized, without, however, collapsing them into the same. True translations helped to bring home pure language from its exile in alien tongues, helped to release it by transposing it into a new language. Realized in such sonorous harmony, pure language no longer "means or expresses anything but is, as expressionless and creative Word, that which is meant in all languages – all information, all sense, and all intention finally encounter a stratum in which they are destined to be extinguished" ("Task," *SW* I, 261). Only in Holy Writ was the conveyance of meaning not the "watershed for the flow of language and the flow of revelation." For, in the word-by-word transliteration of Holy Writ,

the literalness or non-figurative nature of the divine Word appeared. Lacking any need for mediate mediation, the Word was unconditionally translatable, as testified by the interlinear transliteration of the Scriptures, in which all tongues, overcoming the brokenness of their vessel, together rendered the purity of Revelation in language.

Even in the secular present, riddled with shards, language fragments, ruins, linguistic rubble, and dross, the eventual soldering of the shards constituting the symbol lingered as a powerful potentiality. For such reconstitution to come about, humans would need to recollect (*anamnesis, Origin, 36–37; SW* II, 718) the Adamic language of the name, allowing its echo to reverberate in the present. Modernity therefore existed as the possibility of *tikkun*, that is, in Gershom Scholem's words, as "the Messianic restoration and repair which mends and restores the original being of things, and of history as well, after they have been smashed and corrupted by the 'breaking of the vessels.'"[13] Until this potentiality materialized, the condition of modernity could then, by implication, be defined as the rupturing of the organic community of pure (as opposed to derivative) translation. In the life of humans, this condition manifested itself as secular chatter, the fall from the origin in pure language; in natural life, it took the form of nature's mourning at the excesses and abuse experienced at the hands of humans, more particularly their language. Combining his mysticism with a Romantic philosophy of nature, Benjamin's early 1916 essay thus introduced yet another central motif that would recur in his work as a whole: the language of nature, always at a risk of being silenced, alienated, objectified, and suppressed in and through human language. In the face of so much man-made over-naming, nature relinquished itself to the silence of melancholy.

Language's mimesis

Benjamin never entirely renounced his early language mysticism, retaining its frame of reference even as he adopted the historical-materialist method of cultural analysis, which, anchored in an exegesis of allegory, was to find its culmination in the *Arcades Project*. When in February of 1938 Scholem and Benjamin met for the last time in Paris, Scholem was perplexed that the main topic his friend chose to discuss was the connections between "On the Mimetic Faculty" and the 1916 language essay (see Scholem, *Friendship*, 205ff.). Benjamin remained convinced that his early metaphysics of language could securely ground his new theory of a pivotal anthropological category and human faculty, namely, a primordial and authentic mode of *mimesis*, whose sediments were to be found in language. Scholem, for his part, very much doubted that Benjamin's early theological language-magic could

coexist with a materialistic (Brechtian) theory of language committed to the very elimination of magic, or even with the work on history in progress in the *Arcades Project*. Scholem, impatient with what he considered to be Benjamin's "Janus face" (Scholem, *Friendship*, 209), had little understanding for the synchretic Judeo-Marxism that his friend, like Bloch, embraced, holding that a union between the two was impossible.

