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in the Early Walter Benjamin**

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# Thinking Before Totality: *Kritik, Übersetzung*, and the Language of Interpretation in the Early Walter Benjamin



*Thomas Pfau*

Es ist gleich tödlich für den Geist ein System zu haben und keins zu haben. Er wird sich also entschliessen müssen, beides zu verbinden.<sup>1</sup>

## I

Walter Benjamin's early writings, mostly comprised of shorter essays, can undoubtedly be considered one of the least well understood productions within 20th century critical thought. Written between 1913 and 1922, these shorter pieces display a vast thematic range. Beginning with an essay on two poems by Hölderlin, short sketches on Socrates, the Middle Ages and on ancient man, Benjamin eventually moves on to two more developed essays, the first entitled "On Language as Such and on the Language of Man," the second being "On the Program of the Coming Philosophy." Even by 1918, when Benjamin is already writing his dissertation, his thought still seems conspicuously diverse and discontinuous, as though he was in search of an ideal topic, an "ultimate" issue. Besides placing greater emphasis on Benjamin's later work, most of the criticism on Benjamin has attempted to cope with the thematic diversity of his earlier works by reading the respective essays as the expression of a theological or "metaphysical" phase, thus implementing a strong division between this period and the later,

“Marxist” phase of Benjamin. In particular, interpreters have inclined to read the early Benjamin within a religious (Wolin), a religious-metaphysical (Roberts), Hegelian (Adorno), a neo-positivist (Wiesenthal) matrix or as an unwitting predecessor of modern structuralist thinking (Menninghaus).<sup>2</sup> Ostensibly puzzled by the thematic diversity which Benjamin displays throughout his early writings, most critics have understood it as their task to establish the one, systematic concern that underlies all of these essays. Scholem’s and Tiedemann’s decision to unite Benjamin’s early essays under the title of *Metaphysisch-geschichtsphilosophische Studien* may have contributed to the assumption of a convergence between the historical development and the latent systematicity of Benjamin’s work which characterizes many of his present interpreters.

The conception of “metaphysics” as a discourse preoccupied with the ultimate systematicity, universality and identity of the historical inevitably returns us to Hegel whose name, both positively and negatively, is frequently invoked in critical accounts of Benjamin’s thought. The question arises whether it may be necessary or even possible to prevent the Hegelian concept of history and interpretation from already reinscribing itself within a systematic interpretation of Benjamin before it ever gets under way. To put it more positively, through what paradigm can we effectively reopen the question concerning the nature of Benjamin’s early thought without presupposing already the Hegelian topos of the speculative identity of the historical and the systematic, the particular and the universal, etc.? At the very least, such questions suggest that Hegel’s metaphysics prove relevant to the early Benjamin not as a mere “device” through which one might seek to “debunk” the latter’s often insightful interpreters; such would be gratuitous with regard to Hegel as well as to Benjamin’s readers. Instead, a reading of the early Benjamin will first have to take cognizance of the fact that a number of Hegel’s key-concepts (specifically those of *Geschichte*, *Begriff*, *Idee*, and the notion of a totality) do indeed also constitute the conceptual frame of Benjamin’s early writings.

According to Hegel, philosophical discourse itself exhibits the speculative identity of the historical and systematic in its binary structure, namely, by unfolding first as the narrative of its own becoming (*Phänomenologie*) and subsequently as its fully structured presence (*Logik*).<sup>3</sup> As Hegel observes in his introduction to the *Enzyklopädie der Philosophischen Wissenschaften* (1817), the history of philosophy demonstrates “daß die besonderen *Prinzipien*, deren

eines einem System zugrunde lag, nur *Zweige* eines und desselben Ganzen sind. Die der Zeit nach letzte Philosophie ist das Resultat aller vorhergehenden Philosophien und muß daher die Prinzipien aller enthalten."<sup>4</sup>

As is well known, for Hegel the historical and the systematic disclose their essential identity through the progressive self-explication of consciousness as its own totality. Now, as Charles Taylor has argued, it is specifically the duplicitous modality of expression which, for Hegel, facilitates the sublation of the historical and particular element into a universal and systematic conception.<sup>5</sup> Already at the beginning of Hegel's *Phänomenologie*, this capacity of expression to mediate consciousness with itself as its *own* (and improved) *other* emerges quite explicitly when the referential function of language (*das Meinen*) is generally put into question:

Die Sprache aber ist, wie wir sehen, das Wahrhaftere; in ihr widerlegen wir selbst unmittelbar unsere *Meinung*, und da das Allgemeine das Wahre der sinnlichen Gewissheit ist, so ist es gar nicht möglich, daß wir ein sinnliches Sein, das wir meinen, je sagen können.<sup>6</sup>

If indeed Hegel's metaphysics are characterized by a dialectical absolution of natural consciousness from the concretely phenomenal—what Benjamin might refer to as the “profane” realm of history—such an absolution proves to be essentially facilitated by the more truthful nature of language (*das Wahrhaftere*). For in subverting any assimilation to traditional models of referentiality, language effectively “teaches” to natural consciousness the lesson that only an intensive, meta-historical and non-referential mode of expression can be adequate to the universality and totality that characterizes the “Absolute Knowledge” at the end of Hegel's phenomenological movement.

However, with its essentially aporetic relation to an assumed phenomenal order of being, language not only parallels but, as the container invoked by and for all “*Sinnliche Gewissheit*,” it *structurally anticipates* the eventual self-absolution of Hegel's natural consciousness from any exterior conception of being. Language, then, reveals itself as the site of crisis and despair (*Verzweiflung*) where consciousness may separate (Gr. *krinein*) itself from its previous self. Expression (*Ausserung*), however, is not merely a divestment (*Entäusserung*) of inadequate meanings (*das Meinen*), for its implicitly provides the natural consciousness with the parameter (*Masstab*) through which the former can revise its own self-concep-

tion.<sup>7</sup> This capacity of natural consciousness to read itself in its expressions, and thus to render productive the very experience of its (semantic) failure, constitutes the core of Hegel's theory of absolute reflection. Glancing ahead toward Benjamin's early work, a form of negation appears in the ninth thesis on the concept of history, yet here it is presented through the ironic image of a "pile of debris" that constitutes all we ever know about "progress." The question arises as to why, for Benjamin, an experience of negation no longer permits its being read for speculative ends. To employ the images of Hegel and Benjamin: why can natural consciousness convert its expressive failure (*Entäusserung*) into a "return (*Rückkehr*) into itself" whereas the *Angelus Novus* in Benjamin's image of history is impelled by a force that decisively forestalls any sublation of the historical "pile of debris" into a reflective determination of its own truth (*Wahrheit*)? What makes negation readable for Hegel but not for Benjamin?

The central function of expression within Hegel's theory of speculative reflection suggests that an answer to the above questions will have to consider Hegel's and Benjamin's respective semiological theories. For if the subject of Hegel's *Phänomenologie* is to recognize the other of a negation (e.g., a failure of referentiality) as its own other, what Hegel calls the "negation of the negation," there still is need of a criterion by means of which self and other can be identified as the self-same. That is, the successful "divestment" (*Entäussern*) of natural consciousness from itself and its "return (*Rückkehr*) into itself"—*qua* reading the other as its own other, and thus as itself—presupposes the essential compatibility of linguistic expression and intelligence. In the section of the *Enzyklopädie* entitled "Psychologie," Hegel seeks to demonstrate precisely this commensurability of consciousness or intelligence with expression. According to Hegel, the semiological import of expression does not prevent the latter from partaking of the same interiority as consciousness, for the very material aspect of expression is eroded in a movement analogous to that of the natural consciousness itself: "Die wahrhafte, konkrete Negativität des Sprachzeichens ist aber die Intelligenz, weil durch dieselbe jenes aus einem Äusserlichen in ein Innerliches verändert und in dieser umgestalteten Form aufbewahrt wird."<sup>8</sup>

