

Just Language

Walter Benjamin, German-Jewish Exile,
and the Critique of Linguistic Violence



Dennis Johannßen

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Just Language
*Walter Benjamin,
German-Jewish Exile,
and the Critique
of Linguistic Violence*

DENNIS JOHANNßEN

University of Michigan Press *Ann Arbor*

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Contents

<i>Abbreviations</i>	ix
<i>List of Illustrations</i>	xi
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	xiii
Introduction: German-Jewish Exile and the Justice of Language	1
Chapter 1	
Toward the Critique of Linguistic Violence: Political Resistance and Anti-Oppressive Language in Benjamin's Early Essays	16
Chapter 2	
Decolonial Pedagogy: Fairy Tales and the Expansionism of Weimar Education	41
Chapter 3	
Just Philology: Traumatic Names and Anti-Fascist Memory in Benjamin and Adorno	66
Chapter 4	
Language in Exile: Arendt and Benjamin on Linguistic Plurality, Metaphors, and Anti-Propaganda	104
Chapter 5	
Poetic Counterforce: Silence and Objection from Brecht to Celan	132
Epilogue	152

viii Contents

<i>Notes</i>	157
<i>Bibliography</i>	195
<i>Index</i>	211

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Abbreviations

Works by Walter Benjamin:

- AP *The Arcades Project* (trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin)
C *The Complete Correspondence* (trans. Manfred R. Jacobson
and Evelyn M. Jacobson)
EW *Early Writings* (ed. Howard Eiland)
GB *Gesammelte Briefe* (ed. Christoph Gödde and Henri Lonitz)
GS *Gesammelte Schriften* (ed. Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann
Schweppenhäuser)
MD *Moscow Diary* (trans. Richard Sieburth)
SW *Selected Writings* (ed. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings)
TCV *Toward the Critique of Violence* (ed. Peter Fenves and Julia Ng)
OTD *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* (trans. John Osborne)

Works by Hannah Arendt:

- DT *Denktagebuch* (ed. Ursula Ludz and Ingeborg Nordmann)
LM *The Life of the Mind*
MDT *Men in Dark Times*
THC *The Human Condition*

Illustrations

1	Mark Dion, <i>Scala Naturae</i> (1993)	28
2	Front Cover of Alois Jalkotzy's <i>Märchen und Gegenwart</i> (Vienna, 1930)	50
3	Back Cover of <i>Märchen und Gegenwart</i> (1930)	51
4	Theodor W. Adorno's letter to Walter Benjamin, November 10, 1938	77
5	Benjamin's letter to Adorno, December 9, 1938	79
6	Roll call of the SS and SA at the Nazi party rally (Nuremberg, 1934)	99

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Introduction

German-Jewish Exile and the Justice of Language

There are times in which, for a writer who wants to have some influence, it is not good to write. Times in which the tapping of the typewriter is not as useful as that of the machine-gun. But the latter simply obeys the former.

—Kurt Tucholsky, “Snippets” (1931)

“Tiny doses of arsenic”—that is how the philologist Victor Klemperer, who survived the Shoah and Allied air raids on German territory, described the language of the Nazis; their poisonous words, he wrote, are “swallowed unnoticed, appear to have no effect, and then, after a little time, the toxic reaction sets in after all.”¹ The leaders of the Third Reich instrumentalized language’s belated and inconspicuous efficacy to establish their racist ideology and totalitarian rule, prompting a generation of persecuted writers to counter the political violence they witnessed without reproducing its venomous instrumentality. How did anti-oppressive language and oppositional writing develop during the Weimar Republic and the Third Reich, and how did it evolve after 1945 in Germany and beyond?

On September 16, 1935, the Nuremberg Laws revoked the citizenship and protected right to life of German Jews. In doing so, they exercised one of the highest forms of linguistic violence. At that time, the exile writers discussed in this book were already scattered across Europe. Walter Benjamin resided at his sister’s apartment in Paris, completing the “Artwork” essay at the Bibliothèque nationale. Theodor W. Adorno was registered as an advanced student at Oxford’s Merton College, writing a thesis on the philosopher Edmund Husserl. Hannah Arendt lived, like Benjamin, in Paris, working for a Jewish refugee organization while writing a biography of the salonnière Rahel Varnhagen. Paul Celan was fourteen years old; he attended

a Boys' Secondary School in Cernăuți, Romania, where he joined an anti-fascist youth group and coedited a mimeographed magazine called "The Red Student."²

With the passing of the Nuremberg Laws, their intellectual struggle against German fascism seemed lost. Yet, they kept writing. Their works, produced under such life-threatening circumstances, serve as a poignant reminder that one must oppose oppressive politics as forcefully as possible in the spheres of language and representation before they gain control over legal and political institutions.

How did the exile writers of the 1920s and 1930s develop a language of resistance? How did they write against violence and oppression during the years that paved the way for the Shoah, and how did they reflect on those years afterward? How did their experiences of discrimination and persecution shape their philosophical and literary strategies of opposition? *Just Language: Walter Benjamin, German-Jewish Exile, and the Critique of Linguistic Violence* revisits the interwar years and their afterlife in order to put forward a narrative of linguistic, discursive, and political counterforce. The works of Benjamin, Adorno, Arendt, and Celan have become so widely lionized and liberally cited that we tend to forget the situations of great danger and loss from which they were wrested away. At every turn, Benjamin and his fellow émigrés were confronted with war, social targeting, and displacement. Like many in their generation, they turned to—and adhered to—language as a medium of resistance and radical transformation.³

The first half of *Just Language* examines the intersections of language, violence, and justice in Benjamin's writings at three critical historical junctures: World War I and its immediate aftermath (1916–21), European colonialism during Nazism's rise to power (1930–33), and the intensifying crises of World War II (1938–40). Over these years, the links Benjamin drew between language and violence evolved, becoming a gravitational center of his thought. His militant and often contradictory ideas inspired his interlocutors before and after 1945 to develop their own views regarding the task and ability of language to oppose—and fundamentally undo—oppressive politics. Adorno was among the first to take issue with Benjamin's radical understanding of language, as he continued to engage with the intellectual legacy of his late friend during his exile in the United States. After World War II, Benjamin's view of language informed Arendt's and Celan's engagement with the aftermath, survival, and reemergence of oppressive speech, culminating in their political and poetic responses of the late 1960s and early 1970s. Putting the perspectives of this group of German-speaking exile writ-

ers into a prismatic constellation, *Just Language* illuminates the nature and intricacies of linguistic violence while documenting the transformations of political resistance from the Weimar Republic to the Third Reich and beyond.

The term linguistic violence describes the efficacy, temporality, and legitimacy of using language for purposes of domination, oppression, and exploitation, ranging from hurtful generalizations and censorship to racial slurs, propaganda, and systematic persecution. It is a result of language's instrumentalization, of using words as means to an end rather than ends in and of themselves. It unfolds gradually and unnoticeably over time, as Klemperer indicated. At the same time, however, language works in radically anti-oppressive ways, producing counterforces without necessarily turning to counterviolence. How forcefully can linguistic resistance oppose oppressive speech without becoming violent itself? *Just Language* traces how Benjamin, Adorno, Arendt, and Celan responded in different ways to the ambiguous tension between linguistic violence and counterforce, mobilizing language in the realms of philosophy, politics, culture, and education against its political abuse by fascism and totalitarianism.

Toward the Critique of Linguistic Violence

Looking back at the years before World War II, Adorno wrote that Benjamin "shared with the rest of us emigrants the error of thinking that spirit and cunning could accomplish something against a power [*eine Gewalt*] that no longer recognizes spirit as something autonomous."⁴ While, by 1936, the typewriter was not a sufficiently powerful tool to defeat German fascism, spirit and cunning continued to be of vital importance. Adorno's verdict puts the critical urgency of linguistic resistance into sharp relief. The Weimar exiles shared, as he points out, a belief in language's oppositional powers, which transcended the appearance of their immediate limitations.

Benjamin, Adorno, Arendt, and Celan shared the view that language is more than an instrument of communication and expression. On the contrary, they believed that the very reduction of language to a tool was the basis for its violent and catastrophic political abuse. Accordingly, any response to oppressive language cannot consist in the banning of words or the introduction of policies that regulate speech. Rather, their writings emphasize the traumatic dimension of language that targets social groups as the first step toward legal discrimination, persecution, and genocide.⁵ The views of the authors discussed in this book suggest that oppressive language is not only a matter of semantics, semiotics, and pragmatics, but also of tone,

style, semblance, silence, and memory—that which is unspoken no less than that which is made explicit. As a way of being in and disclosing the world, language gradually normalizes and supports social and political violence through euphemisms, insults, slogans, and generalizations as well as intonations, implications, and allusions that cannot be reduced to the meaning, use, or performative dimension of signs and communicative conventions.

The belated and microscopic efficacy of the “tiny doses of arsenic” that Klemperer described creates “an environmental threat to social peace, a sort of slow-acting poison, accumulating here and there, word by word.”⁶ The writings of Benjamin and his interlocutors grant insights into how language facilitates—but also opposes and resists—oppression in the sphere of public speech and discourse, outside of the law and prior to semantics, grammar, and illocution. It gradually creates an atmosphere of hostility that appears to be nonviolent, facilitating the introduction of discriminating laws as a next step toward persecution and destruction.

Just Language argues that the linguistic theory and literary practices of Benjamin and his contemporaries show how oppressive language prepares the ground for and then normalizes political violence while also delimiting a sphere of radical justice beyond the law. In unique and distinct ways, the exile writers saw language as a medium that embraces, permeates, and conditions everyday life—a medium that shapes the social world in anti-oppressive, yet non-instrumental ways. Uncovering this space of linguistic justice requires a philological, historical, and traumatological sensorium that complements pragmatic and performative approaches. As Judith Butler argues, language hurts, damages, and oppresses by invoking and reenacting social trauma.⁷ This invocation is caused on the level of semantics, but its temporality and consequences exceed the realm of communicative action.⁸ Due to this excess, the opposition to oppressive language requires not a “lesser violence,” but an active and, at times, militant linguistic counterforce that springs from sources other than the iterability of the sign and that moves beyond the notion that language is the political opposite of violence.⁹

The writings and experiences of Weimar and Third Reich exile authors make clear that linguistic violence exists and must be taken seriously. It is neither a derivative form of physical violence, nor an entirely different kind of force hovering above the material world. Violence is complex, ambiguous, and multifarious. Some of its forms are physical and some are linguistic; some are evil and calamitous, and some are legitimate or even unavoidable. Above all, taking linguistic violence seriously does not require or sanction downplaying or relativizing physical violence.¹⁰

Paul Ricoeur noted that “the confrontation of violence with language underlies all of the problems which we can pose concerning humanity. This is precisely what overwhelms us. Their encounter occupies such a vast field because violence and language each occupy the totality of the human field.”¹¹ Philosophical concepts and literary practices are precisely what is needed to overcome the paralysis that can come from contemplating such a dizzying field. Understanding and analyzing oppressive language as a form of linguistic violence allows one to confront its fundamental political effects, which otherwise remain opaque.

The term “linguistic violence” roughly translates the German “sprachliche Gewalt.” The word “Gewalt” can be rendered in English as power, force, or violence; it is of Germanic origin and predates the Latin “potestas” and “violentia.” While *potestas* describes the ability of an institution to legitimize the use of police or military force (*vis*) to guard and protect itself, *violentia* describes the use of force outside of and against the law, the state, and the individual rights that they guarantee and administer.¹² The broad semantic scope of the English words violence, force, and power indicates a historical differentiation between violence that is legitimated as force by a legal order, and violence that is considered illegitimate and that occurs outside of the law. Laws and legal procedures, however, can contain and inculcate the highest forms of linguistic violence, as demonstrated by the Nuremberg Laws, which means that linguistic violence must be opposed outside of and prior to the law, in everyday speech and discourse.¹³ As the writings and concepts discussed in the following chapters demonstrate, the encounter of language and violence in the works of Benjamin and his interlocutors escapes and destabilizes the distinction between *violentia* and *potestas*.

As a qualifier of the noun “violence,” the adjective “sprachlich” can be translated as “pertaining to language.” “Sprachlich,” in this broadest sense, exceeds the realms of semantics, pragmatics, phonetics, and performativity. Linguistic violence includes elements of force, power, and violence that are elusive, nonreferential, and nonrepresentational, describing not only the efficacy and temporality of insults, slurs, propaganda, and denial, but also the forces of relationality that condition communication and expression in the first place.

The analysis of linguistic violence entails resisting a reductive comparison with physical force. Language can be a form of representation, which is at least partially immaterial and spiritual, and hence distinct from mechanical influence, but it does not therefore exercise a secondary or derivative kind of violence. One way of avoiding a moralistic separation of different

types of violence is to ask after the specific workings of oppressive language and, in turn, to inquire how anti-oppressive language as a form of political resistance is or can be violent or forceful. While the exile authors discussed in the following chapters responded very differently to this question, their engagements with violence and language originated in their attempts to write against fascism from the transnational perspectives of exile. As lost and desperate as these attempts might have seemed during the dark years of the early twentieth century, they are an urgent reminder of intellectual opposition and the need for literary and linguistic strategies of counterforce and resistance.

“Oppressive language,” Toni Morrison wrote in 1993, “does more than represent violence; it is violence.”¹⁴ This statement dismisses the idea that linguistic violence is less harmful than physical violence because it is mediated and indirect. Without relativizing physical violence, Morrison emphasizes the criticality and severity of oppressive language.¹⁵ Language can represent violence, but it does *more* than that. It produces violence, not in a causal and physical way, like a blow to the face, but traumatically, in a belated, dissociative, often unnoticed, and not fully identifiable manner. Its efficacy and temporality are characterized by a dialectics of knowing and not knowing, by incoherence, discontinuity, and the unavailability and instability of reference and narrative.¹⁶ Language oppresses by using words that associate individuals with social groups and their histories, and this association works by invoking memories of social trauma, reaffirming, in the very act of invocation, the normalization of the oppressive relations that were responsible for the infliction of trauma.¹⁷

Is violence less severe when it eludes reference and immediacy? John Stuart Mill distinguished between publishing an article about the exploitive practices of a corn merchant and delivering a speech that incites an uprising that leads to the merchant’s death. The first must be legally protected at all costs, he argued; the latter should be banned by law.¹⁸ In this example, the expressive power of language to bypass reflection and mobilize the masses for action overrides the idea of linguistic violence’s secondary and mediated character. Benjamin, in turn, referred to the “polarity that exists in every linguistic entity: to be at once expression and communication [*Ausdruck und Mitteilung zugleich zu sein*].”¹⁹ One reason for the elusive character of linguistic violence is its expressive and affective component, which is dissociative and evades the dualisms of mind and body, or mental and physical pain.²⁰

Rather than language’s semantic and communicable content, its traumatic and expressive efficacy creates a hostile environment and, by growing

slowly and imperceptibly, poses a threat to social peace. Each letter, intonation, or diacritical mark makes a difference in the expressive dimension. In the linguistic world of everyday life, street names, office forms, and forms of address normalize categorization until it does not appear exceptional, objectionable, or even noteworthy anymore. Slavoj Žižek has distinguished between subjective and objective violence, arguing that violence is not the excess of what is considered nonviolent, but rather the structural forces that establish what counts as nonviolent in the first place: the violence of normalization.²¹ That these forces are at work in the nonrepresentational as well as the referential dimensions of everyday language constitutes the unruliness and evasiveness of linguistic violence.

Oppressive language's slow-working normalization begs the question of its social and historical temporality. The "stages" of genocide start with classification and symbolization, leading to legal discrimination, physical persecution, and ultimately extermination.²² Representation appears as the lowest stage, followed by legality and physicality: a racial slur is not as damaging as a discriminatory law that affects entire populations, and both are less severe than mass murder. However, if one considers the temporality of these stages in terms of how possible they are to oppose or prevent, representation emerges as the most critical because it is the earliest, most proleptic, anticipatory, and foundational stage. Legality is still abstract and in need of interpretation, but it already implies manifest and documented approval and institutional enforcement.

Actual physical destruction is the last consequence; it is conclusive and final. "The slain are really slain," as Max Horkheimer wrote to Benjamin in 1937.²³ Suggesting anything else, he added, would amount to idealism or theology. This does not mean, however, that physical destruction escapes understanding and representation. Rather, as a historical fact, it is again subject to interpretation. "Even the dead will not be safe from the enemy if he is victorious," Benjamin responded in 1940.²⁴ The Nazi genocide also aimed at the complete obliteration of Jewish culture from history. Representation is not only the first, but also one of the last stages of the catastrophe. In the unfolding of genocide and in its prevention, representation precedes legal dispute and physical intervention, which, to some extent, always come too late.²⁵

The violence of oppressive language is characterized by a traumatic efficacy and a proleptic temporality. While its temporality opens it up to timely intervention and preventive opposition, its efficacy questions its status as a "force of nonviolence."²⁶ Frantz Fanon was adamant that if a group, or even an individual, is violently oppressed and dehumanized—and this, for him,

included language—violence can be a legitimate response.²⁷ In the realm of language, the endorsement of oppositional violence points toward the legitimacy of a specific kind of anti-oppressive linguistic force. As Benjamin suggests in his early essays—and develops in different ways throughout his critical project—radical linguistic counterforces not only oppose and resist, but suspend, interrupt, and ultimately undo the very instrumentalization of language for oppressive purposes. Avoiding the reproduction of the instrumental violence it confronts, anti-oppressive language manifests “a different kind of violence”—or, rather, “counterviolence [*Gegengewalt*].”²⁸

Linguistic counterforce is not, strictly speaking, nonviolent, but its violence is of a different, non-instrumental, salutary kind, opposing and transforming the traumatic, slow-working efficacy and proleptic temporality of linguistic violence. At times, Benjamin seems to suggest that all it takes is a clear distinction between different kinds of violence, one being instrumental and oppressive, and the other being emancipatory and revolutionary. On other occasions, he rejects this very distinction as pertaining to a sort of moral philosophy that is deeply implicated in the rise of fascism, emphasizing instead the radical ability of language to abolish any compartmentalization of linguistic and political practice. During the Third Reich and on into the postwar period, Adorno, Arendt, and Celan engaged with, criticized, and modified Benjamin’s militant and ambiguous view in the fields of philosophy, political theory, and poetics. Through this engagement, they developed their own strategies of writing against fascism, refining the practices they deemed capable of breaking with the historical cycle of political violence and destruction.

Linguistic Counterforce from Benjamin to Celan

The story that *Just Language* tells begins in 1916, when Benjamin responded to the intensifying disaster of World War I by writing a new metaphysics of language. He saw the violence that erupted on the battlefields as the result of a historical dynamic that began with the original sin of language’s instrumentalization. Humans have begun to turn names into signs and words into a means of communication, suppressing language’s radically pluralistic potentials as a medium of appearance and translation.²⁹ In 1921, looking back at the end of the war and the paroxysms of the young Weimar Republic, Benjamin introduced the idea of a “divine violence” (*göttliche Gewalt*) capable of interrupting and supplanting the destructive politics he witnessed.³⁰ Divine violence is linguistic through and through; it opposes and “deposes” (*ent-*

setzen) the violence of oppressive speech and legal discrimination, abolishing structural violence without reproducing its instrumentality and putting anything in its place.³¹

The first chapter of this book, “Toward the Critique of Linguistic Violence,” explores this early turn Benjamin took toward the intersection of language and violence. Read closely together, the two foundational essays, “On Language as Such” (1916) and “Toward the Critique of Violence” (1921), contain the basis of Benjamin’s critique of linguistic violence, a critique that permeates his philosophical and literary project, and that inspired many of his interlocutors and interpreters. Two years into World War I, Benjamin distinguished language’s appropriation as an implement of domination from its more fundamental nature as a medium of justice. From this distinction emerges an ethical demand to oppose and counteract oppression in the realm of everyday speech. In this chapter, I argue that divine violence consists of the linguistic forces that operate on the microlevel of public and political speech, prior to the realms of law and morality, thwarting and eliminating oppressive language’s destructive efficacy. Every “deposing” of discriminatory speech, every silence that creates space for acknowledgment, every diacritical emphasis that leads to empowerment contributes to a process of radical transformation that defies instrumentality.

In 1930, three years before Hitler seized power, Benjamin worked as a literary critic for various newspapers. His turn to childhood, colonialism, and pedagogy during these years casts light on the transnational context of the late Weimar Republic. While Germany’s formal rule over the territories it seized in Africa and the Pacific ended in 1919, the colonial and postcolonial violence continued abroad, as did its distortion and concealment in Europe. The “lie of colonial guilt” (*Kolonialschuldlüge*) and the claim that Germany was entitled to its former colonies supported the rise of nationalism and Nazism, while terms like “race” and “living space” that legitimated colonial crimes were gradually integrated into the evolving language of the Third Reich.³² Benjamin intervened in this forcefield by writing against the “Colonial Pedagogy” of Weimar education. He objected to removing violent language from children’s literature, an approach in which he discerned an “expansionist” tendency to commodify language and conquer the allegedly uncharted mind of the child. Within the confines of his own Eurocentrism, his literary criticism exposed the implicit ideological links between social democratic education, imperialism, and the rise of fascism in Germany.

The second chapter of *Just Language*, “Decolonial Pedagogy,” examines the intersection of language, violence, and colonialism in “Colonial Ped-

agogy” (1930), a review that Benjamin dedicated to the book *Fairy Tales and the Present* (1930) by the Viennese educator Alois Jalkotzy (1892–1987). Jalkotzy argued that Grimm’s fairy tales were brimming with violence and brutality and contained too many moral and technological anachronisms, concluding that they had to be rewritten and revised to make them useful again for daycares and primary schools. Benjamin objected harshly, calling Jalkotzy’s pedagogy “colonial.” Underneath the commodification of children’s fantasy, he discerned an expansionary linguistic tendency that surreptitiously normalized colonialist modes of thinking and speaking in educational institutions. Benjamin’s review itself contains violent comparisons that expose his deep embeddedness in the logic of Empire. Even within these limitations, however, his critique resonates with decolonial attempts to delink literary education from imperialist oppression and exploitation.

On the eve of World War II, the better part of a decade later, Benjamin radicalized his opposition, pushing his understanding of language as a non-violent “pure” means toward—and ultimately beyond—its limits. Benjamin focused on the anti-oppressive power of mourning as a practice of listening, reading, and writing. The “tradition of the oppressed” that he described shortly before his death in 1940 includes those who are silenced and excluded from political discourse: nonhuman nature, children, colonized individuals, and the global working class. This tradition is “nameless” (*namenlos*), he writes, and the task is to create space in the cultural sphere for the radical justice marked and demanded by oppressive names.³³ Adorno was an insistent critic of Benjamin’s emphasis on names over concepts, which he also noticed in fascism’s propagandistic emphasis on myth and slogans. In their exchange of letters, which lasted from 1928 to 1940, they worked together on strengthening the oppositional and transformative powers of cultural criticism in the face of catastrophe, seeking to wrestle away the memory of the past from its fascist appropriation.

Chapter 3, “Just Philology,” takes its cue from unpublished notes on philology on the back of Adorno’s infamous epistolary response to Benjamin’s essay “The Paris of the Second Empire in Charles Baudelaire” (1938). Between 1938 and 1940, Benjamin returned to his early reflections on language and violence to propose a practice of writing about culture that neither puts the dead to rest, nor uses their memory to advance a political program. Adorno was perhaps the sharpest critic of Benjamin’s philological procedure, believing that the utilization of immersion and astonishment made the opposition itself vulnerable. Philology runs the risk of reproducing rather than

breaking the spellbound nature of capitalist modernity that culminated in the cult of Nazism. With Adorno's help, Benjamin refined his philology as a procedure of mourning that mobilizes marginalized memories to counteract fascism's political abuse of the dead. Philology mourns the past—but not to divest from emotional attachment, and not to keep the past alive for its own sake. It listens to what is unsaid in traumatic names, mobilizing the oppositional energies that carry them in support of the anti-oppressive struggles of the present.

The militant elements of Benjamin's critique of linguistic violence prompted various responses in the post-World War II period by readers, friends, and interlocutors who survived him. Chapters 4 and 5 of *Just Language* follow the linguistic strategies of political and poetic resistance in the writings of Hannah Arendt and Paul Celan. Reflecting, and at times refracting, Benjamin's ideas on language, violence, and justice, their work remained attentive to the survival and transformation of fascism and totalitarianism after 1945.

Arendt and Benjamin met frequently in Berlin and Paris, and later, in 1940, in the south of France during the time of their respective internments and escapes. Arendt safeguarded a copy of Benjamin's "On the Concept of History," which was a philosophical and political inspiration as well as a sort of testament for her. In the late 1960s, Arendt wrote and lectured on Benjamin's thought, and she oversaw the first English edition of his essays in 1968. In a unique synthesis of her European heritage and her experience of political violence in the United States, Arendt developed her theory of public speech and empowerment. Through the lens of a critical engagement with Benjamin, which takes place mostly in her intellectual diary, her reflections on propaganda, exile, and linguistic plurality present metaphorical thinking as a distinct political counterforce against propagandistic disambiguation and identification.

Chapter 4, "Language in Exile," examines strategies of anti-propaganda in Arendt's writings from the late 1960s and early 1970s. After fleeing Europe, she engaged intensively with the political violence of slogans, linguistic regulations, and totalitarian propaganda. While she refrained from commenting on Benjamin's "divine" violence, she included and expanded its linguistic counterforce in her concepts of speech, power, and thinking. Focusing on selected *Denktagebuch* entries from the 1960s and 1970s, *On Violence* (1970), and *The Life of the Mind* (1977–1978) allows me to explicate Arendt's concept of thinking as a profoundly linguistic process that "travels through" and

“clarifies” everyday speech, opposing obfuscation, and false identification by creating metaphors that foster openness, ambiguity, and plurality.

Paul Celan, a careful reader of Benjamin, as his philosophical library shows, gave voice to the postwar transformations of linguistic violence in his poems from the late 1960s.³⁴ Resurfacing after Nazism’s murderous abuse of language, linguistic resistance shifted from explicit objection to pointed silence, giving space to oppressed narratives rather than answering with purpose-driven locution and accusation. Celan’s poetic and poetological responses to Benjamin, Bertolt Brecht, and Adorno shed light on a generation’s concern with the justice of language—justice not as a matter of law and order, but as a radically open, multidirectional, and undetermined process of disclosure and conversation.³⁵

The last chapter of *Just Language*, “Poetic Counterforce,” examines silence and objection as strategies of linguistic counterforce in Celan’s “A leaf, treeless” (1968). In this poem, which is related to various poems from the same year that reference Benjamin’s writings, Celan cites, modifies, and corrects Brecht’s iconic exile poem, “To Those Born After” (1939). Having a conversation about a tree, Brecht claimed, was almost a crime, because it implied “silence [*Schweigen*] about so many horrors.”³⁶ In 1968, nearly thirty years later, Celan noted that what makes a conversation nearly a crime was no longer only silence, but also “so much that is said [*soviel Gesagtes*].”³⁷ By sending a “counter-poem” back in time, Celan passed it on, renewed and enriched, to those born after him. Rather than condemning silence, he marks its absence, differentiating between oppressive complicity and the creation of spaces for marginalized and disenfranchised voices. Benjamin’s critique of linguistic violence illuminates Celan’s response to Brecht. By including explicit silence as a “pure means” in the repertoire of poetic counterforces, Celan’s “A leaf, treeless” casts the transformation of linguistic violence and resistance after 1945 into sharp relief.

Linguistic Exile and the Justice of Language

Despite their different approaches and perspectives, the anti-oppressive impulses in the writings of Benjamin, Adorno, Arendt, and Celan are related by their experiences of exile and displacement. These experiences are intricately linked to their conviction that language is not only a technique or practice that can be mastered, not primarily a skill that one hones to transmit and apprehend information, but above all a medium that embraces and permeates nature and culture, allowing beings to appear and relate to each

other. Jacob Grimm remarks that the notion of exile is linked to the German word “Elend”—misery—once pronounced “alilanti” and closely related to the experience of a place that is strange, foreign, and remote.³⁸ The word captures a deep sadness and homesickness (*Heimweh*) caused by loss and expulsion. “Nothing,” Grimm continues, “illuminates the bond to the place of home and its indispensability [*Unentbehrlichkeit*] more than the communiality of language [*Gemeinschaftlichkeit der Sprache*].”³⁹

Grimm uses the singular “language” rather than “languages,” which would have allowed him to acknowledge the essential plurality and intersecting origins that structure every linguistic community.⁴⁰ The writings of the German-speaking exile authors show that once one begins to learn and live in another language amid an unfamiliar political, social, and cultural space, the exilic view onto the “bond” between language and home enforces a transgression of one’s “first” language and its normalized modes of understanding. This, inevitably, reveals the indispensability—but also the instability and transient nature—of every home. In Benjamin, Adorno, Arendt, and Celan, one encounters the sobering insight that one’s right to life expires with the retraction of citizenship.⁴¹ The passing of the Nuremberg Laws has made this abundantly clear. The exile writers discussed in this book realized that if legal orders and nation states cannot guarantee the protection of basic rights in the modern world, let alone bring about justice, alternatives must be sought in the languages that precede and condition these orders, and which remain even when one’s home and nationality are lost and denied.

This insight into the life-threatening fragility of legal protection arises from the experience of displacement and statelessness. Exile—the coerced experience of loss and placelessness—allows for the cultivation of new ways of seeing, speaking about, and listening to the various encounters between what is unfamiliar and what was formerly considered one’s own. While exile “cannot be made to serve notions of humanism,” as Edward Said warned, “exiles are aware of at least two [cultures], and this plurality of vision gives rise to an awareness of simultaneous dimensions, an awareness that—to borrow a phrase from music—is *contrapuntal*.”⁴² Language offers a space for the entwined encounter, juxtaposition, and coexistence of distinct traditions, voices, and perspectives. Exile’s reframing and reshaping of speech and understanding make it an inherently linguistic experience. It creates networks of affiliations and allegiances—giving rise to a closely knit community of speakers who are dependent on each other in moments of danger and persecution, speakers who share similar experiences of loss and feelings

of ambiguity toward return and recuperation, despite the vast differences in their estranged pasts and abandoned homes. The light that the experience of exile casts onto the nature of language shows its irreducible fragmentation and plurality, which allow it to form communities across national, social, and political borders.

The exilic gaze onto language's bond to home and belonging reveals its abuses while intimating and cultivating a pluralistic perspective. Benjamin translated Proust and Baudelaire, and wrote and published in French; Adorno learned English, but never felt settled in it, while realizing that a minimal morality cannot be at home anywhere anymore; Arendt perfected her English and wrote bilingually in astonishingly synthetic ways; and Celan translated from and incorporated French, Russian, Hebrew, Spanish, and Portuguese, among other tongues, in his poems, while maintaining that he did "not believe in bilingualness [*Zweisprachigkeit*] in poetry."⁴³

The experience of exile—carrying and being carried across borders—discloses language as the medium of a kind of justice that precedes and transcends the order of legal systems and nation states. By examining how the exile writers of the early twentieth century opposed language's appropriation for political oppression and domination in the context of law, pedagogy, cultural memory, politics, and poetry, *Just Language* adumbrates the spaces that linguistic exiles open for the redefinition of justice outside of and prior to law and nationality. In these spaces, as Benjamin wrote, "language proves itself as the matrix of justice [*die Mater der Gerechtigkeit*]?"⁴⁴

Werner Hamacher describes the relation between justice and language as a struggle between different linguistic practices. "Delotic" language, he argues in his reading of Aristotle's *Politics*, discloses reality in an open-ended and nonjudgmental fashion: conversation and debate reveal potential ways forward for communities of speakers. In contrast, the "critical" logos that Aristotle understood as emphatically political, decides for or against specific possibilities, leaving the sphere of disclosure and debate to implement and institutionalize what has been decided. Critical logos is the domain of the law, while delotic language appears in the sphere of politics and public speech. The former suppresses the latter, Hamacher suggests: "The prioritization—the self-prioritization—of the decision does not only marginalize and eliminate the disclosing language that it remains dependent on, but also the ateleological language that is against itself and against being [*selbst- und seinswidrige Sprache*], and that follows the neutral disclosure."⁴⁵ One language, the language of decision, drives out another, the language of disclosure. However, there is a third linguistic practice that follows: a not-

yet-conceptualized language that is against the reality of its own instrumentalization. Justice neither resides in pure disclosure, nor in the judge's or jury's decision, but in the process of heeding an undetermined plurality of being, which springs from the essential openness to other, yet unclaimed and even unknown linguistic practices. This openness and plurality co-constitute language as the matrix of justice.

In the struggle between delotlic and critical logos, linguistic violence appears as the prioritization of judgment over disclosure, bringing language into conflict with its own potential. The justice of language does not reside in any one linguistic practice or norm, but rather in the radical receptiveness toward unexpected arrivals and beginnings. This openness, protected by a "taboo [. . .] placed on the future," was part of the heritage that Benjamin's "Angel of History" left to his interpreters—an image of and for those pushed to the periphery of Europe, eyes wide open and fixed on the past at a moment when delotlic language was overpowered by fascism.⁴⁶



From Benjamin's youth, when a shellshocked generation fell silent, to Celan's warnings against forced explication, the genealogy of linguistic violence and its critique pertains to the unresolved intellectual heritage of the German-Jewish exile writers of the Weimar Republic and the Third Reich. They did not "escape from thought into action," as Arendt wrote about René Char's decision to join the French Resistance.⁴⁷ Rather, they continued to oppose fascism and totalitarianism in the realms of language, discourse, and thought, working against a state of affairs in which physical violence is the only way out. The following chapters examine this genealogy of linguistic violence and resistance as a contribution to ongoing debates over language, social justice, and political transformation.

Toward the Critique of Linguistic Violence *Political Resistance and Anti-Oppressive Language in Benjamin's Early Essays*

Walter Benjamin responded to World War I by writing a new metaphysics of language. The war culminated in the death of tens of millions of people, the end of the German imperial monarchy and colonial rule in Africa and the Pacific, and the Treaty of Versailles, which laid the groundwork for a narrative of betrayal that proved instrumental for the rise of National Socialism. In Benjamin's eyes, World War I, later described as the "seminal catastrophe" (*Urkatastrophe*) of the twentieth century, was itself embedded in older and broader historical continuities of destruction and oppression.¹ The overwhelming material devastation and social transformation of these years prompted Benjamin to question the origins of such violence, and how it could be counteracted.

Two of Benjamin's important essays of the period, "On Language as Such and on the Language of Man" (1916) and "Toward the Critique of Violence" (1921), were written under conditions of severe stress and disorientation. The outbreak of the war in July 1914, followed by the suicide of two of his closest friends, prompted him to fall silent for several months and to cut off ties with the German Youth Movement. After feigning illness to avoid the draft, moving several times, getting married, becoming a father, and finishing his doctorate, he returned to Berlin, where he was confronted with the continuing social unrest and intensifying antisemitism of the early Weimar years.²

Benjamin's turn to the intersection of language and violence was a response to World War I—and an unexpected and radical one. Despite the five-year gap between the two essays, they are more closely related than hitherto acknowledged.³ Read together, they contain an analysis of language's use for political purposes as well as a number of ethically grounded linguistic strategies for countering this instrumentalization. Language appears in Benjamin's early writings as far more than a tool employed by human beings to convey information and to achieve their goals in the moral and political world. Similarly, his concept of violence goes far beyond physical force and brutality to include discrimination, oppression, and legal coercion. What emerges in these essays is a powerful critique of linguistic violence that interrupts and undoes the destructive historical cycle of myth and reconciliation. If calamitous violence ought to be reduced and even avoided outright, Benjamin argued, there must first be a radical change in the sphere of language.

Between 1916 and 1921, Benjamin analyzed not only how human beings harness language to shape the moral, legal, and political world, but also how language resists, opposes, and potentially abolishes this instrumentalization. Instrumentalizing language means treating words as means to an end rather than ends in and of themselves—as tools rather than formations with their own histories and contexts. Humans instrumentalize language to varying degrees: from referencing external objects in the world to the use of euphemisms, insults, racial slurs, denial, and discriminatory laws to threaten the lives of entire populations. Oppressive language becomes legible as a degree of structural instrumentalization, not as the expression of a speaker's affective state or impact on a listener.⁴ Language's instrumentalization, Benjamin argued, paved the ground for excessive violence, and he suggested linguistic practices and strategies to counteract and undo this violence.

This chapter reconstructs Benjamin's analysis of instrumental language in order to discover elements of an ethics of nondiscriminatory speech. One does not have to accept every aspect of Benjamin's metaphysical narrative to engage in the task of resisting and fighting oppressive language. "On Language as Such" presents an inventive theory of an originally highly ambiguous linguistic cosmos that is violently misappropriated by human beings.⁵ What Benjamin calls "language as such" is an essential part of every being; it is that part of each being that it shares with others, rather than an external structure of signs and conventions that facilitate that sharing. Language, prior to its human appropriation, discloses the world in a neutral and pluralistic fashion, rather than passing judgment on the benefit or harm of

specific scenarios.⁶ “Human language,” in contrast, is defined by this very instrumentalization of linguistic structures for purposes of judgment and social domination. The tension between language “as such” and its human instrumentalization prompts every individual to decide in solitude and without reliance on universal principles for or against the oppressive use of language.⁷ For Benjamin, the proliferation and intensification of nonviolent language is not a project of moralistic reform, but rather has the power to radically undo and transcend existing social relations and legal institutions. This transcendence lends his conception its theological dimension, while exceeding the boundaries of a “treatise in the philosophy of religion.”⁸

The first section of this chapter traces Benjamin’s metaphysics of language “as such” and its instrumentalization by human beings. The focus is on those elements that Benjamin highlights five years later in “Critique of Violence.” The second section discusses these references to nonviolent language, arguing that “divine violence” is a fine-grained linguistic counterforce operating on the microlevel of everyday speech and writing, prior to the spheres of law and morality. At the end of the chapter, I return to the “Letter to Martin Buber” (1916) to cast light on how the “salutary effects” of language counteract destructive politics without reproducing their instrumental violence.

The Instrumentalization of Language

Benjamin’s metaphysics of language did not appear out of thin air. It has its origins in the historical and social conditions of the Wilhelmine Empire. After his early education in Berlin and a boarding school in the forest of Thuringia, founded and led by the pedagogue and school reformer Gustav Wyneken, Benjamin began his studies of philology and philosophy in Freiburg in 1912. During an educational visit to Italy that same year, he began writing a travel diary. He noted: “It is from out of the diary I am about to write that the journey should first come to be.”⁹

This sentence anticipates Benjamin’s heightened belief in the power of language. It was not the sensual, bodily experience of the trip, but rather the recording of his experiences in writing that deserved the name “journey.” Discursive reproduction has a greater reality than the ephemeral physical presence. Only in writing does fleeting, sensory data become significant, lasting, and collective; only the written word translates one’s perceptions of the environment into a meaningful record for oneself and others.

Benjamin’s interest in the political power of language evolved during

his intellectual and political engagement in the “Culture Reform” branch of the German Youth Movement.¹⁰ Inspired by his reading of Nietzsche, the German Romantics, and naturalist literature, he developed a linguistic critique of Wyneken’s messianic interpretation of Hegel’s “objective spirit.”¹¹ This critique is condensed in a sentence he wrote in 1913: “The spiritual is a sphere of coming-to-an-understanding [*Das Geistige ist eine Sphäre der Verständigung*].”¹² “Verständigung”—a notion that will reappear at a crucial moment of “Critique of Violence”—emphasizes the process of working in language toward mutual understanding, as opposed to “Verständnis,” the state of having understanding or being understood.

Benjamin criticized the educational institutions of the Second Reich from the same linguistic angle, lamenting, above all, that “open discussion [*offene Aussprache*]” between teachers and students was impossible.¹³ For him, objective spirit was not the institutional manifestation of epochal ideas, but the linguistic process of this manifestation. Ideas themselves are, as he went on to write in 1925, “something linguistic [*ein Sprachliches*].”¹⁴ While studying in Freiburg, the anti-psychologism that unified parts of neo-Kantianism and phenomenology complemented his growing distance from Wyneken’s Hegelianism. However, his interest in language did not lead him to a “grammar of pure logic,” as pursued by Husserl, Rickert, and the young Martin Heidegger, but to an engagement with G. W. Leibniz, J. G. Hamann, and the German Romantics.¹⁵

Benjamin’s growing concern with the intersection of language and violence was motivated by the political activism of his student years and by his experiences of racism, oppression, and discrimination. Between 1912 and 1914, he attended various group meetings and conferences of the Youth Movement, was involved in a conflict over the editorial direction of the journal “Der Anfang” (The Beginning), and eventually became the president of the Berlin chapter’s “Sprechsaal” (discussion circle), which he cofounded.

Benjamin’s intellectual activism was motivated by a deep-seated aversion to the authoritarian structures and social inequalities of the Wilhelmine Empire, including its history of coercive assimilation and normalized discrimination.¹⁶ In 1912, he wrote that what he “knew of Judaism was effectively only anti-Semitism and an abstract notion of piety.”¹⁷ A year later, he openly opposed the racism of the youth groups in an article about one of their gatherings: “When the prizes for sports were being awarded, the name Isaacsohn was announced. Laughter rang out from a minority. So long as one of those who laughed has a place among the Free German Youth, it will be without nobility and youthfulness.”¹⁸ Benjamin’s objection was of no small

significance, since about one third of the three thousand students in Wymken's group were Jewish.¹⁹

Benjamin's early experiences of discrimination and exclusion worsened over the following years. In 1916, he took a seminar on the language and culture of ancient Mexico offered by the linguist and Americanist Walter Lehmann at the University of Munich. Benjamin's interest was serious; he purchased a dictionary and considered learning the Nahuatl language.²⁰ This was among the early signs of his engagement with European imperialism and colonialism. Two years after the outbreak of World War I, Benjamin wrote "On Language as Such and on the Language of Man" which contain early elements of his historical epistemology and his critique of political and linguistic violence.

In these reflections on language, Benjamin rarely uses the word "instrument" or "instrumentalization." Rather, he discusses language's abuse as a means to an end, examining how language can be used in oppositional or revolutionary ways without exploiting it. How can language become a medium of anti-oppressive transformation without being used by speakers to achieve political goals? Eventually, a non-instrumental relation to language becomes, for him, the model of a politics beyond the logic of means and ends—the very logic in which Benjamin, following Kant, discerns the origins of violence in history. In his essay, language emerges not as an end in itself, but as a means that ceases to serve predetermined ends.

In framing his intervention, Benjamin relies on Kant's moral philosophy, which he selectively adopts and dismisses in key respects.²¹ For Kant, an act is moral only if it is committed independently and without regard for any purpose it seeks to achieve.²² Only if it is motivated from within, without reference to external goals and based entirely on principles rather than empirical contexts, can it be truly morally good. Kant calls this will which is free of empirical entanglements "pure" (*rein*). Similarly, Benjamin speaks of "pure language" (*reine Sprache*) and a politics of "pure means" (*reine Mittel*).²³

However, while Kant describes the moral act as one that does not treat subjects and objects ever as mere means (*bloße Mittel*), but always also as ends in themselves, Benjamin abandons any system of "just ends," in which he sees the subject violently asserting its autocratic superiority. Rather, he focuses on the idea of language as a means in itself, seeking to disentangle it entirely from its relation to ends. Language, for Benjamin, is not "pure" because it relies on just ends in itself, but rather by abandoning any relationship to preconceived goals. This abandonment requires that we forgo using language as an external tool—as a technique or system of signs external to

both speakers and listeners—and instead embrace it as a medium that envelops, permeates, and constitutes us through and through. Opposition is not the purpose of language; rather, language’s counterforce consists in the very abandonment of purposiveness.

But doesn’t language, in the face of oppressive violence, have to become an instrument of direct, committed struggle? Isn’t the ability to abandon purposiveness a privilege of those who hold power and have room to play?

Benjamin does not seek to empower the opposition vis-à-vis the status quo, but rather to break with the violence perpetuated by their shifting, yet strict dichotomy. To do so, he tackles the link between the purposeful use of language and its use as an external tool or instrument. Both aspects are deeply related: every external use is linked to a purpose outside of itself, and every purposeful act implies a reality to be modified. Language “as such” allows for a political use that does not reduce language to a means—or, rather, one that lies in the very elimination of this reduction. Breaking with the cycle of violence in human history requires relinquishing the arbitrary positing of political ends, and this relinquishment begins with ceasing to use language as an external tool. In becoming a “pure” means, language avoids being geared toward the realization of predetermined political absolutes, and this very avoidance is the measure of its justice and the fulfillment of its anti-oppressive purpose.

The Nonviolence of Language as Such

Benjamin drafted “On Language as Such and on the Language of Man” as a letter to Gershom Scholem in November 1916, responding to questions of mathematics and Judaism that they had discussed during previous meetings.²⁴ In three steps, he distinguishes between “language as such” (*Sprache überhaupt*) and “human language” (*Sprache des Menschen*). The first section of Benjamin’s essay describes what language is and does, in and of itself, prior to and beyond its use and abuse by human beings. The second part tells the story of the “original sin” of human language—namely, the act of naming all creation and reducing names to signs. A third section concerns translation as an ontological process of nature’s appearance, a process that he expands on in “The Task of the Translator” (1921).

Benjamin describes not only how humans began to use language for purposes of domination and exploitation, but also what language was and is prior to and beyond its instrumental reduction. He portrays a structure of language that is not yet used as a means of communication and expression—

not yet permeated by violence. This image of a prelapsarian language entails an ethical demand to oppose language's instrumentalization.

Benjamin begins his depiction of "language as such" with a dramatic expansion of what language is and does:

All communication of the contents of the mind is language, communication in words being only a particular case of human language and of the justice, poetry, or whatever underlying it or founded on it. The existence of language, however, is coextensive not only with all the areas of human mental expression in which language is always in one sense or another inherent, but with absolutely everything. There is no event or thing in either animate or inanimate nature that does not in some way partake of language, for it is in the nature of each one to communicate its mental contents. This use of the word "language" is in no way metaphorical.²⁵

Verbal language is but one variety of human language, and human language is but one sphere of language "as such." The existence of language extends to absolutely everything, and this use of the word "language" is not metaphorical. All beings and entities, not only humans and animals, participate in it. Everything that can be perceived or imagined has a relationship to language. "We cannot imagine," Benjamin adds, "a total absence of language in anything. An existence entirely without relationship to language is an idea; but this idea can bear no fruit."²⁶ One can conceive of a being without relation to language, but this imagined being has no social or political footprint.

While language is coextensive with absolutely everything, not everything is communicable or expressible. This is of great importance to Benjamin. "Within all linguistic formation," he writes, "a conflict is waged between what is expressed and expressible and what is inexpressible and unexpressed."²⁷ This conflict is deeply political, as it concerns the concealment and repression of some beings, or parts of them, and the task of allowing those parts to be expressed and articulated. To create space for the struggle between what is expressible and what is inexpressible, Benjamin proposes a view according to which language is neither distinct from spirit or mind, which would turn it into a tool or implement, nor entirely identical to it. He distinguishes a being's "linguistic essence" (*sprachliches Wesen*) from its "mental" or "spiritual essence" (*geistiges Wesen*)—a distinction that concerns all entities, animate or inanimate, from atoms and stones to things, animals, and humans. Benjamin then proceeds to claim a partial identity of mind and language:

Mental essence is identical with linguistic essence only *insofar* as it is communicable [*mitteilbar*]. What is communicable of a mental essence is its linguistic essence. Language therefore communicates the respective linguistic essence of things, but their mental essence only insofar as it is immediately included [*unmittelbar . . . beschlossen*] in their linguistic essence, insofar as it is communicable.²⁸

A being's mental essence and linguistic essence are neither fully identical nor entirely distinct. Rather, its mental essence is *immediately* included in its linguistic essence to the extent that it can be communicated. This is the crux—and the cloudy spot—of Benjamin's conception; the spot where violence originates as a separation and instrumentalization of one part by the other.

Benjamin does not spell out how the mind is "included" in language, but there seems to be no isomorphism: mental and linguistic events correspond, but without direct, explicable correlation.²⁹ In short, the distinction grants both language and mind their respective autonomy without turning language into a means by which the mind communicates and expresses itself in the world.

There may be a lot, for example, that humans cannot know about a lamp, but what they know about it is due to the lamp's participation in language.³⁰ This participation *is* the lamp's linguistic essence—the part of its mental essence that it shares with other beings. Benjamin indicates this enabling quality by underlining the particle "able" (*bar*) in "communicable" (*mitteilbar*). Language is not a means or instrument used to communicate; rather, it is "in the purest sense the 'medium'" that makes communication and expression possible.³¹ The work that the verb "teilen" (to share, to divide) does in "mitteilen" (to communicate, to impart) gives away the Platonic heritage of Benjamin's conception: language allows minds to participate in, appear, and constitute reality. "Metaphysics," as Peter Fenves writes, "becomes as much a science of language as of being."³² While language is a process of "imparting"—Samuel Weber's translation of Benjamin's verb "mitteilen"—it does impart something beyond itself: it shares oneself with others, a process that is essentially political.³³

The distinction between mental and linguistic essence is essential to Benjamin's critique of linguistic violence. It allows him to argue that "the linguistic essence of things is their language," which evades the instrumentalization of language as a system of signs.³⁴ If language and linguistic essence are identical, language is not external to being. It embeds rather than medi-

ates mental states or contents. Hence, it is not a means to an end, but, rather, an essential part of what and who a being is. It is the part of a being that *contains* the mind, to the extent that it can be shared with others. Conflating mind and language would be as calamitous as separating them. “The view that the mental essence of a thing consists precisely in its language,” he writes, “is the great abyss into which all linguistic theory threatens to fall, and to survive suspended precisely over this abyss is its task.”³⁵ To avoid a conflation of mind and language, Benjamin argues that a distinct part of the mind consists in a being’s ability to share itself with others. This is why Benjamin insists that the mental essence of a being “communicates itself *in* language and not *through* language.”³⁶ The “through” reveals separation and instrumentalization.

Political violence springs from the use of language as a means of communicating ideas, perceptions, or emotions. Benjamin emphasizes that “all language communicates itself. Or, more precisely, [. . .] all language communicates itself *in* itself.”³⁷ While a linguistic formation does not have a content, as the instrumental view has it, it also does not communicate nothing.³⁸ That a linguistic being communicates itself *in* itself means that it shares its history in a unique way. With this evolving idea, Benjamin goes beyond the Romantic conception, expressed strongly by Novalis, who saw language as a formal and hermetic movement of inner correspondences.³⁹ For Benjamin, language is an open, political process in which beings of irreducible difference appear on their own terms. Their encounter is not *facilitated* by a common medium; this medium *is* their encounter.

The difference between communicating something “in” or “through” language is not a sophistic distinction, but rather the very difference between violent and nonviolent politics. The objectification of language as a tool has historically led to the suppression of a self-disclosing, open-ended, and not-yet-goal-oriented way of presenting oneself to others. This suppression, in Benjamin’s reconstruction, is the origin of violence in the moral and legal world. All violence is, ultimately, instrumental, and all instrumentalization is modeled on an original act of using words as signs rather than names.⁴⁰

The defining feature of humanity’s social practice is its conversion of language into a means, spawning a dynamic of exploitation, oppression, and abuse that culminated on the battlefields of World War I. Benjamin tells the story of a lost origin—of a disfigured and concealed relation to language that must be recovered and recuperated to break the spell of unconscious

traumatic repetition—a story that he modifies and transforms throughout his critical oeuvre. From the tension between “language as such,” which discloses in a sharing manner, and the “language of man,” which is instrumental and oppressive, arises the ethical task of opposing the destructive cycle of human history. This opposition must arise where it originates—namely, in the realm of language.

The Violence of Human Language

There are two main ways, according to Benjamin, in which the “language of man” falls back behind language as such, reflected in two extremes of linguistic theory: the bourgeois and the mystical view. The bourgeois, the most widely accepted—and, in Benjamin’s eyes, most impoverished view—“holds that the means of communication is the word, its object factual, and its addressee a human being.”⁴¹ This conception is the model for almost all modern theories of language. It goes back to Aristotle, who analyzed language as a system of signs used by humans for purposes of communication and political decision-making. Strings of letters that represent sounds compose words that are associated with meaning, and this meaning refers to existing or nonexistent things in the world or the mind. The relationship between words and meaning is arbitrary, depending on the agreement and habituation of a group of speakers.⁴² This theory represents, for Benjamin, the paradigm of language’s instrumentalization and the reason for humanity’s ensnarement in a cycle of violence.

In Benjamin’s conception, words are not containers of meaning that articulate facts, thoughts, or emotions, even though they certainly can do that. It’s not that language cannot figure, in the Aristotelian sense, as a carrier of sound-meaning pairs transmitted from one individual to another, conveying information and invoking emotions; it’s that seeing language primarily as a means of communication fails to grasp large parts of what language is and does, especially its enabling, imparting, and potentially non-violent activity of sharing histories and constituting experiences in a common sphere of encounter.

The second extreme of linguistic theory that Benjamin opposes is the mystical view. This view has often been identified with Benjamin’s own perspective, but he objects to it no less vehemently. “The other conception of language,” Benjamin writes, “knows no means, no object, and no addressee of

communication. It means: *in the name, the mental being of man communicates itself to God.*⁴³ The emphasis is on humans sharing themselves with a higher, radically different sphere of being. The world of matter, Benjamin claims, shares itself with humans and animals, and humans share their spiritual being with the “divine” linguistic sphere that embraces them. To assume that humanity embraces and perceives nature without being embraced by other, wider spheres of being and language, is a signature of the anthropocentric metaphysics that Benjamin marks as “human” in the title of his essay, and that he characterizes as coercive and violent.

Benjamin’s main concern with the mystical view is its complete conflation of being and language. While the positivistic bourgeois approach separates language and being, overemphasizing communication as a mediating function, the religious view sees language as the immediate expression of the divine. It reduces language’s ability to share and communicate among environments, animals, and humans to an effect of the divine. This leads to muteness and overwhelming awe, which obfuscate language’s active task of constituting and organizing social and political affairs.

Years later, in the winter of 1926 to 1927, Benjamin looked back and summarized his concern with the two extremes of human language:

The development of the communicative aspect of language to the exclusion of all else in fact inevitably leads to the destruction of language [*Sprachzerstörung*]. On the other hand, the way leads to mystical silence if its expressive character is raised to the absolute. Of the two, it seems to me that the more current tendency at the moment is toward communication [*Mitteilung*]. But in one form or another a compromise is always necessary.⁴⁴

Both the bourgeois and the mystical view violently reduce language to a means of either communication or expression. The result is the destruction of language through absolute communication or a mystical silence in the face of absolute expression. Although at the time Benjamin saw the apotheosis of communication as the greater danger, prompting him to strengthen the excluded transcendent aspects of language vis-à-vis the dominant scientific view, both extremes must be avoided—or, rather, integrated.⁴⁵ There can be no salutary or transformative use of language without first recognizing the history of communication and expression as two limited, and specifically human, linguistic practices.

The Ethics of Noninstrumental Language

To find an alternative route, Benjamin demarcates a point where language as such declined into the language of man. This point, he argues, was man's preposterous assumption of God's prerogative to name all creation.⁴⁶ This naming is no longer a listening to and articulation of a being's linguistic essence, but the allocation of a sign for purposes of identification and organization. This registration, designation, and classification of being was the basis for a practice of judging right from wrong. Only if language becomes apophantic, representing properties and relations among things in the world, can it be reduced to the function of telling truth from falsehood. This change in linguistic practice is the original sin and the origin of political violence. With this new emphasis on designation, decision, and judgment, human beings neglected the disclosing and sharing abilities of language "as such" and began to oppress human and nonhuman nature. The abuse of language and its reimagining as a system of communication—ultimately the reduction of the name to a sign—led to man's expulsion from paradise.

The myth of a lost origin and the unspoken longing for the restoration of an integrated relationship to nature and society are the principal vulnerabilities of Benjamin's schema. Despite these utopian hopes, his reflections offer practical strategies for countering oppressive language and political violence. In different variations, from the rehabilitation of allegory and children's play to storytelling and the reproducibility of art, he will analyze and perform linguistic and literary practices that recollect and amplify the remnants of a pre-instrumental relation to language within a damaged and disfigured state.⁴⁷

Benjamin's first depiction of language's immanent ability to transcend and undo its instrumentalization is the "task" of the translator, which he introduces at the end of "On Language as Such." To put humanity's fatal reduction of language into sharper relief, Benjamin paints the picture of a linguistic cosmos structured by processes of translation between different spheres of being. He then describes the consequences of humanity's abandonment of non-instrumental sharing and translanguing collaboration. Human language is embedded in and dependent on wider linguistic spheres; it is, Benjamin claims, but one step on a cosmic scale of languages, a scale based on the model of Scholastic analogies and the Great Chain of Being.

Benjamin's linguistic scale of being describes a continuous, gradual ascension from the lowest languages of unanimated matter through those of plants, things, and animals, up to humans, angels, and gods. A rendition



Fig. 1. Mark Dion, *Scala Naturae*, 1993. Photostat on paper, 36 × 29 inches (framed). (© Mark Dion, reproduced by permission.)

by visual artist Mark Dion (fig. 1) depicts the chain, which in the Middle Ages tied together the entirety of creation, as a set of stairs, emphasizing the scale-like structure of the model as well as the logics of collection, preservation, and categorization that was forming within the cosmic paradigm of the *Scala Naturae*. In an anti-ideological twist that echoes Benjamin's critique of linguistic anthropocentrism, Dion collapses the spheres of humans, angels, and gods in a depiction of the bust of Aristotle.

After 1921, prompted at least partially by Martin Heidegger's Habilitation thesis on Duns Scotus and Thomas of Erfurt, Benjamin abruptly moved away from Scholastic analogies, focusing instead on Baroque allegories in *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* (1928) and replacing the hierarchical continuity of gradual transitions with a nonhierarchical and paratactic model.⁴⁸

As one language among many, human language entails the task of translating the languages of environments, things, and animals into their own language, and then passing these translations on to higher "divine" spheres.⁴⁹ "To whom," Benjamin asks, "does the lamp communicate itself? The mountain? The fox?—But here the answer is: to man. This is not anthropomorphism."⁵⁰ It would be anthropomorphism to project a human form of communication onto the nonhuman realm. This is not the case, Benjamin claims. On the contrary: a medium of appearance much wider than that of human communication is presented by humanity as its invention. The objection of anthropomorphism is but a means of safeguarding the supremacy of human language.

