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WHEN THE ANGELS PLAYED:
MONADOLOGY AND DIVINE ABSCONSION
IN WALTER BENJAMIN

"Our problem now, the problem of our age,
our interregnum, our interim, our time of the angels —'
'Why angels?'
'Spirit without God.'
'So you expect a new revelation?'
'No, just to hang on.'
'Until?'
'Until religion can change itself into something we can believe in".
Iris Murdoch[1]

Abstract

Interpretations of Walter Benjamin have ranged from the last pre-war man of letters to a Hasidic rabbi. There is consensus that from roughly 1916-1920 Benjamin was interested in Jewish and Christian theology and metaphysics and that from about 1925 to his death in 1940 he was vocally Marxist to the near exclusion of metaphysics. This article identifies ambiguities in Benjamin's early, theistic cosmology, arguing that the inherent instability of Benjamin's accounts especially of language, judgment and allegory compelled him to discard his early Platonism and embrace a cosmology in which God is abscondite. Just as early atheists took inspiration from Duns Scotus's speculation that a triangle would still have three angles in a universe in which God does not exist, Benjamin's vision of a world abandoned by God led him, over the course of the 1920s, into atheistic materialism. When the materialist Benjamin continued, despite himself, to encounter divine traces and teleology in his literary excursions, he concluded that he had to chase God even further from his creation in order for humanity to perceive the latter as it really was. This state of affairs

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[1] I. Murdoch, *The Philosopher's Pupil*, Random House, New York 2008, p. 188.

continued until the last year of Benjamin's life, during which he chose to embrace theology as the hidden spirit lurking within the letter of historical materialism.

Le interpretazioni di Walter Benjamin si estendono dall'estremo di considerarlo l'ultimo significativo uomo di lettere del periodo precedente alla seconda guerra mondiale fino all'estremo opposto di ritenerlo un rabbino hassidico. C'è accordo sul fatto che circa dal 1916-1920 Benjamin fu interessato alla teologia e alla metafisica ebraica e cristiana e che dal 1925 circa fino alla sua morte nel 1940 fu apertamente marxista e giunse fino alla quasi esclusione della metafisica. L'articolo individua le ambiguità della cosmologia teistica del primo Benjamin, sostenendo che l'instabilità intrinseca delle sue considerazioni, specialmente su linguaggio, giudizio e allegoria, lo ha costretto ad abbandonare il platonismo giovanile e ad abbracciare una cosmologia in cui Dio è nascosto. Proprio come i primi atei si ispirarono alla speculazione di Duns Scoto secondo il quale un triangolo avrebbe avuto ancora tre angoli in un universo in cui Dio non esistesse, la visione di Benjamin di un mondo abbandonato da Dio lo condusse, nel corso degli anni Venti, al materialismo ateo. Poiché il materialista Benjamin continuò, nonostante se stesso, a incontrare tracce divine e teleologia nelle sue escursioni letterarie, concluse che doveva cacciare Dio ancora più lontano dalla sua creazione per permettere all'umanità di percepirla come realmente è. Questo atteggiamento si protrasse fino all'ultimo anno di vita di Benjamin, durante il quale scelse di abbracciare la teologia come lo spirito nascosto nella lettera del materialismo storico.

Interpretations of Walter Benjamin have ranged from Winfried Menninghaus's highly secular portrait of the last pre-war man of letters to Bram Mertens's barely heterodox Hasidic rabbi[2]. There is consensus that from roughly 1916-1920 Benjamin was interested in Jewish and Christian theology and metaphysics and that from about

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[2] B. Mertens, *Dark Images, Secret Hints: Benjamin, Scholem, Molitor and the Jewish Tradition*, Peter Lang, Bern 2007 and the article discussed below is: W. Menninghaus, *Walter Benjamins Theorie der Sprachmagie*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main 1980.

1925 to his death in 1940 he was vocally Marxist to the exclusion of metaphysics[3]. Despite this heuristic reversal, metaphysical (not necessarily mystical) elements, as well as the fascination with nonhuman objects which underwrote his Marxism, can be found throughout the Benjaminian corpus. By Benjamin's own account the latter originated in the preoccupations of a lonely childhood, but its first intellectual articulation was in his university years. Benjamin had come under the influence of the vitalist Gustav Wyneken, who endorsed a progressive and teleological spiritualization of nature inspired by Hegel[4]. In his final break with Wyneken, Benjamin countered that matter and spirit were permanently irreconcilable. This rejection of progressive spiritualization would continue to inform Benjamin's philosophical interests for the rest of his life. While he recognized that it was not compatible with orthodox Jewish or Christian religious teleology[5], during his later life Benjamin saw the task of the historian and philosopher as a matter of purifying these disciplines of religious traces through Marxism.

This cosmology, in which God, or spirit, is by necessity abscondite, would remain a consistent theme in Benjamin's work. Although, despite avowing an uncrossable abyss, Benjamin continually built theoretical bridges between God and materiality in his work, the nature of these bridges changed over the course of his adult life. In his early work, human language emanates down from divine *Logos*,

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[3] Besides those discussed below, see for example A. Hirvonen, *Marx and God with Anarchism: on Walter Benjamin's concepts of history and violence*, in "Continental Philosophy Review" 45/4 (2012), pp. 519-543; S. Truskolaski, *Inverse Theology: Adorno, Benjamin, Kafka*, in "German Life and Letters" 70/2 (2017), pp. 192-210; W. Goldstein, *Messianism and Marxism: Walter Benjamin and Ernst Bloch's Dialectical Theories of Secularization*, in "Critical Sociology" 27/2 (2001), pp. 246-281.

[4] B. Witte, *Walter Benjamin: An Intellectual Biography*, Wayne State University Press, Detroit 1997, p. 27.

[5] The idea of a coming age in which spirit will be more tangible is associated in Christianity with Joachite heresy and in Judaism with early modern messianic pretenders.

identifying man as distinct from nature and allowing man to reach back up into dialogue with the divine. In his later work, Benjamin became dismissive of language and fixated on semi-metaphysical substances or monads reminiscent of those posited by Leibniz. Although Benjamin sometimes claimed that the metaphysical aspect of these monads was not built on theism, they still represented a bridge between matter and the divine, as this essay will demonstrate. It will also explain how this transition was compelled by early ambiguities in Benjamin's theory of language. Through close reading of Benjamin's essays and correspondence, it argues that, despite minor Jewish influences, Benjamin's work is best understood in terms of his engagement with Catholic philosophy, at first Augustinian and Pseudo-Dionysian, later Duns Scotan. Engagement with the later work of Duns Scotus, at first through Heidegger and later in a series of attempts to learn scholastic Latin, ushered Benjamin into an idiosyncratic interpretation of Leibniz which Benjamin apparently associated with Marxism. As a result of the tension between Augustine and Duns Scotus in Benjamin's work, Benjamin's transition to Marxism bears parallels to the late medieval and early modern metaphysical theories which arose in Duns Scotus's wake. Although the multiplying contradictions in his work were chiefly a function of Benjamin's inability to reconcile language or anagogy in nature with its reception in mental life and with its ultimate origins in divinity, biographical crises accelerated intellectual ones.

The Word and the Brotherhood: Benjamin's Early Encounter with Molitor's Catholic Deism

Benjamin's close friend Gershom (né Gerhard) Scholem, known in his own right as a historian of Judaic thought, is one of the main sources on Benjamin's repudiation of theology, which he would document with disapproval. The pair met in the summer of 1915,

when Scholem was in his teens and Benjamin in his twenties[6]. Both were flirting with socialism and with a relatively secular Zionism, although Benjamin was attending courses on Catholic theology with a cohort of monks[7]. The friendship reached its climax early, in a period of cohabitation in Switzerland in 1918[8]. Afterwards, as Scholem drifted into religious orthodoxy and Benjamin into Marxism, it was mostly epistolary. Benjamin quickly lost interest in socialism, but as early as 1917 Scholem would doubt his friend's commitment to religion[9]. During their early acquaintance, both men were invested in the idea of language as an extension or emanation of divinity[10]. For Scholem this was always scriptural and for Benjamin, who never learned Hebrew, it was philosophical and theological in a more expansive sense, aspiring to universality[11]. Around 1916 Benjamin began to develop this theory of language into intermediate realms like poetry and law[12].

The early readings undertaken by the pair were more Christian than Jewish. Johann George Hamann, a Lutheran theologo-linguist, was a major early influence[13], as was the Catholic neoscholastic Franz von Baader[14]. Their correspondence from this period reveals

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[6] E. Leslie, *Walter Benjamin*, Reaktion Books, London 2008, pp. 32-33.

[7] H. Eiland, W.M. Jennings, *Walter Benjamin: A Critical Life*, Belknap Press, Cambridge (Mass.) 2016, p. 79.

[8] G. Scholem, *Walter Benjamin: The Story of a Friendship*, New York Review Book, New York 2012, p. 65.

[9] H. Eiland, W.M. Jennings, *Walter Benjamin* … cit., p. 75.

[10] E. Leslie, *Walter Benjamin* … cit., pp. 34-35.

[11] E. Jacobson, *Metaphysics of the Profane: The Political Theology of Walter Benjamin and Gershom Scholem*, Columbia University Press, New York 2003, pp. 61-83.

[12] Ivi, p. 89. In the first draft of *On Language as Such and the Language of Man*, a letter to Scholem, poetry and law are natural intermediates between Logos and language, between God and man. In later drafts of the essay this notion has been excised.

[13] E. Leslie, *Walter Benjamin* … cit., pp. 34-35.

[14] G. Scholem, *Walter Benjamin* … cit., p. 29.

few Jewish referents and little interest in kabbalah as such[15]. The period from 1915-1919 is dominated by a single Catholic source on kabbalah, Franz Joseph Molitor[16]. Molitor, who nursed deistic tendencies, tending to see Judaism and Catholicism as extensions of the same universal religion, appears to have accepted both the truth and the self-proclaimed antiquity of the esoterica he studied. Benjamin and Scholem approached Molitor's volumes from different directions. Benjamin, who was seriously engaged in Plato at that time, was primarily interested in Molitor's Platonism[17], which posited ideas as objects in the mind of God. Scholem saw Molitor primarily as an unrivaled scholar of Jewish theology[18]. Both grappled with the linguistic theory, which described all particular languages as mimetic corruptions of divine language. Although a well-established Jewish idea[19], in Molitor's case it was contingent on his belief that the original divine language was not Hebrew, something upon which not all Jewish kabbalistic schools agreed[20].

Throughout the 1910s Scholem still approached theology from an historian's perspective. Benjamin preferred to engineer it to his own philosophical and political ends[21]. Although he accepted the Judaeo-Christian account of nature's fallenness after Eden and the possibility of its restitution to a pristine condition at the end of time (*apocatastasis* or *restitutio in integrum*)[22], Benjamin was uninterest-

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[15] M. Idel, *Old Worlds, New Mirrors: On Jewish Mysticism and Twentieth-Century Thought*, University of Pennyslvania Press, Philadelphia 2010, p. 169.

[16] B. Mertens, *The Anxiety of Influence: Benjamin, Scholem and Molitor*, in *Millennial Essays on Film and other German Studies*, Peter Lang, Bern 2000, p. 133.

