

Benjamin's Silence

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Nothing more desolating than his acolytes, nothing more godforsaken than his adversaries. No name that would be more fittingly honored by silence.

WALTER BENJAMIN, "One-Way Street"¹

"Expect from me no word of my own. Nor should I be capable of saying anything new; for in the room where someone writes the noise is so great. . . . Let him who has something to say step forward and be silent!"

KARL KRAUS, quoted by Walter Benjamin²

Conversation 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.

WALTER BENJAMIN, "The Metaphysics of Youth"³

I propose here to address—and listen to—that element in Benjamin's language and writing that specifically, decisively remains beyond communication. "In all language and linguistic creations," Benjamin has said,

1. Walter Benjamin, "One-Way Street," trans. Edmund Jephcott, *Selected Writings, 1913–1926*, ed. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, Mass., 1996), p. 469, from a section written in commemoration of Karl Kraus entitled "Monument to a Warrior."

2. Benjamin, "Karl Kraus," *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings*, trans. Jephcott, ed. Peter Demetz (New York, 1986), p. 243.

3. Benjamin, "The Metaphysics of Youth," trans. Rodney Livingstone, *Selected Writings*, p. 6; hereafter abbreviated "MY."

“there remains in addition to what can be conveyed something that cannot be communicated. . . . It is the task of the translator to release in his own language that pure language which is exiled among alien tongues, to liberate the language imprisoned in a work.” In Benjamin’s own work, in his abbreviated, cryptic style and in the essentially elliptical articulation of his thought, a surcharge of meaning is quite literally imprisoned in instances of silence. It is the task of the translator of Benjamin’s own work to listen to these instances of silence, whose implications, I will try to show, are at once stylistic, philosophical, historical, and autobiographical. “Midway between poetry and theory,” my critical amplification and interpretation of this silence—my own translation of the language that is still “imprisoned” in Benjamin’s work—will thus focus on what Benjamin himself has underscored but what remains unheard, unheeded in the critically repetitive mechanical reproduction of his work: “that element in a translation which goes beyond transmittal of subject matter.”⁴

I

Wars and Revolutions

It is customary to view Benjamin essentially as an abstract philosopher, a critic and a thinker of modernity (and/or of postmodernity) in culture and in art. In contradistinction to this dominant approach, I propose to look at Benjamin far more specifically and more concretely as a thinker, a philosopher, and a narrator of the wars and revolutions of the twentieth century. “Wars and revolutions,” writes Hannah Arendt, “have thus far determined the physiognomy of the twentieth century. And as distinguished from the nineteenth-century ideologies—such as nationalism and internationalism, capitalism and imperialism, socialism and communism, which, though still invoked by many as justifying causes, have

4. Benjamin, “The Task of the Translator,” trans. Harry Zohn, *Selected Writings*, pp. 261, 259, 257.

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lost contact with the major realities of our world—war and revolution . . . have outlived all their ideological justifications.”⁵

The seeds of total war developed as early as the First World War, when the distinction between soldiers and civilians was no longer respected because it was inconsistent with the new weapons then used. . . . The magnitude of the violence let loose in the First World War might indeed have been enough to cause revolutions in its aftermath even without any revolutionary tradition and even if no revolution had ever occurred before.

To be sure, not even wars, let alone revolutions, are ever completely determined by violence. Where violence rules absolutely, . . . everything and everybody must fall silent. [*OR*, pp. 14, 18]

In my reading, Walter Benjamin's life work bears witness to the ways in which events outlive their ideologies and consummate, dissolve the grounding discourse of their nineteenth-century historic and utopian meanings. Benjamin's texts play out, thus, one against the other and one through the other, both the “constellation that poses the threat of total annihilation through war against the hope for the emancipation of all mankind through revolution” (*OR*, p. 11), and the deadly succession of historical convulsions through which culture—in the voice of Benjamin who is its most profound witness—must fall silent.

Theory and Autobiography

Silence can be either the outside of language or a position inside language, a state of noiselessness or wordlessness. Falling silent is, however, not a state but an event. It is the significance of the event that I will try to understand and think through in the present essay. What does it mean that culture—in the voice of its most profound witness—must fall silent? What does it mean for culture? What does it mean for Benjamin? How does Benjamin come to represent and to incorporate concretely, personally, the physiognomy of the twentieth century? And how in turn is this physiognomy reflected, concretized, in Benjamin's own face?

In searching for answers to these questions, I will juxtapose and grasp together theoretical and autobiographical texts. Benjamin's own work includes a singular record of an autobiographical event that, to my mind, is crucial to the author's theories as much as to his destiny (although critics usually neglect it). Benjamin narrates this event in one of his rare moments of personal directness, in the (lyrical) autobiographical text entitled “A Berlin Chronicle.” I will interpret this event together with, and through, two central theoretical essays that constitute the corner-

5. Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (Harmondsworth, 1990), p. 11; hereafter abbreviated *OR*.

stones of Benjamin's late work: "The Storyteller" and "Theses on the Philosophy of History." In reading the most personal, the most idiosyncratic autobiographical notations through the most far reaching, groundbreaking theoretical constructions, my effort will be to give Benjamin's theory a face.⁶ The conceptual question that will override and guide this effort will be, What is the relation between the theory and the event (and what, in general, is the relationship between events and theories)? How does the theory arise out of the concrete drama of an event? How does the concrete drama of an event become theory? And how do both event and theory relate to silence (and to Benjamin's embodiment of silence)?

2

Theories of Silence

Because my sense is that in Benjamin, the theory is (paradoxically) far less obscure than the autobiography, I will start by reflecting on the two theoretical essays—perhaps Benjamin's best known abstract texts—of which I propose to underscore the common theoretical stakes. I will argue that both "The Storyteller" and "Theses on the Philosophy of History" can be construed as two theories of silence derived from, and related to, the two world wars: "The Storyteller," written in 1936, is retrospectively, explicitly connected with the First World War; "Theses on the Philosophy of History," written shortly before Benjamin's death in 1940, represents his ultimate rethinking of the nature of historical events and of the task of historiography in the face of the developments of the beginning of the Second World War.

I will suggest that these two texts are in effect tied up together. I propose to read them one against the other and one through the other, as two stages in a larger philosophical and existential picture, and as two variations of a global Benjaminian theory of wars and silence. I argue therefore that "The Storyteller" and "Theses" can be viewed as two theoretical variations of the same profound underlying text. My methodology is here inspired by the way in which Benjamin himself discusses—in his youth—"Two Poems by Friedrich Hölderlin," in analyzing in the two texts (as he puts it) "not . . . their likeness which is nonexistent" but their

6. This textual juxtaposition of the theory and the autobiography will be illuminated, in its turn, by Benjamin's work as a literary critic, especially in the early literary essays on Hölderlin, on Dostoyevsky, and on Goethe's *Elective Affinities*. I will thus borrow metaphors from Benjamin's own literary criticism and will in turn use them as interpretive tools and as evocative stylistic echoes. My methodology will be attentive, therefore, to three distinct levels of the text that the analysis will grasp together: the conceptual level of the theory, the narrative level of the autobiography, and the figurative level of the literary criticism.

“comparativeness,” and in treating them—despite their distance—as two “versions” (or two transformations) of the same profound text.⁷

The End of Storytelling

“The Storyteller” is presented as a literary study of the nineteenth-century Russian writer Nikolai Leskov and of his striking art of storytelling. But the essay’s main concern is in depicting storytelling as a *lost art*: the achievements of the nineteenth-century model serve as the background for a differential diagnosis of the ways in which *storytelling is lost to the twentieth century*. Something happened, Benjamin suggests, that has brought about the death—the agony—of storytelling, both as a literary genre and as a discursive mode in daily life. Benjamin announces thus a historical drama of “the end of storytelling”—or an innovative cultural theory of the collapse of narration—as a critical and theoretical appraisal (through Leskov) of a general historical state of affairs.

The theory, thereby, is Benjamin’s way of grasping and of bringing into consciousness an unconscious cultural phenomenon and an imperceptible historical process that has taken place outside anyone’s awareness and that can therefore be deciphered, understood, and noticed only retrospectively, in its effects (its symptoms). The effects, says Benjamin, are that today, quite symptomatically, *it has become impossible to tell a story*. The art of storytelling has been lost along with the ability to share experiences.

Less and less frequently do we encounter people with the ability to tell a tale properly. . . . It is as if something that seemed inalienable to us . . . were taken from us: the ability to exchange experiences.⁸

Among the reasons Benjamin gives for this loss—the rise of capitalism, the sterilization of life through bourgeois values, the decline of craftsmanship, the growing influence of the media and the press—the first and most dramatic is that people have been struck dumb by the First World War. From ravaged battlefields, they have returned mute to a wrecked world in which nothing has remained the same except the sky. This vivid and dramatic explanation is placed right away at the beginning of the text, like an explosive opening argument or an initial shock or blast inflicted on the reader and with whose force of shock the whole remainder of the text will have to cope and to catch up. The opening is, indeed, as forceful as it is ungraspable. The text itself does not quite process it;

7. Benjamin, “Two Poems by Friedrich Hölderlin,” trans. Stanley Corngold, *Selected Writings*, p. 33.

8. Benjamin, “The Storyteller: Reflections on the Works of Nikolai Leskov,” *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, trans. Zohn, ed. Arendt (New York, 1969), p. 83; hereafter abbreviated “S.”

nor does it truly integrate it with the arguments that follow. And this ungraspability or unintegratability of the beginning is not a mere coincidence; it duplicates and illustrates the point of the text, that the war has left an impact that has struck dumb its survivors, with the effect of interrupting now the continuity of telling and of understanding. The utterance repeats in act the content of the statement: it must remain somewhat unassimilable.