On the level of particular representations (*Vorstellungen*), the image (*Bild*) proves superior to mere intuition (*Anschaung*) in that it is already "arbitrary and random" (*willkürlich oder zufällig*) from

the specific circumstances of intuition.<sup>9</sup> The agenda of Hegel's semiology surface with great clarity when Hegel points out that the image still does not reach the realm of general representations: "Aber zunächst hat [das Bild] *noch keine Homogenität mit mir*, denn es ist noch nicht gedacht, noch nicht in die Form der Vernünftigkeit erhoben."<sup>10</sup> Such homogeneity is attained only in the forms of symbol and sign. For if "universal representation is the interior" (*das Innerliche*) while the image is the exterior (*das Äusserliche*), then the "truch of both sides will thus be their unity" (*Die Wahrheit der beiden Seiten ist daher die Einheit derselben.*)<sup>11</sup>

The commensurability of the linguistic with intelligence is thus evinced through the progressive erosion of the signifiers' material condition. Since this erosion is not an intentional operation of natural consciousness but rather an inevitable corollary of the latter's movements, it is understood as the effect of what Hegel calls the "logical instinct."<sup>12</sup> The latent interiority of all signification manifests itself particularly in reading and in writing. Thus the superiority of alphabetical writing over the Egyptian hieroglyphs reaches its paradoxical height when, due to extensive routine, we can read alphabetical writing without paying any attention to these letters' material, phonetic import. Such a reading and writing of the letter, forgetful of all material aspects of the letter, Hegel metaphorizes as a "hieroglyphic reading" (*das hieroglyphische Lesen*), calling it also "a deaf reading and a mute writing" (*ein taubes Lesen und ein stummes Schreiben*).<sup>13</sup>

As shall be seen, the later Benjamin's acute sensitivity to the material conditions of all interpretation surfaces already in his reflections on the "name" and on the "expressionless" (*das Ausdruckslose*). For Hegel, both the name and the expressionless hold only a negative function within the plot of his semiological narrative. Thus names are simply *sinnlose Äusserlichkeiten* that can be remitted to an order of sense only by the sign. Likewise, the "expressionless" can attain significance only as a negative factor, as *das Unaussprechliche*, which "in truth, [is] only something obscure, fermenting" (*etwas Trübes, Gärendes*).<sup>14</sup> Hegel's speculative fusion of the historical and systematic, then, hinges on reflexive determinations (*Reflexionsbestimmungen*) that, because of their increasingly spiritualized form of signification, permit natural consciousness to read the negation of its originary meaning as the prospective site of its own truth. Yet, as is suggested by the paradoxical reinstating of the hieroglyph, to view language as "the child and instrument of intelli-

gence,” assumes that the linguistic and intelligence are structurally cognate, a premise which Hegel attempts to support in a semiological narrative that repeats again and again the story of a progressive forgetting of the material aspect of all representation (*Vorstellung*).

The question becomes whether Benjamin’s notions of the name and the expressionless are merely a “defective, vague, superficial thinking” as Hegel claims. Or is, perhaps, *das Ausdruckslose* an attempt to think—from another, non-totalizing vantagepoint—the very negative that relentlessly forces Hegel’s semiology to discredit all excessive presence (e.g., the materiality of the name) and all unexpressed absence (*das Ausdruckslose*) as merely “defective, vague and superficial” (*mangelhaft, unbestimmt, gehaltlos*). To begin answering such questions, a reading of Benjamin’s early essays must be receptive to a possible other, *non-totalizing relation between the historical and the systematic*, between concept and idea or, as Benjamin’s distinction goes, between the “sacred” and the “profane.” The relevance of Hegel’s speculative dialectics for the question of Benjamin’s “metaphysics” thus precludes any mere identification or opposition (whose very unity speculative reflection purports to exhibit) of the early Benjamin’s thinking with Hegel’s dialectics—a speculation which is also not warranted by the early Benjamin’s biography.<sup>15</sup>

Both for Hegel and Benjamin, the minimal condition for any relation, such as that of the subject to alterity and to the historical in general proves to be a linguistic one. Whether or not alterity and history, the “negations” of the subject, are properly readable and thus capable of sublation into an order of interiority depends on whether the medium of their presentation, language, is by definition commensurate with this interiority. The question, then, becomes what, if anything, may set apart Benjamin’s conception of critical thinking from Hegel’s, and to what extent does Benjamin’s (possibly non-speculative) conception of language allow him to think the relation of subject and history in a non-totalizing manner. The subsequent remarks will therefore address Benjamin’s two privileged relations of the subject to language and, by extension, to the historical in general. At stake is the practice of criticism (*Kritik*) and of translation (*Übersetzung*). At the risk of an all-too quick fragmentation of possible systematic intentions on Benjamin’s part, the following remarks will have to be limited to Benjamin’s dissertation on the concept of German aesthetic criti-

cism during the Romantic epoch (1918/1919) and to his essay “Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers” (1921).

## II

Benjamin’s dissertation bears the title *Der Begriff der Kunstkritik in der deutschen Romantik*. Like several other essays of Benjamin, this work centers around a concept. Romantic aesthetic criticism is at stake as a philosophical concept and not as a purely historical and extra-linguistic phenomenon. Benjamin intends to situate this concept within a “historico-paradigmatic” (*problemgeschichtlicher*) horizon which he distinguishes sharply from any “historico-philosophical” (*geschichtsphilosophischer*) conception. According to Benjamin, the latter assumes that all philosophical debates ultimately develop the same problem. “Es wird . . . nicht der oft mit unzureichenden Mitteln unternommene Versuch gemacht, das historische Wesen der Romantik darzustellen; mit anderen Worten: die geschichtsphilosophische Fragestellung bleibt aus dem Spiel (*BK*, 12).” However, as regards the historico-paradigmatic status of Romantic aesthetic criticism, Benjamin almost immediately suggests that “dieser Gesichtspunkt dürfte in dem romantischen Messianismus zu suchen sein” (*BK*, 12).

With this remark, Benjamin implies that Romantic aesthetic criticism partakes of a higher order, namely, that of “Romantic Messianism.” Considering that both Novalis and Schlegel ended, in Nietzsche’s words, “as all Romantics end, namely, as Christians,” Benjamin’s placement of the Romantic concept of *Kritik* within the historico-paradigmatic frame of Messianism strikes one as somewhat arbitrary and, perhaps, idiosyncratic.<sup>16</sup> Yet in light of his main thesis—“Für die Romantiker ist Kritik viel weniger die Beurteilung eines Werkes als die Methode seiner Vollendung” (*BK*, 69)—Benjamin’s introduction of Romantic Messianism as a historical paradigm bears a rather unusual structural resemblance to such a “completion” (*Vollendung*). Considering the slim philological evidence of such Messianism among the Romantics (the quote from Schlegel is rather forcedly interpreted), Benjamin himself complements the object of his analysis according to its own intrinsic structure.<sup>17</sup> The Romantic concept of *Kritik* is removed from its liminal position between pantheistic and outrightly Christian notions and aligned with the “historical paradigm” of Messianism. In this sense, Benjamin’s analysis of the Romantic concept

of art-criticism bears considerable structural affinities to its very object of investigation. In a movement analogous to that of the Romantic *Kritik*, as he has analyzed it, Benjamin himself complements and thus, in a sense yet to be determined, sublates the Romantics' own understanding of criticism.