[17] E. Jacobson, *Metaphysics … cit.*, p. 120.

[18] Ivi, pp. 119-121.

[19] Apparently first articulated in Judaism by Philo (Judaeus) of Alexandria, although Philo otherwise saw language quite instrumentally. See *Legum allegoriae* 1.5 and *De migratione Abrahami* XV, as well as *De confusione linguarum* in its entirety.

[20] E. Jacobson, *Metaphysics … cit.*, pp. 119-121.

[21] M. Idel, *Old Worlds … cit.*, p. 170.

[22] In Lurianic kabbalah, the gathering up of the sparks of holiness by the right-

ed in extending it to humanity in the form of original sin[23]. In 1917, he wrote to Scholem that the obligations imposed on humanity by the impending messianic arrival do not conflict with a universal, Rousseauvian natural innocence. Sin might become virtue in the end, since the messiah reverses the apparently existing order in a flash of divine illumination of the true nature of things[24]. Consequently, human judgment in political life and organized religion is a waste of time. Even the final messianic revelation is not judgment[25]. Benjamin recoiled from endorsing judgment of any kind, and tended to dismiss it as a temporary consequence of the Fall of man, a dualistic distortion produced by the fruit of the tree of knowledge. In medieval Christianity, civil and canon law reflect natural and divine law, although civil law is necessarily manmade and human judg-

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eous believer will result in messianic arrival and the *apocatastasis panton*. A life lived in deferment restores the world to its pristine condition, and both diaspora and restoration become objective, if metaphysical, facts of the cosmos. For Augustine and for Christianity generally, individual virtue takes a similar form. The difference, however, is that the future (the beatific vision and subsequently the resurrection of the dead) is considerably better than the Edenic past. Even the saints on earth receive more grace than Adam received in paradise, and greater still will be their glory at the restitution. Matter will be vindicated in the end, but it will take on a form even greater than it had at the moment of its creation. See G. Scholem, *The Messianic Idea in Judaism,* translated by M. Meyer and H. Halkin, Schocken, New York 1995, pp. 197-238. On Augustine, see G.B. Ladner, *The Idea of Reform. Its Impact on Christian Thought and Action in the Age of the Fathers*, Harvard University Press, Harvard 1959, pp. 153-160.

[23] E. Jacobson, *Metaphysics* … cit., p. 162.

[24] Ivi, p. 163.

[25] Messianic reversal is a Jewish and not a Christian concept, although in its most radical form it is heterodox in Judaism. The seventeenth-century Ottoman kabbalist and messianic pretender Sabbatai Zevi committed, in Scholem's words, *fantastic violations of the law* culminating in a conversion to Islam. Scholem attributes this to a literalistic approach to messianic anagnorisis, the exoteric meaning of Zevi's sins supposedly disguising an esoteric virtue. His believers were excommunicated by mainstream Judaism. Other movements taking a similar approach to messianic reversal have met the same fate. See G. Scholem, *Messianic Idea* … cit., pp. 60-123.

ment often fails[26]. For Benjamin, any attempt by humanity to judge its own members is indistinguishable from pagan violence.

Augustinian and Pseudo-Dionysian Cosmology in Benjamin's Theory of Language

Benjamin's Marxist phase after 1925 represented the last break-down[27] of his attempts to theorize the breach between man and God. His early work proposes an unbroken linguistic chain passing from God through man to the lowest forms of matter. It is a complete account only marred by a minor ambiguity in Benjamin's terminology, which later becomes an aporia. The linguistic chain first appears in *On Language on Such and on the Language of Man,* an unpublished essay whose first draft appears in a letter to Scholem[28]. In this essay, Benjamin proposes a graded continuity of language originating in God, the supreme *Logos*[29]. Man, midway through this order, is

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[26] St. Thomas Aquinas argued that since *eternal law is the plan of government in the supreme ruler, all plans of government in subordinate rulers need to be derived from the eternal law. But such plans of subordinate government consist of all the other laws besides the eternal law. And so all laws are derived from the eternal law insofar as they partake of right reason*. When they do not partake of right reason, they are *brute force rather than ... law*. See *Treatise on Law* Q93A3 (quotations from Richard J. Regan, trans., Hackett, Indianapolis 2000).

[27] Until the last year of his life.

[28] Jacobson. *Metaphysics,* p. 86.

[29] This is similar to Augustine's account, but Augustine, while conceiving of thought in terms of language, distinguishes the "inner word" from spoken language. *Accordingly, the word that sounds outwardly is the sign of the word that gives light inwardly; which latter has the greater claim to be called a word. For that which is uttered with the mouth of the flesh, is the articulate sound of a word; and is itself also called a word, on account of that to make which outwardly apparent it is itself assumed. For our word is so made in some way into an articulate sound of the body, by assuming that articulate sound by which it may be manifested to men's senses, as the Word of God was made flesh, by assuming that flesh in which itself also might be manifested to men's senses. And as our word becomes an articulate sound, yet is not changed into one; so the Word of God became flesh, but far be it from us to say*

endowed with a special privilege, the use of names. The *mental being of Man communicates itself to God*[30] directly through the act of naming. However, ideas begin outside language (in the sense that they are part of the mind of God) but are given finite existence by human language, which is *only the reflection* of *God's linguistic being*[31]. As a result, man does not use language but language uses man, who *cannot communicate himself by it, but only in it*[32]. Even human language is in a sense *language itself communicat[ing] itself*[33]. God is absolute *Logos*, but human language is his first emanation and our best chance at grasping Him. His emanations in animals and objects are much less proximate, because objects *are imperfect, and they are dumb*[34]. Their language is infinite but trivial, like sand. *The uninterrupted form of this communication runs through the whole of nature, from the lowest forms of existence to man and from man to God*[35]. Lower forms are lower because they have less access to language, and man is higher because he has the highest grasp of it. This was *already familiar to Scholasticism with regard to mental being*, although most Scholastics did not understand that mental being or intellect was essentially linguistic[36].

This is a simple rearticulation of the medieval Christian great chain of being. The first authors to theorize emanations of divine intellect in the Judaeo-Christian context were the Jewish Platonist Philo Judaeus[37] (c. 20 BC-50), Augustine (354-430) and Pseudo-Di-

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He was changed into flesh. *De Trinitate* XV.20, translated by Arthur West Haddan, T&T Clark, Edinburgh 1873. In Philo Judaeus, language is even more instrumental: *For it is language which has in the first place enabled one man*

[30] W. Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, vol. I, translated by R. Livingstone *et al.*, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, Cambridge 2005, p. 65.

[31] Ivi, p. 68.

[32] Ivi, p. 65.

[33] *Ibidem*.

[34] Ivi, p. 67.

[35] Ivi, p. 74.

[36] Ivi, p. 66.

[37] I can find no proof that Benjamin ever read Philo Judaeus.

onysius the Areopagite (500s)[38], although Dionysius tended to think in terms of love as well as intellect. Augustine, the more influential of the two Christian thinkers, famously posited evil as the absence of good, permitting a chain of divine excess from God's most proximate emanations (forms, angels, human beings) to those furthest from him (animals, plants, inanimate objects). All contain beauty, so we should not *condemn the faults of beasts and trees*[39], but rather seek out divine traces even in

> *that lowest form of beauty, the beauty of seasons*[40] *and the numberless beauties which are observable not only in the bodies of animals, but even in plants and grasses*[41]*, Even the faults of earthly things, which are neither voluntary nor penal … illustrate the excellence of the natures themselves, which are all originated and created by God*.[42]

These *things attest the presence of divinity*[43] and it is our duty to learn what we can about them.

> *Just as knowledge of the habits of the snake clarifies the many analogies involving this animal regularly given in the scripture, so too an ignorance of the numerous animals mentioned no less frequently in analogies is a great hindrance to understanding. The same is true of stones, herbs, and anything that has roots*.[44]

[38] Henceforth Dionysius. Benjamin makes no explicit reference to pseudo-Dionysius to my knowledge, although there is a nearly direct quotation cited below. Benjamin began a friendship with the pseudo-Dionysian scholar Hugo Ball in 1919 and Scholem recalls an exchange of books. See B. Hanssen, *Walter Benjamin's Other History*, University of California Press, Berkeley 2000, p. 185.

[39] Augustine, *De civitate dei* 12.4, translation by M. Dods, T. & T. Clark, Edinburgh 1871, p. 485.

[40] *Ibidem*.

[41] Ivi, 12.17, p. 408.

[42] Ivi, 12.4, p. 485.

[43] Ivi, 12.17, p. 408.

[44] Augustine, *De doctrina Christiana* 2.16.24-25, translation by R.P.H. Green, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1995, p. 85.

Augustine does not call the divine presence in nature *language* because he believes external language to be subordinate to intellect. However, intellect correlates with beauty as well as divinity, *in a sort of incorporeal light*[45]. Bodily things are below us, but we can interpret them according to *non-bodily and everlasting meanings … above the human mind*[46], although *something of [the human mind] is subjoined to them*[47], The essences of the natural world really exist outside the human mind, and they do correspond to forms in the mind of God, but truth appears only through the link with the divine which is inside the human mind and is not generated by nature[48].

In *On Language* Benjamin is mostly in alignment with the Augustinian view of natural symbolism except that he uses *language* to refer to what Augustine tended to generalize as *intellect*. However, Benjamin equivocates on the presence of language in lesser beings like animals, plants and objects. Benjamin informs us that nature communicates the divine message, but does not do so with names (whose power God had relegated only to Adam). *On this is founded the difference between human language and the language of things*[49]. This is not quite an Augustinian position, since the only significant meaning which nature can have for Augustine is anagogical, and the relevant analogies to guide us to the anagogical meaning are all found in scripture. Benjamin believes in a perfectly external chain of analogies stretching from the lowest beings to the highest, which implies a certain autonomy for nature's language. *All higher language is a translation of lower ones, until in ultimate clarity the word of God unfolds*[50]. Rather than being a strictly Augustinian position, this far more closely resembles that of Dionysius and his

[45] Augustine, *De trinitate* 12.15.24, translation by S. McKenna, Catholic University of America Press, Washington, DC 1963, p. 366.

[46] Ivi 12.2, translation by E. Hill, New City Press, Brooklyn 1991, p. 323.

[47] *Ibidem*.

[48] Augustine, *De magistro* 11.38.45-50, translation by Peter King, Hackett Publishing, Indianapolis 1995, Kindle edition, location 3173.

[49] W. Benjamin, *Selected Writings* … cit., p. 65.

[50] Ivi, p. 74.

later interpreters, like John Scotus Eriugena, Hugh of St. Victor and
Nicholas of Cusa. In Dionysius, God *is celebrated from all existing
things, according to the analogy of all things, of which he is Cause.*
All beings are both symbols and interpreters[51]. From *the order of
all beings … we go up, by way and order according to our pow-
er*, to God, and so do all other beings *according to [their] proper
analogy*[52]. Dionysius's model is one of participation, from the *mere
substantial participation* of the inanimate[53] to the moral and mysti-
cal participation possible for human beings. The mere existence of
intelligible and intelligent essences and powers and energies is a
kind of knowledge of God[54].