In Benjamin, however, it is productive to retain what cannot be assimilated. And it is crucially important in my view that what cannot be assimilated crystallizes around a date. Before it can be understood, the loss of narrative is *dated*. Its process is traced back to the collective, massive trauma of the First World War.

With the [First] World War a process began to become apparent which has not halted since then. Was it not noticeable at the end of the war that men returned from the battlefield grown silent—not richer, but poorer in communicable experience? What ten years later was poured out in the flood of war books was anything but experience that goes from mouth to mouth. And there was nothing remarkable about that. For never has experience been contradicted more thoroughly than strategic experience by tactical warfare, economic experience by inflation, bodily experience by mechanical warfare, moral experience by those in power. A generation that had gone to school on a horse-drawn streetcar now stood under the open sky in a countryside in which nothing remained unchanged but the clouds, and beneath these clouds, in a field of force of destructive torrents and explosions, was the tiny, fragile human body. ["S," p. 84]

Thus, narration was reduced to silence by the First World War. What has emerged from the destructive torrents—from the noise of the explosions—was only the muteness of the body in its absolutely helpless, shelterless vulnerability. Resonating to this dumbness of the body is the storyteller's dumbness.

But this fall to silence of narration is contrasted with, and covered by, the new loudness, the emerging noise of information—"journalism being clearly . . . the expression of the changed function of language in the world of high capitalism."⁹

In a world in which public discourse is usurped by the commercial aims and by the noise of information, soldiers returning from the First

9. Benjamin, "Karl Kraus," p. 242. Compare "S," pp. 88–91. Information and narration are not simply two competing modes of discourse (two functions of language). They are in fact two strategies of living and communicating, two levels of existence within culture. Narration seeks a listener, information, a consumer. Narration is addressed to a community, information is directed toward a market. Insofar as listening is an integral part of narration, while marketing is always part of information, narration is attentive and imaginatively productive (in its concern for the singularity, the unintelligibility of the event), while infor-

World War can find no social or collective space in which to integrate their death experience. Their trauma must remain a private matter that cannot be symbolized collectively. It cannot be exchanged, it must fall silent.

The Unforgettable

Gone are the days when dying was “a public process in the life of the individual and a most exemplary one” (“S,” p. 93). Irrespective of the battlefield experience, mortality is self-deceptively denied in sterilized bourgeois life, which strives to keep death out of sight symbolically and literally.¹⁰

Narration was, however, born from the pathos of an ultimate exchange between the dying and the living. Medieval paintings represent the origin of storytelling: they show the archetypal or inaugural site of narration to be the deathbed, in which the dying man (or the original narrator) reviews his life (evokes his memories) and thus addresses the events and lessons of his past to those surrounding him. A dying speaker is a naturally authoritative storyteller; he borrows his authority from death.¹¹

Today, however, agonizers die in private and without authority. They are attended by no listeners. They tell no stories. And there is no authority—and certainly no wisdom—that has survived the war. “We have no counsel either for ourselves or for others. After all, counsel is less an answer to a question than a proposal concerning the continuation of a story which is just unfolding” (“S,” p. 86).

It is not simply that there is no longer a proposal for historical or narrative continuation. The First World War is *the first war that can no longer be narrated*. Its witnesses and its participants have lost their stories. The sole signification which “The Storyteller” can henceforth articulate is that of mankind’s double loss: a loss of the capacity to symbolize; a loss of the capacity to moralize.¹²

mation is mechanical and reproductive (in its concern for the event’s exchangeability, explainability, and reproducibility).

Benjamin was concerned not only with communication but (implicitly, essentially) with education. Educationally, these two modes conflict not only as two separate roles or institutions. They wage a battle *within* every institution and *within* every discipline of knowledge. They are in conflict, in effect, *within* every pedagogy. They struggle (to this day) within every university.

10. “Today people live in rooms that have never been touched by death and . . . when their end approaches they are stowed away in sanatoria or hospitals by their heirs” (“S,” p. 94).

11. “Death is the sanction of everything the storyteller has to tell. He has borrowed his authority from death” (“S,” p. 94).

12. Since the storyteller (in Leskov and his tradition) is “a righteous man,” a “teacher” and a “sage” (“S,” pp. 109, 108), what now falls to muteness is the very possibility of righ-

A Philosophy of History

The outburst of the Second World War in 1939 (three years after the publication of "The Storyteller") brings Benjamin to write, in 1940—in the months that were to be the last ones of his life—what I have called his second theory of silence, entitled "Theses on the Philosophy of History." At first, this text seems altogether different from "The Storyteller." Its topic is not literature but history, of which the essay offers not a diagnosis but a theory. The theory is programmatic: its tone is not descriptive but prescriptive. The "theses" are audaciously abbreviated and provocatively dogmatized. They do not explicitly reflect on silence. The essay focuses rather on (scholarly and scientific) *discourses* on history. The word *silence* does not figure in the text.

And, yet, speechlessness is at the very heart of the reflection and of the situation of the writer. Like the storyteller who falls silent or returns mute from the First World War, the historian or the theorist of history facing the conflagration of the Second World War is equally *reduced to speechlessness*: no ready-made conceptual or discursive tool, no discourse about history turns out to be sufficient to explain the nature of this war; no available conceptual framework in which history is customarily perceived proves adequate or satisfactory to understand or to explain current historical developments. *Vis-à-vis* the undreamt-of events, what is called for, Benjamin suggests, is a *radical displacement of our frames of reference*, a radical transvaluation of our methods and of our philosophies of history.

The current amazement that the things we are experiencing are "still" possible in the twentieth century is *not* philosophical. This amazement is not the beginning of knowledge—unless it is the knowledge that the view of history which gives rise to it is untenable.¹³

History is now the property and the propriety of Nazis (of those who can control it and manipulate its discourse). It is by virtue of a loyalty to history that Hitler is proposing to avenge Germany from its defeat and its humiliation in the First World War. All the existing discourses on history have proven ineffective either to predict or to counteract the regime and the phenomenon of Hitler.¹⁴

teousness. Similarly, literature as teacher of humanity (in the manner of Leskov) has lost its voice. In the collapse of narrative as a generic, literary mode of discourse, literature as ethics—"counsel," education—is thus inherently historically and philosophically reduced to silence.

13. Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," *Illuminations*, p. 257; hereafter abbreviated "TPH."

14. Among the theories of history that Benjamin critiques and "deconstructs" are pure theology (religion), pure historicism (positivism), pure liberalism (idealism), and pure Marxism (uncritical historical materialism).

History in Nazi Germany is Fascist. Fascism legitimates itself in the name of national identity on the basis of a unity and of a continuity of history. The philosophical tenets of this view are inherited from nineteenth-century historicism, which has equated temporality with progress, in presupposing time as an entity of natural development, progressively enhancing maturation and advancing toward a betterment as time (and history) go by. Benjamin rejects this view, which has become untenable vis-à-vis the traumas of the twentieth century.

It is the victor who forever represents the present conquest or the present victory as an improvement in relation to the past. But the reality of history is that of the traumatized by history, the materialist reality of those who are oppressed by the new victory. Historicism is, however, based on an unconscious identification with the discourse of the victor and thus on an uncritical espousal of the victor's narrative perspective. "If one asks with whom the adherents of historicism actually empathize," Benjamin writes,

the answer is inevitable: with the victor. . . . Empathy with the victor inevitably benefits the rulers. Historical materialists know what that means. Whoever has emerged victorious participates to this day in the triumphal procession in which the present rulers step over those who are lying prostrate. According to traditional practice, the spoils are carried along in the procession. They are called cultural treasures, and a historical materialist views them with cautious detachment. For without exception the cultural treasures he surveys have an origin which he cannot contemplate without horror. They owe their existence not only to the efforts of the great minds and talents who have created them, but also to the anonymous toil of their contemporaries. There is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism. And just as such a document is not free of barbarism, barbarism taints also the manner in which it was transmitted from one owner to another. ["TPH," p. 256]

Historicism is thus based on a perception of history as victory. But it is blind to this presupposition. So blind that it does not see the irony with which this axiom has been borrowed—taken to extremes—by the discourses of Fascism. Fascism is, indeed, quite literally, a *philosophy of history as victory*. Unlike historicism, it is not unconscious of this prejudice; it is grounded in a cynical and conscious *claim* of this philosophy of history.¹⁵

Historicism is then based on a confusion between truth and power. Real history is, on the contrary, the ineluctable discrepancy between the

15. Compare Hitler's harangue to his top civilian and military officials in 1939, on the occasion of the invasion of Poland: "Destruction of Poland is in the background. The aim is elimination of living forces, not the arrival at a certain line . . . I shall give a propagandistic

two.¹⁶ History is the perennial conflictual arena in which collective memory is named as a *constitutive dissociation* between truth and power.

What, then, is the relation between history and silence? In a (conscious or unconscious) historical philosophy of power, the powerless (the persecuted) are constitutionally deprived of voice.