Benjamin's model of ontological translation entails a communal and transnational project. By finding in each human language the corresponding "way of meaning" to another—which is what he calls the "task" of the translator—human languages complement each other by responding to their differences, and then sharing the collective "meaning" of all human languages with other natural and cosmic spheres.⁵¹ Without recognizing and respecting its embeddedness in these wider contexts and processes, the "language of man" deteriorates into an implement for the realization of absolute goals, pursued by oppression, aggression, and war.

"On Language" provides a narrative framing for the ethical imperative to resist the instrumentalization of language for political purposes. The crux of this instrumentalization is language's use as an external tool. After 1933, Benjamin embraced more explicitly the purposeful use of language for anti-fascist opposition; even then, however, this opposition required avoiding using language as a tool. The difference between language "as such" and "human language" produces concrete practices of non-instrumental lin-

guistic resistance. Benjamin's concept of translation, for example, promotes plurality, collaboration, and flattened hierarchies, as he envisions linguistic communities working together and depending on each other to complete the common task of amplifying and intensifying linguistic differences. Every language learner who studies a "second" or "third" language—and along with it another shade of language as such—takes on this task.

One needn't accept the idea of a transcendent or "divine" sphere of language to oppose its instrumental reduction; neither does the belief in a divine origin of language invalidate this opposition. For an ethics of anti-oppressive speech, it is not necessary to decide if Benjamin conceived of "pure language" as an attainable goal of universal translation or as an essentially inconclusive and unachievable task.⁵² As a fundus of strategies, the metaphysics of "language as such" contain elements of linguistic relationality that provide a measure of justice outside of the law. This measure resides in a process of collaborative disclosure, sharing, and translation that underlies and conditions any judgment as to what is beneficial or harmful.

Benjamin was adamant that "no system of possession, however articulated, can [. . .] lead to justice," and that "the law's concern with justice is only apparent [*scheinbar*]."⁵³ Rather than formulating normative rules for a nonviolent use of language, he found the guidelines for justice in the very procedures and practices that produce, interpret, question, and subvert such rules. Language "as such" precedes the purposeful decision for or against justified means and just ends, which is why justice can only occur as an "enforcement without judgment [*urteilslose Vollstreckung*]."⁵⁴ This execution or enforcement, as Benjamin's word choice indicates, might be nonjudgmental and non-discriminating, but it cannot simply be called nonviolent.



In response to the political violence that enabled World War I, Benjamin depicts the instrumental abuse of language as a scale that begins with turning a word into a sign and escalates to the systemic oppression of legal violence. In the human realm, this instrumentalization begins on the microlevel of everyday speech, a process that Benjamin saw unfolding as the enthusiasm that greeted the outbreak of World War I turned into a sinister and overtly antisemitic campaign.⁵⁵ In 1916, he located the origins of language's political violence in the appropriation of words as linguistic signs—an appropriation that obfuscated the names that these words carry. "The name," Ben-

jamin wrote, “has as its sole purpose and its incomparably high meaning that it is the innermost nature of language itself.”⁵⁶ Far from being a designator that picks out individuals, events, or places, the name is the remnant and reminder of a primordial relation between language and being.⁵⁷

A decade later, in the “Prologue” to *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* (1925), Benjamin went on to articulate how essential the name is for his understanding of violence: “Truth is not an intent which realizes itself in empirical reality; it is the power [*prägende Gewalt*] which determines the essence of this empirical reality. The state of being, beyond all phenomenality, to which alone this power [*Gewalt*] belongs, is that of the name.”⁵⁸ The name is the innermost nature of language, and as such it *alone* has the power to determine the essence of empirical reality. The ontological power and, in its absoluteness, violence of the name as the essence of language could hardly be greater.

As if to mark, in retrospect, an evolving tension in his conception of language, Benjamin removed a parenthesis that he included in the draft version of this passage: “the power which determines the essence of this empirical reality (without exercising any violence on it).”⁵⁹ The word for both power and violence in this sentence is “Gewalt.” Language is the power or force that exercises absolutely no violence. Wouldn’t Benjamin, based on this formulation, deny the very existence of linguistic violence and oppressive language? If language has such foundational powers that it alone shapes the meaning of reality, but exercises no violence at all, then how can it resist violence? How could it have stemmed the tide of violence that erupted before Benjamin’s eyes, threatening to sweep all of Europe away? This question connects “On Language” to “Toward the Critique of Violence,” in which Benjamin spells out the social, legal, and political consequences of his metaphysics of language.

Divine Linguistic Violence

How can the destructive dynamics of human history be opposed—even thwarted—without using instrumental violence in return? This question motivated large parts of “Toward the Critique of Violence,” an essay that Benjamin published as a commissioned work for a sociology journal in August 1921.⁶⁰ In this essay, he challenges the idea that the difference between state power and revolutionary violence is a question of legal legitimation. The English terms “force,” “power,” and “violence” are dialectically related in the

word “Gewalt,” which predates the Roman distinction of *potestas* and *violentia*.⁶¹ While police or military force is legitimated by a legal order that protects the freedom and property of its subjects, violence is what occurs outside of the law and the state, and can be directed against them.

Benjamin’s “Critique” exposes the violent origins of the logic of legitimacy. The title of his essay invokes Kant’s critical method of analyzing the conditions of knowledge about empirical reality rather than reality itself. It takes a step back to establish common grounds from which conflicts can be considered and resolved. Unlike Kant, however, Benjamin proceeds in a distinctly historical fashion. “The critique of violence,” he writes, “is the philosophy of its history—the ‘philosophy’ of this history because only the idea of its development makes possible a critical, discriminating, and decisive approach [*kritische, scheidende und entscheidende Einstellung*] to its temporal data.”⁶² The manifestations of violence, its temporal data, change over time. The critical evaluation of these manifestations can only be philosophical—that is, discerning and decisive—if the critique is directed, as he wrote in 1915, at “the present [. . .] in which history rests concentrated, as in a focal point.”⁶³ Benjamin’s critique seeks to determine the entry point for interrupting and abolishing the self-perpetuating regime of legal violence.

The essay consists of an analysis and a response, both of which have their origins in “On Language as Such.” The analysis reveals that every legal order with its state apparatus is founded on violent acts of war or revolution that helped to establish it and that live on within it. Every new order is defended with legally legitimated force against internal and external forces that threaten to overthrow and replace it. This cycle corrupts itself, since every “law-positing” violence, no matter how emancipatory its goals, becomes oppressive as soon as it legitimates and institutionalizes violence to preserve itself. This cycle of law-establishment and law-preservation has a narrative coherence, which is why Benjamin calls it “mythic.” The means used for legitimating the application of self-preserving force is legal language. The law now appears as one of the highest forms of linguistic violence.

Legal violence, for Benjamin, is rooted in linguistic instrumentality. In this, he relies on the means–ends schema upon which Kant built his discussion of violence in his moral philosophy.⁶⁴ Ultimately, however, Benjamin returns to “On Language” and his analysis of instrumental language. He claims that “the most elementary basic relation in every legal order is the one between ends and means. Furthermore, it is clear that violence can first be sought only in the realm of means, not in the realm of ends.”⁶⁵ The instru-

mentality that Benjamin analyzed in “On Language” reappears as the most fundamental trait of the law.

Natural as well as positive legal systems are essentially violent due to their foundational means–ends structure. They either consider violence as naturally given or as emerging in and from history. While natural law defines systems of just ends, which are used to justify the means used to attain them, positive law scrutinizes the justness of means, which then justify the ends. Both operate in terms of means–ends relations. There is no other law, Benjamin argues, and “both schools meet in the fundamental dogma they share: just ends can be attained by justified means, and justified means can be used for just ends.”⁶⁶

Conceiving of the law as the epitome of instrumental language reveals a spectrum of linguistic violence that extends, in the human realm, from the minimal extreme of communicating something through rather than in language to the maximal case of laws and orders that dispose individuals of their right to life and prompt armies to invade and occupy territories. Benjamin’s focus in this essay is not on insults, slurs, or hate speech; still, the violence of these linguistic acts culminates in legal documents that affect entire populations. Oppressive speech is part of a continuum that prepares, facilitates, and supports legal violence. Ultimately, Benjamin is concerned with non-violent linguistic practices like conference, debate, and conflict resolution as examples in which the potentials of “language as such” shines through, but also with limit cases like compromise, strikes, and extortion, which exercise a radically different kind of linguistic force, interrupting instrumentality without reproducing it.

A Different Kind of Violence

In “Critique of Violence,” Benjamin returns, three years into the Weimar Republic, to the sphere of language in order to find a way of “breaking through” the cycle of violence that “spins under the spell of mythical forms of law”—a breaking through that requires, as Benjamin claims, “another kind of violence” that is “law-annihilating [*rechtsvernichtend*]” and “lethal in a bloodless manner [*auf unblutige Weise lethal*].”⁶⁷ Against the backdrop of his reflections from 1916, this other, “divine” violence appears as an ensemble of linguistic “counterforces [*Gegengewalten*]”⁶⁸ capable of annihilating rather than destroying existing political and legal violence on a fundamental level. Linguistic counterforce does not instrumentalize language against violence, but rather advances and mobilizes it in a non-instrumental fashion.

To analyze the efficacy of nonviolent or “pure means [*reine Mittel*],” Benjamin turns to concrete linguistic practices outside of and prior to the law, practices of “nonviolent resolution [*gewaltlose Beilegung*]” such as “nonviolent agreement [*Einigung*],” mediation “by way of things [*Sachen*],” or “discussion as a technique of civic accord [*Technik ziviler Übereinkunft*].”⁶⁹ The examples that Benjamin provides are exclusively linguistic and operate in an extralegal space. While the language of law is violent through and through, the language of civil agreement opens spaces of nonviolent change. The “suspension of violence in principle,” he claims, is apparent in the legal treatment of another everyday linguistic practice: the “impunity for lying.”⁷⁰

Lying is not generally prohibited by law, because it exceeds the duality of truth and falsehood that structures law and order. Lying shows that language cannot be measured against an “objective state of affairs,” as Hamacher comments, since it is “the articulation of a mediacy prior to any distinction between ‘true’ and ‘false’ and is therefore not subject to that distinction.”⁷¹ Benjamin does not concern himself with the morality or immorality of mendacity; instead, he focuses on its legal status in order to discover spaces of deviation and transformation outside of the law.

This brings us to a key formulation of the relationship between language and violence in Benjamin’s early writings. The impunity with which one may lie shows “the existence of a sphere of human accord that is nonviolent to such a degree that it is wholly inaccessible to violence [*der Gewalt vollständig unzugänglich*]: the proper sphere of ‘coming-to-an-understanding,’ language.”⁷² Language is the proper sphere of “*Verständigung*”—the word Benjamin used in 1912 to describe the essence of “spirit”—and violence has absolutely no access to this sphere. How then can language ensnare the world in violence, while at the same time being entirely inaccessible to it?

Language’s inaccessibility to violence rearticulates the split between what language has become as an instrument of violence and what it can be as the proper sphere of understanding—between language “as such,” which allows beings to share and express themselves in unfettered ways, and the language of man, of law and morality, which is an implement of domination. Benjamin’s “divine” violence is the manifestation of language “as such” within the “language of man.” It is not an interruption from the outside but arises from within a predominantly instrumental linguistic practice, in the public sphere, exerting a gentle or “weak” counterforce capable of suspending, countering, and eventually *consigning* the destructive cycle of law-positing and law-preserving violence *to oblivion*. By characterizing divine

violence as “lethal,” based on the Greek etymology of the word, Benjamin alludes to this forgetting of mythic violence.

Divine violence precedes physical violence by intervening at an early stage, when discourse is beginning to constitute itself. It is *just language*—a multitudinous linguistic force that opposes and suspends oppressive speech on the microlevel of civic engagement. Every objection against instrumental and oppressive language, every debate over discriminatory names, every heeding of a social group’s demand for self-designation participates in a rhizomatic linguistic movement of oppositional counterforce. This movement is not nonviolent, since it forcefully contradicts existing legal and moral structures of self-preservation, but it also avoids reproducing the causal efficacy of instrumental violence. It suspends and dissolves the process of normalization that legitimates legal discrimination and paves the way for persecution and exploitation. It does not spill blood, since it unfolds in the realm of spirit and understanding, transcending the order of fate, guilt, and expiation that the law can only seemingly overcome and is in fact bound to reproduce.⁷³

Benjamin’s prime example of a “pure means of politics” that offers “an analogue to the means governing the peaceful interchange between private persons” is the right to strike.⁷⁴ This right is granted, he writes, by the state to preclude sabotage, economic harm, and violent protests, adding that the strongest motivation for finding nonviolent solutions is the fear of mutual disadvantage. The state grants the right to strike “because it restrains violent actions it is afraid to confront.”⁷⁵ The general strike—and here Benjamin cites George Sorel—is “capable of diminishing [*vermindern*] the incidence of actual violence in revolutions.”⁷⁶ However, there are two kinds of general strikes: the political general strike, which exercises a granted right to make specific demands, but does not challenge the fundamental social relations of exploitation, and the proletarian general strike, which “sets itself the sole task of annihilating [*Vernichtung*] state power.”⁷⁷

This annihilation can hardly be characterized as nonviolent, yet its task exceeds the order of instrumental violence. The proletarian general strike exemplifies what Benjamin calls “divine” violence in one crucial respect: unlike the political strike, it rejects the language of legitimacy upon which the order of laws and nation states is built. While the political strike makes use of a right, accepting the power of the legal order to grant it, the proletarian strike renounces this right, and with it the very foundation upon which the legal institution rests. After all, this foundation was itself established with brute force. The “divine” violence of the proletarian general strike

does not reside in the cessation of work, the economic harm it causes, or an abstract ideological opposition, but in the linguistic act of provoking a “conflict of *interpretation* [*conflit d’interprétation*]” over the very limits of the law and its founding in and through instrumental violence.⁷⁸

In emphasizing the interpretive conflict at the heart of the proletarian general strike, Benjamin portrays its counterforce as a pure linguistic means. “How would it be if all the violence imposed by fate, using justified means, were of itself in irreconcilable conflict with just ends,” he asks, “and if at the same time a different kind of violence arose that certainly could be either the justified or the unjustified means to those ends but was not related to them as means at all but in some different way?”⁷⁹ This other *Gewalt*—at the intersection of force, power, and violence that transcends fate, myth, and law—goes beyond the logic of retaliation and expiation, allowing for the appearance of civil practices that radically counteract political violence. While oppressive language is characterized by the pursuit of absolute goals such as economic supremacy or ethnic homogeneity, “divine” linguistic counterforces aim at the interruption and abolition of the violence of legitimation.

The Salutary Effects of Anti-Oppressive Language

How does “divine” linguistic counterforce operate on the microlevel of everyday language? How does it oppose the fateful spiral of violence that Benjamin saw spinning out of control in 1914 and again in 1939? These questions lead back to July 1916. In a letter to Martin Buber, written a few months before “On Language as Such,” Benjamin discusses his “highly political style and writing.”⁸⁰ This discussion has implication for anti-oppressive and non-discriminatory language. Benjamin had invited Buber, who was already an established voice, to speak at a Youth Movement gathering; now Buber invited Benjamin to contribute to his new journal, *Der Jude*, but Benjamin declined the offer, using the opportunity to discuss the moral and political dimensions of his emerging theory of language.

In more practical than metaphysical terms, Benjamin opposes the idea of using language to achieve political goals. “The opinion is widespread, and prevails almost everywhere as axiomatic, that writing [*Schrifttum*] can influence the moral world and human behavior, in that it places the motives behind actions at our disposal.”⁸¹ Benjamin is alarmed by the increasingly ruthless use of writing to enlist people in the pursuit of political goals. This is achieved by using language as a “mechanism” of combining words and

sentences to provide reasons for action, ultimately in support of expansionist and imperialist domination:

Every action that derives from the expansive tendency to string words together [*expansiven Tendenz des Wort-an-Wort-Reihens*] seems terrible to me, and even more catastrophic where the entire relationship between word and deed is, to an ever-increasing degree, gaining ground as a mechanism for the realization of the true absolute [*richtigen Absoluten*], as is the case among us now.⁸²

Language is used in an expansionary manner to achieve political goals. In 1916, these political goals included mobilizing bodies, labor, and resources for trench warfare. The violence with which language was instrumentalized by the German Empire motivated Benjamin's reflections, and his response—as one might expect, given his philosophical views at the time—was distinctly anti-psychological and anti-moralistic, focusing instead on the structural links between linguistic practices and political programs.⁸³ In his view, it is a certain way of speaking and writing, a *tendency to string words together*, that perpetuates the fatal historical dynamics.

“Divine” linguistic violence interrupts this “stringing together” of words that underlies the political logic of expansionism. Language is not reflecting the political and economic process; rather, this process imitates a dominant linguistic practice. Benjamin opposes the reproduction of a linguistic pattern that inconspicuously aligns the public with an imperialist political agenda. In his commentary on the passage, Samuel Weber notes that:

With this, we encounter Benjamin's political-theological critique of what is today called political correctness [*politische Korrektheit*]. [...] The ‘correctness’ of the ‘absolute’ corresponds to the ability of language to string together individual words without a predefined limit [*ohne vorgegebene Grenze*]. This is how the stringing together of words becomes the linguistic model [*sprachlichen Vorbild*] of an absolute that can be realized ‘correctly’ by a judging language.⁸⁴

Benjamin throws the linguistic violence behind the notion of politically correct language into sharper relief. Dominant social groups use the demands of targeted communities to acknowledge their social trauma by respecting their “right to self-designation [*Recht auf Selbstbezeichnung*],” presenting it as the danger of policing language and restricting the freedom

of speech.⁸⁵ Freedom, in this argument, is not the disclosing openness of language as a medium of justice, but the demand for privileged access to a tool of domination. The fight for representational recognition is presented as a legal or moral one based on the prevalent understanding of language as a mechanism of expansionism and imperialism. The demonizing use of the term “political correctness” reveals its underlying instrumentality: the normalized use of language to expand influence in the public sphere, which Benjamin opposed as early as 1916.

The political pursuit of “correct” absolutes cannot be opposed by stringing words together. Prohibitions on oppressive language create spaces for the recognition of oppression and the mobilization of opposition, but these prohibitions cannot be enforced without repeating the traumatizing effects of oppressive speech.⁸⁶ Language can be used to legislate, but it cannot itself be legislated. Linguistic counterforce must oppose oppressive and expansionary tendencies in a non-instrumental way.

What struck Benjamin about the dominant view of language was “that it completely fails to consider a relationship between language and action in which the former would not be the instrument [*das Mittel*] of the latter.”⁸⁷ But how can language oppose the political pursuit of murderous absolutes if not by furnishing and working toward *alternative* political goals? Benjamin realized that the response to oppressive language and politics lies neither in avoiding it silently, nor in reproducing its logic, but in fighting it with a different kind of force.

Benjamin describes this force as a changed relation to language. “Every salutary [*heilsame*] effect, indeed every effect [*Wirken*] not inherently devastating [*verheerend*], that any writing may have resides in its (the word’s, language’s) mystery [*Geheimnis*].”⁸⁸ This secret or enigma of language aligns with the inexpressible dimension discussed in “On Language as Such.” Benjamin further specifies language’s salutary efficacy: “It seems to me that the elimination of the unsayable in language [*die Elimination des Unsagbaren in der Sprache*] [. . .] is the form given to us and closest to us to have an effect within language and, to that extent, through it.”⁸⁹ Here, he verges on breaking with the verdict on language’s instrumentalization in “On Language as Such”; now, there is a way to effect change in the moral and legal world *through* language by “eliminating” that which cannot be said *in* it.

This “elimination of the unsayable in language” anticipates the revolutionary linguistic counterforce Benjamin invokes in “Critique of Violence.” The unsayable is another word for the inexpressible, which struggles with the expressible within every linguistic formation. It is a memory or “mental

essence” that is not yet articulated, not yet translated into communication and expression. An insulting epithet, for example, subsumes an individual under a social group, yet this subsumption is not what is oppressive. Oppression inheres in the actualization of the historical violence inflicted upon this group; this violence is perpetuated in the linguistic act of subsumption. The history of oppression is “unsayable” to the extent that it demands and awaits its articulation, even as it is pushed into enigmatic obscurity by dominant social groups.

Benjamin uses the word “elimination” in a defamiliarizing way. It does not describe the obliteration of the unsayable, but rather the removal of the boundary (*limes*) between the expressible and the inexpressible, so that more of what cannot be said can be voiced.⁹⁰ The issue with political correctness is that the dominant linguistic practice presents the insistence of oppressed communities on being represented however they choose to be as a moralistic and legalistic threat to the established grammatical and political order. Demanding and respecting the right to self-designation is a matter of learning about and articulating the unsayable within the name, and then debating, defending, and claiming it publicly. In “Critique of Violence,” Benjamin presents the salutary effects of language as a fundus of linguistic practices capable of “eliminating” the justice that demands articulation within the instrumental violence of legal institutions. If used in a proliferating and multitudinous fashion, the eliminating counterforces of language have the power to resist, erode, and undo expansionist and destructive politics without exercising violence.

Whether or not speakers use language in oppressive or salutary ways is something they struggle with on their own and in silence. This struggle, Butler argues, must be understood “as a solitary, if anarchistic, form of wrestling with an ethical demand.”⁹¹ The political efficacy of “divine” violence resides in a changed linguistic practice based on an ethical task posed by language itself—by the disclosing, not yet instrumentalized abilities of language “as such.” This changed practice is revolutionary in a bloodless manner; it springs from a lawless realm, does not revert into fate, and shifts the boundaries of what is not yet articulated further out into the open.



During the 1910s and 1920s, violence and language clashed in unprecedented ways. Manipulative and inflammatory communication was used to mobilize the masses for World War I and to promote political narratives of antisemi-

tism, nationalism, and colonial aggression.⁹² Language's strategic use for political goals brought to light its oppressive function, prompting Benjamin to locate the origins of the violence he witnessed.

Benjamin's essays from 1916 and 1921 are closely related as political complements: the metaphysics of "language as such" undergirds his analysis of legal and political violence, and his "Critique of Violence" argues that non-instrumental linguistic practices can interrupt—and potentially obliterate—the historical cycle of war and destruction. By establishing a link between linguistic instrumentality and political domination, Benjamin's critique of linguistic violence allows for an analysis of oppressive language and linguistic resistance. This analysis went on to occupy his attention for much of the following decades, prompting him to highlight non-instrumental and anti-oppressive practices in pedagogy, media, philology, and historiography.

Insults, assaultive speech, and discriminatory slogans are manifestations of linguistic violence. They tend toward large-scale structural exclusion, legal discrimination, and persecution. Underneath the pragmatic and performative dimensions of injurious words, oppressive language normalizes the readiness to target social groups for displacement and erasure. Language "as such," however, cannot be corrupted by worldly violence; operative within a largely instrumental everyday language, anti-oppressive linguistic practices transform the social and moral world in a forceful manner, without engaging in reactionary violence. Every time an oppressive word or turn of phrase is avoided, marked, or rebuffed, in favor of what is unsaid within it, a space is opened for a kind of justice that pushes beyond the boundaries of law and order.

Decolonial Pedagogy *Fairy Tales and the Expansionism of Weimar Education*

Weimar Germany's explosive mixture of economic crises, artistic diversity, and political brutality was embedded in wider European and global processes of imperialism and capitalist expansionism. The Treaty of Versailles had ended Germany's thirty years of territorial rule in Africa and the Pacific. Soon, the view that Germany had a right to its formerly colonized territories and must regain them became stronger and more accepted than it was before the war, leading to the narrative of the "lie of colonial guilt" (*Kolonialschuldliüge*). Meanwhile, the violence inflicted on colonized territories did not end in 1919. In addition to this continued material and social devastation overseas, the postcolonial transformations in the realms of language, knowledge, and memory shaped the Weimar years and Germany's role in the pan-European project of imperialist exploitation. While a focus on the continuities in Europe risks turning a blind eye to the conditions of colonized populations and lands, it is important to remember that German colonial rule produced the vocabularies and practices of racism, forced labor, exploitation, and extermination that paved the way for the Third Reich and the Shoah. By the early 1930s, colonial resentment had become fuel for nationalist movements, while the atrocious realities abroad were concealed under a veneer of colonial exhibitions and exoticist commodity culture.¹

Benjamin's intervention in this context came in the form of a review essay in the *Frankfurter Zeitung*, published on December 21, 1930, under the title "Colonial Pedagogy [*Kolonialpädagogik*]."² The title announces a convergence of his critical engagement with pedagogy and education, which

goes back to his activism for the German Youth Movement, and his scattered but significant remarks on colonial imperialism. The review itself discusses the book *Fairy Tales and the Present: The German Folk Tale and Our Times* (1930) by Alois Jalkotzy, a social democrat and educator from Vienna.³ Jalkotzy argues that Grimms' *Children's and Household Tales* (1812) should be redacted, reorganized, and rewritten as their descriptions of violence and dated technologies made them useless for contemporary children and teachers. In his review, Benjamin reveals and challenges the links between children's literature, political instrumentalization, and Weimar's "colonial unconscious."

The 211 stories that Jalkotzy refers to were collected and composed by the Brothers Grimm during a time in which vernacular stories supported the formation of German nationalism. They were meant to educate children and adults alike about the language, myths, and cultural identities of the German-speaking population.⁴ By the Weimar era, Jalkotzy argues, the tales were perceived as largely disturbing, morally suspicious, and in their traditional form of no use for kindergarten and primary school teachers. They contain beheadings, beatings, evil stepmothers, antisemitism, alcohol abuse, and misogyny; they glorify aristocracy and have little to say about class struggle; and they are written in an antiquated and inconsistent prose that children no longer understand, replete with invocations of household items and technologies that had long since disappeared from everyday life. All these elements must be removed, or, where possible, rewritten. As a genre, however, the fairy tale must be rescued, redefined, and strengthened, especially in view of the decline of the family in modernity. Its new home must be schools and daycares, where the tales could be used to refine children's linguistic abilities and emotional intelligence, shaping a democratic and humanistic future. Jalkotzy dedicated the book "to the female kindergarten teachers" and included practical examples of revised stories.

Benjamin severely criticized the book. He not only rejected Jalkotzy's instrumentalizing and commodifying views of children and education but characterized his pedagogy as "colonial." What is "colonial" about *Fairy Tales and the Present*, and what does this designation reveal about Benjamin's own Eurocentrism, as well as his efforts to combat rising xenophobia, nationalism, and fascism? In this chapter, I discuss Jalkotzy's book and Benjamin's review to examine the links between literary education and colonial imperialism in the early 1930s.

Benjamin's perspective and his philology were shaped and limited by the lifeworld of the German Empire under which he was born and raised.

He did not write about the realities of the territories colonized by the *Reich*. His analysis is restricted to how oppression and exploitation—including the representation and legitimization of imperialism—were distorted in European commodity culture, which appeared to him as a gigantic fairy tale. In his review, Benjamin suggests that Jalkotzy’s proposal to produce redacted, non-violent, and easily consumable versions of Grimms’ fairy tales supported the obfuscation of violence in this cultural representation. For him, Jalkotzy’s descriptions of children as “primitives” exposes his deeper intent: to use literature to conquer and then to cultivate the mind and emotional world of the child. Benjamin discerns a pious, complicit, and “colonial” pedagogy at work, resting on the abuse of language and literature as a means of political and military expansionism.

Benjamin’s review also contains oppressive language. He compares school children in Europe to enslaved workers in the German colonies in Africa. This reproduction of a racist stereotype exposes his Eurocentrism and the limitations of his critical gaze onto European imperialism. Oscillating between dangerous complicity and militant political opposition, the review reveals how the normalization of expansionism in education supported the rise of fascism in Germany during these years, while illuminating Benjamin’s evolving attempts to expose and counteract this normalization. Despite its shortcomings, his discussion of Jalkotzy’s book resonates with decolonial theories and practices by “delinking” the social democratic pedagogy of the Weimar years from the linguistic preparation and justification of colonial violence.⁵

Fairy Tales and the Present

Not much is known about Alois Jalkotzy. Born, like Benjamin, in 1892, he lost his parents when he was seven years old. During several years in an orphanage in Vienna, he gained insights into what he described as a misanthropic education system hostile to life. As an adult, he dedicated himself to the improvement of this system. In 1922, Jalkotzy became the general secretary of the Austrian *Kinderfreunde* (Friends of Children), an organization of the Social Democratic Party founded in 1908 that was committed to improving the physical and psychological wellbeing of children. In 1934, he was incarcerated by the Austrian Home Guard (*Heimwehr*) for six months. Later that year, he went to England, became a Quaker, and took on multiple jobs until the end of World War II.⁶

After 1945, Jalkotzy worked as a teacher and as an inspector for local daycares. He eventually became the director of a shelter for neglected and

socially disadvantaged children. In that role, he developed concepts for social reintegration, including the *Mappe der Menschlichkeit* (Portfolio of Humanity), a monthly journal published by the children in the shelter that contained only positive news in an effort to help them work through their experiences of the war. Jalkotzy is the author of several monographs and guidebooks, including the *Elternschule* (School for Parents), dedicated to educating the educators; *Die Kindersprache* (The Language of Children, 1952); and a book about the November Pogroms of 1938.

Fairy Tales and the Present was published after eight years of work for the Kinderfreunde organization in Vienna. It has a decidedly practical outlook and a clear political mission: turning Grimms' fairy tales into tools for early childhood educators in the context of a social democratic agenda. To this end, Jalkotzy discusses many individual fairy tales. His prime examples are "The Juniper Tree [*Von dem Machandelboom*]," which he includes in its entirety because of its particularly violent and anachronistic nature, as well as popular stories like "Sleeping Beauty," "Rapunzel," and "Little Red Riding Hood." He draws on contemporaneous research literature on the fairy tale genre and its history to argue that the Grimms' collection is "in need of critical pedagogical revision [*Bearbeitung*]" (66).

To substantiate this claim, Jalkotzy distinguishes fairy tales from funny or comedic stories (*Schwänke*) and legends:

The fairy tale is a simple-minded story of primitive people [*einfältige Geschichte primitiver Menschen*], in which a hero travels from everyday life into a magical realm. He passes through this realm despite great danger and in a fortuitous manner, returning to everyday life as a victor [*Sieger*] and with success. With him, the good prevails. (7–8)

While the fairy tale pertains to women and the family home, the "Schwank" belongs to men and the tavern, and morality and the supernatural play a different role (11–12). Fairy tales, in short, begin in everyday reality, travel through a supernatural realm, often in three different iterations, before returning to an elevated and enriched version of everyday life.

Like pulp fiction (*Schund*) and pulp cinema (*Schundkino*), the fairy tale has a happy end. Every fairy tale contains violence, magic, and fear, but ends happily in the real world. Evil characters are never reformed or bettered, but always—and often brutally—punished. Anticipating the popular filmic adaptations of the Grimms' stories that Walt Disney made, Jalkotzy mentions the

possibility of a “fairy tale cinema [*Märchenfilm*]” (75), and his characterization corresponds in several respects to Walt Disney’s approach.⁷ Rather than leaving the “art of the people [*Volkskunst*]” to trivial and schematic literature and film—Jalkotzy mentions Karl May (55)—the power of the Grimms’ collection must be salvaged by revising and changing the stories it contains. To prepare the ground for this process of revision, Jalkotzy discusses the stories’ deficiencies in detail. The list, which he summarizes at the end of his analysis, is long:

Grimms’ collection contains fairy tales of great beauty. It also contains pieces that are quite poorly narrated. It must be determined to what extent criticism is justified. The motifs [*Motive*] of the German folk tale are sometimes, but not very often, outdated [*überholt*]. Understandably, modern motifs are missing entirely. The elements that the fairy tale uses are frequently unusable [*unbrauchbar*], antiquated [*veraltet*], and have become alien to our contemporary sensibility [*unserem gegenwärtigen Empfinden fremd*]. The evil stepmother plays a special role. Child murderers and man-eaters are typical characters in the German folk tale. The blood lust is striking; descriptions of murders and killings are popular. In addition, the supernatural world of the fairy tale is, above all, terrifying [*schreckenerregend*]. The Grimms’ collection is brimming with pleasure in beatings. The German folk tale often celebrates alcohol; at least it is never against it. In terms of cultural history, Grimms’ collection is of the highest significance. Understandably, the fairy tale is full of superstition. Individual traits are morally questionable [*bedenklich*]. Grimms’ collection is permeated by aristocratic society. Despite contradictions of classes, there is no class struggle. Their language makes many of the pieces quite unequal. (69)

Because of these problematic elements, Jalkotzy claims, comprehensive revision is necessary. He suggests three overarching principles: (1) all dated motifs must be removed or replaced; (2) antiquated characters and objects must be replaced by modern ones, so a loom, for instance, would become a sewing machine; (3) all words and phrases that are not comprehensible anymore must be reworked or cut entirely. The last of these often entails wholesale restructuring, including the replacement of indirect with direct speech, the addition of new rhythmic repetition, the insertion of subheadings to structure the stories more clearly, and the combination of similar narrative elements into single stories (68–69).

Despite its many flaws, the fairy tale, in Jalkotzy's eyes, matters greatly. It must be saved and restored to full strength so that it may carry out its educational mission. He emphasizes the readers' positive emotional identification with the hero (26, 30–31, 62) and the fairy tale's ability to refine children's fantasy worlds by isolating and portraying the workings of semblance:

The fairy tale [. . .] is truthful [*wahrhaftig*] because it identifies semblance as semblance [*Schein als Schein bezeichnet*]. The one who enters the fairy tale as a listener or reader consciously enters the realm of fantasy—the realm of art. The fairy tale seemingly solves the deepest problems of life in a realm of semblance [*scheinbar im Reich des Scheins*]. It does not pretend to be able to shape life truly. It presents itself truthfully as an escape from the real world; that is why it is truthful and genuine art. (15)

The fairy tale presents the fantasy world as such, distinct from social reality, allowing the child to practice their relationship to the supernatural rather than being immersed in it. Against Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Immanuel Kant, and Maria Montessori—who argued, each in their own way, that children have an abundance of fantasy, and that the task is to limit it in order to strengthen their rationality (35)—Jalkotzy seeks to guide the child's desire for otherworldliness and the fantastic toward educational ends. The morality conveyed through emotional identification must be socially minded and work against antisemitism and misogyny (49, 52).

Besides emotionality and fantasy, and somewhat separated from both, Jalkotzy underscores the importance of language education. While he felt fairy tales should be told by a “storyteller [*Erzähler*]” (48, 64, 68, 74)—a female storyteller, to be precise—the next best thing was reading written stories out aloud to convey their linguistic quality and texture; he felt this was necessary because, in his view, school teachers of the early 1930s could no longer recite with sufficient accuracy.⁸ Rhymes play a key role as a mnemonic device for the storyteller, as well as providing an inspiration and aid to comprehension for children and adult language learners. While the rhythmic structure of nursery rhymes and the repetitions in the stories help with strong conjugations, subjunctive and indirect speech must go, since they cannot be comprehended easily enough by the children of the day (68; 75).⁹ In a similar vein, Jalkotzy discusses the importance of the radio (72) for the purpose of turning Grimms' fairy tales into what he envisions as an art of the people, or *Volkskunst*.



This proposal—by a noted pedagogue and teacher—aroused Benjamin’s interest and prompted a decisive objection. What was it about Jalkotzy’s book that motivated Benjamin to write a scathing review that railed against the wider tendencies of Weimar’s pedagogical theory and practice?

Since 1925, Benjamin published articles, reviews, and glosses in the *Frankfurter Zeitung*, one of Germany’s oldest and most prominent left-liberal newspapers. Founded in 1866 as a stock market report, it was the main oppositional press organ during the early Second Empire, with many of its editors being incarcerated for not revealing their sources. During the Weimar years, its readership consisted of entrepreneurs and businessmen, while its feuilleton steadily gained in popularity. Benjamin’s friend Siegfried Kracauer worked as a reporter for the *Frankfurter Zeitung* from 1921 onward, writing about cultural events, exhibitions, and conferences. Other prominent contributors included Thomas and Heinrich Mann, Joseph Roth, and Alfred Döblin.¹⁰

Benjamin’s intentions in writing a review of *Fairy Tales and the Present* were at least twofold. First, he seems to have hoped to destabilize the liberal mindset that he expected to welcome Jalkotzy’s proposal by pointing out how his allegedly socially minded pedagogical agenda limited rather than expanded future possibilities, thereby playing into the hands of regressive political forces. Second, Benjamin’s invocation of colonial imperialism spoke directly to the growing, strategically instrumentalized resentment that many Germans harbored toward neighboring nations that still controlled extensive and lucrative colonial empires.

In the following, I examine passages in Jalkotzy’s book that Benjamin critiqued as “colonial,” and in which he recognized a connection between liberal-democratic pedagogy and expansionist politics that paved the way, through linguistic violence in the realm of education, for the rise of the Third Reich.

“Colonial Pedagogy”

In the late 1920s and early 1930s, Benjamin refocused his engagement with education and pedagogy that he had begun with his intellectual activism for the “School Reform” branch of the German Youth Movement. He wrote radio plays, studied children’s relationships to language and memory, and

discussed children's theater, the proletarian child, and the transgenerational aspect of materialist historiography.¹¹ These elements are connected by a critique of "educative violence [*erzieherische Gewalt*]," which unfolds outside the realm of morals and the law as a key manifestation of "divine" violence.¹² Esther Leslie has discussed how Benjamin's review of Jalkotzy's book objects to the infantilization of children and their subjugation based on a logic of commodification and exploitation.¹³ The review itself reveals that Benjamin's evolving response to colonialism and imperialism was closely related to this critique of commodification.

Benjamin's first remarks about colonial imperialism date back to a seminar he participated in at the University of Munich, led by the Americanist Walter Lehmann, on the languages and cultures of the Maja and Mexica. This course informed Benjamin's metaphysics of language, his theory of translation, and his historical epistemology, as reflected in "On Language as Such."¹⁴ He continued his analysis of Weimar's "colonial unconscious" in *One-Way Street* (1928) and in another review essay from the 1930s on Marçel Brion's *Bartholomée de Las Casas*.¹⁵ The "Victory Column" aphorism of *Berlin Childhood around 1900* (1932–1938) references the Boer War of 1899 and "Uncle" Paul Kruger, who fought against the British in South Africa, and who paraded through Berlin on The Day of Sedan.¹⁶

The *Arcades Project* contains various remarks about the imprint of colonialism on the market and commodity culture of Paris, on occasions like World's Fairs and in spaces like the Place du Maroc, but it does not systematically engage with these effects.¹⁷ In 1935, Adorno suggested to Benjamin that the project could be enhanced by contextualizing the arcades within the wider dynamics of European colonialism. "I believe the category of the commodity," Adorno wrote, "could be effectively concretized through the specifically modern categories of world trade and imperialism. For example: the arcade as bazaar, and antique shops as world trade markets of the temporal."¹⁸

One can only speculate how such a change of perspective would have transformed the *Arcades Project*. Benjamin did not engage explicitly with the life worlds, languages, and cultures of the territories colonized by the German Empire between 1884 and the end of World War I, including much of what is today Burundi, Cameroon, Ghana, Namibia, Togo, Rwanda, and Tanzania. Instead, he intensified his focus on the European "dream consciousness" that concealed and supported the violence of global capitalism and imperialism. Between 1927 and 1929, he conceived of the *Arcades Project* in its earliest states as a "dialectical fairyland [*dialektische Feerie*]."¹⁹ The

representation of colonialism in Europe was itself a fairy tale for Benjamin, and he examined its visual and material appearance. Jalkotzy's proposal to purge violent descriptions and unfamiliar references from Grimms' stories mirrored this distortion and concealment of colonial violence.

Never judge a book by its cover (fig. 2). Benjamin begins his review with the curious assertion that, in this case, one can and should: "The cover gives it away right from the start. It is a photomontage: winding towers, skyscrapers, factory chimneys in the background, a powerful locomotive in the middle distance and, at the front of this landscape of concrete, asphalt and steel, a dozen children gathered around their nursery teacher, who is telling a fairy tale."²⁰ The back cover (fig. 3), which Benjamin does not describe, continues the visual narrative: a propeller plane descending over a large crowd of workers gathered outside a factory. In the foreground, a gondola and a Fiat 521 atop scenes of labor at a forge and on an assembly line.

Despite this curious juxtaposition of technology, intimacy, and labor practice, the cover reveals, according to Benjamin, the book's utter disregard for the meaning of literature and the inner workings of storytelling as a medium of experience and education. "It is incontestable," he writes sarcastically, "that whoever engages with the measures which the author [Jalkotzy] recommends in the text will convey just as much of the fairy tale as the person who relates it at the foot of a steam hammer or inside a boilermaker."²¹ The power of storytelling unfolds in immersion, distraction, and the temporary suspension of intentional consciousness, allowing what is heard to sink into the organism and become part of the deeper strata of body and mind.²² The cover portrays an industrialized environment in which fairy tales cannot be heard or experienced properly. Benjamin asserts that rewritten and redacted fairy tales are as harmful to the children's emotional and spiritual development as the pollution of a chemical plant is, noting that "the children will have just as much in their hearts of the reformed fairy tales [*Reform-Märchen*] that are earmarked for them here as their lungs have of the cement desert into which this admirable spokesman 'of our present' relocates them."²³ Above all, however, Benjamin takes offense with Jalkotzy's view of children and education:

It is not easy to find a book that demands the relinquishment of what is most genuine and original with such taken-for-grantedness [*Selbstverständlichkeit*]; that understands the child's delicate and hermetic fantasy [*zarte und verschlossene Fantasie*] so resolutely as a spiritual demand in the sense of a commodity-producing society; and that considers education with such



Fig. 2. Front cover of Alois Jalkotzy's *Märchen und Gegenwart* (Vienna: Jungbrunnen-Verlag, 1930). (Reprinted by permission of Jungbrunnen-Verlag.)

dreary indifference as a colonial opportunity for the sale of cultural goods [*koloniale Absatzchance für Kulturgüter*].²⁴

Jalkotzy's book, Benjamin claims, misrecognizes entirely the cultural and historical meaning of Grimms' fairy tales. In reducing the child's fragile and mysterious mind to a receptacle for literary products, it treats children like buyers at a market specializing in wares from a distant and exoticized world. Benjamin's invocation of colonialism extends beyond a critique of commodification. Few elements in Jalkotzy's book directly suggest this analogy. Benjamin, not unlike a psychoanalyst, brings the book's unconscious colonial fantasies to light, noting Jalkotzy's tendency to refer to children as "primitives"



Fig. 3. Back cover of Alois Jalkotzy's *Märchen und Gegenwart* (Vienna: Jungbrunnen-Verlag, 1930). (Reprinted by permission of Jungbrunnen-Verlag.)

and his invocation of childhood as a stage of “primitive humanity” (7, 9–18, 20, 29–30, 72–73). These descriptions infantilize children based on the same logic of moral and technological superiority that underlies the racist stereotype of Africans as children or “primitives.”²⁵ Benjamin, following the thread of these implicit linkages, discerns the coloniality of Jalkotzy’s approach on a deeper linguistic level. Children and children’s literature are not only related by an exchange logic that reduces them to buyers and commodities; they are linked in an oppressively expansionist manner. In Benjamin’s eyes, Jalkotzy’s book commits violence on fairy tales, children, and the transformative forces of education, preparing and supporting the violence that colonial imperialism enacts on oppressed populations and exploited lands.

Benjamin continues to unfold this disquieting analogy. He relates Jalkotzy's "psychology of the child" to the book *Psychologie der Naturvölker* (Psychology of the Natural Peoples, 1900) by the neo-Kantian philosopher Fritz Schultze, a book that Benjamin might have encountered in Lehmann's seminar. The book epitomizes the academic apology for European supremacy by proposing a "colonial psychology" that seeks both to "dominate" and to "educate" colonized communities.²⁶ Countering this psychology, which considers the colonized as "heaven-sent consumers of European junk wares," Benjamin invokes Sigmund Freud's study on narcissism, praising its "magnificent interpretation of the child's superiority [*kindlicher Überlegenheit*]."²⁷ This invocation of Freud—one of only a handful in Benjamin's writings—shows how he sought to expose Jalkotzy's colonial unconscious. Elaborating on Freud's study, however, would mean taking "too much trouble with a text in which superficiality is proclaimed so fanatically, unleashing, under the banner of the contemporary moment [*Panier der Jetztzeit*], a holy war against everything that does not correspond to the 'present sensibility [*gegenwärtigen Empfinden*]' and which places children (like certain African tribes) in the first line of battle."²⁸

What ought we to make of this comparison between the school children of the Weimar Republic and the exploited, persecuted, and murdered individuals in the former German colonies? Benjamin does not substantiate his comparison with research into the conditions and realities in the colonized territories, nor does he specify which countries or populations he is referring to; instead, he mobilizes the word "colonial" against Jalkotzy's liberal pedagogy. In making this comparison, Benjamin himself exercises linguistic violence, invoking the suffering of colonized individuals to oppose a pedagogy and political tendency that he recognized as being complicit with the expansionist agendas of rising nationalism and fascism.²⁹

"Certainly," Zahid Chaudhary comments, "Benjamin [. . .] is guilty of a Eurocentrism that does not admit of alternate temporalities except within Europe's frame, but the critique of Eurocentrism is a necessary but insufficient ground for rethinking historical difference. In order for a reading practice to do more than point a finger, one must attempt to detach such insights"—including the convergence of colonialism and pedagogy—"from their discrete contexts, in a Benjaminian spirit, and refunction them for postcolonial thought."³⁰ The comparison of European children with enslaved individuals from African countries perpetuates oppression by using a deracinated abstraction as an invective against Nazism. Benjamin suspends, opposes, and counteracts a destructive historical tendency with

his own violent language. Can the comparison be explained based on the increasing discrimination Benjamin experienced as a Jew in Weimar Germany? Was his forceful language conscientious? The violence of the comparison, which he reiterates at the end of the review, indicates, on a linguistic level, a conflicted decolonial literary strategy that exceeds the critique of commodification.

Before concluding his review, Benjamin addresses Jalkotzy's critique of the violence of Grimms' fairy tales. After summarizing the long list of inadequacies that Jalkotzy assembled—blood lust, child murderers, alcoholism, and so forth—Benjamin comments cynically: “And so the times move on. While [. . .] the cannibal must have been a rather common feature of German everyday life until quite recently, he is now somewhat alienated from ‘contemporary sensibilities.’”³¹ The man-eater might not be around anymore, Benjamin admits, but “what if children, given the choice, would rather run into his throat than into that of this new pedagogy? And thereby for their part prove themselves likewise to be alienated [*entfremdet*] from the ‘contemporary sensibility?’”³² Benjamin defends children's choices, rather than infantilizing them. As Alison Ross writes, he identifies in reform programs like Jalkotzy's “the imposition of the fantasised adult perspective of a bourgeois life for children that overlooks their fascination for the grotesque and the disturbing.”³³ If children, Benjamin adds, led by curiosity and free will, turn their attention to Grimms' collected tales, not even the radio that Jalkotzy praises as a “miracle of technology” will lure them away.

Benjamin cites Jalkotzy's contention that “the fairy tale [. . .] necessitates narration [*das Erzählen*] as the most important expression of life” (72) in order to cast him as a dangerous author who not only misrecognizes the elevated historical significance of storytelling's decline, but also “shies away from nothing” in the “adaptation [*Anpassung*]” of literature “to particular needs.”³⁴ The instrumentalization of language for the purpose of education reveals the flawed character of its politics, its willingness to neutralize and eradicate historical difference. Benjamin's skepticism toward adapting, blending in, and making oneself similar pertains to his critique of assimilation rooted in his experience of antisemitism during the interbellum years.³⁵ The coercive pressure to become similar, even when resisted, informed Benjamin's search for literary practices that might be able to combat expansionism and colonialism.

Benjamin vehemently objects to Jalkotzy's embrace of adaptation by emphasizing the power of historical differentiation. He cites Jalkotzy: “The less of this spook and nightmare of German history we place in front of our

children, the better will it be for the children and for the development of the German people and its democracy,” just to respond: “No! The night of our republic is not so dark that all the cats in it are grey and Wilhelm II and King Thrushebeard can no longer be distinguished from each other.”³⁶ He discerns the calamity of Jalkotzy’s pedagogy not so much in historical relativism, but in the alignment of language with an unquestioned nonviolent politics. Appealing to the most inconspicuous political forces of the Weimar Republic—its children—Benjamin ends his review by rearticulating his disconcerting comparison:

It [the Weimar Republic] will still find the energy to block the path of this fun-loving reformism [*lebfrischen Reformismus*], for which psychology, folklore and pedagogy are only flags under which the fairy tale as an export commodity is freighted to a dark corner of the globe [*dunklen Erdteil*], where the children yearn in the plantations of this reformism’s pious mode of thinking [*frommen Denkungsart*].³⁷

Benjamin turns to a naval metaphor to describe fairy tales in Jalkotzy’s schema as commodities that are shipped to the uncharted minds of children who long for literary material that satisfies their needs. In this violent depiction, Benjamin compares the conditions of individuals in the colonized territories in Africa to those of children who attend preschools in Vienna and Berlin. This rendering relies on a reduction of the unique experiences of colonial oppression and a relativization of the crimes committed against colonized communities. Benjamin used the comparison to oppose the politics of colonial guilt during the Weimar period. Can this critique, despite its Eurocentrism, be refashioned in a way that resonates with decolonial strategies?



Benjamin uses the comparison between children and colonized populations to object to using Grimms’ fairy tales for the invasion and cultivation of children’s minds. In this agenda, he discerns not only instrumental violence and a “pious” hypocrisy, but also an expansionist linguistic mechanism that he describes as colonial. Benjamin opposes Jalkotzy’s pedagogy, which proposes removing violence and incomprehensibility from popular children’s stories. While he does not ascribe pedagogical or political value to exposing children to historical descriptions of violence, his rejection of Jalkotzy’s

proposal connects the militant strand of his youth activism to his writings against fascism and his materialist historiography.

As early as 1912, Benjamin wrote that education is about “finding a way out of the opposition [*Widerstreit*] between natural, truthful development, on the one hand, and the task of transforming the natural individual into the cultural individual, on the other hand, a task that will never be completed without violence [*Gewalt*].”³⁸ Benjamin not only objects to the beatings and physical punishments that were common during the Wilhelmine Empire, but also to the linguistic violence that structured the relations between teachers and students, including the literature used in homes, classrooms, and offices. Transforming a natural individual into a cultured individual includes violence, Benjamin claims, as opposed to letting the child develop without intervention. The task is to find a way out of this conflict between violent transformation and the abstract ideal of unadulterated development, rather than imagining a nonviolent form of culturalization, which he deems impossible. In 1928, he advocated for organizing rather than mastering the relationship between educators and the educated: “But who would trust a cane wielder who proclaimed the mastery [*Beherrschung*] of children by adults to be the purpose of education? Is not education, above all, the indispensable ordering of the relationship [*Ordnung des Verhältnisses*] between generations and therefore mastery (if we are to use this term) of that relationship and not of children?”³⁹

This ordering of the relations between generations, which easily declines into instrumental mastery, is linguistic: it is the realm of “divine” educative counterforce that precedes and potentially destabilizes the fundamental nature of law and morality. In the purported nonviolent objectives of Jalkotzy’s proposal, Benjamin saw a violent instrumentalization of language and literature to master the child’s mind and emotions. When he discussed children’s books and toys during the late 1920s and early 1930s, he began to outline an alternative route. The “Colonial Pedagogy” review grants insights into the educational methods that Benjamin rejected; at the same time, it sheds light, within the confines of his Eurocentric perspective, on Benjamin’s linguistic critique of colonialism, and, by extension, on the ways in which Weimar exile writers countered rising oppression, antisemitism, and totalitarianism.

Decolonializing Weimar Pedagogy

Benjamin criticized Jalkotzy’s pedagogy for conceiving of education as a transactional process that turns fairy tales into literary commodities and

children into consumers.⁴⁰ If he had stopped with a critique of capitalist pedagogy, the invocation of colonialism would not have been necessary. However, Benjamin sees Jalkotzy's approach as "colonial" on a linguistic and literary level. He discerns a relation of imitation between the pedagogical proposal to rewrite children's literature for political purposes and the application of colonial violence in the name of European progress. As much as the adult's instrumentalization of the child reveals the parent to be authoritarian and hence not considerate or mature, the actions of those who proclaim cultivation through social and technological advancement prove the opposite: that they resort to the very barbarity they ascribe to the communities and individuals they oppress, exploit, and destroy.⁴¹

Benjamin claims that colonial politics and practices are shaped by an expansionist use of language. His interest in imitation led him to refocus his theory of language on mimesis and childhood in the early 1930s. Whereas coercive imitation is based on the production of semblance (*Schein*), he discerns an oppositional, decolonial mimesis in repetition and play (*Spiel*). He observed both poles in the language of children, which he believed epitomized wider phylogenetic and historical developments in perception and representation. This two-sided relation of imitation underlies Benjamin's objection to rewriting historical literature for children and the colonial pedagogy it supports. Jalkotzy—and, by extension, Weimar's liberal pedagogy—does not unconsciously imitate the colonial or postcolonial practices of imperialist Germany. Rather, it is the other way around.

Benjamin's critique of colonialism builds on his early engagement with language and violence. The instrumentalization of fairy tales for political education is rooted in the "expansionary tendency [*expansive Tendenz*] of stringing words together" that he rejected decisively in his letter to Martin Buber from 1916, and that, for him, had the most catastrophic social and historical effects.⁴² The "bourgeois" view of language as a system of signs serves the realization of "political absolutes," culminating in a destructive cycle of law-positing and law-preserving violence. What Benjamin called "expansionary" in 1916, he now calls "colonial"—namely, the purposeful employment of children's literature to produce functioning citizens based on the fairy tale of a nonviolent present and future. Language is used to infiltrate the minds of children and plant ideas there, normalizing the legitimation to invade territories and impose languages, rules, and practices onto subjugated populations. Terms such as "race" (*Rasse*) and "living space" (*Lebensraum*), which the German colonizers developed and which provided the ideological cornerstones of the *Ostpolitik* and the Final Solution, are the products of this expansionary mechanism.⁴³

In the summer of 1933, after being forced out of Germany, Benjamin revised his theory of language, supplementing his metaphysics of language “as such” with an anthropological and historical theory of human language as a highly sublimated form of animal mimicry. This revision included an inquiry into how precisely the instrumental linguistic mechanisms that he analyzed during World War I shaped the moral and social world of the 1930s. In 1933, mimesis became the linchpin of his reconceived theory of language and violence. The relation between linguistic and social realities was compulsively mimetic.

Every new generation, compelled to imitate existing linguistic realities, is forced into the symbolic order of the previous one. This process appears entirely natural and opaque, but it can be resisted and interrupted by a change in everyday language use—by non-imitative mimetic practices. These practices have, as the “Colonial Pedagogy” review indicates, a decolonial dimension. The possibility of fundamental transgenerational change led Benjamin to approach the intersection of language and violence from yet another perspective.

By 1930, when Benjamin began to revisit his view on language, children had joined his category of “the oppressed” (*die Unterdrückten*).⁴⁴ This category rests on a strong generalization. It originated in “On Language as Such” with human language’s silencing, exclusion, and devaluation of nonhuman languages—the forms of communication and expression of matter, things, and animals. During the Weimar years, Benjamin began to include children and, as the review from 1930 indicates, the colonized in this category. In 1940, Benjamin used the term “the oppressed” and applied it to the proletariat and the victims of fascism, which he described as the “nameless” (*namenlose*) inheritors and avengers of the defeats and disappointments of the past.⁴⁵

What characterizes the oppressed and defeated (*die Besiegten*) is the deprivation of speech and their enforced muteness and silence.⁴⁶ In “On Language,” nature is described as sad because it is named surreptitiously by humans, but cannot name them in return, or name itself, and is thereby excluded from the sphere of political discourse.⁴⁷ Children, too, are spoken for and often deprived of linguistic and political agency.⁴⁸ Benjamin argues that human language, as an overly coercive form of imitation, forces children into the symbolic realm that the victors in history—those who seized the power to shape educational, legal, and political institutions—have developed over generations. When Benjamin emphasizes the namelessness of the oppressed, he is not enjoining the historian to find and assign names, but rather encouraging them to articulate histories of oppression in terms that are not provided by or useful for the oppressors.

From both a post- and a decolonial perspective, the weakness of the category of the oppressed is its generality, in which the specificity of the violence imposed on social groups such as the colonized, children, or workers, is lost. The violence of Benjamin's comparison between children and enslaved or colonized communities is rooted in this erasure of specificity. Benjamin's focus is not on the historical facticity and empirical reality of oppression, but on how language facilitates, supports, reinforces, and potentially counteracts it. Rather than paying attention to the realities of the colonized, he is concerned with European children, language learning, translation, storytelling, and the question of how those who hold power can cease to speak for and distort the memory and representation of the dispossessed. "Colonial Pedagogy" casts light not only on Benjamin's turn against using literature to shape the children of the future, but also on his inclusion of the colonized in the "tradition of the oppressed."⁴⁹

In Jalkotzy's pedagogy, Grimms' fairy tales become a means of shaping children's minds according to an adult image of a nonviolent politics. For Benjamin, the proposal to remove violent language from the stories is itself an act of violence. Colonial pedagogy means, as Tyson Lewis writes, "[to] impose the adult world onto the child through coercive force."⁵⁰ What makes this forceful imposition "colonial" in addition to being coercive? What is the specifically *colonial* violence inherent in Jalkotzy's pedagogy? If the adjective is a placeholder that describes coercion in general, it once again runs the risk of distorting the specific material and psychological brutality imposed on colonized communities. The expansionist tendency of "stringing together words" and editing fairy tales to match "contemporary" German or European sentiment describes an aspect of instrumentality that transgresses and complements the commodity form and the self-preservation of legal orders.