Benjamin's more active model for nature resembles that of Dio-
nysius[55], but his translation model is more mechanistic than partici-
patory and leaves less room for the free will of the human interpreter.
If all higher language is simply *a translation of lower [languages]*,
this renders object language esoteric, *a secret password that each*

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[51] E.D. Perl, *Theophany: The Neoplatonic Philosophy of Dionysius the Areop-
agite*, State University of New York Press, Albany 2007, p. 107.

[52] Pseudo-Dionysius, *Divine Names* VII.3.869-872, translation from E.D. Perl
(see above), p. 107. Id., *Celestial Hierarchy* III.2.165, translation from E.D. Perl,
p. 78.

[53] Pseudo-Dionysius, *Divine Names* IV.4, translation by J. Parker, Parker and
Co., London 1897, p. 38.

[54] Pseudo-Dionysius, *Divine Names* IV.1 … cit., p. 33.

[55] Marie-Dominique Chenu writes: *Pseudo-Dionysius remained entirely faith-
ful to Neoplatonism, which was essentially a method of approach to intelligible
reality, not an explanation of the world of sense by means of that reality. But for
him this method was to be conceived as an ascent that began from the lowest ma-
terial level, on which the mind of man found its connatural objects – objects whose
value for knowledge, for sacred knowledge, lay not in their own coarse material
natures but in their symbolic capacity, their 'anagogy.' 'Anagogy' was not only
wholly different from the technique of metaphor employed by scripture or the poets;
philosophically speaking, it was also totally different form the Augustinian (lat-
er, the Cistercian and Victorine) 'image' and from Aristotelian abstraction from
sense-perceptible particulars.* Marie-Dominique Chenu, *Nature, Man, and Society
in the Twelfth Century,* translated by Jerome Taylor and Lester K. Little, University
of Toronto Press, Toronto 1997, p. 83.

sentry passes to the next in his own language, but the meaning of the password is in the [previous] sentry's language. Midway through this process of translation we reach man. Man has special access to the power of naming, which Benjamin apparently perceives as an emanation of God's *judgment suspended over [man]*[56], a third quantity somewhere between divine and human language, although Benjamin contradicts himself on whether judgment is something properly belonging to God, bridging the gap with humanity, or a half-malign *magic*[57] which man has appropriated with the Fall. The *cognizing*[58] language of man, intellect for Augustine and Pseudo-Dionysius, in either case proceeds up into absolute *Logos*, and the language of nature proceeds down into muteness. Benjamin has, however, by speaking of an esoteric nature-language, opened up the implication that nature might know something which man does not know. One suspects that the *language* of nature, which God sometimes uses to speak to us, harbors secrets which are closer to God than we are. *[I]n the mute magic of nature, the word of God shines forth*[59]. This is potentially no more than Dionysian anagogy, but as we will see Benjamin wishes to take it even further.

Benjamin's ideas about the Fall are central to the problems faced by his theory of language. Partly this is because his view of Eden is Jewish or at minimum non-Christian. In Christianity, the Incarnation of the messiah raises man to a higher condition than he enjoyed in

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[56] W. Benjamin, *Selected Writings* … cit., p. 74.

[57] Ivi, p. 71. Human knowledge of good and evil is a definitely malign, unnatural magic. Divine judgment is not malignant, but Benjamin also characterizes it as a magic summoned by man: *Admittedly, the judging word has direct knowledge of good and evil. Its magic is different from that of name, but equally magical. This judging word expels the first human beings from Paradise; they themselves have aroused it in accordance with the immutable law by which this judging word punishes--and expects--its own awakening as the sole and deepest guilt. In the Fall, since the eternal purity of names was violated, the sterner purity of the judging word arose.*

[58] Ivi, p. 74.

[59] Ivi, p. 69.

Eden. For Augustine and for all the Church Fathers, although de-
tails vary, the beatific vision and subsequent resurrection of the dead
constitute renewal to something better than man has ever known be-
fore[60]. Even the saints on Earth receive more grace than Adam did.
For Jews, apocatastasis is more strictly defined. It is the restoration
of man and the cosmos to their prelapsarian condition[61]. Benjamin's
apocatastasis is clearly Jewish. Furthermore, Benjamin's view of
Paradise sometimes resembles the Enlightenment notion of the state
of nature, in that Benjamin's account foregrounds its satisfaction of
the demands and needs of nature, not the needs and demands of man
(or God). For Benjamin, the Fall was *man abandon[ing] immediacy*.
Was prelapsarian man immediately in communion with God or with
nature? Apparently the answer is both: before the fall, man knew the
divine names of objects, which brought him into direct communion
with God and nature through the *eternal purity of names*[62], while the
Fall marks the birth of the human word*, in which name no longer
lives intact*[63]. The knowledge of good and evil was the birth of ab-
straction, which for Benjamin is also equivalent to the human word
of judgment. This human word caused nature to become mute and
begin to lament[64]. *Speechlessness: that is the great sorrow of na-
ture*[65]. But this lies ill at ease with Benjamin's account of the Edenic
naming of nature, in which the *linguistic community of mute crea-
tion with God* was imperfect until completed by Adam's act of nam-
ing[66]. Benjamin's distinction between name and human word (and
relegation of names to the prelapsarian condition) rescues him from
self-contradiction, but the result is that he associates the language of
judgment with contingency and instrumentalism. By distinguishing

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[60] G.B. Ladner, *The Idea of Reform* … cit., p. 159.
[61] G. Scholem, *Messianic Idea* … cit., p. 238.
[62] W. Benjamin, *Selected Writings* … cit., p. 71.
[63] *Ibidem*.
[64] Ivi, p. 72.
[65] *Ibidem.*
[66] Ivi, p. 70.

good and evil, postlapsarian man *makes language a means, … and this later results in the plurality of languages*[67].

We have seen earlier that Benjamin associates divine judgment with man's power of naming. This was given to Adam before the Fall, but Benjamin denies that this constituted prelapsarian access to judgment for humanity. Human judgment, for Benjamin, is dualistic (deriving, as it does, from the knowledge of good and evil, with evil reified) and consequently pluralistic. *The Fall … in making language mediate, laid the foundation for its multiplicity*[68], a latent potentiality soon realized with the Tower of Babel. It was in fact the *word of judgment*[69] which marked human language as postlapsarian, the beginning of its descent into the *abyss of prattle*[70]. Judgment is thus not only dualism and pluralism but also chaos. Objects, cut off by man's word of judgment from the divine names of things, are deprived of language and mourn their own muteness. It does not seem possible that this account of human judgment is reconcilable with the other account of judgment found in the same essay, where *the creative word of God … is preserved in man as the cognizing name and above man as the judgment suspended over him*[71]. This is the problem with which Benjamin cannot quite grapple: *judgment* is two things simultaneously. For man, it is the (inherently dualistic) knowledge of good and evil afforded him only by his illicit sampling of the Tree of Knowledge. As wielded by God, it is also a higher form of language somewhere between God and man to which man has partial access. If judgment is inherently dualistic, how can it be above man? And if it is not dualistic, why is it called knowledge of good and evil? Does not God also judge between good and evil? Before the Fall, did nature keep man safely in communion with God

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[67] Ivi, p. 71.
[68] Ivi, p. 72.
[69] *Ibidem.*
[70] *Ibidem.*
[71] Ivi, p. 74.

and itself without any element of judgment? Or was the *cognizing name* a link to divine judgment in its own right?

If Benjamin had accepted the Augustinian or Pseudo-Dionysian appropriation of Plato altogether, rather than piecemeal, he would probably have been forced to view human moral judgment as a postlapsarian emanation of divine judgment. Even a stronger commitment to Platonism would have exorcised the spectre of dualism with a more rigorous definition of evil as absence. As an apparent deist incorporating some Christian and Platonic insights, however, Benjamin struggles considerably with finding a place for human judgment. This is the problem at the heart of 1921's *Critique of Violence*. In this essay, Benjamin distinguishes between state violence, which is dualistic and hence pagan[72], and divine violence, which is the only remedy for the arbitrary cruelty inevitably engendered by the former. Legal violence is arbitrary self-affirmation for the state, which does not preserve *legal ends* but *the law itself*[73]. *Law reaffirms itself*[74], exactly as the violence of pagan gods was their

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[72] In summary: the state maintains its existence by asserting a monopoly on violence (p. 238). The use of violence by individuals is forbidden not because it threatens the natural dignity or rights of other people but because it constitutes an existential threat to the state (p. 239). Hence state violence relies on a dualistic state/nonstate distinction, although the dualism is more apparent in enforcing bodies like the military (p. 241). The general strike, for Benjamin, is as much a potential annihilation of state power as is divine violence, although there is no justification for this belief beyond Marxist fideism. A military coup (p. 240), for example, would not constitute the same kind of existential threat as it would inevitably establish a new state (which Benjamin does not consider to be a threat with proletarian rule). Benjamin generalizes this to the historical emergence of polities through conquest and dares to assert that *violence crowned by fate is the origin of law* (p. 242), just as pagan violence is the mere self-assertion of the gods (p. 248, see below). The two, (pagan) divine self-assertion and state self-assertion, are functionally equivalent: *Far from inaugurating a purer sphere, the mythic manifestation of immediate violence shows itself fundamentally identical with all legal violence* (p. 249). Here we see Benjamin's typical pattern: assertion of the superiority or even truth of monotheism, but denial of its ability to leave observable traces in reality.

[73] Ivi, p. 239.

[74] Ivi, p. 242.

mere manifestation[75]. The violence of the Judaeo-Christian God is infinitely removed[76] from this pagan-state violence as it *expiates*[77], which Benjamin equates with the *abolition of state power*[78]. It is sacramental rather than contingent, and *pure divine violence*[79] also existed anterior to mythic and state violence, which *bastardized [it] with law*[80]. Benjamin is ambivalent on whether humanly apprehensible manifestations of Judaeo-Christian divine violence exist. He proposes *education*[81] as a potential manifestation at least of natural law if not of divine law, as well as the general strike[82], but concedes that the expiation distinguishing divine from pagan violence is not *visible to men*[83]. Positive law, for Benjamin, is here synonymous with pagan dualism, serving the same (dubious) function as human judgment in *On Language*. This is opposed to the medieval scholastic conception of positive law as a corrupted but necessary emanation of divine law[84].

Indeed, were it not for the ambiguous status of judgment and law, Benjamin's essays through the early 1920s could be categorized as belonging to a relatively conventional strain of Platonism. In *Language and Logic*, from 1920-1, he endorses the *deification of the verbal concept* or a *deification of the words*[85]. The equation of the two is not a lapse, as Benjamin will still refer to Plato's *deification of*

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[75] Ivi, p. 248.

[76] *In all spheres God opposes myth* (p. 249).

[77] Ivi, p. 249.

[78] Ivi, p. 252.

[79] *Ibidem*.

[80] *Ibidem*.

[81] Ivi, p. 238.

[82] Ivi, p. 239. Benjamin's Marxism has led him effectively to deify the proletarian general strike. In his view, proletarian rule will not assert a new version of (natural or positive) state law, but abolish the state permanently (p. 246).