Because official history is based on the perspective of the victor, the voice with which it speaks authoritatively is *deafening*; it makes us unaware of the fact that there remains in history a claim, a discourse that we *do not hear*. And in relation to this act of deafening, the rulers of the moment are the heirs of the rulers of the past. History transmits, ironically enough, a legacy of deafness in which historicists unwittingly share. What is called progress, and what Benjamin sees only as a piling of catastrophe upon catastrophe, is therefore the transmission of historical discourse from ruler to ruler, from one historical instance of power to another. This transmission is constitutive of what is (misguidedly) perceived as continuity in history. "The continuum of history is that of the oppressors." "The history of the oppressed is a discontinuum."¹⁷

If history, despite its spectacular triumphal time, is thus barbarically, constitutively conflict ridden, the historian is not in possession of a space in which to be removed, detached, "objective"; the philosopher of history cannot be an outsider to the conflict. In the face of the deafening appropriation of historical philosophy by Fascism; in the face of the Nazi use of the most *civilized* tools of technology and law for a most barbaric racist persecution, "objectivity" does not exist. A historical articulation proceeds not from an epistemological "detachment" but, on the contrary, from the historian's sense of urgency and of emergency.¹⁸

The tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the "state of emergency" in which we live is not the exception but the rule. We must attain to a conception of history that is in keeping with this insight.

cause for starting the war,—never mind whether it be plausible or not. The victor shall not be asked later on whether we told the truth or not. In starting and making a war, not the right is what matters but victory" (quoted by Robert Jackson, introduction to Whitney Harris, *Tyranny on Trial: The Evidence at Nuremberg* [New York, 1954], p. xxxi).

16. In this conception, Benjamin is the interpreter—the synthesizer—of the diverse legacies of Nietzsche, Marx, and Freud.

17. Benjamin, "Paralipomènes et variantes des *Thèses 'Sur le concept de l'histoire,'*" *Écrits français*, ed. Jean-Maurice Monnoyer (Paris, 1991), p. 352; my trans.

18. The reality of history is grasped (articulated) when the historian *recognizes* a historical *state of emergency* that is, precisely, *not* the one the ruler has declared or that (in Hobbes's tradition, in Carl Schmitt's words) is "decided by the sovereign" (Carl Schmitt, *Politische Theologie* [Munich, 1922], a work cited and discussed by Benjamin in his *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, trans. John Osborne [1928; London, 1977], pp. 65, 74, 239 nn. 14–17; hereafter abbreviated *OG*.)

Then we shall clearly realize that it is our task to bring about a real state of emergency, and this will improve our position in the struggle against Fascism. ["TPH," p. 257]

The theory of history is thus itself an *intervention in the conflict*; it is itself historical. In the middle of a cataclysmic world war that shifts the grounds from under our very feet, danger, Benjamin implies, is what triggers the most lucid and the most clairvoyant *grasp* of history. Historical insight strikes surprisingly and unexpectedly in "moments of sudden illumination" in which "we are beside ourselves."¹⁹ Danger and emergency illuminate themselves as the conditions both of history (of life) and of its theory (its knowledge). New, innovative theories of history (such that enable a displacement of official history) come into being only under duress.

To articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it "the way it really was" (Ranke). It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger. Historical materialism wishes to retain that image of the past which unexpectedly appears to man singled out by history at a moment of danger. ["TPH," p. 255]

In Benjamin's own view, history—a line of catastrophe—is not a movement toward progress but a movement toward (what Benjamin calls enigmatically) redemption. Redemption—what historical struggles (and political revolutions) are about—should be understood as both materialist (Marxist, political, interhistorical) and theological (suprahistorical, transcendent). Redemption is discontinuity, disruption. It names the constant need to catch up with the hidden reality of history that always remains a debt to the oppressed, a debt to the dead of history, a claim the past has on the present.

Redemption is the allegory of a future state of freedom, justice, happiness, and recovery of meaning. History should be assessed only *in reference* to this state that is its goal. Historical action should take place as though this goal were not utopian but pragmatic. Yet it can never be decided by a mortal if redemption, ultimately, can be immanent to history or if it is doomed to remain transcendental, beyond history. "This world," Benjamin has written elsewhere, "remains a mute world, from which music will never ring out. Yet to what is it dedicated if not redemption?"²⁰

19. Benjamin, "A Berlin Chronicle," *Reflections*, pp. 56, 57; hereafter abbreviated "BC."

20. Benjamin, "Goethe's Elective Affinities," trans. Corngold, *Selected Writings*, p. 355; hereafter abbreviated "GEA." Redemption seems, therefore, to be linked to the moment of illumination which suddenly and unexpectedly gives us the capacity to *hear the silence*—to *tune into* the unarticulated and to *hear* what is in history deprived of words. Redemption starts by redeeming history from deafness.

Dedicated to Redemption

When, therefore, will redemption come? Will there be a redemption after the Second World War? Will there ever be redemption *from* the Second World War? Benjamin foresees the task of the historian of the future. He will be sad. His history will be the product of his sadness.

Flaubert, who was familiar with [the "cause of sadness"], wrote: "*Peu de gens devineront combien il a fallu être triste pour ressusciter Carthage*" ["Few will be able to guess how sad one had to be in order to resuscitate Carthage"]. ["TPH," p. 256]

Before the fact, Benjamin foresees that history will know a holocaust. After the war, the historian's task will be not only to "resuscitate Carthage" or to *narrate extermination*, but paradoxically, to *save the dead*:

Nothing that has ever happened should be regarded as lost to history. ["TPH," p. 254]

Only that historian will have the gift of fanning the spark of hope in the past who is firmly convinced that *even the dead will not be safe from the enemy if he wins*. ["TPH," p. 255; emphasis mine; Benjamin's italics]

Thus, the historian of the Second World War will be sad. Beyond sadness, he will have to be intently vigilant. In this war particularly, the conceptual question of the historian's identification with the victor inadvertently evolves into a graver, far more serious question of political complicity.

The task of the historian of today is to *avoid collaboration* with a criminal regime and with the discourses of fascism. Similarly, the historian of tomorrow will have to be watchful to avoid complicity with history's barbarism and with culture's latent (and now patent) crimes. Benjamin's text, I argue, is the beginning of the critical awareness of the treacherous questions of collaboration that so obsessively preoccupy us to this day. It is still early in the war. Benjamin intuitively senses the importance of this question, as it will arise precisely, later, *out of* the Second World War. The historian, Benjamin suggests, must be revolutionary lest he be unwittingly complicit. And complicity, for Benjamin, is a graver danger, a worse punishment than death.

Historical materialism wishes to retain that image of the past which unexpectedly appears to man singled out by history at a moment of danger. The danger affects both the content of the tradition and its receivers. The same threat hangs over both: that of becoming a tool of the ruling classes. In every era the attempt must be made anew to

wrest tradition away from a conformism that is about to overpower it. ["TPH," p. 255]

The historian, paradoxically, has no choice but to be a revolutionary if he does not want to be a collaborator.²¹

History and Speechlessness

Benjamin advances, thus, a theory of history as trauma—and a correlative theory of the historical conversion of trauma into insight. History consists of chains of traumatic interruptions rather than of sequences of rational causalities. But the traumatized—the subjects of history—are deprived of a language in which to speak of their victimization. The relation between history and trauma is speechless. Traditional theories of history tend to neglect this speechlessness of trauma: by definition, speechlessness is what remains out of the record. But it is specifically to this speechless connection between history and trauma that Benjamin's own theory of history intends now to give voice.

He does so by showing how the very discipline, the very "concept of history" is constituted by what it excludes (and fails to grasp).²² History (to sum up) is thus inhabited by a historical unconscious related to—and founded on—a double silence: the silence of "the tradition of the oppressed," who are by definition deprived of voice and whose story (or whose narrative perspective) is always systematically reduced to silence; and the silence of official history—the victor's history—with respect to the tradition of the oppressed. According to Benjamin, the hidden theoretical centrality of this double silence defines historiography as such. This in general is the way in which history is told, or, rather, this is in general the way in which history is silenced. The triumph of Fascism and the outbreak of the Second World War constitute only the most climactic demonstration, the most aberrant materialization or realization of this historiography.

Whereas the task of the philosopher of history is thus to take apart "the concept of history" by showing its deceptive continuity to be in fact a process of silencing, the task of the historian is to reconstruct what his-

21. For a historiography free of complicity, we must disassociate ourselves from our accustomed thinking:

Thinking involves not only the flow of thoughts, but their arrest as well. Where thinking suddenly stops in a configuration pregnant with tensions, it gives that configuration a shock, by which it crystallizes into a monad. A historical materialist approaches a historical subject only where he encounters it as a monad. In this structure he recognizes a sign of a Messianic cessation of happening, or, put differently, a *revolutionary chance* in the fight for the oppressed past. ["TPH," pp. 262–63; emphasis mine]

22. The original and current German title of the essay is, precisely, "On the Concept of History" ("Über den Begriff der Geschichte").

tory has silenced, to give voice to the dead and to the vanquished and to resuscitate the unrecorded, silenced, hidden story of the oppressed.