If Benjamin's criticism—like that of the Romantics—involves essentially the intensification and thus the completion of a given structure—a work of art, but also religious and socio-political phenomena, etc.—we may have to return to the first term of his book, that of the “concept” in order to demarcate their potential differences. As Hegel's phenomenology of the natural consciousness and its “ordinary language” suggests, a focus on Benjamin's use of the word “concept” (*Begriff*) is more than a haphazard solution; for the relation of any interpretive act to the historical is essentially determined and validated by its mode of conceptualization. In the present context, then, the question of Benjamin's relation to metaphysics requires the clarification of whether the *concept* of art-criticism is only assessed as a paradigm within the historical frame of the Romantic movement or whether Benjamin's notion of “Messianism” constitutes an attempt to situate the Romantic theory of art-criticism within a *historico-philosophical* horizon after all. Does Benjamin seek to analyze art-criticism *as* a (historical) concept or criticize it *qua* a concept (“Messianism”) of his own? It is in his section entitled “System und Begriff,” that Benjamin addresses precisely this question when saving Friedrich Schlegel from the “mysticism of an intellectual intuition:”

Was insbesondere die intellektuelle Anschauung betrifft, so ist Schlegel's Denkweise im Gegensatz zu derjenigen vieler Mystiker ausgezeichnet durch Indifferenz gegen Anschaulichkeit; er beruft sich nicht auf intellektuelle Anschauungen und entrückte Zustände. Vielmehr sucht er, um es in eine Formel zusammenzufassen, eine unanschauliche Intuition des Systems, und er findet sie in der Sprache. Die Terminologie ist die Sphäre, in welcher jenseits von Diskursivität und Anschaulichkeit sich sein Denken bewegt. Denn der Terminus, der Begriff enthielt für ihn den *Keim des Systems*, war im Grunde nichts anderes als ein präformiertes System selbst. (*BK*, 47; italics mine)

At least for the Romantics, criticism occurs on the level of the conceptual; more precisely, it is the concept which delineates the intensive totality of that system toward which art-criticism as a form of reflexivity is moving. “Die Reflexion ist der intentionale Akt absoluter Erfassung des Systems und die adäquate Aus-

drucksform dieses Aktes ist der Begriff" (*BK*, 47). This concept indeed differs very little from the proper "name" or the act of "naming" through which—as Benjamin argues in his earlier essay "Über die Sprache überhaupt und über die Sprache des Menschen"—man echoes the convergence of creation and word by God.<sup>18</sup> Thus he quotes Novalis, "Mehrere Namen sind einer Idee vorteilhaft" (*BK*, 48), and A. W. Schlegel, "selbstgeprägte Wörter [gelingen] besser als Fragmente" (*BK*, 47). The concept or the proper name is—and this metaphor will recur in his essay on the translator—the "pollen of the system." At the same time, Benjamin's parenthesis, "um es *in eine Formel* zusammenzufassen," once again imitates the very form that he is analyzing. Frequently homologous to its very object, Benjamin's analysis of the Romantic concept of art-criticism seems perturbingly reminiscent of rather traditional metaphysical thinking; his dissertation thus appears to propose a triadic scheme which, at first glance, would offer little more than a vulgarized Hegelianism:

Idea  
 Concept / System  
 The Profane: Works of Art, Nature, etc.

In characterizing *Kritik* as an intensification of finite and "profane" structures toward an order of ideality, a process for which the concept proves the essential medium (the "pollen of a system"), Benjamin repeatedly reminds us that the Romantics were keenly aware of the impossibility of grounding this system/concept in any "ontology" of the absolute or, at least, of an absolute presence. According to Benjamin, only Fichte had attempted such a grounding with his notion of an "intellectual intuition." Instead, *the Romantics recast the very relation between any system and its concept as an intrinsically contingent one*, for any relation between the conceptual and the systematic is always already determined by an irreducible individuality: "Im Begriff allein kann auch die individuelle Natur . . . zum Ausdruck gelangen" (*BK*, 48). Benjamin's sympathies with the Romantics are stated emphatically as he observes: "Unübertrefflich charakterisiert [Schlegel] diese Idee absoluten Erfassens des Systems mit der Frage: 'Sind nicht alle Systeme Individuen?' " (*BK*, 46). The proclaimed strict priority of an individuality over any systematic considerations, which Benjamin finds and endorses in the Romantics, also leads him to restate the relation between the conceptual and the systematic as a mystical one: "*Mystische Terminologie*

... ist der Versuch, das System beim Namen zu nennen, d.h. in einem mystischen individuellen Begriff so zu erfassen, daß die systematischen Zusammenhänge in ihm inbegriffen sind" (*BK*, 49).<sup>19</sup> Whereas in Hegel, all individuality is systematized by progressively sublating the totality of its positions, for Benjamin the system is individualized due to his radically different view of the conceptual.

Curiously enough, it is again through the figure of the hieroglyph that Benjamin—following Elkuß—can express his understanding of the conceptual. Among these "hieroglyphic expressions" Benjamin lists the concepts of *Transzendentalpoesie*, *Ironie*, *Arabeske*, yet also those of "the Romantic" and the concept of *Kritik* itself. As we saw earlier, for Hegel, the hieroglyph can surface only in relation to sense (*Sinn*) and its designated beneficiary, *Intelligenz*. Thus the original hieroglyph remains deficient due to its excess of materiality, yet conversely the superior alphabetic system will culminate in what Hegel calls a "hieroglyphic reading," a reading which effectively obliterates any residual phonetic affiliations of the alphabetic script. Yet for Benjamin, the hieroglyph does not qualify the relation between the conceptual and the systematic (Hegel's *Sinn*) but, *qua* metaphor, it points to the irreducible contingency of any such relation on an individuality that—like the metaphor of the hieroglyph itself—remains radically outside of such *Sinn*.<sup>20</sup> Not surprisingly, then, Benjamin mentions the concept of irony as one instance of this contingency which, perhaps, not even Hegel's speculative *logos* may be able to recuperate.

As Benjamin notes, the individual, onomastic and essentially mystic quality of the Romantic concept also impairs the reach of the systematic concerns which it seeks to express. Thus he observes how Schlegel had "systematic intentions" that were not "unfolded" as a system (*BK*, 47). In contrast to Hegel's derisive comments on this matter in the *Aesthetics*,<sup>21</sup> Benjamin, like the Romantics, validates precisely a form of conceptualization which states at once the necessity of a system and its impossibility (cf. epigraph). Quoting two aphorisms by Schlegel, Benjamin shows that a consequence of such mysticism is a certain loss, even an outright denial of a system's "communicability" (*Mittelbarkeit*, *BK*, 46) and he concludes: "In diesem Sinne haben die Romantiker unter dem Namen der Kritik zugleich die unausweichliche Unzulänglichkeit ihrer Bemühungen *eingestanden*" (*BK*, 52; italics mine).

Criticism, naming and conceptualization constitute what, in preparation for his doctoral work, Benjamin had tentatively called

an “infinite task,” and thus they remain enclosed by the irreducible horizon of history.<sup>22</sup> “Und aus diesem Grunde,” Benjamin comments, “ist denn auch diese Arbeit nicht Wiedergabe einer romantischen Theorie der Kunstkritik, sondern die Analysis ihres Begriffs” (*BK*, 50). Criticism intensifies its objects within the non-intuitive dimension of the concept, regardless of whether this intensification is understood as an “accumulation of consciousness,” as for the Romantics, or whether it enriches the realm of language, as Benjamin suggests. In either case, the inherent mysticism and lack of “communicability” of the concept forestalls the completion of any systematic “tendencies” or “intentions” on the part of *Kritik*. “Die Bewusstseinssteigerung in der Kritik ist also prinzipiell unendlich” (*BK*, 68). As the focal point of all *Kritik*, the idea can never lay claim to an “absolute knowledge,” for the relation between the idea and its corresponding concept is systematic only with respect to the individuality by which it was set forth. And it is this contingent and strictly individual denomination of “system and concept” in a *mystische Terminologie* which also prevents the language of Romantic *Kunstkritik* from being read for speculative ends, that is, from sublating the “profane,” the historical, and individual consciousness into an order of absolute knowledge and systematicity.