[83] Ivi, p. 252.

[84] See footnote 26.

[85] Ivi, p. 273.

the verbal concept as late as 1925[86], but the idea of linguistic multi-plicity is more positively addressed than it was in *On Language*:

> *that multiplicity would simply amount to the contradiction of a pri-mordial and God-willed unity, but the multiplicity of languages is not the product of decadence any more than is the multiplicity of peoples.*[87]

But the relationship between this multiplicity and divine unity remains unclear. In Benjamin's account of Platonism, *the higher does not devour the lower. Instead, it rules over it*, but this is only true in the realm of *essences*[88] and in the realm of pure language in Benjamin's distorsive account, denying this Platonic model any extension into politics or even into society in general. In *The Philosophy of History of the Late Romantics and the Historical School* (1921), Benjamin reiterates his belief in the medieval chain of be-ing, *the complex layers that compose the world and its best features [which] have in part an ontological status, which is to say that they form a scale that advances from existence to appearance*[89]. He also sees the philosophy of the modern nation, which *since the Middle Ages*[90] has lost knowledge of this chain, as *oscillat[ing] helplessly between the ethical and the aesthetic*[91]*,* thanks to an unjustified *ideal of an unspoiled state of nature*[92], when *the links between them can be clarified by theology*[93] alone. This theology would take the form of *religious and pragmatic … observation*[94], which would presum-

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[86] W. Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, preface G. Steiner, trans. J. Osborne, Verso, London 1998, p. 36.
[87] W. Benjamin, *Selected Writings* … cit., p. 273.
[88] *Ibidem*.
[89] Ivi, p. 284.
[90] *Ibidem*.
[91] Ivi, p. 285.
[92] *Ibidem*.
[93] *Ibidem*.
[94] *Ibidem*.

ably involve a kind of non-dualistic judgment. Benjamin refuses to explain his terms, preferring to posit an empirical theology without clarifying how it might circumvent or recover judgment.

The same ambiguity appears in 1920's *Theologico-Political Fragment*, which rejects all earthly teleology in favor of a kingdom of God which is entirely outside history. Benjamin follows Bloch in rejecting theocracy as an intermediate point between positive law and the divine kingdom, which also is consistent with Augustine. He also encourages *world politics*[95] to accelerate (i.e. become more violent) and exhaust itself. Yet this exists simultaneously with the idea that the *suffering* of the *inner man* contains some *immediate Messianic intensity*[96], a validly Augustinian[97] and Jewish[98] position. If taken seriously, this would mean that suffering and martyrdom by individuals could put the world right in some concrete sense. Yet all Benjamin can do is criticize the Enlightenment fixation on personal worldly happiness without elaborating on the curative properties of personal suffering (this might force or at least encourage him to profess belief in a human afterlife, an idea to which he is resistant). The following year, in *The Task of the Translator*, although Benjamin apparently professes belief in the real divinity of Scripture[99], he posits the discrete work of art as a kind of second best thing to scripture, to an extent where Benjamin is willing to subordinate human beings to artworks. *Life [is] not limited to organic corporeality*[100]*, nor by such tenuous factors as sensation and soul*[101], and *the afterlife of works of*

[95] W. Benjamin, *Theologico-Political Fragment,* in E. Mendieta (ed.), *The Frankfurt School on Religion*, Routledge, London 2005, p. 264.

[96] Ivi, pp. 263-264.

[97] G.B. Ladner, *The Idea of Reform* … cit., p. 184.

[98] G. Scholem, *Messianic Idea* … cit., pp. 197-202. This only applies to the Lurianic kabbalah, which is accepted by orthodoxy, and not to messianic or heretical movements.

[99] W. Benjamin, *Selected Writings* … cit., p. 260.

[100] Ivi, pp. 254-255.

[101] Ivi, p. 255.

art [is] far easier to recognize than that of living creatures[102], making them a *special and high form of life*[103]. In summary: works of art have an afterlife and people do not. Here, for the first time explicitly, we see the idea of a discrete object which can bypass humanity in its connection to God. Although in *On Language as Such* we saw nature in general potentially having a more immediate relationship with God than is permitted to man, here for the first time we see an object (works of art) receiving an afterlife denied to man.

Myth and Sacrament: Pseudo-Dionysian Ontology in Benjamin's Commentary on Goethe

1922's *Goethe's Elective Affinities* sees Benjamin drifting back into medieval Christian positions, launched against Goethe's romantic tellurism. Uncharacteristically, Benjamin defends the institution of marriage as a form of spiritual discipline built into human life, a link between earth and heaven, where in his view Goethe sees it as a trial to be overcome before one meets one's real lover in heaven, trivializing *its moral necessity*[104]. By documenting *its decline [into] the juridical* Goethe ignores *the moral constitution of this bond*[105]. *In its dissolution, everything human turns into appearance, and the mythic alone remains as essence*. Benjamin detects Goethe's endorsement of this return to the mythic and pagan, the melting of the lovers into *the tellurian element*[106], or at minimum his acceptance of the inevitability of such decadence[107]. In this essay there is nothing of Benjamin's romantic longing for communion with or liberation of nature. The telluric forces are unequivocally evil.

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[102] *Ibidem*.
[103] *Ibidem*.
[104] Ivi, p. 299.
[105] Ivi, p. 302.
[106] Ivi, p. 303.
[107] *Ibidem*.

> *Natural life, which in man preserves its innocence only so long as natural life binds itself to something higher, drags the human down. With the disappearance of supernatural life in man, his natural life turns into guilt, even without his committing an act contrary to ethics.*[108]

Although the lovers do not consummate their affair and so manage to abide by the natural law, their lack of faith results in an infinite piling-up of guilt, and *every one of [their] velleities*[109] *brings fresh guilt upon [them], every one of [their] deeds will bring disaster upon [them]*[110]. In correlation with this guilt, the objects around them begin to come alive, and in coming alive they turn hellish[111].

They are only hellish, however, for Benjamin the moralist. Goethe does not mean for the return to the telluric and mythic to appear so malign. He sacrifices his lovers' bodies to nature so that their natural urges can be divinized and their adultery can continue above in a *heavenly ascension of wicked desires*[112]. He has reduced language to nature, allowing *the empire of the ur-phenomena*[113], to subsume even thought by the *idolatry of nature*[114]. And Goethe must pay a price for his paganism and narcissism, which is the extreme fear of death[115]. He could have avoided this fate had he recognized that *what is proper to the truly divine is the logos: the divine does not ground life without truth, nor does it ground the rite without theology*[116]. But Goethe wants theology without theology. He has stolen the idea of virginity from Christianity and attempted to paganize it into pure natural law, equating it with the death brought

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[108] Ivi, p. 308.
[109] Note Benjamin's scholastic usage.
[110] *Ibidem*.
[111] *Ibidem*.
[112] Ivi, p. 310. *Wicked desires* is an inline quotation of FH Jacobi.
[113] Ivi, p. 315.
[114] Ivi, p. 316.
[115] Ivi, p. 317.
[116] Ivi, p. 326.

by the lovers' failure to consummate their affair, a virgin sacrifice which is doubly pagan as it is also a suicide[117]. In Christianity, *natural innocence* is unequivocal and pure, an expression of *spiritual life*, whereas *purely sexual phenomena*[118] are mere absence, a denial of character. Goethe's version of natural innocence is *not purity but its semblance*[119]. Ottilie refuses to explain her decision to die[120], and this, for Benjamin, is a sign of her total lack of a Christian spiritual life, since *no moral decision can enter into life without verbal form*[121]. In her muteness, *the morality of the will to die that animates her becomes questionable*[122]. She is a suicide, and *voluntary death* is totally incompatible with *holy absolution*[123]. The whole book is the manifestation of a demonic *speechless drive*[124].

Because the characters are only able to perceive their natural drives for one another, and lack a capacity for the spiritual, they are unable to find absolution.

> *Whereas in true reconciliation the individual reconciles himself with God and only in this way conciliates other human beings, it is peculiar to [the characters'] reconciliation that the individual wants others to make their peace with one another and only in this way become reconciled with God*.[125]

Because of their lack of linguistic communion with God, they are totally dependent on appearance, despairing at *every waning of beauty*[126] whereas in true

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[117] Ivi, p. 335.
[118] *Ibidem*.
[119] *Ibidem*.
[120] Ivi, p. 336.
[121] Ivi, p. 336.
[122] *Ibidem*.
[123] *Ibidem*.
[124] Ivi, p. 337.
[125] Ivi, p. 342.
[126] Ivi, p. 344.

> *love, the beauty of the beloved is not decisive … And so one must emphasize that it is not true love which reigns in Ottilie and Eduard. Love becomes perfect only where, elevated above its nature, it is saved through God's intervention*.[127]

In *redeemed true love*, the characters could find *true ransoming of the deepest imperfection which belongs to the nature of man himself*[128]. As he wraps up the essay, Benjamin contrasts Goethe's investment in superficial beauty or semblance (glamour)[129] with the Platonic theory of beauty. While beauty requires glamour, glamour *does not comprise the essence of beauty* but rather *points down more deeply* to the apophatic truth contained within[130]. It is a *veil* and *beauty appears as such only in what is veiled*[131]. This is almost a direct quote from Dionysius: *For it is not possible that the thearchic ray illumine us otherwise than as anagogically cloaked in the variety of the sacred veils*[132]. Despite moments of ambivalence, a blessing of the ungodly lovers in the essay's last line (*Only for the sake of the hopeless ones have we been given hope*)[133] this is Benjamin in lockstep with the Dionysian theory of beauty and even with Catholic morality. His most positive citation of another critic is of the Jesuit Alexander Baumgartner[134]. In 1923's *Even the Sacramental Migrates into Myth*, which is also about *Elective Affinities,* Benjamin presents two choices: sacrament and *satanic victory*[135]. Benjamin was in the midst of an affair resembling the one described in

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[127] Ivi, pp. 343-345.

[128] Ivi, p. 345.

[129] Eiland uses *semblance* for *Schein,* but a better translation would be *glamour*, as I established in conversation with Fredric Jameson while developing this paper.

[130] W. Benjamin, *Selected Writings* … cit., p. 350.

[131] *Ibidem*.

[132] *Celestial Hierarchy* I.2.121. Proclus uses similar language but his context is demiurgic.

[133] W. Benjamin, *Selected Writings* … cit., p. 356.

[134] Ivi, p. 347.

[135] Ivi, p. 403.

the novel[136], guilt over which may account for his moralism, but his work on *Elective Affinities* is primarily interesting for its rejection of the *idolatry of nature*. Unlike most of his subsequent work, it is explicitly theocentric and even seems to reconcile divinity, language (logos), theology and human judgment (in the form of Christian sexual morality).