3

The Event

I would like now to look backward from the theory to the autobiography and to try to reach the roots of Benjamin's conceptual insights in an original event whose theoretical and autobiographical significance remains totally ungrasped in the voluminous critical literature on Benjamin. The event takes place at the outbreak of the First World War. It consists in the conjunction of the German invasion of Belgium on 4 August 1914 with the joint suicide, four days later, of Benjamin's best friend, Fritz Heinle, and of Heinle's girlfriend. A farewell express letter of the now-dead friend informs Benjamin where to find the bodies. This shared readiness to die and this joint act of self-inflicted violence is interpreted by Benjamin and his friends as a symbolic gesture of protest against the war. For Benjamin, the event is therefore one of loss, of shock, of disillusionment, and of awakening to a reality of an inexorable, tragic historical connection between youth and death. For the world, it is the outbreak of the First World War.

The impact of this event marks a dramatic turning point in Benjamin's life and in his thought. Before this event, Benjamin is involved in political activism in the youth movement, working to revolutionize German society and culture through a radical reform of education. In the youth groups supporting this reform, he holds a position of strong leadership as president of the Berlin Free Students' Union. After the event, he abdicates his leadership and turns away from political activity. He gives up any public role along with the belief that language can directly become action. He breaks with his admired teacher, Wyneken, of whose ideas he has been both the disciple and the ardent follower. Because this former mentor now guides youth toward the war, Benjamin realizes that philosophy has failed and that authority can no longer be relied on: "*theoria* in you has been blinded," he writes to Wyneken, in severing his links with him.²³

In the duplicity of governments, in the duplicity of teachers, and in the isolated words of the letter of a dead youth telling Benjamin—the friend, the leader, the collaborator—where to find the bodies, language has betrayed. But the betrayal constitutes precisely the event; the betrayal is precisely history. "Midway through its journey," Benjamin will write, "nature finds itself betrayed by language, and that powerful blocking of

23. Quoted in "Chronology, 1892–1926," in *Selected Writings*, p. 499.

feeling turns to sorrow. Thus, with the ambiguity of the word, its *signifying* power, language falters. . . . History becomes equal to signification in human language; this language is frozen in signification.”²⁴

Refusing to participate in the betrayal of language and in the madness of the war, Benjamin leaves Germany for Switzerland and resorts to a silence that will last six years, until 1920.²⁵ During these years, he does not publish anything. He writes and circulates among close friends a text on Hölderlin in which he meditates on the nature of the lyric and its relation to the poet’s death. The poet’s death relates to Heinle’s death. Heinle also has left poems, which Benjamin reads and rereads in an attempt to deepen his acquaintance with the dead. It is, indeed, as a dead poet that he now comes to know his friend. But Benjamin vows to give the dead poet immortality: to save Heinle from oblivion, to save the suicide from its meaninglessness, by publishing his friend’s poetic work. This hope will never be relinquished. In the years of silence following the suicide, he edits Heinle’s manuscripts. Benjamin’s own text on Hölderlin and on the nature of the lyric is also an implicit dialogue with Heinle’s work, a dialogue with Heinle’s writing as well as with his life and with his death. Hence, Benjamin’s specific interest in two poems by Hölderlin, “The Poet’s Courage” and “Timidity,” which designate the difference between Heinle’s (suicidal) courage and the timidity of Benjamin’s own (condemnation to) survival: suicide or survival—two existential stances between which Benjamin no doubt has oscillated but which he declares to be, surprisingly and paradoxically, two “versions” of the same profound text, deeply comparable or similar despite their difference.²⁶

Belated Understanding

This drama and this suicide are narrated (among other things) in Benjamin’s most personal autobiography, “A Berlin Chronicle.” I will argue that for Benjamin, this autobiographical narrative becomes an allegory of the ungrasped impact of the First World War.

But “A Berlin Chronicle” is written eighteen years later, in 1932. The direct result of the events of the war at the time of their ungraspable occurrence is that Benjamin quite literally falls silent. And especially, quite literally and strictly silent, speechless about the subject of the war: as though by oath of loyalty to the dead friend; as though his own speech, or the language of youth they shared, had equally committed suicide. Something within him has died as well. The traumatic (and, belatedly,

24. Benjamin, “The Role of Language in *Trauerspiel* and Tragedy,” *Selected Writings*, p. 60.

25. Compare Momme Brodersen, *Walter Benjamin: A Biography*, trans. Malcolm R. Green and Ingrida Ligers, ed. Martina Derviş (London, 1996), p. 118.

26. Benjamin, “Two Poems by Friedrich Hölderlin,” p. 33.

theoretical) significance of this silence remains equally ungrasped by critics, who keep expressing their politically correct critique of it and their amazement at this eccentricity of Benjamin. Nor does anybody grasp the profound connection of this early silence to the later, much admired classic essays, "The Storyteller" and "Theses on the Philosophy of History." Benjamin's early experience is, thus, on the contrary, separated from his later theory and is at once dismissed and trivialized: "Silence as an expression of inner protest at contemporary events: little doubt was cast on the legitimacy of such a stance at the time," the latest biographer Momme Brodersen historicizes.²⁷ The editors of the Harvard volume, more tuned in, feel equally compelled to mark a pious reservation: "Remarkably enough, Benjamin's letters . . . focus exclusively on personal issues. . . . There is rarely mention of the war, and no direct consideration of it or of his attitude toward it. It is as if Benjamin's injunction against political activity at the time also precluded cognizance of the most difficult events of the day."²⁸ What critics fail to see is how Benjamin's own narration of his war experience in "A Berlin Chronicle" is precisely, quintessentially, an autobiographical (and theoretical) *account of the meaning of his silence*.

4

The Subject Represented by the "I"

Eleven pages into "A Berlin Chronicle," Benjamin begins the narration of his war experience by insisting on his reluctance to say "I":

If I write better German than most writers of my generation, it is thanks largely to twenty years' observance of one little rule: never use the word "I" except in letters. ["BC," p. 15]

However, Benjamin adds ironically, in this solicited piece he has accepted not just to say "I" but to be paid for it; if, therefore, these subjective notes have become longer than he had intended, it is not only because the subject, "accustomed for years to waiting in the wings, would not so easily be summoned to the limelight" but also because, metaphorically and literally, "the precaution of the subject represented by the 'I' . . . is entitled not to be sold cheap" ("BC," pp. 15–16).

The autobiographical impulse is therefore in conflict with a speechlessness, a muteness of the "I" that constantly defeats narration from inside. And, yet, the text originates in an imperative to tell, in a symbolic

27. Brodersen, *Walter Benjamin*, p. 89.

28. "Chronology, 1892–1926," p. 502.

debt that goes beyond the personal and that makes narration unavoidable and indispensable. What is at stake, says Benjamin, are “deep and harrowing experiences” that constitute “the most important memories in one’s life” (“BC,” p. 16). Of these experiences, all the other witnesses are now dead: “I alone remain” (“BC,” p. 17). The ethical impetus of the narration stems from this aloneness and from this necessity: since the narrator is the last surviving witness, history must be told despite the narrator’s muteness. The narrator sees himself surrounded by dead doubles, younger than himself or of his age, dead witnesses who, had they been alive, might have helped him to cross the difficult thresholds of memory but whose dead faces now appear to him “only as an answer to the question whether forty [Benjamin’s age at the time of writing] is not too young an age at which to evoke the most important memories of one’s life” (“BC,” p. 16). “A Berlin Chronicle” implicitly announces, thus, the author’s fortieth birthday, with which its writing coincides. The autobiographer celebrates his birthday by mourning for the death of his contemporaries. From the start, death and birth are juxtaposed. “Berlin” is the name for this juxtaposition.

Prosopopeia

Longing for the complementary narration of his dead doubles and identified with their eternal silence, the speaker in fact writes an epitaph much more than a biography. “A Berlin Chronicle” is an autobiography that is inherently, profoundly epitaphic and that seeks, thus, not expression but precisely “the expressionless”: the moment in which life is “petrified and as if spellbound in a single moment” (“GEA,” p. 340). In line with Benjamin’s analysis of “the expressionless,” the writing possesses a “critical violence” that interrupts expression, with which “every expression simultaneously comes to a standstill” with the abruptness of “a moral dictum” (“GEA,” pp. 340, 341, 340). “Only the expressionless completes the work, by shattering it into a thing of shards, into a fragment of the true world, into the torso of a symbol” (“GEA,” p. 340). To use the terminology of Paul de Man, we might say that in “A Berlin Chronicle” “autobiography veils a defacement of the mind of which it is itself the cause.”²⁹ De Man’s rhetorical analysis is here particularly pertinent: “the dominant figure of the epitaphic or autobiographical discourse is . . . the prosopopeia,” “the fiction of an apostrophe to an absent, deceased, or voiceless entity, which posits the possibility of the latter’s reply and confers upon it the power of speech.”³⁰

I would suggest, indeed, that an implicit figure of prosopopeia struc-

29. Paul de Man, “Autobiography as De-Facement,” *The Rhetoric of Romanticism* (New York, 1984), p. 81.

30. *Ibid.*, pp. 77, 75–76.

tures not just Benjamin's autobiography but his entire work; the underlying, understated evocation of the dead is present and can be deciphered everywhere. Benjamin's whole writing could be read as work of mourning, structured by a mute address to the dead face and the lost voice of the young friend who took his own life in desperate protest in the first days of the First World War.