While Benjamin appears to combine two concepts in the title of his review—colonialism and pedagogy—his analysis ultimately "delinks" them. This "delinking," as Walter Mignolo suggests, characterizes decoloniality as a linguistic and rhetorical practice distinct from postcoloniality as an academic project: "Delinking means to change the terms and not just the content of the conversation."⁵¹ Apart from the derogatory remarks about "primitives," hardly anything in Jalkotzy's *Fairy Tales and the Present* indicates a connection to colonialism. Benjamin's discussion of the book brings to light a hidden dimension with severe material consequences—namely, an educational agenda that not only conceals the violence of imperialism but normalizes and perpetuates it. It aims at realizing a future based on the image

of a present purged of violence and evil. By choosing the word “colonial,” Benjamin exposes this subterranean logic of Jalkotzy’s book, and, by delinking the terms, he makes visible their latent codependency. Colonialism and pedagogy meet in Benjamin’s review only to be separated and disentangled. Exposing the unconscious colonial mindset that informed Weimar pedagogy was a first step toward decolonizing its educational practices.

Benjamin conceived of this delinking within the European framework, exposing the complicity of liberal educational policy with Nazism and colonial imperialism. It was bad enough that expansionist violence appeared in Europe as phantasmagorical sensationalism, adventurous escapism, and exotic commodity culture; it would be much worse if the literature that provided the training ground for children’s fantasy life were modified according to a fiction of nonviolence entertained by their parents and teachers. New stories must be written in a different, non-expansionary language. Benjamin objected to the preformation of the child’s mind based on politically biased blueprints of the future. The rewriting of historical documents concerned him not because their authentic originality had to be preserved—for the “most genuine and original” elements of the tales relate them in unique ways to *another* present—but rather for the sake of the historical transformations that were sedimented in them and could be studied based on the terminological shifts and changes they carry.⁵² That looms are no longer common household items makes them not only more interesting, but also, in this regard, more important for children to hear and read about than sewing machines, even if they had become ubiquitous and concealed the exploitation of labor just as seamlessly.

Benjamin’s analysis of the colonial tendencies of Weimar pedagogy was ultimately concerned with linguistic and literary strategies of resistance. If Jalkotzy’s proposal to remove violence from Grimms’ tales exemplified colonial pedagogy, does the opposition to his proposal entail a kind of decolonial educational practice? What light does this cast on violent and oppressive language in children’s books during the Weimar period and beyond?

Benjamin discerned in children’s play with language a way of resisting the coercive imitation of an existing instrumental linguistic cosmos. His concern with Jalkotzy’s pedagogy was, in short, that it silently forced children into a biased and preformed symbolic order, artificially liberated from violence and disturbance, in much the same way that world’s fairs and markets for colonial goods masked the realities of oppression and exploitation abroad. Benjamin does not advocate for intentionally disturbing children, so they can learn the truth about our brutal world of imperialism and genocide,

but he does emphasize the importance of cultivating critical resistance and oppositional strategies at an early age by fostering awareness of the dialectic of culture and barbarism.⁵³

The philosophical crux, for Benjamin, was to understand how children are forced into an existing linguistic practice, and how they can resist this compulsion within the sphere of language. This question led him to the concept of mimesis, which was discussed by Plato and Aristotle in the context of education. Whereas Plato associated it in Books 3 and 10 of *Republic* with poetry's dangerous ability to weaken the guards of the polis by exposing them to pain and mourning, Aristotle emphasized its productive powers: "Imitation," he wrote, "comes naturally to human beings from childhood [μιμῆσθαι σύμφυτον τοῖς ἀνθρώποις ἐκ παιδῶν] (and in this they differ from other animals, that is, in having a strong propensity to imitation [μιμητικώτατόν] and in learning their earliest lessons through imitation); so does the universal pleasure in imitations."⁵⁴ Mimesis, based on distanced representation rather than physical influence, promises a less strict and more pluralistic relationality than that of cause and effect.⁵⁵

Benjamin emphasizes the struggle between the coercive and the transformative sides of mimesis. In 1933, exiled in Ibiza, he wrote two short essays, "Doctrine of the Similar" and "On the Mimetic Faculty."⁵⁶ They contain his "second" theory of language—a terminologically revised, refocused, and, in certain respects, expanded version of "On Language as Such." These essays reflect Benjamin's engagement with childhood and, in a renewed and materialist fashion, with education. Language's mimetic powers open up new ways of accessing the non-instrumental, "salutary" effects of language, which are now presented as playful and non-imitative linguistic forces sublimated in the evolution of human perception: forces that engender oppositional—if not revolutionary—practices of resistance against capitalist and colonial exploitation.

"On the Mimetic Faculty" presents human language no longer as a fallen language of unmediated disclosure and translation, but as the historical product and "canon" of an age-old mimetic propensity:

Nature produces similarities; one need only think of mimicry. The highest capacity for producing similarities, however, is man's [*hat der Mensch*]. His gift for seeing similarity is nothing but a rudiment of the once powerful compulsion [*des ehemals gewaltigen Zwanges*] to become similar and to behave mimetically. There is perhaps not a single one of his higher functions in which his mimetic faculty does not play a decisive role.⁵⁷

By 1933, language and violence intersect in a changed way in Benjamin's thinking. The human being's ability to perceive similarities is a gift (*Gabe*), dating back to its animalistic prehistory. The noninstrumental linguistic cosmos of language "as such" appears as a nonhierarchical, chaotic realm of similarities, and the genesis of instrumental human language begins not outside of and prior to natural history, but in the ancestral development of the human species.

The origin of human language entails coercion: the unwrought and untrained basis (rudiment) of a once powerful and enormous compulsion—*eines gewaltigen Zwanges*—to make oneself similar, to hide, conceal, and assimilate. A gift, we don't know where from, gave rise to practices of imitation, evolving all the way to the disasters of political violence, instrumental reason, and totalitarianism.⁵⁸ Human language, Benjamin writes, "may be seen as the highest level of mimetic behavior [. . .]: a medium into which the earlier powers of mimetic production and comprehension have passed [*hingewandert*] without residue, to the point where they have liquidated those of magic."⁵⁹ Benjamin now calls the communicative and expressive sides of language "semiotic" and "mimetic," and the "elimination" of the unsayable in language becomes the "liquidation" of its magical residues, inheriting the salutary and anti-oppressive practice of voicing the inexpressible within the confines of communication and expression.

The ancient ability to perceive and produce similarities has passed into language's communicative and expressive registers, operating from within, as demonstrated by the atavistic survival of astrology in modern life.⁶⁰ The salutary practice of eliminating the unsayable in language—of allowing repressed memories of violence to come to the fore on their own terms—returns as the strategic sublimation of language's magical forces. Still, as in 1916, eliminating the unsayable does not mean removing or erasing it, but rather dissolving the barrier that separates it from language's communicable, pragmatic registers, allowing for the mobilization of unarticulated energies for the social struggles of the present.

The idea that imitation is not only the most powerful motivation for learning, as Aristotle suggested, but also a compulsive mechanism to become similar and to blend into the existing order of things pertains to the intersection of linguistic violence and colonialism. Homi Bhabha's analysis of "colonial mimicry" has shown how colonized communities are produced by coercive regimes of signs, and how those inflicted regimes can be turned against the colonizers. Mimicry of this sort, Bhabha argues, "is the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, as a subject of a difference that is almost

the same, but not quite. Which is to say, that the discourse of mimicry is constructed around an ambivalence; in order to be effective, mimicry must continually produce its slippage, its excess, its difference.⁶¹ The oppressors control the colonized by forcing them to imitate and adopt their signs and symbols, compelling them to become similar. At the same time, the colonized must remain different and recognizable as such. The necessary incompleteness of the mimetic process opens up spaces of resistance and opposition in which the unarticulated contradiction at the heart of colonial oppression—that the colonizers are, in truth, the uncivilized cane wielders as which they depict the colonized—can be repurposed and used against the oppressors.⁶²

Benjamin presents the scene of mimetic resistance as a struggle between semblance and play.⁶³ There is coercion in the compulsion to assimilate and become like those in power—like the wealthy, the armed, the parents, and the teachers. The earliest training ground for this form of imitation is the child's language learning. The coercion to reproduce and internalize the words of the masters links the oppression of children to that of the colonized. The refusal to imitate, but to playfully reconfigure, rearrange, and distort the language of those in power can be read as an innate linguistic resistance against the formation of a "dependence complex."⁶⁴

Again, comparing colonized subjects to children infantilizes them. For Benjamin, however, the child is not an immature and "primitive" adult. Rather, adults—like all oppressors—are the infantile ones, barred by their power position from gaining insight into the reality of the situation.⁶⁵ By focusing on the unconscious or "mythical" reproduction of existing violence across generations, Benjamin's reflections on childhood expand upon his "Critique of Violence." The fatal mythical dynamic of law-positing and law-preserving violence—of wars and revolutions building their destructive violence into the fabric of every new order—reappears as the compulsion to sustain oneself by imitating and adopting the methods and comportments of one's predecessors. The cyclicity of historical violence is mimetic—or, rather, imitative.

Language is the medium of this coercive imitation, but also of its counterforce—namely, of playful repetition. Imitation is the violence with which the language of the adults and colonizers—those who wear "the mask [. . .] of 'experience'"—pulls every new generation into the existing institutional reality.⁶⁶ The counterforce capable of interrupting this imitation is play, which Benjamin discerns in the language of children as well as in storytelling and montage, and which provides the basis for his theory of nonmimetic and nonauratic art and perception.⁶⁷ The medium of film, for

example, not only forces spectators and producers to imitate the laws of the market and the logic of commodification, it also allows them to challenge this compulsion by refashioning the sphere of moving images as a “room for play” (*Spielraum*).⁶⁸

Similarly, storytelling (*Erzählen*) is the adult’s method of creating distance in repetition—a way of coping with reality that does not imitate what is perceived, but thwarts it by resisting its mimetic pull. When Jalkotzy declares that fairy tales present “semblance as semblance,” Benjamin would agree. However, this explicit semblance is not an offer to imitate the blueprint of a supposedly nonviolent reality, but a reminder to suspend and counteract the compulsion of this imitation.

Children, Benjamin suggests, learn language primarily by imitating adults, which he sees as largely compulsive. What matters are the moments in which children resist this imitation by repeating—and tacitly making fun of—their outmoded archetypes. The “law of repetition” governs the “world of play,” Benjamin writes; nothing gives the child “greater pleasure than the ‘Do it again!’” for “in habit [. . .] an element of play survives to the end.”⁶⁹ Returning to “Colonial Pedagogy,” then, the oppressive comparison of the child and the colonized highlights the linguistic counterforces available to the colonized—not because they have been less disfigured by the alienation of modern life, but because they are able to suspend, interrupt, and radically undo the cyclical violence of coercive imitation in ways that are unavailable to the adult and the colonizer.

There is a violence to mimesis: a coercive propensity to make oneself similar, to appear not as distinct but as part of the dominant discourse, to camouflage the measure of difference controlled by the oppressor. This violence is rooted in an instrumental linguistic practice. Human language is a sublimated way of imitating the existing social and cultural world, but also a medium for challenging this assimilation. The struggle between judgment and disclosure—human language and language as such—returns as the struggle between coercive imitation and playful repetition. Children teach us linguistic resistance because they respond to perceived similarities in less instrumental ways than adults do. Their senses are less pre-formed by the semantic and semiotic functions of language, the mastery of which virtually constitutes the boundary of adulthood.⁷⁰

The child’s use of language exposes the mimetic polarity of semblance and play. On the one hand, children make themselves similar, immersing and hiding themselves in the world of language and matter; on the other hand, they wrest themselves away from the mimetic pull of the existing

world by playing with sounds, letters, and colors. Both play and semblance, the two poles of the mimetic faculty, can be seen as ways of coping with the overwhelming force of reality.⁷¹ Mimesis protects the organism by allowing it to disappear; play operates without knowing its direction or destination, motivated by the unfolding of an action in time rather than the meaning of a concept.⁷² Play does not simply oppose mimetic compulsion by refusing to become similar; it repeats this compulsion to create spaces for improvisation and reconfiguration.⁷³

Benjamin illustrates mimetic counterforce by recalling a memory of himself being enthralled by a nursery rhyme. Hearing the words “Muhme Rehlen”—Aunty Rehlen—as one word, *Muhmerehlen*, taught him how “to disguise [himself]”—*sich zu mummen*—“in words, which really were clouds.”⁷⁴ What appears to the grown-up as a misunderstanding reveals an experience familiar to many language learners: one hears a word, but does not know how it is written, so its nature remains clandestine until the mystery is dispelled, literally, by seeing the word spelled out.

Paradoxically, in its state of distortion and dissimulation, the child translates the language of things into human language in a less distorted way, for what is distorted, and thereby suspended, is the sign character of the word, and along with it the social and moral world of adulthood. The nursery rhyme playfully reproduces the enjoyment of resisting in language the primordial compulsion to resemble that which is supposed to be communicated. That Jalkotzy emphasized the imitative pull of nursery rhymes rather than their playful dissimulation might have been another reason for Benjamin’s visceral rejection of his view of language and education.

The expansionary violence of human language—European languages in particular—is countered by strategies of *becoming dissimilar*, the playful deployment of forces that counter the coercive violence of producing similarities. Children use words not only as clouds—as a way of hiding from the world of adults—but also as “pure means” of suspending and redirecting the pull that compels them to fit in. After all, Benjamin does not express any embarrassment over not knowing the reference of the phrase “Muhme Rehlen.” Instead, he revels in the pleasure he derived from uttering the sound of a sign that had no reference.



Grimms’ fairy tales, in Benjamin’s eyes, do not invite us to imitate, absorb, and reproduce the violence of beatings, punishment, and misogyny, but

rather encourage us to approach them in playful and improvisatory ways, stunned and inspired, at times disturbed and disoriented, by strange and unfamiliar imagery and terminology. If a storyteller adjusts a verb here and there while reading the stories, that is one thing. Systematically rewriting them to present a world free of violence and injustice is a different project altogether, one that promotes instrumentalist and expansionist linguistic practices, and deprives those who fight colonial and postcolonial violence of some of their strongest partisans amid the colonizers: their children.

Just Philology *Traumatic Names and Anti-Fascist Memory in Benjamin and Adorno*

Language has unmistakably made plain that memory is not an instrument for exploring the past, but rather a medium.

—Walter Benjamin, “Excavation and Memory”

und manche von uns tun es: das erinnern
es geschieht sowieso, ob die anderen es wahrhaben
wollen oder nicht

—Sharon Dodua Otoo, “das erinnern”

The German fascists not only refused to mourn; they enlisted the memory of the dead to present themselves as the redeemers of the past and the harbingers of a bright future. Mourning was incompatible with an ideology of extreme historical stasis bound to sacrifice the individual for the sake of the eternal life of the racial community. Once the movement triumphed, the Nazis claimed, German deaths, past and present, would not have been in vain. There was no need to wallow in sadness and nostalgia, no need to work through the loss of those who were murdered. Traitors and impostors, Jews and Communists first among them, were denying them the recognition they believed they were due, and the movement promised to correct this supposed injustice. Propagandistic narratives and symbols glossed over the affective burden of loss, instrumentalizing its repression to realize a world view of extreme antisemitism, racism, and cultural homogeneity.¹

Persecuted writers like Benjamin and Adorno witnessed how the Nazis selectively idealized European culture to construct an image of Germanic strength and superiority, ruthlessly molding social reality to match what they proclaimed to be eternal, true, and valuable.² The works of epochs in

which empires of allegedly Nordic descent flourished were highlighted and subsumed into a continuous lineage that legitimated the Third Reich as their inheritor and final consequence, while others—the ones the Nazis named insignificant, marginal, and inferior—were suppressed.³ The dead were brought back to life when needed, and were put ever deeper into the ground as soon as they threatened the dominant narrative of uniqueness and authenticity. Under the banners of superiority and honor, the Nazi's cultural lineage concealed the sadness of loss and destruction; this is a part of what constituted fascism's populist appeal. By 1938, this disfiguration of the past prompted a generation of persecuted writers and intellectuals to ask how countervailing cultural memory and historiography could fight German fascism without reproducing its political violence.

In the summer of 1938, four months before the November Pogroms, Benjamin visited Bertolt Brecht in exile in Denmark. They played chess, listened to Hitler's speeches on the radio, and discussed their work. At some point during the visit, Brecht read from the *Svendborg Poems* (1939), one of the most iconic collections of German-language exile poetry. "While he spoke," Benjamin noted in his diary, "I felt a violence [*Gewalt*] affecting me that was capable of opposing that of fascism; what I mean to say is: a violence that originates as deeply in the depth of history as that of fascism."⁴ This anti-fascist counterforce concerned something that Benjamin felt in Brecht's poems—namely, the "divine" linguistic counterforces that he theorized seventeen years earlier in "Critique of Violence," and that he now began to utilize more strategically and purposefully against fascism's brutality, even at the risk of instrumentalizing language.

Neither Benjamin nor Brecht joined the armed resistance. They continued their struggle against political extremism within the realm of language and thought.⁵ While law and the foundations of legality appeared to Benjamin as the highest form of linguistic violence in 1921, history and memory increasingly drew his attention in the late 1930s, prompting him to focus on how the past can be mobilized to counter fascism. This mobilization is part of Benjamin's "philological procedure," which traces the violent appropriations of culture to turn them against oppressive politics.⁶

By 1940, Benjamin went beyond allowing silenced and marginalized voices to appear on their own terms, deploying them more forcefully against fascism's abusive invocation of the dead. In this chapter, I draw on Adorno's infamous epistolary objections from 1938 and 1939 to read Benjamin's philology as a practice of mourning that counters the oppressive instrumentalization of the past in the realms of language and memory.

Benjamin approached philology, for the most part, by avoiding it.⁷ Yet, at key moments between 1919 and 1938, he defined it rather explicitly as the history of terminology, the history of transformation, as unfolding in ornamental margins, and as the examination of a text, which, proceeding on the basis of details, magically fixates the reader. I draw on letters, marginalia, and newly discovered archival notes to contextualize these definitions and advance an interpretation of Benjamin's philology as a micrological, anti-oppressive linguistic practice that reframes and utilizes traumatic memories for active political resistance. The chapter culminates in an analysis of the aphorism "News of a Death" from *Berlin Childhood Around 1900* (1934–38), which reveals Benjamin's philology as a practice of listening to histories of violence and loss marked by traumatic names. Anti-oppressive philology does not work through these histories in order to move on and live with them, but to channel their residual energies into oppositional and revolutionary practice.

Oppressive Terms

Benjamin first commented on philology a year after the end of World War I. In an effort to delimit the scope of his published doctoral thesis, *The Concept of Art Criticism in German Romanticism* (1920), he notes that concepts such as "transcendental poetry" and "irony" would be discussed in detail, "while others—for example, that of philology—will not be treated at all."⁸ This exclusion is remarkable, since Friedrich Schlegel himself described philology as "nothing but critique," which appears in the very title of Benjamin's dissertation.

Benjamin does not treat philology explicitly as a concept because his entire dissertation unfolds the question of philology as critique. Not only does "art criticism," as Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe notes, essentially signify "literary criticism," but Benjamin presents his idea of critique, following Schlegel and G. W. Leibniz, as the "heightening of consciousness" in the medium of the literary work.¹⁰ As a technique of interpolation, critique does not add anything external to the work but rather explicates immanent correspondences that lie dormant in it and await discovery, reflection, and representation (*Darstellung*). Philology as critique, in other words, amplifies the echoes of voices within a linguistic formation that have not been sufficiently articulated.

Two years later, in 1921, Benjamin reflected on philology and the elision of its concept in his dissertation:

I have given some thought to philology (even back when I was in Switzerland). I was always aware of its seductive side [*das Verführerische an ihr*] [. . .]. I define philology, not as the science or history of language, but as the history of terminology at its deepest level [*in ihrer tiefsten Schicht als Geschichte der Terminologie*].¹¹

Benjamin's attention to philology's "seductive side" is instructive. By this he means the temptation to get ever closer to the text, the danger of losing oneself in its permutations and allusions, the concern that one will miss the moment of sudden interruption and remain enthralled by the historical depth of language. Philology's temptation inheres in the mythical, esoteric, and irrational; and in the traumatic and unconscious element of the neglected, marginalized, and insignificant. These are precisely those elements that oppressive cultural historiographies seek to exclude and obfuscate.¹² At this point in the development of his thinking, however, Benjamin makes only passing reference to philology's seductive side, turning immediately to something that sounds like a definition: philology is the "history of terminology," a characterization that allows him to tease out language as the "deepest layer" (*Schicht*) of history (*Geschichte*).¹³

The history of terminology is the history of the science of terms. In the Roman Empire, *termini* were boundary stones that were used to demarcate territories. These boundary stones were sanctified during the Terminalia celebrations, the yearly Roman festivities in honor of the god Terminus, protector of boundary marks. Bones, blood, and the ashes of sacrificial victims were buried underneath the stones, along with charcoal, broken glass, grain, wine, and honeycomb, marking the sacred spot in case any markers were unlawfully removed.¹⁴ Philology studies how words (*logoi*) with particularly charged histories are used to mark, define, and divide up social and historical realities. The term—as word and as stone (*lithos*)—participates in violence by establishing borders and policing inclusion and exclusion. In addition to preparing and reconstructing texts based on the etymologies, grammar, and semantics of the period in which those texts were written and then circulated, the philologist examines how textual corpses were modified, claimed, disavowed, and differentiated over time. Philology as the *history* of terminology is then a kind of meta-philology, especially when it comes to its traditional understanding in the context of Graeco-Roman civilization.¹⁵ It excavates the demarcations and displacements that constitute the archives of languages; it is less interested in the boundary stones themselves than the ashes and vines buried underneath them.

Philology is the love of the word not as a semantic container for refer-

ence and meaning, but as the traumatic marker of occupations, revolutions, struggles, and wars. It examines and uncovers how words are turned into *termini*. Language constitutes an archive of sedimented pain and hope, and philology is the study of how the violence that produced that archive was first covered up and repressed—and how it then resurfaces in time. What Benjamin calls the “genuine philological stance [*die echt philologische Haltung*]”¹⁶ is the attention we turn to the resonances of painful memories caused by past violence and exclusion. At the same time, the adjective “echt” (genuine, real, authentic) preserves philology’s seductive and nebulous undercurrents, which continue to shine through from Benjamin’s first definition.

A year later, at the beginning of his essay “Goethe’s *Elective Affinities*” (1922), Benjamin specifies philology’s relationship to critique. Commonly, he notes, philology is associated with lengthy explanations and meticulous reconstructions rather than critical ambitions; he claims that his study of Goethe’s novel is meant as critique, not as commentary.¹⁷ Philological critique deals with those elements of a work that pertain to its truth content (*Wahrheitsgehalt*); commentary engages with its material or factual elements (*Sachgehalt*). The truth content is the work’s lively political meaning that concerns and impacts the present—that is, its relevance for social transformation. This is concealed by anachronistic and arcane references that the philologist elucidates and “eliminates,” so that whatever it is that impacts the present can come to the fore. Rather than demoting philology vis-à-vis critique, Benjamin rejects attempts to sideline it as mere elucidation and commentary. He separates its preparatory tasks from the “heightening” of a work’s political, social, or metaphysical contents.

Benjamin’s philology elucidates epoch-defining terms, vocabularies, and references. He builds on his idea that language as such is neither spiritual nor physical, but rather the very dividing line and the medium of translation between those two realms. Benjamin concludes that the political meaning of a cultural manifestation is “most deeply sunken” into its factual elements, so that the “concrete realities rise up before the eyes of the beholder all the more distinctly the more they die out in the world.”¹⁸ In order to see how the political present was anticipated in a historical document—to recognize those demands of the past that are inherited by contemporary struggles—everything that is pragmatic, referential, and conventional must be marked as such and cleared away. The “realia” of the work are the boundary stones that endure; the more closely they are inspected, the more their porous structure is exposed, bringing the grains and bones beneath them to

light. The truth content of the work appears as its unprocessed and unredeemed traumatic residue.

Three years into the Weimar Republic, while writing “Critique of Violence,” Benjamin distinguishes three “methodological kinds of history”: “pragmatic history,” which “proceeds temporally, in struggles [*verläuft zeitlich, in Kämpfen*],” differs from “the history of phenomena,” which follows “the series of [. . .] phenomenological (non-temporal) conditions [*die Reihe der phänomenologischen (nicht zeitlichen) Voraussetzungen der Phänomene*].”¹⁹ What concerns Benjamin the most, however, is the third kind, “philology,” which he defines as

a history of transformations [*Verwandlungsgeschichte*]; its unidirectionality resides in the way that terminology does not become a presupposition but, rather, the material [*Stoff*] of a new [terminology], etc. [. . .] [It] inclines in the end towards the cyclical. This history has an end but not a goal.²⁰

Benjamin notes that history will change depending on whether on focuses on events, phenomena, or terminologies. All historiography proceeds unidirectionally. The first two kinds establish series of empirical events or states of consciousness, respectively. Philology, however, concerns neither social struggles nor their mental representations, but rather the terminologies used to demarcate change over time.

Philology presents history as cyclical—as having an end, but not a goal. Every cycle becomes material for a new one without causing it, and so forth. “The philology that is thought in this way is a threshold without a beyond, a praxis without a guiding theory, a history ad infinitum.”²¹ This open-endedness and cyclicity is not an idealist exit strategy, but the basis for what Benjamin calls “transformation” (*Verwandlung*): metamorphosis, change, or revolution. The historical cycles that philology—a strange philology indeed—presents, are immanent to language, and this independence from external, factual determination safeguards the possibility of an unconditional interruption and departure. The excavation of linguistic boundaries does not provide terms that work toward a predetermined goal or social order but rather clears the path for infinitesimal openings of radical change in language.

There is always another end—*terminus*—that this history moves toward. It becomes the material of yet another cycle, even though no prefiguration distorts the immanence of this movement. As in “Critique of Violence,” Ben-

jamin is concerned here with a historical shift that radically breaks with any existing chain of events or series of phenomena. Philology, now understood as the history of terminological transformations, presents and amplifies the recurring efforts in language—in political and philosophical terminology—to depart from the continuum of violence that is maintained and supported by oppressive terms. This history is neither that of wars and revolutions nor of ideas and concepts. It shows how language, as the medium that relates events and phenomena, interrupts the chain of realities by articulating the anger and longing associated with their representations.

Mobilizing the Margins

In 1925, amid the turmoil caused by hyperinflation and a spate of political assassinations, Benjamin wrote that *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* (1928) was supposed to be framed by “ornamental margins [*ornamentale Randleisten*]” in which he intended to introduce himself “with a Romantic concept of philology, as far as that’s possible.”²² These margins remained—and perhaps had to remain—unwritten.²³

Philology operates in the margins. It applies itself to that which is marginalized and pushed into insignificance. It does not recuperate and present lost meaning to empower whatever has been neglected, thereby mimicking the instrumental violence of oppression, but rather creates space for the painful, often unwilling remembrance of loss and injury. Benjamin’s philology performs a kind of linguistic maieutic in the margins. In the midst of increasing persecution and political brutality, he transformed his understanding of Romantic philology, which emphasizes the heightening of consciousness, into a new conception of philological critique as “mortification.”²⁴ Like G. W. Leibniz, who conceived of deaths (*morts*) as “diminutions [*des Diminutions*]” of expression, he sees texts shrinking and shriveling up, so that knowledge can “take up residence in them [*Ansiedlung des Wissens in ihnen*].”²⁵

While this might appear as a rhetoric of settler colonialism—taking up residence in mortified territories—what Benjamin is after is the creation of space, by means of the elimination of terms, for historically oppressed voices. Philology destabilizes linguistic markers and boundary stones to enable the articulation of traumatic memory. This elimination or mortification of terms cannot strictly be called nonviolent, but it is instrumental only in a very conditional sense. “Mortification” describes a process of diminishing what is in the way: in this case, the territorial terminologies that block the way

to history's traumatic, revolutionary, anti-oppressive energies. This process has an end—that of making space—but no goal, since it leaves open what will occupy its space.²⁶ The less coercive the mortification of existing terminological boundaries, the less determined the unearthing and self-articulation of trauma will be. The language of the Third Reich is a prime example of the kind of hermetic terminology that violently shapes reality, gaining its power and appeal from a systematic concealment of pain and sadness arising from the losses of the past.

The ornamental margins Benjamin intended to write, but never wrote, would not have been decorative or incidental; rather, they would in their minority and marginality contain the most significant remarks about what *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* was about: loss. The margins would have been ornamental in the Baroque sense, materially expressing the exuberance of signification produced by the secularization of religious transcendence following the Middle Ages. The beyond as the shelter of hope had shriveled and transcendence had migrated into the secular “stage [*Schauplatz*] of history.”²⁷ Benjamin recovered the traces of hope from the worldly, textual sphere—from the allegorical references in the mourning plays that kept spinning and spinning. In this very cycling, he found, if not redemption or reconciliation, then at least consolation. Philology is the procedure that recovers the loss at the origin of the allegorical “mechanism,” and it was supposed to be introduced in the ornamental margins.

Eventually, the margins merged into the “Prologue,” which, again, does not mention philology, but rather explains its procedure as a way of listening to language—or, rather, as an exercise in transformative cultural memory. In a far-reaching meditation on the relation between art, science, and philosophy, Benjamin describes what philologists do when they examine a corpus of texts delimited by a term like “Mourning Play” (*Trauerspiel*). This label, he suggests, designates an idea that appears amid a constellation of realia, and this idea is what the philologist clarifies and articulates by mortifying the term. Philology reduces, as far as possible, the pragmatic elements of texts until that which is not yet articulated—their political impact on the present—appears as what Adorno would later call their “fiery nucleus [*Glutkern*],” their truth content.²⁸

The nucleus of the Baroque plays that Benjamin examines in *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* is the practice of mourning (*Trauer*). They function as allegories for the loss of meaning that had been provided, up until the Thirty Years' War, by the promise of a redeemed afterlife. The philological procedure mortifies the term “mourning play” to set free its affective

potential in the present.²⁹ Benjamin told Asja Lācis that he conceived of the allegorical mourning of Baroque poetry as being “immediately related to very pressing problems of contemporary literature,” and that he considered allegory, which he rehabilitated vis-à-vis the symbol, as a “formal language [*Formsprache*] analogous to Expressionism.”³⁰ This is how Benjamin linked the way that allegorical language mourned the loss of transcendent hope to the contemporaneous avant-gardist opposition to rising totalitarianism and fascism.

Benjamin’s philology is permeated by a “mythological Platonism” that Adorno identified as early as 1925.³¹ What drives his anti-oppressive historiography, however, is a radical secularization of the “idea.” The idea, for Benjamin, is a word with a particularly powerful social, cultural, and political history: the lively anti-oppressive content of a term. Philology approaches the idea not as a supernatural and timeless paradigm, but as a linguistic formation. It remembers what is alive underneath a word’s terminological petrification. “Mourning play” ultimately describes a practice of playful mourning with explosive political ramifications for the commemorative culture of the 1920s and 1930s. By “mortifying” the idea of the mourning play as a linguistic formation, philology practices an anti-oppressive form of remembrance:

The idea is something linguistic [*ein Sprachliches*], it is that element of the symbolic in the essence of any word. In empirical perception, in which words have become fragmented [*zersetzt*], they possess, in addition to their more or less hidden, symbolic aspect, an obvious, profane meaning. It is the task of the philosopher to restore, by representation [*Darstellung*], the primacy of the symbolic character of the word [. . .] This can only be achieved by recalling in memory the primordial form of perception [*durch ein aufs Urvernehmen allererst zurückgehendes Erinnern*].³²

By listening to the symbolic dimension of the word, philology remembers and thereby opposes oppressive linguistic violence. The “idea” is not a supernatural entity, but something linguistic, something essential to and operative within language—namely, the element of any word in which it is a symbol. Benjamin performs a “phenomenological reduction” that allows the word to appear as such, prior to its habitual understandings and utilizations. In doing so, he distinguishes four elements from which the word is to be constructed—the “skeleton of the word [*Skelett des Wortes*]”—“message, symbol, sign, and name [*Mitteilung, Symbol, Zeichen und Name*].”³³ This is the “fragmented” nature of the word. As communication, it points toward an identifiable referent; as

a symbol, it alludes to “a non-communicability [*eine Nicht-Mittelbarkeit*].”³⁴ This non-communicability is a ubiquitous, everyday part of linguistic practice that nevertheless appears as a secret or enigma. Scientists find it disorienting and artists find it inspiring. Philologists, for their part, cannot leave it be—they must return (*zurückgehen*) via remembrance to a primordial perception in the word. This return to a symbolization that defies semantic univocity and referential stability is the basis for philology’s practice of mourning.

What is the original perception to which the philologist returns? Part acoustic, part intellectual, it is the symbolic pointing of the utterance toward that which it indicates fully and at once, but cannot articulate due to the finitude and limitation of the sign. “If [. . .] a sense is complete in a saturated way within a mere indication,” Benjamin writes, “then this indication is a symbol,” specifying that “a symbol designates a sense [. . .] which completes itself until it is saturated through the mere indication of this sense.”³⁵ The symbolic in the word finds its fulfillment in the mere act of pointing toward (*Hindeutung*) that which is unarticulated: the traumatic core that is not yet represented within the realm of signs. Philology remembers and recuperates this primordial openness by “mortifying” the petrification of the word as a term.

Mourning plays point toward the loss of redemptive narratives, leading to an obsessive and exuberant production of allegorical references. That is how they document the epochal rupture of the Thirty Years’ War. The traumatic core of these plays was the sheer sadness and depletion of an era whose faith in redemption was fundamentally shattered and devastated—a sadness that has been passed on in cyclical movements within language and culture, harboring anti-oppressive and anti-fascist counterforces. These movements are documented in the ornamental margins that Benjamin intended to write, but that he was constrained by their nature to merely allude to.

“Marxist Philology”

After its marginalized appearance during the interwar years, Benjamin’s philology evolved out of public view. It resurfaced again in 1938, profoundly altered by Nazism’s rise to power, and by Benjamin’s experience of persecution, displacement, and exile.

The German expression “zur Sprache kommen” roughly translates to “being brought up” or “coming up in a conversation.” On an idiomatic level, however, it describes how something previously unarticulated might break through. There is a sense of finally finding the right words, or at least some

words, to express something that had been hidden and could not be said before. This is the spirit in which I read Benjamin and Adorno's epistolary exchange over Benjamin's essay "The Paris of the Second Empire in Charles Baudelaire" (1938).

Adorno, acting on Horkheimer's instructions, sent a carefully composed—though still quite insolent—rejection letter from his apartment on the Upper West Side. The letter is dated November 10, 1938, one day after the November Pogroms. It eventually found Benjamin in his tiny place in Paris struggling to make ends meet, informing him, on a pragmatic level, that the *Journal for Social Research* would not print the essay on Baudelaire they had asked him to write. The reasons for this, which Adorno unfolds meticulously, came down to concern over Benjamin's methodology, which Adorno and Horkheimer deemed to be insufficiently aligned with the work of the Institute for Social Research.³⁶ Benjamin responded a month later, and they exchanged two further letters on the topic in February 1939. What "came to language" in these letters is language itself—or, rather, the question of how language can counter fascism without reproducing its instrumental violence.

After reading Adorno's trenchant critique of his essay, Benjamin jotted down a few notes on the back of the letter to outline his response, summoning key aspects of his philological procedure (fig. 4). The first words read: "Tendency / Marxist philology [*Tendenz—marxistische Philologie*]."³⁷

These notes reveal what Benjamin perceived to be at the core of Adorno's objections to his essay. The word "tendency" marks, above all, what Benjamin perceived as the political tendentiousness of the Frankfurt Institute. More charitably, it indexes the efforts that both he and Adorno had been making to write against their persecution and intended destruction as racialized Jews and oppositional intellectuals. It speaks to their common efforts to develop an anti-oppressive cultural criticism that counters fascism in the spheres of literature, music, media, and education.

The formulation "Marxist philology" begs the question of whether philology can be informed by a theoretical or political program without itself becoming tendentious and instrumental. If there is a political philology, wouldn't it be committed, if not to the realization of a free association of producers, then at least to the abolishment of "all those conditions in which man [*der Mensch*] is an abased, enslaved, abandoned, contemptible being"?³⁸

Adorno and Horkheimer urged Benjamin to make use of the concept of commodity fetishism to interpret Baudelaire's poetry and to demonstrate more stringently how the poems document the expansion of the exchange principle into the cultural sphere. In order to substantiate their criticism,

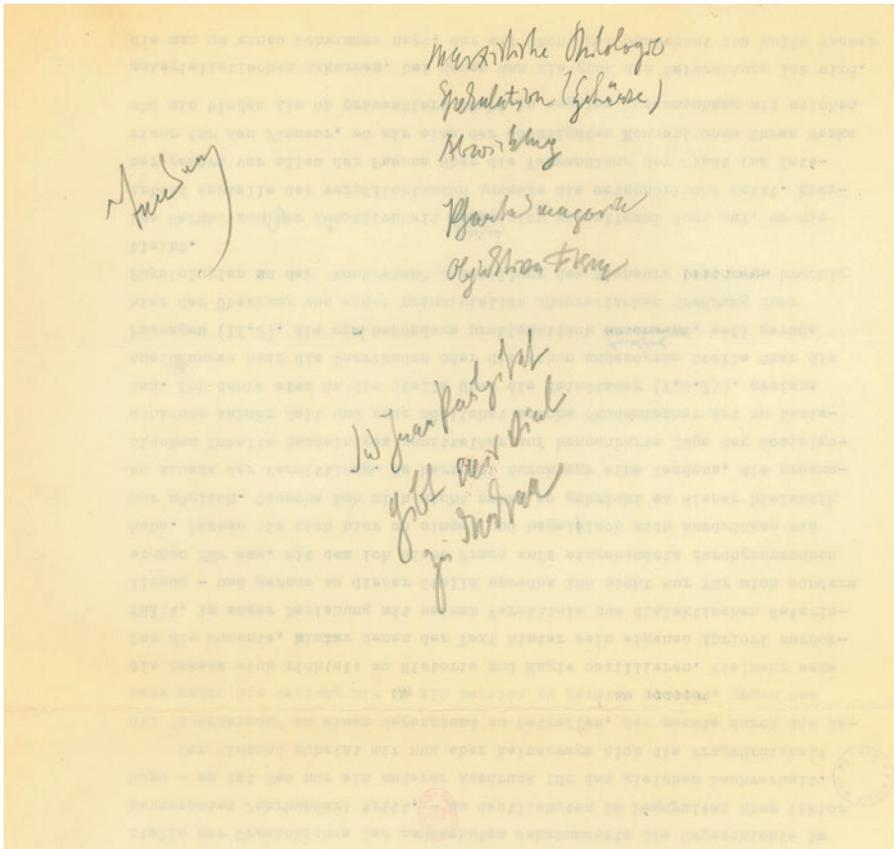


Fig. 4. Reverse side of Theodor W. Adorno's letter to Walter Benjamin, November 10, 1938. (Unpublished notes. Academy of Arts, Berlin, Walter Benjamin Archive, WBA 248/2v.)

Adorno accused Benjamin of an undialectical, anthropological materialism that related cultural phenomena to social reality without showing, as Marx himself insisted, that the realm of spirit, in turn, shapes the material basis of society.

Many commentators read Adorno's objections as misguided and as a misrecognition of Benjamin's philological procedure, suggesting that imposing external concepts to literary works such as *Les Fleurs du Mal* (1840) was itself an act of interpretive violence.³⁹ Adorno, however, depicts it the other way around. He claims that pretending to analyze a document of culture without applying any violence to it—without bringing any concepts to the

text—constitutes the true act of violence, and makes the critical response itself susceptible to fascist appropriations. Leaving the political significance of Baudelaire's poetry open runs the risk of ceding it to fascism rather than mobilizing it in support of what appeared, in 1938, to be the strongest anti-fascist political movement: revolutionary Marxism. Benjamin felt that this approach entailed an instrumentalization of the philological procedure. However, his stance on the question was already in flux, and Adorno's response inspired him—despite its dismissive tone—to radicalize his philological procedure and turn it still further toward anti-oppressive remembrance.

The following keywords on Benjamin's list—speculation, casing, objective distance, and phantasmagoria—speak to the elements of his philological procedure that he outlined beginning in the early 1920s. The "casing [*Gehäuse*]" invokes a motif from Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's "New Melusine," the story embedded in *Wilhelm Meister's Journeyman Years* (1821), about which Benjamin wanted to write an essay, but which, like the *Trauerspielbuch's* ornamental margins, remained unwritten.⁴⁰ In the story, a glimmer of light escapes through a crack in a small box (*Kästchen*), falling on the ceiling of Wilhelm Meister's carriage in the middle of the night. When he peeks through the crack, expecting to find diamonds and gold inside the box, he beholds instead a scene of his own life in a bright, tastefully furnished royal chamber.⁴¹ This is the light of "speculation," a term that Benjamin invokes because of its ocular etymology, drawing on the dialectic of insight and obfuscation. Speculation allows for the traumatic residues concealed by historical terms to come to light.

Philological "speculation"—a word choice that emphasizes close visual examination—illuminates the "objective distance" of the work. This formulation alludes to the discontinuity between Baudelaire's epoch and the 1930s, and to Benjamin's remark that Marx's method is an expression of its era as much as railways and factories are.⁴² Benjamin's insight that the historical distance of the work is objective—literally thrown at the spectator—underlies his invocation of Adorno's book, *Kierkegaard: Construction of the Aesthetic* (1933), in his description of the philological procedure. Benjamin had reviewed the *Kierkegaard* book, in which Adorno references Benjamin's notion of the dialectical image, in 1931. In his letter from 1938, Benjamin cites a passage from Kierkegaard's book on *The Concept of Irony* (1841), which Adorno added to his Habilitation manuscript during the revision process, and which Benjamin, in an act of a philological microscopy, inserted by hand into the margins of the letter's typescript (fig. 5).⁴³ The passage contains a description of how a mythical image, such as Plato's allegories of metem-

den. In der Tat ist die Indifferenz zwischen Magie und Positivismus, wie Sie es treffend formulieren, zu liquidieren. Mit anderen Worten: die philologische Interpretation des Autors ist von dialektischen Materialisten auf hegelsche Art aufzuheben. — Die Philologie ist diejenige an den Einzelheiten vorrückende Beugenscheinigung eines Textes, die den Leser magisch an ihn fixiert. Fausts schwarz auf weiss nach Haus Getragenes und Grimms Andacht zum Kleinen sind eng verwandt. Sie haben das magische Element gemeinsam, das zu exorzisieren der Philosophie, hier dem Schlussteil, vorbehalten ist. Es scheint mir darum eine Verkennung des Sachverhalts, wenn Sie im Text einen "unmittelbaren Rückschluss von der Wäinstfeuer auf l'âme du vin" finden. Das Junctim ward vielmehr auf legitime Art im philologischen Zusammenhang hergestellt — nicht anders als es entsprechend in der Interpretation eines antiken Schriftstellers zu geschehen hätte. Es gibt dem Gedicht das spezifische Gewicht, das es in der echten Lektüre annimmt, die an Baudelaire bisher nicht viel geübt worden ist. Es wenn dieses Gewicht an ihm zur Geltung gekommen ist, kann das Werk von der Deutung betroffen, um nicht zu sagen erschüttert werden. Diese schliesst ~~aber~~ das fragliche Gewicht ihres Ortes nicht an Steuerfragen, sondern an die Bedeutung des Rausches für Baudelaire.

Wenn Sie an anderen meiner Arbeiten zurückdenken, so werden Sie finden, dass die Kritik an der Haltung des Philologen bei mir ein altes Anliegen — und zumeist identisch mit der am Mythos — ist. Sie provoziert jeweils die philologische Leistung selbst. Sie dringt, um in der Sprache der Wahlverwandtschaftenarbeit zu reden, auf die Herausstellung der Sachgehalte, in denen der Wahrheitsgehalt historisch entblättert wird. Ich verstehe, dass diese Seite der Sache für Sie zurücktrat. Damit aber auch einige wichtige Interpretationen. Ich denke nicht nur an solche von Gedichtnen — A une passante — oder von Prosa stücken — Der Mann der Menge — sondern vor allem an die Aufschliessung des Begriffs der Modernität, bei der es mir besonders darauf angekommen ist, sie in den philologischen Schranken zu halten.

Das Péguy-Zitat, das Sie als Evokation der Urgeschichte im neunzehnten Jahrhundert beanstanden, war — um dies im Vorbeigehen anzumerken — dort am Platze, wo die Erkenntnis vorzubereiten ist, dass die Interpretation Baudelaire's auf keinerlei chthonische Elemente sich zu be-

Handwritten notes in the left margin:
 Es ist bemerkenswert, so schreiben die anderen Kritiker, dass die Philologie nicht ein bloßes Mittel, sondern ein Zweck ist. Sie will im Gegensatz zu der aus Kritik heraus hervorgehenden Philologie, die sich nur um die Herstellung der Textgenauigkeit bemüht, die Bedeutung des Textes zu erschließen. Sie will im Gegensatz zu der aus Kritik heraus hervorgehenden Philologie, die sich nur um die Herstellung der Textgenauigkeit bemüht, die Bedeutung des Textes zu erschließen. Sie will im Gegensatz zu der aus Kritik heraus hervorgehenden Philologie, die sich nur um die Herstellung der Textgenauigkeit bemüht, die Bedeutung des Textes zu erschließen.

Fig. 5. Page 4 of Walter Benjamin's letter to Theodor W. Adorno, December 9, 1938. (Annotated typescript. Academy of Arts, Berlin, Theodor W. Adorno Archive, Frankfurt am Main, TWAA 93/123v.)

psychosis or the chariot, survives like an “antediluvian fossil” in a reflexive age, such as Kierkegaard’s own.⁴⁴ The distance of the work, testament to its fading away and marginalization, survives historical ruptures, striking the reader at a later time with elevated force.

The word “phantasmagoria”—literally the speaking of specters—describes how, at the heart of commodity fetishism, the memory of labor is conjured away and forgotten, along with the histories of oppression and transformation that culminated in it.⁴⁵ Benjamin and Adorno link this removal to a process of reduction (*Verkleinerung*), which is the effect of paying close attention to details. This is not only a technique that produces ideological and propagandistic illusion, but also a linguistic “artifice” capable of diminishing the valorization of authenticity and uniqueness that characterized fascist politics. Between 1938 and 1940, and with the help of Adorno’s comments, Benjamin re-functionalized his philological procedure as a political practice of mourning that mobilizes microstructures of collective trauma for anti-fascist opposition.

Micro-Resistance

A philology that pursues radical social change operates on the microlevel, showing how painful memories are instrumentalized for oppressive purposes and how language can be used to resist. But how can one be sure that the invocation of the past does not serve oppressive purposes? What differentiates fascist and anti-fascist appeals to the hatred and anger of the past? This question arose in the “Baudelaire” letters, and Benjamin went on to formulate an answer in “On the Concept of History” (1940). The increasing political violence of the mid- to late-1930s required more committed linguistic counterforce than he espoused in the 1920s. This led him to relinquish a measure of his reluctance to employ language for political purposes.

Adorno proposed the concept of commodity fetishism as the key concept that would ensure that the interpretation of culture was aligned explicitly with anti-fascist social ontology and political history. For Benjamin, this approach contradicted the philological procedure, which was supposed to remain unbiased and pre-judgmental. Adorno’s critique prompted him to reflect on the vulnerability of this position. Perhaps the idea of not bringing any external concepts to the text and immersing oneself fully in it was the most mythical position of all. “If you think back to my other works,” he responded to Adorno, “you will find that the critique of the philologist’s stance [*Haltung des Philologen*] is an old concern for me—and most pro-

foundly identical with my critique of myth. Each time, [this] critique provokes the philological work itself.”⁴⁶

The presuppositions and narrative violence of philology must be criticized, but in a philological manner. In the spirit of continuing this self-critique, Benjamin attempts another definition:

Philology is the examination of a text, which, proceeding on the basis of details, magically fixates the reader on the text [*diejenige an den Einzelheiten vorrückende Beaugenscheinigung eines Textes, die den Leser magisch an ihn fixiert*]. What Faust took home black on white is closely related to Grimm’s reverence for small things [*Andacht zum Kleinen*]. They share the magical element, which is reserved for philosophy to exorcise.⁴⁷

Philology is the visual examination or observation (*Beaugenscheinigung*) of a text which blurs the boundary between what emanates from the words themselves and what is brought to them by the reader. Taking the text into consideration, *ihn in Augenschein nehmen*, combines a kind of *Blickstrahl* or *Augenschein* (*conspectus, res praesens, αὐτοψία*)—the gaze’s attentive focus on the words—with the readiness to be affected by the text, to let it shine on you, *als Auge selbst beschienen werden*.⁴⁸ This immersive examination can easily revert into mere documentation (*Bescheinigung*), as in the “Study Scene” in Goethe’s *Faust* that Benjamin alludes to, in which the student says to Mephisto: “What you’ve got down in black and white / you can take home and then be sure of it [*Denn, was man schwarz auf weiß besitzt, / Kann man getrost nach Hause tragen*].”⁴⁹

Benjamin discerns a proximity between positivistic evidence and what he calls the reverence for small things (*Andacht zum Kleinen*). This formulation superimposes two motifs. First, there is the “devotion to the insignificant [*Andacht zum Unbedeutenden*],” which Sulpiz Boisserée noticed in August Schlegel’s review of Grimm’s *Altdeutsche Wälder*.⁵⁰ Boisserée meant the phrase to be demeaning, but others went on to use it to praise the work of the Grimms. The second motif, that of smallness, invokes the “new poets of nature” (*neuen Naturdichter*) whom Friedrich Hebbel mocked for only being able to describe bugs and flowers so well because they ignored the great laws that govern nature and society.⁵¹ The critique of philology is a question of micrology. The closer one looks—or, rather, looks and listens—the sharper the contours of the object, the more exposed its traumatic core, and the more impactful the critical intervention. Benjamin proposes a micrological optics and acoustics that is not interested in evidence, but in reverence. Linguistic violence resides in the details, and so do language’s counterforces.

This is Benjamin's philological critique of "microaggression."⁵² Myriads of traumatic terms tacitly structure social life, creating a hostile environment, normalizing and enabling large-scale oppression and exclusion. Catastrophes of the largest magnitude begin with the normalization of the most inconspicuous linguistic offences. Philological attention to violent language counteracts structural oppression on the microlevel. The minute linguistic detail is the "small gateway [*kleine Pforte*]" through which the messiah enters at the moment when nobody awaits his arrival anymore.⁵³ This messiah "will not wish to change the world by force [*mit Gewalt*] but will merely make a slight adjustment in it [*nur um ein Geringes sie zurechtstellen*]."⁵⁴ Both the greatest harm and the greatest redemption reside in the most minute and allegedly insignificant detail, the proverbial iota. Interventions on the linguistic microlevel—diacritical marks, intonations, accents, capitalizations of adjectives—turn Klemperer's "tiny doses of arsenic" into micro-oppositional countermeasures.⁵⁵

Still, philological attention attuned to the fine-grained structure of language runs the risk of remaining enthralled by its material, getting lost in memory while missing the larger social and political context of the intervention. This was Adorno's concern. Benjamin's response connects the most fine-grained understanding of cultural memory to the vital task of opposing fascism:

The illusion of closed facticity that adheres to any philological examination and that casts its spell on the investigator [*Forscher*] fades to the degree that the object is construed within a historical perspective. The baselines [*Fluchtlinien*] of this construction converge in our own historical experience. The object thus constitutes itself as a monad. In the monad, everything that was mythically paralyzed as textual evidence comes alive.⁵⁶

Benjamin's elucidation of Baudelaire's poems culminates in his—and Adorno's—experience of persecution, displacement, and exile (*Flucht*) as German Jews, an experience that mirrors that of millions of others. The description of the poem as a monad, which invokes Leibniz's *petites perceptions*, designates an indispensable political task: opposing fascist violence in the realm of language and culture.⁵⁷ Attention to the smallest detail represents the whole "in the discontinuity of the singular,"⁵⁸ charging it with a tension that, when interrupted by a "sudden illumination [*blitzartige Erhellung*]," invokes with striking force the possibility of another history and, with it, another present.⁵⁹ Without this interruption, the analysis runs the risk of

preserving, if not reinforcing, the propagandistic and phantasmagorical reality that the critic attempted to break.

Adorno insisted that philology's excursions into the margins are perilous without a conceptual guideline. To mobilize what is oppressed for revolutionary purposes, the "wide-eyed presentation [*staunende Darstellung*]" of facts must be "jolted [*erschüttert*]," as Benjamin agreed, and the "total social process [*gesellschaftlicher Gesamtprozess*]" must be made visible as the link between the smallest detail and the largest political consequences.⁶⁰ This "jolting" is not, strictly speaking, nonviolent. If there is a counterforce strong enough to oppose fascism, how can this counterforce—this jolting of the past—make sure it does not reproduce the aggressions of the victors, perpetuating the mythical violence that it intends to interrupt and counteract?

The philologist's minute attention to textual details produces phantasmagorical effects. It excavates the shards and bones, the lingering symbols of past defeat and subjugation, buried underneath the boundary stones that demarcate the landscapes of the past. The philologist has transformed: once a mourning actor on the stage of history, now a strategist on the battlefield of cultural memory. Philology had always opposed the use of language for political purposes, but, as the Nazis appealed more and more violently to the frustration and anger of a defeated past, the philologist was compelled to mobilize painful memories for anti-fascist resistance. However, there had to be a means of distinguishing oppressive from anti-oppressive memory. This measure had to be found in the procedure itself—in how philology listened to, recalled, and presented the memories of loss and insult.

Traumatic Names

Benjamin's philology reorients traumatic memories on the linguistic micro-level to counter propagandistic and oppressive speech. The challenge of this reorientation is to avoid reproducing the violence of political propaganda. Benjamin approaches this challenge by considering names as traumatic markers, wresting the memories that carry them away from the oppressors who use them for social domination. The aphorism "News of a Death [*Todesnachricht*]," which Benjamin rewrote several times between *Berlin Chronicle* (1932) and *Berlin Childhood around 1900* (1932–1939), reveals this evolving philology's emphasis on listening. This is the most elaborated version of Benjamin's philological procedure, which he repurposed, on the eve of World War II, as a forceful, and yet nonviolent, strategy of anti-propaganda.

How do names mark histories of oppression, and how do listening and

interpolation recall and transform them into oppositional memory? This section engages with interpretations by Judith Butler, Werner Hamacher, and Adorno to discuss Benjamin's understanding of the name as a centerpiece of his analysis of linguistic violence, followed by a close reading of "News of a Death."

In *Excitable Speech*, Butler describes the significance of names for hate speech and racism as a relation between language, trauma, and history. The name is related to historicity (*Geschichtlichkeit*) in the Heideggerian sense of the possibility of history rather than the empirical chronology of events.⁶¹ Names, Butler suggests, go beyond systems of signs, impacting the temporal and existential structure that allows events to become "historical" in the first place. "Racist speech works through the invocation of convention; it circulates, and though it requires the subject for its speaking, it neither begins nor ends with the subject who speaks or with the specific name that is used."⁶² Oppressive language works on the level of historicity, not only referencing historical injustice, but normalizing it through invocations of social trauma.

Racist language invokes names that have been used in the past and continue to be used in the present as markers of demotion, persecution, enslavement, and murder. The history of this violence, Butler continues, is attached to names. To understand this attachment, she cites Michel Foucault, who suggests in *History of Sexuality* that power is "the name that one attributes to strategical situations" in a particular society; names "arrest" the movement of the "mobilities" that make up these strategical situations.⁶³ In other words, "power" is the name given to a movement of arrest that freezes and pulls together mobile strategies in a social context. Butler builds on Foucault to question the linguistic power of names in general:

Is the "name" perhaps one way in which that arrest is performed? A strange way to think about power, as the arrest of movement, as a movement which comes to a halt or arrests itself—through nominalization. The name carries within itself the movement of a history that it arrests.⁶⁴

Oppressive names, a key element of linguistic violence, are not historical, but rather constitute history, now understood as the sum total of "how they have been used, in what contexts, and for what purposes; it is the way such histories are installed and arrested in and by the name."⁶⁵ Echoing Benjamin's reflections on language and violence, Butler suggests that the power of the name is "the history which has become internal to a name [. . .]: the sedimentation of its usages as they have become part of the very name, a sed-

imentation, a repetition that congeals, that gives the name its force.”⁶⁶ How does the name arrest movement, leading to an arrest—or, as Benjamin might say, a *standstill*? How does the history of a word’s usages become internal to it? These questions cannot be adequately addressed by a semantic or deictic understanding of names as special words that designate individuals.

Benjamin’s theory of names complements Butler’s reflections, and vice versa. Key notions such as arrest, sedimentation, and historicity are central to this theory. Importantly, both Butler and Benjamin understand the force of language in terms of traumatic memory rather than cause and effect. Butler continues:

If we understand the force of the name to be an effect of its historicity, then that force is not the mere causal effect of [. . .] an inflicted blow, but works in part through an encoded memory or a trauma, one that lives in language and is carried in language.⁶⁷

Linguistic violence perpetuates and introduces oppressive social relations by invoking traumatic names. The pragmatic understanding of words injuring through their referential function misses this oppressive dimension. Butler suggests that this dimension operates through the historicity of violence “encoded” in the name. But how is that historicity encoded, if the process is not one of pragmatic and arbitrary association? Butler’s reading reveals that she thinks of language as a historical dynamic in which the scene of trauma is repeated. Yet, the name figures as a vessel or carrier of memories and usages—as something in which experiences of violence are stored and from which they are being retrieved. She writes that trauma is encoded in language. It lives and is carried in it. Names, however, do not carry anything; they are being carried. How can traumatic memory be “encoded” in them?