On the Cusp: Baroque Recursion and Allegory in The Origin of German Tragic Drama

Walter Benjamin wrote *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* in Frankfurt from 1924-25. The affair was over and Benjamin was under pressure from his wife Dora's parents to find a job. Ignoring their pleas, he attempted to submit this piece as a postdoctoral dissertation (*Habilitationsschrift*) to the University of Frankfurt[137]. It is by far his most ambitious work. He attempts to replicate the Baroque *Weltanschauung* in the very structure of the dissertation, which he calls a *scholastic tractate*. For Benjamin, this is equivalent to a series of fragments piled up seemingly at random, yet together pointing to an apophatic, unspeakable yet absolutely transcendent truth. Benjamin recognizes in Baroque allegory a version of this eclectic apophasis, as well as another version in the era of High Scholasticism[138], with important differences. Ori Rotlevy has argued persuasively that Benjamin intended to bring back the heteroglossic but ultimately anagogical format pioneered by Abelard and perfected by St. Thomas Aquinas, which is built upon seeming paradox yet ends by *resolving the contradiction*[139]. In other words, despite taking

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[136] H. Eiland, W.M. Jennings, *Walter Benjamin* … cit., p. 148.

[137] W. Benjamin, *The Origin* … cit., pp. 7-8.

[138] O. Rotlevy. *Presentation as Indirection, Indirection as Schooling: The Two Aspects of Benjamin's Scholastic Method*, in "Continental Philosophy Review" 50/4 (2017), p. 502.

[139] *Ibidem*.

the form of a disputation, the scholastic treatise was *not dialectic* as it did not conceive truth dialectically[140]. The dialectic aspect, as Rotlevy argues, was *part of an ascetic schooling* meant to expurgate the sin of *possessiveness*[141], a pedagogical exercise associated with *loosening up the subject*[142], although Rotlevy concedes that Benjamin may have seen something of flânerie in the process.

Whether flânerie entered the picture or not, there are quite harsh arguments against plural truth in *Origin*. The most explicit of these arguments is historical, a new mode of thinking for Benjamin. One of the main preoccupations of the thesis is the historical placement of the Baroque between medieval theocentrism and modern secularism (which may be anthropocentric or object-centric). The political form corresponding to the Baroque cultural movement was absolutism, which purported to deify the monarch. Over the course of the seventeenth century *a new concept of sovereignty emerged … from a final discussion of the juridical doctrines of the Middle Ages*[143]. Rather than Christian subjects commanded to coexist in peace, monarchs became masters of their fate, demigods in their exercise of absolute right. With the Gallican articles of 1682, *the absolute right of the monarch had been established before the Curia*[144]. The excuse had been a *state of emergency*[145], a millenarian moment in which royal guidance had become exigent. In the absence of apocalyptic consummation, the state of exception had become the new norm. Through the sovereign's absolute power, *all earthly things are gathered together and exalted*[146] in him, in preparation for an end which never manifested itself. Since this had happened in more than one country, the result was a kind of theomachy. *Princes should keep*

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[140] Ivi, p. 504.
[141] Ivi, p. 510.
[142] Ivi, p. 514.
[143] W. Benjamin, *The Origin* … cit., p. 65.
[144] *Ibidem*.
[145] *Ibidem*.
[146] Ivi, p. 66.

well away from each other[147]. Where once Christendom had been *integrated in the process of redemption*[148] under papal guidance, it became a set of warring provinces with no fundamental meaning assigned to their political actions.

However, in each royal court something of the *hierarchical strain of the Middle Ages*[149] survived, cut off from divine transcendence. Even Counter-Reformation Catholic drama *remained confined to a context of strict immanence, without any access to the beyond of the mystery plays*[150]. The distinction was a fine one. In the Middle Ages, literature presented *the futility of world events and the transience of the creature as stations on the road to salvation*[151]. Baroque drama, by contrast, *is taken up entirely with the hopelessness of the earthly condition*[152], although there were national variations. In German baroque drama the reduction of reality to a pointless language-game was more sharply felt, whereas in Spain the king stepped in for God to an extent, restoring a semblance (but no more than a semblance) of order. However, in Benjamin's view, the feeling was universal in Europe that reality, deprived of metaphysics, had been reduced to recursion *ad nihilum.* God has absconded, and man's reflective capacity

> *repeats itself infinitely, and reduces to immeasurability the circle which it encloses. Both these aspects of reflection are equally essential: the playful miniaturization of reality and the introduction of a reflective infinity of thought into the finite space of a profane fate. For the world of the drama of fate is … a self-enclosed world.*[153]

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[147] Ivi, p. 67.
[148] Ivi, p. 78.
[149] Ivi, p. 79.
[150] Ivi, p. 80.
[151] Ivi, p. 81.
[152] *Ibidem*.
[153] Ivi, p. 83.

In other words, whether explicitly, as when the Tudor court proclaimed the king of England to be the vicar of Christ, beholden to no higher human authority, or implicitly, as when the Habsburgs announced their veto power over the diffusion of papal bulls in Spain, royal absolutism rested on the denial of any intermediary between the monarch and God. The effect was the proliferation of hermetically-sealed courts, microcosms of the medieval order with the king rather than God as supreme being, whose religious culture reproduced the political theory: with the removal of mediation, God's distance from man seemed less a metaphor and more an immeasurable physical distance. As a result, human and material hierarchy supplanted metaphysical hierarchy in Baroque literary production, the microcosm generating further microcosms in plays-within-plays and the like (*the playful miniaturization of reality*). Like the multitude of absolute princes who confined metaphysics to their courts, there existed a plenitude of apparently hermetic baroque allegories, each supposedly meant to approximate the divine, but in concrete terms tending to descend into the chaotic proliferation of nature. Corollary to this anarchic pluralism was a cultural obsession, an extension of the recursion of miniaturization, with reflection, the two concepts combined in the endless recursive reflection of the *mise en abîme* or hall of mirrors. Benjamin's next step is to unify these tendencies into a total theory of the Baroque: on the one hand, baroque allegory attempted to seek the divine by going down, so to speak, into nature; and, on the other hand, its obsession with recursion, with smaller and smaller microcosms, meant that this process of "going down" is necessarily infinite. But (and this is the first appearance of what would become the Benjaminian monad) this infinite quality is, for Benjamin, itself subsumed or limited by the divine, so the allegory succeeds in revealing God after all. At the last moment, divinely-imposed limits to recursion announce themselves, and the whole apparatus reverses itself and teleports up into the bosom of the Creator.

Baroque allegories are hence both fractal extensions of nature and flashpoint bridges to truth. They contain both an *organic, mountain and plant-like quality* and a *momentary quality*[154]. At the ultimate end of each allegory or each pile of metaphors is an instant of sudden reversal which reveals the face of God. This is because, despite the apparent abscension of God the new law of absolutism, *the old rules of metaphysics*[155] still apply. At some point the practical limits to material nihilism manifest themselves in abject nature and, in a *flash of lightning which suddenly illuminates the dark night*[156], the *all-too-earthly* baroque allegory reveals *the transfigured face of nature ... in the light of redemption*[157]. In a stray maxim, there is a *flash of light in the entangling darkness of allegory*[158] and the whole apparatus must *turn around so that all its darkness, vainglory, and godlessness seems to be nothing but self-delusion*[159]. God or nature has set a *limit ... upon allegorical contemplation*[160]. What formerly appeared to be *secret, privileged knowledge*[161] is lost in the *infinity of a world without hope*[162] and the allegory, like a Stoic or early modern martyr, *faithlessly leaps forward to the idea of resurrection*[163]. The pile of natural allegories is a ruin, but it is the only form which can preserve *the image of beauty to the very last*[164]. This bears some analogy to Augustine's theory of divine illumination. For Augustine, a teacher can communicate only so much to a student through words, which are in this context basically instrumental. The moment of understanding comes when linguistic critical mass is reached and

[154] Ivi, p. 165.
[155] Ivi, p. 177.
[156] Ivi, p. 163.
[157] Ivi, p. 166.
[158] Ivi, p. 197.
[159] Ivi, p. 232.
[160] *Ibidem*.
[161] *Ibidem*.
[162] *Ibidem*.
[163] Ivi, p. 233.
[164] Ivi, p. 235.

truth illuminates the student's mind in a *flash*[165]. However, Augustine does not necessarily associate the mass of words and signs with nature and his theory is neither mystical nor historicizing. This raises the question of whether Benjamin's account does not apply to all allegory (including allegory which does not point to divinity) or even to nonliteral speech in general. The answer, in Benjamin's terms, is twofold. First, the assumed distance between God and human life in Baroque metaphysics was much greater (often potentially infinite) than in medieval Christian metaphysics or even postsocratic metaphysics in general. Second, although the signifier and signified are never equivalent in nonliteral speech, Baroque allegory is unique in positing a kind of oppositeness or reversal between the two (unity approached through chaos, or charity approached through moral desolation).

This historical uniqueness, and its distance from traditional Christian allegory, can be clarified by the references to Augustine in *Origin*. They are not connected with Benjamin's hope for apophasis but with his suspicion that Baroque allegory may be demonic. The first simply cites the Bishop of Hippo as a source for the medieval fear of nakedness. Only in Heaven, Augustine says, can nakedness be enjoyed without fear of impurity[166]. Likewise Augustine's fear of demons residing in those statues of the pagan gods which survived into his time, cited in *Origin* to buttress Benjamin's notion that the incorporation of ancient gods into Baroque allegory could not but have been intended as demonic, for when these gods survive into the Christian era *they become pagan, and they become creatures*[167]. It is not simply their nakedness which preoccupies Benjamin. The equation of knowledge in the sense of judgment with the demonic here reappears from *On Language*, newly endowed with Catholic

[165] P. King, *Preface*, in Augustine of Hippo, *Against the Academicians and The Teacher*, Hackett, Indianapolis 1995, p. xvi.

[166] Augustine, *De civitate dei* 22.24, cited in W. Benjamin, *The Origin* … cit., p. 222.

[167] W. Benjamin, *The Origin* … cit., p. 225.

citations. Saint Francis of Assisi had warned that *one single demon knows more than you*[168]. Augustine had gone even further in *The City of God*, writing that *demons are so called because of their knowledge*[169]. But demonic knowledge will ultimately reveal itself to be *nonsense*, the absence of knowledge, a realization which triggers the final, apophatic leap of faith. Benjamin had already intimated this when he wrote in *On Language* that

> *the knowledge of … good and evil is, in the profound sense in which Kierkegaard uses the word, 'prattle,' and knows only one purification and elevation, to which the prattling man, the sinner, was therefore submitted: judgment*.[170]

This is reconcilable with Benjamin's Augustinian criticism of allegory, but it sits ill at ease with Benjamin's suspicion of judgment as postlapsarian and tainted. It is not at all clear whether the Benjamin of *Origin* is trying to rationalize his approbation of allegory in semi-Christian terms, with the insertion of the final apophatic leap back to God, or whether he is genuinely suspicious of Baroque political theology. In the most likely scenario, both were true at once. The idea of a set of recursive microcosms which are still ultimately theological was very appealing to Benjamin, and another aspect of this fascination was his growing interest in Leibniz.