In all mourning there is the deepest inclination to speechlessness, which is infinitely more than the inability or disinclination to communicate.³¹

All of Benjamin's evolving subjects, I will argue, are implicitly determined by the conceptual implications of the underlying autobiographical *prosopeia*, or the mute address to the dead friend: lyric ("Heinle was a poet" ["BC," p. 17]), language ("Because she is mute, nature mourns"), *Trauerspiel* (the corpse is the sole bearer of signification), and, finally, history itself:

In allegory the observer is confronted with the *facies hippocratica* [agonizer's face] of history as a petrified, primordial landscape. Everything about history that, from the very beginning, has been untimely, sorrowful, unsuccessful, is expressed in a face—or rather in a death's head. [OG, p. 166]

*A Lecture on the Nature of the Lyric,
or The Face of History (A Primal Scene)*

It is precisely as a metaphor for his entire work as inarticulate *prosopeia* that Benjamin describes the lecture on Hölderlin and on "the nature of the lyric" that, after Heinle's suicide, he struggled to articulate in memory of his deceased friend.

It is significant that "A Berlin Chronicle"'s narration of the war events and of its "harrowing experiences" starts (disorientingly, hermetically) by the description of this lecture—by the mediation, that is, of the trauma by the work, by the translation of the lived event into *a thought on literature*. "A Berlin Chronicle" cannot go directly either to the proper name of the dead friend or to the actual story of his death. Temporally as well as spatially, the story keeps moving in circles, as though around an empty, silent center. The word suicide does not figure in the text. Heinle's name is introduced as though in passing: it vanishes as soon as

31. Benjamin, "On Language as Such and on the Language of Man," trans. Jephcott, *Selected Writings*, p. 73: "Even where there is only a rustling of plants, there is always a lament. Because she is mute, nature mourns. Yet the inversion of this proposition leads even further into the essence of nature; the sadness of nature makes her mute" (*ibid.*).

it is mentioned; and so does the event. Throughout the text, the name and the event keep vanishing.

It was in Heidelberg, during what was undoubtedly self-forgetful work, that I tried to summon up, in a meditation on the nature of the lyric, the figure of my friend Fritz Heinle, around whom all the happenings in the Meeting House arrange themselves and with whom they vanish. Fritz Heinle was a poet, and the only one of them all whom I met not “in real life” but in his work. He died at nineteen, and could be known in no other way. All the same, this first attempt to evoke the sphere of his life through that of poetry was unsuccessful, and the immediacy of the experience that gave rise to my lecture asserted itself irresistibly in the incomprehension and snobbery of the audience. [“BC,” p. 17]³²

In a roundabout way, what Benjamin is trying to evoke is not Hölderlin but history: an original historical event that has remained completely untranslatable. History is “the original,” the writings, its translations. The task of the translator is the witness’s task. The lecture tried, but failed, to translate the impact of the event. Nevertheless, the lecture gives a sense of the remoteness, of the unapproachability of the historical event. Behind this failed translation of the lecture on Hölderlin and on the nature of the lyric, the untranslatable historical original—the lived experience of the outbreak of the war—constitutes for Benjamin a veritable intellectual and existential *primal scene*.

The Meeting House (Das Heim)

What, then, is the core of the historical event that cannot be approached but must be distanced even in the very act of bearing witness to it? What is the meaning of the story that the text cannot arrive at, cannot reach, cannot *begin* except through what has followed, the lecture that attempted to translate it—unsuccessfully?

It is the story of a death without signification, though pregnant with sense, with life and with emotion. It is the story of a meeting and of a Meeting House that turns out to be, ironically, the house of an encounter with a corpse, the posthumous symbol of a lost community and of the loss of language as communal, and the empty center of the space of the remembrance of so many missed encounters: a missed encounter with the audience of the lecture; a missed encounter with the war; a missed encounter with the friend who, dying so young, dies before he could be

32. The incomprehension of the audience then could ironically today stand for the incomprehension of Benjamin’s contemporary critics with respect to the significance of the event (and of its subsequent inscription as a silence) in Benjamin’s life and in his work.

truly met. "Fritz Heinle was a poet, and the only one of them all whom I met not 'in real life' but in his work. He died at nineteen, and could be known in no other way." It is the story of a war, and of its casualties that history does not narrate and does not count. It is the story of a letter doubled by a corpse that has become the bearer of a meaning it cannot deliver:

No matter how much memory has subsequently paled, or how indistinctly I can now give an account of the rooms in the Meeting House, it nevertheless seems to me today more legitimate to attempt to delineate the outward space the dead man inhabited, indeed the room where he was "announced," than the inner space in which he created. But perhaps that is only because, in this last and most crucial year of his life, he traversed the space in which I was born. Heinle's Berlin was the Berlin of the Meeting House. . . . I once visited him . . . after a long separation resulting from a serious dissension between us. But even today I remember the smile that lifted the whole weight of these weeks of separation, that turned a probably insignificant phrase into a magic formula that healed the wound. Later, after the morning when an express letter awoke me with the words, "You will find us lying in the Meeting House"—when Heinle and his girlfriend were dead—this district remained for a period the central meeting place of the living. ["BC," pp. 17–18]

The Letter and the Corpse

The unnamed suicide takes place in the blank, the interval between a future—"you will find us"—and a past: "were dead." The corpse has left an urgent letter that awakens Benjamin in shock. But the letter does not speak, it tells no story. It does not explain the motivation of the suicide or its grounds; it does not *narrate* anything other than the utter muteness of the body—of the corpse: "You will find us lying in the Meeting House." What remains of Heinle now are only words. Words of poetry, which Benjamin preserves and hopes to publish. Words of an unintelligible letter. "Just as a certain kind of significant dream"—Benjamin writes—"survives awakening in the form of words when all the rest of the dream content has vanished, here isolated words have remained in place as marks of catastrophic encounters" ("BC," p. 14).

Heinle at nineteen, Benjamin at twenty-two have come to the end of the experience that enables telling, or that makes narration possible. In 1936, in "The Storyteller," Benjamin will write that people have returned mute from the battlefields of the First World War. Benjamin himself falls silent not at the war's end but before the war, at the beginning of the war, because he grasps before the others its significance in history and its senseless violence, because he sees ahead of time the consequences of the war. The meaning of the war reveals itself to him in one stroke, in an

obscure illumination or in the shock of an epiphany of darkness, in the image of the suicide and in the vision of the combination of the private trauma and of the collective one.

It was in this café that we sat together in those very first August days, choosing among the barracks that were being stormed by the onrush of volunteers. We decided on the cavalry of Belle-Alliance Strasse, where I duly appeared on one of the following days, no spark of martial fervor in my breast; yet however reserved I may have been in my thoughts, which were concerned only with securing a place among friends in the inevitable conscription, one of the bodies jammed in front of the barracks gates was mine. Admittedly only for two days: on August 8 came the event that was to banish for long after both the city and the war from my mind. ["BC," p. 21]

"Autobiography"—said de Man—"veils a defacement of the mind of which it is itself the cause." The "place among friends" Benjamin tries to "secure" in "the inevitable conscription" turns out to be a place among corpses. "A Berlin Chronicle" is an autobiography of trauma. The event consists of an erasure: an erasure of Berlin and of the war out of the map of consciousness; an erasure of the self—its transformation into an automaton or a half-corpse, a body dispossessed of consciousness. "One of the bodies jammed in front of the barracks gates was mine," says Benjamin. The war, the shock against the mass of bodies replicated, two days later, by the shock of the discovery of two dead bodies, strips the self of "I": "It is to this immolation of our deepest self in shock that our memory owes its most indelible images" ("BC," p. 57).

Unspeakable Youth, or Living Outside Experience

Benjamin mourns thus his own lost youthful self, for which Fritz Heinle has become the metaphor: he grieves at the same time over Heinle's and his own lost youth. "The medium in which the pure melody of his youth would swell was destroyed. . . . In despair, he thus recalls his childhood. In those days there was time without flight and an 'I' without death. . . . Finally, he is redeemed by losing his comprehension. Amid such obliviousness . . . he begins the diary. It is the unfathomable document of a life never lived" ("MY," p. 11).