As his letters amply show, Benjamin never questioned the feasibility of a mediation between his earlier language philosophy and later style of dialectical materialism (*C*, 372) – though he readily admitted that the new study of mimesis was "perhaps a peculiar text" (*C*, 406). Language, Benjamin now declared, amounted to an "archive of nonsensuous similarities" and "nonsensuous correspondences" (*SW* II, 695, 722), the last resort of an original, primitive, more potent and encompassing human gift for mimesis. Bordering on the esoteric and occult, the study mined contemporary anthropological research on mimesis to disclose the quasi-religious experience of a world suffused with nonsensuous, spiritual similarities. Moving between anthropology and religion, Benjamin coupled his new theory of mimesis to Freud's idea of a phylogenetic telepathic mode of communication, preceding the origin of language (*GS* II.3, 953). At the same time, he claimed to have encountered the phenomenon of "nonsensuous similarity" in the *Zohar*, specially in "the manner in which [its author] considers the sound formations, and even more the script signs, as deposits of world connections," being careful to reject the *Zohar*'s view that such correspondences flowed forth from emanation rather than from a "mimetic origin" (*C*, 512). Perhaps the competing programs of these two sources – the more sober psychoanalysis, the spirited kabbalah – partially help to explain the striking discrepancies that existed between the earlier, longer version of the study – "Doctrine of the Similar" (Berlin, 1933) – and the revised, cut draft that Benjamin readied just a few months later on Ibiza, now labeled "On the Mimetic Faculty."[14] Where the first version unambiguously aligned itself with mystical and theological conceptions of language, the second proposed a more "naturalistic" account of the phenomenon – to use the felicitous term suggested by Schweppenhäuser and Tiedemann (*GS* II.3, 950). Blotting out references to mysticism, theology, and, crucially, the residue of magic in language, the later "On the Mimetic Faculty" ended with the statement that language's higher "level of mimetic behavior" had liquidated the earlier powers of magic (*SW* II, 722) – a position that may have reflected Benjamin's effort to come closer to Scheerbart's and Brecht's praxis of a pared-down, non-auratic language, stripped of all magic (*SW* II, 733).

Despite his dislike of Cassirer's neo-Kantian framework, Benjamin may well have taken note of his influential *Language and Myth* (1925), which

regarded metaphor to be the earliest concoction of a mythical thinking immersed in language, in other words, a mode of translation rooted in the power to generate similarity. Yet, the differences were considerable. Not only did Benjamin expand the scope of mimesis to the point where it acquired ontological dimensions, spelling a primeval, enchanted state of natural correspondences in which even objects were endowed with mimetic power; he also thoroughly revised his own initial negative appraisal of mimesis as an inauthentic mode of being, whose falseness formed the foil against which the purity of language earlier had acquired shape. Such earlier, sometimes covert, references to "bad" mimesis may have been informed by the Judaic prohibition against idolatry as well as the Platonic critique of mimesis in *The Republic*. The first significant work by Benjamin to break explicitly with this refusal of the mimetic was *The Origin of the German Tragic Drama*, whose study of allegory anticipates his theory of the dialectical image. For the first time, Benjamin here seriously weighed the dialectical relations between image and language, in advance of his later full-blown fascination with the image culture of photography and film. However, the mimesis study ventured even further since it proved willing to postulate a mimetic stage predating the acquisition of language. Freed of its negative Platonic connotations, the mimetic faculty was modeled on Aristotle's *Poetics*, which had isolated mimesis as a fundamental human activity. For humans to be endowed with the mimetic capacity meant that they possessed the ability not just to recognize (reception) but to produce similarities (spontaneity). Reworking his 1916 understanding of human reception as echoing, Benjamin now defined the world of natural correspondences as the "stimulants and awakeners of the mimetic capacity which answers them in man" ("Doctrine," *SW* II, 695).

Having an ontogenetic and phylogenetic history, mimesis, when studied according to the first perspective, could be seen to manifest itself in the everydayness of children's play, in keeping with Aristotle's observation that "from childhood it is instinctive in human beings to imitate."[15] Benjamin's autobiographical *Berlin Childhood Around 1900* offered up several examples from his own youth, while his adult collection of children's picture books sought to conserve the power of the mimetic illustrative image in the present. A phylogenetic account of mimesis, by contrast, uncovered the historical wear that had befallen the mimetic capacity, its frailty in the present, and the sparsity of magical correspondences – all in all a state that unfavorably distinguished moderns from ancient peoples. Once, the horoscope was not just a handy interpretive tool but also an astrological nexus that held together micro- and macrocosm, an experiential totality that mapped how the heavenly constellations were to be repeated and imitated

by individuals and collectives. Fundamentally, the diminished capacity of mimesis reflected a dulling of the perceptual apparatus, which increasingly became unable to perceive similarities announcing themselves immediately, instantaneously, flashing up in the moment of the *Nu* (now, instant). Only language, in fact, nothing more nor less than the highest manifestation of the mimetic genius, remained in the place of our earlier ability to recognize similarities among astral constellations and ourselves.