In an extended prologue to *Origin*, Benjamin oscillates between describing himself as a scholastic nominalist, denying all reality to universals, and revealing his approbation for Leibniz's theory of monads[171], which resemble universals with important differences. Despite that universals are invented, arbitrary categories *to help us come to grips with an infinite series of varied spiritual manifestations and widely differing personalities*. Benjamin believes enough in the

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[168] Ivi, p. 230.
[169] *Ibidem*.
[170] W. Benjamin, *Selected Writings* … cit., p. 71.
[171] See below.

world of ideas to equate its inhabitants with Leibnizian monads. *The idea is a monad. The being that enters into it, with its past and subsequent history ... an indistinct abbreviation of the rest of the world of ideas, just as, according to Leibniz's* Discourse on Metaphysics *(1686), every single monad contains, in an indistinct way, all the other*[172]. Yet Benjamin demonstrates himself to be more Platonic than Leibnizian shortly thereafter. There are higher and lower ideas and *the higher the order of ideas, the more perfect the representation contained within them*[173], which is to say that mimetic corruption affects even the world of ideas. This is Pseudo-Dionysian: the *images and likenesses of … divine paradigms* become clearer and clearer until they disappear into divine apophasis[174]. In Benjamin, the higher ideas are equivalent to *objects of theology without which truth is inconceivable*. In Leibniz, there are higher and lower monads, but all monads are microcosms, which does not appear to be consistently the case in Benjamin. Beauty is a lower-order idea which is subordinate to truth, which is its guarantor. External phenomena are transient and can only be comprehended if we *rescue* them by subsuming them into ideas[175], which in turn only come to life when examples manifest themselves. Benjamin has here endorsed two incompatible cosmologies. On the one hand, there is a chain of ideas running from higher to lower, from less to more accurate approximations of unitary truth. On the other hand, there are the monads, which are presumably equivalent to the baroque allegories in the body of the dissertation, pieces of litter on a level field blocked off from God's light. Their relationship to truth is far less clear. If each

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[172] W. Benjamin, *The Origin* … cit., p. 47.

[173] *Ibidem*.

[174] Pseudo-Dionysius, *De divinis nominibus* 7.3.869-872, translated by P. Rorem, Clarendon, Oxford 1998, p. 229.

[175] W. Benjamin, *The Origin* … cit., p. 23. This idea of rescuing phenomena is also a central feature of the *Arcades Project,* although time does not permit me to elaborate at any length on this aspect of Benjamin's unfinished work.

monad contains within itself the whole chain of being and anagogy, the field is not so level as Benjamin's nominalism would imply.

This makes considerably more sense if we return to Benjamin's scholastic influences and specifically to John Duns Scotus. Benjamin had first encountered Duns Scotus through Heidegger's habilitation thesis, published as a book in 1916, and had decided to read him for himself, having found Heidegger's reading superficial[176]. He began to teach himself scholastic Latin and made more progress than he would ever make in Hebrew. The only surviving fruit of this endeavor was a short, unpublished note written in 1920 and entitled *According to the Theory of Duns Scotus*. In it Benjamin argues that the Duns Scotan theory of language is circular: signifier and signified point to each other. The only way out is to glean out something which exists in signifiers which is greater than signified. The signifier is only based on the signified *insofar as its material determination is concerned*[177] which is circumscribed by a *modus essendi* contingent on the larger institution of language. Ideas, forms, categories, images, monads: whatever we choose to call intermediate quantities, they remain a byproduct of divine language in this fragment. Although Duns Scotus did not have a developed theory of language, his cosmology left little room for its divinity.

In the early Duns Scotus, there is some idea of a procession from God to ideas to matter, which vanishes by his mature output[178]. This development arose from Duns Scotus's discomfort with analogies, which he perceived to be a form of equivocation[179]. In order to dispel the scholastic analogy, Duns Scotus also had to suppress the idea

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[176] M. Rrenban, *Wild, Unforgettable Philosophy*, Lexington Books, Lanham 2005, p. 307. The Habilitationschrift is *Duns Scotus: Theory of Categories and of Meaning*.

[177] W. Benjamin, *Selected Writings* … cit., vol. I, p. 228.

[178] T. Bates, *Duns Scotus and the Problem of Universals*, Continuum, New York 2012, p. ix-x.

[179] J.P. Hochschild, *The Semantics of Analogy*, University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame 2010, p. 42.

of anagogy in the material world. *Of God there is no phantasm*[180].
We cannot understand God by perceiving creatures and identifying
him as a concept *that is analogous to a concept of a creature*[181]. If
God shares anything with a creature this similarity does not rest on
analogy. If God and nature were not univocal it would be *impossi-
ble to have some concept of God in a natural way, which is false*[182].
Anagogy exists to an extent, but this anagogy is a property of nature
which is not only inferior to God but also to man, nature, and the
objects in which it is contained. *A concept of God based on a creat-
ed object is less perfect than the word of the object [itself] because
as an equivocal effect it is less similar to its cause*[183]. Duns Scotus
recognizes how problematic this subordination of anagogy to matter
can be. *Every concept of God will be less perfect than [for instance]
the proper perfect concept of white*[184]. His answer to this problem
rests not on analogy but on reason. Anagogy is only more perfect
than the nature which holds it *in a less strict sense*[185] (Duns Scotus
cannot say *analogically*) because we can use our reason to extrapo-
late our observations *from limitation* to *infinity*[186]. Merely thinking
analogically would lead us to say that *God is a stone* by observing
a stone[187]. Objects contain their own names and concepts[188], but the
divine concept resides far beyond them. We observe only imperfec-
tion (which Duns Scotus rather Platonistically associates with differ-
ence and determination[189]) around us and cannot but conceive God

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[180] John Duns Scotus, *Ordinatio* 1.3.1.1, in J. van den Bercken (ed.), *On Being
and Cognition*, Fordham, New York 2016, p. 41.
[181] Ivi, *Ord.* 1.3.2.26, p. 51.
[182] Ivi, *Ord.* 1.3.2.35, p. 54.
[183] Ivi, *Ord.* 1.3.2.49, p. 61.
[184] Ivi, *Ord.* 1.3.2.50, p. 61.
[185] *Ibidem*.
[186] *Ibidem*.
[187] Ivi, *Ord.* 1.3.2.40, p. 57.
[188] Ivi, *Ord.* 1.3.2.44, p. 59.
[189] Ivi, *Ord.* 1.3.2.21, p. 47.

as the negation of an imperfection[190]. It is immediately clear why this theory was appealing to Benjamin. Once again, we see vanishingly small material microcosms which, with absolute abruptness, reverse themselves and reveal the face of God. Unlike Augustinian or Dionysian anagogy, there is nothing gradual or linear about Duns Scotan anagogy[191].

Duns Scotus is not, precisely speaking, a nominalist. Categories exist objectively outside the mind of man. But they do not exist in the mind of God. They exist objectively in particular objects, and like anagogy are subordinate to their objects[192]. How man moves from perception of these natural categories (which, being material, should be too particular to share any property) to assigning them a common name goes unexplained. Both the theory of anagogy and the theory of categories bear some resemblance to the cosmology which appears in Leibniz's *Monadology*. For Leibniz, there is a *certain perfection* or *self-sufficiency*[193] in everything which exists. This autarky can be isolated to discrete ideas or monads. These are not just angels and human souls but also *souls of beasts* and *other entelechies*[194] pertaining to nature. These monads are so sufficient that Leibniz dares to describe them as *incorporeal automata*[195]. Human souls are distinguished from animal souls because they contain *knowledge of necessary and eternal truths*, granting them access to reason[196]. All monads are ultimately somehow generated by *continual fulgurations of the divinity*[197], as in Dionysius, but this is not

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[190] Ivi, *Ord.* 1.3.2.57, p. 64.

[191] Many scholars see Duns Scotus as nearly a Protestant thinker, an idea which appears to have been introduced by Max Weber in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism.*

[192] Ivi, *Ord.* 2.3.1.1-2.3.1.6.

[193] G.W. Leibniz, *Monadology*, trans. L. Strickland, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh 2014, p. 17.

[194] Ivi, p. 16.

[195] Ivi, p. 17.

[196] Ivi, p. 19.

[197] Ivi, p. 23.

exactly consistent with Leibniz's doctrine of *self-sufficiency*, nor is the idea that the whole universe is contained within each monad[198]. The precise links between *the physical kingdom of nature* and the *moral kingdom of grace* are left to apophasis[199]. Leibniz's idea of anagogy[200] as something subordinate to nature which we can nonetheless extrapolate to infinity (and from infinity to God) is similar to Duns Scotus's and also to Benjamin's account of Baroque allegory. The common factor underwriting all three is divine absconsion and self-sequestration at a potentially infinite distance from matter. In practical terms, this absconsion makes understanding of God a matter of empirical observation followed by rational speculation about the observed substrate, rather than a result of prayer, asceticism, religious practice, or of mysticism by most definitions of the word. The contemplation of ideas or categories has no real place in any of these schemata.

Benjamin's correspondence from the early 1920s reveals a man deeply conflicted about the place of ideas in his cosmology. At some moments they are Platonic forms (lacking any infinite or microcosmic quality and orderable by proximity to God), at others Leibnizian monads (i.e. somehow both microcosmic infinities and potentially ordered from lesser to greater), and at still other moments they are engines of an extrapolation from empirical difference to the divine infinite as in Duns Scotus. While there is an unambiguous condemnation of Gnosticism in one letter to Scholem[201], its author simultaneously sought after an impossibly autarkic *way of creating things which is not imitation*[202]. With some of his interlocutors, notably the Catholic Habsburg royalist Hugo von Hofmannstahl[203], who

[198] Ivi, p. 27.

[199] Ivi, p. 32.

[200] See the *Tentamen anagogicum* for Leibniz's understanding of anagogy.

[201] W. Benjamin, *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin,* translated by M.R. Jacobson and E.M. Jacobson, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1994, p. 190.

[202] Ivi, p. 207.

[203] At the end of his life, Benjamin would eulogize Hofmannstahl as a man acutely aware of his own original sin. See W. Benjamin, *Selected Writings* … cit.,

had written him fan mail after reading the essay on *Elective Affin-*
ities, and the Protestant theologian Florens Christian Rang, Benja-
min adopts a Christian-Platonic attitude. *Ideas*, Benjamin writes to
Rang, *are the stars, in contrast to the sun of revelation*[204]. But soon
the ambiguity returns. The stars struggle to escape the sun. They do
not await judgment day[205] with the rest of the universe. Their *inten-*
sive infinitude, Benjamin concludes, *characterizes them as monads*
[206]. And the sun is a star among many. Ideas are equivalent to natural
monads, for *Plato defined the scope of the theory of ideas as the*
domain of art and nature[207]. To Hofmannstahl Benjamin writes that
every truth has its home, its ancestral palace in language, and *this*
palace is constructed out of the oldest logoi [208]. Are the logoi mi-
cro-truths or monads? Did the language or the logoi come first? Is
there an objective relationship between the two? If so, does it corre-
spond to the pre-Reformation universe in which the king, a Christian
among many, snugly inhabits a metaphysical hierarchy? Or are the
monads absolute princes, supervising hierarchies emanating from
themselves alone, doomed to exist in a void in which no communion
is possible with other monads? Benjamin is silent.