To the extent that criticism consists of the progressive intensification of the idea, itself the “essence” of the profane, criticism and its system(s) can still be seen as retaining a metaphysical, indeed a teleological structure. However, this metaphysical element is deformed, even displaced in that the idea itself can never be decisively set into a relation, positively or negatively, to *truth*. In order to characterize the exact relation between the idea and an as yet unspecified and possibly absent ontology in Benjamin’s thought, we may now turn to his essay on the translator. For it is in the interpretive act of translation, an alternate form of mediating the profane and the ideas, that language itself—which for Benjamin means a concept *qua* name—experiences a significant transformation.

### III

*Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers* elaborates on the second form which the mediation of the profane may take: translation.<sup>23</sup> Unlike in his dissertation, Benjamin in this essay does not make any effort to

shroud his intention of a "true doctrine" in the form of an academic analysis.<sup>24</sup> Furthermore, translation differs from both, the Romantics' and Benjamin's concept of criticism in that it does not merely analyze a certain progressive relation between the profane, the concept and the idea. Instead, it concerns specifically the relation between the latter two. Translation is thus understood as the "survival" (*Überleben*) of the original, and Benjamin defends his placement of works of art within a certain paradigm of life by saying:

Vielmehr nur wenn allem demjenigen, wovon es Geschichte gibt und was nicht allein ihr Schauplatz ist, Leben zuerkannt wird, kommt dessen Begriff zu seinem Recht. Denn von der Geschichte, nicht von der Natur aus, geschweige denn von so schwankender wie Empfindung und Seele, ist zuletzt der Umkreis des Lebens zu bestimmen.

(AÜ, 11)

An essay on translation postulating that nothing can ever transcend the horizon of history faces the problem that even its most central issue, the relation between individual languages, could not be removed from this limitation: "Worin kann die Verwandtschaft zweier Sprachen, abgesehen von einer historischen, gesucht werden?" (AÜ, 13). Benjamin here introduces the distinction between an *Intention des Gemeinten* and the *Art des Meinens* (AÜ, 14). The *Intention* itself is twofold, appearing once as the poet's "naive, erste, anschauliche," whereas the translator has "eine abgeleitete, letzte, ideenhafte Intention" (AÜ, 16). A good translation, then, will not attempt an "inaccurate transmission of an inessential content" (*ungenau Übermittlung eines unwesentlichen Inhalts*, AÜ, 9). Instead, it depicts "wie das Gemeinte an die Art des Meinens in dem bestimmten Worte gebunden ist" (AÜ, 17). Consequently, Benjamin observes, the "transhistorical affinity" (*überhistorische Verwandtschaft*) of languages consists of a shared semantic intention which, however, is only conceivable as a cumulative totality (*Allheit*) of these languages. Such a totality Benjamin calls "the pure language" (*die reine Sprache*, AÜ, 13).

Every translation thus complements the language of its original by relating the latter's semantic intent to the transhistorical idea of a "form of signification" (*Art des Meinens*). Again, Benjamin's distinction appears conspicuously Hegelian, for the teleological movement of translation toward a "pure language" rests on the dismissal of the original's referential function (*Intention vom Gemeinten*) which is being compared to a more universal *form* of in-

telligence (*Art des Meinens*). Indeed, a complete mediation of these two poles would have to yield some systematic and universal sense. Yet while translation “does not deny its direction toward an ultimate, final and decisive stage of all language-relations (*Sprachführung*),” Benjamin also notes that it can merely anticipate this “realm of reconciliation and redemption of all languages” (AÜ, 15f.). Concerned with the “Ausdruck des innersten Verhältnisses der Sprachen zueinander,” translation

kann dieses verborgene Verhältnis unmöglich offenbaren, unmöglich herstellen; aber darstellen, indem sie es *keimhaft* oder *intensiv* verwirklicht, kann sie es. Und zwar ist diese Darstellung eines Bedeuteten durch den Versuch, den Keim seiner Herstellung ein ganz eigentümlicher Darstellungsmodus, wie er im Bereich des sprachlichen Lebens kaum angetroffen werden mag. Denn dieses kennt in Analogien und Zeichen andere Typen der Hindeutung, als die intensive, d.h. vorgehende, andeutende Verwirklichung. (AÜ, 12)

This irreducible hiatus between all translation and the “pure language” which it seeks to anticipate, Benjamin now foregrounds as the “essential core” (*wesenhafte Kern*, AÜ, 56) of all translation. It is that in translation “was an ihr selbst nicht übersetzbar ist,” and as Benjamin notes, there remains “in aller Sprache und ihren Gebilden ausser dem Mitteilbaren ein Nicht-Mitteilbares” (AÜ, 19). Due to this residual, ineffable aspect of all translation its teleological movement toward a “pure language” can only occur in a space that remains radically outside Hegel’s speculative economy of sense and non-sense. For the ineffable is not simply a negative concept, such as Hegel’s redefinition of it as *das Nicht-Mitteilbare* would imply. On the contrary, this seemingly negative and deficient aspect constitutes the “essential core” of translation because it prefigures a positive ineffability on the part of “pure language” itself. Thus Benjamin can state that in “this pure language, which no longer means anything nor expresses anything,” the word is “an expressionless, creative” one (*ausdrucksloses und schöpferisches Wort*, AÜ, 19).

It is also in this context, that the concept of translation is linked to that of Romantic irony, since the former “verpflanzt das Original in einen wenigstens insofern—ironisch—endgültigeren Sprachbereich” (AÜ, 15).<sup>25</sup> The comparative “endgültigeren” and the choice of “ironisch” underscore the strictly finite, historical status of any translation. Being irreducibly deficient in the “form of its signification,” that is, partaking of the finite and historical “Schuldzusammenhang des Lebendigen,” translation, too, belongs

to the order of fate; hence it is a task (*Aufgabe*). The intensive anticipation of the “pure language,” however, occurs only if translation remains aware of its inherently fragmentary status. Thus Benjamin suggests that translation must “liebend vielmehr und bis ins Einzelne hinein dessen [des Originals] Art des Meinens in der eigenen Sprache sich an bilden, um so beide wie Scherben als Bruchstück eines Gefäßes, als Bruchstück einer grösseren Sprache erkennbar zu machen” (*AÜ*, 18). The idea, through which translation and *Kritik* reconstitute and intensify profane structures, still remains strictly historical. Although it is intensively anticipated by the ideas, such a totality cannot efface its fragmentary nature. The potsherds of the vase, like the historical “pile of debris” that Benjamin mentions in the ninth thesis on the concept of history, remind the interpreting subject, translator and critic alike, of the irreducibly historical, individual, and non-totalizing status of their ideas:

Wenn aber diese [Sprachen] derart bis ans messianische Ende ihrer Geschichte wachsen, so ist es die Übersetzung, welche am ewigen Fortleben der Werke und am unendlichen Aufleben der Sprachen sich entzündet, immer von neuem *die Probe auf jenes heilige Wachstum* der Sprachen zu machen: wie weit ihr Verborgenes von der Offenbarung entfernt sei, wie gegenwärtig es im Wissen um diese Entfernung werden mag. (*AÜ*, 14).

The uncovering of the idea within the original by way of translation is merely a *testing* of the “holy growth” of languages. Only the messianic end of history alone can reveal whether the idea, which translation expresses “wie ein Königsmantel in weiten Falten,” did indeed come close to this revelation. It is here, that the analysis of Benjamin’s relation to a metaphysics of history has to be most incisive. Even more than criticism, translation condensates or intensifies the significance or idea which is intrinsic to the order of the profane. For Benjamin, the profane involves works of art as well as natural or socio-political phenomena; it is radically historical and finite. However, it is criticizable and/or translatable. *Übersetzbarkeit* and *Kritisierbarkeit* are immanent in the finite; and because the finite does not exhaust itself in its mere existence but, like life, contains the imperative of survival, prolongation, interpretation forms an integral part of these structures. Rather than being a mere “option” for a given individual, translation and criticism present themselves as “tasks” that root in the very structure and presence of their respective originals. They effect a movement from the original to a plain that is at once more and less than the

original, and in that sense translation can never bring about a *parousia* of the “pure language” and of the end of history but remains merely a *Gedenken Gottes*.