Up to a certain point, linguistic theory had always acknowledged language's mimetic capacity in onomatopoeia.[16] But Benjamin refused to take onomatopoeia merely in its empirical, philological sense, that is, as the sensuous imitation of a natural sound. Instead, he considerably expanded it, first of all, to include the registers of echo and rhyme, whose playful resounding of a more original language were central to *The Origin of the German Tragic Drama* and the Kraus essay (*Origin* 210; *SW* II, 451–54).[17] Benjamin did not stop there. Going further, his theory of similarity expanded onomatopoeia to include the nonsensuous similarities through which words of different languages were grouped around the same signified. What else, then, did Benjamin do here than implicitly reinterpret the 1921 translation essay on which he now projected the doctrine of similarity? What is more, to similarity at the level of sound needed to be added a nonsensuous similarity at the level of writing and script. Confirming that the most intriguing instance of a nonsensuous similarity was that between the written and the spoken, graphology uncovered the images, or picture puzzles, deposited in handwriting to be the repository of the unconscious. Original writing for Benjamin, then, was not the production of conventional signs but an ideographic activity, as the discussion of hieroglyphs in *The Origin of the German Tragic Drama* had already intimated. Just like spoken language, script itself was an archive of nonsensuous similarities or correspondences (on this aspect, see also Benjamin's fragment "Astrology," *SW* II, 684). Divination relinquished its power to the (non-mediate) medium of language, so that things were now present immanently, living as essences in language (a truth condensed in the Hebrew word *beth*, which was the "root" for "house," *SW* II, 696), waiting to be snapped up by the attentive glance of the studious reader. "Collecting [*herauslesen*: gathering, collecting, gleaning, extracting from] on the basis of similarity," Benjamin noted in a preliminary draft, was to be considered "the primal form of reading [*lesen*]" ("Antitheses Concerning Word and Name," *SW* II, 718; trans. modified). Whether profane or magical (as in astrology), reading was the gift that enabled the spirit to participate in another temporality, in which similarities flashed up out of the flood of things. Such acts of illumination required, however, that the mimetic come to appearance in and through language's semiotic, communicative side. Only in and

through the materiality of letters, the "magical function of the alphabet" ("Antitheses," *SW* II, 718), could the picture puzzle, or rebus, be rendered visible. This magical union of matter and spirit, or so, at least, "Doctrine of the Similar" seemed to suggest, was to correspond to the absorption of reading, a state in which the reader dwelt in, or literally (*wörtlich*) inhabited, a world of similarity through words. A "thought image" (*Denkbild*) from 1933 best captured the dynamics of this enchanted style of reading. In this image Benjamin linked the ability of children to treat words as "caverns, with the strangest corridors connecting them" to everyday acts of reading, when texts are read not for the meaning but "for the names and formulas that leap out of the text at the reader," "meaning" being "merely the background on which rests the shadow that they cast, like figures in relief." However, a second thread led to commentaries of sacred texts, for in their interpretation the student would "fix on particular words, as if they had been chosen according to the rules of the game," knowing that, in the end, they had been "assigned" to him as "as a task" ("Thought Figures," *SW* II, 726).

Weary, in the end, of the Platonic ban on mimesis, Benjamin thus developed a redemptive concept of imitation, which no longer had anything to do with the production of a "transportable" aesthetic copy snatched from an external object. Ultimately, our gift to see similarities proved the weak rudiment of a more "powerful compulsion to become similar and to behave mimetically" ("On the Mimetic Faculty," *SW* I, 720). Compelled by this forceful drive, the child Benjamin had acted out the word *Mummerehlen*, changing into the word he could not understand – an episode recounted in his memoirs, *Berlin Childhood*. Interested in the process of becoming and being one with the object world, Benjamin thus returned to the magical moment preceding the sharp division between object and subject in instrumental reason and technology.[18] It is this very attunement to a magical world that overwhelmed young Benjamin in *Berlin Childhood*, a vignette that allegorically illustrated how a radical alterity came to shape the subject.