The suicide represents, however, not simply death but a refusal to compromise with life. Benjamin loves deeply Heinle's absolute commitment to a youth that, unlike Benjamin, he refuses to survive. "Never in any other work," Benjamin will say of Goethe, "did he give to youth what he granted it in Ottilie: the whole of life, in the way that, from its own duration, it has its own death" ("GEA," p. 353). This description equally applies to Heinle. Paradoxically, Heinle's suicide comes to represent not death but, on the contrary, vitality and life: "The pure word for life in its

immortality is 'youth,'" writes Benjamin, in analyzing traumatized youth in Dostoyevsky's *The Idiot*: "This young generation suffers from a damaged childhood."³³

Unexpectedly, trauma meets youth precisely in its absence—its erasure—of experience: "We have not yet experienced anything," said Benjamin at twenty-one, speaking for youth.³⁴ At twenty-two, the trauma as erasure—"the event that was to banish for long after both the city and the war from my mind"—equally remains outside experience.³⁵

In spite—or perhaps because—of this . . . the city of Berlin was never again to impinge so forcefully on my existence as it did in that epoch when we believed we could leave it untouched, only improving its schools, only breaking the inhumanity of their inmates' parents, only making a place in it for the words of Hölderlin or George. It was a final, heroic attempt to change the attitudes of people without changing their circumstances. We did not know that it was bound to fail, but there was hardly one of us whose resolve such knowledge could have altered. And today, as clearly as at that time, even if on the basis of an entirely different reasoning, I understand that the

33. Benjamin, "Dostoevsky's *The Idiot*," trans. Livingstone, *Selected Writings*, pp. 80–81; hereafter abbreviated "DI." Paradoxically, traumatized youth embodies both a principle of life (an everlasting youth) and a concurrent principle of the survival within language of a childish inarticulateness. Benjamin's interpretation of this wounded generation pursues one principle (life, youth) into the other (speechlessness, deficient language): "The pure word for life in its immortality is 'youth.' Dostoevsky's great act of lamentation in this novel is for the failure of the youth movement. Its life remains immortal, but the 'idiot' is obscured by his own brightness. . . . *This young generation suffers from a damaged childhood. . . . The child's inability to express itself continues to have a crippling effect on the speech* of Dostoevsky's characters" (ibid.; emphasis mine). Damaged youth is marked, thus, at once by a fixated condensation of vitality ("immortal life," eternal youth) and by a speechless inarticulateness (a damaged, "crippled," silent language). A traumatized language is for Benjamin the sign of a traumatized (an overwhelming) youth. This analysis applies to Benjamin as well (as will be demonstrated and elucidated by what follows). In childhood, life itself is a prisoner of silence (etymologically, an "infant" means "unable to speak"). Language develops with experience. But youth eternalized in death remains forever a prisoner of muteness.

34. Benjamin, "Experience," trans. Lloyd Spencer and Stefan Jost, *Selected Writings*, p. 3.

35. "The greater the share of the shock factor in particular impressions . . . , the less do these impressions enter experience [*Erfahrung*]," Benjamin will later write in his essay on Baudelaire (Benjamin, "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire," *Illuminations*, p. 163; hereafter abbreviated "B"). As Freud explained in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, memory fragments "are 'often most powerful and most enduring when the incident which left them behind was one that never entered consciousness'" (quoted in "B," p. 160). "Put in Proustian terms, this means that only *what has not been experienced explicitly and consciously*, what has not happened to the subject as an experience, can become a component of the *mémoire involontaire*" ("B," pp. 160–61; emphasis mine). "Perhaps the special achievement of shock defense may be seen in its function of assigning to an incident *a precise point in time in consciousness at the cost of the integrity of its content*" ("B," p. 163; emphasis mine). The *integrity of content* of the war experience—the integrity of its narration—is thus lost to consciousness and lost to language.

“language of youth” had to stand at the center of our associations.
[“BC,” p. 18]

Benjamin pledges fidelity to the “language of youth” the war has erased and that his subsequent work has struck dumb and reduced to silence. But “A Berlin Chronicle” narrates the way in which what is erased—the war, the corpse—remains precisely at the center. The center will thus be a silence. What is erased, what falls to silence at the outbreak of the war, is youth. But youth can have an unexpected afterlife. Heinle’s youth lives on in Benjamin. And Benjamin’s own silenced youth still speaks in interrupted lyric intervals that have become expressionless through Benjamin’s own silence. “Fidelity shall be maintained, even if no one has done so yet,” wrote Benjamin at twenty-one, signing “Ardor.”³⁶ Grown mute, the aged writer still asserts: “And today, as clearly as at that time . . . I understand that the ‘language of youth’ had to stand at the center of our associations.”

“Death,” Benjamin discovers, “has the power to lay bare like love.” “The human being appears to us as a corpse. . . . The human body lays itself bare” (“GEA,” p. 353). In a shocking, unnarratable epiphany of darkness, the war lays bare the body, in suddenly revealing youth as corpse.

The Burial

But the most traumatic memory that Benjamin keeps from the war is not simply this unnarratable epiphany—this sudden overwhelming revelation of youth as a corpse—but the added insult, the accompanying shame of the impossibility of giving the beloved corpse a proper burial, the shame of the incapability of taking leave of the dead bodies by giving them the final honor of a proper grave. It is because the bodies cannot be appropriately buried that the corpse of youth becomes a ghost that never will find peace. The grave, symbolically, cannot be closed. The event cannot be laid to rest.

And when, finally, after August 8, 1914, the days came when those among us who were closest to the dead couple did not want to part from them until they were buried, we felt the limits in the shame of being able to find refuge only in a seedy railway hotel on Stuttgart Square. Even the graveyard demonstrated the boundaries set by the city to all that filled our hearts: it was impossible to procure for the pair who died together graves in one and the same cemetery. But those were days that ripened a realization that was to come later, and that planted in me the conviction that the city of Berlin would also not be spared the scars of the struggle for a better order. If I chance

36. Benjamin, “Experience,” p. 4.

today to pass through the streets of the quarter, I set foot in them with the same uneasiness that one feels when entering an attic unvisited for years. Valuable things may be lying around, but nobody remembers where. ["BC," p. 20]

The graveyard stands for space in culture and in history: a grave materializes the survival of a name in the deterioration of the corpse. Symbolically, however, these casualties of war remain outside the map of history. The corpse of youth must remain nameless. "Valuable things may be lying around, but nobody remembers where."

The trauma, therefore, is not simply that a capitalist society and a capitalist war have killed youth and have taken *life* away. The real trauma is that they have taken *death* away, that they have robbed youth even from the possibility of mourning. In a world that has condemned youth to die at the war or from the war and in which even a burial is unaffordable; in a society in which even a grave is a commodity that needs to be bought and that can therefore be afforded only by the fortunate, youth, lacking proper funds, are subject—literally and metaphorically—to a *grief beyond their means*: "It was impossible to *procure* for the couple who died together graves in one and the same cemetery."³⁷

The Lesson of the War

The mourning will thus be transformed into shame. And it is the lesson of this shame, the moral of this shame, that will enable the autobiographer to say "I" despite his reluctance, as long as he is sufficiently paid,³⁸ and that will, on the other hand, give the narrator insight into the historical relation between war and revolution: "But those were days that ripened a realization that was to come later . . . that the city of Berlin would also not be spared the scars of the struggle for a better order." The lesson of the war is revolutionary, as history has demonstrated, in effect, in giving rise to the Russian revolution in the wake of and as a major consequence of the First World War. Benjamin will come both to endorse and to support this revolutionary logic that leads from war to revolution. If history has once revealed youth as a corpse, and if historically youth

37. There may have been additional reasons for the impossibility of giving the suicides a proper burial: religious reasons (since Heinle's girlfriend was Jewish; Jewish communities had their separate communal graveyards) and sociological reasons (middle-class families owned large familial burial sites potentially sufficient for the accommodation of their entire family; but the couple obviously did not qualify to be buried as family members by either family). The Selikson family (the wealthier of the two) would have probably accused Heinle of having dragged their daughter to suicide.

38. To overcome, that is, ironically and lengthily "the precaution of the subject represented by the 'I,' which is entitled not to be sold cheap."

means “the existence of a beginning that is separated from everything following it as though by an unbridgeable chasm” (*OR*, p. 20), only the new rupture of a revolution—only a new radical historical beginning—might perhaps one day redeem the corpse of youth or mean a possible return of youth in history. The loyalty to youth is henceforth revolutionary: it looks not to the past, but to the future. “Fidelity shall be maintained. . . .” “And today, as clearly as at that time, *even if on the basis of an entirely different reasoning*, I understand that the ‘language of youth’ had to stand at the center of our associations.”

Written for a Child

To whom, however, is this revolutionary lesson of a corpse passed on? To whom does Benjamin address the message of the “I,” this tale of the divorce between words, deeds, motivation, understanding, that is called history? For whom does Benjamin defeat “the precaution of the ‘I’” that is “entitled not to be sold cheap”? The dedication of “A Berlin Chronicle” reads: “For my dear Stefan.” Stefan is Benjamin’s only son, then fourteen years old. This unnarratable narration of a war, this horrifying, baffling story of a suicide and of the absence of a grave is, paradoxically, surprisingly, itself *addressed precisely to a child*.³⁹

What Benjamin attempts, in other words, is to *transmit* the story that cannot be told and to become himself the storyteller that cannot be one but that is one—the last narrator or the post-narrator. The trauma—or the breakdown of the story and of memory, the fragmentation of remembrance and the rupture of the chain or of the web of stories—is itself passed on to the next generation as a testament, a final gift.

Memory creates the chain of tradition which passes a happening on from generation to generation. . . . It starts the web which all stories form in the end. One ties on to the next, as the great storytellers . . . have always readily shown. [“S,” p. 98]

“A Berlin Chronicle,” much like “The Storyteller,” is about transmission and about a breakdown of transmission. But this rupture is itself

39. “For childhood, knowing no preconceived opinions, has none about life. It is as dearly attached . . . to the realm of the dead, where it juts into that of the living, as to life itself” (“BC,” p. 28). Compare, toward the very end of “A Berlin Chronicle,” Benjamin’s own childish memory of having been the addressee of a paternal narrative of death. “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 that so affected me. . . . But in the way in which my father told me, there lay [text breaks off]” (“BC,” p. 57).

materialized now in the drama—in the image—of the suicide's corpse. What the corpse cannot tell will become the torso of a symbol.