A Policy of Acceleration: Oscillations in the Marxist Benjamin

   In early 1924, Benjamin had mentioned Marxist views with
dismissive ire, taking out subscriptions to monarchist newspapers.
Over the course of the following year, Benjamin began to claim to
Scholem that he was on the verge of creating an entirely original
politics of his own volition. He began to refer to himself, sporadi-

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vol. IV, p. 415.
   [204] *Ibidem*.
   [205] *Ibidem*.
   [206] *Ibidem*.
   [207] Ivi, vol. I, p. 389.
   [208] *Ibidem*.

cally, as a Marxist. Scholem warned him off it; by 1926 Benjamin was claiming, with his typical disregard for consistency, that communism was nonsense but *this does not diminish the value of communist action one iota* exactly *because there are no meaningfully political goals*[209]. This distrust of politics had, as we have seen, been present in Benjamin's work all along, but as the monads swung into focus and God out of it Benjamin became specifically enamored with materialism. Scholem still considered himself apolitical in a normal sense, and he did not react sympathetically to Benjamin's emergent desire to commit himself to the revolution[210]. He continued to try to pressure Benjamin intellectually in the direction of Jewish theology and practically into a move to Israel. Benjamin spent the latter part of the 1920s promising Scholem that he would learn Hebrew[211], although, perhaps with some self-awareness, he claimed that he would get around to it as soon as he had constructed a totally original metaphysics which could elevate matter to is properly deserved place.

Benjamin's correspondence with Scholem shows a lack of sincerity, promising Jewish literary projects which never materialized[212], and increasingly taking advantage of Scholem's anti-Christian leanings to condemn Christian thinkers essentially for being too theistic[213]. He rejects Scholem's solicitations at interesting him in kabbalah, although he occasionally defends Judaism as *better than Protestantism*[214]. Scholem saw Benjamin's newly external and historicizing view of religion as pandering, writing to Benjamin in 1934 that the latter was only capable of seeing divine law in prelapsarian terms, cutting it off from the present state of the world absolutely[215]. This had been a barrier to a full endorsement of theism in Benjamin's

[209] W. Benjamin, *The Correspondence* … cit., p. 301.

[210] Ivi, pp. 300-312.

[211] Ivi, pp. 348-349.

[212] *Ibidem*.

[213] Ivi, pp. 385-388.

[214] Ivi, p. 403.

[215] Ivi, p. 446.

earlier work, but now it had cut Benjamin off from seeing religion in any terms but historical ones, except where a completely abscondite and unapproachable divine law was concerned. Benjamin wrote back, characteristically, that earthly law is an inversion of divine law and therefore no bridge to Heaven[216]. Scholem, began to ignore his friend's intellectual projects and focused on the practical aspect of forcing Benjamin to leave Germany[217]. Eventually, realizing that Benjamin had no intention of learning Hebrew, Scholem exclaimed in 1931 that all Benjamin was doing was projecting acquired theological knowledge onto an unresponsive materiality, then deluding himself into thinking he was getting results[218].

Despite the disapproval he encountered from Scholem, Benjamin doubled down on his commitment to the primacy of the material. In 1932's *Privileged Thinking*, Benjamin lathers into a rage at the Catholic philosopher Theodor Haecker for proposing a *language-mysticism*[219] basically indistinguishable from the propositions of his own *On Language as Such*. It is Haecker's correlative humanism which particularly attracts Benjamin's ire. When Haecker refers to *the human*, Benjamin responds that *for someone schooled in the tradition of scholasticism, as Haecker obviously is, a statement of this kind requires an uncommon freedom from intellectual scruple*[220]. In other words, Haecker did not make enough concessions to nominalism, blithely assuming *the human* as a universal. Benjamin also accuses Haecker of assuming that *the West* is another such universal, a kind of *idolatry of the spirit*[221] against which Benjamin no longer has a sanatory, non-idolatrous monotheism to posit[222]. On the same

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[216] Ivi, p. 449.

[217] Ivi, pp. 393-398.

[218] Ivi, p. 375.

[219] W. Benjamin, *Selected Writings* … cit., vol. II p. 570.

[220] *Ibidem*.

[221] Ivi, vol. II.2 p. 573.

[222] Haecker does appear to have believed in *humanism* as among *the distinctive characteristics of Europe* ("Journal in the Night" article 615). But he rejects entirely the *"religion" of humanism and of this world* as an invention of Satan ("Journal

page, unfazed by the contradiction, Benjamin defines medieval allegory, positively, as a survival of the pagan gods, an idea which he had toyed with in *Origin* but subordinated to unitary truth[223]. The tension between Benjamin's monotheism and his monadology had reached a crisis point. Rejection of divine language, and of his own Judaeo-Christian past, had become Benjamin's only motive.

God Among the Monads: Benjamin's Final Return to Theology

Around 1935, Benjamin began to find a sort of stability in exile, although he continued to struggle with the addictions he had accumulated throughout his adult life[224]. His theoretical commitment continued to be to materialism, but a theological lexis began to creep back into his work. In *The Storyteller*, from 1936, Benjamin rehabilitates the Russian writer Nikolai Leskov as a believer in a kind of great chain of being, but one who places the *righteous man* near the top of his version of it, just behind *the mineral*[225] (for the nature-obsessed Benjamin, this privileging of the inanimate could only be good). Yet when Leskov and Hebel place man or nature at the top of their cosmologies they are *casuist[s]*[226], a word with strong early modern connotations, as though Leskov and Hebel were Jesuit heretics from the properly medieval chain of being. If the inversion of the great chain is sophistic, the implication is that Benjamin's model is still the medieval one. Benjamin's pattern in the mid-Thirties was to assume that theology is true, yet to praise those who tried to rid the world of it. In a letter to Scholem, Benjamin cites Kafka, with approbation, as the great destroyer of theology. In Kafka, he con-

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in the Night" article 540).

[223] W. Benjamin, *Selected Writings* … cit., vol. II.2 p. 573.

[224] Ivi, p. 484.

[225] W. Benjamin, *Selected Writings* … cit., vol. III, pp. 159-160.

[226] Ivi, p. 160.

cludes, *there is no doctrine to be learned*[227]. This is a citation of Benjamin's own statement in 1921's *Capitalism as Religion* that capitalism has replaced religion, but in capitalism *there is no specific body of dogma, no theology*[228]. In the same essay, Benjamin had dismissed Marx as simply an accelerationist proponent of capitalism. *Marx is a similar case [to Nietzsche and Freud]; the capitalism that refuses to change course becomes socialism*[229]. In 1936, Benjamin now subscribes to the same model except that he endorses acceleration.

Rather than the infinite horizon of socialism or a theology-free world, however, it was the monad-allegory of his earlier work which underwrote the attempt at reinventing metaphysics for the *Arcades Project*. This was not a simple historicist project built on aesthetic fascination with the Parisian nineteenth century. Benjamin wished to universalize his insights from observation of the arcades into a new vision of history constructed from the bottom up. However, the historical narrative provided by Benjamin in the *Arcades Project* often recapitulates the vision of the Baroque of *Origin*. History has been enshrined as heritage[230] and Benjamin sees it as his job to rescue it[231], even if this means resacralizing it[232]. For this reason *it is good to give materialist investigations a truncated ending*[233]: in other words, to make them into an immensely magnified Baroque allegory, which stops at the last minute as it reveals to the reader an infinitely abscondite truth. The same imagery recurs on a smaller scale, within historical investigations, where the epic view of history must be deconstructed by *interspersing it with ruins – that is, with the pres-*

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[227] Ivi, p. 326.

[228] Ivi, vol. I p. 288.

[229] Ivi, p. 289.

[230] W. Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, transl. by H. Eiland and K. McLaughlin, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, Cambridge 1999, p. 473, N.9.4.

[231] Benjamin means this in the same sense as when he refers to *rescuing phenomena* in *Origin.*

[232] See, for instance, Ivi, N3.2-N3.3., p. 462.

[233] Ivi, N.9a.2, p. 473.

ent[234]*,* although Benjamin is decidedly ambiguous on whether the *ruins* are *the present* because they lead up towards ahistorical truth or because all historical thinking is necessarily presentist[235]. The difference between the two has no practical implications: in either case, history must be dehistoricized by deriving some ahistorical (or useful) truth from its *revolutionary moments*[236]. Benjamin's theoretical approach to the *revolutionary moments* betrays something beyond mere utility when he reveals that *if the object of history is to be blasted out of the continuum of historical succession, that is because its monadological structure demands it*[237]. Each such moment, in a metaphysically determined manner, contains in its *interior its own fore-history and after-history*[238]. In this way Benjamin attempts to reconcile the critique of the concept of progress which he sees in Hermann Lotze, which is radically historicist, with the *denial of the notion of progress in the religious view of history*[239], which Lotze praises only because a purely material history logically *could not by any of its movements attain a goal lying out of its own plane*[240]. Ambiguity between the ahistorical-because-metaphysically-true and ahistorical-because-merely-useful-to-the-present hence permeates the whole apparent schema of the *Arcades Project.* References to theology carefully avoid resolving the ambiguity. *My thinking,* Benjamin writes, *is related to theology as a blotting pad is to ... ink. It is saturated with it. Were one to go by the blotter, however, nothing of what is written would remain*[241]. The obvious intimation is apophasis, but the metaphor is mixed: is theology writing or undifferentiated liquid ink? Perhaps Benjamin endorses his version of

[234] Ivi, N.9a.6, p. 474.
[235] *Ibidem. Every epoch with which [the materialist historian] occupies himself is only prehistory for the epoch he himself must live in.*
[236] Ivi, N.9a.5, p. 474.
[237] Ivi, N.10.3, p. 475.
[238] *Ibidem.*
[239] Ivi, N.13a.2, p. 479.
[240] *Ibidem*.
[241] Ivi, N.7a.7, p. 471.

Lotze, and is interested in theology only because it (in the form of Baroque metaphysics) can provide the template for the monad-allegories' escape from material univocity, a kind of noble lie, or perhaps he really equates the revolutionary catastrophe which he hopes to engender in the present with some truth above the material plane.

Regardless of his actual commitments, Benjamin often does speak as though he believes in the metaphysical reality of his monadology. The historian must gather *flashes*[242] of dialectic energy *suddenly emergent*[243] at the *genuine synthesis*[244] of time and space, of empiricism and metaphysics[245]. This is the endeavor of *historical materialism*[246]. The result will be an *immanent critique of the concept of progress*[247]. This correlates with Benjamin's contempt for progressive history, yet associates progress with redemption, and the latter quantity he does not entirely reject[248]. At one point he contrasts the present state of universal history, bogged down in progressive obscurantism, with an authentic one which *is a messianic concept*[249]. Benjamin wishes for real transcendence through the science of extracting the revolutionary moments or monads, *bound to a nucleus of time hidden within the knower and the known alike*[250]. The result of this process would be *so true that the eternal [would be] far more than the ruffle on the dress of some idea*[251]. *Image*, Benjamin writes, *is that wherein what has been comes together in a*

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[242] Ivi, N.1.1, p. 457.

[243] Ivi, N.2a.3, p. 462.

[244] Ivi, N.9a.4, p. 474.

[245] There are obvious parallels with the kabbalistic notion of divine sparks whose proper constellation must be found by the righteous man. But Benjamin tends to treat *constellations* as synonymous with monads rather than a potential higher order for sets of monads. See S.1.3, O.12a.12 among others, and below.