Similar to Adorno's equally complex conception of a beneficial mimesis, Benjamin's theory described an encounter with the otherness of nature that preceded its melancholic stage of lamentation – a register of nature that wholly escaped the objectifying worldview of the natural sciences. It was this very interplay between mimetic *perception* and *(re)production* that Benjamin felt to constitute poetic experience (*Erfahrung*). Nothing less than the "impassioned cult of similarity" shaped the literary *intérieur* of the French mystic-writer of self-absorption, Marcel Proust, who, as an "aged child," proved "homesick for the world distorted in the state of similarity" ("On the Image of Proust," *SW* II, 239–40). If the Romantics were the

first to have comprehended that this state of similarity was the realm of *correspondances*, and if Baudelaire had most passionately conjured up their aura, then it was still only Proust who had succeeded in revealing these correspondences "in our lived life." His was "the work of *la mémoire involontaire*, the rejuvenating force which is a match for the inexorable process of aging" ("On the Image of Proust," *SW* II, 244). Only when gauged in the context of this intricate web of connections can one make sense of a puzzling line Benjamin jotted down in the early thirties: "Experience (*Erfahrung*) consists of lived similarities" ("Experience," *SW* II, 553; tran. modified). This gnomic statement, however, loses its air of mystery when it is linked to an entry from an early draft for the *Arcades Project*, in which Benjamin, musing about his own proper name, "W.B.," defined the name as the "realm of the similar," while similarity was the "organon of experience (*Erfahrung*)" (*Arcades*, 868). As "the object of mimesis," the name simultaneously brought together its bearer's past and future, as it both "preserves, but also marks out in advance" "the habitus of a lived life" (*Arcades*, 868). Finally, these various strands of reference all came together in the 1933 notes, "Antitheses Concerning Word and Name," which aimed to reconstruct the hidden pathways between the 1916 language theory and the doctrine of mimesis. Closing the circle, these notes looped back from language to the realm of auratic similarities, ending in a sublime theory of recollection: "Historically," Benjamin mused, "the fleeting appearance of similarity has the character of an anamnesis – that is to say, of a lost similarity, free from the tendency to become dissipated. This lost similarity, which existed in time, prevails in the Adamite spirit of language" ("Antitheses Concerning Word and Name," *SW* II, 718), that is, in the recollective power of the name. In the end, then, mimesis, or the recognition and production of sensuous and nonsensuous (language-based) similarities, required an altered mode of perception, not unlike the sensibility that marked the poet or theologian.

At once an allegorist and collector of language, Benjamin throughout the years of his research sought to set language free, reviving its original, productive, and poetic force. Conforming to the physiognomy of the collector, on display in the *Arcades Project*, he gathered unalloyed, unmined, pure specimens of language, hoping to avert language's reduction to a mere means of communication, the trafficking in worn-out coins, exploited for their exchange value – whether perpetrated by the jargon of neo-Kantianism or the empty slogans wielded by at least part of modernity's mass media culture. Conforming to the figure of the allegorist, however, Benjamin remained entangled in a double, dialectical relation to language: seeking to recapture some of its primeval meaning *(Sinn)* and symbolic nature, which he perused with the profundity of the melancholic brooder, he also recognized the

necessary alienating, defamiliarizing allegorical operations of language. The same duality, in the end, marked his proposals for an altered way of reading and for the observance of a swift tempo, able to seize the "critical moment" ("Doctrine," *SW* II, 698), something profane reading had in common with its older, magical variant. For, as his writings on language indubitably suggest, if language's reality required a style of reading that could cope with its interruptive, caesura-like force, it also called for another gift: the ability to recognize the flash of lightening, the magic of similarities and correspondences, in poetic, historical, and secular no less than in sacred texts.