Benjamin’s view complements Butler’s. He understands the name not as a vessel or a designator, but as a historical marker and an entry point for remembrance. Benjamin is adamant that the name is not a sign. It is also not identical with the word. It isn’t an element of language among others; it isn’t a special word or linguistic function. Rather, the name is the aspect of a word that allows language to have any kind of relation to the spiritual and material world in the first place. “By the power of the name [*Kraft des Namens*], words have their intention toward the object; the words participate in the object through the name [*haben durch den Namen an ihm teil*].”⁶⁸ Names are the links between words and things. How does Benjamin conceive of this link?

The name is the fourth element of Benjamin’s “skeleton of the word.”

The nominalist idea that the name is part of language is less noteworthy than the realist notion that it is an element of the object itself. For Benjamin, however, the name participates in both the word and the thing; it is what makes them relatable. “The object falls apart into name and essence [*Name und Wesen*]. The name is above the essence [*überwesentlich*]; it signifies the relationship of the object to its essence.”⁶⁹

The name concerns the meaning (*Bedeutung*) of a word as opposed to its signification (*Bezeichnung*). This is the crucial element of Benjamin’s formulation as far as traumatic memory is concerned. Considered as a sign or message, a word does not mean anything. As such, “a word [. . .] communicates that a certain, original spiritual being is communicable. With only that, however, it does not mean [*bedeutet*] anything.”⁷⁰ Words can signify, as signs, and order the world pragmatically, but it is the name that provides the temporal or historical structure—the historicity, to use the Heideggerian term that Butler invokes—that allows objects to have meaning. The name is the aspect of the word that enables memory as a complex interrelation of signification, translation, and communication between beings over time. The name does not carry anything; rather, the word and the thing carry it together.

Werner Hamacher discusses the power of the name to create meaning apropos Franz Kafka’s many anagrams, acronyms, and dissimulations:

At issue is not only what a name means but *whether* it can say anything at all, whether it belongs to language, whether, in sum, a language of names is a language at all and indeed whether a name is a name at all—and not [. . .] a monstrous power [*Gewalt*] that takes away every name that can be spoken.⁷¹

Hamacher inverts the orthodox view of pragmatic linguistics—that the primary function of a name is to identify individuals and objects—in order to suggest that the power of the name consists in the “taking away of language, a *Sprach-Nahme*.”⁷² The name does not enable speakers to point toward objects; rather, it takes away language as commonly known, leaves us to question whether it belongs to language at all. Like Benjamin, Hamacher understands the name as a web of historical relations. It constitutes a transcendental structure of memory and history, the layer of historicity, that allows words to signify anything in the first place. Hamacher contrasts this view with those of Bertrand Russell and Saul Kripke, both of whom ultimately believed that the name is a conventional sign that identifies objects in the world. Russell proposed that names do not simply point to a referent,

but to other linguistic descriptions of the referent, such as “The German-language poet from Prague born in 1883” for Kafka; Kripke opposed this view by claiming that names are conventions of social groups, installed by acts of “initial baptism” through which names are linked to referents.⁷³ Hamacher clarifies Benjamin’s view by underlining its radical divergence from Kripke’s and Russell’s:

The name does not belong to a system of language that communicates something but to the markings in this system whose only function is to secure communicability itself. These markings do not “say” anything, they mark [*markieren*]. In this sense, they are the places most resistant to meaning in any system generally disposed toward meaning.⁷⁴

Understanding the name as a marker rather than a semantic vessel corresponds to Butler’s analysis of linguistic violence. As designators, names do not say anything. They are indeed arbitrary in this respect, mere technicalities. However, with respect to the histories they mark, they are anything but arbitrary. The name’s historicity constitutes the histories of terms by marking invocations and insinuations, and the sedimentation of references over time, allowing for their later recollection and remembrance.

Russell and Kripke, Hamacher argues, “forget that deixis and baptizing are always already absorbed in an open system of differential relations, and this system erases the absolute singularity they propose as it inevitably joins each singularity to a codex of classifications.”⁷⁵ Every act of deixis or baptism makes use of a preexisting system of differentiations. The disregard for the historicity of the name is what Hamacher describes as an act of forgetting. “However much a name may be inclined toward the pure denotation of an unmistakable and nontransferable singularity, it nevertheless remains caught in a network of connotations [*in ein Netz von Konnotationen eingesponnen*].”⁷⁶

Adorno has a similar view of the name. He emphasizes its ephemerality and ability to constitute history: “The name is but sound and smoke [*Schall und Rauch*],” he writes, “But isn’t that a lot?”⁷⁷ For Adorno, names are seals (*Siegel*) of history: “When the lines of our fate become entangled in an inextricable web [*unentwirrbaren Netz*],” he writes, “names are each time again the seals embossed on the lines of the ruled paper [*der Lineatur aufgeprägt*].”⁷⁸ Here, too, names provide a measure of orientation, analogous to the staff lines on music paper, for events to become historical in the first place. What Butler describes as a process of encoding, Adorno and Benjamin depict

as embossing or engraving. The name, Benjamin writes, is the “engraving power [*prägende Gewalt*].”⁷⁹ This is how trauma is “encoded” in language: it is marked by names embossed on historical webs of connotations.

This explains why traumatic names transgress social context. “There is no way,” Butler writes, “to invoke examples of racist speech, for instance, in a classroom without invoking the sensibility of racism, the trauma and, for some, the excitement.”⁸⁰ This uncontainable force of the name cannot be explained on pragmatic or performative grounds alone; it pertains to the traumatic dimension of language. The visual or auditory perception of a traumatic marker breaks through conceptual and institutional barriers, recalling the painful memory of insult and oppression. There is no classroom or courtroom in which the power of traumatic names—and of language as such—does not transcend social and moral conventions.

For the same reason, injurious words can change, while the name, as the marker of the injury, is passed on and remains the same. This explains the deferral of oppressive language. Designators are changed or replaced as the injured and oppressed expand or modify the narratives of their social trauma. One word injures less than another because it further acknowledges the traumatic history. This deferral mourns the histories of violence marked by the name. That dominant social groups heed the demand of the oppressed to be addressed with a specific signifier, and that the oppressed find commonality in agreeing on it, is part of the process of working through social trauma. If oppressive traumatic repetition ebbs and its linguistic substitutions become fossils, social trauma can be articulated and acknowledged to inaugurate legacies that are no longer defined by the oppressors.

Butler recognizes the traumatic experience of “being named by another” as an “act that precedes my will, an act that brings me into a linguistic world [. . .]. The terms,” she continues, “by which we are hailed are rarely the ones we choose (and even when we try to impose protocols on how we are to be named, they usually fail); but these terms we never really choose are the occasion for something we might still call agency, the repetition of an originary subordination for another purpose, one whose future is partially open.”⁸¹ Butler encloses the failure of imposing guidelines for how one wants to be named in parentheses. For Benjamin, the original fallacy of human language as opposed to nonhuman languages is that it names everything around it. Linguistic justice implies not only the “right to self-designation [*das Recht auf Selbstbezeichnung*],” but also the acknowledgment of this choice by all other social groups, particularly the dominant ones, as revealed by their usage of the chosen signifier.⁸²

The invocation of traumatic names arrests, as Butler suggests, a web of connotations encoded in language. Hamacher describes this arrest as an “interruption [*brechen . . . ein*]” of the “ordered world of intentions” by “unruly associations, similarities, and differentiations.”⁸³ The performative dimension of linguistic violence, which Butler emphasizes, captures the hurtful quality of oppressive speech as a reenactment and repetition of social trauma: “The force of the name depends not merely on its iterability, but on a form of repetition that is linked to trauma, on what is, strictly speaking, not remembered, but relived, and relived in and through the linguistic substitution for the traumatic event.”⁸⁴ In Butler’s view, the name arrests a historicity and reenacts it in the present. The traumatic event is not, strictly speaking, remembered, but rather acted out, which prompts a practice of oppositional counter-citation. Benjamin’s philology engages with the historical and material ramifications of linguistic violence, beyond the pragmatic and performative level. It does not cite traumatic names to counteract their oppressive usage but rather listens to the histories of violence they mark, embedding them in political counter-narratives.

Benjamin’s understanding of the name has little to do with the work that signs do to single out individuals or events in the world. The word, as a sign, does this, too, but it is not all it does, and it is not even what matters most about it. The same can be said of linguistic violence in general; of course, the semantics and pragmatics of injurious words matter, but they are not all that matters, not even what matters the most. A more encompassing understanding of the name’s relation to memory opens up a new understanding of social and political life in which names are not arbitrary signs that can be used, banned, or avoided according to a catalogue of accepted terms, but markers of histories that constitute and potentially transform the political world. As markers, names have a traumatic effect that is less palpable than their semantic function, but politically more efficacious due to their pre-historical and nonreferential character.

How do traumatic names strike us, breaking through the borders of social institutions and linguistic conventions? They get to us, Benjamin suggests in the late 1930s, as sound, as echoes. Traumatic names are triggered acoustically. He indicates just how primordial the link between sound, name, and memory is in a disarmingly short definition: “The name is the cry of naked lust.”⁸⁵ Listening to the echoes of this cry—whether as lust, frustration, or revolutionary demand—is essential to the philological procedure.

Philological Listening

Benjamin, drawing on his reflections on the structure of the word, describes the name as the marker and entry point of remembrance—or, rather, reminiscence (*Eingedenken*). In an aphorism entitled “News of a Death [*Todesnachricht*]” that first appeared in *Berlin Chronicle*, and that Benjamin integrated with significant changes into the two versions of *Berlin Childhood around 1900*, he discusses *déjà vu*, questioning whether it might be related to sound and listening rather than sight and seeing.⁸⁶ The passage from the 1934 version of *Berlin Childhood* reads:

The phenomenon of *déjà vu* has often been described. Is the term really apt? Shouldn't we rather speak of events which affect us like an echo—one awakened by a sound [*Hall*] that seems to have issued from somewhere in the darkness of past life? By the same token, the shock with which a moment [*Augenblick*] enters our consciousness as if already lived through tends to strike us [*zustößt*] in the form of a sound [*Laut*]. It is a word, a rustling or knocking, that is endowed with the power [*Gewalt*] to call us unexpectedly into the cool sepulcher of the past, from whose vault the present seems to resound [*zurückzuhallen*] only as an echo.⁸⁷

The earlier version of this passage in *Berlin Chronicle* speaks of the “magic power [*magische Gewalt*],” rather than simply the “power,” of a word or sound to catapult the listener back into former times.⁸⁸ In the “final” version of *Berlin Childhood* (1938), Benjamin removed the quoted passage from the aphorism and reworked the part that remained, which tells the story of his father sharing with him the news of a relative's death without naming the reason: “syphilis.”⁸⁹ Benjamin might have removed this observation about the acoustics of memory because he planned to unfold it elsewhere. It concerns a correction, almost an inversion, of Proust's *mémoire involuntaire* with key implications for language, violence, and trauma.

Benjamin questions the visual component of the designation “*déjà vu*,” proposing to replace the visual element with an acoustic one. It is a sound (*Laut*) or echo (*Hall*) that triggers the sudden interruption and the ensuing immersive remembrance. The perception of the word is likened to a knocking on the door or a rustling in the trees. A sound, not a visual impression, overpowers the perceiving individual. Benjamin's focus on the auditory dimension of immersive remembrance specifies that listening provides the grounds for interpolation. In “The Task of the Translator,” Benjamin uses the

word “echo” to describe the reciprocal encounter of the “way[s] of meaning” in different languages, encouraging the translator to call into the “language forest [*Sprachwald*]” and listen to the resultant echoes. In “The Storyteller,” a precarious “gift of listening [*Gabe des Lauschens*]” allows stories, perceived while one’s attention is absorbed by a mechanical task, to bypass the filters of consciousness. That way, they sink deeply into the narrator’s and listener’s life, enabling an integral rather than formalistic transmission of experience. Finally, in “On the Concept of History,” the voices of failed revolutions and slain ancestors resonate through the generations, prompting the amplification of their “echoe[s]” and the resolution of their silenced demands.⁹⁰ At all stages, Benjamin “appeals to the ear to criticize an identifying and petrified optics.”⁹¹ Eyes and ears, however, complement and correct each other, along with the other senses, to recover elements of the future—of future acknowledgment and transformation—embedded in the past.⁹²

Benjamin’s philological listening is inspired by the sudden and overwhelming interruption of involuntary memory and *déjà vu*. In his procedure, listening becomes an active practice, artificially inducing, so to speak, the inadvertent suspension of the affective filters of traumatic reification and dissociation. Listening to the absence of recognition marked by traumatic names enables the philologist to interpolate, writing the story of this absence into the margins of the name’s histories. Listening and interpolation are philological micropractices that resist and potentially abolish linguistic violence. On the microlevel of linguistic life, they discover the painful memories abused by oppressive speech, voicing them and making them part of the record to interrupt the normalization of political violence.

The subsequent reflection in “News of a Death,” omitted in the “final” version from 1938, expands on the link between listening and remembrance at the heart of Benjamin’s philological procedure:

Strange that no one has yet inquired into the counterpart of this [the *déjà vu*’s] transport [*Entrückung*]*—*namely, the shock with which a word makes us pull up short [*uns stutzen macht*], like a muff that someone has forgotten in our room. Just as the latter points us to a stranger who was on the premises, so there are words or pauses pointing us to that invisible stranger—the future—which forgot them at our place.⁹³

The awkward superimposition of the sexual encounter on the future as embodied by the “invisible stranger [*unsichtbare Fremde*]” might have been another reason why Benjamin decided not to include this passage in the

revised version of *Berlin Childhood*. The word “syphilis” filled the narrative void that his father created when telling him about the death of Benjamin’s uncle. The child remembers the scene because the name was absent; and when the name appears in a similar context in the future, the void is filled with the missing narrative element. The childhood experience is not erased or repressed but includes a blank spot and therefore never existed in full.

The first version of the aphorism, included in *Berlin Chronicle*, takes its cue from a reflection on photography and memory. Benjamin suggests that the duration of an impression is not related to how vividly spaces and situations are being remembered. On the contrary, he observes, very short and incisive events are more likely to leave a mark, just like the magnesium powder of the camera flash that suddenly bursts into flames. The intensive light of a sudden illumination forcefully engraves an impression on the background of the “half-light of habit [*Dämmerung der Gewohnheit*].”⁹⁴ This half-light is related to the “pure night” in the letter to Buber—the backdrop on which that which is wordless in language unfolds its most revolutionary powers. In the center of these “rare images” of memory, Benjamin continues, “it is always we ourselves. [...] It is to this immolation of our deepest self in shock that our memory owes its most indestructible images [*unzerstörbarsten Bilder*].”⁹⁵

This is the scene of traumatic experience. The surface of the photographic plate—the same surface that Sigmund Freud describes in “A Note Upon the ‘Mystic’ Writing-Pad” (1924)—breaks down due to a sudden overexposure, and the impression is indelibly engraved onto memory. Just like Freud, who imagines “feelers” that appear from the unconscious to absorb the impression, Benjamin speaks of moments of “exaltation of the deepest self [*Augenblicke des Außer-Uns-Seins*].”⁹⁶ In listening closely—and reading and thinking also involve this kind of inner listening—the subject opens up, but so does language itself. It reaches out, affected, potentially shattered and transformed. “While our waking, habitual, everyday self is involved actively or passively in what is happening, our deeper self rests in another place and is touched [*wird betroffen*] by the shock, as is the little heap of magnesium powder by the flame of the match.”⁹⁷ The resting self is suddenly struck by a flash of light that breaks through all habitual defense mechanisms.

After this reflection, in the first version of the aphorism, Benjamin tells the story of his father sharing the news of the death in the family:

So the room in which I slept at the age of six would have been forgotten, had not my father come in one night—I was already in bed—with the news of a death. It was not really the news itself [*nicht diese Nachricht selbst*] that so

affected me: the deceased was a distant cousin. But in the way in which my father told me, there lay [text breaks off].⁹⁸

Benjamin reflects on the relationship between trauma, language, and acoustics. It was not the news, not the information, that engraved the scene in the child's memory, but the way in which his father *omitted* the name "syphilis" when telling him about what had happened. It is the "way of meaning" (*die Art des Meinens*) that Benjamin describes in "The Task of the Translator," not the meaning itself, that constructed the historical relation to the future—the openness toward future completion and transformation.⁹⁹

In his subsequent revisions of the aphorism, Benjamin replaces the visual analogy of the photographic plate with an acoustic and linguistic explanation. It is a sound echoing from *somewhere in the darkness of past life* that triggers the sudden remembrance of the *déjà vu*. Benjamin suggests that the scenes stayed with him because the name that marked the narrative center of the news was left out. The later perception of the name—resulting from the realization that what his father had left out was the word "syphilis"—completes the memory, offering a fuller understanding of past and present. The shift from the visual to the acoustic—the transposition of the sudden illumination of a magnesium flash into the involuntary auditory perception of a name—brings together the two sides of any critique of linguistic violence: the traumatic moment in which a word, sound, or sentence shapes reality by invoking a name associated with a painful history, and the power of language to break through the defense mechanism of forgetting, reaching the ear like the spark that ignites a pile of magnesium.

The passage that Benjamin added in the first version of *Berlin Childhood* and then removed in the final version reappears a year later in "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire" (1940), in which the concept of trauma appears in conversation with Freud and Paul Valéry.¹⁰⁰ Benjamin's reflection concerns, again, the *absence* of a word in a traumatic scene as the proleptic trigger for a later recollection, as if something was kept open that awaits supplementation at another point. The word "syphilis" made Benjamin pause, prompting the remembrance of his childhood bedroom and the originary scene in which narratives of sexual anxiety and loss are passed on across generations.

Benjamin's reflection concerns what he would later call the "Copernican turn" in historiography. The present becomes a chamber for hearing the echoes of the past, and the task of the anti-fascist writer is to decipher how the present, the here-and-now, has been anticipated at a moment *in the darkness of a past life*. In an early formulation of this model of historiography,

Benjamin wrote: “What is at stake is not to portray literary works [*Werke des Schrifttums*] in the context of their age [*ihrer Zeit*], but to represent the age that perceives them [*die sie erkennt*]*—our age—in the age during which they arose.*”¹⁰¹ Historiography is not concerned with presenting a chain of motivations and deeds that leads inexorably to the present, but rather with writing the history of proleptic transformation. Writing history requires listening to the echoes in names rather than empathizing with former minds. The task is to illuminate how the political present, the moment in which history is written, was anticipated, without being known or named, as a critical moment in the past—to represent the present in the past, not the past in the present. Writing history requires finding the name that, retroactively, allows a moment of the past to give meaning to the present. History is interpretative conflict; intervening in that conflict in an anti-oppressive way means redeeming the energies of past injuries and failed revolutions without seeding or harvesting resentment and fear.

In “News of a Death,” the way this meaning is conceived is not as a possibility or potentiality, as if any present could lead to variously contingent futures. The counter-image (*Gegenbilde*) to Proust’s involuntary memory is a sudden and powerful transport (*Entrückung*) that does not recall a moment of fullness and happiness, but something that was absent because it was unsayable. *Words or pauses* point to an unknown future. The words that engraved traumatic moments *are* pauses—missing names—that wait for a moment of listening in which what was meant, but not said—the unsayable—enables a fuller understanding of the present. In this fullness resides the potential for resistance and transformation.

The name is violent in the sense that it disarms the listeners, transporting them against their will, in a shattering and shocking manner, into a confrontation with past and present. Its power points to a strangeness, to something that was absent and not fully disclosed in the past, but that can now be remembered. The cornerstone of linguistic violence is the traumatic name. Words that harm via traumatic memory and discriminate as propaganda do so by associating speakers and listeners with legacies of oppression. In each act of linguistic violence dwells an unheard name, linking it to the “acoustical unconscious,” which is “not a site of storage,” but rather “a site, without location, of material transfiguration.”¹⁰² Hearing the name and articulating the memory that carries it interrupts and dispels the oppressive power of the word. Out in the open, the previously unsaid absence can be collectively worked through rather than acted out by those who refuse to mourn. The name appears in human language not only as something that arrests and

overwhelms, but also as something incomplete and inconclusive, always open to further interpolation—as the reminder that what is is not all there is.

If language hurts and oppresses, it does so by using *improper* names. It is not primarily the sign that injures, but the name the word conceals and recalls. Every word contains a name as the nodal point of the memories associated with its uses and abuses—as a sedimentation of past losses and hopes. A memory-based concept of the name is essential for a critique of linguistic violence. Names, for Benjamin, are markers of an absence that can be invoked to oppress and harm, but also to interrupt, resist, and transform. This is how they respond to trauma as a rupture in the coherence of representation. Names are the traces of trauma in language, and it is the task of the philologist to hear them, listen to them, and take them seriously. The search for the *proper* name—or, rather, the search for how to say, or not to say, the name, for how to acknowledge it as a mark that can never be chosen or changed by the carrier of the name alone—is a cornerstone of linguistic justice.

Anti-Opressive Mourning

Between 1938 and 1940, Benjamin transformed his philology to counteract fascism's instrumentalization of the past. Unlike fascist cultural appropriation, his philology mourns the dead. It mobilizes their memory in the struggle against the oppressors, continuing—and possibly redeeming—the work of those who were exploited, abused, and murdered along the way.

Freud conceives of the “work of mourning” (*Trauerarbeit*) as a painstaking, piecemeal, and minute process of recollecting every memory of loving attachment to the lost object. “Reality-testing,” Freud writes in “Mourning and Melancholia” (1917), “has shown that the loved object no longer exists, and it proceeds to demand that all libido shall be withdrawn from its attachments to that object [. . .] bit by bit, at great expense of time and cathectic energy.”¹⁰³ The beloved object—the ancestor, the fallen contemporary, the idolized leader, or the childhood home—is gone. Following a quasi-anthropological reflex, and working against significant resistance, the mourner struggles to symbolize the lost object, to integrate it into a rational narrative, and eventually to detach from it and move on.

Detachment is achieved by means of remembrance, repetition, and acceptance: “Each single one of the memories and expectations in which the libido is bound to the object,” Freud continues, “is brought up and [. . .] detachment of the libido is accomplished in respect of it.”¹⁰⁴ This process of

recollection is inherently linguistic, unlinking myriads of word-object associations until the energies bound up in these links are available again for reinvestment. "When the work of mourning is completed the ego becomes free and uninhibited again," Freud concludes.¹⁰⁵

Benjamin's philological mourning differs from Freud's psychoanalytical schema in one key respect: it does not aim at resolution and reinvestment. As a result, it evades a clear distinction between mourning and melancholy.¹⁰⁶ Anti-oppressive mourning does not work through loss to free up previously assigned and invested energies. Rather, it interprets the past in order to counter the political abuse of the memory of the dead.

As World War II broke out around him, Benjamin dialed back on his premise that political writing had no goal or purpose and turned toward a more militant employment of philology. Although he does not reference Freud's definition of mourning, he describes philology as a tedious and microscopic process of remembrance that examines the past based on linguistic details. Benjamin's remarks about philology are remarkably close to Freud's description of mourning: repression, remembrance, and micrology. The idea of returning in remembrance to the primordial perception of the name encapsulates Benjamin's view of how memory works in mourning. However, rather than reclaiming invested energies for reallocation, as Freud suggested, Benjamin argues that the negative feelings bound up with the lost object must be redirected and mobilized as a counterforce against oppressive political violence. The invocation of the dead and the political capital of resentment cannot be left to fascism but must be wrested away from it.¹⁰⁷

Martin Jay argues that Benjamin's writings reveal an "uncompromising resistance to [...] commemorative culture" and a "resistance to symbolic mourning."¹⁰⁸ Benjamin was not able or willing, on a collective or personal scale, to smooth over, integrate, and live with the violence of the past. If the Nazis refused to mourn, instead enlisting the dead as betrayed victims for their murderous program, the anti-fascist counterforces could neither afford to heal their wounds and let go, nor to "keep the wound open in the hope of some later Utopian redemption."¹⁰⁹

Benjamin's reluctance to mourn in the Freudian sense was strategic and carefully considered, rather than a dissociation caused by the suicides of his childhood friends, Fritz Heinle and Rika Seligson, who took their own lives in an act of protest against World War I. It was also not mere refusal. Rather, for Benjamin, as for Jacques Derrida, the Freudian model of mourning implied a kind of "infidelity"—a forgetting of those who were trampled down, abused, and violated.¹¹⁰ This sort of forgetting is not impious or immoral, but life-

threatening and calamitous, for it leaves the energies of resentment, anger, and hatred to the victors. Mourning begins, according to Derrida, “before death, [. . .] in the undeniable anticipation of mourning that constitutes friendship.”¹¹¹ In the sphere of culture, this anticipation describes philology as the friendship (*philia*) with language (*logos*).

Benjamin’s philology does not commemorate the victims of the past in an affirmative manner, for this all too often serves the political identity of those who claim the task of mourning for themselves, destroying once again those who were oppressed and murdered.¹¹² In a historical perspective, the practice of mourning is caught between retention and evacuation, between keeping the memory of the dead alive in the hope of redemption and putting them to rest so that one can move on with renewed energy. Finding the right balance between these extremes is what Hegel, and later Freud, described as the task of mourning.¹¹³

Both paths—preservation and leaving behind—run the risk of insulting the victims again and again. On the one hand, if they are put to eternal rest, the demands they made on the present and the past are buried along with them. As Rebecca Comay elaborates:

History is just this purgatory. Every victim stands to suffer, not once, but the repeated torture of an injustice multiplied in being denied. Thus the dead, beyond awakening, nonetheless stand to die a second death in being forgotten. What has been improperly or unsafely buried comes back to haunt the living in the eternity of a recurrence which neither returns nor makes good the loss. Neither securely dead nor spiritually recuperable, the dead exert their uncanny pressure on the living who are in turn reduced to living dead.¹¹⁴

If, on the other hand, the dead are revived, remembered, and preserved by means of empathy and commemoration, then they are being lent a voice, which may potentially reduce them to mouthpieces for the ideas and agendas of others:

The dead can die again: every act of resuscitation presupposes and reinforces a prior mortification which only escalates in being reversed. [. . .] Empathic revival only inserts the victim within the “triumphal procession” of the victors, rehabilitates losers as winners according to the slave logic of the *qui perd gagne* [. . .]. To give voice to the voiceless is thus to redouble silence by submerging dissonance within the infinite tautology of a subject

hearing-itself-speak. The dead are thus killed off again in being reanimated, re-silenced in being ventriloquized [. . .]. To revive is to remortify, to escalate repression in the very denial of it: a negation of the negation which entirely fails to redeem what it repeats.¹¹⁵

Neither option was palatable to Benjamin, and he also refused a balance, compromise, or synthesis between them. The final burial of the dead was not viable because fascism has already enlisted their memory actively for its causes, presenting itself as the redeemer of the past. The architects of Nazism held that it was only through their triumph that the massive number of soldiers who died in World War I could be redeemed, their death made meaningful after the fact. As the famous imagery at the center of Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will* (1935) documents, the Nazi movement instrumentalized the legacy of fallen patriots, most of whom were members of the working class, proclaiming that, in the end, they would be honored for supporting the phantasmatic triumph of the German Empire (fig. 6).

By mimicking fascism's projected future redemption, Benjamin wrote in 1940, anti-fascist politics deprived themselves of their greatest strength—namely, the oppositional energy that results from the promise of redeeming loss. Social democracy, one of the largest organized oppositions to fascism besides communism at the time, “cast the working class in the role of a redeemer of *future* generations,” Benjamin argued, “in this way cutting the sinews of its greatest strength.”¹¹⁶ This emphasis on the future made the working class, which was simultaneously German fascism's strongest social base and potentially the most potent wielder of counterforce, “forget both its hatred and its spirit of sacrifice [*den Haß wie den Opferwillen*], for both are nourished by the image of enslaved ancestors rather than by the ideal of liberated grandchildren.”¹¹⁷ Promises of a better future weakened anti-fascist forces by leaving their painful past to the fascists. Their hatred and anger over their lost forebearers and slain contemporaries were harvested by the Nazis, and this harvest had to be interrupted and redirected against them by another kind of memory and mourning.

By projecting redemption into the future, social democracy neutralized the negative feelings of guilt and resentment. In order to counter the unveiled violence of instrumentalizing the dead, liberals wanted to go another route: putting the fallen to rest and leaving pain behind. While the fascists insulted and abused the dead a second and third time, the opposition let them die another death in representation. Benjamin proposed an alternative to the balance between abandonment and mummification: an active and militant

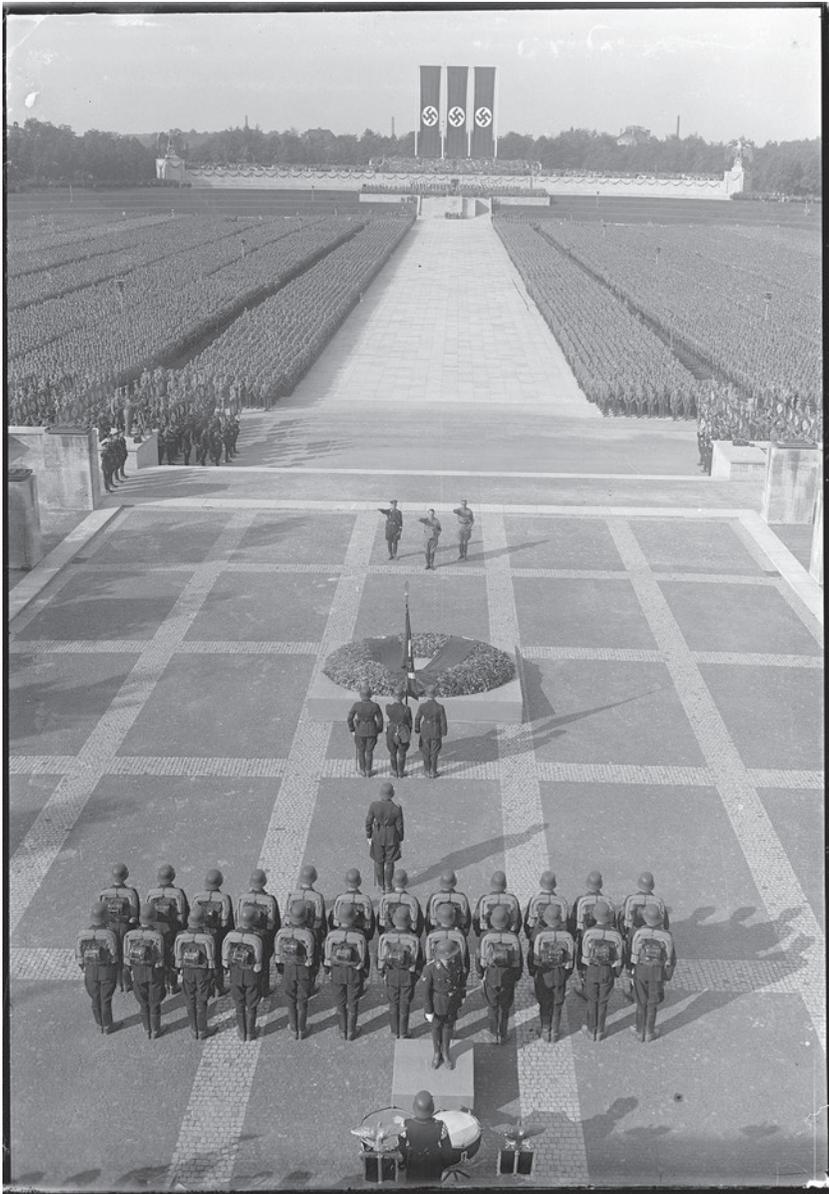


Fig. 6. Commemoration of the fallen soldiers of World War I during a roll call of the SS and SA at the Nazi party rally in Nuremberg, 1934. (Photographer: Georg Pahl. Reprinted courtesy of Bundesarchiv, Bild 102-04062A.)

cultural mourning directed against the ruthlessness of the oppressors and the righteousness of their political opponents. In Benjamin's last writings, according to Comay,

a form of memory emerges which neither recuperates nor cuts its losses, whether by spiritualizing or by letting bygones be bygones. Strictly speaking such a memory exceeds the very alternative of memory and forgetting insofar as it manages neither to resuscitate nor to lay to rest the past.¹¹⁸

This other form of mourning follows the lead of petrified words that mark traumatic memories and demand historical transformation. Philology neither revives nor leaves the dead behind, but rather mobilizes the anger and hatred over past defeat, oppression, and murder against the tradition of the perpetrators. It mourns in a militant and rebellious fashion, not with a view to a free and uninhibited future, but by harvesting the negative emotions of the past for resistance and transformation. This distinguishes it from both the mere refusal to mourn and the victors' instrumentalization of resentment.

The mobilization of negative emotions over past injuries occurs in language: by listening to and aligning the terms of the past with the anti-oppressive struggles of the present. Philology takes its cue from language's nonreferential and nonpragmatic registers, such as tone, style, intimations, ruptures, omissions, and silences. It continues the practice of interpolating where manuscripts are damaged or missing, or where meaning has been otherwise lost. As a linguistic practice, Benjamin's anti-oppressive mourning anticipates key aspects of Jacques Lacan's reinterpretation of Freud: "The work of mourning strikes us," Lacan writes, "in a light that is at once identical and contrary [to Freud's conception, D.J.], as a labour that is carried out to maintain and sustain all these painstaking links"—the libidinal links to the lost object—"with the aim of restoring the bond [*lien*] with the true object of relation, the masked object, the object *a*."¹¹⁹

For Lacan, the work of mourning does not consist in withdrawing libidinal energies from the lost object and setting them free, but in restoring the bond with the veritable and concealed object of loss. This object is not the empirical object, not the thing or person designated, described, and thus remembered by the survivor. Rather, it is the "real" object of loss: the object that existed, underneath and at the origin of the system of signs and signification, from early on in life. This has now been lost a second time. It had already been lost in its immediacy when the individual entered the order of

signs, and it is now lost again, as the object represented in and by this order. The object in its symbolized and recovered reality is not mourned; what is mourned is what the object was to the abandoned or surviving subject prior to its representation. Mourning concerns “the lack of the lack,” or, rather, the loss of a preexisting lack—that of the veritable object of desire—which the individual now tries to fix and make up for by rearranging the order of signs.¹²⁰ Correspondingly, Lacan defines the work of mourning as being “first of all performed to satisfy the disorder that is produced by the inadequacy of signifying elements to cope with the hole that has been created in existence.”¹²¹ Mourning, for Lacan, is language’s effort to repair a symbolic patch that was itself intended to fix a much older, primordial fissure.

Lacan’s insight into the linguistic work of mourning expands on Freud’s observation that the difference between what he called healthy mourning and pathological melancholy is to be found in primary narcissism.¹²² For the melancholic, mourning fails because the lost object has never been loved as an autonomous and independent being in the first place. It was always reduced to being an extension of the melancholic’s ego. The desired object was loved for what it added to the self, not as such. The loss one experiences, then, is not the loss of an object or person, but the loss of a part of the self, which ensnares the mourner in an infinite regress, fed by one’s own guilt over the shameful reduction of otherness.

Against this backdrop, Derrida juxtaposes the infinite sadness of true loss: “The one who looks at us—and for whom we are—is no longer; he is completely other, infinitely other, as he has always been, and death has more than ever entrusted him, given him over, distanced him, in this infinite alterity.”¹²³ What is lost is the other’s gaze on us, constituting the self in autonomous desire and recognition. Oppressive memory reduces the other to the self, prolonging and petrifying this reduction by refusing to mourn, a refusal that survives in presenting itself as an inability.¹²⁴

For Benjamin, as for Lacan, mourning is a linguistic procedure performed by a community in the medium of memory and culture.¹²⁵ The task of mourning, for him, is the opposition to political violence. “The dead,” Comay comments, “are summoned to a rallying, which can no longer serve to legitimate the present. For in its radical self-divestment the latter is always already offering itself as repast to that which it would incorporate and thus necessarily fails to make good on, that is, re-collect, what it recollects.”¹²⁶ This self-divestment turns mourning from detachment in Freud and recovery in Lacan into an anti-oppressive counterforce. The dead rally—not to serve the present, but to interrupt and transform it. Benjamin’s philology mobilizes

the memory of the oppressed against their narcissistic reduction. This narcissism is the reason why Benjamin believed that the victors are, underneath their show of strength and superiority, sad.¹²⁷

Instead of mourning, or even acknowledging, the loss of the victims, the victors draw their energy from a lineage they have imagined into being of all their triumphant predecessors. The countermeasure, Benjamin claimed, is an anti-oppressive cultural memory that traces the struggles of those who remain nameless in history. Benjamin's philology, the linguistic practice of combing history against the grain of normalized traumatic refusal, searches for terms in the landscape of the past that mark, in the margins, traces of attempted but suppressed social transformation. It mourns the oppressed dead, not by keeping their memory alive or by laying them to final rest, but rather by amplifying and heightening the demand that their struggles impose on the present.

The philological sensitivity, the ability to mourn without either consuming or abandoning the other, is given to every generation along with the terminological maps and distorted relics of past trauma.¹²⁸ This sensitivity is what Benjamin describes as a "*weak messianic force [schwache messianische Kraft]*:" a linguistic, anti-oppressive force that mourns, not to invest anew, nor to strengthen one's own political identity by recovering an original loss, but to interrupt and abolish the oppressive historical continuum of the rulers who have "never ceased to be victorious."¹²⁹



Benjamin's philology provides the tools for his critique of linguistic violence. Faced with the triumphant advance of Nazism during the 1930s, he gradually reduced his insistence on language's non-instrumental efficacy and opposition. Still, though, he continued to adhere to the premise that anti-oppressive counterforce must not reduplicate instrumental violence. As a linguistic practice of cultural remembrance, philology cannot claim to be nonviolent—that would be the most violent position of all. Rather, it exercises a tacit force of mourning that amplifies and continues the struggles of the past without instrumentalizing the dead or forgetting their loss.

While Benjamin was willing, in his last years, to put language to use more decisively, Adorno remained reluctant to conjure up the dead in support of anti-oppressive struggle. Rather, he described mourning as a kind of thinking that respects the limit of what cannot be represented or recuperated, as a "metaphysical [. . .] memory [*Memento*] of what is best, of some-

thing that we must not forget, but that we are nevertheless compelled to forget.”¹³⁰ By pointing out the residual violence of Benjamin’s philological procedure, Adorno prompted him to reconceive of mourning as an anti-oppressive and anti-fascist practice of cultural memory.

Between 1938 and 1940, Benjamin and Adorno recognized the task of mourning the losses of the past as an anti-fascist political practice. In a moment of heightened urgency, expressions of painful collective memories could not be metabolized and integrated anymore. It was also unimaginable to cite these memories in support of a pacified future. Rather, the memories of past violence that were disregarded and marginalized by fascism had to be gathered to meet in a kind of focal point, and then mobilized against the continuum of political violence. The philology that Benjamin and Adorno discussed directs the echoes of those who were silenced and downtrodden toward the contemporary struggles that they were not able to fight to the end.

Language in Exile

Arendt and Benjamin on Linguistic Plurality, Metaphors, and Anti-Propaganda

For Hannah Arendt, exile was a distinctly linguistic experience. After fleeing Germany and France, she escaped to New York via Lisbon in 1941. On the pier waiting for their boat, as the iconic story has it, she and her husband, Heinrich Blücher, read Benjamin's "On the Concept of History" (1940) aloud to a group of refugees.¹ Along with her copy of the "Theses," which Benjamin entrusted to her during his own escape a few months earlier, Arendt took German, the language of her childhood, with her over the Atlantic. German became the language of silent discourse, intimate correspondence, and intercultural translation—the "backstage" of her mind, as Sigrid Weigel wrote.² At the same time, language "as such"—and the concept of language—went into hiding, living a clandestine life in Arendt's political thought. Protected from the Nazis, from forgetting and loss, language appeared as speech tied to action, as slogans, metaphors, and narrative, as the medium of thinking, but rarely as an explicit philosophical topic.

Language was what "remained," Arendt stated in 1964, surviving as her "mother tongue," harmed in many ways by the Third Reich and the Shoah, and perhaps altered more profoundly than she would admit by what German-Japanese poet Yoko Tawada might have called her new "linguistic mother" (*Sprachmutter*), American English.³ From Arendt's childhood experiences with antisemitic speech to her exposition of Adolf Eichmann's "thoughtlessness" and her engagement with Kant's theory of judgment, language provided the "in-between" of politics, while offering powerful strategies for resisting the renewed rise of fascism and totalitarianism.⁴

This chapter examines the intersections of language and violence in Arendt's writings. The focus is on the years 1950 to 1953, when she first analyzed the obfuscating and politically destructive effects of totalitarian slogans, as well as the years 1967 to 1971, when she revisited her analysis in order to foreground metaphorical language as a centerpiece of anti-totalitarian thinking and speech. I see Arendt's engagement with metaphors and anti-propaganda as a synthesis of her exile experience during and after the Third Reich with the political violence she witnessed in the late 1950s and 1960s in the United States and in Europe. This engagement was inspired by a largely implicit philosophical dialogue with Benjamin, whom she described as the foremost metaphorical thinker and writer, emphasizing that his political style arose from a close relationship with everyday language.⁵

In the first two sections of this chapter, I discuss Arendt's understanding of slogans as instruments of totalitarian propaganda and her first attempts at finding political counterforces in the experience of "linguistic plurality" (*Pluralität der Sprachen*). The third and fourth sections relate Arendt's notion of "clarification" (*Klärung*), which she introduced in 1970, to her understanding of metaphors in the first volume—concerning thinking (*Denken*)—of the posthumously published book, *The Life of the Mind* (1977–1978).⁶ In the final section of the chapter, I link Arendt's distinction between power and violence in *On Violence* (1970) with her distinction between language (*Sprache*) and speaking (*Sprechen*). Taken together, these elements of her thought aid in understanding her theory of metaphors as an anti-oppressive linguistic practice arrayed against obfuscation, disambiguation, and identification.



Most of Arendt's books, beginning with *Rahel Varnhagen* (1938), were written in exile, in new homes and in new languages. They were composed amid new political spaces and against the intensification and normalization of violence. Her exilic and multilingual experience between Germany, France, and the United States lent her analysis of totalitarianism, political life, and the faculties of the mind a distinct emphasis on public speech and plurality, as well as a heightened sense of the calamitous potentials of withdrawal, exclusion, and loneliness.⁷ During the years of persecution, escape, and exile, language, for Arendt, became a stronghold against violence.

Arendt engaged intensively with questions of language and propaganda in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, which was published in the United States in 1951 and, with significant changes and additions, in Germany in 1958. At

that time, she was concerned with how slogans, language rules, watchwords, and catchphrases permeate and destroy the sphere of politics to pave the way for totalitarian rule. Language continues to be of central importance in *The Human Condition*, published in 1958 in English and in 1960 in German, in which political action is understood as the self-revelation of social beings in speech.

Arendt's engagement with language is illuminated by her reflections in *Denktagebuch*, the intellectual diary she kept from 1950 to 1973.⁸ An entry on metaphors appears as early as 1950; substantial notes on linguistic plurality, speech, and action followed until 1953. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, during her work on *The Life of the Mind* and *On Violence*, Arendt continued her inquiry, focusing actively on questions of violence, muteness, and, eventually, metaphors and linguistic resistance.

Between 1968 and 1971, Benjamin emerges in Arendt's thought as a key inspiration and explicit reference for questions of everyday language and metaphors.⁹ Immediately after arriving in New York for the first time, Arendt sought to publish Benjamin's "Theses," and she attempted to commission the first English-language edition of his writings between 1945 and 1948. Neither of these projects materialized. She continued her efforts and, two decades later, published *Illuminations* (1968), a collection of Benjamin's works preceded by a detailed philosophical and political portrait based on a series of lectures she gave in Freiburg and New York under the title "Walter Benjamin." During the following years, and in response to the renewed intensification of political violence she witnessed, Arendt proposed a theory of metaphors as political resistance.

From the late Weimar Republic through the Third Reich and into the postwar years, Arendt examined forms of oppressive speech, developing powerful linguistic and intellectual strategies for countering and preventing the rise and reemergence of fascism and totalitarianism.

Slogans

In 1964, Arendt recalled a childhood memory of antisemitic speech. This recollection encapsulates a distinction that is key to her political theory. When asked in an interview about her family home, Arendt responded:

All Jewish children encountered anti-Semitism. And it poisoned the souls of many children. The difference with us was that my mother was always convinced that you mustn't let it get to you. You have to defend yourself!

When my teachers made anti-Semitic remarks—mostly not about me, but about other Jewish girls, eastern Jewish students in particular—I was told to get up immediately, leave the classroom, come home, and report everything exactly. Then my mother wrote one of her many registered letters; and for me the matter was completely settled. I had a day off from school, and that was marvelous! But when it came from children, I was not permitted to tell about it at home. That didn't count. You defended yourself against what came from children. Thus these matters never were a problem for me. There were rules of conduct by which I retained my dignity, so to speak, and I was protected, absolutely protected, at home.¹⁰

This description of her experience as a child illuminates Arendt's distinction between politics as a discursive realm of speech and action—the realm in which she defended herself, on her own, against the attacks by other children—and the sphere of social institutions, such as the school and its educational agenda, which is permeated by differences and in need of legal regulation, represented here by her mother's letters to the school board, reporting her teacher's antisemitism.

Arendt's memory casts light onto the normalized state of racial discrimination faced by children in the years before World War I, when Arendt attended primary school in Königsberg. Later, in her fine-grained analysis of antisemitism's origins and constitutive elements, the poisonous remarks that she experienced first-hand and with apparent frequency appear almost as an epiphenomenon compared to the larger structural conditions of the nation state's decline, the expansion of imperialism, and the rise of mass society.

Questions of linguistic violence and oppressive language are everywhere in evidence in Arendt's writings. In *The Origins of Totalitarianism*—the summa of her flight, exile, and immigration years—they appear as “slogans,” which Arendt translates as “Schlagwörter” and which literally means “punching or fighting words,” and as lies, which represent reality in false and instrumental ways, yet remain coherent, total, unambiguous, and in full accordance with common prejudice.¹¹ Arendt began analyzing slogans for a very practical reason. In 1933, the writer Arnold Zweig hired her on behalf of the periodical *Jüdische Rundschau* to scour newspapers for antisemitic remarks.¹² To “show the extent of anti-Semitic action in nongovernment organizations, private circles, business associations, and professional societies,” as Elisabeth Young-Bruehl writes, Arendt was asked “to make a collection of the sort of anti-Semitic remarks which would be unlikely to make their way into the German or foreign press.”¹³ This illegal work led to

Arendt's arrest by the Gestapo, which was a traumatic event in itself. She was forced to manipulate the arresting officer verbally in order to secure her release.

"Propaganda" figures in Arendt's analyses of antisemitism as a variation on linguistic violence. Nazi slogans like "expansion for expansion's sake," "above the parties," or "my loyalty is my honor" were normalized as everyday language; the diffusion of postwar terms like "human rights" followed a similar pattern.¹⁴ The violence of these phrases lies in their inconspicuous and far-reaching dissemination and circulation. They appear insignificant, inessential, and merely representational. Like a slow-working poison, slogans employ synonyms, euphemisms, and logical reduction to normalize prejudice and obfuscate, bit by bit, the political realm. The willing and receptive application of clichés, language rules, and stock phrases made Eichmann's murderous deeds "banal," as Arendt suggested in 1963. This receptivity toward propagandistic speech is itself linguistically conditioned, which led Arendt to her inquiries into the life of the mind and the process of thinking.

There is a mechanics of propaganda, which concerns its rhetorical elements and political function.¹⁵ Yet its violence precedes the use of a sign system to present and promote ideas as allegedly preexisting and eternal. The word "propaganda" downplays the violent instrumentalization of language that permeates everyday speech, inward and outward, by presenting it as a technical problem—as a kind of aberration that can be corrected by sharpening moral sensitivity and increasing attention and regulation.

The linguistic violence that makes propaganda work undercuts and precedes rhetoric. Slogans and lies are central to Arendt's understanding of totalitarianism as a new and distinct form of political domination. Her search for countermeasures—part and parcel of Arendt's project of preventing a recurrence of fascism after 1945—must occur on the most fundamental level of thinking, which is linguistic through and through, embedded in and permeated by everyday speech.

In April 1970, almost thirty years after her escape from German Nazism, Arendt approached the question of slogans and propaganda anew. In her work on thinking, she focuses explicitly on the medium of everyday language: "All thought," she suggests, "starts and departs from everyday speech [*Alles Denken fängt mit der Alltagssprache and und entfernt sich von ihr*]."¹⁶ Her preeminent example of a writer who paid heightened attention to everyday speech is Benjamin. For him, Arendt writes, "reality manifested itself most directly in the proverbs and idioms of everyday language," adding that

“the art of taking proverbial and idiomatic speech literally enabled Benjamin [...] to write a prose of such singularly enchanting and enchanted closeness to reality.”¹⁷ Focusing on proverbs, catch phrases, and idioms illuminates the closeness between language and reality, including the political conditions and social relations of the time, and reveals entry points for resistance against the curtailment of speech and thought.

Benjamin appears in Arendt’s works in the late 1960s not only as one of the men and women “in dark times,” but also as a philosophical interlocutor on the subject of opposition against political violence in the sphere of everyday language. Although she does not reference Benjamin’s early essays on language and violence in her published work, Arendt’s engagement with his writings in her edition of his works coincided with the intensification of political violence during the Civil Rights Movement in the United States and a new wave of student protests in North America and Europe. This new encounter with violence prompted Arendt to reflect more explicitly on her understanding of language “as such.”

Like Benjamin and Heidegger, who was of no less importance for Arendt’s thought on speech and politics, she considers all thought and, by extension, the entire life of the mind, to occur and unfold in language. Not only does all thought depart from everyday speech, understood as the lively and messy language used by pluralistic and constantly transforming communities, it is also “more than doubtful that we would have any ‘ideas’ without language.”¹⁸ This assumption mirrors Benjamin’s definition of the idea as “something linguistic [*ein Sprachliches*].”¹⁹ The raw material of thinking is language, or, rather, the living languages of highly heterogeneous and unequal groups of speakers—languages that always appear to the senses—rather than the noetic perception of timeless patterns. As Arendt states:

The greatest difficulty from Plato to Heidegger is to elucidate what actually happens in thinking [*im Denken*]. Although thinking is a speaking with oneself [*ein Sprechen mit sich selbst*], it is impossible to say what it is; there is no language for it, because it is itself soundless [*tonlos*], and all language sounds [*tönt*]; it is essentially without appearance, and everything that is said [*alles Gesagte*], appears.²⁰

In this comment, written in response to the publication of Heidegger’s *Zur Sache des Denkens* (1969), Arendt grapples with the immediacy of language that Benjamin describes as the “great abyss” of all linguistic theory.²¹ What happens in thinking cannot be spoken, she claims, because it is with-

out auditory appearance. This observation reveals Arendt's distinction between language (*Sprache*) and speaking (*Sprechen*). The first is a medium and can be soundless; the latter must be uttered and is always audible. That "thought is impossible without speaking [*Sprechen*]" shows how everything pushes towards appearance [*zur Erscheinung drängt*]," she wrote a year earlier, in July 1968.²² The invisible inner life of the mind appears to others and to oneself as sound. "Language," Arendt suggests, "has the twofold function of forcing what is inside to appear [*das Innere zur Erscheinung zu zwingen*], and to articulate it, not just to express it as in a scream; and, second, to transform what is externally visible into something invisible and internal."²³ In a movement that is both externalizing and internalizing, speech is the material and medium of thinking, yet thinking occurs in a language that is not spoken out but remains soundless. By delineating a tradition that stretches from Plato to Heidegger, Arendt positions herself a little apart, separating herself from that line of inquiry and indicating the distinctiveness of her own perspective apropos the relation between thinking and speaking.

Language compels (*zwingt*) that which unfolds silently on the inside to appear on the outside, in public. There is violence in this compulsion—in the urge to use existing everyday language to articulate something soundless and unarticulated. While "thinking" can be thought, silently and in the medium of existing language, Arendt continues, language itself can neither be thought nor spoken about. That would be a confusion of registers. "In thought, language still carries [*trägt noch*]; in thinking about language [*über Sprache*], there is nothing that carries anymore."²⁴ Thinking falters with respect to language to the extent that it depends on speaking with oneself. This limitation reveals something essential about the linguistic dependencies of thought and about Arendt's effort to shelter language, as opposed to the practice of speaking, from the vicissitudes of cultural and social life.

In an early reflection on the relation between thinking and speaking, recorded in November 1965, Arendt underscores that,

for thinking, everything exists for which language has a word. That for which language does not have a word, escapes thinking [*fällt aus dem Denken heraus*]. Everything that is merely experienced [*nur erfahren*], but not spoken [*nicht gesprochen*] (it does not have to be discussed [*besprochen*]!), does not exist for thinking.²⁵

Thinking begins with everyday language as its unprocessed material and its point of departure, but it also requires articulation within this exist-

ing language. Only that which has been named can be thought, and even then, only in the way it has been named and contextualized within everyday speech. Articulated language is the threshold between mere sensory perception and what Arendt calls thinking. This articulation is an act of naming that makes the world of appearances our own, an act of learning about it and breaking its categorical otherness. “The sheer naming of things, the creation of words, is the human way of *appropriating* [*Aneignung*] and, as it were, disalienating the world [*Aufhebung der Entfremdung von der Welt*] into which, after all, each of us is born as a newcomer and a stranger.”²⁶ Like newborns, immigrants arrive in an exilic world they must appropriate.

For Arendt, thinking relies on the living and spoken languages of social and political actors who struggle with their circumstances.

Discursive thought is inconceivable without words already meaningful, before a mind travels, as it were, through them [. . .]. Language, no doubt, also serves communication between men, but there it is needed only because men are thinking beings and as such in need of communicating their thoughts; thoughts do not have to be communicated in order to occur, but they cannot occur without being spoken—silently or sounding out in dialogue, as the case may be.²⁷

Language *also* serves communication between social actors, but this is only a secondary function, resulting from a deeper compulsion to think—a compulsion that appears, at this point in Arendt’s thought, as a kind of anthropological premise. Humans are thinking, then speaking beings. All thought is linguistic—a silent dialogue with oneself based on sounding conversations with others, articulated, in both cases, in everyday speech.

Slogans unfold their effects in the communicative sphere of everyday language. This is where the political importance of linguistic analysis arises: not only as a component of political science, but as a practical means of countering political extremism. Action is political in contrast to mere violence only if it is accompanied by speech, and speech presupposes both conversation with others and the inner dialogue of thinking. As Arendt summarizes her view: “I think in acting insofar as I speak.”²⁸ Political action is “thoughtful” action, and it becomes thoughtful by “traveling through language” (*poreuesthai dia logōn*), which is to say through everyday speech. This traveling is a linguistic process, as Arendt suggests in *The Human Condition*, differing decisively from both communication and logical reasoning:

No other human performance requires speech to the same extent as action. In all other performances speech plays a subordinate role, as a means of communication [*dienen lediglich der Information*] or a mere accompaniment to something that could also be achieved in silence. It is true that speech is extremely useful as a means of communication and information [*Informationszwecke*], but as such it could be replaced by a sign language, which then might prove to be even more useful and expedient to convey certain meanings, as in mathematics and other scientific disciplines [. . .]; but if nothing more were at stake here than to use action as a means to an end, it is obvious that the same end could be much more easily attained in mute violence [*mit Hilfe stummer Gewaltmittel*], so that action seems a not very efficient substitute for violence, just as speech, from the viewpoint of sheer utility, seems an awkward substitute for sign language. In acting and speaking, men show who they are, reveal actively their unique personal identities and thus make their appearance in the human world, while their physical identities appear without any activity of their own in the unique shape of the body and sound of the voice.²⁹

Language is more than a means of communication. As articulated speech, it reveals the unique identity of actors in the social world. This revelation is reminiscent of both Heidegger's description of speech (*Rede*) in *Being and Time* (1927) and Benjamin's notion of language as the pure medium of communication (*Mitteilung*), despite the key differences between their conceptions.³⁰ Arendt develops her own theory of language in conversation with Heidegger and Benjamin but distinct from both. She views language as the medium and limit of thinking, as narrative revelation, and as anti-oppressive resistance in everyday speech. She shares with Benjamin and Heidegger an aversion to the "bourgeois" view of language as a mere instrument of communication deteriorating into chatter (*Gerede*)—as a vehicle of logical reasoning that knows nothing but true or false.³¹ Arendt's verdict on logic is particularly harsh:

That which is specifically evil about violence [*Gewalt*] is its muteness [*Stummheit*]. [. . .] Logic as the last residuum of speaking leads to this muteness, insofar as it has already lost the "about" of speaking, along with the loss of the other and the self in its abandonment [*Verlassenheit*]. Logical thinking therefore always leads to violence. Logic speaks to nobody and about nothing. That is how it prepares violence.³²

Arendt draws a clear connection between the technical reduction of language, the decline of politics, and the increase of violence in social relations. This is the tendency that Benjamin described in *Moscow Diary* as the “destruction of language” (*Sprachzerstörung*), which results from turning communication into an absolute.³³ While Arendt’s statement about logic is apodictic, it reveals a wider preoccupation with the instrumentalization of language as a system of signs—a preoccupation that she shared with many writers of her generation, including Benjamin and Heidegger.

Slogans and clichés are the result of a technical relation to language; they arise in a relation to speech that is known and familiar, neither enchanted nor close to reality. Replacing speech with a sign language that serves logical reasoning and the efficient exchange of information for the achievement of predetermined goals amounts to the abandonment of politics. In her analysis of how language conditions and impacts political life, Arendt reveals thinking’s reliance on articulation, metaphors, and storytelling. The objective of her theory is eminently political insofar as it seeks to counteract obfuscation and oppression on the level of thinking and speech. This anti-oppressive thinking “travels through” the identificatory and reductive elements of everyday language that threaten to suspend judgment and stifle the urge of the individual to appear as unique, distinct, and different.

At the beginning of the first volume of *The Life of the Mind*, Arendt asks:

Could the activity of thinking as such, the habit of examining whatever happens to come to pass or to attract attention, regardless of results and specific content, could this activity be among the conditions that make men abstain from evil-doing or even actually “condition” them against it?³⁴

Thinking, then, is a way of inspecting and working through everyday language. In the exemplary case of Eichmann, this work concerns the “cliché-ridden language” of “stock phrases [and] conventional, standardized codes of expression.”³⁵ In the narrative clarification of this language, Arendt discerned a means of countering totalitarian tendencies in the post-war moment, when they threatened to reemerge and reconstitute themselves. While it was articulated in the philosophical terminology of the old world, Arendt’s theory of language and violence was profoundly shaped by her lived experience as an immigrant in the United States and as a learner and speaker of American English.