As in his essay on the Romantic concept of aesthetic criticism, Benjamin here disconnects the significance or idea which translation “intensively realizes” from any absolute order. The relation among languages in its “innermost” quality cannot be “revealed.” That is, no metaphysical construct, not the competing metaphysical semiologies of *analogia* or sign, and even less the mythical *Naturverfallenheit* of an indifferent symbolism can ever suffice to establish a definitive relation between such an idea (i.e., of the relation among individual languages) and the revelation of the (Messianic) Absolute.<sup>26</sup> As Benjamin states early in his essay: “Um das echte Verhältnis zwischen Original und Übersetzung zu erfassen, ist eine Erwägung anzustellen, deren Absicht durchaus den Gedankengängen analog ist, in denen die Erkenntniskritik die Unmöglichkeit einer Abbildtheorie zu erweisen hat” (*AÜ*, 12). An unbridgable hiatus thus separates the realm of ideas from the Messianic. The absolute historicity of interpretation, criticism and translation indefinitely defers the awaited convergence between concept and idea on the one hand, and their “intensively presented” ontology on the other hand. Similar to the purely individual semantic presence of the Romantic *Witz*, where system and concept were realized for a fleeting instant, translation affords an intensive and seed-like anticipation of that which man speculates to be the nature of an extensive Messianic revelation. The earlier triadic scheme which related the materials, the interpretive acts and the conceptual to one another thus needs to be expanded. Regardless of how “systematic” the interpretive results of criticism and translation may appear in and of themselves, Benjamin’s essay makes it clear that any interpretive act will have to await its final validation by the disclosure of an ontology to which, as a purely historical “task,” it continues to bear a strict and unbridgable non-relation. The earlier scheme thus needs to be expanded:

Ontology:	Revelation, End of History, Messiah
	-----Total Hiatus-----
	H
	I Idea, System, Concept
	-----
System of	S
Knowledge	T Translation, Criticism
	-----
	O
	R Finite-Profane: Art, Nature,
	Y Socio-Political phenomena.

## IV

By elaborating two modalities which the interpretation of the “profane” can take, Benjamin’s dissertation and his essay on the translator betray a clear skepticism toward any metaphysics that would seek to determine in a totalizing manner, and thus absolve itself from, the historical. Returning once again to Hegel, we recall that specifically for him the project of philosophy was inextricably bound up with the concept of totality. In order to comprehend and conceptualize (*begreifen*) the totality of absolute knowledge not as indifference but be able to assimilate it to the category of difference, Hegel’s system had to unfold twice: once as its own genesis, which after every step recognizes itself to be guided by a quasi Platonic *anamnesis*, and which thus dialectically absolves itself from its own historicity; and the other time as a fully structured systematic presence. As we already saw, Hegel’s corrective for the dialectical self-explication of totality rests with the very phenomenon of expression, language. Thus, in the last section of the *Phänomenologie*, “Absolute Knowledge” has thoroughly “absolved” the subjectivity from history and temporality.<sup>27</sup> It is here alone that the spirit can coincide with itself as the totality of the historical, as *absoluter Begriff*. On the level of expression, this culmination of Hegel’s speculative movement has two major implications: a) Hegel’s absolute knowledge implies the absolute convergence of the historical particular (*das Individuelle*) with the linguistic (*Begriff*), and b) it also asserts the commensurability and speculative identity of the linguistic with the structure of an absolute (self-)consciousness.

Benjamin’s dissertation as well as his essay on the task of the translator constitute a philosophically sensitive deflection rather than continuation of such metaphysics. Both, *Kritik* and *Übersetzung* still contain a reflex of the Hegelian teleology which at once sanctions and redeems the “doubt” of post-Cartesian thought, for they, too, refer intrinsically finite and deficient ontic structures to the realm of ideas.<sup>28</sup> Indeed, it can be said that, even for Benjamin, these ideas through which the “profane” is intensified remain essentially commensurable with the conceptual. Yet such ideas and concepts can no longer be set into any relation, positive or negative, with the ontology which they merely seek to anticipate. As a *vorgreifende, andeutende Verwirklichung* of the Messianic end of history, criticism and translation and their “pawns,” the idea and its concept, remain historical and radically individual forms of interpretation. Their movement, then, can no longer be understood as progress, since the ontology which would sanction

the systematic coherence of the interpretive acts as final and thus as meta-historical remains absolutely inaccessible. Critique and translation are confined to the realm of history, and the concept and idea that intensify and “mortify” their respective original can thus amount only to a “probing,” to an unsanctioned, intensive anticipation of any “beyond-history.”

By cautioning against the temptation of referring such “systematic intensions” (as Benjamin called them in Schlegel) that underlie the practice of criticism and translation to a notion of definitive spiritual progress, Benjamin’s thought contains the ironic reinscription of yet another (Hegelian) metaphysical position, that of total coherence. Ostensibly, the vast thematic range of Benjamin’s early writings as well as each essay’s complex structure seemingly resurrect Hegel’s thesis of an absolute, self-determined totality. Yet to the extent that neither the translator nor the critic can know “wie weit ihr Verborgenes von der Offenbarung entfernt sei,” no interpretive investment can ever be redeemed by a disclosure of absolute knowledge. As we saw earlier on, Benjamin’s ninth thesis on the concept of history performs an apocalyptic, severely ironic reinscription of the Hegelian topos of historical progress.<sup>29</sup> Any attempt to monumentalize the concept and its idea as a (metaphysical) theoretical totality, that is, any attempt to bridge the hiatus between the historico-finite and the altogether inaccessible Messianic constitutes an ideological moment (what Benjamin from his earliest essays on refers to as *hubris*) of the worst kind. The “pile of debris [that] rises skyward” includes metaphysical claims to totality as well as the (more obviously) violent excesses of external historical action.

How, then, does Benjamin conceive of the relation between the idea/concept as the “pawns” of the interpretive *praxis* and the Messianic totality toward which they direct their “systematic intensions?” Does there exist any relation at all, or are we to understand the image of the angel of history merely as a fatalistic illustration for the complete absence of any such relation? Does the “irony” which according to Benjamin accompanies all translation and criticism merely assert the impossibility of any relation between the two realms? It appears that for Benjamin the central impasse in the general question of this relation does not reside so much in an incompatibility between the conceptual and the “profane,” which the former is designed to intensify, nor between the concept and its corresponding ideas. Rather, the interpreting subject always faces the absence of a ground on which to relate the intensive con-

cept and idea to their intended extensive, yet forever inaccessible counterpart, the Messianic. Only later, in the prologue to his book on the *Ursprung des Deutschen Trauerspiels*, does Benjamin resolve this problem. For by then, the idea has been explicitly disconnected from any form of a relation whatsoever: "Wahrheit tritt nie in eine Relation" (I,1: 216). Seen instead as the "objective interpretation" and "salvaging" (*Rettung*) of the phenomena, ideas are increasingly addressed with respect to their function for the interpreting, historical subject itself.<sup>30</sup> Benjamin's image of the idea as a "constellation" is anticipated by a cosmological metaphor in a letter to Florens Christian Rang according to which "die Ideen sind die Sterne im Gegensatz zur Sonne der Offenbarung" (*Briefe I*, 323).