NOTES

1. Benjamin proved indebted to Hamann's *Aesthetica in nuce*, subtitled "A Rhapsody in Kabbalistic Prose," as well as to his "Metakritik" of Kant. Important references by Benjamin to this anti-Enlightenment critic and philosopher can be found in "On Language" (*SW* I, 67, 70), and in "On the Program of the Coming Philosophy" (*SW* I, 108). An early positive appraisal of Mallarmé appears in the 1921 "The Task of the Translator: An Introduction to the Translation of Baudelaire's *Tableaux parisiens*" (*SW* I, 259), and in a 1925 fragment, "Reflections on Humboldt," which argued that the philologist [Humboldt], in distinction to Mallarmé, neglected "the magical side of language" (*SW* I, 424).

2. Benjamin discusses this change in the structure of experience in "Motifs," (*SW* IV, 313–14). The word used for experience here, *Erfahrung*, along with *Erlebnis*, which is close to yet distinct in meaning from *Erfarhung*, are key words running through all of Benjamin's thought. Among Benjamin's most important texts on the topic are "On the Program of the Coming Philosophy" (*SW* I, 100–10); "Experience" (1931 or 1932; *SW* II, 553); "Experience and Poverty" (1933; *SW* II, 731–36); "The Storyteller," and "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire" (*SW* III, 143–66 and *SW* IV, 313–55). For the English translator, the pair *Erfahrung* and *Erlebnis*, which both can be rendered by "experience," poses inordinate translation difficulties since there exists no corresponding English pair that captures the varying German connotations. In a note to a sentence from Benjamin's 1929 text, "The Return of the Flâneur," the Harvard edition proposes the following demarcation: *Erlebnis*, "a single, noteworthy experience"; *Erfahrung*, "'experience' in the sense of learning from life over an extended period" (*SW* II, 267n). Although appropriate in this context, the translation cannot be maintained in all instances. Often, for Benjamin, the term *Erlebnis* signaled a negative condition, the irrationalist "experience cult" of vitalism taken to task in section 1 of "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire." His earliest use of the term *Erfahrung* sought to uncover – in Nietzschean fashion – the "mask" of experience, often worn as a solace by elders and "spiritless philistines," who were blind to higher values that remained "inexperiencable" (see "Experience," *SW* I, 3–5). Subsequently, the term *Erfahrung* came to represent the attempt to retrieve a more authentic, non-scientific concept of experience, which would include "absolute experience" and the "experience of the Absolute." As such, it frequently appeared in conjunction with a heightened state of perception. Perhaps

the most helpful distinctions between the pair *Erfahrung* and *Erlebnis* emerge in "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire," where both were securely linked to Benjamin's theory of memory and where authentic *Erfahrung* was tantamount to the ability to countenance the auratic. *Erfahrung* in this context meant the conjunction between the individual past and the collective past.

3. On the anaesthetic in Benjamin, see Susan Buck-Morss, "Aesthetics and Anaesthetics: Walter Benjamin's Artwork Essay Reconsidered," in *October* 62 (Fall 1992), 3–41. For an early study of Benjamin's language-magic, see Winfried Menninghaus, *Walter Benjamins Theorie der Sprachmagie* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1980); see also Richard Wollin, *Walter Benjamin: An Aesthetic of Redemption* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1994), 29–77.

4. The term "mystical terminology" was coined by A. W. Schlegel in a letter to Schleiermacher to describe how his brother's genius was "concentrated" in "self-coined phrases." Using the term positively, not just for Friedrich Schlegel but also for Novalis, Benjamin saw it as the Romantic attempt to acquire a "noneidetic intuition of the system" in language (*Concept of Criticism*, *SW* I, 139–40).

5. *Zohar, The Book of Splendor: Basic Readings from the Kabbalah*, ed. Gershom Scholem (New York: Schocken Books, 1977), *passim*.

6. The figure of the caesura not only structured Benjamin's Hölderlin essay, *SW* I, 18–36, but played an equally cardinal role in his "Goethe's *Elective Affinities*," *SW* I, 297–360.

7. In what follows, Benjamin's "geistig" and "Geist" are rendered as "spiritual" (instead of "mental") and "spirit" (instead of "mind," suggested by the extant translations of the essay).