Linguistic Plurality

Arendt's remarks about the political importance of thinking and its relationship to everyday language point back to the years after her immigration to the United States. Confronted with the reductive linguistic violence of Nazism's slogans and stock phrases, Arendt noticed and began to theorize the power of linguistic plurality—a concept that arose from her experience of exile. Already familiar with German, French, Latin, and Ancient Greek, she took English lessons in France with Blücher and Benjamin, and she began writing in English shortly after her arrival in New York. Her close friends and trusted colleagues edited and, as she called it, “anglicized” her prose up until her last works. By the late 1960s, the philosopher Glenn Gray praised her “fine English prose,” which, to his ears, suggested that Arendt was “nourished on English poetry.”³⁶ The experience of growing into English as the language of her public and intellectual expression—alongside her relationship to the unique diversity and urban sublimity of New York—shaped her notion of political plurality.

Arendt's multilingualism developed into a transatlantic practice of translation and revision.³⁷ Many of her books, beginning with *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, were first conceived in German, the language of her thought. She subsequently wrote and published her works first in English, after which she translated them into German, later with the help of translators. She always revised and edited them thoroughly, adding clarifying passages and additional reflections in German, while being careful to use only those words that “have not been damaged” by the Nazis.³⁸ Arendt described these German translations as “second” or “revised” editions, shaped by the linguistic differences as well as by the different readerships and cultural contexts that she must have had in mind while preparing them. She then drew on responses to the German edition as the basis for the first revised English edition. This way, her published work was enriched and expanded by a confluence of meanings, connotations, and expressions at the intersections of multiple languages and cultural spheres, and by a reciprocal integration of feedback and critical responses. Arendt carefully considered possible expectations and misunderstandings in both languages, which allowed her to bring different political worlds and histories into dialogue with each other.³⁹

Arendt's concept of plurality was shaped by her multilingualism. Plurality is a central property and measure of politics, and is among the first features of political life to be obliterated by totalitarianism. The individual,

forced by fear into loneliness, succumbs to the coherent totality of a great lie. In the case of the Third Reich, this great lie was a totalistic antisemitism grounded in scientific racism, the features of which were also applied to non-Jewish individuals that departed from the racial and sexual norms of Nazi ideology. The fear of being excluded from this norm presupposes the destruction of plurality. Conversely, nurturing plurality was, for Arendt, a requirement to prevent the rise of totalitarian movements, as she emphasized in 1958:

Action, the only activity that goes on directly between men without the intermediary of things or matter, corresponds to the human condition of plurality [. . .] [T]his plurality is specifically the condition—not only the *conditio sine qua non*, but the *conditio per quam*—of all political life.⁴⁰

Plurality not only conditions, but *produces* political life; it is not achieved or created, but rooted in the human species, and totalitarianism must quash and suppress it to erode and then to abandon politics.

Political plurality has its model in the “plurality of languages [*Pluralität der Sprachen*],” as one of Arendt’s earliest entries in *Denktagebuch* suggests.⁴¹ Linguistic plurality, she states, assures that there cannot be only one truth: “If there were only one language, perhaps we would be sure of the nature of things.”⁴² This uncertainty is not a deficiency that philosophy and science must overcome, but a blessing. Arendt writes, in an analysis of a phrase from Lessing: “Let us thank God that we don’t know *the* truth.”⁴³ Her reflection on the plurality of language emphasizes that, first, many languages exist that are different not only in their vocabulary but in their grammar—which for her means in their “mode of thinking” (*Denkweise*)—and, second, that “all languages can be learned [*erlernbar sind*].”⁴⁴

This “learnability” (*Erlernbarkeit*) of language, as Benjamin might have said, goes far beyond the capacity to acquire a skill or master a means of communication and expression, beyond even the ability to bridge intercultural borders in order to exchange knowledge and experience. For Arendt, the learnability of language not only guarantees political plurality as something that is rooted in how things are in the world—in, that is, the multilingual condition of human experience—but also safeguards a powerful method for countering the obfuscation of politics. The plurality and learnability of languages support a key property of political life: uncertainty (*Unsicherheit*). Because things are uncertain, they must be debated and discussed in public,

without any single actor, or language, knowing the answer in advance. This uncertainty is a productive linguistic phenomenon, incompatible with political tendencies toward exclusive authority over a singular truth.⁴⁵

Linguistic plurality renders the essence of things, both natural and produced, uncertain. That “the object which, for us, is there to present and carry things can be called *Tisch* as well as ‘table’ indicates that we are missing something about the true essence of even that which we produced and named ourselves.”⁴⁶ It is not the senses and their possibilities of deceiving us that “make the world uncertain [*unsicher*],” Arendt continues, nor is it the terrifying possibility that all reality could be a dream; it is “the ambiguity [*Vieldeutigkeit*] of language, or rather, of languages.”⁴⁷ The stability created by a word such as “table” begins to “sway” as soon as one reaches the border of a linguistic community.

This swaying ambiguity [*schwankende Vieldeutigkeit*] of the world and the uncertainty of human beings in it would naturally not exist if there wouldn’t be the possibility of learning [*Möglichkeit der Erlernbarkeit*] a foreign language, which proves to us that there are other “correspondences” to the common and identical world [*“Entsprechungen” zur gemeinsam-identischen Welt*].⁴⁸

Benjamin used the ending “-ability [*-barkeit*]” to describe an enabling structural disposition that produces and conditions the empirical reality of specific manifestations.⁴⁹ Books are translated because they are translatable; artworks are being reproduced because they are reproducible. It is the task of the translator to perceive, act upon, and do justice to the translatability of the work, which establishes a structural and historical measure beyond morality and psychology. The plurality of languages renders the world ambiguous, uncertain, and thereby political; the learnability of languages assures the possibility of recognizing, valuing, and nurturing this ambiguity and uncertainty.⁵⁰

Arendt ends her reflection with a note on the “nonsense of a world language,” an idea that she considers to be more than just foolish, since it implies the “artificially violent disambiguation of the ambiguous [*künstlich gewaltsame Vereindeutigung des Vieldeutigen*].”⁵¹ This description names a key feature of totalitarian propaganda—namely, the suppression of plurality due to the creation of an all-embracing narrative that “co-ordinates” and removes all ambiguity. This unification is a violent and artificial technical manipulation, yet it is itself the effect of a certain use of language—a form of

linguistic violence. The violence that aims at reducing cultural plurality and multilingualism to a zero point of oneness and unidirectionality, as exercised by the Nazis, is itself linguistic, rooted in the instrumentalization of language for communicative disambiguation.

The link that Arendt establishes between linguistic plurality and political action was shaped by her experience of exile. Jacob Grimm finds the origins of the word “exile” in the misery and sadness that one feels over the loss of one’s home, adding that what ultimately has to be mourned in exile is the severed bond between one’s place of residence and the “communal-ity of language [*die Gemeinschaftlichkeit der Sprache*].”⁵² Although Arendt’s “mother tongue” is of undeniable importance to her, she does not derive a sense of uniqueness or belonging, national or otherwise, from it, but rather emphasizes the power that lies in destabilizing the bond between language and home—the power of running up against the limits and boundaries of one’s own languages.

The language learner’s awareness of linguistic plurality corresponds to the public’s openness to cultural and linguistic diversity. In this respect, Arendt writes that the political nature of a community is revealed by its receptiveness toward “newcomers,” or “Neuankömmlinge.” The children of every generation are newcomers, she notes, and so are refugees and immigrants.⁵³ In a reflection on the shared epistemological origins of the verbs “to begin” and “to rule” (*archein*), she suggests that “newcomers and beginners by virtue of birth [. . .] take initiative, are prompted into action.”⁵⁴ While this ascribes significant responsibility to the newcomers, it also provides a touchstone for evaluating the political condition of the society in which they arrive and that receives them:

Action and speech are so closely related because the primordial and specifically human act must at the same time contain the answer to the question asked of every newcomer: “Who are you?” This disclosure of who somebody is, is implicit in both his words and his deeds; yet obviously the affinity between speech and revelation is much closer than that between action and revelation, just as the affinity between action and beginning is closer than that between speech and beginning, although many, and even most acts, are performed in the manner of speech.⁵⁵

“Newcomers” reveal themselves, above all, in speaking. Using different languages, expressions, accents, dialects, sociolects, and idiolects, those who arrive make audible and visible the essential plurality of a shared political

space. Arendt's analysis implies a performativity, based on a phenomenology of linguistic arrival, sharing, and beginning. With each new arrival—with each child, refugee, or migrant—a social order demonstrates again if it is a political space, or if it merely claims the right to discrimination.

In her own habits of translation and revision, Arendt puts the oppositional powers of linguistic plurality into practice. She insists, for example, that the term “crimes against humanity [*Menschheit*]” does not correspond to “crimes against humanness” (*Menschlichkeit*), the preferred—and convenient—German translation of the judgment at the Nuremberg Trials, which implied that “the Nazis had simply been lacking in human kindness.”⁵⁶ This debunking of ideological euphemisms and distortions during the translation process shows the political productivity of running up against—and then being forced to work against and transgress—linguistic boundaries.

At the same time, linguistic plurality seems to have contributed to Arendt's restriction of equality to the realm of politics. Equality, for her, is an ideal that can only be approximated but never realized in society without paying the price of enforcing absolute homogeneity. The model for this fear was Nazi Germany; in the US context, the exclusion of equality from the social sphere resulted in Arendt's inability to recognize the demands of the Civil Right Movement of the 1950s and 1960s.

While equality is a necessary condition of politics, the social, in Arendt's view, is essentially unequal, which is why she considered discrimination to be a necessary feature of a pluralistic society. When, in 1957, President Eisenhower caused the Little Rock Crisis by federalizing Arkansas's National Guard, ordering it to secure the access of nine Black students to a racially segregated school, Arendt wrote:

What equality is to the body politic—its innermost principle—discrimination is to society. [. . .] [D]iscrimination is as indispensable a social right as equality is a political right. The question is not how to abolish discrimination, but how to keep it confined within the social sphere, where it is legitimate, and prevent its trespassing on the political and the personal sphere, where it is destructive.⁵⁷

Defining discrimination as a social right is in conflict with principles of nondiscrimination and legitimates racism in society. Arendt admitted having misunderstood and misrepresented the situation of Black American communities, but she continued to adhere to the distinction between social discrimination and political equality as a central tenet of her political theory.⁵⁸ While

everyone is equal in the sphere of politics, in social reality such equality cannot exist. When it is enforced, it poses a fundamental threat. “The more the general structure of a society is characterized by equality [*Gleichheit*],” Winfried Thaa comments, “the higher the danger that differences that continue to exist will be resented and that plurality in general will be questioned.”⁵⁹

The eradication of diversity that forced Arendt out of Germany led her to misjudge the equal educational and economic opportunities for oppressed minorities elsewhere. For non-white communities in the United States, emphasizing the abstract right of political equality, which is widely disregarded and distorted, while structurally legitimating social discrimination, was insulting. Enforcing equal opportunity is a threat only if it aims at white supremacist homogeneity; it is a necessary step toward taking political mandates seriously if exercised in support of disenfranchised communities. In this crucial case, Arendt’s visceral experience of Nazi rule had warped her theoretical lens, which in and of itself sheds light on a crucial historical development and transatlantic political difference.

“All *languages* are *foreign* languages,” Thomas Schestag notes.⁶⁰ Arendt’s bilingual writing practices and her experience with multilingualism could have offered her a way of reconciling the tensions between political equality and social discrimination, the very distinction that kept her from acknowledging the demands of the Civil Rights Movement.⁶¹ Linguistic plurality provides a model for equality and nondiscrimination. As signs, “table” and “Tisch” might refer to the same object; as words, however, they are unequal in shape, sound, and provenience. Their “sense” or “way of meaning” is distinct, which can be said not only of words, but also of other appearances. As Benjamin wrote in a letter from 1938, which Arendt studied closely in the late 1960s:

Equality or sameness [*Gleichheit*] is a category of cognition [*Erkenntnis*]; strictly speaking, it is not to be found in sober perception. Perception that is sober in the strictest sense of the word, free of all prejudice [*Vorurteil*], would always come upon something similar, even in the most extreme case.⁶²

There is a world of difference between logical identity and even the highest degree of similarity. This was Arendt’s concern with what she took to be the demands of the NAACP. Using a federal executive order to enforce social equality reminded her—incorrectly so—of Nazi Germany’s disregard for the political division of power.

As a model for political practice, thinking must work through the obfuscation of difference, rather than creating equality by enforcing identity. Thinking imports the reality reflected in everyday language into the realm of the invisible—from the radical difference of society into the radical equality of politics—and then brings this discursive reality back from invisibility into the realm of appearances. Enriched by this journey, political action and speech can amplify equality without enforcing homogeneity. If—and only if—visible and audible differences among communities of speakers do not legitimate discrimination, then the social realization of the political ideal of equality can appear on the horizon.

Clarification

It is striking, given Arendt's exile experience and multilingualism, how persistently she upheld the boundary between German and English. Each language had its realm and function. She drafted her works in German, then translated them into English with the help of friends and colleagues, and while German remained the language of private philosophical and poetic reflection, English became the medium of correspondence and public appearance. Various day-to-day practices indicate that the languages blurred into one another more than she was willing to admit; as time went on, for instance, an increasing number of her diary entries were written originally in English or switched back and forth between the two tongues.⁶³ Would blurring this boundary—or acknowledging how much it had already blurred—have meant giving up a piece of the home that remained?

Moving back and forth between German and English gave rise to a multiplicity of voices and perspectives in Arendt's thought. It also led her to juxtapose different ways of thinking, often in a more static fashion than one might have expected. Arendt claimed, for example, that philosophers in the German critical tradition “clarify” (*klären*) the obfuscatory and dangerously reductive elements of everyday language, while Anglo-American philosophers merely “analyze” semantics to produce technicist inventories.⁶⁴ Anglophone readers simply accept synonyms, she adds, rather than asking for the differences that are concealed by equating the meaning of two similar words. Despite the argument's stereotypical reductions, Arendt's notion of “clarifying” everyday language warrants attention as part of her critical analysis of oppressive language.

“The need to think arises whenever we find that words taken in their ordinary sense are obscuring rather than revealing. The process of clarifica-

tion [*Prozeß der Klärung*] that occurs in the thinking process comes about through distinctions [*Unterscheidung*].”⁶⁵ While analysis, in the Kantian sense, unpacks the relations contained in a concept, revealing preexisting identity, the process of clarification aims at unfolding differences. Slogans reduce a complex and manifold social reality to simplified truths that are mendacious in their obfuscation of particularity. Countering this reduction requires careful differentiation of the empirical similarities that have been passed off as identical in cognition.

The dualism of clarity and obscurity mirrors Arendt’s Manichean image of the public sphere. Heidegger had problematized the common view of the public as a transparent and lucid space by claiming that “by publicness everything gets obscured,” suggesting that chatter and what he calls “common sense” have come to dominate everyday life.⁶⁶ In 1968, Arendt called this image “the most succinct summing-up of existing conditions,” which suggests a disturbing parallel between the late 1920s and the late 1960s.⁶⁷ While Arendt agrees with Heidegger’s diagnosis, she objects to his response: withdrawing into the solitude of thinking to recuperate a concealed authenticity. Instead, she underlines the need to actively oppose the obfuscation of everyday language in thinking, acting, and speaking. It is the withdrawal from public self-revelation and reflexive judgment that leads to the withering of politics. Countering this withdrawal begins with preventing slogans and stock phrases from gaining traction, spreading, and becoming ubiquitous.

Slogans and clichés obscure social reality by shining their searchlights into every corner of the public realm. The task of thinking is not to clarify their use, signification, or history, but, paradoxically, to illuminate how they cloud and darken thought and judgment. When Arendt speaks of “pan-Germanic” or “nationalist” slogans, she has a host of words and phrases in mind that work in a coordinated fashion, creating a grand lie of racial homogeneity and cultural supremacy.⁶⁸ The acknowledgment and reproduction of these phrases, as innocuous as they might seem in isolation, relieve people of the burden of making their own inquiries into themselves and others. Arendt’s attention to the incremental coerciveness of slogans destabilizes her separation of language and violence. Slogans are linguistic formations, yet they exhibit all of violence’s characteristics: instrumentality, the implemental extension of force and strength, and even muteness, if it is taken to describe not soundlessness, but the absence of self-revelation in speech.

Arendt claims that a possible antidote to linguistic obfuscation lies in treating the oppressive elements of everyday language with the same attention that Benjamin and Kafka applied to proverbs and idioms: unfold-

ing them like a parable or, in Benjamin's analogy, like "the boat which one teaches children to make [. . .] unfolds into a flat sheet of paper."⁶⁹ Clarification in this sense does not create a coherent logical reconstruction of reality, as suggested by Descartes' description of clarity as an uninterrupted conceptual deduction based on the model of geometry; it is not coherence or seamlessness that characterizes clarity in Arendt's sense, but the narrative presentation of how a catchphrase, synonym, or "language rule" (*Sprachregelung*) works to obscure public discourse, leading to withdrawal and isolation in thought and judgment.⁷⁰

Clarification, paradoxically, does not create clarity as an end in itself, but unpacks and reconstructs differences and distinctions that have been covered and obliterated. In *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (1963), Arendt discusses Himmler's slogans and "watchwords," which became Eichmann's "catch phrases" and "winged words," such as "My Honor is my Loyalty;" phrases like these are engineered to excel at "solving problems of conscience."⁷¹ The force of these slogans was so great that they banished problems of unrepresentable proportions. Their purported—and perceived—clarity and simplicity masked their true obscurity, which allowed them to bridge the most fundamental moral boundaries on the way to mass murder and genocide.

Clarifying a propagandistic slogan means revealing the violence with which it establishes synonymy and "enforces false identity."⁷² Loyalty becomes honor, and honor becomes loyalty; two utterly distinct matters, each with their own complexities, are presented as identical, relieving individuals overwhelmed by this complexity from thinking about what "loyalty" and "honor" mean for them and with respect to the people around them. This phrase provided, among other things, a remedy for the losses of the fallen soldiers and dependents of World War I. The "truth" that totalitarian slogans establish is logical and coercive, devoid of meaning and narrative. They offer imageless, technicist identifications and homogenizations that conjure away social and historical ambiguity. Linguistic clarification shows the communicative identification on the level of signification and reference, allowing us to once again take on the challenge of thinking about the complexities of "loyalty" and "honor."

It is at the intersection of identificatory language and propagandistic slogans that metaphors become relevant for Arendt. They are linguistic practices that create orientation of another kind: not signposts, but flashlights in the dark that promote, rather than suppress, plurality and ambiguity, loosening and opening up the "in between" spaces of politics.

Anti-Oppressive Metaphors

Metaphors, for Arendt, are ambiguous linguistic artifices. They can amplify uncertainty, openness, and plurality, and, if they degenerate into slogans, they can suffocate public speech by imposing guardrails for thinking and action. Arendt reflects explicitly on thinking and metaphors in *The Life of the Mind*. Around the same time, she summarizes her views on the matter in her diary: “All thinking ‘transfers [*überträgt*],’ all thinking is metaphorical,” or at least all thinking worthy of the name.⁷³ Thinking works on material from the world of appearances, and since all thinking starts with everyday language, Arendt conceives of the sensible world as linguistically structured: “Most words relate to *objects*, and words relating to concepts (such as justice, courage, etc.) relate primarily not to ideas in my head but to experiences I had in the world of appearances (just deeds, courageous acts, etc.)”⁷⁴ In this explicit reflection on reference, a materialist view appears, in which the meaning of all words, even if crystallized in grand concepts such as justice, has its basis and origin in social action. The task of political speech, by extension, is to shape social actions in return.

Unlike the realm of politics, the realm of appearances from which concepts arise is profoundly chaotic, unequal, and, in Arendt’s eyes, discriminatory. Without the linguistic violence deployed by propagandistic speech, there cannot be agreement over the meaning of words such as “justice” or “courage.” In turn, language is politically most resistant and transformative when it amplifies ambiguity and polysemy. In a note from 1950, Arendt reflects on how metaphors relate to this ambiguity:

Nothing reveals the peculiar ambiguity of language—in which alone we can establish and say the truth, through which alone we can actively remove truth from the world [*aus der Welt schaffen*] and which, in its necessary polished smoothness, is always in the way of finding the truth—more distinctly than the metaphor.⁷⁵

Arendt describes three effects of ambiguity: it allows us to possess and tell the truth; it can actively remove truth from the world, and it is always in the way of finding the truth. The second aspect of these—the ability of language to remove truth from the world—closely resembles Arendt’s theory of violence. It also accords with her reflections on lies and slogans in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, for if language obfuscates truth, and the obfuscation

of truth is what paves the way for totalitarianism, then how can this paving of the way not be instrumental and therefore violent? Where does violence start, if not in the anticipatory and prefigurative suppression of politics?

Slogans differ from metaphors by enforcing the creation of identities between incommensurate elements. Benjamin's concept of "aura," for example, can be called a political metaphor; it promotes ambiguity and uncertainty by blurring the lines between the nostalgia of lost experience and the celebration of a new kind of distracted plurality. Another example, for Arendt, is Karl Jasper's use of the word "clarity," which describes how world and existence are "brought to light" by reason: "to take it upon oneself to answer before mankind for every thought means to live in that luminosity in which oneself and everything one thinks is tested."⁷⁶ A Nazi phrase like "expansion for expansion's sake," however, is imageless, simplifying, and formulaic. Metaphors show how slogans achieve their goal of destroying politics, while also offering vital countermeasures against linguistic violence.

How do metaphors work, and how can they work against the obfuscation of truth? Arendt builds on Aristotle to advance the claim that thought is concerned not with truth, but with meaning.⁷⁷ With this, she returns to her view that human beings are compelled to speak and think due to their pluralistic existence, and that speechless thought does not exist. Here we find the radical political focus of Arendt's view of language; it undoes loneliness, shelters plurality, and propels thinking on the most fundamental level. Thinking is understood not as a path to truth, but as a way of working against the thoughtlessness that permits violence to take a hold in the public sphere.

Arendt—drawing on Aristotle, Ludwig Wittgenstein, and Percy Bysshe Shelley—understands metaphors as products of poetic genius that make the similar visible within the dissimilar.⁷⁸ Metaphors make the inapprehensible apprehensible. They transfer undifferentiated linguistic material from the sensible world, from society and culture, into the sphere of the mind, where it enters the thinking process and eventually returns to the world as examined and transformed language. By externalizing once more what has been internalized and thought through, metaphors "undo, as it were, the withdrawal from the world of appearances that is the precondition of mental activities."⁷⁹ Thinking presupposes withdrawal, but cannot, according to Arendt, stay there. It must return to the world of appearances. This path from the sensible to the insensible and back is a precondition of politics.⁸⁰

As they make their way from everyday language to the solitude of thinking and back into the social world, metaphors provide intuitions for

that which has not yet been intuited, not by means of analogies and already perceivable similarities, but based on relational similarities that allow for the recognition of new meaning based on synthetic knowledge. A hand mill and a despotic state, in the example that Arendt draws from Kant, are not similar; however, using the mill as a metaphor for the state grants insight into the causality of despotism: both hand mill and despotic state are governed by the absolute will of a single individual.⁸¹ This example from political theory is not incidental. Metaphors make something palpable; they have fighting power.⁸²

Thinking is anti-oppressive insofar as it clarifies how the slogan-like elements of everyday language obfuscate public discourse. Arendt herself models this process when she shows how a complex, oppressive social and political reality was concealed by the image of Eichmann as a radically evil person. The metaphor of the “devil” prevented, in her eyes, the recognition of the instrumental and thoughtless day-to-day following of orders that made the Shoah possible. However, since both slogans and metaphors “guarantee the unity of human experience,” it is the task of poetic thinking to create metaphors that “serve as models to give us our bearings lest we stagger blindly among experiences that our bodily senses with their relative certainty of knowledge cannot guide us through.”⁸³

Transformative thinking is poetic, clarifying and countering the creation of reductive identity amid the chaos of appearances. For Arendt, all philosophical concepts, and ultimately all words, are metaphors; however, some are more impactful than others. The metaphor of “hell,” as she wrote in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, serves to bring something invisible and ineffable—the crimes and horrors of the Shoah—into the realm of the visible and the palpable.⁸⁴ The metaphor gives unity to reality; it marks the system of concentration and extermination camps as the entry point for examination and inquiry. “From innocence beyond virtue and guilt beyond vice, from a hell where all Jews were of necessity angelic and all Germans of necessity diabolical, we must return to the reality of politics.”⁸⁵ Prompting research into social reality rather than establishing any kind of conclusive understanding, the metaphor of “hell” destabilizes and counteracts the restrictive work that positivistic and utilitarian explanations do.⁸⁶ The use of such a metaphor is a form of anti-propaganda; it is imagistic, polemical, and strategic, directed against obfuscation, reduction, and relativization.

Arendt’s inquiry into the workings of metaphor was inspired by Benjamin, who, as she wrote, “thinks poetically, i.e., in metaphors.”⁸⁷ Benjamin “thought poetically and therefore was bound to regard the metaphor as the

greatest gift of language. [. . .] He had no trouble understanding the theory of the superstructure as the final doctrine of metaphorical thinking.”⁸⁸ Benjamin rarely used the word metaphor; he preferred speaking of symbolization in the Kantian sense, describing language’s ability to allude rather than signify, to adumbrate and present something that can only be shown, never explained. In this respect, Benjamin considered the metaphor not only as the greatest gift of language, but also as one of its most vital political counterforces.

Metaphors have an orienting but also a preventive and oppositional efficacy. Slogans and clichés work piecemeal and insidiously—like an army, to use Nietzsche’s simile—on asphyxiating reflexive judgment and political action. Poetic thinking must clarify them, revealing them to be means of artificially violent disambiguation. Counter-metaphors must then be provided to strengthen the space of politics by loosening the fiber of social and cultural appearances.⁸⁹ Metaphors amplify plurality and uncertainty; therein lies their political resistance. Arendt placed her hopes on metaphorical thinking to mobilize counterforces against propaganda. The German poems that she learned by heart as a child carried her through her exile, modeling for her a mode of thinking and speaking powerful enough to oppose the violence of fascism.

Fire Alarms

Michael Löwy claims that Benjamin’s aphorism “Fire Alarm” from *One-Way Street* (1928) characterizes the central political impetus of his writings: “his whole work can be regarded as a kind of ‘fire alarm’ to his contemporaries, a warning bell attempting to draw attention to the imminent danger threatening them, to the new catastrophes looming on the horizon.”⁹⁰ Something very similar can be said of Arendt and her political theory.

Arendt’s critical engagement with fascist slogans, lies, and the obfuscation of politics suggests that language and violence are not as strictly opposed in her work as some of her own delineations between them suggest. The line Arendt draws to protect language from the alienation of exile and the assault of totalitarianism is part and parcel of a tradition that understands violence to be based on physical brutality, distinguishing it strictly from language as a spiritual, divine, and disembodied realm. While Arendt relies on this tradition, it increasingly came into conflict with postwar developments and with her life in the United States—a political sphere in which racial discrimination is recognized as both violent and representational.

In *On Violence*, Arendt explicitly discusses the highly ambiguous term “violence” (*Gewalt*) without making any mention of Benjamin’s “Critique of Violence.” This is particularly striking because, in 1967, debate broke out over Benjamin’s putative suppression by the Frankfurt School, and Benjamin’s “Critique of Violence” was of distinct importance.⁹¹ Arendt took a decisive position against Adorno and the Institute of Social Research. *On Violence* can be read as a silent response to Benjamin’s militant essay and its reception by the student movement in Germany and beyond.

Giorgio Agamben, who must have noticed the implicit presence of Benjamin in *On Violence*, points toward the intersections of violence and language as one of the book’s blind spots. “Today,” he wrote in an article he shared with Arendt in 1970, “organized linguistic violence [*violenza linguistica*] aimed at manipulating consciousness is such a common experience that any theory of violence must address its expression in language.”⁹² According to Agamben, linguistic violence in politics, society, and culture had become a key concern, especially for stateless, occupied, and disenfranchised people.⁹³

In *On Violence*, Arendt distinguishes between violence, power, force, strength, and authority. This set of terminological distinctions is an object case of what she calls clarification and a telling example of the power of multilingual thinking. In Benjamin’s highly dialectical use of the word “Gewalt,” all five concepts intersect. The word is not the same at the beginning of Benjamin’s essay as it is at the end, and he moves back and forth rather freely between its different senses, meanings, and connotations. The English language allowed Arendt to differentiate these facets of the single German word.

What is most important, with respect to language, is Arendt’s definition of violence as instrumental, which matches Benjamin’s understanding quite precisely. Violence (*Gewalt*) needs implements, she writes, while power (*Macht*) exists temporarily and fleetingly in between actors, relying on their active support and endorsement.⁹⁴ Power is “in need of numbers” and is essentially political.⁹⁵ Violence, in contrast, marks the outer limit of politics. It is used to “increase and multiply human strength.”⁹⁶ Both differ from force (*Kraft*) and strength (*Stärke*), which pertain only to the realm of nature. Authority, finally, is its own form of political rule that aims at making violence unnecessary.⁹⁷ By differentiating Benjamin’s dialectical term, Arendt delimits the violence that she rejects as apolitical, while trying to salvage a part of what Benjamin portrayed as revolutionary—and, in that respect, transformative—political counterviolence.

Since power is constitutive of the political sphere—a “communications

concept,” in Habermas’ interpretation—it is tied to speech no less closely than speech is tied to action.⁹⁸ While power is essentially linguistic, language, for Arendt, is “wholly inaccessible to violence,” to invoke Benjamin’s formulation.⁹⁹ Arendt rejects Benjamin’s inclusion of violence in the sphere of politics, since for her it will always be an extension of force and strength. At the same time, she rescues the linguistic dimension of “divine” violence that interrupts and ousts instrumentality and mythical violence as the pluralistic and fragile power of political action and speech. Power is the pure means of “language as such.”

The downsides of Arendt’s interpretation mirror those of her strict separation between society and politics. Society is permeated and structured by violence and discrimination, while politics must be protected against it. This is the same conception that led Arendt to label the demands of Black American communities for equal access to education politically misguided and of secondary importance. It also blocked her from recognizing slogans and propaganda as violent *and* political—as instrumental while still extending into the realm of action and power.¹⁰⁰

There are key moments, however, when a recognition of linguistic violence emerges clearly from Arendt’s distinctions. These moments are informed by her multilingualism and her experience of exile in the United States. The legitimacy she grants to public protest and civil disobedience is one of these moments. As a form of action that is performed and “can serve to dramatize grievances and bring them to public attention,” protest dramatizes these grievances in a manner that is goal-oriented, expressive, and communicative.¹⁰¹ This performative dramatization is a modality of language, a form of speech. Yet it is difficult to call protests nonviolent, since their essence is to push against the limits of established law and the institutions it legitimates.

Arendt’s distinction between speaking and language, which dates back to 1953–1955, mirrors that between violence and politics. “*Violence* begins where speaking [*Sprechen*] falls silent; all other action apart from that which is violent takes place as speaking. All means of violence are means to replace language or make it superfluous.”¹⁰² Action becomes violent when it is devoid or deprived of speech. In other words: “the limit [*Grenze*] of action is mute violence [*stumme Gewalt*].”¹⁰³ Muteness marks not the absence of language, but the moment of its loss or unavailability. Violence is a “falling silent, being overwhelmed, losing language [*Ver-stummen, Überwältigtsein, die Sprache verlieren*].”¹⁰⁴

Arendt became increasingly aware of the intricate demarcation between language and violence, and her thinking about these intricacies intensified

her engagement with Benjamin, particularly with his early writings.¹⁰⁵ The word “violence,” for Arendt, is reserved for the “darkness of the heart,” the realm that begins where language is barred and excluded by instrumentalization. In 1953, she wrote: “What is specifically evil about violence is its muteness [*Stummheit*].”¹⁰⁶ Arendt believed that muteness was the sign of thoughtlessness years before she attended the Eichmann trial. All thinking is speaking with oneself, taking its cues from everyday speech and polyvocal conversations with oneself and others. Where this speaking seizes and stops, thinking ends; language falls silent; and violence flares up. “The muteness of violence [. . .] is the ‘animalistic’ [*das ‘Tierische’*] that bestializes the human being.”¹⁰⁷ The mute brutality of human beings is violent, as is “the use of force in human relations,” and this violence also extends surreptitiously into the realm of work and production: “violence is present in all fabrication.”¹⁰⁸ What production and violence share is their muteness. In that, they are both distinct from political action as a mode of speaking.

Violence, then, does not commence where language ends, but where it falls silent; where speaking ends, violence extends into the sphere of language. Violence is mute or speechless, but not languageless (*sprachlos*).¹⁰⁹ Language used as an implement is violence; language as speech is the medium of politics and power. One of violence’s modalities in the realm of language is its reduction to communication and logical reasoning; another one is the propagandistic use of slogans that impose a darkening unity on the world. In these cases, language “as such” is being employed as an implement of strength, domination, and obfuscation.

There is an antidote, however, which Arendt alludes to, tellingly, in a grammatical analogy, as if to show how language survives its own categorization:

The *accusative* of violence, as of love, destroys the in-between, annihilates or burns it, leaves the other without refuge [*schutzlos*], robs itself of its refuge. Opposite is the *dative* of saying and speaking, which confirms the in-between, moves within the in-between. And then there is the accusative of the singing poem, which absolves and releases what is sung about [*das Besungene*] from the in-between and its relations, without confirming anything. If poetry, and not philosophy, absolutizes, there is salvation [*Rettung*].¹¹⁰

Arendt distinguishes the destructive accusative of violence and love, which consumes the other, from the enabling dative of saying and speaking, which

cares for and supports the in-between of politics. There is a mode of language that is speechless, that absorbs the self and the other, that knows no plurality and no speaking *with others* about something. The grammatical case of giving and of the “to whom”—of sharing stories, trust, gratitude, or gifts—becomes the paradigm of speech and politics. Perhaps her life and work in the English language, in which the dative case is much less visible, prompted Arendt to distinguish so clearly between power and violence.¹¹¹ However, a third mode appears between dative and accusative, between violence and speaking, a mode that is characterized by a different linguistic or paralinguistic modality altogether: singing. While violence is mute and politics is spoken, poems are sung, and they resound (*ertönen*). True thinking appears in the world of appearances as song, relieved from the confines of both silence and speech.

The singing poem as a model for non-instrumental thinking avoids the shortcomings of the accusative, the annihilation of the other and the self. It is both *about* something and in correspondence *with* others, detaching what it sings about from the pluralistic and ephemeral entanglements of the political sphere. It is as if Arendt absolves poets and poetic thinkers from exercising violence when creating metaphors that last, resist, and give unity to the world, acknowledging that they do so in the best political sense.¹¹² Poetic thinking rescues the meaning speech lends to experience by severing it from the sphere of action and power, condensing it in silent immanence, and then transposing it back as metaphors into the messy sphere of society and culture, where it spawns, all of a sudden, new narratives of and for resistance.¹¹³ Arendt’s philosophical diary is testimony to the fact that, amid exile and linguistic plurality, thinking’s poetic features are particularly noticeable and especially needed.

Poetic language evades—or, rather, transforms—the “burning” of the in-between that Arendt invokes in her reflection on grammar and resistance. The image recalls the catastrophe of annihilation, which begins with the accusative of violence. From 1933 on to the end of her life, in many of the pages that Arendt wrote one can hear Benjamin’s “alarm clock that in each minute rings for sixty seconds.”¹¹⁴ Arendt practiced the transformative counterforce of metaphorical thinking as an “art of alarm,” in the words of Elisabeth Young-Bruehl, kindling what Benjamin described as “the living flame [that] continues to burn over the heavy logs of what is past and the light ashes of what has been experienced.”¹¹⁵ In this flame, “the phrase is turned back into the word,” spawning “a veritable metamorphosis in which it is as though the course of nature which wills that all fire burn to ashes is reverted and even dust can burst into flames.”¹¹⁶ For only in the light of new

metaphors and narratives—and here Arendt and Benjamin agree perhaps more than they do anywhere else—“will the past open up to us with unexpected freshness and tell us things no one has yet had ears to hear.”¹¹⁷ The sheer newness and uncertainty of poetic language that has traveled from the sensible world through thinking and then back to society are among the most powerful ways of opposing the violence of political extremism.

Poetic Counterforce

Silence and Objection from Brecht to Celan

Paul Celan's poems bear the traces of violence. There is the violence he experienced during his internment in a forced labor camp; the violence visited upon his family when his parents, Friederike Schragger and Leo Antschel-Teitler, were murdered by the Rumanian and German fascists in 1942; the violence that forced him to leave his home and seek refuge in Vienna and Paris. This violence marks his poems, from their meter, syntax, and semantics to their tone, arrangement, and posture. Violence is their backdrop, but the source of their power lies elsewhere. From the beginning of Celan's displacement through the period of the Third Reich and into the 1950s and 1960s, the politicization of violence led him to develop and refine a linguistic and poetic counterforce, a form of writing that "stands *against* [. . .] the murderous [*gegen das Mörderische*]," from the most innocuous combinations of syllables to the most catastrophic laws and orders.¹ Celan's poems are "counter-poems," composed of "counterwords" (*Gegenworte*), written against persistent forms of fascism, totalitarian rule, and political violence.² His poems unsettle readers who approach words as carriers of meaning, demanding instead a practice of understanding that unfolds what is unsaid—or, rather, what survives the catastrophic abuse of language—that facilitated the Shoah. By exercising its own kind of counterforce, Celan's poetry reveals the violence committed on language itself.

In a series of poems written in late July 1968, shortly after the student protests and on the heels of a reading tour to Germany, Celan revisited selected exile writings from the 1930s, engaging with, citing, and addressing authors like Bertolt Brecht and Walter Benjamin. In these poems, most of which he did not select for publication in the posthumously published

volume *Schneepart* (1971), he scrutinizes the efforts of these authors to write against German fascism with a distinct interest in the survival, transformation, and enduring viability of their anti-oppressive linguistic strategies. Celan's responses to the Weimar writers indicate how the "critique of violence [*Kritik von Gewalt*]" that his poetry entailed from the beginning changed over the postwar years before resurfacing forcefully in the late 1960s.³

This chapter examines Celan's linguistic "counterforces" (*Gegengewalten*) as they appear in his poem "Ein Blatt, baumlos [*A leaf, treeless*]" (1968). Celan wrote this poem in early July 1968 in either Freiburg, Frankfurt, or Kiel. It contains a direct response to Brecht's "An die Nachgeborenen [*To Those Born After*]" (1939), which was included in the collection *Svendborg Poems* (1939). By sending Brecht, who passed away twelve years before, a "treeless" leaf or sheet (*Blatt*), Celan constructs a transgenerational bridge between 1939 and 1968. He sends this leaf back in time, back to Brecht's home in exile in Denmark, where he wrote and discussed "To Those Born After" with Benjamin. This allows Celan to take up Brecht's address to future generations by performing a kind of tiger's leap into the past, to use Benjamin's phrase, prompting those who came after him to ask, again, about the conditions of linguistic and intellectual resistance against political violence.

"A leaf, treeless" and "To Those Born After" are not antithetical examples of "hermetic" and "committed" poetry. They are also not brothers-in-arms, united in a heroic mission of working through the apocalypse of fascism. The truth lies somewhere in the middle. While both poems are political and anti-fascist, they differ significantly and instructively in how they enact political resistance and opposition.⁴ Their different approaches to the task they hold in common illuminate the postwar transformation of linguistic violence. Benjamin's non-instrumental view of language, which inspired and concerned both Brecht and Celan, provides a key to this transformation.⁵

It is curious that Celan wrote his poetic missive to Brecht—one of the few direct references to him, and one of the most substantial ones, in his oeuvre—just a few weeks, or perhaps even days, prior to a series of sixteen poems that contain references to Benjamin's works. These references concern, in particular, the essays and treatises that Celan read in his copy of *Schriften* sometime after 1955, over a decade before the scholarly and political engagement with Benjamin's works began to intensify.⁶ Celan chose to include neither of the poems that reference Benjamin in *Schneepart*, not even the most pointed one, "Port Bou—deutsch?" (1968).⁷ Instead, three lines from Brecht in 1939 stand in for a forceful, explicit, and, in Celan's eyes, tellingly changing strategy of writing against oppressive violence. A close reading of the broken, transgenera-

tional conversation between “A leaf” and “To Those Born After” shows Celan’s “correction” of Brecht, which rescues silence (*Schweigen*) as a “pure means” of opposition and political transformation. Celan does so not by absolving silence of the charge of complicity, but by foregrounding it as a linguistic practice of acknowledging representation that has been denied.

Broken Conversations

Brecht’s “To Those Born After,” written between 1934 and 1938, was first published on June 15, 1939, in the exile journal, *Die neue Weltbühne*. The first part of the poem, which Brecht included later that year in *Svendborg Poems*, was originally titled “An die Überlebenden [*To the Survivors*].”⁸ It includes some of the most iconic lines of early twentieth-century German exile poetry:

Was sind das für Zeiten, wo
Ein Gespräch über Bäume fast ein Verbrechen ist
Weil es ein Schweigen über so viele Untaten einschließt!⁹

*[What kind of times are they, when
A talk about trees is almost a crime
Because it implies silence about so many horrors?]*¹⁰

Close to thirty years later, Celan published “A leaf, treeless,” dated July 1968, in a volume entitled *Von den Nachgeborenen (From Those Born After)*.¹¹ A year later, Celan selected the poem to be included in *Schneepart*:

EIN BLATT, baumlos,
für Bertolt Brecht:

Was sind das für Zeiten,
wo ein Gespräch
beinah ein Verbrechen ist,
weil es soviel Gesagtes
mit einschließt?¹²

*[A LEAF, treeless,
for Bertolt Brecht:*

*What kind of times are these,
when a conversation*

is well nigh a crime
 because it includes
 so much that is said?³

The first line of the poem appears in place of its title; the second resembles a dedication, followed by a colon. The next five lines cite and modify Brecht's verses from 1939. Peter Szondi cites "A leaf, treeless" as an example of Celan's "ever more consistent rejection [*Abkehr*], in his later work, of the institution of the titled poem [*Gedichtüberschrift*]," adding that the lines "EIN BLATT, baumlos/für Bertolt Brecht: [. . .]" would be a title for the variation on a Brecht poem that follows them were it not for adjective and colon.¹⁴ Celan held Brecht's works in high regard and owned a copy of his collected works. He discussed Brecht's "Die Nachtlager [*A Bed for the Night*]" with Walter Jens in 1957 and alluded to "1940" in a letter to Szondi from August 1961. Besides fleeting references in "Fadensonnen" (in *Atemwende*) and "Die Liebe" (in *Fadensonnen*), "A leaf" is the most significant published evidence of Celan's engagement with Brecht. There are no traces of Brecht's familiarity with Celan's work, apart from his readings of Ingeborg Bachmann's early poetry.¹⁵

Both poems question the conditions of their respective eras ("Was sind das für Zeiten"). The question is proverbial and lamentary. It creates distance; it takes a step back, asking about the present as it might appear to another, later time. The plural "Zeiten" evokes a multilayered temporality, comparing the contemporary moment to other epochs, while the adverb "wo" (*where*) gives the times a spatiality and topography. Celan follows Brecht, letter by letter, up to the word "Gespräch," which can mean, among other things, conversation, way of speaking, speech (*Rede*), consultation (*Beratung*, *Unterredung*), or chatter and idle talk (*Geschwätz*, *Gerede*).¹⁶ In "The Meridian," the speech Celan gave after receiving the Georg Büchner prize in 1960, he describes the poem itself as a conversation: "The poem—under what conditions!—becomes the poem of someone (ever yet) perceiving, facing phenomena, questioning and addressing these phenomena; it becomes conversation—often despairing conversation."¹⁷

Celan retracts Brecht's enjambment, breaking the line after the word "Zeiten" and not, like Brecht, after the "wo," which modifies Brecht's rhythmic structure decisively. In the first line, and only there, the free rhythm of Brecht's poem does not match the syntax of the sentence, emphasizing the caesura between the exploratory tone of the initial question and the ensuing response. By adapting Brecht's initially interruptive rhythm for the remaining lines, Celan exposes the transparent mode of signification that his poem

announces. He abolishes the security of grammatical structure, interrupting the sentence again and again, so that only the impetus, but not the tone, of the question, persists until the end. Celan's rupture of verse (*Verbrechung*) puts into question the promise (*Versprechung*) of communicability and pragmatic signification.¹⁸

In both poems, a conversation is almost (*fast*) or nearly (*beinah*) a crime (*Verbrechen*), but while Brecht's has an object, Celan's does not—or, rather, while Brecht's conversation concerns trees, Celan's is "treeless" (*baumlos*). Brecht's trees interpose blossoming nature with the shadows of persecution, displacement, and murder. Celan reemphasizes these shadows in an enigmatic way by negating the metaphor.¹⁹ Yet, the conversation in his counter-poem is not about nothing, not a conversation "as such," but rather traces something that was once present.²⁰ Rather than indicating, as Theo Buck comments, a "complete absence of any palpable object of art" or "an emptiness of meaning in view of which the attentive beholder is left speechless," the word "baumlos" raises awareness by interrupting the seemingly effortless process of signification.²¹ While Celan removes a leaf from the tree, and then the tree altogether, it remains present in the declaration of its absence, perhaps even more present than in Brecht's lines. In 1968, not only is a conversation about a tree almost a crime, but so is the very use of the word "tree" as a sign, image, or icon.

By highlighting the sign's absence, Celan's poem becomes a despairing, ongoing, and refractory meditation about the memory of other, bygone conversations, and about the changes in their conditions and implications. Both poetic conversations are "almost" or "nearly" a crime. Celan's "nearly" might indicate yet another kind of conversation, a third or fourth kind, that is nearby (*in der Nähe*), but not yet palpable. In both poems—and here they begin to part ways—the noun "Verbrechen" evokes the image of a rupture (*Bruch*), a breaking with (*brechen mit*) an established order, law, norm, or expectation. The word originally meant "to break" or "to crack" (*zerbrechen*) before its sensual root was lost, replacing the prefix "zer" with "ver" in written language.²² Besides its familiar meaning of a damaging act, particularly the breaking of juridical norms, it can designate the damaged thing itself, like a "defect" or "deficiency" (*Gebrechen*). The verb "verbrechen" (*frangere, delinquere*) also has the meaning of "to interrupt" or "to terminate" (*unterbrechen, abbrechen*). Like a hunter, who marks the trail of an animal by snapping little twigs off trees (*die Fährte verbrechen*), words interrupt speech (*Wörter, die die Rede verbrechen; verbrochene Worte*) or end silence (*das Schweigen verbrechen*).²³ Both poems break down, break off, or break with a specific mode of conversation—and with one another.

In Brecht's stanza, the "brechen" of his own name, *Brecht*, resonates as the self-accusation of the poet who can no longer enjoy conversing about trees in his Scandinavian exile, while those he left behind are threatened by poverty and death. This memory appears in one of the adjacent *Finnish Epigrams*, which ends, after describing the plentitude of delicious foods in a larder, with the lines:

Oh, könnt ich laden euch, die überm Meere
Der Krieg der leeren Mägen hält!

[To those fighting the war on empty bellies
Far to the south: I wish it were for you.]²⁴

In Celan's response, the crime is of a different kind. Its rupture is linked to the poet's self-accusation. The crime still resembles the one in Brecht's poem—namely, the complicity of poetic language—though this language is no longer one that falls silent, but one that demands locution and explicit objection. For Celan, the crime extends to the demotion of poetry to a measure and function of that which it seeks to oppose. In this respect, the word "Verbrechen" in Celan's counter-poem marks Brecht's inability to break with poetic language's instrumentalization. This is not an accusation. Celan heeds the last lines of Brecht's "To Those Born After," which ask in an almost imploring tone, "Gedenkt unsrer / Mit Nachsicht [*Remember us / With forbearance*]."²⁵ The question is whether Celan embraces Brecht's response to the linguistic and political violence of the time—the accusation of poetic and intellectual silence—or whether he sees this response as resembling too closely the very instrumentalization of language for purposes of domination and destruction that Brecht sought to counteract.

In September 1938, Brecht notes in his journal that the social and economic conditions had forced him "into battle," so that he can no longer commune "with nature in the woods," as Goethe did, but is rather "accompanied by policemen [*Ich gehe nicht mehr 'im Walde vor mich hin', sondern unter Polizisten*]."²⁶ Around the same time, Benjamin notes in his diary that when Brecht spoke to him about his "poems from exile," he felt "a violence [. . .] capable of opposing that of fascism [*eine Gewalt auf mich wirken, die der des Faschismus gewachsen ist*]."²⁷ What is at stake, then, between Celan and Brecht, is the efficacy of poetic and linguistic counterforce in view of the abuse of language by despotic, fascist, and totalitarian forces.

The last lines of Brecht's and Celan's poems question the conditions

and consequences of poetry's relation to violence. How can a poem speak of and against the crimes of the epoch and the language that prepares and accompanies them? Celan's *envoi* to Brecht concerns the extremes of objection and silence as gestures of linguistic violence and resistance.

Brecht charges those who have a conversation about trees with implicitly condoning so many horrors by not addressing and objecting to them.²⁸ What begins as a question ends with an exclamation mark; the question was rhetorical, and the answer already given. Celan repeats Brecht's explanatory formulation ("weil es . . . [*because it*]"), but introduces two changes, one strikingly, almost suspiciously forceful, and the other more inconspicuous. While Brecht's conversation includes silence (*ein Schweigen*), Celan's includes so much that is or has been said (*soviel Gesagtes*). The nominalized participle suggests the past tense—so much that has been said, how it was said, and how it continues to resonate in the words used in this and other conversations—but it can also evoke the almost atemporal sense of something that *is being said*, or is believed to be said. This formulation marks a way of relating to words as vehicles of semantic content that accompanies them with every turn of phrase, perhaps even in a slightly anticipatory fashion, as something to be aware of as one speaks.

Relatedly, the conversation in Celan's poem is included "with" (*mit einschließt*), alongside whatever else it comprises—including, perhaps, so much that is unsaid (*Ungesagtes*). This underlines the modification. The preposition "mit" (with) signals modesty, but also belonging, heeding whatever else, known or unknown, might be included in the conversation that is not about trees and not about nothing, but about the fading memory of the referent and the violence of the explication that it demanded.

Brecht laments silence; Celan removes the invocation of silence altogether. His poem is silent about silence. This removal indicates, above all, a notable distrust in the self-evidence of language's tasks and abilities.²⁹ Silence about "so many wrongdoings" becomes "so much that is said" or has been said. Replacing Brecht's "silence" with the "said" (*Gesagtes*) suggests that silence might be the more powerful response to political atrocities, and, at the same time, displaces the excessive burden of a language commissioned to say how things are in the world. In Brecht's poem, it is almost a crime to speak about trees; in Celan's poem, the mode of conversation itself becomes the wrongdoing. Remaining or falling silent appears as an alternative—and perhaps more fitting—response to the continuing instrumentalization of language.³⁰ This explicit and complicit mode of communication survived the

atrocities of Brecht's times and continued to legitimate and support those of the postwar period and beyond.

Celan's reply does not simply invert Brecht's gesture, but rather continues to think through the problem it raises—namely, the “paradoxical dialectic of speech and silence.”³¹ One might also hear in Celan's “correction” a reminder that poetry has to distance itself from everyday speech, establishing a sphere that appears marginal and opaque but that is capable of exposing what is being normalized.³² Celan distances himself from the view of language as a means of speaking up and objecting, but, rather than claiming a separate sphere for poetic language, he adumbrates the beauty of that which has not been disfigured by language's reduction to communication and administration. The chiasmic substitution of silence with excessive locution marks, to invoke Peter Szondi, the stumbling block (*skándalon*) of Celan's response to Brecht and his contemporaries.³³

Benjamin was a key interlocutor for Celan regarding language's violence, oppositional efficacy, and reduction to mere communication. He dissects Benjamin's review essay of Max Kommerell's book *The Poet as Leader in German Classicism* (1928) in “Port Bou—deutsch?” (1968), juxtaposing motifs such as war (*Stahlhelm*), national culture and antisemitism (*Links- / Nibelungen*, *Rechts- / Nibelungen*), negation, belatedness (*Kein Zu-spät*), and openness (*ein geheimes / Offen*).³⁴ Celan struggled, earlier than other commentators, with Benjamin's invocations of conservative and antisemitic writers like Ludwig Klages, Carl Schmitt, and C. G. Jung. Despite these disquieting affinities, there is a deep kinship between Benjamin and Celan when it comes to the critique of instrumental language and the transformative forces of the unsayable and inexpressible.

In the poems from July 1968 that reference Benjamin's works, Celan grapples with how Benjamin's ambiguous views correspond to his own way of writing against oppressive memory and the survival of fascism. While mourning (*Trauer*) and philological attention (*Aufmerksamkeit*) are important areas of affinity, inspiration, and agreement—as the excessive underlining in Celan's copy of Benjamin's *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* and his citation of Benjamin's “Kafka” essay in the “Meridian” speech show—the impact of Benjamin's writings on language and violence has been more implicit, but no less fundamental.³⁵

The polarity of silence and communication was of central importance for Benjamin, from the original sin of human language to the “weak” messianic force of his late historiography. That tension appears in July 1968 as the

stumbling block between “A leaf” and “To Those Born After.” The fact that Celan wrote multiple poems that reference motifs in Benjamin’s works only a few weeks after “A leaf, treeless” sheds light onto the transformation of linguistic violence and resistance after 1945 that gave rise to his “counterword.”

Silence and Explication

“A leaf” and “To Those Born After” correspond by working with and through rather than against each other. Brecht’s verses begin as an inquiry into the condition of the present, but soon turn to lament, and ultimately, to indignation. His poem’s evaluation of the times in which it was written call for a language capable of saying how things are: dark. “Wirklich, ich lebe in finsternen Zeiten! [*Truly, I live in dark times!*]”³⁶ Brecht uses the conversation about trees as a historical sundial. The times are dark, because having a conversation about trees has become the privilege of the few who escaped German fascism. For Brecht, using this privilege for musings about the natural world is tantamount to maintaining silence, and poetry must speak up against the political crimes of the present. Otherwise, it becomes complicit by looking away.

The anticipation of future accusations is expressed perhaps most clearly in Brecht’s poem “In finsternen Zeiten [*In Dark Times*]”:

Aber man wird nicht sagen: Die Zeiten waren finster
Sondern: Warum haben ihre Dichter geschwiegen?

[*However, they won’t say: the times were dark
Rather: why were their poets silent?*]³⁷

With the exclamation point at the end of the stanza—“Because it implies silence about so many wrongdoings!”—“To Those Born After” has morphed into an accusation of complacent and self-interested artists and intellectuals who flee into aestheticism. Brecht’s view of poetry’s oppositional work in the face of triumphant fascism was radically committed and actionist to the point of accepting forcefulness and active linguistic counterviolence. His most radical statement of this view came in 1937: “How can we authors write in a deadly way [*tödlich schreiben*]?”³⁸

Celan recalls the tone with which Brecht’s poem begins, furnishing the last line with the question mark that was lost along the way. He sends a leaf, sheet, or page to Brecht, looking, like Brecht, at the conditions of the

conversation. Unlike Brecht, however, Celan questions the belief that language can oppose the misdeeds of the time by explicating them—the belief that language has the ability, or even the responsibility, to render visible and palpable things as they are. This belief in language’s explicatory ability was reflected in Brecht’s way of speaking and his mode of articulation. Max Frisch recalls his impression of Brecht reading “To Those Born After”: “Clear and precise, particularly in the rhythm, with no apparent emphases, factual, demonstrating words in the way one demonstrates stones, fabrics, or other things that have to make their own impression; [. . .] more or less as one reads out a letter—simply to pass on the news.”³⁹ This was perhaps the very speaking tone in which Benjamin perceived a violence capable of opposing that of fascism. Celan, in contrast, sang his poems in a lamenting fashion, for which he was ridiculed by the non-Jewish postwar writers during one infamous meeting of the Gruppe 47.⁴⁰

Brecht, Celan indicates, tacitly grants priority to a language that does not turn away but calls out, asserts, and accuses. This language is clear, direct, and political, whereas the language that talks about trees, the language of musing and digression, is demoted and damaged by the times, marginalized and forced into exile along with its speakers.⁴¹ Underneath Brecht’s indignation resounds the hope that another, more sober and explicit language might escape this criminal evasion. While Brecht laments the fact that the times have turned those who converse about trees into silent collaborators, this very conversation provides diagnostic criteria for the condition of the times. By claiming that the reality of violence corrupts the allegedly autonomous sphere of poetic language, Brecht turns the willingness to tear down this boundary into a requirement for political opposition.⁴²

Celan takes issue with the functionalization of language, underlining how this tendency survived and intensified after the Third Reich. The lines in the middle of “Fadensonnen” (“Threadsuns,” 1965) mark the elevated, enlightened tone that Celan discerned in Brecht’s demand—the demand that poetic language should object to and intervene in oppressive politics:

Ein baum-
hoher Gedanke
greift sich den Lichtton

[A tree-
high thought
strikes the light-tone]⁴³

“A leaf” is a reminder of and warning against the Enlightenment belief that a clear explication of crimes should be enough to prevent them, or, failing that, to render justice to the victims. Rather, Celan’s counter-poem exhibits the fundamental and fine-grained practices and assumptions about language through which words are turned into vessels of semantic content and conveyors of information.⁴⁴ As Brecht laments poetry’s silence about violence and impending genocide, Celan’s “so much that is said” renders the communicative reduction of language explicit. By turning to language, however, he turns language into yet another measure of the times.⁴⁵ The excision of referentiality and antimetaphorical resistance are no less violent than committed objection and opposition, but their violence is of a different kind.