The great care with which Benjamin avoids concepts or tropes that imply a totalization of the interpretive act is paralleled by his insistence on a proper understanding of language in the course of such interpretation. As the essay on the translator specifies, the success of a translation hinges on the interpreter's having access to an "altogether peculiar mode of presentation" ("ein ganz eigentümlicher Darstellungsmodus," *AÜ*, 12) that remains strictly non-referential. Already in his 1916 essay "Über Sprache überhaupt und über die Sprache des Menschen," Benjamin repeatedly insists that the essence of language does not consist in its communicative or referential function (*die bürgerliche Auffassung der Sprache*<sup>31</sup>) but in its capacity to intensively present (*darstellen*) the idea that is immanent in the presence of the original. This immanence, however, can become apparent in interpretation only once the concept has already separated all semblance (*Schein*) from the actual "element" of a given phenomenon.<sup>32</sup> Continuing his letter to Rang, Benjamin thus observes:

Kritik ist . . . Darstellung einer Idee. Ihre intensive Unendlichkeit kennzeichnet die Ideen als Monaden. Ich definiere: Kritik ist Mortifikation der Werke. Nicht Steigerung des Bewusstseins in ihnen (Romantisch!) sondern Ansiedlung des Wissens in ihnen. Die Philosophie *hat die Idee zu benennen* wie Adam die Natur um sie, welche die wiedergekehrte Natur sind, zu überwinden. . . . Mir stellt sie sich letzten Endes in der Einsicht dar: daß alles menschliche Wissen wenn es sich soll verantworten können, die Form der Interpretation haben muss, und keine andere und daß die Ideen die Handhaben feststellender Interpretation sind. (*Briefe I*, 323)

Knowledge is intrinsically finite (*menschliches Wissen*). It coincides with interpretation and holds as its "pawn" the idea. The idea, in turn, has to be named in order to surpass the mere presence of its

origin, the profane. It is precisely because of its suspension between the profane and the sacred, between a mere presence and a forever absent ontology that human, finite knowledge involves responsibility. The tasks of criticism and translation, that is, interpretation in general, cannot come to a halt with the ideas, but they must commit these ideas to the realm of language. It is in this context that Benjamin also voices his disagreement with the Romantics for whom, in his view, the ultimate site of all knowledge was a certain, infinitely reflexive structure of consciousness. By contrast, Benjamin locates all knowledge in a paradigm of language that has been decisively disconnected from a merely ancillary relation to consciousness.<sup>33</sup> Instead, the symbolic word's "intensive infinity" responds to the *archetypus intellectus*, to God, whose creation contains the imperative for the linguistic presentation (*Darstellung*) of that creative gesture by means of which things originated: the act of naming: "Gottes Schöpfung vollendet sich, indem die Dinge ihren Namen vom Menschen erhalten, aus dem im Namen die Sprache allein spricht. Man kann den Namen als die Sprache der Sprache bezeichnen. . . ."<sup>34</sup>

To the extent that the act of naming constitutes a private modality of transferring the cognitive (idea) to the linguistic, given interpretations and their ideas may ultimately show little coherence with one another. Benjamin, in his letter, addresses precisely that problem when he situates his concept of the idea in the context of Leibniz' *Monadology*:

Die gesamte Anschauung des Leibniz, dessen Gedanke der Monade ich für die Bestimmung der Ideen aufnehme und den Du mit der Gleichsetzung von Ideen und Zahlen beschwörst—denn für Leibniz ist die Diskontinuität der ganzen Zahlen ein entscheidendes Problem gewesen—scheint mir die Summa einer Theorie der Ideen zu umfassen. (*Briefe* I, 323)

While it appears that Benjamin's "metaphysics" share problems and key-concepts with Hegel's thought, statements like the one just cited might also lead to the conclusion that Benjamin can evade Hegel's totalization of the interpretive act only by taking recourse to a rather idiosyncratic, even elitist and esoteric model of interpretation. Indeed, the continuity of numbers does not appear to have posed any essential problem for Leibniz. However, Benjamin's scholarly questionable way of introducing the general problem of continuity (as such indeed a crucial problem throughout Leibniz's career) greatly advances an understanding of

the ideas in his model of interpretation. For as Benjamin makes clear, it is precisely *because* of a certain discontinuity among its elements, that Leibniz's *Monadology* can still be appreciated as a *Summa* of ideas.

In an early Platonic dialogue on the antinomies of continuity, Leibniz already suggests what, in the course of his thinking, he develops with increasing clarity: namely, the notion of continuity cannot be deduced as an essence underlying a given phenomenon (e.g., that of motion) but it constitutes an ideality, a postulate for all analysis. Thus Leibniz understands continuity as the result of a continually renewed, creative act according to which it is not the phenomena that fluctuate but a certain "transcreation" that causes them to originate anew.<sup>35</sup> It is significant, however, to note how for Benjamin such a "transcreation" of phenomena into ideas does not guarantee the latter's continuity but, instead, effects their essential discontinuity. For as the result of an individual, interpretive act whose semiological conditions severely limit its "communicability" (*Mittelbarkeit*), Benjamin's ideas cannot find any universal continuity among their respective phenomena, but instead they consign all systematic coherence to the interpreting individual.

The discontinuity of the ideas thus remains an integral part of all interpretation, implicitly forestalling any knowledge of whether its "systematic tendencies" and its "pawns," the ideas, will ever be redeemed by a (Messianic) revelation of absolute order. With the hope for a Messianic revelation fading progressively out of sight, Benjamin increasingly focuses on the first and essential "task"—for the critic and translator alike—to accept and understand this very discontinuity of ideas, that is, the historical succession of interpretations and translations themselves. The metaphysical ideal of a theoretical continuity and coherence, of a systematicity underlying all thinking, has been displaced, and for Benjamin there remains no ontology according to which one could distinguish between the dubious progress of a "pile of debris rising skyward" and that of the "holy growth of languages."

However, the very same radical historicity that renders impossible any ultimate validation of systematic "tendencies" also contains the imperative of interpretation. Criticism and translation are "tasks" that disclose themselves in the "criticizability" and "translatability" of the profane. Man's relation to the profane is not one of subject to object or of consciousness to nature as mere *res extensa*. Rather, the wealth of phenomena otherwise known as the "profane" contains the imperative to repeat intensively the originary,

creative gesture of the *archetypus intellectus*, God. This gesture, then, Benjamin understands to be an essentially linguistic one, a mode of expression which—with its onomastic and non-referential character—anticipates the “pure language” of a Messianic revelation. In his essay *Goethes Wahlverwandschaften*, Benjamin comments how it is through mythical structures and symbolic forms of expression that we seek again and again to escape from this very task of interpretation. Hence, according to Benjamin, the *natura naturans*, Goethe’s chaos of symbols, must be shattered. Truth—and here Benjamin abandons the most fundamental axiom of Hegelian metaphysics, that of totality—is merely the “fragment of the true world, torso of a symbol”:

Das Ausdruckslose ist die kritische Gewalt, welche Schein vom Wesen in der Kunst zwar zu trennen nicht vermag, aber ihnen verwehrt sich zu mischen. Diese Gewalt hat es als moralisches Wort. Im Ausdruckslosen erscheint die erhabene Gewalt des Wahren, wie es nach Gesetzen der moralischen Welt *die Sprache des Wirklichen bestimmt*. Dieses nämlich zerschlägt was in allem schönen Schein als die Erbschaft des Chaos noch überdauert: *die falsche, irrende Totalität*—die absolute. Dieses erst vollendet das Werk, welches es zum Stückwerk zerschlägt, zum Fragmente der wahren Welt, zum Torso eines Symbols.<sup>36</sup>

The force of the expressionless (*das Ausdruckslose*) characterizes the ambivalent status of a subject which cannot ever absolve itself autonomously (like Hegel’s negation) through its own insight from the very “nexus of guilt” (*Schuldzusammenhang*) of historical life by which all interpretation is called forth. For here, the “expressionless” does not refer to the mute *Naturverfallenheit* of Otilie, nor can it be reduced to Hegel’s “obscure, fermenting” lack of *Sinn*. Being, as it were, doomed to expression, yet also realizing that the ideas of such expression can only intensively anticipate what might absolve them from their finitude, the interpreter recognizes the expressionless as the “critical force” par excellence. It is that which “determines” language, such as the language of translation and criticism. The interpretation’s “naming” of its “pawns,” the ideas, can never be more than a “probing” of the distance that separates its subject from the messianic revelation. It is most notably *the emergence of this altogether different understanding of a language of interpretation* that characterizes Benjamin’s early essays.