8. "On Language," *SW* I, 62. Benjamin's early writings seem strewn with caveats not to read his statements metaphorically instead of literally. See, for example, "The Task of the Translator," *SW* I, 254, discussed below. However, by no means does it follow from this that he rejected metaphor *as such*, as is clear, for example, from his correspondence with the Austrian writer Hofmannsthal (*C*, 286), which offered a raving appraisal of Proust's use of metaphor in "A propos du style de Flaubert." See also *GBr* III, 116, where Benjamin lauded the virtues of literary metaphor in reply to a now lost text by Hofmannsthal about "Gleichnisse."

9. The words Benjamin uses here, "*Gleichheits- und Ähnlichkeitsbezirke*," indicate external or abstract similarities. Here, Benjamin still deployed the word "similarity" (*Ähnlichkeit*) negatively, a practice far removed from his later texts, "On the Mimetic Faculty," and "Doctrine of the Similar" (discussed below).

10. J. G. Hamann, "*Aesthetica in Nuce*," in *German Aesthetic and Literary Criticism*, ed. H. B. Nisbet (Cambridge University Press, 1985), 141; trans. modified.

11. Benjamin's use of the German "Sprachgeist" also makes use to the Latin, *spiritus*, and the Greek, *pneuma*. For a clear discussion of the differences between these various terms, see Jacques Derrida, *Of Spirit: Heidegger and the Question* (University of Chicago Press, 1989).

12. Another fragment from 1920–21, "Language and Logic" (*SW* I, 272–75), fine-tuned this initial position. This short text went against the mystics' view that the "degeneration of the true language" defied a "primordial and God-willed unity," ending in its "dissolution into many languages" (*SW* I, 273). Instead, the multiplicity of languages was to be comprehended as a "multiplicity of essences,"

while postlapsarian "degeneracy" meant a decrease in "the integral power to rule." The original language expressed itself in harmony through the multiplicity of spoken languages, so that its power was infinitely greater than that of any singular, individual language.

13. Gershom Scholem, "Walter Benjamin and his Angel," in *On Walter Benjamin*, ed. Gary Smith (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1988), 84.

14. The text "Doctrine of the Similar" was retained in a notebook from the years 1931 to 1933, which included versions of the mystical "Agesilaus Santander," also written on Ibiza. Faced with the horrors of National Socialism, Benjamin here reflected on the significance of the Jewish practice to give children secret names. See Gershom Scholem's account in "Walter Benjamin and His Angel," 55, as well as an early entry about Walter Benjamin's name from the *Arcades Project* (*Arcades*, 868; Q°, 24), discussed below.

15. *Aristotle's Poetics*, ed. James Hutton (New York: Norton, 1982), 47.

16. Citing Rudolf Leonhard approvingly, for whom every word not to mention the whole of language was onomatopoetic ("Doctrine," *SW* II, 696), Benjamin in fact pursued his earlier discussion of onomatopoeia in *The Origin of the German Tragic Drama* (*Origin*, 204) and the 1931 Kraus essay. He also reconsidered the issue in a long review essay on language sociology commissioned by the Institute for Social Research. Mostly a dry, reproductive account of prevailing research in the area, which was to earn him Brecht's warm approval, the essay ended on a lively, enthusiastic note, attesting to Benjamin's fascination with a non-linguistic, mimetic, and corporeal mode of expression that also fueled his admiration for Klages's dubitable science of graphology ("Graphology Old and New," *SW* II, 398–400).

17. For a more detailed interpretation of the Kraus essay, see my *Walter Benjamin's Other History: Of Stones, Animals, Human Beings, and Angels* (London, Berkeley, and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1998), 114ff.

18. My reading here is indebted to Michael Weller's "Imitating Truth: Mimesis in Adorno's *Ästhetische Theorie*" (2001 Harvard University thesis). For further study of the dialectic of mimesis, the reader is referred to Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *The Dialectic of Englightenment*, trans. John Cumming (New York: Continuum, 1991).