Celan’s rejoinder exposes the conflict within a linguistic practice that speaks up against repressive and abusive power, and claims to engage actively in the social and political struggles of its time. He submits a leaf or page that draws attention to how Brecht inadvertently reproduces the linguistic violence he opposes: a language that is seen as being capable of getting things done by pointing them out. But how could things change without articulating them in a way that everyone understands? Wouldn’t such a language, a language everyone understands, impose comprehensibility on a world that is utterly incomprehensible and illegible? And would, in return, a language that—almost—falls silent, and thereby tacitly imitates incomprehensibility, have greater power to break with the cycle of violence?

The question of language’s anti-oppressive efficacy echoes Benjamin’s concerns. After all, he had juxtaposed absolute expression and absolute communication as two ways of missing the essence of language as early as 1916. He and Brecht likely discussed his theory of “eliminating” the unsayable in language—or, as he put it in 1933, the “liquidation” of magic. Both formulations indicate the evolution of Benjamin’s “highly political style and writing” that seeks to forcefully oppose oppressive linguistic violence without reproducing language’s instrumentalization.⁴⁶

This forceful, yet non-instrumental opposition concerned Celan as much as it did Benjamin and Brecht. The elimination of the unsayable in language is a key point of encounter between Benjamin and Celan.⁴⁷ It describes precisely where Celan turns against Brecht: not explication and communication but disclosing the unsayable as unsayable—as the marginalized, the excluded, the dispossessed. Locating the unsayable within the damaged linguistic material is the source of a political resistance that does not reproduce or perpetuate the violence of instrumentality.

For Benjamin, silence and communication were extremes of a larger

historical development of human language. In an early note related to his “Mimesis” studies, which, as his diaries indicate, he likely discussed with Brecht, Benjamin wrote:

Language’s line of development: the division [*Scheidung*] between the magical and the profane [*profanen*] function of speech is liquidated in favor of the latter. The sacred [*Das Heilige*] is located closer to the profane than to the magical. Direction towards a language purified from all magical elements [*von allen magischen Elementen gereinigte Sprache*]: Scheerbart, Brecht.⁴⁸

Benjamin describes the historical development of human language as a movement toward the liquidation of a divide, where “to liquidate” (*liquidieren*) does not mean to remove or obliterate, as it does in fascist jargon, but—wresting the term away from the fascists—to liquefy or dissolve. The divide between the profane and the magical functions of speech, Benjamin suggests, is eliminated in favor of the former, because the sacred (*das Heilige*)—a word that Friedrich Hölderlin uses for a radical selflessness and collective altruism—resides closer to the profane than to the magical.⁴⁹ The dialectical tension is preserved, yet shifted toward the profane. In the works of Brecht and Paul Scheerbart—an affiliation that puzzled Scholem—Benjamin discerned a shared attempt to completely neutralize this division.⁵⁰ Brecht, Benjamin suggests, intended to purge language of all magical elements, for better or worse.

Brecht makes use of Benjamin’s distinction in a reflection on the “washing” or “cleaning of language” (*Sprachwaschung*), which he pursued in his *Finnish Epigrams*, a group of poems closely related to “To Those Born After.”⁵¹ He marks the demise of poetry’s “beautiful contradictory unity [*schöne widersprüchliche Einheit*]”⁵² after Goethe. In Brecht’s eyes, this disintegration manifests itself in two lines, the “profane” and the “pontifical,” epitomized in the works of Heinrich Heine and Hölderlin, respectively. The pontifical line subsequently splits, with Stefan George representing one branch and Karl Kraus the other. Brecht’s discussion of their respective oppositions to the bourgeoisie—both of which he considered instructive, but insufficient, for different reasons—suggests that he himself intended a dialectical reunification of the profane and the pontifical. The “washing of language” may entail a kind of ablution, but a reference to the panning of gold through which the emancipatory elements of poetry are separated from its regressive debris is no less suggestive.⁵³ While Benjamin diagnoses the liquification of the magical side of language, Brecht aims at recuperating language’s beautiful

contradictory unity through the recombination of poetry's most powerful pontifical and profane currents.

Brecht's descriptions of "pontifical" poetry evokes a language that severs itself from the empirical world. He characterizes both George and Kraus as "non-sensuous [*unsinnlich*]," while George's "extreme subjectivism" is "clerico-feudal" and "actively working for the counter-revolution," Kraus is "much closer to the object" and "a 'radical' critic, but of a purely idealistic [*rein idealistisch*], liberal kind."⁵⁴ Brecht's understanding of the profane line, on the other hand, is related to what Benjamin described and criticized as language's reductive "semiotic or communicative element."⁵⁵ This language is "scientific," pragmatic, and transparent, bringing to light the hidden laws of society.⁵⁶

Benjamin's observations and the corresponding resonances in Brecht's journal illuminate what concerned Celan about Brecht's language, namely, the tendency toward the complete dissolution of language's magical aspect in favor of its pragmatic use. Although Scholem reports that Benjamin described this dissolution as his own project in 1938, he did not intend to purge language's magical aspect itself, and neither did Brecht. They sought, instead, to liquidate the boundary that separates it from the profane, so that language's magical, poetic, and nonpragmatic forces would merge with and be operative within the profane.⁵⁷ This was Benjamin's attempt at combining his philological procedure with a materialist history of perception—a task, as he wrote to Scholem, that he did not fully accomplish.⁵⁸

Celan, in turn, radicalizes language's magical, symbolizing abilities to expose the total disintegration of "profane" language—the destruction of language due to its complete communicative reduction. Still, however, Brecht's and Celan's poems cannot be reduced to the extremes of profane and pontifical language. Rather, they reveal, in their intersection, the development of language's political appropriations and counterforces over time. "A leaf" responds to "To Those Born After," not to point out a shortcoming or to clear away a difference, but to highlight the transformation of a dilemma—that of language's task of opposing violence without reproducing its instrumentality.

Celan does not criticize Brecht's demand for explication. Instead, he rearticulates Brecht's warning and passes it on to future generations. Despite Brecht's attempts to reconstitute language's beautifully contradictory unity, the gravitational center of his poetry falls on the side of the profane—of calling a spade a spade. Celan inherited poetry's pontifical currents, and he

struggled with that inheritance. Their poems rearticulate an age-old conflict while searching for a time-sensitive source of power for linguistic resistance.

Poetic Counterforce

weil es soviel
Gesagtes
mit einschließt?⁵⁹

In this early version of “A leaf” that Celan sent to Jürgen Wallmann on April 16, 1969, he abbreviated Brecht’s name as “B.B.” and introduced a line break before the word “Gesagtes.” This isolation emphasizes that “A leaf” addresses speech no less explicitly than “To Those Born After” addresses the wrongdoings of the times. In a letter to Adorno, who discussed the tacit social commitment of Celan’s “hermetic” poetry in *Aesthetic Theory* (1970), Celan calls their own times not dark, but—with another word by Hölderlin—“dürftigst,” which can mean most meager, but also most in need.⁶⁰ Language survived Brecht’s dark times, and was allowed to come to light again, “enriched [*angereichert*],” as Celan wrote in his Bremen prize speech, after years of “frightful muting [*furchtbares Verstummen*]” and “the thousand darknesses of death-bringing speech [*die tausend Finsternisse der todbringenden Rede*].”⁶¹ The word “enriched” is ambiguous; taken as a sign of hope and confidence in language’s transformative abilities, it also includes so much that is and has been said. Its violence as well as its resistance have changed.

Celan’s poem turns first to language, and only then to the wrongdoings of the time. It shifts attention from the demands of commitment to the pragmatic complicity of a language that Hölderlin described as “murderous-factual [*tödtendfactisch*].”⁶² The “deadly-factual [*tödlichfactisches*]” or “actual murder with words” seizes the body and kills on command. Examples include Oedipus’ accusation of Jocasta, which prompts her to commit suicide, or an SS officer ordering that someone be shot. The “murderous-factual” word, in contrast, kills in a communicative, belated, and propagandistic manner.⁶³ Murderous-factual language is oppressive language that normalizes discrimination and exclusion in preparation for displacement, persecution, and genocide. So much that is said using referential, explicatory, and instrumental language corrupts speech, but not language “as such.” In the end, despite its forward-looking gesture, it is difficult not to hear in Celan’s rejoinder to

Brecht a hint of accusation for claiming a similar functionalization of poetic language, even if for anti-oppressive purposes.

By addressing the crime of silence in a language that evades statements and propositions, Celan reclaims language for yet another purpose, despite its careful refusal to imitate what has been damaged. In making the complicity of language explicit, he endows what Adorno called a “disintegrated language [*zerfallene Sprache*]” with the task of withdrawing, and thereby rendering visible, the violence of explication itself.⁶⁴ Celan speaks of language as decisively as Brecht prescribes what poetry should speak *about*. In this movement and countermovement of claim and correction, Brecht’s and Celan’s transgenerational conversation discloses the possibility of a poetic counterforce that is decisive and forceful without being instrumental or reductive.

The possibility of such a counterforce surfaces in Adorno’s remarks about Brecht and Celan. Adorno describes Brecht’s poetry as “didactic *poésie*.”⁶⁵ Brecht’s plays recognize, Adorno suggests, that the appearance of social life veils its essence, which is why he attempted to “turn the gruesomeness of society into a theatrical phenomenon by dragging it out into the open.”⁶⁶ In a similar way, “To Those Born After” drags the atrocities of the times out into the open of public and poetic conversation.⁶⁷ Brecht claims that silence veils and shields these atrocities; the poet ought, instead, to call them out and make them palpable and resistible. Poetic language is not explicit enough. Its alleged autonomy—the aestheticism coded into the figure of the tree—turns the conversation almost into a crime.

Adorno criticizes Brecht for not having satisfied the norm he himself established. The exposure of the laws of capitalism in scientific yet entertaining parables distorts the theoretical truth of Brecht’s plays. For the sake of increased theatrical vividness, complex relationships are reduced to everyday scenes and characters; Brecht portrays the functionaries of the Nazi party as a group of ordinary gangsters. This reduction of complexity reveals a desire to persuade that, in Adorno’s eyes, is evinced most clearly by Brecht’s attempt to conceal it. This desire infiltrates the very fiber of his writing:

Even the best part of Brecht is infected by the deceptive aspect of his commitment. The language bears witness to the extent of the divergence between the poetic subject and what it proclaims. In order to bridge the gap, Brecht’s language affects the speech of the oppressed. But the doctrine it

champions requires the language of the intellectual. Its unpretentiousness and simplicity are a fiction.⁶⁸

Adorno's critique resonates with Celan's response to Brecht. The divergence between the poetic subject and what it proclaims is the tension at the heart of "To Those Born After." The poem claims to present culture's complicity with the Nazis' crimes in a sober and profane fashion, disregarding the complicity of instrumental language in the preparation and realization of those very crimes. This is why Celan turns Brecht's silence into so much that has been or is being said. The crime is no longer mere acquiescence, but speaking a language that leaves no space for silence. By omitting the word "silence" to indicate the self-refutation of committed poetry, Celan brings into focus the transformation of poetic resistance after 1945.

Adorno locates the linguistic counterforce of Celan's "hermetic poetry" in its tendency to seal itself off from empirical reality.⁶⁹ While Brecht associates this tendency with the pontifical, Adorno asks after the social reality that corresponds to the self-contained character of Celan's poetry, suggesting that his poems spring from a "growing pressure to separate the poetized [*das Gedichtete*] from the thematic material [*Stoffgehalt*] and from the intentions."⁷⁰ Celan's poems omit—and thereby reveal—rather than explicate the effects of the violence they voice as song. In an excessively functionalized and purpose-driven society, perceiving "what is essential to the poems" requires the "transformation of emphatic content into intention."⁷¹

In alluding to what is unsaid, the phrase "so much that is said" makes the reader run up against the limits of communication, evoking the futility and violence of seeking to elicit meaning and signification in a time in which memory and perception are traumatically distorted. This evocation is a temporal, defoliating process that differs markedly from the interpretation of encoded references and correspondences: a process that Werner Hamacher describes as the "laying out of something earlier laid down [*Auslegung des zuvor Hineingelegten*]."⁷² In an earlier, topologically related poem written around the time of *Niemand'srose* (*The No-One's-Rose*, 1963), but not included in the collection, Celan draws attention to the defoliating work of poetic language:

Gespräche mit Baumrinden. Du
schäl dich, komm,
schäl mich aus meinem Wort.

[*Conversation with tree barks. You
peel yourself, come,
peel me from my word.*]⁷³

This poem pluralizes the conversations (*Gespräche*), directing attention to the solidified outer layers of the tree, the barks, which are simultaneously the walls of a home and its protective shell. This is how Celan's poems "intimate," as Adorno writes, "a language beneath the helpless language of human beings [*unterhalb der hilflosen der Menschen*], indeed beneath all organic language: It is that of the dead speaking of stones and stars [*die des Toten von Stein und Stern*]."⁷⁴ The bark is the threshold between the dead and the living, the intersection where communication comes to a close and life continues to circulate speechlessly. Adorno's reflections on the immanent law of Celan's poems, which he discerns in their attempt to define their own purpose by rejecting all external determinations, points to the middle of Celan's "Leaf" for Brecht:

Celan's poems want to speak of the most extreme horror through silence [*das äußerste Entsetzen durch Verschweigen sagen*]. [...] The language of the lifeless becomes the last possible comfort for a death that is deprived of all meaning [*zum letzten Trost über den jeglichen Sinnes verlustigen Tod*].⁷⁵

Silence—or rather, the act of being silent about something—becomes a linguistic "pure" means, a way of speaking about what escapes explication: the horrors of the Shoah. But does Celan want to say anything *through* silence? Is his gesture one of consolation? Within the distorted shell of his "muted word," written and uttered against oppressors and murderers, with its own oppositional and resistant force, Celan's cautious comportment toward language casts not only the contours of the murderous potentialities it discloses, but also those of the poetic counterforces it encloses into sharp relief. The exposure of language's violent disfigurements offers more than consolation—namely, opposition. This is a poetic and pedagogical strategy of resisting and counteracting the insidious and inconspicuous communicative instrumentalization of language, which serves the oppressors by blocking the memory of the oppressed.

The linguistic violence and counterforces that appear in the interstices between Celan's and Brecht's poems are the expressions of historical change. Brecht's denouncement of poetry's complicit silence, culminating in a plea for clemency and understanding, reflects his stance on language and violence on the eve of World War II when the worst wrongdoings were just beginning to appear on the horizon. From the relative security of exile, the

fear of not doing enough, and of not being explicit enough, led to poetry's enlistment as an active force of anti-fascist resistance. As the Nazis made clear that they would shy away from nothing, Brecht claimed that the language of the persecuted and displaced was itself entitled, and ultimately required, to be deadly.

In 1968, Celan emphasized that linguistic violence had anything but vanished. Its instrumentalization for the administration of war and genocide survived the Third Reich, "enriched" and further normalized by the Nazis' crimes and methods. A few months after an eruption of protest and frustration over the recognition of ongoing violence and structural oppression, Celan excludes the word "silence" from his response to Brecht, reconsidering its charge of criminal complicity. It was a specific silence that Brecht denounced: the silence of complacency, aloofness, and resignation. Celan rehabilitates silence as a linguistic practice of strategic resistance against the oppressiveness of banal, thoughtless, and ultimately "murderous-factual" speech.

Benjamin's remarks about silence resonate with Celan's understanding of it, his agreement with Brecht over the need for militant linguistic anti-fascist resistance notwithstanding. For Benjamin, too, silence is not the other of speech, but rather a linguistic practice that questions its communicative reduction. "Silence [*Schweigen*]," Benjamin wrote in 1914, "is one of the clearest means of communication [*eines der deutlichsten Verständigungsmittel*]."⁷⁶ "Schweigen" is the nominalization of a verb that means to be or to remain silent, to abstain from speaking. The use of the word "silence" for the absence of noise or sound translates into German as "die Stille." Across these interlinguistic differences, the force of silence resides in its clarity. The infinitive includes the command not to speak—*Schweig!*—which is only superseded in linguistic oppressiveness by the act of shushing. The German expression "jemanden zum Schweigen bringen" means to kill a person. As a willful or ordained act, "schweigen" is distinct from speechlessness (*Sprachlosigkeit*), which describes the absence of speech, but not that of language, since, as Benjamin noted, "we cannot imagine a total absence of language in anything."⁷⁷

In its toneless clarity, the ambiguity of silence wields power over the disambiguation of speech. A child who does not respond when an adult asks them a question gives a sense of this power. Silence is neither the absence of language, nor the absence of communication, but the absence of speech. As a linguistic act of utmost clarity, silence can condone, oppose, or refuse to give consent—*speak now or forever hold your peace*.

When taking the place of an unambiguous response to a racist murder, silence is clearly violence. The clarity of silence results not from the absence of ambivalence, but from the refusal or inability to delimit it. This inability characterizes the involuntary response to traumatic shock, as the legions that Benjamin saw returning from the battlefields, incapable of telling their stories, demonstrated.⁷⁸ Whatever silence says, it says it clearly. In this amplification of ambiguity lies its anti-oppressive counterforce.

During his time in the German Youth Movement, Benjamin invoked silence not as the passive absence of speech but as a verbose and active stance that one might adopt in matters of ethics, education, and politics. When he said that “youth” remained silent during a large Youth Congress in 1913, he was not suggesting that nobody spoke. It was an event filled with speeches, shouting, and chatter. Youth remained silent because they did not speak *as youth*—that is, as a “permanently vibrating feeling for the abstractness of pure spirit.”⁷⁹ Amid myriads of communiqués and declarations, the linguistic being of the community of students remained unarticulated. This does not mean that nothing was shared. The silence of youth encompassed, for Benjamin, the opposition to antisemitic slogans and the promotion of “racial hygiene”⁸⁰ at the gathering.

Silence is a forceful practice of articulating opposition—a pure means of resistance—but, more importantly, it is an ethical practice of listening and making space for marginalized and oppressed voices. “Conversation [*Gespräch*],” Benjamin suggests in a sentence that anticipates and illuminates Celan’s response to Brecht, “strives toward silence, and the listener is really the silent partner. The speaker receives meaning from him; the silent one is the unappropriated source of meaning.”⁸¹ Silence entails listening as an active response to the speaker, who is the absent one, immersed in signs and meaning. The listener is the silent partner who “holds true language in readiness; the words enter him, and at the same time he sees the speaker.”⁸²

Silence is not the absence of language, but its heightened presence. While information is being received, receptiveness is shared. This explains why Benjamin sees “mythical silence” (*mythisches Schweigen*) as the extreme of expression, while the “destruction of language” (*Sprachzerstörung*) is the result of absolute communication.⁸³ Celan’s incisive response to Brecht’s forceful plea for explicit opposition suggests that every time an oppressive term or image is avoided, silenced memories can resonate and be voiced. Olivia Wenzel describes this posture—being acutely aware and highly present, while refraining from speaking and listening instead to what is absent and unsaid—as “the leaving out of the word,” as “a minimal, conscious, and

acknowledging silence for millions of [...] dehumanized, dispossessed, and murdered human beings.”⁸⁴

Celan’s counterword from July 1968 weighs silence and explication in view of his present. In passing a leaf on to the future by sending it back in time, the poem itself verges on becoming “a tree / Stripped of its foliage, and foliage stripped of its trunk [*Baum . . . / beraubt des Laubs, und Laub, beraubt des Stamms*].”⁸⁵

Epilogue

M-Straße. A Benjaminian flaneur strolling through today's Berlin may encounter a busy street that carried as its name, up until the summer of 2025, an oppressive blanket term for Black people used in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The name has now officially been changed and is becoming part of the city's archives. Spelling out the name of the street reproduces and perpetuates the social trauma it symbolizes; leaving the name abbreviated and unsaid marks and exposes the violence it conceals as a referent. For decades, the attempts to change the name have been discredited as censorship and language policing, showing that the critique of linguistic violence is not a matter of choosing one's words righteously, but a necessary, though not sufficient, condition of social change.

The Initiative of Black People in Germany has argued since the early 1990s that the name of Berlin's "M-Street" includes a discriminatory insult, and that the disregard for the demands of the city's Black communities demonstrates Germany's deficient engagement with its histories of colonialism and racism. May Ayim wrote in 1993 that this street name, which was introduced a year earlier to replace that of the East-Berlin metro stop "Thälmannstraße," is "a clear sign that racist language and its corresponding thought are tolerated and passed on [*geduldet und tradiert*] in the upper white echelons of the new republic."¹ The "hitherto unquestioned preservation of street names and monuments in the Western part of Germany," Ayim added, "continues to glorify colonialization and humiliate the colonized."²

A lawsuit led by the historian Götz Aly and several residents prevented the city from changing the name of the street for several years, arguing that to do so would be a "historical sacrilege [*Geschichtsfrevel*]"—a forgetting, if not a desecration, of German history, indicative of a wider loss of resilience

in the face of the reality of past violence.³ Without directly opposing the name change, other voices suggested that naming concerns mere language, not practical social relations, reflecting the view that a “politics of representation” that focuses on the “social position of the speaker rather than the political content of their statements” blocks rather than supports radical change.⁴ While the Black German community exposes the street name as the marker of past and present oppression, those opposed to changing the name of the street consider it to be a sign with a fixed historical meaning. This reduction treats language as a possession, trait, or technical matter, as something that can be regulated by law or moral code.

For Benjamin’s flaneur, the life of street names far exceeds the use of words as signs and labels. Names become entry points into the underworld of traumatic as well as revolutionary memories that can be mobilized for social struggles. “What was otherwise reserved for only a very few words, a privileged class of words,” Benjamin wrote in the *Arcades Project*, “the city has made possible for all words, or at least a great many: to be elevated to the noble status of name. The revolution in language was carried out by what is most general: the street. Through its street names, the city is a linguistic cosmos.”⁵ For Benjamin, the urban linguistic setting was not one of semantics or references alone, not a moral or legal space of right or wrong. Rather, he saw it as sensory, immersive, and prelogical, as “conceptually unburdened and purely acoustic.”⁶

Those who wander around a city consume street names “like intoxicating substances” that make their “perceptions more stratified and richer in spaces,” and “what is decisive here is not the association but the interpenetration of images.”⁷ Things are not as clear-cut as they seem. Names are apprehended in visceral ways, providing training grounds for a broadened perception of the entwinement of past, present, and future. They can either be tiny doses of poison or eye-opening catalysts for learning. If visitors encounter streets “with base and obscene names,” Benjamin continues, they would have “all grounds for believing in the immorality of the inhabitants,” while, at the same time, the “true expressive character of street names can be recognized as soon as they are set beside reformist proposals for their normalization.”⁸ Benjamin referred to a proposal from 1801 to rename the streets of Paris, some of which memorialized the French Revolution, after villages and rivers organized by size and geographic location. Changes of this sort, he suggests, impact the population in profoundly political ways, shaping the sensual and aesthetic environment in which social life is designed and organized.

In July 2023, after more than thirty years of debate, artistic interven-

tions, and international protests, the Berlin administrative court ruled that “M-Street” would be renamed “Anton-Wilhelm-Amo-Straße” in memory of the philosophy professor who was born in Axim, in today’s Ghana, and who taught in Wittenberg, Halle, and Jena in the mid-eighteenth century. As of this writing, however, “M-Street” is still displayed as part of the German capital’s linguistic present. The subway marker contains the previous name written in small letters underneath the new one—to avoid confusion, as the city’s public transportation company explains—and soon to be removed entirely along with its appearances in city maps and tourist guides. In 2022, Sharon Dodua Otoo reflected—in a poem titled “remembering [das erinnern]”—on two street name changes in Berlin’s African Quarter. She points out that the work of memory and commemoration “will happen anyway [*es geschieht sowieso*],” in everyday practices and gestures, while calling the names that replace those of colonial criminals, “gifts”: “We give our names to German streets [*Wir schenken deutschen straßen unsere namen*].”⁹ As gifts, rather than signs, streets that carry the names of Black Germans point to a future beyond their reduction to German national identity.

Benjamin’s reflections on the evocative force of street names were prompted by a stroll to the “Place du Maroc” in the Belleville district in Paris, where he walked—and wrote—through a “heap of stones” that he deciphered as a “monument of colonial imperialism.”¹⁰ Without providing generalizing answers, he recognized both the oppressive effects of traumatic names and the perils of moralistic reformism. Changing a discriminatory street name does not yet make society more just, but it manifests commitment to political plurality and opposes populist reductionism.

The constellation of ideas espoused by Benjamin, Adorno, Arendt, and Celan highlights the importance of the encounter between language and violence in periods of profound social and political transformation. Their critiques of linguistic violence emphasize the power of voicing and debating memories of oppression in the medium of language. In these debates, language proves itself as the “matrix” of justice and the “in between” of politics—as the sphere in which justice is shaped in anticipatory, anti-traumatic, and radically noninstrumental ways.

The modes of linguistic violence, and their multiple variations, changed drastically between 1916 and 1968, casting light on the task that every generation must take up: to inquire into the discursive and intellectual countermeasures demanded by the malevolent political instrumentalization of language.

From Benjamin to Celan and beyond, the analysis of linguistic violence creates a fundus of preventive and oppositional strategies and practices. Philological and pedagogical micro-resistance, anti-oppressive mourning, pluralizing metaphors, and explicit silence are already part of the repertoire. Radical counterforces in the realm of language cannot—paradoxically—be geared toward political goals, but must be mobilized against the instrumentalization of language itself: a mobilization that can only occur amid political forcefields of plurality and alterity.

Notes

Introduction

1. Victor Klemperer, *The Language of the Third Reich: LTI—Lingua Tertii Imperii, A Philologist's Notebook*, trans. Martin Brady (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 15–16. Translation changed.

2. Howard Eiland and Michael Jennings, *Walter Benjamin: A Critical Life* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2014), 483–575; Stefan Müller-Doohm, *Adorno: A Biography*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge: Polity, 2005), 187–213; Elisabeth Young-Bruehl, *Hannah Arendt: For Love of the World* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982), 115–63; and John Felstiner, *Paul Celan: Poet, Survivor, Jew* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 7–8.

3. Jean-Michel Palmier, *Weimar in Exile: The Antifascist Emigration in Europe and America*, trans. David Fernbach (London: Verso, 2006); Amos Elon, *The Pity of It All: A History of the Jews in Germany, 1743–1933* (New York: Picador, 2002), 355–432; and Eiland and Jennings, *Walter Benjamin*, 391–482, 647–76.

4. Theodor W. Adorno, “On Benjamin’s *Deutsche Menschen*, a Book of Letters,” in *Notes to Literature*, vol. 2, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991–92), 329.

5. Brian Mullen and Tirza Leader, “Linguistic Factors: Antilocutions, Ethnonyms, Ethnophaulisms, and Other Varieties of Hate Speech,” in *On the Nature of Prejudice: Fifty Years after Allport*, ed. John F. Dovidio, Peter Glick, and Laurie A. Rudman (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), 192–207; and Helen Fein, *Accounting for Genocide: National Responses and Jewish Victimization during the Holocaust* (New York: Free Press, 1979), 7–10.

6. Jeremy Woldron, *The Harm in Hate Speech* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012), 4.

7. Judith Butler, *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 36–38.

8. Jürgen Habermas, *Theory of Communicative Action*, vol. 1, *Reason and the Rationality of Society*, trans. Thomas McCarty (Cambridge, MA: Polity, 1984).

9. Jacques Derrida, “Violence and Metaphysics: An Essay on the Thought of Emmanuel Levinas,” in *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (London: Routledge,

2001), 400n21. See also Beatrice Hanssen, *Critique of Violence: Between Poststructuralism and Critical Theory* (London: Routledge, 2000), 158–78.

10. For the most impactful Western approaches to language and violence, see Hannes Kuch and Steffen K. Herrmann, eds., *Philosophien sprachlicher Gewalt: 21 Grundpositionen von Platon bis Butler* (Weilerswist: Velbrück, 2010). On the relation between physical and symbolic violence, see Sybille Krämer, “‘Humane Dimensionen’ sprachlicher Gewalt oder: Warum symbolische und körperliche Gewalt wohl zu unterscheiden sind,” in *Gewalt in der Sprache: Rhetoriken verletzenden Sprechens*, ed. Sybille Krämer and Elke Koch (Paderborn: Fink, 2010), 21–42.

11. Paul Ricoeur, “Language and Violence,” trans. Joseph Bien, in *Political and Social Essays*, ed. David Stewart and Joseph Bien (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1976), 34. Translation changed.

12. Anselm Haverkamp, “Ein unabwerfbarer Schatten: Gewalt und Trauer in Benjamins *Kritik der Gewalt*,” in *Gewalt und Gerechtigkeit: Derrida–Benjamin*, ed. Anselm Haverkamp (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1994), 162–63. Peter Fenves (TCV, 24) suggests that “Gewalt [. . .] is ‘force’ when it plays a significant role in a historical process, ‘violence’ when it remains outside of such processes.”

13. For the struggle over antisemitic designation and classification leading up to the formulation of the Nuremberg Laws, see Cornelia Essner, *Die “Nürnberger Gesetze” oder die Verwaltung des Rassenwahns 1933–1945* (Paderborn: Schöningh, 2002), 155–70.

14. Toni Morrison, “The Bird Is in Your Hands,” *Nobel Lectures from the Literature Laureates, 1986 to 2006* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2006), 185.

15. See Charles R. Lawrence III et al., “Introduction,” in *Words that Wound: Critical Race Theory, Assaultive Speech, and the First Amendment*, ed. Mari J. Matsuda et al. (New York: Routledge, 1993), 1–15.

16. Cathy Caruth, “Trauma and Experience: Introduction,” in *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, ed. Cathy Caruth (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 4–10; and Susannah Radstone, “Trauma Theory: Contexts, Politics, Ethics,” *Paragraph* 30, no. 1 (2007): 9–29.

17. Butler, *Excitable Speech*, 36.

18. John Stuart Mill, *The Collected Works of John Stuart Mill*, vol. 18, *Essays on Politics and Society*, Part I, ed. John M. Robson (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1977), 260.

19. MD 47.

20. Ilit Ferber, *Language Pangs* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 2–3, 12–14; and Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 3–11.

21. Slavoj Žižek, *Violence: Six Sideways Reflections* (New York: Picador, 2008), 2, 12–13.

22. Gregory H. Stanton, “The Seven Stages of Genocide,” paper presented at the Genocide Studies Program Seminar, New Haven, Yale Center for International and Area Studies, February 12, 1998.

23. AP, 471.

24. “On the Concept of History,” SW 4:391.

25. Heidegger remarks that, ontologically, necessity has the highest priority,

while reality is second and possibility is the lowest. In existential terms, however, the order is reversed: possibility is most fundamental, since it determines Dasein's projection into the future, whereas necessity marks an end point of stasis. Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (London: Blackwell, 2001), 183.

26. Judith Butler, *The Force of Nonviolence: An Ethico-Political Bind* (London: Verso, 2020).

27. Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Richard Philcox (New York: Grove Press, 2004), 3; and *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markmann (London: Pluto, 2008), 8–27.

28. "Critique of Violence," SW 1:247, 251. See also Andrew Benjamin, *Working with Walter Benjamin: Recovering a Political Philosophy* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013), 1–14, 98–99.

29. "On Language as Such and on the Language of Man," SW 1:69–72.

30. "Critique of Violence," SW 1:248–50.

31. Werner Hamacher, "Affirmative, Strike: Benjamin's 'Critique of Violence,'" in *Walter Benjamin's Philosophy: Destruction and Experience*, ed. Andrew Benjamin and Peter Osborne (London: Routledge, 1994), 113; and Richard J. Bernstein, *Violence: Thinking Without Banisters* (Cambridge: Polity, 2013), 105–71.

32. Jürgen Zimmerer, "The Birth of the *Ostland* Out of the Spirit of Colonialism: A Postcolonial Perspective on the Nazi Policy of Conquest and Extermination," *Patterns of Prejudice* 39, no. 2 (2005): 197–219.

33. "On the Concept of History," SW 4:392. Translation changed. See also Eduardo Cadava and Sara Nadal-Melsió, *Politically Red* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2023).

34. Paul Celan, *La bibliothèque philosophique—Die philosophische Bibliothek*, ed. Alexandra Richter, Patrik Alac, and Bertrant Badiou (Paris: Éditions Rue d'Ulm, 2004), 268–303.

35. Werner Hamacher, *Sprachgerechtigkeit* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 2018), 7–49.

36. Bertolt Brecht, "To Those Born Later," trans. John Willett et al., in *Poems 1913–1956*, ed. John Willett and Ralph Manheim (New York: Methuen, 1976), 318.

37. Paul Celan, "Ein Blatt / A leaf," in *Selected Poems and Prose of Paul Celan*, trans. John Felstiner (New York: W. W. Norton, 2001), 343.

38. Jacob Grimm, "Über die Heimatliebe. 1830 (De desiderio patriae)," in *Göttinger Universitätsreden aus zwei Jahrhunderten*, ed. Wilhelm Ebel (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1978), 221. My translation.

39. Grimm, "Über die Heimatliebe," 222. My translation.

40. Yasemin Yildiz, *Beyond the Mother Tongue: The Postmonolingual Condition* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2012), 2, 14–21; and Kristina Mendicino, *Prophecies of Language: The Confusion of Tongues in German Romanticism* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2017), 5. See also David Gramling, *The Invention of Monolingualism* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), 1–43; and Rainier Grutman, *Des langues qui résonnent: L'hétérolinguisme au XIXe siècle québécois* (Montréal: Fides, 1997), 11–12, 39–78.

41. Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace

Jovanovich, 1973), 267–302; and Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 126–35.

42. Edward Said, “Reflections on Exile,” in *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), 174, 186.

43. Felstiner, *Paul Celan*, 170.

44. “Karl Kraus,” SW 2:454. Translation changed.

45. Hamacher, *Sprachgerechtigkeit*, 28. My translation.

46. “Central Park,” SW 4:162. On the notion of inheritance in Benjamin’s thought and writing, see Gerhard Richter, *Inheriting Walter Benjamin* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), 1–12.

47. Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought* (New York: Viking, 1969), 8.

Chapter 1

1. George F. Kennan, *The Decline of Bismarck’s European Order: Franco-Russian Relations, 1875–1890* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), 3; and Ernst Schulz, “Die Urkatastrophe des zwanzigsten Jahrhunderts,” in *Der Erste Weltkrieg: Wirkung, Wahrnehmung, Analyse*, ed. Wolfgang Michalka (Munich: Piper, 1994), 3–27.

2. Howard Eiland and Michael Jennings, *Walter Benjamin: A Critical Life* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2014), 75–176; and Martin Jay, “Walter Benjamin, Remembrance, and the First World War,” *Review of Japanese Culture and Society* 11/12 (1999–2000), 18–31.

3. Werner Hamacher noted that “one must assume that the two pieces are based on the same fundamental conception,” and that “each text can be read as the political complement of the other.” Werner Hamacher, “Afformative, Strike: Benjamin’s ‘Critique of Violence,’” in *Walter Benjamin’s Philosophy: Destruction and Experience*, ed. Andrew Benjamin and Peter Osborne (London: Routledge, 1994), 127n13.

4. Toni Morrison, “The Bird Is in Your Hands,” in *Nobel Lectures from the Literature Laureates, 1986 to 2006* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2006), 185. See also Katherine Marcoccio, “Identifying Oppression in Language,” *Canadian Social Work Review* 12, no. 2 (1995): 146–58.

5. The essay’s gesture is reminiscent of Leibniz’s “Monadology,” which Bertrand Russell called a “fantastic fairy tale, coherent perhaps, but wholly arbitrary,” only to then dedicate his first book to it. Bertrand Russell, *A Critical Exposition of the Philosophy of Leibniz. With an Appendix of Leading Passages* (London: Routledge, 1992), xxi.

6. Werner Hamacher, *Sprachgerechtigkeit* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 2018), 18–19.

7. Judith Butler, “Critique, Coercion, and Sacred Life in Benjamin’s ‘Critique of Violence,’” in *Political Theologies: Public Religions in a Post-Secular World*, ed. Hent de Vries and Lawrence E. Sullivan (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006), 214–16; and Simon Critchley, *The Faith of the Faithless: Experiments in Political Theology* (New York: Verso, 2012), 217–21.

8. Axel Honneth, “‘Zur Kritik der Gewalt,’” in *Benjamin-Handbuch: Leben—*

Werk—Wirkung, ed. Burkhardt Lindner (Stuttgart: J. B. Metzler, 2006), 193. My translation.

9. “Meine Reise in Italien Pfingsten 1912,” GS 6:252. Eiland and Jennings, *Walter Benjamin*, 30.

10. Johannes Steizinger, *Revolte, Eros und Sprache: Walter Benjamin’s “Metaphysik der Jugend”* (Berlin: Kadmos, 2013), 47–73.

11. For Benjamin’s intellectual activities during those years, see John McCole, *Walter Benjamin and the Antinomies of Tradition* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), 35–70; Erdmut Wizisla, “‘Die Hochschule ist eben der Ort nicht, zu studieren’: Walter Benjamin in der freistudentischen Bewegung,” *Wissenschaftliche Zeitschrift der Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin* 36, no. 7 (1987): 616–23; Matthew Charles, “Pedagogy as ‘Cryptic Politics’: Benjamin, Nietzsche, and the End of Education,” *boundary 2* 45, no. 2 (2018): 35–62; and Ian Fleischmann, “Speaking Silence: Historical Subjectivity in Nietzsche and Benjamin,” in *Forces of Education: Walter Benjamin and the Politics of Pedagogy*, ed. Dennis Johannßen and Dominik Zechner (London: Bloomsbury, 2022), 111–24.

12. Letter to Ludwig Strauß, January 7–9, 1913, GB 1:82. My translation.

13. “Epilogue,” EW, 55. Translation modified.

14. OTD, 36.

15. Peter Fenves, *The Messianic Reduction: Walter Benjamin and the Shape of Time* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012); “Entanglement—Of Benjamin with Heidegger,” in *Sparks Will Fly: Benjamin and Heidegger*, ed. Andrew Benjamin and Dimitris Vardoulakis (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2015), 3–25; Uwe Steiner, “Walter Benjamins Husserl-Lektüre im Kontext,” *Internationales Jahrbuch für Hermeneutik* 9 (2010): 189–258; Paula Schwebel, “Intensive Infinity: Walter Benjamin’s Reception of Leibniz and Its Sources,” *MLN* 127, no. 3 (2012): 589–610; Alexander Stern, *The Fall of Language: Benjamin and Wittgenstein on Meaning* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2019), 1–26, 42–49; and Winfried Menninghaus, *Unendliche Verdopplung: Die frühromantische Grundlegung der Kunsttheorie im Begriff absoluter Selbstreflexion* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1987), 30–71.

16. Helmut Berding, *Moderner Antisemitismus in Deutschland* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1988), 86–164.

17. Letter to Ludwig Strauß, October 10, 1912, C, 69–70.

18. “Youth Was Silent,” EW, 135–36.

19. In Vienna, 450 out of the 500 members of the Academic Committee for School Reform identified as Jewish. “Anmerkungen der Herausgeber,” GS 2:848.

20. John Kraniauskas, “Beware Mexican Ruins! ‘One-Way Street’ and the Colonial Unconscious,” in *Walter Benjamin’s Philosophy: Destruction and Experience*, ed. Andrew Benjamin and Peter Osborne (London: Routledge, 1994), 139–54; and Julia Ng, “Afterword: Toward Another Critique of Violence,” in TCV, 145–58.

21. Günter Figal and Horst Folkers, *Zur Theorie der Gewalt und Gewaltlosigkeit bei Walter Benjamin* (Heidelberg: Forschungsstätte der Evangelischen Studiengemeinschaft, 1979), 3–10, 33–38; Fenves, “Introduction,” TCV, 26–29; and Werner Hamacher, “Intensive Languages,” *MLN* 127, no. 3 (April 2012): 490–91.

22. Immanuel Kant, “Groundwork of *The Metaphysics of Morals*” (1785), in *Practical Philosophy*, ed. and trans. Mary J. Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 55 [4:400].

23. Carlo Salzani, “Purity (Benjamin with Kant),” *History of European Ideas* 36 (2010): 441.

24. The essay was known to several of Benjamin’s close friends. It was first published posthumously in Walter Benjamin, *Schriften*, vol. 2, ed. Theodor W. Adorno and Gretel Adorno (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1955), 401–19. For an introduction and overview, see Uwe Steiner, “Über Sprache überhaupt und über die Sprache des Menschen,” in *Benjamin-Handbuch*, ed. Burkhardt Lindner, 592–603.

25. “On Language as Such,” SW 1:62.

26. “On Language as Such,” SW 1:62.

27. “On Language as Such,” SW 1:66.

28. “On Language as Such,” SW 1:63. Translation changed. The emphases, which are not included in the English translation, are Benjamin’s.

29. Stern, *The Fall of Language*, 12–16, 41–42. In this text, Benjamin makes no statements about other “essences.” In a series of reflections and fragments from around 1918, however, he attempts to include the question of corporeity, which prompts him to distinguish between mind (*Geist*), body (*Leib*), and corporeal substance (*Körper*). “Schemata on the Psychophysical Problem,” SW 1:393–401; “Anthropologie,” GS 6:64. See also Fenves, *Messianic Reduction*, 228–29.

30. Thomas Schestag, “Lampenfragmente: Zur literarischen Theorie,” in *Germanistik und Komparatistik: Internationales DFG-Symposium 1993*, ed. Hendrik Birus (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1995), 344–60.

31. “On Language as Such,” SW 1:64. On this key claim of Benjamin’s theory of language, see Winfried Menninghaus, *Walter Benjamins Theorie der Sprachmagie* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1995); Sybille Krämer, *Medium, Messenger, Transmission: An Approach to Media Philosophy*, trans. Anthony Enns (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2015), 40–47; and Bettine Menke, *Sprachfiguren: Name—Allegorie—Bild nach Benjamin* (Weimar: Verlag und Datenbank für Geisteswissenschaften, 2001), 42–70.

32. Fenves, *Messianic Reduction*, 56.

33. Samuel Weber, *Benjamin’s -abilities* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), 38–48.

34. “On Language as Such,” SW 1:63. Translation changed.

35. “On Language as Such,” SW 1:64.

36. “On Language as Such,” SW 1:64.

37. “On Language as Such,” SW 1:64.

38. Stern, *The Fall of Language*, 42n13.

39. Novalis, “Monologue,” in *Philosophical Writings*, trans. Margaret Mahony Stoljar (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997), 83. See also Martin Seel, “Sprache bei Benjamin und Heidegger,” in *Sich bestimmen lassen: Studien zur theoretischen und praktischen Philosophie* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2002), 68–73.

40. For Benjamin, the word contains a name, a sign, a message, and a symbol. The name and the symbol can be understood as the word’s historical, memory-related components, which stand in opposition to the sign and the message, which are pragmatic and used merely (*bloß*) for reference. “Der Gegenstand: Dreieck,” GS 6:14. See Tamara Tagliacozzo, *Experience and Infinite Task: Knowledge, Language and*

Messianism in the Philosophy of Walter Benjamin (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017), 52–57.

41. “On Language as Such,” SW 1:65.

42. Aristotle, “De Interpretatione,” in “*Categories*” and “*De Interpretatione*,” trans. J. L. Ackrill (Oxford: Clarendon, 2002), 43–68; Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, trans. Wade Baskin (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011).

43. “On Language as Such,” 65.

44. MD, 47.

45. This mirrors Winfried Menninghaus’ thesis that Benjamin’s early theory of language rationalizes mystical and kabbalistic linguistics. Menninghaus, *Walter Benjamins Theorie der Sprachmagie*, 32, 197–99.

46. “On Language as Such,” 70–72; and Anja Hallacker, *Es spricht der Mensch: Walter Benjamins Suche nach der lingua adamica* (Munich: Fink, 2004), 112–23.

47. Whether one rejects the myth of a lost origin entirely or displaces it from a religious to a mythical context, “On Language” contains the bases for the critique of “instrumental reason” that became a cornerstone of Frankfurt School Critical Theory. Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 45. For similar reasons, “On Language” has been of great importance for Jacques Derrida in analyzing the violence of the sign’s iterability and the way it destabilizes singularity and closure. Jacques Derrida, “Des Tours de Babel,” trans. Joseph F. Graham, in *Psyche: Inventions of the Other*, vol. 1 (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007), 191–225.

48. See the Letters to Gershom Scholem, ca. December 1, 1920, and January 1921, C, 168, 172; “According to the Theory of Duns Scotus,” SW 1:228; Martin Heidegger, “Die Bedeutungs- und Kategorienlehre des Duns Scotus,” in *Gesamtausgabe*, ed. Friedrich-Wilhelm von Herrmann, vol. 1 (Frankfurt am Main: Klostermann, 1976), 256–63; Margarete Kohlenbach, *Walter Benjamin: Self-Reference and Religiosity* (New York: Palgrave, 2002), 34; and Julian Roberts, *Walter Benjamin* (London: Macmillan, 1982), 8. On the history of the Scala Naturae, see Arthur Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being: A Study of the History of an Idea* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2021).

49. “On Language as Such,” SW 1:69–70; “The Task of the Translator,” SW 1:254, 257.

50. “On Language as Such,” SW 1:64.

51. “The Task of the Translator,” SW 1:257.

52. Paul de Man, “Conclusions,” *Walter Benjamin’s ‘The Task of the Translator,’ Yale French Studies* 69 (1985): 25–46.

53. “Notes toward a Work on the Category of Justice,” TCV, 65; “The Right to Use Force,” SW 1:232.

54. “Gottfried Keller: In Honor of a Critical Edition of his Works,” SW 2:54. Translation modified. This formulation appears in the context of a reflection on humor, which Benjamin calls “a legal order [*Rechtsordnung*] in its own way.” See also, “J. P. Hebels Schatzkästlein des rheinischen Hausfreundes,” GS 2:628. The word “Vollstreckung”—execution or enforcement—also appears in the last sentence of “Critique of Violence.”

55. Berding, *Moderner Antisemitismus*, 167–74.
56. “On Language as Such,” 65.
57. Hallacker, *Es spricht der Mensch*, 21–23, 79–90; and Menke, *Sprachfiguren*, 78–126.
58. OTD, 36.
59. “Einleitung,” GS 1:937. My translation. “[S]ondern die das Wesen dieser Empirie (ohne im mindesten ihr Gewalt anzutun) erst prägende Gewalt.” Benjamin’s word for both “power” and “violence” in this sentence is “Gewalt.” The removal of the parenthesis in the published version points back to “Critique of Violence,” marking the limits of the “Prologue” as an epistemological rather than philological and political essay.
60. For an overview and introduction, see Peter Fenves, “Introduction,” TCV, 1–37.
61. Anselm Haverkamp, “Ein unabwerfbarer Schatten: Gewalt und Trauer in Benjamins *Kritik der Gewalt*,” in *Gewalt und Gerechtigkeit: Derrida–Benjamin*, ed. Anselm Haverkamp (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1994), 162–63.
62. “Critique of Violence,” SW 1:251.
63. “The Life of Students,” EW:197.
64. Figal and Folkers, *Zur Theorie der Gewalt und Gewaltlosigkeit*, 3–10, 33–38; Fenves, “Introduction,” TCV, 26–29.
65. TCV, 39.
66. TCV, 40.
67. TCV, 60, 57.
68. TCV, 60.
69. TCV, 50.
70. TCV, 50.
71. Hamacher, “Afformative, Strike,” in *Walter Benjamin’s Philosophy*, ed. Andrew Benjamin and Peter Osbourne, 115; “Notes on ‘Objective Mendacity’ I” and “Notes toward a Work on Lying II,” TCV, 93–97; and Julia Ng, “Afterword,” TCV, 159.
72. TCV, 50.
73. “Fate and Character,” SW 1:202–4.
74. TCV, 51.
75. TCV, 51.
76. “Critique of Violence,” SW 1:246.
77. TCV, 52.
78. Léa Veinstein, *Violence et langage: Une lecture de la “Critique de violence” de Walter Benjamin* (Toulouse: EuroPhilosophie, 2017), première partie, par. 10.
79. “Critique of Violence,” SW 1:247.
80. Letter to Martin Buber, July 1916, C, 80.
81. Letter to Martin Buber, July 1916, C, 79.
82. Letter to Martin Buber, July 1916, C, 79–80.
83. Fenves, *Messianic Reduction*, 21–24.
84. Samuel Weber, “Der Brief an Buber vom 17.7.1916,” in *Benjamin-Handbuch*, ed. Burkhardt Lindner, 604. My translation.
85. Sharon Dodua Otoo, “Wer hat die Definitionsmacht? Durch die Wahl unserer Worte verändern wir die Realität,” *Critical Whiteness: Debatte um antirassistische*

Politik und nicht diskriminierende Sprache, Sonderbeilage, *Analyse & Kritik* (2013), 25. My translation.

86. Butler, *Excitable Speech*, 14, 40–41.

87. C, 80.

88. C, 80. The word “Heer” (army) in “verheerend” alludes to the anti-militaristic gesture of the letter.

89. C, 80. Translation modified; GB 1:325.

90. See Weber, “Der Brief an Buber,” in *Benjamin-Handbuch*, ed. Burkhardt Lindner, 605–6. While Weber points out that understanding “elimination” as “abolishment” (*Abschaffung*) would miss the intensifying movement toward the inner secret of the word, or rather, of the name, his paraphrase of elimination as a moving “beyond the threshold [*Schwelle*]” and “out of the house” conflicts with Benjamin’s turn against instrumental language’s expansive tendency. Rather, elimination entails a moving further toward the inside of one’s own house, toward what is uncanny, or *unheimlich*—namely, the oppressed and marginalized elements within what is most normalized and familiar.

91. Butler, “Critique, Coercion,” in de Vries and Sullivan, *Political Theologies*, 215.

92. In 1920 alone, the *Deutschvölkische Schutz- und Trutzbund* (German Nationalist Protection and Defiance Federation) printed around eight million stickers and almost ten million fliers and pamphlets with aggressive antisemitic slogans, accusations, and caricatures. Berding, *Moderner Antisemitismus*, 181.

Chapter 2

1. Sebastian Conrad, *German Colonialism: A Short History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 36–87; Florian Krobb and Elaine Martin, “Introduction: Coloniality in Post-Imperial Culture,” in *Weimar Colonialism: Discourses and Legacies of Post-Imperialism in Germany after 1918*, ed. Florian Krobb and Elaine Martin (Bielefeld: Aisthesis, 2020), 9–44; and Jürgen Zimmerer, “The Birth of the *Ostland* Out of the Spirit of Colonialism: A Postcolonial Perspective on the Nazi Policy of Conquest and Extermination,” *Patterns of Prejudice* 39, no. 2 (2005): 197–219.

2. Walter Benjamin, “Colonial Pedagogy,” trans. Esther Leslie, in *The Storyteller: Tales Out of Loneliness*, ed. Sam Dolbear, Esther Leslie, and Sebastian Truskolaski (London: Verso, 2016), 195–98; and “Kolonialpädagogik,” GS 3:272–74. The review essay has not been included in *Selected Writings*.

3. Alois Jalkotzy, *Märchen und Gegenwart: Das deutsche Volksmärchen und unsere Zeit* (Vienna: Jungbrunnen, 1930). All translations from this book are my own. References are provided in parentheses in the text. To improve readability, I capitalized the nouns in the German citations, which are originally lower case.

4. Jakob Norberg, *The Brothers Grimm and the Making of German Nationalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022).

5. Walter D. Mignolo, “Delinking: The Rhetoric of Modernity, the Logic of Coloniality and the Grammar of De-Coloniality,” *Cultural Studies* 21, nos. 2–3 (2007): 449–514.

6. Jakob Bindel, ed., *Gestern—heute—morgen: Fünfzig Jahre Wirken der österreichischen Kinderfreunde für das gute Buch* (Vienna: Jungbrunnen, 1958), 23, 75–77;

75 Jahre Kinderfreunde, 1908–1983: Skizzen, Erinnerungen, Berichte, Ausblicke (Vienna: Jungbrunnen, 1983), 47–49, 114–20; Jakob Bindel, Hilde Böhmer-Zechmeister, and Willi Zwacek, eds., *Die Schönbrunner: Vision, Erfüllung, Ausklang* (Vienna: Jungbrunnen, 1990), 46–47. See also Roswitha Anna Maria Ebner, “Der Verlag Jungbrunnen und seine Erziehungsratgeber 1923 bis 1934 und 1945 bis 1967,” Diploma Thesis (University of Vienna, 2012), 66–67.

7. Jack Zipes, *Fairy Tale as Myth/Myth as Fairy Tale* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1994), 72–95; and Jane Darcy, “The Disneyfication of the European Fairy Tale,” in *Issues in Americanisation and Culture*, ed. George McKay, Jude Davies, and Neil Campbell (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004), 181–96.

8. Jalkotzy’s remarks about narration (*das Erzählen*) might have informed Benjamin’s essay “The Storyteller: Observations on the Works of Nikolai Leskov,” SW 3:143–66.

9. Jalkotzy published multiple books on children’s rhymes, including *Kinderreime* (Children’s Rhymes, 1920), illustrated by Fritz Gareis.

10. Kurt Paupié, “Frankfurter Zeitung, Frankfurt a.M. (1856–1943),” in *Deutsche Zeitungen des 17. bis 20. Jahrhunderts*, ed. Heinz-Dietrich Fischer (Pullach: Dokumentation Saur, 1972), 247–50; Eiland and Jennings, *Walter Benjamin*, 235–36.

11. Tyson E. Lewis, *Walter Benjamin’s Antifascist Education: From Riddles to Radio* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2020), 63–110; and Lecia Rosenthal, “Walter Benjamin on the Radio: An Introduction,” in *Radio Benjamin*, ed. Lecia Rosenthal (London: Verso, 2014), ix–xxix.

12. Eva Geulen, “Legislating Education: Kant, Hegel, and Benjamin on ‘Pedagogical Violence,’” *Cardozo Law Review* 26, no. 3 (2005): 943–56; and Matthew Charles, “Towards a Critique of Educative Violence: Walter Benjamin and ‘Second Education,’” *Pedagogy, Culture & Society* 24, no. 4 (2016): 525–36.

13. Esther Leslie, “Colonial and Communist Pedagogy,” *Pedagogy, Culture & Society* 24, no. 4 (2016): 517–24.

14. Julia Ng, “Afterword: Toward Another Critique of Violence,” in TCV, 145–58; Birgit Haberpeuntner, “‘A Theater of New, Unforeseen Constellations’: Walter Benjamin’s ‘Arcade’ in Postcolonial Theories of (Cultural) Translation,” *Translation Studies* 16, no. 1 (2023): 118–33; and Vladimir Biti, *Post-Imperial Literature: Translatio Imperii in Kafka and Coetzee* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2022), 43–58.

15. John Kraniauskas, “Beware Mexican Ruins! ‘One-Way Street’ and the Colonial Unconscious,” in *Walter Benjamin’s Philosophy: Destruction and Experience*, ed. Andrew Benjamin and Peter Osborne (London: Routledge, 1994), 139–55; and Alexis Alvarez-Nakagawa, “La voz de los vencidos: Justicia y experiencia colonial en Walter Benjamin,” *Revista Direito e Práxis* 11, no. 3 (2020): 1986–2017. See also Horst Bokma, *Das pädagogische Experiment des Schreibenden: Untersuchungen zu Walter Benjamins Rezensionen pädagogischer Literatur von 1924 bis 1932* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2000). Surprisingly, Bokma does not include “Colonial Pedagogy” in his list of “pedagogical reviews” (83–84).

16. *Berlin Childhood around 1900*, SW 3:347–48. The *Sedantag* was a holiday that commemorated the victory of the German Empire in the Battle of Sedan (1870) during the Franco-Prussian War.

17. Caitlin Vandertop, “The Colonies in Concrete: Walter Benjamin, Urban Form,

and the Dreamworlds of Empire,” *International Journal of Postcolonial Studies* 18, no. 5 (2016): 709–29; and João Cunha, “Phantasmagorias of the Post-Colonial Interiors,” *Proceedings of the 4th International Congress on Ambiances* (France, HAL 2020), 210–15.

18. “Exchange with Theodor W. Adorno on the Essay ‘Paris, the Capital of the Nineteenth Century,’” SW 3:60.

19. “Exchange with Theodor W. Adorno,” 64n8, 421.

20. “Colonial Pedagogy,” in *The Storyteller*, 195–96.

21. “Colonial Pedagogy,” 196.

22. “The Storyteller,” SW 3:149.

23. “Colonial Pedagogy,” 196.

24. “Colonial Pedagogy,” 196. Translation changed.

25. Nicola Gess, *Primitive Thinking: Figuring Alterity in German Modernity*, trans. Erik Butler and Susan L. Solomon (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2022), 86, 303–32; and Alvarez-Nakagawa, “La voz de los vencidos,” 2005n8.

26. Fritz Schultze, *Psychologie der Naturvölker: Entwicklungspsychologische Charakteristik des Naturmenschen in intellektueller, ästhetischer, ethischer und religiöser Beziehung* (Leipzig: Veit, 1900), iii.

27. “Colonial Pedagogy,” 196.

28. “Colonial Pedagogy,” 196.

29. A slightly more charitable reading would be that Benjamin does not invoke anyone’s suffering, but merely compares the roles played by children and “certain African tribes” in the cultural imaginary. The violence would then reside in condemning the instrumentalization of the suffering of children while failing to state that no one’s suffering should be instrumentalized in this way.

30. Zahid R. Chaudhary, “Subjects in Difference: Walter Benjamin, Frantz Fanon, and Postcolonial Theory,” *differences* 23, no. 1 (2012): 162.

31. “Colonial Pedagogy,” 197.

32. “Colonial Pedagogy,” 197. Translation changed.

33. Alison Ross, *Revolution and History in Walter Benjamin: A Conceptual Analysis* (New York: Routledge, 2019), 26–27.

34. “Colonial Pedagogy,” 197.

35. Anson Rabinbach, “Why Were the Jews Sacrificed? The Place of Anti-Semitism in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*,” *New German Critique* 81 (2000): 49–64.

36. “Colonial Pedagogy,” 197. Translation changed.

37. “Colonial Pedagogy,” 197. Translation changed.