The images, severed from all earlier associations, . . . stand—like precious fragments or torsos in a collector's gallery—in the prosaic rooms of our later understanding. ["BC," p. 26]

Reminiscences . . . do not always amount to an autobiography. And these quite certainly do not. . . . For autobiography has to do with time, with sequence and what makes up the continuous flow of life. Here, I am talking of a space, of moments and discontinuities. ["BC," p. 28]

Benjamin knows that "the flood of war books" published in the aftermath of the First World War cannot bridge over this gap in experience. Like Freud, Benjamin has therefore understood that the impact of the break will be belated and that the real problem of the trauma will be that of the second generation. This is why the postnarrator wants to reestablish the transmissibility of his experience and to transmit the happening that cannot be told—to transmit the war, the corpse, the suicide—to his son.

It is not the object of the story to convey a happening *per se*, which is the purpose of information; rather, it embeds it in the life of the storyteller in order to pass it on as experience to those listening. ["B," p. 159]

Where there is experience in the strict sense of the word, certain contents of the individual past combine with material from the collective past. ["B," p. 159]

"Seen in this way," Benjamin himself, much like the storyteller, "joins the ranks of the teachers and sages" ("S," p. 108).⁴⁰

5

The Angel of History

In "A Berlin Chronicle" (1932), Benjamin speaks of the First World War in facing Hitler's rise to power. In "The Storyteller" (1936), Benjamin

40. In addressing his impossible narration to a child, Benjamin returns to his original (early) concern with pedagogy and with education, a concern that in turn has been struck by silence but that he has never in effect abandoned. "But who would trust a cane wielder who proclaimed the mastery of children by adults to be the purpose of education? *Is not education, above all, the indispensable ordering of the relationship between generations* and therefore mastery . . . of that relationship and not of children?" (Benjamin, "One-Way Street," p. 487; emphasis mine).

speaks of the First World War because he foresees already the unavoidable outbreak of the Second World War. "At the door awaits the economic crisis, and the shadow of the next war is right behind," he writes in 1933. "In [the] buildings, in [the] paintings and in [the] stories [of those who have made the radically new their concern], humanity prepares itself to survive culture, if there is no choice."⁴¹

The traumatic repetition of the war will make Benjamin fall silent a second time, this time definitively.

Before this final fall to silence, in the second winter of the war, Benjamin will write, however, the "Theses on the Philosophy of History" (1940), in which the story of the silence of narration—the story of the First World War—is again narrated but this time interpreted as a theory of history. Again, Benjamin sees ahead of time the consequences of the war. The theory of history names the constellation of the two world wars—the past one and the present one—envisioned one against the other and one through the other. "One ought to speak of events that reach us like an echo awakened by a call," wrote Benjamin in "A Berlin Chronicle" ("BC," p. 59). It is therefore through the repetition of the trauma that the historian will read history and that the theorist will theorize it; it is from the repetition of the trauma that Benjamin derives his crucial insight into the "philosophy" of history as a constitutive process of silencing, a discourse covering the muteness of the victims and drowning in its own noise the real happenings of their repeated fall to silence.

Thus, the angel of history is mute: his mouth is speechlessly open, as he is helplessly *pushed back toward the future*, pushed back from the Second World War to the speechless experience of the First.⁴² The invasion of France in May 1940 repeats the invasion of Belgium twenty-six years earlier, on 4 August 1914, an invasion that was to be followed, four days later, by the double suicide.

Benjamin is trapped in what has now become occupied France. He plans to escape, to cross the Franco-Spanish border in the hope of ultimately reaching the United States, not so much because he wants to save his life as because he wishes to transmit a manuscript to the free world, be-

41. Benjamin, "Erfahrung und Armut," *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. Hermann Schwepenhäuser and Rolf Tiedemann, 7 vols. in 14 (Frankfurt am Main, 1972–89), 2:1:219.

42. Compare "TPH":

A Klee painting named "Angelus Novus" shows an angel looking as though he is about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating. His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress. ["TPH," pp. 257–58]

cause he wishes to *transmit*, that is, beyond the silence—and beyond the silencing—to the next generation. He carries this manuscript precisely on his body. Ironically, it is not known today what was this manuscript. Materially, the manuscript has not survived. It is presumed that this manuscript was indeed the very essay on history, of which copies were preserved elsewhere. But we cannot be sure. The title of the manuscript that Benjamin transported on his body will remain forever shrouded in silence.

“The Time of Death Is Our Own”

Arrested at the border and informed that he will be handed over, the next day, to the Gestapo, Benjamin will end his story by a final suicide. His own suicide will repeat, therefore, and mirror, the suicide of his younger friend, his alter ego, at the outbreak of the First World War.

What is highly ironic is that history repeats also the story of the absence of a grave—for lack of proper funds. The money left in Benjamin's pocket at his death turned out, apparently, to be sufficient only for the “rental” of a grave. After a while, the body was disinterred and the remains were moved to a nameless collective grave of those with no possessions. History repeats itself at once intentionally (suicide) and unintentionally (absence of a burial). “This language of the intentionless truth . . . possesses authority,” Benjamin has written; “this authority stands in opposition to the conventional concept of objectivity because its validity, that of the intentionless truth, is historical.”⁴³ After the fact, “A Berlin Chronicle” sounds almost like a prophecy: “Valuable things may be lying around,” Benjamin insisted, “but nobody remembers where.” Benjamin, writes Demetz, “is buried in Port Bou, but nobody knows where, and when visitors come . . ., the guardians of the cemetery lead them to a place that they say is his grave, respectfully accepting a tip.”⁴⁴ For a long time, there was in that Spanish cemetery “neither monument nor flower.” In 1992, a monument was built.⁴⁵ But Benjamin's body is not in the grave where the monument now stands.

“For storytelling is always the art of repeating stories,” Benjamin has written in “The Storyteller” (“S,” p. 91). Benjamin's own suicide will ironically and tragically repeat, thus, both the story of the suicide of his youth and the shameful story of the absence of a burial. By asserting his own choice of death and by taking his own life, Benjamin repeats as well, from Heinle's story, *the message of the corpse*: the posthumous, mute message of

43. Benjamin, “On the Topic of Individual Disciplines and Philosophy,” trans. Livingstone, *Selected Writings*, p. 404.

44. Demetz, introduction to Benjamin, *Reflections*, p. xv.

45. The monument (sponsored by the German government) was planned and built by the “Arbeitskreis selbständiger Kulturinstitut” (ASKI).

the suicide as a symbolic gesture of protest against the war and as the autonomous assertion of an uncoerced and uncoercible will in the face of the overpowering spread of world violence.

In repeating Heinle's suicide at the threshold of the First World War and in reactivating his symbolic message of resistance to the war, Benjamin's own rush to suicide in the early stages of the Second World War will achieve, thus, a definitive reunion with the cruelly lost friend.

It was after a long separation. . . . But even today I remember the smile that lifted the whole weight of these weeks of separation.

Benjamin has always known—since the trauma of the First World War and the example of the suicide of his friend—that “the cowardice of the living” (the survivor's timidity that paralleled “The Poet's Courage” or the poet's death) “must ultimately become unbearable” (“MY,” p. 14). Already, at the age of twenty-one, he writes prophetically, as though in premonition of his future suicide:

The diary writes the story of our greatness from the vantage point of our death . . .

In death we befall ourselves. . . . And the time of death is our own. Redeemed, we become aware of the fulfillment of the game. . . . The vocation that we proudly dismissed in our youth takes us by surprise. Yet it is nothing but a call to immortality. [“MY,” p. 15]

A Signature (A Call to Immortality)

Framed as it is by Benjamin's own texts, prefigured by his life and central to the processes of his entire thought, the suicide therefore is not just an act of weariness and abdication, a mere untimely gesture of fatigue and of despair—as Hannah Arendt has quite famously depicted it (and mourned it) in underscoring its essential feature as “bad luck.”⁴⁶ Beyond the irony of fate, beyond misfortune, the suicide makes of death a sign. In desperation, dying becomes a language. It makes a point. It is not only a decision to stop suffering and to lapse into protective and forgetful sleep. It is—across the gap of two world wars—a knocking at the doors of history. It is the punctuation of a life of writing that, by a final, willful

46.

There is . . . another . . . element . . . which is involved in the life of those “who have won victory in death.” It is *the element of bad luck*, and this factor, very prominent in Benjamin's life, cannot be ignored here because he himself . . . was so extraordinarily aware of it. In his writing and also in conversation he used to speak about the “little hunchback,” . . . a German fairy-tale figure . . . out of . . . German folk poetry. The hunchback was an early acquaintance of Benjamin. . . . His mother . . . used to say, “Mr. Bungle sends his regards” . . . whenever one of the countless little catastrophes of childhood had taken place. . . . The mother referred to “the little hunchback,”

act of silence, leaves behind *its signature*: a signature of desperate but absolutely *unconditional refusal of complicity and of collaboration* with the coercive tyranny of world wars.

Yet tragic silence . . . must not be thought of as being dominated by defiance alone. Rather, this defiance is every bit as much a consequence of the experience of speechlessness as a factor which intensifies the condition. The content of the hero's achievements belongs to the community, as does speech. Since the community . . . denies these achievements, they remain unarticulated in the hero. And he must therefore all the more forcefully enclose within the confines of his physical self every action and every item of knowledge the greater and the more potentially effective it is. It is the achievement of his *physis* alone, not of language, if he is able to hold fast to his cause, and he must therefore do so in death. [OG, p. 108]

Projected into his own words, Benjamin's own suicide can be read as "the attempt of moral man, still dumb, still inarticulate . . . to raise himself up

who caused the objects to play their mischievous tricks upon children. . . . (*With a precision suggesting a sleepwalker [Benjamin's] clumsiness invariably guided him to the very center of a misfortune*). . . . Wherever one looks in Benjamin's life, one will find the little hunchback. . . .