[246] Ivi, N.11.4, p. 476.

[247] *Ibidem*.

[248] See Ivi, J.57.6, p. 332 and Ivi, N.13a.3, p. 479.

[249] Ivi, N.18.3, p. 485.

[250] Ivi, N.3.2, p. 463.

[251] *Ibidem*.

flash with the now to form a constellation[252]. The *nucleus ... hidden within the knower and the known* is reminiscent of the great chain of being of *On Language,* but the operative quantity is now time rather than language. This time, like all substrates of observation in Duns Scotus, is potentially extrapolable to infinity, but the language of an *eternal* which at first appears to be *the ruffle on the dress of some idea,* but which is in reality far more, specifically recalls the Baroque allegory of *Origin*. The obfuscation between the idea of a constellation, which is an ordered gathering of points, and that of a moment or flash, is among other things a preemptive evasion of the most common criticism of Leibniz's monadology: what holds the monads together? What relation do they bear among themselves and what relationship do they bear to God? For Benjamin, the monad and the constellation are the same self-generating instant, and there is no larger order which could subsume several or all monads. As Paula Schwebel has put it[253], Benjamin follows Leibniz in failing to follow through his own assertions. Leibniz may have thought of himself as a thinker of harmony, but his refusal to explain the relationship among monads left his philosophy unstable and prone to readings where anarchic rupture is the only certainty. The same is true of Benjamin's monadology, even though it may be the case, as Rotlevy has suggested[254], that Benjamin wished for absolute truth to persist as harmony among monads. Benjamin's new interest in messianic time and messianic redemption implies that such harmony is possible, but Benjamin deliberately avoids theorizing it[255].

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[252] Ivi, N.2a.3, p. 462.

[253] P.L. Schwebel, *Intensive Infinity: Walter Benjamin's Reception of Leibniz and its Sources*, in *MLN* 127/3 (2012), p. 590.

[254] O. Rotlevy. *Presentation as Indirection … cit.*, p. 497.

[255] In one of the few named references to Leibniz in the *Arcades Project,* Benjamin does attribute a *harmony* to his cosmology, although this is not dwelled on. See *Arcades Project,* G.1a.4, p. 174. Another reference to harmony in the *Arcades Project* is in the context of Baudelaire's irrational attempts to harmonize *Christian asceticism* with *extravagant pleasure in the most dismal details of physical reality*. W. Benjamin, *Arcades Project* J.15a.1, p. 255, quoting Jules Lemaître, *Les Contem-*

By the late thirties, even Theodor Adorno, despite his atheism, began to regard Benjamin's belief that he could develop a new metaphysics from history and materiality with impatience. In 1938 he wrote to his friend that Benjamin *almost superstitiously ascribe[s] to the enumeration of materials a power of illumination, but this power is never reserved for a pragmatic reference but only for theoretical construction*[256]. Benjamin responds defending the *monad*[257] as an engine of anagnorisis or ultimate revelation, making *textual evidence [come] alive* with the vivifying force of *astonishment*[258]. The imagistic nature of Benjamin's monads caused him to wage war upon language and culture as well as teleology. In 1933's *Experience and Poverty*, written immediately after Benjamin's flight from Germany, Benjamin posits Socratic self-awareness as a fall from grace, performing a similar function to judgment in his earlier work. In order to combat this false consciousness, we must construct a language which is *arbitrary … in contrast to organic language*[259]. This has the potential of *changing reality instead of describing it*[260]. Benjamin still believes in the divine or at least demiurgic power of language, but he wishes to deprive it of its organic harmony, just as his historical monads are conceived against harmony. Rather than a divine gift endowing man with special prerogatives, Benjamin's new version of language will allow culture to die away, leaving *buildings, pictures, and stories*[261], liberated from it and plainly *barbaric*[262] in contrast to the bourgeoisie who are *more barbaric, but not in the good way*[263]. In the *Arcades Project* Benjamin made clear that he associated culture with language and *collective intellectual*

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porains 4 (Paris: 1895), pp. 28-31.

[256] W. Benjamin, *The Correspondence* … cit., p. 583.

[257] Ivi, p. 588.

[258] *Ibidem*.

[259] W. Benjamin, *Selected Writings* … cit., vol. II.2 p. 732.

[260] *Ibidem*.

[261] Ivi, vol. II.2 p. 735.

[262] *Ibidem*.

[263] *Ibidem*.

development[264], rejecting both. Rather than simple last-minute reversal, as in early versions of the monad-allegories, Benjamin calls for a generalized ethos of accelerating rupture.

In the end, Benjamin's commitment to accelerating the chaos which he perceived around him flagged. In a 1940 book review he identifies himself implicitly as a secular St. Augustine watching the West unravel[265]. It became harder and harder for Benjamin to convince himself that he wished the unraveling to continue. Scholem later believed the turning point to have been the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact. In January 1940 Benjamin wrote to Scholem that his interest in the Soviet Union had evaporated when he heard of the pact[266]. His last letters to Scholem are less polemical and warmer in tone. Benjamin had been reading Scholem's *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* with Hannah Arendt, and this had reignited his interest in the messiah[267]. A longing for apocatastasis overflows through Benjamin's last essay, *Theses on the Philosophy of History*[268]. When Scholem had first met Benjamin in 1915, the elder scholar had been engrossed in the radical Catholic philosopher Franz von Baader (1765-1841). Twenty-five years later, Benjamin's first *Thesis* opens with Baader. In Benjamin's exegesis of one of the neo-scholastic's stories, history, or more properly historical materialism, is the mechanical Turk which had won so many chess games in Baader's time. It is a perfect player which can and should win every game, just as Marxism insists on the inevitable and irreversible victory of historical materialism. The Turk bypasses human culture and language. But all is not as it appears. Below deck, a dwarf grandmaster conducts the mechanical man to victory. This human player, degraded in stature and posi-

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[264] Ivi, N.14.1, p. 480.

[265] W. Benjamin, *Kritiken und Rezensionen 1932 – 1940*, chapter 63, online version in *German Project Gutenberg*, retrieved: November 2018 from http://gutenberg.spiegel.de/buch/kritiken-und-rezensionen-1932-1940-2982/63.

[266] H. Eiland, W.M. Jennings, *Walter Benjamin* … cit., p. 658.

[267] Ivi, p. 659.

[268] The Angel of History's desire for *restitutio in integrum* is the best-known instance of this longing.

tion, invisible to the public, is *theology, which as everyone knows is small and ugly and must be kept out of sight*[269]. Hence historical materialism becomes, in Benjamin's terms, an immensely magnified Baroque allegory. It takes the reader as far down into the material as is possible to go, until the divinely imposed limits are reached and truth is revealed: we have been in the hands of theology all along.

With this admission Benjamin converges with his Catholic contemporaries. In Thesis XVI of the same essay, there is a condemnation of historicism[270] as the domain of those who *give themselves to the whore called 'Once upon a time' in the bordello of historicism*[271]. The historical materialist, presumably guided by the dwarf theology, will be *man enough to explode the continuum of history*[272]. This is not a significant departure from the theories of the *Arcades Project,* but it is a shift of emphasis, an approximation of traditional religious critiques of historicism. As Benjamin's health deteriorated through the spring of 1940, Theodor Haecker, also dying and driven into hiding by the Nazi regime, began to put down the theses which would be published posthumously as *Journal in the Night. The little whore called history in Germany today*, the Catholic philosopher wrote, is *exploited by those without honor who support the ruling 'clique.'* If history will once again be written in Germany*, then it will be written by others*[273]. Influence in either direction is not possible. These were the private thoughts of the moribund, and Benjamin and

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[269] W. Benjamin, *Theses on the Philosophy of History* Thesis I, transl. by D. Redmond, University of Bergen, online version of *Gesammelte Schriften* I:2, Suhrkamp Verlag, Frankfurt am Main 1974, retrieved November 2018 from https://folk.uib.no/hlils/TBLR-B/Benjamin-History.pdf. All subsequent translations (but not those from the prologue) are Redmond's.

[270] The *Arcades Project* reserves the word *historicism* for the nineteenth-century version, which Benjamin perceives to be outdated and incorrect. But Benjamin's obsession with the arcades is inevitably historicizing.

[271] W. Benjamin, *Theses,* Thesis XVI. See above.

[272] *Ibidem*.

[273] T. Haecker, *Journal in the Night*, article 247, transl. by A. Dru, Pantheon, New York 1950, p. 247.

Haecker did not move in the same intellectual circles. They are the natural conclusions of scholars whose frustrations with German historicism were religious in nature. In a prologue to the *Theses,* Benjamin wrote that *universal history* had to be recuperated, together with *universal language*[274]. It needed a basis, *whether in theology, as in the Middle Ages, or in logic, as more recently in Leibniz*[275]. The Day of Judgment will bring entelechy for every historical moment, but *every moment is a moment of judgment concerning certain moments that preceded it*[276]. This is Benjamin finally coming to terms with lesser judgments than divine judgment, and also perhaps a recognition that, despite his continual condemnations of progress, in the *Arcades Project* Benjamin's history is also linear. Still, Benjamin hedges his bets, holding out hope that Leibniz's ahistorical monads might ultimately prove as valid as theology.

Despite this ambivalence, Benjamin's commitment to messianic redemption was stronger than that of the traditionally religious Haecker. *For all their impenetrable mystery*, Haecker wrote, *the most human words are still: My God, why has thou forsaken me? … I can say [them] at times in all truth and honesty*[277]. Benjamin had been proclaiming divine absconsion all his life, but in his last days he began to reconsider it. Perhaps it was not permanent. There are two addenda to the *Theses*. In the first, he compares a recuperated history to *the beads of a rosary*[278], an unambiguously Catholic image, *in which splinters of messianic time are shot through*[279]. Historical moments are no longer discrete monads whose connection to one another is unknown. They finally have something to tie them together: the 'string' of messianic time. In the second addendum, the references are Jewish. *It is well known that the Jews were forbidden to look*

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[274] W. Benjamin, *Selected Writings* … cit., vol. IV p. 406.

[275] *Ibidem*.

[276] Ivi, vol. IV p. 407.

[277] T. Haecker, *Journal* … cit., article 586, Dru p. 175.

[278] W. Benjamin, *Theses,* Addendum A.

[279] *Ibidem*.

into the future. Their religious education is instruction *in remem-brance*[280]. Although they could not look it in the face, this preserved a sense of hope, and *every second* of the future *was the narrow gate through which the Messiah could enter*[281]. Here, finally, is reconcil-iation with the Judeo-Christian critique of progress. Benjamin had been, successively, a kabbalist, a Platonic and Pseudo-Dionysian language mystic, an Christian moralist, a Duns Scotan scholastic ossifying all aspects of existence into univocity, an Enlightenment man of letters, and a Bolshevik. Grappling in his hour of need with a historical materialism which refused to light the way to the next human epoch, Benjamin tore off its trappings and exposed beneath them the Judaeo-Christian humanism of his youth. As Molitor might have said, it hardly mattered whether the Messiah waiting to catch the angel of history and release him from his burdens was on the cusp of His first or second coming.

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[280] W. Benjamin, *Theses,* Addendum B.
[281] *Ibidem*.