38. “School Reform,” EW, 59.

39. *One-Way Street*, SW 1:487.

40. Giulio Schiavoni, “Zum Kinde,” in *Benjamin-Handbuch: Leben—Werk—Wirkung*, ed. Burkhardt Lindner (Stuttgart: J. B. Metzler, 2011), 373–85. Schiavoni characterizes the review as an “act of condemning a modern consumer society that tends to exploit the fantasy of the child for purely commercial purposes” (379, my translation).

41. Aimé Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism*, trans. Robin D. G. Kelley (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2000), 32–34, 42.

42. Letter to Martin Buber, July 1916, C, 79–80.

43. Zimmerer, “The Birth of the *Ostland*,” 202–7.
44. The rewriting of Benjamin’s theory of language as a theory of mimesis was in no small part the result of his experience with and intensive observations of the language learning of his son, Stefan Rafael, who was born in 1918. Ursula Marx et al., *Walter Benjamin’s Archive* (London: Verso, 2015), 109–49; and Eiland and Jennings, *Walter Benjamin*, 100–101, 243–44. See also Eva Weissweiler, *Das Echo Deiner Frage: Dora und Walter Benjamin—Biographie einer Beziehung* (Hamburg: Hoffmann und Campe, 2020), 183–84.
45. “On the Concept of History,” SW 4:392. Translation changed. See also Michael Löwy, “Le point de vue des vaincus dans l’histoire de l’Amérique latine: Réflexions méthodologiques à partir de Walter Benjamin,” *Cahiers d’anthropologie sociale* 1, no. 4 (2008): 63–71.
46. Alvarez-Nakagawa, “La voz de los vencidos,” pp. 1994–1997, 2000–2004; and Shoshana Felman, “Benjamin’s Silence,” *Critical Inquiry* 25, no. 2 (1999): 209–14. See also Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1988), 295.
47. “On Language as Such,” SW 1:72–73; and Jacques Derrida, *The Animal That Therefore I Am* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), 18–20.
48. This view found a strong expression in Kant’s comparisons of the unenlightened to children who are “minor” or “immature”—*unmündig*—which literally means “without mouth” or incapable of speaking for oneself. Immanuel Kant, “An Answer to the Question: What Is Enlightenment?,” in *Practical Philosophy*, trans. Mary J. Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 17. See also Philippe Ariès, *Centuries of Childhood: A Social History of Family Life*, trans. Robert Baldick (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973), 365–404.
49. “On the Concept of History,” SW 4:392; and Ariella Azoulay, “The Tradition of the Oppressed,” *Qui Parle* 16, no. 2 (2007): 73–96.
50. Lewis, *Walter Benjamin’s Antifascist Education*, 52.
51. Mignolo, “Delinking,” 459, 452.
52. These are also the terms in which Benjamin defines his “philological procedure”: as the “history of terminology” and the “history of transformations [*Verwandlungsgeschichte*].” C, 589, 176; GS 6:94.
53. “On the Concept of History,” SW 4:392.
54. Aristotle, *Poetics*, trans. Malcolm Heath (London: Penguin, 1996), 6 [1448b].
55. Martin Jay, “Mimesis and Mimetology: Adorno and Lacoue-Labarthe,” in *The Semblance of Subjectivity: Essays in Adorno’s Aesthetic Theory*, ed. Tom Huhn and Lambert Zuidervart (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1997), 31–33.
56. The differences between these two essays are highly significant. They both concern the same subject and set of questions, but the first version is closer to the theological framework of “On Language,” while the second reflects Benjamin’s engagement with historical and dialectical materialism. Menninghaus, *Walter Benjamins Theorie der Sprachmagie*, 60–77; and Anja Lemke, “Zur späteren Sprachphilosophie,” in *Benjamin-Handbuch*, ed. Burkhardt Lindner, 643–53. Both document Benjamin’s attempt to construct, as he wrote, “a bridge [*Vermittlung*] to the way dialectical materialism looks at things from the perspective of [his] particular stance

on the philosophy of language,” an effort that he, according to Gershom Scholem, never fully accomplished. Letter to Max Rychner, March 7, 1931, C, 372; and Gershom Scholem, *Walter Benjamin: The Story of a Friendship*, trans. Harry Zohn (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1981), 209. The two essays on mimesis are the site of an intensive “remelting process [*Umschmelzungsprozess*]” in which Benjamin tried to make his theory of language “as such” more fruitful for social theory and materialist aesthetics and less vulnerable to metaphysical objections. Letter to Theodor W. Adorno, May 31, 1935, C, 489. Translation modified. Benjamin never published the essays, sharing them only with his closest friends. “Über das mimetische Vermögen [On the Mimetic Faculty]” was first published in 1955 in *Schriften*, vol. 1, 507–10, and “Lehre vom Ähnlichen [Doctrine of the Similar]” in 1977 in GS 2:204–10. 57. “On the Mimetic Faculty,” SW 2:720.

58. In 1938, Benjamin described his contribution to the work of the Frankfurt School Institute of Social Research as the examination of “the historical variables of human perception,” linking his early remarks about reading and perception to the “Mimesis” essays. “A German Institute of Independent Research,” SW 3:301.

59. “On the Mimetic Faculty,” SW 2:722. See also Juliane Prade-Weiss, “Liquidation im Bild: Zur Artikulation von Geschichte,” Unpublished manuscript. Conference of the International Walter Benjamin Society, Oxford University, 2017.

60. “On the Mimetic Faculty,” SW 2:722. Translation modified. See also “Doctrine of the Similar,” SW 2:695; and Ulrich Welbers, *Sprachpassagen: Walter Benjamins verborgene Sprachwissenschaft* (Munich: Fink, 2009), 19–20.

61. Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge 1994), 125.

62. The “colonial unconscious” that Benjamin brings to light—or rather, to language—is not the archetypical unconscious of C. G. Jung but bears similarities with Frantz Fanon’s notion of an ensemble of culturally transmitted myths and prejudices, which, recognized as such, allow for the struggle against the most uncivilized and repressed elements of European culture. Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markmann (London: Pluto, 2008), 145–47. See also Manuela Sampaio de Mattos, “Could Walter Benjamin’s Unconscious of the Collective Be Read as Postcolonial?,” unpublished manuscript. Conference of the International Walter Benjamin Society, Berlin, 2021.

63. Benjamin will summarize and make use of this distinction in his analysis of film in 1935. See “The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility,” SW 3:127–28n22.

64. Octavo Mannoni, *Prospero and Caliban: The Psychology of Colonization*, trans. Pamela Powesland (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1990), 39–48.

65. Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism*, 42.

66. “Experience,” EW, 116.

67. Michael Powers, “The Smallest Remainder: Benjamin and Freud on Play,” *MLN* 133, no. 3 (2018): 729–32.

68. “The Work of Art,” SW 3:117; and Miriam Bratu Hansen, “Room-for-Play: Benjamin’s Gamble with Cinema,” *October* 109 (2004): 3–45.

69. “Toys and Play: Marginal Notes on a Monumental Work,” SW 2:120.

70. In this context, Benjamin objects to the use of examples in education because they encourage easy imitation over playful modification and therefore enforce the

unquestioned adaptation of a pre-formed symbolic order. “The concept of example [*Beispiel*] (to say nothing of ‘influence’ [*Beeinflussung*]) should be totally excluded from the theory of education.” Letter to Gershom Scholem, September 1917, C, 93.

71. Hans Blumenberg, *Work on Myth*, trans. Robert M. Wallace (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1985), 3–33.

72. “The Cultural History of Toys,” SW 2:115; Powers, “The Smallest Remainder,” 730.

73. Thomas Schestag, “Improvisation,” in *Forces of Education: Walter Benjamin and the Politics of Pedagogy*, ed. Dennis Johannßen and Dominik Zechner (London: Bloomsbury, 2022), 191–209.

74. *Berlin Childhood around 1900*, SW 3:374.

Chapter 3

1. See Peter Homans, *The Ability to Mourn: Disillusionment and the Social Origins of Psychoanalysis* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 338; Johann Chapoutot, “L’historicité nazie: Temps de la nature et abolition de l’histoire,” *Vingtième Siècle. Revue d’histoire* 117, no. 1 (2013): 43–55; and Peter Fritzsche, *Life and Death in the Third Reich* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2008), 38–56.

2. Eric Michaud, *The Cult of Art in Nazi Germany*, trans. Janet Lloyd (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), 181–219.

3. David B. Dennis, *Inhumanities: Nazi Interpretations of Western Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012); Alan E. Steinweis, *Art, Ideology, and Economics in Nazi Germany* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993), 103–46; Pamela M. Potter, *Art of Suppression: Confronting the Nazi Past in Histories of the Visual and Performing Arts* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2016), 19–30; and Johann Chapoutot, *Greeks, Romans, and Germans: How the Nazis Usurped Europe’s Classical Past*, trans. Richard R. Nybakken (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2016).

4. “Tagebuchnotizen 1938,” GS 6:539. My translation. “Während er [Brecht] so sprach fühlte ich eine Gewalt auf mich wirken, die der des Faschismus gewachsen ist; ich will sagen eine Gewalt die in nicht minder tiefen Tiefen der Geschichte entspringt als die faschistische.”

5. On Adorno’s writing against fascism during his exile years, see Gerhard Richter, “Nazism and Negative Dialectics: Adorno’s Hitler in *Minima Moralia*,” in *Thought Images: Frankfurt School Writers’ Reflections on Damaged Life* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007), 147–91.

6. Letter to Theodor W. Adorno, November 10, 1938, C, 589; “On the Concept of History,” SW 4:392. Benjamin’s particular philology informs his messianism and historical epistemology at various stages. See Michael Levine, *A Weak Messianic Power: Figures of a Time to Come in Benjamin, Derrida, and Celan* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014), 1–13; Werner Hamacher, “NOW. Walter Benjamin on Historical Time,” in *The Moment—Time and Rupture in Modern Thought*, ed. Heidrun Friese (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2001), 169–75; and Eli Friedlander, *Wal-*

ter Benjamin: *A Philosophical Portrait* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012), 190–205.

7. Thomas Schestag, “Interpolationen: Benjamins Philologie,” in *Philo:xenia. Erste Folge* (Basel: Urs Engeler, 2009), 10.

8. *The Concept of Art Criticism in German Romanticism*, SW 1:141.

9. Friedrich Schlegel, “Zur Philologie,” in *Kritische Friedrich-Schlegel-Ausgabe*, ed. Ernst Behler, vol. 16, *Fragmente zur Poesie und Literatur 1* (Munich: Schönningh, 1981), 49. My translation.

10. *The Concept of Art Criticism in German Romanticism*, SW 1:152; Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, “Introduction to Walter Benjamin’s *The Concept of Art Criticism in German Romanticism*,” *Studies in Romanticism* 31, no. 4 (1992): 426n8. Leibniz conceived of the noncausal correspondences between individuals as the increase of expression in one monad and the simultaneous decrease of expression in another. In “Discourse on Metaphysics” (1686), an earlier version of “Monadology” (1714), a text that Benjamin quotes in the draft of the “Epistemocritical Prologue,” Leibniz writes: “The action of one finite substance upon another consists in nothing but the increase of degree of its expression [*l’accroissement du degré de son expression*] together with the diminution of the expression of the other [*la diminution de celle de l’autre*].” That which “passes immediately to a greater degree of perfection or to a more perfect expression exercises its power and acts,” he continues, “while any substance which passes to a lesser degree of perfection shows its weakness and suffers.” G. W. Leibniz, “Discourse on Metaphysics,” in *Philosophical Papers and Letters*, trans. Leroy E. Loemker (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1989), 312–13.

11. Letter to Gershom Scholem, February 14, 1921, C, 175–76.

12. Jürgen Habermas opposed this element in Benjamin’s works, suggesting that Adorno’s “differentiating thinking [*sondierendes Denken*]” sought out Benjamin to analyze, work through, and eventually neutralize the mystical, romanticist, and neo-conservative European tradition associated with writers such as Ludwig Klages, C. G. Jung, Erich Unger, and Roger Caillois. Jürgen Habermas, “Das Falsche im Eigenen: On Benjamin and Adorno,” in *A Berlin Republic: Writings on Germany*, trans. Steven Rendall (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1997), 126, 124. Jacques Derrida expressed a similar discomfort with Benjamin’s thinking, discerning “disquieting analogies” between Benjamin, Carl Schmitt, and Heidegger. Jacques Derrida, “Force of Law: The ‘Mystical Foundation of Authority,’” in *Deconstruction and the Possibility of Justice*, ed. Drucilla Cornell, Michel Rosenfeld, and David Gray Carlson (New York: Routledge, 1992), 66n6. See also Helmuth Lethen, “Unheimliche Nähe: Carl Schmitt liest Walter Benjamin,” *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* 215, September 16, 1999.

13. Schestag, “Interpolationen,” in *Philo:xenia. Erste Folge*, 12. Benjamin proposes an alternative etymological interpretation of the word “Geschichte,” which, as the female noun “die Geschichte” is thought to derive from “geschehen,” to occur, to happen. The neuter noun, “das Geschichte,” means that which is layered or stacked like earth or stones. Jacob Grimm and Wilhelm Grimm, *Deutsches Wörterbuch*, vol. 5 (Leipzig: Hirzel, 1897), ln. 3857.

14. Numa Denis Fustel de Coulanges, *The Ancient City: A Study on the Religion, Laws, and Institutions of Greece and Rome* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University

Press, 1980), 60. Benjamin quotes Fustel de Coulanges in “On the Concept of History,” SW 4:391.

15. Ulrich von Wilamowitz-Moellendorff, *History of Classical Scholarship*, trans. Alan Harris (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982), 1–4.

16. Letter to Theodor W. Adorno, December 9, 1938, C, 587.

17. “Goethe’s *Elective Affinities*,” SW 1:297.

18. “Goethe’s *Elective Affinities*,” SW 1:297.

19. “Methodische Arten der Geschichte,” GS 6:93. My translation.

20. “Methodische Arten der Geschichte,” GS 6:94. Translation Werner Hamacher, “What Remains to be Said,” trans. Kristina Mendicino, in *Give the Word: Responses to Werner Hamacher’s “95 Theses on Philology,”* ed. Gerhard Richter and Ann Smock (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2019), 324–25.

21. Hamacher, “What Remains to Be Said,” 325.

22. Letter to Gershom Scholem, March 5, 1924, C, 238. Translations changed.

23. Schestag, “Interpolationen,” in *Philo:xenia. Erste Folge*, 11.

24. Letter to Florens Christian Rang, December 9, 1923, C, 224.

25. G. W. Leibniz, “Monadology,” in *Philosophical Papers and Letters*, 650 (§73); and the letter to Florens Christian Rang, December 9, 1923, C, 224.

26. On the ambiguous motif of making empty space, see Irving Wohlfarth, “No-Man’s Land: On Walter Benjamin’s Destructive Character,” in *Walter Benjamin’s Philosophy: Destruction and Experience*, ed. Andrew Benjamin and Peter Osborne (London: Routledge, 1994), 170, 176.

27. “Berlin Chronicle,” SW 2:611. Translation changed. Benjamin uses this sentence in his reflection “Memory and Excavation” (1932), replacing the word “Schauplatz” with “Medium.” John Osborn renders “Schauplatz” as “setting.” OTD, 119.

28. Theodor W. Adorno and Walter Benjamin, *Briefwechsel, 1928–1940*, ed. Henri Lonitz (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1994), 143. My translation.

29. The “semantic energies” that Habermas discerned as the link between past and present are not themselves semantic, but rather the affective energies marked by semantic references. Jürgen Habermas, “Consciousness-Raising or Redemptive Criticism: The Contemporaneity of Walter Benjamin,” *New German Critique* 17 (1979): 47.

30. Asja Lācis, *Revolutionär im Beruf: Berichte über proletarisches Theater, über Meyerhold, Brecht, Benjamin und Picador*, ed. Hildegard Brenner (Munich: Rogner & Bernhard, 1971), 44. My translation. See also “Anmerkungen der Herausgeber,” GS 1:879.

31. Theodor W. Adorno and Siegfried Kracauer, *Briefwechsel, 1923–1966*, ed. Wolfgang Schopf, vol. 7 of *Briefe und Briefwechsel*, ed. Theodor W. Adorno Archiv (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2008), 208–9. My translation.

32. OTD, 36.

33. “Das Skelett des Wortes,” GS 6:15; and “Der Gegenstand: Dreieck,” GS 6:14. My translation. Stepping back from the natural attitude, which takes language’s ability to signify for granted, Benjamin directs his gaze onto language “as such.” An “intentional switch” reveals the inner workings of the word, independently, as much as possible, of their familiar use. “An intention toward ‘table’ Π is possible, but also an intention toward the word without representation: ‘-table-’ (By the way, this an

object lesson of an intentional switch) [*Es ist eine Intention auf 'Tisch' II möglich, aber auch eine Intention auf das Wort ohne Vorstellung: '- Tisch -' (Übrigens Schulfall einer intentionalen Umstellung)*]. “Das Skelett des Wortes,” GS 6:15. See also Tamara Tagliacozzo, *Experience and Infinite Task: Knowledge, Language and Messianism in the Philosophy of Walter Benjamin* (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017), 52–57.

34. “Es ist seltsam,” GS 6:15. My translation.

35. “Wenn sich in einer Region,” GS 6:16–17. My translations. “Wenn sich in ihr [in einer Region] ein Sinn gesättigt erfüllt in einer bloßen Hindeutung, so ist jene Hindeutung ein Symbol.”—“Ein Symbol bezeichnet einen Sinn innerhalb einer Region, welcher sich bis zur Sättigung erfüllt durch die bloße Hindeutung auf denselben.”

36. For a reconstruction of the debate over the “Baudelaire” letters, see Eiland and Jennings, *Walter Benjamin*, 622–25.

37. Theodor W. Adorno, “Letters to Walter Benjamin,” Walter Benjamin Archive, WBA III, 577v. Previously unpublished manuscript. My translation. The left side of the page reads, slightly diagonal, “Tendenz.” A little farther to the right: “marxistische Philologie / Spekulation (Gehäuse) / Abwicklung.” After a line break: “Phantasmagorie / Objektive Ferne [or Form].” Noted farther down, slightly diagonally: “Das Jean-Paul-Zitat gibt mir viel zu denken. [*Tendency / Marxist philology / Speculation (casing) / Phaseout / Phantasmagoria / Objective distance [or form] / The Jean Paul citation gives me a lot to think about.*]”

38. Karl Marx, “Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right: Introduction,” *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York: Norton, 1978), 60.

39. Giorgio Agamben, “The Prince and the Frog: The Question of Method in Adorno and Benjamin,” in *Infancy and History: The Destruction of Experience*, trans. Liz Heron (London: Verso, 1993), 107–24; “Introduzione,” in Walter Benjamin, *Charles Baudelaire: Un poeta lirico nell’età del capitalismo avanzato*, ed. Giorgio Agamben, Barbara Chitussi, and Clemens-Karl Härle (Vicenza: Neri Pozza, 2012), 7–18; and Willem van Reijen, “Die Adorno-Benjamin-Kontroverse,” *Zeitschrift für philosophische Forschung* 60, no. 1 (2006): 99–121. The word “Abwicklung” in Benjamin’s notes may document his initial inclination to conclude his collaboration with the Institute of Social Research.

40. Schestag, “Interpolationen,” in *Philo:xenia. Erste Folge*, 3–4, 16.

41. Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Wilhelm Meister’s Travels*, trans. Thomas Carlyle (Columbia: Camden House, 1991), 265–66.

42. In *Arcades Project*, Benjamin intended to “demonstrate how the milieu in which Marx’s doctrine arose affected that doctrine through its expressive character (which is to say, not only through causal connections); but, second, it will also show in what respects Marxism, too, shares the expressive character of the material products contemporary with it.” AP, 460. See Barbara Johnson, *Mother Tongues: Sexuality, Trials, Motherhood, Translation* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), 113. The same thought underlies the last of Benjamin’s notes. Adorno had included two citations from Jean Paul’s *Herbstblumine* that both contain descriptions of light in the shifts between night and day. Adorno noticed in these descriptions a prefiguration of outdoor gas lamps, which, he adds, Jean Paul was not familiar with. One of

the quotes might have occupied Benjamin because of the idea that each epoch dreams the one to follow, which he found in Jules Michelet, and which became central to the *Arcades Project*.

43. Letter to Adorno, December 9, 1938, C, 587–88.

44. Søren Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Irony, with Continual Reference to Socrates: Together with Notes of Schelling's Berlin Lectures*, trans. and ed. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), 103. In the Danish original, the passage contains a philological ambiguity. Grammatically, the word “hvilken” (which, welchen) in the phrase “en anden Art Tilvær, hvilken Tvivlen bortskyllede” can mean both that the other form of “Tilvær,” Kierkegaard’s rendering of Hegel’s “Dasein,” washed away the doubt, or that the doubt washed away the other form of existence. Søren Kierkegaard, *Om begrebet ironi, med stadigt hensyn til Socrates* (Kjøbenhavn: Philipsen, 1841), 106. The syntax of the passage suggests that the imagistic has been washed away and preserved as a fossil within the reflexive age, which corresponds to Howard and Edna Hong’s translation as well as the German translation by Emanuel Hirsch, but not to the one by Hans Heinrich Schaefer, which Adorno used. Schaefer puts it the other way around: “an eine andere Daseinsform erinnern sieht, die den Zweifel wegsplülte.”

45. See Margaret Cohen, “Benjamin’s Phantasmagoria,” *New German Critique* 48 (1989): 87–107.

46. Letter to Adorno, December 9, 1938, C, 588. Translation modified.

47. Letter to Adorno, December 9, 1938, C, 587.

48. Jacob Grimm and Wilhelm Grimm, *Deutsches Wörterbuch*, vol. 1 (Leipzig: S. Hirzl, 1854), ln. 810–11.

49. Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Faust I & II*, ed. and trans. Stuart Atkins (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 50; and Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Faust: Eine Tragödie*, in *Goethes Werke*, vol. 3, ed. Erich Trunz (Hamburg: Christian Wegner, 1964), 64.

50. Sulpiz Boisserée, *Briefwechsel. Tagebücher*, ed. Mathilde Boisserée, vol. 2 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1970), 72. My translation. See also Wilhelm Scherer, *Kleine Schriften zur altdeutschen Philologie*, vol. 1, ed. Konrad Burdach and Erich Schmidt (Berlin: Weidmannsche Buchhandlung, 1893), 7–8. The editors of Benjamin’s and Adorno’s correspondence suggested that Benjamin might have thought of the preface to the first volume of *Deutsches Wörterbuch*, which he quotes in his commentary on a letter by Jacob Grimm in *Deutsche Menschen* (1936). Adorno and Benjamin, *Briefwechsel*, 386. See also Benjamin’s invocation in “The Rigorous Study of Art,” SW 2:668. Paul Klee uses the phrase “Andacht zum Kleinen” to describe his drawings, and it was the title given to an exhibition of Klee’s works in Basel in 1982. Paul Klee, *Pedagogical Sketchbook*, trans. Sibyl Maholy-Nagy (New York: F. A. Praeger, 1953), 8.

51. “Wißt ihr, warum euch die Käfer, die Butterblumen so glücken? / Weil ihr die Menschen nicht kennt, weil ihr die Sterne nicht seht!” Christian Friedrich Hebbel, “Die alten Naturdichter und die neuen,” in *Werke*, vol. 3, ed. Gerhard Fricke et al. (Munich: Hauser, 1965), 122. Adalbert Stifter responded by praising the “gentle law [das sanfte Gesez]” that “guides humanity.” Adalbert Stifter, *Bunte Steine*, vol. 2.2 of

Werke und Briefe: Historisch-kritische Gesamtausgabe, ed. Alfred Doppler and Wolfgang Frühwald (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1982), 12. My translation.

52. The term “microaggressions” was introduced in 1970 by Chester Pierce, who described them as “subtle, stunning, often automatic, and nonverbal exchanges which are ‘put downs.’” Chester Pierce et al., “An Experiment in Racism: TV Commercials,” in *Television and Education*, ed. Chester Pierce (Beverly Hills: Sage, 1978), 66. Marking and remarking that an individual does not belong to a social group, but rather to a legacy of less or non-grievable lives, injures and damages them while cementing large-scale political and cultural oppression. See Judith Butler, *The Force of Nonviolence: An Ethico-Political Bind* (London: Verso, 2020), 126–30, 141–49.

53. “On the Concept of History,” SW 4:397.

54. “Franz Kafka,” SW 2:811.

55. Victor Klemperer, *The Language of the Third Reich*, trans. M. Brady (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 15–16.

56. Letter to Adorno, December 9, 1938, C, 588.

57. According to Leibniz, the more obscurely a monad’s infinitely small perceptions are represented, the more unconscious they are; and the more distinctly they are represented, the more aware and conscious they become. The word Leibniz uses for the process of representing perceptions more distinctly and fine-grained is remembrance (*reminiscence*). Leibniz, “Discourse on Metaphysics,” 320 (§26) in *Philosophical Papers and Letters*. See also Letter to Florens Christian Rang, December 9, 1923, C, 224; Charles de Roche, *Monadologie des Gedichts: Benjamin, Heidegger, Celan* (Munich: Fink 2013), 47–67; and Werner Hamacher, “Intensive Languages,” *MLN* 127, no. 3 (2012), 516–18.

58. Reiner Nägele, “Das Beben des Barock in der Moderne: Walter Benjamins Monadologie,” *MLN* 106, no. 3 (1991): 505. My translation. See also Samuel Weber, “Genealogy of Modernity: History, Myth, and Allegory in Benjamin’s *Origin of the German Mourning Play*,” in *Benjamin’s -abilities* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), 131–63; and Peter Fenves, “Antonomasia: The Fate of the Name in Leibniz,” in *Arresting Language: From Leibniz to Benjamin* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), 13–79.

59. Letter to Adorno, December 9, 1938, C, 586. Translation changed.

60. Letter from Adorno, November 10, 1938, C, 582–83; and Letter to Adorno, December 9, 1938, C, 588.

61. Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), 41–43, 424–55.

62. Judith Butler, *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 34.

63. Butler, *Excitable Speech*, 35.

64. Butler, *Excitable Speech*, 36.

65. Butler, *Excitable Speech*, 36.

66. Butler, *Excitable Speech*, 36.

67. Butler, *Excitable Speech*, 36.

68. “Lösungsversuch des Russelschen Paradoxons,” GS 6:14. My translation.

69. “Lösungsversuch des Russelschen Paradoxons,” GS 6:14. My translation.

70. “Es ist seltsam,” GS 6:15. My translation.

71. Werner Hamacher, “The Gesture in the Name,” in *Premises: Essays on Philosophy and Literature from Kant to Celan* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), 313.

72. Hamacher, “The Gesture in the Name,” 313.

73. Bertrand Russell, “On Denoting,” *Mind* 14, no. 4 (1905): 479–93; and Saul Kripke, *Naming and Necessity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980), 96–97. Other analytic philosophers such as Gottlob Frege and Ludwig Wittgenstein conceded that there is more to a name than its reference. Frege’s distinction between sense and meaning accommodates another dimension of the word next to its referential function. If two words have the same referent, such as “Morning Star” and “Evening Star,” they have the same meaning (*Bedeutung*), but a different sense (*Sinn*). Frege does not conclusively spell out what constitutes the sense of a word, but his notion of “Sinn” leaves space for the historicity of meaning that Butler and Hamacher emphasize. Gottlob Frege, “Über Sinn und Bedeutung,” *Zeitschrift für Philosophie und philosophische Kritik* 100 (1892): 25–50. The “sense” of a name as opposed to its reference can be understood as an abbreviation of the kind of synonymous descriptions that Russell described. Names would then be open pointers that stand in for various descriptions, hardly ever reducible to one of them. This can be called the traditional or “weak” (as opposed to the directly referential) view of names, held also, to some extent, by Wittgenstein. See Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (Oxford: Blackwell, 1958), 36–38 (§79), and James D. Carney, “Wittgenstein’s Theory of Names,” *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 57, no. 1 (1979): 59–68.

74. Hamacher, “The Gesture in the Name,” in *Premises*, 313. What Hamacher, in this sentence, calls “Bedeutung” (translated as “meaning”), Benjamin at time parses as “Bezeichnung” (signification).

75. Hamacher, “The Gesture in the Name,” 314.

76. Hamacher, “The Gesture in the Name,” 313.

77. Theodor W. Adorno, “Notiz über Namen,” in *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, vol. 20 (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1986), 533. My translation.

78. Adorno, “Notiz über Namen,” 534. My translation.

79. OTD, 36. The verb “prägen” means to coin, mint, engrave, or impress, but also to memorize (*sich etwas einprägen*). It derives from Middle High German *braechen*, *praechen*, Old High German *prahan*, which corresponds to Latin *celare*, *sculpare*, *signare*. The origin is to “make break,” *brechen machen*, which led to engrave, or *eingraben*. It describes the process of breaking a surface in order to leave a mark or find something below it. Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm, *Deutsches Wörterbuch*, vol. 13, ln. 2055. The English “engrave” preserves an allusion to the breaking of the ground before lowering a coffin or an urn into a grave.

80. Butler, *Excitable Speech*, 37.

81. Butler, *Excitable Speech*, 38. Derrida discusses the trauma of being named in his work on animals, who cannot name in return. Naming is being reminded of one’s finitude, of death. Our names will survive us. They allow us and those who come after us to judge our lives and deeds. Those who lived before us chose our names, often without having known us. With this act of imposition, we *have been* entered

into linguistic life. Jacques Derrida, *The Animal That Therefore I Am* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), 19–20.

82. Sharon Dodua Otoo, “Wer hat die Definitionsmacht? Durch die Wahl unserer Worte verändern wir die Realität,” in *Critical Whiteness: Debatte um antirassistische Politik und nicht diskriminierende Sprache*, special supplement, *Analyse & Kritik* (2013), 25. My translation.

83. Hamacher, “The Gesture in the Name,” in *Premises*, 314.

84. Butler, *Excitable Speech*, 36.

85. AP, 489.

86. On the topic of sound and listening in *Berlin Childhood*, see the chapter “Benjamin’s Ear” in Gerhard Richter, *Walter Benjamin and the Corpus of Autobiography* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2000), 163–98.

87. *Berlin Childhood around 1900*, SW 3:389–90.

88. “Berlin Chronicle,” SW 2:634.

89. *Berlin Childhood around 1900*, SW 3:368.

90. “The Task of the Translator,” SW 1:258; “The Storyteller: Observations on the Works of Nikolai Leskov,” SW 3:446–47; “On the Concept of History,” SW 4:390.

91. Martin Mettin, *Echo im Sprachwald: Figuren dialektischen Hörens bei Walter Benjamin* (Berlin: Neofelis, 2019), 124. My translation. See also Mirko M. Hall, “Dialectical Sonority: Walter Benjamin’s Acoustics of Profane Illumination,” *Telos* 152 (2010), 83–102.

92. Ilit Ferber, “Walter Benjamin and the Acoustics of Childhood,” *Angelaki* 27, no. 5 (2022): 47–49.

93. *Berlin Childhood around 1900*, SW 3:389–90.

94. “Berlin Chronicle,” SW 2:632.

95. “Berlin Chronicle,” SW 2:633. Translation changed.

96. Sigmund Freud, “A Note upon the ‘Mystic Writing-Pad,’” trans. James Strachey, in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works*, vol. 19 (London: Hogarth, 1961), 231; “Berlin Chronicle,” SW 2:633.

97. “Berlin Chronicle,” SW 2:633.

98. “Berlin Chronicle,” SW 2:633.

99. “The Task of the Translator,” SW 1:257.

100. “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire,” SW 4:317–18.

101. “Literary History and the Study of Literature,” SW 2:464.

102. Julie Beth Napolin, “The Fact of Resonance: An Acoustics of Determination in Faulkner and Benjamin,” *symploke* 23, nos. 1–2 (2015): 181. See also Robert Ryder, *The Acoustical Unconscious from Walter Benjamin to Alexander Kluge* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2022), 16–17, 28–65.

103. Sigmund Freud, “Mourning and Melancholia,” in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. James Strachey et al., vol. 14 (London: Hogarth, 1957), 244–45.

104. Freud, “Mourning and Melancholia,” 245. See also Sigmund Freud, “Remembering, Repeating, and Working-Through,” in *Complete Psychological Works*, vol. 12 (London: Hogarth, 1958), 147–56. On the understanding of mourning as work, see Werner Hamacher, “Working Through Working,” trans. Matthew T. Hartman, *Modernism/Modernity* 3, no. 1 (1996): 23–56.

105. Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia," 245.
106. Ilit Ferber, *Philosophy and Melancholy: Benjamin's Early Reflections on Theater and Language* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013), 16–66.
107. On the ambiguity and productivity of resentment, see Ilit Ferber, "Jean Améry and the Time of Resentment," *Philosophy and Social Criticism* (2023): 1–21.
108. Martin Jay, "Walter Benjamin, Remembrance, and the First World War," *Review of Japanese Culture and Society* 11/12 (1999–2000): 21, 25.
109. Jay, "Walter Benjamin, Remembrance, and the First World War," 26. See also Gillian Rose, *Mourning Becomes Law: Philosophy and Representation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 41–62, 69–71; and Monica Black, *Death in Berlin: From Weimar to Divided Germany* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 69–110.
110. Jacques Derrida, *The Work of Mourning*, ed. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 45.
111. Derrida, *The Work of Mourning*, 159; and Werner Hamacher, "For–Philology," trans. Jason Groves, in *Minima Philologica* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015), 110.
112. See Y. Michal Bodemann, *Jews, Germans, Memory: Reconstructions of Jewish Life in Germany* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996), 19–48; and Max Czollek, *Versöhnungstheater* (Munich: Hanser, 2023).
113. Catherine Malabou, "History and the Process of Mourning in Hegel and Freud," *Radical Philosophy* 106 (2001): 17. Benjamin, as Irving Wohlfarth argues, "marks a clear departure from the Hegelian digestive system, an encyclopaedic, (anal-)retentive, self-interiorizing memory (*Er-Innerung*) which 'preserves-and-negates' (*aufheben*) the entirety of its prehistory." Wohlfarth, "No-Man's Land," in *Walter Benjamin's Philosophy*, 176.
114. Rebecca Comay, "Mourning Work and Play," *Research in Phenomenology* 23 (1993): 106.
115. Comay, "Mourning Work and Play," 120.
116. "On the Concept of History," SW 4:394.
117. "On the Concept of History," SW 4:394.
118. Comay, "Mourning Work and Play," 105.
119. Jacques Lacan, *Anxiety: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book X*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller (New York: Polity, 2014), 335.
120. Richard Boothby, "The Lost Cause of Mourning," *Continental Philosophy Review* 46 (2013): 212, 218, 220.
121. Jacques Lacan, "Desire and the Interpretation of Desire in Hamlet," *Yale French Studies* 55/56 (1977): 38.
122. Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia," in *Complete Psychological Works*, vol. 14, 249. Freud draws on Otto Rank to argue that, in melancholia, "the object-choice has been effected on a narcissistic basis, that the object-cathexis, when obstacles come in its way, can regress to narcissism. The narcissistic identification with the object then becomes a substitute for the erotic cathexis, the result of which is that in spite of the conflict with the loved person the love-relation need not be given up." Benja-

min was familiar with Freud's "On Narcissism" (1914). Walter Benjamin, "Colonial Pedagogy," in *The Storyteller: Tales Out of Loneliness*, trans. Esther Leslie (London: Verso, 2016), 196.

123. Derrida, *The Work of Mourning*, 161.

124. Alexander Mitscherlich and Margarete Mitscherlich, *The Inability to Mourn: Principles of Collective Behavior*, trans. Beverly R. Placzek (New York: Grove Press, 1975), 27–28. The Mitscherlichs argued that after 1945 the German population was not able to mourn the loss of Adolf Hitler, whom they had loved and admired, and who was now exposed as a monstrous criminal.

125. Lacan describes the work of mourning as "accomplished at the level of the logos," adding that he chose the word "logos rather than group or community, although group and community, being organized culturally, are its mainstays." Lacan, "Desire and the Interpretation of Desire in Hamlet," 38.

126. Comay, "Mourning Work and Play," 122.

127. "On the Concept of History," SW 4:391.

128. Marianne Hirsch, "The Generation of Postmemory," *Poetics Today* 29, no. 1 (2008): 103–28.

129. "On the Concept of History," SW 4:391, 394.

130. Theodor W. Adorno, *Kant's Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), 176. Translation changed.

Chapter 4

1. Elisabeth Young-Bruehl, *Hannah Arendt: For Love of the World* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982), 162.

2. Sigrid Weigel, "Sounding Through—Poetic Difference—Self-Translation: Hannah Arendt's Thoughts and Writings Between Different Languages, Cultures, and Fields," in "Escape to Life": *German Intellectuals in New York; A Compendium on Exile after 1933*, ed. Eckart Goebel and Sigrid Weigel (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2012), 60. See also Barbara Hahn, "Hannah Arendt's Literatures: Zwischen Deutschland und Amerika," *Internationale Zeitschrift für Philosophie* 1 (2007): 17–26; and Thomas Wild, *Nach dem Geschichtsbruch: Deutsche Schriftsteller um Hannah Arendt* (Berlin: Matthes & Seitz, 2009), 203–5.

3. Hannah Arendt, "'What Remains? The Language Remains': A Conversation with Günter Gaus," in *Essays in Understanding, 1930–1954* (New York: Schocken, 1994), 12; and Yoko Tawada, "From Mother Tongue to Linguistic Mother," trans. Rachel McNichol, *Mānoa* 18, no. 1 (2006): 139–43.

4. For an overview of Arendt's political thought, see Dana R. Villa, "Introduction: The Development of Arendt's Political Thought," in *The Cambridge Companion to Hannah Arendt*, ed. Dana R. Villa (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 1–21.

5. Arendt and Benjamin met frequently in Paris after 1933, and they had likely encountered each other already in Berlin, as Arendt recalled. After they were both interned in the south of France as potential German collaborators, they spent several

weeks together in Lourdes, conversing and playing chess. This is where Benjamin handed Arendt her copy of “On the Concept of History.” A few months after Benjamin committed suicide in Port Bou, Arendt passed through the town on her own escape from Europe, later describing the “fantastic beauty” of the cemetery overlooking the sea. Arendt to Scholem, 17. October, 1941, in *The Correspondence of Hannah Arendt and Gershom Scholem*, ed. Marie Luise Knott, trans. Anthony David (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017), 9; and Eiland and Jennings, *Walter Benjamin*, 676. On the relationship between Arendt and Benjamin, see Detlev Schöttker and Erdmut Wizisla, “Hannah Arendt und Walter Benjamin: Konstellationen, Debatten, Vermittlungen,” in *Arendt und Benjamin: Texte, Briefe, Dokumente*, ed. Detlev Schöttker and Erdmut Wizisla (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2006), 11–44; Andrew Benjamin, “Walter Benjamin and Arendt: A Relation of Sorts,” in *The Bloomsbury Companion to Hannah Arendt*, ed. Peter Graton and Yasemin Sari (London: Bloomsbury, 2020), 149–58; Liliane Weissberg, “On Friendship in Dark Times: Hannah Arendt Reads Walter Benjamin,” in *Literary Paternity, Literary Friendship: Essays in Honor of Stanley Corngold*, ed. Gerhard Richter (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 278–94; Marie Luise Knott, “Walter Benjamin,” in *Arendt-Handbuch: Leben—Werk—Wirkung*, ed. Wolfgang Heuer, Bernd Heiter, and Stefanie Rosenmüller (Stuttgart: Metzler, 2011), 254–55; and Hannah Arendt, *Von den Dichtern erwarten wir Wahrheit: Ausstellung Literaturhaus Berlin*, ed. Barbara Hahn and Marie Luise Knott (Berlin: Matthes & Seitz, 2007), 129–39.

6. Hannah Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, vol. 1 (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1977), 12. In the following abbreviated as LM. The first part of the book, *One / Thinking*, was based on a series of lectures and seminars that Arendt gave in the mid- to late-1960s.

7. Seyla Benhabib, *Exile, Statelessness, and Migration: Playing Chess with History from Hannah Arendt to Isaiah Berlin* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018), 1–8. For the writings of the immediate post-immigration years, see Hannah Arendt, *Vor Antisemitismus ist man nur noch auf dem Monde sicher: Beiträge für die deutsch-jüdische Emigrantenzeitung “Aufbau” 1941–1945*, ed. Marie Luise Knott (Munich: Piper, 2004).

8. Hannah Arendt, *Denktagebuch, 1950–1973*, ed. Ursula Ludz and Ingeborg Nordmann (Munich: Piper, 2022). In the following abbreviated as DT.

9. Arendt’s published writings contain only a few invocations of Benjamin’s works. She references his description of Paris as “the capital of the nineteenth century” and his critique of progress in Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1973), 79, 143, and in “Kafka: A Reevaluation,” in *Essays in Understanding*, 74–75. In her *Denktagebuch*, she invokes Benjamin’s concept of historical time in close proximity to Franz Kafka, without, however, referencing him in her corresponding published discussion of Kafka’s parable “He.” DT, 667, 669; and Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought* (New York: Viking, 1969), 7–14. In an entry from December 1968, Arendt invokes Benjamin’s idea that history is no longer transmissible (*tradierbar*), but only citable (*zitierbar*), in the context of the crisis of the humanities, which she discussed in her course on “Philosophy and Politics” at the New School for Social Research (DT, 702, 704). In *The Life of the Mind*, she notes that both Heidegger’s and Benjamin’s

understandings of truth have not fully relinquished the visual origin, citing Benjamin's claim that truth "slips by [*huscht vorüber*]." LM, 122; and "On the Concept of History," GS 4:390. Marie Luise Knott has suggested that Benjamin constitutes a "center left unspoken [*ein ungesagt gelassenes Zentrum*]" in Arendt's works, similar to the importance of Kafka for the writings of Hermann Broch. Knott, "Walter Benjamin," in *Arendt-Handbuch*, ed. Heuer, Heiter, and Rosenmüller, 254, my translation; see also Hermann Broch, *Dichten und Erkennen: Essays*, vol. 1, ed. Hannah Arendt (Zurich: Rhein-Verlag, 1950), 355.

10. Arendt, "What Remains? The Language Remains," in *Essays in Understanding*, 8.

11. Arendt's narrative theory and practice in *Origins* concern the question of mendacity. Martin Blumenthal-Barby draws a connection between Arendt's view of totalitarian propaganda and Benjamin's early remarks on "objective mendacity" from 1922 to 1923. Martin Blumenthal-Barby, "The Odium of Doubtfulness"; or, The Vicissitudes of Metaphorical Thinking," *New German Critique* 106 (2009): 69n13; "Notes on 'Objective Mendacity' I," TCV, 93–95; "Notes toward a Work on Lying II," TCV, 96–97; and Peter Fenves, "Testing Rights—Lying in View of Justice," *Cardozo Law Review* 13, no. 4 (1991): 1081–1114.

12. Thomas Meyer, *Hannah Arendt: Die Biografie* (Munich: Piper, 2023), 111, 119–20.

13. Young-Bruehl, *Hannah Arendt*, 105.

14. *Origins*, 126, 250, 293; and Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: Report on the Banality of Evil* (New York: Penguin, 2006), 105.

15. Jason Stanley, *How Propaganda Works* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), 4, 51–52. Similarly, the "manufacture of consent" (Walter Lippmann) emphasizes the artificiality and pragmatics of propagandistic language, tending to ignore its performative and memory-based components. See Noam Chomsky and Edward S. Herman, *The Manufacturing of Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media* (New York: Pantheon, 1988), lviv. Edward Bernays, the father of modern propaganda, also focuses on media, regarding language almost entirely as a promiscuous means of communication. Edward Bernays, *Propaganda* (New York: Horace Liveright, 1928). "Propaganda" starts with the reduction of names to signs, which conditions the use of signs for political purposes.

16. DT, 770, 772.

17. Hannah Arendt, *Men in Dark Times* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1968), 168. In the following abbreviated as MDT.

18. DT, 771.

19. OTD, 36. Arendt's note is from April 1970. She was familiar with Benjamin's "On Language as Such" at least since 1955, when it appeared in Adorno's edition of *Schriften*. It is likely, however, that Benjamin's distinct view of language was part of their conversations in Paris and Lourdes. Arendt does not comment on *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, although the title of her first book uses the word "Ursprung" (in the plural), and some of her remarks on methodology in her response to Eric Voegelin are reminiscent of Benjamin's notion of "constellation": "The book [. . .] gives a historical account of the elements which crystallized into totalitarianism." Hannah Arendt, "A Reply to Eric Voegelin," *Essays in Understanding*, 403. See also

Seyla Benhabib, “Hannah Arendt and the Redemptive Power of Narrative,” *Social Research* 57, no. 1 (1990): 172; and Annabel Herzog, “Illuminating Inheritance: Benjamin’s Influence on Arendt’s Political Storytelling,” *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 26, no. 5 (2000): 6–8.

20. DT, 723. My translation.

21. “On Language as Such and on the Language of Man,” SW 1:63.

22. DT, 690. My translation.

23. DT, 690. My translation.

24. DT, 690. My translation.

25. DT, 642–43. My translation.

26. LM, 100.

27. LM, 99.

28. DT, 644. My translation.

29. Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970), 179. In the following abbreviated as THC.

30. While Benjamin emphasizes that language transcends the human realm, Heidegger focuses on language as humanity’s privileged path to the meaning of being, a conception that persists after 1945 as the “call” in language and history. On their relationship, see Peter Fenves, “Entanglement—of Benjamin with Heidegger,” in *Sparks Will Fly: Benjamin and Heidegger*, ed. Andrew Benjamin and Dimitris Vardoulakis (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2015), 3–25; and Howard Caygill, “Benjamin, Heidegger, and the Destruction of Tradition,” in *Walter Benjamin’s Philosophy: Destruction and Experience*, ed. Andrew Benjamin and Peter Osborne (London: Routledge, 1994), 1–30. It is likely that Arendt had read Benjamin’s “On Language as Such” (1916) and perhaps also “On the Mimetic Faculty” (1933) by the late 1950s. On Arendt’s interpretation and transformation of Heidegger’s concept of “Rede,” see April N. Flakne, “Beyond Banality and Fatality: Arendt, Heidegger and Jaspers on Political Speech,” *New German Critique* 86 (2002): 3–18.

31. Benjamin discusses chatter in “On Language” with reference to Kierkegaard, and Heidegger in *Being and Time* in the context of the “they [*das Man*].” For the wider context, see Peter Fenves, *Chatter: Language and History in Kierkegaard* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993), 1–27.

32. DT, 345. My translation.

33. MD, 47.

34. LM, 5.

35. LM, 4; and Arendt, *Eichmann*, 48, 85–86.

36. Quoted in Ursula Ludz, “Werk und Werkgruppen,” in *Arendt-Handbuch*, ed. Heuer, Heiter, and Rosenmüller, 14.

37. Yasemin Yildiz develops the concept of multilingualism in the German-speaking context against the backdrop of “monologualism,” which, as she argues, “is much more than a simple quantitative term designating the presence of just one language. Instead, it constitutes a key structuring principle that organizes the entire range of modern social life, from the construction of individuals and their proper subjectivities to the formation of disciplines and institutions, as well as of imagined collectives such as cultures and nations” (2), a structuring principle that had been obfuscated since the emergence of the monolingual paradigm in late-eighteenth-

century Europe. Yasemin Yildiz, *Beyond the Mother Tongue: The Postmonolingual Condition* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2012), 1–21, 203–11.

38. Barbara Hahn, *Hannah Arendt—Leidenschaften, Menschen und Bücher* (Berlin: Berliner Taschenbuch, 2005), 107. My translation.

39. Richard H. King, *Arendt and America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 80–88; and Meyer, *Hannah Arendt*, 207–12.

40. Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 7.

41. DT, 42. My translation.

42. DT, 42. Translation Thomas Wild, “By Relating It’: On Modes of Writing and Judgment in the *Denktagebuch*,” in *Artifacts of Thinking: Reading Hannah Arendt’s Denktagebuch*, ed. Roger Berkowitz and Ian Storey (New York: Fordham University Press, 2017), 56.

43. Hannah Arendt, “Truth and Politics,” in *Between Past and Future*, 234.

44. DT, 42. My translation.

45. The uncertainty resulting from multilingualism resembles the incompleteness that Derrida describes as a property of translation: “What the multiplicity of idioms comes to limit is [. . .] also a structural order, a coherence of construct. There is then (let us translate) something like an internal limit to formalization, an incompleteness of the constructure.” Jacques Derrida, “Des tours de Babel,” trans. Joseph F. Graham, in *Psyche: Inventions of the Other*, vol. 1 (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007), 191. See also Weigel, “Sounding Through,” in “*Escape to Life*,” ed. Goebel and Weigel, 72. Weigel understands Arendt’s self-translation into German in analogy to Freud’s method of working through. The reverse argument could also be made, namely, that Arendt’s bilingual work shows the linguistic conditioning of the process of recollection, remembrance, and detachment. The first language is not the original; rather, the work in the other language opens interspaces that can be spelled out and explored at a later point.

46. DT, 42. My translation.

47. DT, 42. My translation.

48. DT, 43. My translation.

49. Samuel Weber, *Benjamin’s -abilities* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), 3–10.

50. See Yildiz, *Beyond the Mother Tongue*, 204.

51. DT, 43. Translation based on Wild, “By Relating It,” in *Artifacts of Thinking*, ed. Berkowitz and Storey, 56.

52. Jacob Grimm, “Über die Heimatliebe. 1830 (De desiderio patriae),” in *Göttinger Universitätsreden aus zwei Jahrhunderten*, ed. Wilhelm Ebel (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1978), 222. My translation.

53. THC, 9; and Hannah Arendt, “We Refugees,” in *The Jewish Writings*, ed. Jerome Kohn and Ron H. Feldman (New York: Schocken, 2007), 264.

54. THC, 177.

55. THC, 178.

56. Arendt, *Eichmann*, 275.

57. Hannah Arendt, “Reflections on Little Rock,” *Dissent* 6, no. 1 (1959): 51.

58. Arendt’s responses to the Civil Rights Movement have been criticized as racist and elitist. Kathryn T. Gines, “Hannah Arendt, Liberalism, and Racism: Controversies Concerning Violence, Segregation, and Education,” *Southern Journal of*

Philosophy 47 (2009): 53–76; Kathryn T. Gines, *Hannah Arendt and the Negro Question* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2014), 2–6, 43–58; King, *Arendt and America*, 165–87; and Robert Bernasconi, “The Double Face of the Political and the Social: Hannah Arendt and America’s Racial Divisions,” *Research in Phenomenology* 26 (1996): 3–24. Christopher J. Lee has argued that Arendt’s analyses of imperialism, antisemitism, and genocide provide powerful resources for postcolonial studies. Christopher J. Lee, “Locating Hannah Arendt within Postcolonial Thought: A Prospectus,” *College Literature* 38, no. 1 (2011): 95–114.

59. Winfried Thaa, “Die Krisen der Republik,” in *Hannah-Arendt-Handbuch*, ed. Heuer, Heiter, and Rosenmüller, 119. My translation.

60. Thomas Schestag, “Vorwort des Herausgebers,” in *Philo:xenia. Erste Folge*, ed. Thomas Schestag (Basel: Engler, 2009), 7. My translation.

61. Claiming that Arendt’s reflections on Little Rock “played no role” for the history of Black intellectuals and the Civil Rights Movement neglects the missed opportunity on Arendt’s part to recognize and support their work and activism. Meyer, *Hannah Arendt*, 417. My translation. The essay reveals, in retrospect, a missed chance to learn from transnational differences regarding the limits between society and politics.

62. Letter to Theodor W. Adorno, February 23, 1939, C, 597. This letter was included in Adorno and Scholem’s letter edition of 1966, which Arendt read carefully in the context of her polemics against the Frankfurt Institute. Arendt’s note about everyday language and synonyms is from April 1970, whereas the reflection on the plurality of language is from November 1950.

63. See, for example, the following entry from February 1968: “Die alten Metaphern tragen nicht mehr: Warum sollte das Unsichtbare zum Beispiel im Himmel lokalisiert sein. / Remembrance renders the visible invisible, but—verinnerlicht, sieht nicht das Unsichtbare im Sichtbaren. / a) Obst: I order fruits, my category, related to man. / b) Being: ?” DT, 708.

64. DT, 770.

65. DT, 770.

66. Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), 165 (§27). Arendt recalled the sentence with a slight modification that reveals her emphasis on its metaphorical content: “The light of the public obscures everything” or “The light of the public darkens everything.” MDT, ix, 189.

67. MDT, ix.

68. *Origins of Totalitarianism*, 222, 264, 266.

69. “Franz Kafka,” SW 2:802.

70. Arendt discusses the Nazis’ term “language rule” in *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, 85–86.

71. Arendt, *Eichmann*, 105.

72. DT, 214.

73. DT, 728. My translation. This resembles parts of Derrida’s argument, according to which all language is metaphorical because words only refer to other words, as they do in Aristotle’s basic definition of metaphor, without ever pointing to an

object or referent. See Jacques Derrida, “White Mythology: Metaphor in the Text of Philosophy,” trans. F. C. T. Moore, *New Literary History* 6, no. 1 (1974): 5–74. Arendt’s claim, however, does not aim at the instability of sign systems, but at language’s work of carrying manifest everyday language into the nonsensual realm of thinking.

74. DT 771.

75. DT, 46; translation by Blumenthal-Barby, “The Odium of Doubtfulness,” 72.

76. Hannah Arendt, “Karl Jaspers: A Laudatio,” in MDT, 75. “In the works of a great writer,” Arendt suggests in the same paragraph, “we can almost always find a consistent metaphor peculiar to him alone in which his whole work seems to come to a focus. One such metaphor in Jaspers’s work is the word ‘clarity.’”

77. LM, 98.

78. LM, 103, 104.

79. LM, 103.

80. The basis for Arendt’s understanding is Aristotle’s notion of the metaphor as a “perfect resemblance of two relations between totally dissimilar things” (LM 165). There is no similarity between the two objects, but their inner relations resemble each other. Arendt describes Nietzsche’s description of the willing ego as a wave as a “perfect metaphor”: “the two dissimilar things the metaphor is bringing together not only resemble each other, for Nietzsche they are identical” (LM 165). She adds, however, that this “mathematical understanding” misses something essential about the workings of the metaphor, namely, that it is not symmetrical, but processual: “What is lost in the mathematical reckoning is the actual function of the metaphor, its turning the mind back to the sensory world in order to illuminate the mind’s non-sensory experiences for which there are no words in any language” (LM 106).

81. LM, 103–4.

82. In the section “Metaphor and the Ineffable,” Arendt discusses the limits of the metaphor in its reliance on the senses, particularly vision and hearing, and its inability to show the purposelessness of thinking, “in which something invisible within us deals with the invisibles of the world” (LM, 123). While metaphors bridge the “two worlds” of sense and intellect, they reveal their instrumental character, which distinguishes them from the “pure” language of thought.

83. LM, 109.

84. *Origins*, 445.

85. Hannah Arendt, “The Image of Hell,” in *Essays in Understanding*, 200.

86. Hannah Arendt, “Social Science Techniques and the Study of Concentration Camps,” in *Essays in Understanding*, 241.

87. DT, 771. Arendt also suggested that Heidegger thought poetically. While Heidegger’s metaphors such as the “clearing of being” (*Lichtung des Seins*) or the “ringing of silence” (*Geläut der Stille*) seek to destabilize the petrified vocabularies and terminologies of epistemology and metaphysics, they are grotesquely detached from the social reality of the 1930s and 1940s. Benjamin’s metaphors such as “aura” or the “angel of history” are concerned with the interruption of historical and political violence.

88. MDT, 166. This remark, directed against Adorno’s critique of Benjamin’s “Baudelaire” essay, indicates that she discerned language’s non-instrumental efficacy

as the issue at the heart of what Adorno called Benjamin's "anthropological materialism." Theodor W. Adorno and Walter Benjamin, *The Complete Correspondence, 1928–1940*, trans. Nicholas Walker (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 146, 283.

89. Arendt refers to Hans Blumenberg's *Paradigms for a Metaphorology* (1960), in which he argues that metaphors are a way of coping with a threatening and largely incomprehensible reality. Arendt acknowledges Blumenberg's discovery that "modern pseudo-sciences owe their plausibility to the seeming evidence of metaphor, which they substitute for the lacking evidence of data" (LM 113), a claim that supports her distinction between obfuscating slogans and poetic metaphors.

90. Michael Löwy, *Fire Alarm: Reading Walter Benjamin's "On the Concept of History,"* trans. Chris Turner (London: Verso, 2005), 16.

91. See Irving Wohlfarth, "Entsetzen: Walter Benjamin and the Red Army Faction, Part One," *Radical Philosophy* 152 (2008): 7–19. The other two parts of this essay appeared in the consecutive issues of the same journal. See also the reconstruction in Burkhardt Lindner, "Das Politische und das Messianische: Hannah Arendt und Walter Benjamin," in *Affinität wider Willen? Hannah Arendt, Theodor W. Adorno und die Frankfurter Schule*, ed. Liliane Weissberg (Frankfurt am Main: Campus, 2011), 214–17.

92. Giorgio Agamben, "The Limits of Violence," *Diacritics* 39, no. 4 (2009): 105.

93. In the German version of *On Violence*, Arendt adds a reference to Agamben's essay "The Limits of Violence" (1970), in which he develops his concept of "sacred" revolutionary violence based on Benjamin's "Critique of Violence." Her various discussions of the means–ends relationship as violence in *The Human Condition* and *Denktagebuch* make no reference to Benjamin's idea of "pure means," which connects his philosophy of language to his critique of violence. This omission suggests that Arendt either found it unhelpful, was undecided on it, or felt it best to avoid addressing it explicitly. Burkhardt Lindner argues that Arendt rejected the "destructive impulse" of Benjamin's notion of the messianic, which was directed against the concept of progress in the minds of the anti-fascist opposition, and which she reduced, based on a kind of defense mechanism, to the figure of the collector as historiographer. Lindner, "Das Politische und das Messianische," in *Affinität wider Willen?*, 228. My translation. Arendt's judgment on "Critique of Violence" may have resembled that on the "Artwork" essay, which she shrugged off with the words: "I don't like the essay, though it was very important to Benjamin." Arendt to Scholem, 25. September, 1946, in Arendt and Scholem, *Correspondence*, 59.