On September 26, 1940, Walter Benjamin, who was about to emigrate to America, took his life at the Franco-Spanish border. There were various reasons for this. The Gestapo had confiscated his Paris apartment, which contained his library . . . and many of his manuscripts. . . . Besides, nothing drew him to America, where, as he used to say, people would probably find no other use for him than to cart him up and down the country to exhibit him as "the last European." *But the immediate occasion for Benjamin's suicide was an uncommon stroke of bad luck.* Through the armistice agreement between Vichy France and the Third Reich, refugees from Hitler Germany . . . were in danger of being shipped back to Germany. . . . To save this category of refugees . . . the United States had distributed a number of emergency visas through its consulates in unoccupied France. Thanks to the efforts of the Institute in New York, Benjamin was among the first to receive such a visa in Marseilles. Also, he quickly obtained a Spanish transit visa to enable him to get to Lisbon and board a ship there. However, he did not have a French exit visa . . . which the French government, eager to please the Gestapo, invariably denied to German refugees. In general this presented no great difficulty, since a relatively short and none too arduous road to be covered by foot over the mountains to Port Bou was well known and was not guarded by the French border police. Still, for Benjamin, apparently suffering from a cardiac condition . . . even the shortest walk was a great exertion, and he must have arrived in a state of serious exhaustion. The small group of refugees that he had joined reached the Spanish border town only to learn that Spain had closed the border that same day and that the border officials did not honor visas made out in Marseilles. The refugees were supposed to return to France by the same route the next day. During the night Benjamin took his life, whereupon the border officials, upon whom this suicide had made an impression, allowed his companions to proceed to Portugal. A few weeks later the embargo on visas was lifted again. One day earlier Benjamin would have got through without any trouble; one day later the people in Marseilles would have known that for the time being it was impossible to pass through Spain. Only on that particular day was the catastrophe possible. [Arendt, introduction to Benjamin, *Illuminations*, pp. 5–18; emphasis mine]

amid the agitation of that painful world" (*OG*, p. 110). Benjamin himself embodies, thus, in his own concept but with the "authority of . . . the intentionless truth," the "paradox of the birth of the genius in moral speechlessness" (*OG*, p. 110). His death gives his posterity a language; it endows the future with a yet unborn word.

The repetition of the suicide recovers the collective meaning that was lost to death both in the battlefields—and in the suicide—of the First World War. "The voice of the anonymous storyteller" ("S," p. 107) recovers "a collective experience to which even the deepest shock of every individual experience, death, constitutes no impediment or barrier" ("S," p. 102).⁴⁷

One can . . . ask oneself whether the relationship of the storyteller to his material, human life, is not in itself a craftsman's relationship, whether it is not his very task to fashion the raw material of experience, his own and that of others, in a solid, useful, and unique way . . . exemplified by the proverb if one thinks of it as an ideogram of a story. A proverb, one might say, is a ruin which stands on the site of an old story and in which a moral twines about a happening like ivy around a wall. ["S," p. 108]

Through his death, Benjamin converts, thus, his own life into a proverb.

The Will (A Posthumous Narration)

Scholem tells us that the idea of suicide was not new to Benjamin, who was close to suicide several times throughout his life. Particularly, Scholem has learnt after the fact that, upon writing "A Berlin Chronicle," Benjamin had an imminent suicide plan in mind, a plan that unpredictably was changed at the last moment. This is why, as a correlative or counterpart to the autobiographical "A Berlin Chronicle," Benjamin has also

47. Benjamin in this way reenacts, beyond the moral speechlessness of Heine's story, a more effective transformation of the corpse into a message. If "storytelling is always the art of repeating stories," it goes without saying that *not every repetition is an art*. In "the age of mechanical reproduction," not every reiteration is endowed with what "The Storyteller" calls "the gift of retelling" ("S," p. 91), a gift which is specifically, says Benjamin, *a listener's gift*—an insight born out of the capacity for silent listening. Benjamin's "gift of retelling" is both autobiographical and theoretical: it is at once a literary gift and a historical force of perception; it is compellingly subjective (it pays the ultimate subjective price) and compellingly objective (it speaks with the intentionless authority of history). There are various ways of "repeating stories"—with or without historical surprises, with or without new meaning, with or without historical authority. Benjamin's historical retelling of the story of the suicide is authoritative, because it makes *transmissible* what it repeats, because it rescues the past suicide from its meaninglessness and from its original forgettability, in endowing it with a transmissible historical intelligibility.

left a will, a will that he “did not destroy when his will to live gained the upper hand at the eleventh hour,” and that after his death was found in his documents. The will reads:

All the manuscripts in my estate—both my own writings and those of others—shall go to Dr. Gerhard Scholem, Abyssinian Road, Jerusalem. My entire estate contains in addition to my own writings the works of the brothers Fritz and Wolf Heinle. It would be in accordance with my wishes if their writings could be preserved in the university library in Jerusalem or in the Prussian State Library. These comprise not only Heinle’s manuscripts but also my edited handwritten copies of their works. As regards my own works, it would be in accordance with my wishes if the University Library in Jerusalem provided space for some of them. Should Dr. Gerhard Scholem publish a posthumous selection of my writings . . . , it would be in accordance with my wishes if he sent a certain portion of the net profits from that edition—about 40–60% after deducting his expenses—to my son Stephan.⁴⁸

In the enclosed farewell letter to his cousin Egon Wissing, the executor of his will, Benjamin declared:

I think it would be nice if the manuscript department of the library of the University of Jerusalem accepted the posthumous papers of two non-Jews from the hands of two Jews—Scholem’s and mine.⁴⁹

As posthumous narration, the will insures transmission of the story of the other. Beyond its author’s death, it must secure, safeguard, the other’s immortality. It is in thus resisting another’s loss of life and another’s loss of meaning that Benjamin in death recovers, for himself and for his friend, what Heinle in his suicide lost precisely: the “narrator’s stance.”

With this comes to light the innermost basis for the “narrator’s stance.” *It is he alone who, in the feeling of hope, can fulfill the meaning of the event. . . . Thus, hope finally wrests itself from it . . . like a trembling question. . . . This hope is the sole justification of the faith in immortality, which must never be kindled from one’s own existence.* [“GEA,” p. 355; emphasis mine]

Immortality takes from the other. Life can become immortal only insofar as it is linked to others’ lives. What is immortal is the other, not

48. Quoted in Gershom Scholem, *Walter Benjamin: The Story of a Friendship*, trans. Zohn (New York, 1988), pp. 187–88.

49. Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 188.

the self. What is immortal is, in other words, not the narrator but the very story of the repetition, a story that, repeated at least twice, is not simply individual. And the transmission must go on.

In the “trembling question” of a hope, Benjamin assigns to Scholem the task of continuing the story: the task of duplicating now, in Scholem’s own life, the prosopopeia to the dead; the task of inheriting and of continuing the *Story of a Friendship*. Scholem will fulfill this task. Benjamin has proven thus that “not only a man’s knowledge or wisdom,”

but above all his real life—and this is the stuff that stories are made of—first assumes transmissible form at the moment of his death. Just as a sequence of images is set in motion inside a man as his life comes to an end—unfolding the views of himself under which he has encountered himself without being aware of it—suddenly in his expressions and looks the unforgettable emerges and imparts to everything that concerned him that authority which even the poorest wretch in dying possesses for the living around him. This authority is at the very source of the story. [“S,” p. 94]

Textual Authority

Authority is what commends a text (a life) to memory, what makes it unforgettable. What Benjamin—prophetically again—says of Prince Myshkin—the protagonist of Dostoyevsky’s *The Idiot*—can equally account for his own effect and for the literary impact of his own textual authority:

Immortal life is unforgettable. . . . *It is the life that is not to be forgotten, even though it has no monument or memorial. . . .* And “unforgettable” does not just mean that we cannot forget it. It points to something in the nature of the unforgettable itself, something that makes it unforgettable. [“DI,” p. 80]

What is the secret of Myshkin’s charisma? “His individuality,” says Benjamin, “is secondary to his life” (“DI,” p. 80). Like Myshkin, Benjamin is unforgettable because his individuality (including his own death, his suicide) is subordinated to his life.

Like the storyteller, Benjamin has “borrowed his authority from death.” But the authority he has borrowed from death is none other than the storyteller’s power to transmit, to *take across a limit, the uniqueness of a life*. It is life that, over and beyond the author’s death, has been preserved in the texts of Benjamin. It is life that, over and beyond the Second World War, still reaches out to us and touches us and teaches us in the words of Benjamin and in his silence. It is the textual authority of Benjamin’s life

that has claimed Scholem and that has compelled him to repeat the story and to continue in his own way Benjamin's prosopopeia to the dead.

In "The Metaphysics of Youth," when he was still himself a very young man, Benjamin wrote:

Conversation 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.

Benjamin was a good listener because he was always faithful to the silent one.

I would suggest that the task of criticism today is not to drown Benjamin's texts in an ever growing critical noise but to return to Benjamin his silence.