It is all too evident, then, that Benjamin’s notion of a language of interpretation is no longer patterned on a hermeneutic model of assigning meanings to an exterior object of understanding. Yet

his shift away from a referential model of language, does not so much imply a belief in the impossibility of such "meaning" as it reflects Benjamin's conviction that the use of language as mere "tool" would fundamentally obscure its significance for the interpreter. However, the proposed non-referential conception of language cannot be assimilated to the speculative scheme of Hegel's theory of expression either, a scheme where the referential use of language (*das Meinen*) is effectively supplanted by the self-referentiality of the "absolute concept." Benjamin's language of interpretation remains strictly outside any such "totalization" because, unlike in Hegel, expression is no longer understood as an act of freedom on the part of a primordially guilt-free subjectivity. The very fact that criticism and translation present themselves as "tasks" illustrates the extent to which the interpreting subject is always already implicated in an irreducible *Schuldzusammenhang des Lebendigen*. Understood as exploring precisely this nexus of a historical and guilt-fraught existence, the ideas of interpretation must not mystify the relation between the profane and the sacred. Rather it remains their continuous task to "test," through the shattered symbol of the "name" (echoing the Romantics' individuation of system and concept) the extent to which the interpreting subject is caught up in this nexus of guilt. It is on account of this *unique recasting of the referential aspect of language* that Walter Benjamin's early writings will continue to be of great significance for the current debate concerning the limits and possibilities of literary and philosophical language.

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## NOTES

- 1 Friedrich Schlegel, quoted by Walter Benjamin in *Der Begriff der Kunstkritik in der Deutschen Romantik*. Henceforth cited parenthetically as *BK* and, as all works of Benjamin, cited according to the *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. Gershom Scholem and Rolf Tiedemann (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1977). Volume numbers are given in Roman and Arabic numerals, followed by the page number. For the Schlegel citation, see *BK* (I,1: 48).
- 2 Rolf Tiedemann, *Studien zur Philosophie Walter Benjamins* (Frankfurt: Europäische Verlagsanstalt, 1965); Theodor Adorno, *Über Walter Benjamin* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1970); Julian Roberts, *Walter Benjamin* (London: Macmillan, 1982); Richard Wolin, *Walter Benjamin: An Aesthetic of Redemption* (New York: Columbia UP, 1982); Liselotte Wiesenthal, *Zur Wissenschaftstheorie Walter Benjamins* (Frankfurt: Athenäum, 1973); Winfried Menninghaus, *Walter Benjamins Theorie der Sprachmagie* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1980). Some of these texts are

- discussed by Bernd Witte, *Walter Benjamin: Der Intellektuelle als Kritiker* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1976), pp. 1-5.
- 3 On the (for many critics of Hegel confusing) question concerning the status of the *Phänomenologie des Geistes* and the *Logik* within the overall "system" of Hegel's philosophy, see the very lucid remarks by Martin Heidegger, *Hegels Phänomenologie des Geistes*, ed. Ingrid Gölrand, *Gesamtausgabe*, vol. 32 (Frankfurt: Klostermann, 1980), pp. 1-13.
  - 4 *Enzyklopädie der Philosophischen Wissenschaften*. In G. W. F. Hegel, *Werke*, vol. 8, *Theorie Ausgabe* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1970), p. 58.
  - 5 "The traditional view receives a new formulation in expressivism: man comes to know himself by expressing and hence by clarifying what he is and recognizing himself in his expression. The specific property of human life is to culminate in self-awareness through expression." Charles Taylor, *Hegel* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1975), p. 17.
  - 6 G. W. F. Hegel, *Phänomenologie des Geistes*, ed. Johannes Hoffmeister (Hamburg: Felix Meiner, 1952), p. 82.
  - 7 For a very rigorous and thorough interpretation of the dialectical structure of the movement of consciousness, see Martin Heidegger's analysis of the "Einleitung" to the *Phänomenologie des Geistes*; "Hegels Begriff der Erfahrung," *Holzwege* (Frankfurt: Klostermann, 1980), pp. 111-204.
  - 8 Hegel, *Enzyklopädie der Philosophischen Wissenschaften, Werke*, vol. 10, p. 280. On Hegel's conception of a philosophical language that interprets the "ordinary language" of the natural consciousness, cf. Jean Hyppolite, "The Structure of Hegel's Philosophic Language According to the 'Preface' of Hegel's *Phenomenology of Mind*," *The Structuralist Controversy*, ed. Richard Macksey and Eugenio Donato (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1972) pp. 157-185. For a close analysis of Hegel's semiology, cf. Jacques Derrida, "The Pit and the Pyramid," in *Margins of Philosophy* (Chicago: Chicago UP, 1982), pp. 69-108.
  - 9 *Enzyklopädie*, vol. 10, p. 258f. See also the *Zusatz* to paragraph 456 where Hegel notes: "Schon die Bilder sind allgemeiner als die Anschauungen." *Ibid.*, p. 266.
  - 10 *Ibid.*, p. 260.
  - 11 *Ibid.*, p. 267.
  - 12 *Ibid.*, p. 272.
  - 13 *Ibid.*, p. 277.
  - 14 *Ibid.*, p. 274 (on names) and p. 280 (on the ineffable).
  - 15 Considering Benjamin's dislike of Hegel—"Hegel scheint fürchterlich zu sein" (*Briefe*, ed. Gershom Scholem and Theodor Adorno [Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1966], vol. I, p. 166)—and his apparently limited reading of Hegel's philosophy, Wiesenhal has all the textual evidence on her side when attempting to "save" Benjamin from the Hegelians (Adorno, Tiedemann). However, her contention that "weder in der Erkenntnistheorie noch in der Ästhetik und der Gesellschaftsphilosophie Benjamins lassen sich relevante systematische Übereinstimmungen mit der Philosophie Hegels feststellen" (p. 187), does not recognize that the problems and the conceptual framework in which they are cast by the early Benjamin nevertheless remain very close to Hegel.
  - 16 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Die Geburt der Tragödie aus dem Geist der Musik. Sämtliche Werke*, ed. Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari (Munich: dtv, 1980), vol. I, p. 22. Schleiermacher, Novalis, and somewhat later also Friedrich Schlegel all converted to Catholicism. On the religious tendencies of the Romantics, see Charles Taylor, *op. cit.*, p. 46.
  - 17 Regarding Benjamin's argumentation here, Bernd Witte notes: "Als Beleg für seine These zitiert er kommentarlos Fragmente und Briefstellen von Friedrich