94. Hannah Arendt, *On Violence* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1970), 4, 42, 46.

95. Arendt, *On Violence*, 42.

96. Arendt, *On Violence*, 53.

97. Arendt, *On Violence*, 45; and Hannah Arendt, "What is Authority?," in *Between Past and Future*, 91–141.

98. Jürgen Habermas, "Hannah Arendt's Communications Concept of Power," trans. Thomas McCarthy, *Social Research* 44, no. 1 (1977): 3–24.

99. TCV, 50.

100. The question of linguistic violence pertains to the tension between liberalism and radical resistance in Arendt's work. While her strict separation of politics and

society led her to underestimate the cultural struggles of disenfranchised social groups, her ideas about how speech, storytelling, and metaphors oppose the totalitarian obfuscation of politics offer powerful “pure means” of resistance.

101. Judith Butler criticizes Arendt’s gender assumptions regarding the public and private sphere as well as the diminution of the body in her conception of public appearance, while acknowledging that the “angered [and] indignant” reveal linguistic or legal exclusion by assembling in public. The act of appearing to others, particularly against their will, is a political act because of one’s appearance as a social being—as worker, squatter, child, or refugee—and this being is constituted “not only in vocal and written language,” but also “through a performativity of the body.” Judith Butler, *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015), 75, 45, 80–83.

102. DT, 340. My translation.

103. DT, 528. My translation.

104. DT, 345. My translation.

105. Andrew Benjamin suggests that the correspondences between Benjamin’s “caesura” and Arendt’s “natality,” specifically her descriptions of “promise” and “pardon” in *The Human Condition*, offer further entry points into a reconstruction of their unarticulated philosophical dialogue. A. Benjamin, “Walter Benjamin and Arendt,” in *The Bloomsbury Companion to Hannah Arendt*, ed. Graton and Sari, 149–50.

106. DT, 345. My translation.

107. DT, 345. My translation.

108. THC, 130, 139.

109. See Wout Cornelissen, “Thinking in Metaphors,” in *Artifacts of Thinking*, ed. Berkowitz and Storey, 75. I take the English “speechless” and the German “sprachlos” to describe the absence of speaking or speech, not of language as such.

110. DT, 428. Translation Cornelissen, “Thinking in Metaphors,” 83.

111. In Old English, the dative case was used to refer to the possessor, as in contemporary German. This function was lost likely due to external language contact by the late ninth century. Cynthia L. Allen, *Dative External Possessors in Early English* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 1–14; and Michail L. Kotin, “Der deutsche Dativ genealogisch und diachron: Eine Sprachwandelstudie über den dritten Fall,” *Beiträge zur Geschichte der deutschen Sprache und Literatur* 143, no. 1 (2021): 51–111.

112. In a passage of *The Human Condition* that Arendt reworked with particular attention in her German translation, she writes that “of all things of thought, poetry is closest to thought, and a poem is less a thing than any other work of art [*das am wenigsten dingliche unter den Welt dingen*]; yet even a poem, no matter how long it existed as a living spoken word in the recollection of the bard and those who listened to him, will eventually be ‘made,’ that is, written down and transformed into a tangible thing among things.” THC, 170. See also Hahn, “Hannah Arendts Literaturen,” 20–21.

113. Thomas Schestag suggests that Benjamin’s rendition of the French “rupture” as “Durchbruch” (breakthrough) in the thirteenth thesis of Arendt’s manuscript of “On the Concept of History” informed her discussion of narrative reconstruction in her Lessing prize speech, “On Humanity in Dark Times: Thoughts about Lessing,” written in 1959 and published in German in 1960 and in English in 1968, in which she

uses the word to describe the permanent possibility of poetry's sudden appearance. Thomas Schestag, *Die unbewältigte Sprache: Hannah Arendts Theorie der Dichtung* (Basel: Engler, 2006), 25n21; Hannah Arendt, *Von der Menschlichkeit in finsternen Zeiten: Rede über Lessing* (Munich: Piper, 1960), 35.

114. "Surrealism: The Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia," SW 2:218.

115. Elisabeth Young-Bruehl, "The Art of Alarm," *The Good Society* 16, no. 2 (2007): 19–24; and "Goethe's Elective Affinities," SW 1:298.

116. DT 48, my translation; and THC, 168.

117. Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 94.

Chapter 5

1. Letter to the philosopher Otto Pöggeler, August 9, 1960. Paul Celan, "etwas ganz und gar Persönliches." *Briefe 1934–1970*, ed. Barbara Wiedemann (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2019), 463. My translation.

2. Paul Celan, "The Meridian," in *Selected Poems and Prose of Paul Celan*, trans. John Felstiner (New York: Norton, 2001), 403. For the notion of "counter-poems," see Erich Fried, *Befreiung von der Flucht: Gedichte und Gegengedichte* (Hamburg: Claassen, 1968). My translation.

3. Marlies Janz, *Vom Engagement absoluter Poesie: Zur Lyrik und Ästhetik Paul Celans* (Frankfurt am Main: Syndikat, 1976), 62. My translation.

4. See Theo Buck, "Weite und Enge: Zu einer lyrischen Auseinandersetzung Celans mit Brecht," in *Festschrift für Friedrich Beißner*, ed. Ulrich Gaier and Werner Volke (Bebenhausen: L. Rotsch, 1974), 67–89; and Paul Peters, "Himmel der Verfinsterung: Faschismus und Apokalypse bei Brecht und Celan," *Weimarer Beiträge* 59, no. 3 (2013): 325–61.

5. On the relationship between Brecht and Benjamin, see Erdmut Wizisla, *Benjamin and Brecht: The Story of a Friendship*, trans. Christine Shuttleworth (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009).

6. Paul Celan, *La bibliothèque philosophique—die philosophische Bibliothek*, ed. Alexandra Richter, Patrik Alac, and Bertrant Badiou (Paris: Éditions Rue d'Ulm, 2004), 268–303, 746n2; and Paul Celan, *Die Gedichte: Neue kommentierte Gesamtausgabe*, ed. Barbara Wiedemann (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2018), 1176. See also Ralf Zschachlitz, "Le recueil *Schneepart* dans l'optique des *Gedichte aus dem Nachlaß*," *Études Germanistique* 3 (2000): 665–84; and Christine Ivanović, "Trauer—nicht Traurigkeit: Celan als Leser Benjamins; Beobachtungen am Nachlaß," *Celan-Jahrbuch* 6 (1995): 119–59. Ivanović suggests that Celan might have become aware of Benjamin even earlier through the publications of some of his essays in French or through his conversations with Adorno (144–45).

7. Zschachlitz, "Le recueil 'Schneepart,'" 669–72; Jean Bollak, *Dichtung wider Dichtung: Paul Celan und die Literatur*, ed. Werner Wögerbauer (Göttingen: Wallenstein, 2006), 153–64; and Ulisse Dogà, "Port Bou—deutsch?": *Paul Celan liest Walter Benjamin* (Aachen: Rimbaud, 2009).

8. Jan Knopf, "Zeilenkommentar zu *Svendborger Gedichte*," in Bertolt Brecht, *Werke: Große kommentierte Berliner und Frankfurter Ausgabe*, ed. Werner Hecht et al. (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1988), 12:387.

9. Bertolt Brecht, "An die Nachgeborenen," in *Werke*, 12:85.
10. Bertolt Brecht, "To Those Born Later," trans. Edith Anderson et al., in *Poems 1913–1956*, ed. John Willett and Ralph Manheim (New York: Methuen, 1976), 318. See also the translation by H. R. Hays: "Ah, what an age it is / When to speak of trees is almost a crime / For it is a kind of silence about injustice!" in Bertolt Brecht, "To Posterity," *Selected Poems*, trans. H. R. Hays (New York: Grove Press, 1959), 173.
11. Paul Celan, "Ein Blatt, baumlos," in *Von den Nachgeborenen: Dichtungen auf Bertolt Brecht*, ed. Jürgen P. Wallmann (Zürich: Die Arche, 1970), 9.
12. Paul Celan, "Ein Blatt," in *Gesammelte Werke in sieben Bänden*, vol. 2, ed. Beda Allemann and Stefan Reichert (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2000), 385.
13. Paul Celan, "Ein Blatt / A leaf," in *Selected Poems and Prose of Paul Celan*, trans. John Felstiner (New York: W. W. Norton, 2001), 343. See also the translation by Michael Hamburger: "A LEAF, treeless / for Bertolt Brecht: // What times are these / when a conversation / is almost a crime / because it includes / so much made explicit?" Paul Celan, "A leaf," *Poems of Paul Celan*, trans. Michael Hamburger, 2nd ed. (New York: Persea, 2002), 319.
14. Peter Szondi, *Celan Studies*, trans. Susan Bernofsky (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 85, 125n5.
15. Wolfgang Emmerich, "Autoren aus der DDR," in *Celan-Handbuch: Leben—Werk—Wirkung*, ed. Markus May, Peter Goßens, and Jürgen Lehmann (Stuttgart: J. B. Metzler, 2008), 325–26.
16. Jacob Grimm and Wilhelm Grimm, *Deutsches Wörterbuch*, vol. 5 (Leipzig: S. Hirzel, 1897), ln. 4161–65.
17. Paul Celan, "The Meridian: Speech on the Occasion of the Award of the Georg Büchner Prize," in *Selected Poems and Prose*, 410.
18. Buck, "Weite und Enge," in *Festschrift für Friedrich Beißner*, ed. Gaier and Volke, 71, 75–77.
19. Ralf Zschachlitz, *Vermittelte Unmittelbarkeit: Paul Celans kritische Poetik* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1990), 173–82; and Pajari Räsänen, *Counter-Figures: An Essay on Antimetaphoric Resistance, Paul Celan's Poetry and Poetics at the Limits of Figuralität*. Diss. University of Helsinki, 2007.
20. Gerhard Richter, "Gespräch über Bäume," *Zeitschrift für kritische Theorie* 34/35 (2012): 202–13.
21. Buck, "Weite und Enge," 73. My translations. See also Georg-Michael Schulz, *Negativität in der Dichtung Paul Celans* (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer, 1977), 235n23.
22. Grimm, *Deutsches Wörterbuch*, vol. 25 (Leipzig: S. Hirzel, 1956), ln. 159–62.
23. Grimm, *Deutsches Wörterbuch*, vol. 25, ln. 159.
24. Bertolt Brecht, "Finnische Guttspeisekammer 1940," in *Werke*, 12:99; and Bertolt Brecht, "Larder on a Finnish Estate, 1940," *Poems 1913–1956*, 352. See also Bertolt Brecht, *Journals 1934–1955*, trans. Hugh Rorrison, ed. John Willett (London: Methuen, 1993), 80.
25. Brecht, "An die Nachgeborenen," 87.
26. Brecht, *Journals 1934–1955*, 17. Translation modified. Brecht cites Goethe's poem "Gefunden [Found]" (1813), which begins with the lines: "Ich ging im Walde / So für mich hin."
27. "Tagebuchnotizen 1938," GS 6:539. My translation.

28. This argument against the complicity of not speaking up returned as the slogan “silence is violence” during the protests against the murder of George Floyd in 2020. The phrase claims that not acting or being indifferent toward the crimes committed against oppressed social groups amounts to committing direct violence against them. See Nikita Dhawan, *Impossible Speech: On the Politics of Violence and Silence* (Sankt Augustin: Academia, 2007), 249–73.

29. Schulz, *Negativität in der Dichtung Paul Celans*, 233–35; and Dietmar Goltschnigg, “Intertextuelle Traditionsbezüge im Medium des Zitats am Beispiel von Erich Frieds lyrischem Dialog mit Paul Celan,” in *Literarische Tradition heute: Deutschsprachige Gegenwartsliteratur in ihrem Verhältnis zur Tradition*, ed. Gerd Labrousse and Gerhard Peter Knapp (Amsterdam: Rolopi, 1988), 40.

30. See Wagner, *Bertolt Brecht*, 238.

31. Goltschnigg, “Intertextuelle Traditionsbezüge,” in *Literarische Tradition heute*, ed. Labrousse and Knapp, 44. “In its paradoxical attempt to make speechlessness [*Sprachlosigkeit*] the object of the poem, Paul Celan’s poetry verges on silence [*bewegt sich . . . an der Grenze des Schweigens*].” Ludwig Völker, *Muse Melancholie, Therapeutikum Poesie: Studien zum Melancholie-Problem in der deutschen Lyrik von Höltz bis Benn* (Munich: Fink, 1978), 147. My translation.

32. Jürgen H. Petersen, *Absolute Lyrik: Die Entwicklung poetischer Sprachautonomie im deutschen Gedicht vom 18. Jahrhundert bis zur Gegenwart* (Berlin: Erich Schmidt, 2006), 188. Brecht himself practiced the “corrections of old myths.” See Brecht, *Werke*, 19:338–41.

33. Szondi, *Celan Studies*, 89.

34. Paul Celan, “Port Bou—deutsch?,” in *Die Gedichte*, 519.

35. There are no direct indications of Celan’s readings of Benjamin’s essays “On Language as Such,” “Critique of Violence,” and “On the Mimetic Faculty.” In his copy of *Schriften*, these essays show no underlining or comments in the margins. It seems unlikely, however, that Celan studied almost all of Benjamin’s essays and treatises in *Schriften* in detail, but skipped those that are concerned with language, violence, and mimesis. Celan added the date “August 1965” at the beginning of his copy of *Kritik der Gewalt und andere Aufsätze*, which appeared the same year. Celan, *La bibliothèque philosophique*, 268, 287, 302–3.

36. Brecht, “An die Nachgeborenen,” in *Werke* 12:85; and Brecht, “To Those Born Later,” in *Poems 1913–1956*, 318.

37. Brecht, *Werke*, 14:364; and Brecht, *Poems 1913–1956*, 274. The final lines of “Schlechte Zeit für Lyrik [*Bad Times for Poetry*]” invoke a related motif: “In mir streiten sich / Die Begeisterung über den blühenden Apfelbaum / Und das Entsetzen über die Reden des Anstreichers. / Aber nur das zweite / Drängt mich zum Schreibtisch [*Inside me contend / Delight at the apple tree in blossom / And horror at the house-painter’s speeches. / But only the second / Drives me to my desk*].” Brecht, *Werke*, 14:432; and Brecht, *Poems 1913–1956*, 331. See also “Vom Klettern in Bäumen” and “In finstern Zeiten,” Brecht, *Werke*, 11:71–72 and 14:433.

38. Bertolt Brecht, “Gefährlichkeit der Intelligenzbestien,” in *Werke*, 22:341. My translation.

39. Max Frisch, *Sketchbook 1946–1949*, trans. Geoffrey Skelton (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1977), 153–54. Quoted in Buck, “Weite und Enge,” in *Festschrift für Friedrich Beißner*, ed. Gaier and Volke, 72.

40. John Felstiner, *Paul Celan: Poet, Survivor, Jew* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 64–65.

41. Celan's and Brecht's experiences of exile and Nazi violence differed greatly. Brecht, who was not Jewish, fled Germany in 1933, immigrated via Scandinavia and Russia to the United States, and returned to Germany in 1948. He was never imprisoned by the Nazis or any other fascists but lived in a variety of cultural, political, and linguistic environments including Denmark, the United States, and the newly formed German Democratic Republic. Stephen Parker, *Bertolt Brecht: A Literary Life* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 305–550. Celan was subjected to forced labor and exposed to physical and linguistic violence in Romania under the dictatorship of Ion Antonescu between 1942 and 1944. Israel Chalfen, *Paul Celan: A Biography of His Youth*, trans. Maximilian Bleyleben (New York: Persea Books, 1991), 147–65; and Leonard Forster, "Todesfuge: Paul Celan, Immanuel Weissglas and the Psalmist," *German Life and Letters* 39, no. 1 (1985): 2–3.

42. Because of this tension, "A leaf" and "To Those Born After" have been described as representatives of absolute and committed poetry. See Petersen, *Absolute Lyrik*, 188–89; Frank Dietrich Wagner, *Bertolt Brecht: Kritik des Faschismus* (Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag, 1989), 236–39; and Amy Colin, *Paul Celan: Holograms of Darkness* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 155–57.

43. Paul Celan, "Fadensonnen," in *Gesammelte Werke*, 2:26; Felstiner, *Paul Celan*, 218.

44. Hamacher notes how, in Celan, the critique of the language of commodity fetishism merges with trauma theory's attention to the reification of consciousness as a protective layer, locating the forceful resistance of Celan's poems in the refusal and evasion of any kind of positing (*Setzung*). Werner Hamacher, "HÄM. Ein Gedicht Paul Celans mit Motiven Benjamins," in *Keinmaleins: Texte zu Celan* (Frankfurt am Main: Klostermann, 2019), 51–52.

45. Buck, "Weite und Enge," in *Festschrift für Friedrich Beißner*, ed. Gaier and Volke, 77.

46. Letter to Martin Buber, July 1916, C, 80; and "On the Mimetic Faculty," SW 2:722.

47. Jean Bollack, "Paul Celan über die Sprache: Das Gedicht 'Sprachgitter' und seine Interpretation," trans. Henriette Beese and Jean Bollack, in *Paul Celan*, ed. Werner Hamacher and Winfried Menninghaus (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1988), 277, 282–84.

48. "Der Augenblick der Geburt," GS 2:956. My translation.

49. See Felix Duque, "Vollendete Uneigennützigkeit: Das Heilige bei Heidegger und Hölderlin," in "*Voll Verdienst, doch dichterisch wohnt der Mensch auf dieser Erde*": *Heidegger und Hölderlin*, ed. Peter Trawny (Frankfurt am Main: Klostermann, 2000), 147–48.

50. Gershom Scholem, *Walter Benjamin: The Story of a Friendship*, trans. Harry Zohn (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1981), 208.

51. Brecht, *Journals 1934–1955*, 90.

52. Brecht, *Journals 1934–1955*, 90. Translation modified. Brecht, "Journal Finnland 1940/41," in *Werke* 26:416.

53. Hans Peter Neureuter, "Gedichte 1933–1941, Einführung," in *Brecht-Handbuch*, vol. 2, ed. Jan Knopf (Stuttgart: J. B. Metzler, 2001), 217.

54. Brecht, *Journals 1934–1955*, 90. See Ari Linden, *Karl Kraus and the Discourse of Modernity* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2020), 105–13.

55. “Doctrine of the Similar,” SW 2:697.

56. Bertolt Brecht, “Short Organon for the Theater,” in *Brecht on Theater*, 3rd ed., ed. Marc Silberman, Steve Giles, and Tom Kuhn, trans. Steve Giles and John Willett (London: Bloomsbury Methuen Drama, 2015), 229.

57. Scholem, *Walter Benjamin*, 209. See also Benjamin’s description of the relationship between materialism and theology in “On the Concept of History,” SW 4:389.

58. Scholem, *Walter Benjamin*, 209.

59. Paul Celan, “Ein Blatt,” *Schneepart: Vorstufen—Textgenese—Reinschrift*, ed. Heino Schmull (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2002), 97. “because it includes so much / that is said / along with it.” My translation.

60. Theodor W. Adorno and Paul Celan, *Briefwechsel 1960–1968*, ed. Joachim Seng, in *Frankfurter Adorno Blätter*, vol. 8, ed. Theodor W. Adorno Archiv (Munich: Text + Kritik, 2003), 184. Celan refers to a line in Hölderlin’s poem “Brot und Wein [*Bread and Wine*]”: “wozu Dichter in dürftiger Zeit? [*who wants poets at all in lean years?*]” Friedrich Hölderlin, *Sämtliche Werke und Briefe*, ed. Michael Knaupp, vol. 1 (Munich: Carl Hanser, 1992), 378; and Friedrich Hölderlin, *Poems and Fragments*, trans. Michael Hamburger (London: Anvil, 1994), 270.

61. Paul Celan, “Speech on the Occasion of Receiving the Literature Prize of the Free Hanseatic City of Bremen,” in *Selected Poems and Prose*, 395.

62. Friedrich Hölderlin, “Remarks on ‘Antigone,’” in *Essays and Letters on Theory*, trans. and ed. Thomas Pfau (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988), 114.

63. Hölderlin, “Remarks on ‘Antigone,’” 114. See also Friedrich Hölderlin, *The Death of Empedocles: A Mourning-Play*, trans. David Farrell Krell (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2008), 224–25.

64. Theodor W. Adorno, “Theses on the Language of the Philosopher,” in *Adorno and the Need in Thinking: New Critical Essays*, ed. Donald A. Burke et al. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007), 37.

65. Theodor W. Adorno, “Commitment,” in *Notes to Literature*, vol. 2, trans. Sherry Weber Nicholsen (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), 82.

66. Adorno, “Commitment,” 82.

67. Brecht’s word is not “Grausamkeiten” (atrocities), however, but “Untaten,” literally “non-deeds,” which underlines the linguistic, murderous-factual dimension of fascism’s crimes.

68. Adorno, “Commitment,” 86–87.

69. Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (London: Continuum, 2002), 321.

70. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 321. Translation changed.

71. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 321.

72. Werner Hamacher, *Premises: Essays on Philosophy and Literature from Kant to Celan*, trans. Peter Fenves (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), 9.

73. Paul Celan, “Gespräche mit Baumrinden,” in *Gesammelte Werke*, 7:49. My translation.

74. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 322.

75. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 322.
76. Letter to Ernst Schoen, June 22, 1914, C, 70.
77. “On Language as Such,” SW 1:62.
78. “Experience and Poverty,” SW 2:731. See Shoshana Felman, “Benjamin’s Silence,” *Critical Inquiry* 25, no. 2 (1999): 218.
79. Letter to Carla Seligson, September 15, 1913, GB 1:175. My translation.
80. “Youth Was Silent,” EW, 136.
81. “Metaphysics of Youth,” SW 1:6.
82. “Metaphysics of Youth,” SW 1:7.
83. MD, 47; GS 6:331. See Adi Nester, “Silence, Medium, Transmission: Walter Benjamin’s Metaphysics of Language and Youth,” *Forces of Education: Walter Benjamin and the Politics of Pedagogy*, ed. Dennis Johannßen and Dominik Zechner (London: Bloomsbury, 2022), 125–41.
84. Olivia Wenzel, “So viele Augen,” *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, July 1, 2020. My translation.
85. Bertolt Brecht, “California Autumn” (1941), in *Poems 1913–1956*, 383; and Bertolt Brecht, “Kalifornischer Herbst,” *Werke*, 15:44. Peters (“Himmel der Verfinsterung,” 326) suggested that Celan’s “A leaf, treeless” references Brecht’s image of himself as a “treeless leaf [*baumloses Blatt*]” in his exile in California.

Epilogue

1. May Ayim, “Das Jahr 1990: Heimat und Einheit aus afro-deutscher Perspektive,” in *Entfernte Verbindungen: Rassismus, Antisemitismus und Klassenunterdrückung*, ed. Ika Hügel-Marshall (Berlin: Orlanda-Frauenverlag, 1993), 215, my translation. See also Christian Kopp and Marius Krohn, “Blues in Schwarz-Weiß: Berlins Black Community im Widerstand gegen kolonialrassistische Straßennamen,” in *Black Berlin: Die deutsche Metropole und ihre afrikanische Diaspora in Geschichte und Gegenwart*, ed. Oumar Diallo and Joachim Zeller (Berlin: Metropol, 2014), 219–31; and Tiffany Florvil, *Mobilizing Black Germany: Afro-German Women and the Making of a Transnational Movement* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2020), 92, 128–29, 180.
2. Ayim, “Das Jahr 1990,” 215. My translation.
3. Götz Aly, “Rettet die Berliner Mohrenstraße!,” *Berliner Zeitung*, May 18, 2021. My translation.
4. Eleonora Roldán Mendivil and Bafta Sarbo, “Einleitung,” in *Die Diversität der Ausbeutung: Zur Kritik des herrschenden Antirassismus*, ed. Eleonora Roldán Mendivil and Bafta Sarbo (Berlin: Dietz, 2023), 19–20. My translation.
5. AP, 522.
6. AP, 518.
7. AP, 518.
8. AP, 521, 519.
9. Sharon Dodua Otoo, “das erinnern (ein gedicht statt einer rede),” ISD Online, accessed September 12, 2025. <https://isdonline.de/das-erinnern/>
10. AP, 522.

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Index

Note: Page references in italics indicate illustrations and tables

- accents, 117
acoustics, 93
action: language and, 38; political, 111, 117; speech and, 117
Adorno, Theodor W., 73, 102–3, 163n47, 184n62, 185n88; *Aesthetic Theory*, 145; on Brecht, 146–47; Celan on, 12; on commodity fetishism, 76–77, 80; in exile, 1; *Kierkegaard*, 78; letters with Benjamin, 77, 79; on linguistic violence, 3; literary legacy of, 2; mythological Platonism for, 74; on names, 87–88; on names over concepts, 10; writings on fascism, 8
Aesthetic Theory (Adorno), 145
allegory, 74, 78–79
Aly, Götz, 152
ambiguity: affects of, 123–24; of silence, 149
analogy, 50, 52, 93, 122, 129
anthropological materialism, 77
anti-fascism, 78, 80, 82, 98
anti-oppressive language: metaphors and, 123–26; philology and, 74; salutary effects of, 36–39; in Third Reich, 1, 83, 102; in Weimar Republic, 1
anti-oppressive mourning, 95–98, 100, 102, 155
anti-propaganda, 11, 83, 105, 125
antisemitism: Arendt’s childhood experiences with, 104–7; Final Solution and, 56; “illegal,” 107–8; as linguistic violence, 108; political narratives of, 39–40; World War I and, 30–31
anti-trauma, anti-traumatic, 154
Antonescu, Ion, 191n41
Arcades Project, 48–49, 153
Arendt, Hannah, 179n5, 181n19; on ambiguity, 123–24; antisemitism towards, 104–7; Benjamin as philosophical influence on, 2, 104, 109; on Civil Rights Movement in U.S., 109, 118–19, 183n58, 184n61; *Denktagebuch*, 11, 106, 115, 130; early life for, 104; *Eichmann in Jerusalem* in, 122; on equality, 118, 120; exile for, 1, 104–6; on Heidegger, 185n87; *The Human Condition*, 106, 111–12, 186n93; *Illuminations* and, 106; immigrant experience for, 113; on language as distinct from speaking, 110; *The Life of the Mind*, 11, 105–6, 113; linguistic plurality and, 105, 114–20; on linguistic violence, 3, 107, 128–29; literary legacy of, 2; literary works while in exile, 104–6; on logic, 112–13; memory for, 107; on metaphors, 105, 185n82; multilingualism of, 114–15; on “On the Concept of History,” 11; *On Violence*, 11, 105–6, 127–29, 186n93; on oppressive language, 107; on oppressive speech, 2; *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 105–6, 114, 123–25, 181n11; on philosophical clarification, 120–22;

- Arendt, Hannah (*continued*)
 poetic resistance in works of, 11;
Rahel Varnhagen, 105; on slogans,
 105–13, 121; on speaking as distinct
 from language, 110; on speaking as
 distinct from thinking, 110–11; theory
 of violence for, 123–24; on thinking,
 104–5, 108, 110–15, 120–24, 130–31;
 writings on fascism, 8. *See also* anti-
 propaganda; propaganda
- Aristotle, 60, 124, 184n73, 185n80
- assaultive speech, 40
- Ayim, May, 152
- Baroque poetry, 74
- Baudelaire, Charles, 76–77, 82
Bedeutung. *See* meaning
- being, 27
- Being and Time* (Heidegger), 112
- belated efficacy, 1, 4, 6
- Benjamin, Walter, 179n5; Arendt influ-
 enced by, 2, 104, 109; Brecht and, 67;
 Celan influenced by, 2; Celan's cri-
 tique of, 12, 132–33; on colonial impe-
 rialism, 47, 50–51; on decolonial peda-
 gogy, 55–64; on divine violence, 8–9;
 Eurocentrism of, 42–43, 52; exile of, 1,
 57; flâneur for, 153; in German Youth
 Movement, 16, 19, 150; intellectual
 activism of, 19–20; on “just ends” sys-
 tem, 20–21; Kant and, 20; letters with
 Adorno, 77, 79; on linguistic counter-
 force, 8–12; on linguistic theory, 25–
 26, 109–10, 168n44; on linguistic vio-
 lence, 3, 23–24; as literary critic, 9;
 literary legacy of, 2; on messianism,
 186n93; mimesis studies, 143; on
 mimetic resistance, 62; mythological
 Platonism for, 74; philological proce-
 dure for, 10–11, 67, 77, 103; on pure
 language, 20; Second Reich critiqued
 by, 19; silence for, 139–40, 142–43, 149
- Benjamin, Walter, works of: *Berlin
 Childhood Around 1900*, 68, 83, 90, 92–
 93; *Berlin Chronicle*, 83, 90, 92; “Colo-
 nial Pedagogy,” 41–44, 53–55, 57; in
Denktagebuch, 11; “Excavation and
 Memory,” 66; “Goethe’s *Elective Affin-
 ities*,” 70; *Illuminations*, 106; “Letter to
 Martin Buber,” 18, 56; literary influ-
 ence of, 11; “News of a Death,” 91, 94;
One Way Street, 126; “On the Concept
 of History,” 11, 80, 91, 104; “On the
 Mimetic Faculty,” 60–61; *The Origin of
 German Tragic Drama*, 29, 31, 72–75,
 139, 181n19; “The Paris of the Second
 Empire in Charles Baudelaire,” 76;
Psychology of the Natural Peoples, 52;
 review of *Fairy Tales and the Present*,
 10, 43–47, 53–54; “The Storyteller,” 91;
 “Theses on the Philosophy of His-
 tory,” 104; “Toward the Critique of
 Violence,” 16; World War I as influ-
 ence on, 16. *See also* “On Language as
 Such and on the Language of Man”
Berlin Childhood Around 1900 (Benja-
 min), 68, 83, 90, 92–93
Berlin Chronicle (Benjamin), 83, 90, 92
 Bernays, Edward, 181n15
Bezeichnung. *See* signification
- Bhabha, Homi, 61–62
- Blücher, Heinrich, 104
- Blumenberg, Hans, 186n89
- Blumenthal-Barby, Martin, 181n11
- Boer War, 48
- Brecht, Bertolt: Adorno on, 146–47; Ben-
 jamin and, 67; Celan and, 12, 132–36,
 147; exile for, 191n41; *Finnish Epi-
 grams*, 137, 143; “In Dark Times,” 140;
 linguistic violence in poetry of, 148–
 49; silence for, 138–39; *Svendborg
 Poems*, 67, 133. *See also* “To Those
 Born After”
- Brion, Marcel, 48
- Buber, Martin, *Der Jude*, 36
- Butler, Judith, 4, 84–85, 88–89, 187n101
- causality, 125
- Celan, Paul, 190n35; on Adorno, 12; in
 anti-fascist youth group, 1–2; Benja-
 min as philosophical influence on, 2;
 Brecht and, 12, 132–36, 147; concep-
 tual approach to literary works, 132–
 34; counterforces of, 133; counterpo-
 ems of, 132; engagement with
 Benjamin, 12, 132–33; exile for,
 191n41; hermetic poetry and, 145–47;
 on linguistic counterforce, 8–12; on
 linguistic violence, 3; linguistic vio-
 lence in poetry of, 148–49; literary

- legacy of, 2; "The No-One's-Rose," 147–48; on oppressive speech, 2; poetic resistance in works of, 11; pontifical poetry of, 144–45; *Schneepart*, 132–33; silence for, 138–39, 148, 150–51; "Threadsuns," 141; writings on fascism, 8. *See also* "A leaf, treeless"; "To Those Born After"
- Char, René, 15
- Chaudhary, Zahid, 52
- children, childhood and: colonized peoples compared to, 52, 54; lack of linguistic agency for, 57; lack of political agency for, 57; as oppressed people, 57; primitive humanity of, 51; as primitives, 43; translation of language of things, 64
- citizenship, for German Jews, 1, 13
- Civil Rights Movement, in U.S., 109, 118–19, 183n58, 184n61
- clarification, 120–22
- coercion, coerciveness and, 61–63
- collaboration through, translation and, 30
- colonial guilt (*Kolonialschuld*), 9
- colonial imperialism, 47, 50–51
- colonialism: aggressive, 40; *Arcades Project* and, 48–49; expansionist use of language and, 56; in *Fairy Tales and the Present*, 58; German, 41–43; intersectionality of, 61–62; mimicry of, 61–62; settler, 72. *See also* colonial pedagogy
- colonial pedagogy: children as primitives, 43; commodity culture and, 43; definition of, 58; *Fairy Tales and the Present* and, 42–43; imperialism and, 43; Jalkotzy on, 59; Weimar Republic and, 9, 59
- "Colonial Pedagogy" (Benjamin), 41–44, 53–55, 57
- colonial unconscious, 169n62
- colonial violence, Jalkotzy on, 58
- colonized peoples, children compared to, 52, 54. *See also* colonialism
- Comay, Rebecca, 97, 100–101
- commodity fetishism, 76–77, 80, 191n44
- The Concept of Art Criticism in German Romanticism* (Benjamin), 68
- The Concept of Irony* (Kierkegaard), 78
- counterforce: linguistic violence and, 148–49; poetic, 145–51
- counter-narratives, 89
- counterwords, 132
- crimes against humanity, 118
- crimes against humanness, 118
- critical language, 6
- critical logos, 14–15
- cultural memory, 82
- decolonialism: oppressed and, 58; pedagogy and, 55–64
- déjà vu, 90
- delotic language, 14–15
- delotic logos, 14–15
- democracy, social, 98
- Denktagebuch* (Arendt), 11, 106, 115, 130
- "dependence complex," 62
- Derrida, Jacques, 96–97, 101, 163n47, 171n12, 176n81, 184n73
- Descartes, René, 122
- despotism, 125
- dialectical materialism, theological framework of, 168n56
- dialectics, of knowing/not knowing, 6
- dialects, 117
- Dion, Mark, 28, 29
- discrimination, 118
- discriminatory slogans, 40
- the divine: linguistic counterforce and, 36; in linguistic theory, 26, 30; linguistic violence and, 31–39
- divine violence, 33, 35–36; linguistic counterforce and, 8–9; political efficacy of, 39
- Döblin, Alfred, 47
- domination, through language, 21
- Duns Scotus, John, 29
- durcharbeiten*. *See* working through
- education, mimesis and, 60
- educative violence, 48
- efficacy: belated, 1, 4, 6; of divine violence, 39; of linguistic violence, 4; of oppressive language, 7–8; traumatic, 7
- Eichmann, Adolf, 104, 108
- Eichmann in Jerusalem* (Arendt), 122
- equality, Arendt on, 118, 120
- essence of spirit. *See* Verständigung
- essences, 22–24, 162n29

- ethics: of noninstrumental language, 27–30; in “On Language as Such and on the Language of Man,” 29
- Eurocentrism, of Benjamin, 42–43, 52
- “Excavation and Memory” (Benjamin), 66
- Excitable Speech* (Butler), 84
- exile: for Adorno, 1; for Arendt, 1, 104–6; for Benjamin, 1, 57; for Brecht, 191n41; for Celan, 191n41; experience of, 14; German etymology for, 13; Grimm on, 13. *See also* linguistic exile; *specific people*
- expansionism, 56, 59, 64
- expansionist violence, 59
- experience, of exile, 14
- explication, 15, 138; silence and, 140–45, 151; violence of, 146
- exploitation, 21, 41
- expression, expressions and, 3–4, 117
- fairy tales: comedic stories as distinct from, 44; critique of violence in, 53; gender narratives in, 44; happy endings as element of, 44; Jalkotzy on, 58; for political education, 56; violence in, 64–65
- Fairy Tales and the Present* (Jalkotzy), 10, 50–51; Benjamin review of, 42–43, 53–54; colonialism in, 58; emotional identification, 46; “The Juniper Tree,” 44; revisions of, 45
- Fanon, Frantz, on oppression, 7–8
- fascism, 8, 98, 126. *See also* anti-fascism; German fascism
- Faust* (Goethe), 81
- Fenves, Peter, 23
- Finnish Epigrams* (Brecht), 137, 143
- flâneur, 153
- Les Fleurs du Mal* (Baudelaire), 77
- Floyd, George, 190n28
- force (*Kraft*), 5, 36, 127
- Foucault, Michel, 84
- Frankfurter Zeitung* (newspaper), 41–42, 47
- Frankfurt School, 76, 163n47, 169n58
- Frege, Gottlob, 176n73
- Freud, Sigmund, 92–97
- Frisch, Max, 141
- gaze, linguistic exile and, 14
- genocide, 7, 59–60
- German colonialism, 41–43
- German Empire, 37, 48–49
- German fascism, 2, 98
- German Romantics, 19, 68
- Germany: Initiative of Black People in Germany, 152–53; National Socialism in, 16; Second Reich, 19; traumatic street names in, 152–53. *See also* Nazi Germany; Weimar Republic
- German Youth Movement, 16, 19, 47–48, 150
- Gewalt*. *See* violence
- Goethe, Johann Wolfgang von, 78, 81, 143
- “Goethe’s *Elective Affinities*” (Benjamin), 70
- grammatical analogy, 129
- Gray, Glenn, 114
- Great Chain of Being, 27
- Grimm, Jacob, 13. *See also* fairy tales
- Habermas, Jürgen, 128, 171n12, 172n29
- Hamacher, Werner, 14, 84, 86, 89, 147, 191n44
- Hamann, J. G., 19
- healthy mourning, 101
- Hebbel, Friedrich, 81
- Hegel, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich, 19, 97
- Hegelianism, 19
- Heidegger, Martin, 19, 29, 109–10, 112, 182n30; Arendt on, 185n87; on philosophical clarification, 121
- Heine, Heinrich, 143
- Heinle, Fritz, 96
- Herbstblumine* (Jean Paul), 173n42
- Himmler, Heinrich, 122
- Hirsch, Emanuel, 174n44
- historical violence, 39
- history, historiography and: Copernican turn in, 93; cyclical nature of, 71; pragmatic, 71; in “Toward the Critique of Violence,” 71–72
- History of Sexuality* (Foucault), 84
- Hölderlin, Friedrich, 143, 145
- Hong, Edna, 174n44
- Hong, Howard, 174n44
- Horkheimer, Max, 7, 76–77, 163n47
- The Human Condition* (Arendt), 106, 111–12, 186n93, 187n112
- Husserl, Edmund, 1

- idiolects, 117
- idioms, 121–22
- Illuminations* (Benjamin), 106
- imperialism: colonial, 47, 50–51; colonial pedagogy and, 43; genocide and, 59–60
- Initiative of Black People in Germany, 152–53
- Institute for Social Research, 76, 169n58
- instrumental language: evolution of, 19; in German Youth Movement, 19; “On Language as Such and on the Language of Man” and, 32–33; political power of, 19; sensory data and, 18; in Third Reich, 1; in “Toward the Critique of Violence,” 40; Wilhelmine Empire and, 18–20. *See also* non-instrumental language
- insults, 40
- intellectual activism, of Benjamin, 19–20
- intersectionality: of colonialism, 61–62; of language, 2–3, 9–10; of linguistic violence, 61–62; of violence and language, 17
- involuntary memory, 94
- irony, 68, 78, 174n44
- Jalkotzy, Alois, 10, 165n3; on children and education, 49–51; on colonial pedagogy, 59; colonial unconscious, 52; on colonial violence, 58; decolonial pedagogy and, 55–64; early career of, 43–44; on language education, 46; literary works of, 44; on power of fairy tales, 58. *See also* *Fairy tales and the Present*
- Jens, Walter, 135
- Jewish populations, in Nazi Germany: genocide of, 7; under Nuremberg Laws, 1; revocation of citizenship for, 1, 13
- Journal of Social Research*, 76
- Der Jude*, 36
- Jüdische Rundschau* (periodical), 107
- Jung, Carl G., 139, 169n62
- Kafka, Franz, 87, 121–22, 180n9
- Kant, Immanuel, 46, 168n48; Benjamin and, 20; “just ends” system for, 20–21; moral philosophy for, 20; neo-Kantianism, 19; theory of judgment for, 104
- Kierkegaard* (Adorno), 78
- Kierkegaard, Søren, 78, 174n44
- Klages, Ludwig, 139
- Klemperer, Viktor, 81; on efficacy of linguistic violence, 4; on language of Nazi Germany, 1
- knowing, dialectics of, 6
- Kolonialschuldfrage*. *See* colonial guilt
- Kommerell, Max, 139
- Kraft*. *See* work
- Kraus, Karl, 143, 144
- Kripke, Saul, 86–87, 176n73
- Kruger, Paul, 48
- Lacan, Jacques: on mourning, 100–102; on work of mourning, 178n121, 179n125
- Lacoue-Labarthe, Philippe, 68
- language, human: action and, 38; coercive elements of, 61–62; colonialism and, 56; communicable content of, 6–7; as communication medium, 112; critical, 6; delotlic, 14–15; domination and exploitation through, 21; expansionary violence of, 64; expression through, 3–4; extremes of, 26; function of, 110; immanent ability of, 27; intersectional approach to, 2–3, 9–10; learnability of, 115–16; as mechanism, 36–37; metaphysics of, 18, 31; mimesis and, 56, 61; modern theories of, 25; non-violent, 17; origins of, 61; politically correct, 37–38; pure, 20; purpose and scope of, 3–4; as representation, 5–6; speaking as distinct from, 110; trauma and, 93; verbal, 22; “Verständigung” and, 34; washing of, 143. *See also* nonhuman language; words; *specific topics*
- language, justice of, 2, 38; conceptual approach to, 12–15; delotlic logos and, 14–15; Hamacher and, 14
- language, violence and: intersectionality of, 17. *See also* linguistic violence “language as such,” 21–22, 25; social protest and, 109
- language education, 46

- “language of man,” 21–22; violence of, 25–26
- language of resistance, development of, 2
- “A leaf, treeless” (Celan), 134–35, 142, 144–45; conceptual approach to, 133; linguistic counterforce in, 12; violence in, 138
- legal violence, 32–33
- legitimacy, in “Toward the Critique of Violence,” 32
- Lehmann, Walter, 20, 48, 52
- Leibniz, Gottfried Wilhelm, 19, 68, 72, 82, 171n10, 175n57
- Leslie, Esther, 48
- “Letter to Martin Buber” (Benjamin), 18, 56
- Lewis, Tyson, 58
- The Life of the Mind* (Arendt), 11, 105, 113, 123
- Lindner, Burkhardt, 186n93
- linguistic counterforce: Benjamin on, 8–12; Celan on, 8–12; divine, 36; divine violence and, 8–9; in “A leaf, treeless,” 12
- linguistic essence, 22–24
- linguistic exile: conceptual approach to, 12–15; gaze and, 14; reshaping of speech and, 13–14
- linguistic plurality, 105, 114–20
- linguistic resistance, 3, 12, 40, 62–63, 106, 145
- linguistic theory, language theory and: Benjamin on, 25–26, 109–10, 168n44; conceptual approach to, 4; the divine in, 26, 30; mystical views of, 25–26
- linguistic violence (*sprachliche Gewalt*): Adorno on, 3; antisemitism as, 108; Arendt on, 3, 107, 128–29; Benjamin on, 3, 23–24; in Brecht works, 148–49; Celan on, 3; in Celan works, 148–49; conceptual approach to, 3–8; counterforce and, 148–49; definition of, 3; the divine and, 31–39; efficacy of, 4, 6–7; elements of, 5; etymology of, 5; intersectionality of, 61–62; in literary practice, 5; methodological approach to, 9–12; Mill on, 6; modes of, 154–55; Nuremberg Laws and, 5; propaganda and, 108; scope of, 3; semantics and, 4, 6–7; social trauma and, 4; in Third Reich, 4; traumatic names and, 94–95; in Weimar Republic, 4
- listening. *See* philological listening
- literary practice, linguistic violence and, 5
- logic, Arendt on, 112–13
- logos: critical, 14–15; delotlic, 14–15
- Löwy, Michael, 126
- Macht*. *See* power
- Mann, Heinrich, 47
- Mann, Thomas, 47
- Marx, Karl, 77, 173n42
- Marxism: philology and, 75–78, 80; revolutionary, 78
- materialism, 77. *See also* dialectical materialism
- May, Karl, 45
- meaning (*Bedeutung*), 86, 176nn73–74
- memory: anti-oppressive, 74; for Arendt, 107; cultural, 82; “Excavation and Memory” and, 66; involuntary, 94; transformative cultural, 73; traumatic, 85
- mental essence, 22–24
- messianism, 186n93
- metaphor: anti-oppressive, 123–26; Arendt on, 105, 185n82; Aristotle on, 184n73, 185n80; Benjamin on, 125–26; intuition and, 124–25; pluralization of, 155; slogans compared to, 124, 126
- metaphysics, 23; of language, 18, 31
- Meyer, Thomas, 184n61
- microaggression, 82, 175n52
- micro-resistance, 80–83, 155
- Mignolo, Walter, 58
- Mill, John Stuart, on linguistic violence, 6
- mimesis, 168n56; Aristotle on, 60; Benjamin’s studies on, 143; coercive elements of, 60; in education, 60; language and, 56, 61; “On Language as Such and on the Language of Man” and, 60; Plato on, 60; transformative elements of, 60; violence and, 63
- mimetic resistance, 62
- Mitscherlich, Alexander, 179n124
- Mitscherlich, Margarete, 179n124
- modernity, philology and, 11

- Montessori, Maria, 46
 moral philosophy, 20
 Morrison, Toni, 6
 mortification, 72–73
 mourning: allegorical, 74; anti-oppressive, 95–98, 100, 102, 155; burial and, 98; Derrida on, 101; detachment and, 95–96; Freud on, 95–97; healthy, 101; Lacan on, 100–101, 178n121, 179n125; as linguistic procedure, 101; narcissism and, 102; in *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 73–74; philosophical procedure as practice of, 67; philology and, 11, 100; redemption and, 75. *See also* work of mourning
 “Mourning and Melancholia” (Freud), 95–96, 178n122
 “mourning play,” 73–75
 M-Street (*M-Straße*): renaming of, 154; as traumatic name, 152–53
 multilingualism, 182n37, 183n45; of Arendt, 114–15
 muteness, 129
- Nahuatl language, 20
 name, names and: Adorno on, 87–88; Butler on, 84–85, 88–89; concepts compared to, 10; Hamacher on, 84, 86, 89; histories of oppression and, 83–84; linguistic violence and, 84–85; signs and, 8; traumatic, 83–89; violence and, 31
 narcissism: Freud on, 52; mourning and, 102; pathological melancholy and, 101
 narcissism study, 52
 nationalism, 40
 National Socialism, in Germany, 16
 naturalism, in literature, 19
 nature, in “On Language as Such and on the Language of Man,” 57
 Nazi Germany, 99; Final Solution and, 56; genocide in, 7; loss and destruction in, 67; *Ostpolitik* and, 56; philology and, 75. *See also* Jewish populations; Third Reich
 neo-Kantianism, 19
 “New Melusine” (Goethe), 78
 “News of a Death” (Benjamin), 91, 93
 Nietzsche, Friedrich, 19, 185n80
 nonhuman language, 88
 noninstrumental language, 27–30
 nonmimetic theory, 62
 non-referential, 5, 89, 100
 nonviolent language, 17
 “The No-One’s-Rose” (Celan), 147–48
 “A Note Upon the ‘Mystic’ Writing Pad” (Freud), 92
 not knowing, dialectics of, 6
 November Pogroms, 67
 Nuremberg Laws, 1, 5, 13
 Nuremberg Trials, 118
- objective violence, 7
One-Way Street (Benjamin), 126
 “On Language as Such and on the Language of Man” (Benjamin), 16, 48, 163n47, 172n33, 181n19; chatter in, 182n31; children as oppressed in, 57; domination and exploitation through language, 21; instrumental language and, 32–33; “language as such” in, 21–22, 25; “language of man” in, 21–22, 25; mental essence, 22–24; metaphysics of language, 31; mimesis and, 60; narrative framing of ethics, 29; nature in, 57; noninstrumental language and, 27; nonviolent language in, 17; political violence in, 24; Scholem and, 21; social practices of humanity in, 24–25; spiritual essence, 22–23; theological framework of, 168n56; verbal language, 22
 “On the Concept of History” (Benjamin), 11, 80, 91, 104, 187n113
 “On the Mimetic Faculty” (Benjamin), 60–61
On Violence (Arendt), 11, 105–6, 127–29, 186n93
 oppression: children and, 57; decolonialism and, 58; Fanon on, 7–8; names as markers for, 83–84; terms for, 68–72
 oppressive language: Arendt on, 2, 107; Celan on, 2; criticality of, 6; efficacy of, 7–8; genocide as result of, 7; legal violence and, 33; Morrison on, 6; normalization of, 7; physical destruction as result of, 7; representation and, 7; severity of, 6; structural instrumentalization of, 17; temporality of, 7. *See also* anti-oppressive language

- The Origin of German Tragic Drama* (Benjamin), 29, 31, 72–75, 139, 181n19
- The Origins of Totalitarianism* (Arendt), 105–6, 114, 123–25, 181n11
- Ostpolitik*, 56
- Otoo, Sharon Dodua, 66, 154
- Paradigms for a Metaphorology* (Blumenberg), 186n89
- “The Paris of the Second Empire in Charles Baudelaire” (Benjamin), 76
- pathological melancholy, 101
- pedagogy: colonial, 42–43; colonial violence and, 58; decolonialization of, 55–64; in Weimar Republic, 55–64. *See also specific topics*
- phantasmagoria, 78, 80
- phenomenology, 19, 74
- philological listening, 92, 94–95; acoustics and, 93; auditory dimension of, 90–91; déjà vu, 90; interpolation in, 91; trauma and, 93
- philological procedure, 10–11, 67, 77, 103
- philology: anti-oppressive remembrance and, 74; critique of, 70; definition of, 81; history of terminology and, 69–70; Marxist, 75–78, 80; microaggression and, 82; modernity and, 11; mourning and, 11, 100; narrative violence of, 81; oppressive terms and, 68–72; ornamental margins in, 72–75; Platonism and, 74; scope of, 69; speculation of, 78; study of, 69. *See also* philological listening
- philosophy, philosophical concepts and: linguistic violence and, 5; moral, 20
- Pierce, Chester, 175n52
- Plato, 60, 78–79, 109
- Platonism, 74
- playful repetition, 63
- plurality, pluralism and, 30, 105, 114–20
- The Poet as Leader in German Classicism* (Kommerell), 139
- poetic resistance, 11
- poetry: Baroque, 74; counterforce and, 145–51; counterpoems, 132; hermetic, 145–47; pontifical, 144; profane in, 143–44; transcendental, 68
- pogroms. *See* November Pogroms
- political absolutes, 56
- political action, 111, 117
- politically correct language, 37–39
- political violence, 24, 30
- politics: anti-fascist, 98; delotlic language in, 14–15; instrumental language and, 19. *See also specific topics*
- pontifical poetry, 144–45
- power (*Macht*), 5, 36, 127–28
- pragmatic history, 71
- profane, in poetry, 143–44
- propaganda: Bernays and, 181n15; clarification and, 122; linguistic violence and, 108; mechanics of, 108; political function of, 108; signs in, 181n15; through slogans, 122; totalitarianism and, 108, 116–17. *See also* anti-propaganda
- proverbs, 121–22
- public speech, delotlic language in, 14–15
- pure language, 20
- racist speech, 84. *See also* antisemitism
- radical resistance, 186n100
- Rahel Varnhagen* (Arendt), 105
- Rank, Otto, 178n122
- redemption, mourning and, 75
- reduction, as process, 80
- reference, referentiality and, 142. *See also* non-referential
- repetition, 63
- representation, 5–7
- Republic* (Plato), 60
- resistance: micro-resistance, 80–83, 155; mimetic, 62; poetic, 11; radical, 186n100. *See also* language of resistance; linguistic resistance
- Richter, Gerhard, 160n46, 170n5, 177n86
- Richter, Jean Paul, 173n37, 173n42
- Ricœur, Paul, 5
- Riefenstahl, Leni, 98
- Ross, Alison, 53
- Roth, Joseph, 47
- Rousseau, Jean-Jacques, 46
- Russell, Bertrand, 86–87, 176n73
- Said, Edward, 13–14
- Scala Naturae* (Dion), 28, 29
- Schaefer, Hans Heinrich, 174n44
- Scheerbarth, Paul, 143

- Schestag, Thomas, 119, 162n30, 170n73, 187n113
- Schiavoni, Giulio, 167n40
- Schlagwort*. See slogan
- Schlegel, August, 81
- Schlegel, Friedrich, 68
- Schmitt, Carl, 139
- Schneepart* (Celan), 133
- Scholastic analogies, 27, 29
- Scholem, Gershom, 21, 144, 168n56, 184n62
- Schultze, Fritz, 52
- Seligson, Rika, 96
- semantics, 4, 6–7, 75
- semiotics, language and, 61. See also signs
- settler colonialism, 72
- Shelley, Percy Bysshe, 124
- Shoah, 1–2, 41, 104, 125, 132, 148
- signification (*Bezeichnung*), 86
- signs: external structure of, 17; names and, 8, 21; performative dimension of, 104; in propaganda, 181n15; regimes of, 61; silence and, 150; street names and, 153–54; systems of, 21, 24, 56, 84, 100–101; words as, 24, 86, 89
- silence: ambiguity of, 149; for Benjamin, 139–40, 142–43, 149; for Brecht, 138–39; for Celan, 138–39, 148, 150–51; explication and, 140–45, 151; explicit, 155; scope of, 150–51; as violence, 190n28
- slogan (*Schlagwort*): Arendt on, 105–13, 121; discriminatory, 40; fascism and, 126; metaphors compared to, 124, 126; in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 123–24; in propaganda, 122; totalitarianism and, 108
- social democracy, 98
- social trauma, linguistic violence and, 4
- sociolects, 117
- Sorel, George, 35
- speaking (*sprechen*): language as distinct from, 110; thinking as distinct from, 110–11
- speech: action and, 117; assaultive, 40; oppressive, 2, 33; public, 14–15; racist, 84; reshaping of, 13–14
- spiritual essence, 22–23
- sprachliche Gewalt*. See linguistic violence
- sprechen*. See speaking
- “The Storyteller” (Benjamin), 91
- storytelling, 63
- street names, 7, 152–54
- subjective violence, 7
- Svendborg Poems* (Brecht), 67, 133
- the symbolic, symbolism and, 57, 59, 74–75
- Szondi, Peter, 135–36, 139
- Tawada, Yoko, 104
- temporality, of oppressive language, 7
- terminology: history of, 69; in Third Reich, 73
- “Theses on the Philosophy of History” (Benjamin), 104
- thinking: for Arendt, 104–5, 108, 110–15, 120–24, 130–31; everyday language and, 113; speaking as distinct from, 110–11
- Third Reich: anti-oppressive language in, 1; exiled writers of, 15; hermetic terminology of, 73; instrumentalization of language by, 1; legitimization of, 67; linguistic violence in, 4
- Thirty Years’ War, 73–75
- Thomas of Erfurt, 29
- totalitarianism, 108, 116–17
- “To Those Born After” (Brecht), 12, 134, 140–41, 144–45; conceptual approach to, 133; explication of atrocity in, 146; rhythmic structure for, 135–36; violence in, 138. See also “A leaf, treeless”
- “Toward the Critique of Violence” (Benjamin), 16; divine violence in, 33; instrumental language in, 40; legitimacy and, 32; metaphysics of language in, 31; state power in, 31; types of history in, 71–72; the unsayable in, 39; “Verständigung” in, 19
- transcendental poetry, 68
- transformative cultural memory, 73
- translation, Benjamin’s concept of, 30
- Trauerarbeit*. See work of mourning
- trauma: acoustics and, 93; language and, 93; memory and, 85; philological listening and, 93. See also anti-trauma
- traumatic efficacy, 7
- traumatic memory, 85
- traumatic names, 83–89, 94–95

- Treaty of Versailles, 16, 41
Triumph of the Will, 98
 Tucholsky, Kurt, 1
- United States (U.S.): Civil Rights Movement in, 109, 118–19, 183n58, 184n61; discrimination in, 118
- Valéry, Paul, 93
 Varnhagen, Rahel, 1
 “Verständigung” (essence of spirit), 19, 34
 violence (*Gewalt*), 5; colonial, 58; definition of, 127; divine, 8–9, 33, 35–36, 39; educative, 48; expansionist, 59, 64; of explication, 146; in fairy tales, 53, 64–65; force and, 36, 127; historical, 39; of human language, 64; immediacy of, 6; of “language of man,” 25–26; in “A leaf, treeless,” 138; legal, 32–33; mimesis and, 63; muteness and, 129; names and, 31; narrative, 81; Nuremberg Laws and, 5; power and, 36; power as distinct from, 36, 127–28; references of, 6; revolutionary, 31–32; subjective, 7; in “To Those Born After,” 138. *See also* linguistic violence
 visual analogy, 93
- Wallmann, Jürgen, 145
 Weber, Samuel, 23, 37, 165n90
 Weigel, Sigrid, 104, 183n45
 Weimar Republic: anti-oppressive language in, 1; colonial pedagogy of, 9, 59; decolonial pedagogy in, 55–64; education in, 9; exiled writers of, 15; linguistic violence and, 4
 Wilhelmine Empire, 18–20
 Wittgenstein, Ludwig, 124, 176n73
 words: counterwords, 132; as signs, 24, 86, 89
 working through (*durcharbeiten*), 183n45
 work of mourning (*Trauerarbeit*), 95–96, 100–101, 178n121, 179n125
 World War I, 30–31; Benjamin’s works influenced by, 16, 57
 World War II, 2, 10, 83, 96, 148
 Wyneken, Gustav, 18–19
- Yildiz, Yasemin, 182n37
 Young-Breuhl, Elisabeth, 107, 130
- Žižek, Slavoj, 7
Zur Sache des Denkens (Heidegger), 109–10
 Zweig, Arnold, 107