- Schlegel und Novalis, in denen das Reich Gottes zum Kriterium der Geschichtsbetrachtung gemacht wird. . . . [Kritik] soll der Darstellung religiöser Erfahrung im Medium der Geschichte dienen. Die Vermittlung zwischen diesen beiden Polen wird unter dem Namen 'Ideen' vorgestellt." Op. cit., p. 13. According to Witte, Benjamin's concept of criticism also differs from that of the Romantics in that, for Benjamin, *Kritik* must also respond to the historicity of the text. *Ibid.*, p. 23f.
- 18 "Der Inbegriff dieser intensiven Totalität der Sprache als des geistigen Wesens des Menschen ist der Name. Der Mensch ist der Nennende, daran erkennen wir, da aus ihm die reine Sprache spricht. . . . er ist Herr der Natur und kann die Dinge benennen. Nur durch das sprachliche Wesen der Dinge gelangt er aus sich selbst zu deren Erkenntnis—im Namen. Gottes Schöpfung vollendet sich, indem die Dinge ihren Namen vom Menschen erhalten, aus dem im Namen die Sprache allein spricht." "Über Sprache Überhaupt und Über die Sprache des Menschen," (II,1: 144).
- 19 In a letter to Gersholm Scholem from January 1918, Walter Benjamin summarizes his impressions from a few readings in Hegel: "Von Hegel dagegen hat mich das was ich bisher las durchaus abgestossen. Ich glaube wir würden bald auf die geistige Physiognomie kommen die daraus blickt: die eines intellektuellen Gewaltmenschen, eines Mystikers der Gewalt, die schlechteste Sorte die es gibt: aber auch Mystiker" (*Briefe* I, p. 171). Benjamin's choice of the term "mystic" suggests that he will not concede Hegel's system any status outside of the individuality of its creator either. Thus Benjamin explicitly foregrounds Hegel as an individual when speaking of "*die Physiognomie eines intellektuellen Gewaltmenschen.*"
- 20 In reading the hieroglyph as metaphor, however, we must remain aware of its function—namely, to indicate an outside to the Hegelian economy of sense and non-sense. Thus the metaphor of the hieroglyph might be understood as a form of catachresis, "a figure put in the place of that which is unfigurable." Cf. Andrzej Warminski, *Readings in Interpretation: Hölderlin, Hegel, and Heidegger* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), p. xlix. On the notion of catachresis see also pp. lii-lviii.
- 21 G. F. W. Hegel, *Vorlesungen über Ästhetik, Werke*, op.cit., vol. 13, pp. 92f.
- 22 cf. Benjamin's letter to Gersholm Scholem in which he characterizes his interest in Kant, whose historical writings he is reading, as that of an "infinite task" (*Briefe* I, 159). See also the recently edited fragments of Benjamin (VI, 51-53).
- 23 "Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers" (IV,1: 9-21). Henceforth cited parenthetically as *AÜ*.
- 24 In his letters, Benjamin repeatedly indicates that the carefully crafted "academic" form of his dissertation was ultimately inadequate for what he understood as the task of critical thinking. "Ich habe mir . . . das Thema meiner Dissertation genehmigen lassen. . . . Wenn ich ihm das tiefere abgewinnen will und eine Dissertation verlangt Quellennachweise, die doch bei der Romantik für gewisse ihrer tiefsten Tendenzen kaum zu finden sind. [The sentence is fragmentary] Ich meine ihre geschichtlich fundamentale wichtige Koinzidenz mit Kant, die zur 'dissertatorischen' Erscheinung zu bringen sich unter Umständen als unmöglich erweisen könnte" (*Briefe* I, 188).
- 25 The numerous cross references between the dissertation and the translator essay generally center around the concepts of translation and irony. See especially Benjamin's qualification of the translation as *ironisch endgültiger*: "Nicht umsonst mag hier das Wort 'ironisch' an die Romantiker erinnern. Diese haben vor anderen Einsicht in das Leben der Werke besessen, von welchem die Übersetzung eine höchste Bezeugung ist. Freilich haben sie diese als solche kaum erkannt, vielmehr ihre ganze Aufmerksamkeit der Kritik zugewandt, die eben-

- falls ein, wenn auch geringeres Moment, im Fortleben der Werke darstellt." (AÜ, 15). See also, (BK, 70).
- 26 In his discussion of the translator essay, Jacques Derrida addresses the same issue with slight yet significant differences. In the context of Benjamin's image of translation which, "wie die Tangente den Kreis flüchtig und nur in einem Punkte berührt und wie ihr wohl diese Berührung, nicht aber der Punkt, das Gesetz vorschreibt" (AÜ, 60), Derrida remarks: "[Translation] puts languages into symbolic expansion, and symbolic here means that, however little restitution there be to accomplish, the larger, the new vaster aggregate, has still to *reconstitute* something. It is perhaps not a whole, but it is an aggregate in which openness should not contradict unity." "Des Tours de Babel" in *Difference in Translation*, trans. & ed. Joseph F. Graham (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1982), pp. 189ff. The tangent may be determined by the single point whereat it touches the circle of the original, yet there is no ontological certainty that it touches the circle at the right point. Thus even a "symbolic expansion" would already claim too much knowledge of the "holy growth of languages." Like the Romantic *Begriff* and its "mystic terminology," translation remains but a test (*Probe*) whose systematic aspirations never exceed the boundaries of the historical, interpretive subject. If, as Benjamin states in the "Theologico-Political Fragment," the "order of the profane has to orient itself according to the idea of chance (*Glück*), then the openness of thought and its intended systematic unity are not even symbolically reconcilable. Only the Messiah can retroactively establish a continuity between these realms; order is "created" only as a Messianic analepse. "Erst der Messias selbst vollendet alles historische Geschehen, und zwar in dem Sinne, daß er dessen Beziehung auf das Messianische selbst erst *erlöst, vollendet, schafft*." "Theologisch-Politisches Fragment" (II,1: 203).
- 27 The absolution of the subject *qua* the conceptual from any form of temporality is made explicit by Hegel in the last section of the *Phänomenologie*: "Die Zeit ist der *Begriff* selbst, der *da ist*, und als leere Anschauung sich dem Bewusstsein vorstellt; deswegen erscheint der Geist notwendig in der Zeit, und er erscheint so lange in der Zeit, als er nicht seinen reinen Begriff *erfasst*, d.h. nicht die Zeit *tilgt*. Sie ist das *äussere* angeschaute vom Selbst *nicht erfasste* reine Selbst, der nur angeschaute Begriff; indem dieser sich selbst erfasst, hebt er seine Zeitform auf. . . ." op. cit., p. 558.
- 28 The (Christian) topos of the philosopher's doubt becomes explicit in the "Einleitung" to the *Phänomenologie*, where Hegel characterizes the progress of the soul as "Weg des Zweifels, oder eigentlicher als Weg der Verzweiflung," op. cit., p. 67.
- 29 "Über den Begriff der Geschichte," (I,2: 697f.).
- 30 The prologue to the *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels* contains some of the most concise formulations on the relation of the ideas to language. Thus Benjamin connects the *Intentionlosigkeit* of the ideas with the non-referentiality of their expression: "Die Idee ist ein Sprachliches, und zwar im Wesen des Wortes jeweils dasjenige Moment, in welchem es Symbol ist. . . . Sache des Philosophen ist es, den symbolischen Charakter des Wortes, in welchem die Idee zur Selbstverständigung kommt, die das Gegenteil aller nach aussen gerichteten Mitteilung ist, durch Darstellung wieder in seinem Primat einzusetzen" (I,1: 216).
- 31 "Über Sprache überhaupt und über die Sprache des Menschen," (II,1: 144).
- 32 "Die Phänomene gehen aber nicht integral in ihrem rohen, empirischen Bestande, dem der Schein sich beimischt, sondern in ihren Elementen allein, gerettet, in das Reich der Ideen ein. Ihrer falschen Eiheit entäussern sie sich, um aufgeteilt an der echten der Wahrheit teilzuhaben. In dieser ihrer Aufteilung unterstehen die Phänomene den Begriffen. . . . Denn nicht an sich selbst, son-

dern einzig und allein in einer Zuordnung dinglicher Elemente im Begriff stellen die Ideen sich dar" (I,1: 213).

- 33 "Nicht selten hat die Unkunde von dieser ihrer [i.e., der Ideen] diskontinuierlichen Endlichkeit energische Versuche zur Erneuerung der Ideenlehre, zuletzt noch die der älteren Romantiker, gebrochen. In ihrem Spekulieren nahm die Wahrheit anstelle ihres sprachlichen Charakters den eines reflektierenden Bewusstseins an." *Der Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels*, I,1: 218). See also Roberts, pp. 117f.
- 34 "Über Sprache überhaupt und über die Sprache des Menschen," (II,1: 144).
- 35 "Pacidius Philalethi" (October 1776), *Opuscules et Fragments Inédits*, [1903] ed. Louis Couturat (Reprint: Hildesheim: Olms, 1961), pp. 623f. See also, Ernst Cassirer, *Das Erkenntnisproblem* vol. II [1922] (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1974), pp. 151ff.
- 36 "Goethes Wahlverwandtschaften," (I,1: 181).