



EARLY  
WRITINGS  
1910-1917

**WALTER  
BENJAMIN**

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1910–1917

**WALTER BENJAMIN**

*Translated by Howard Eiland and Others*

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# Abbreviations and a Note on the Texts

The following abbreviations are used for works by Walter Benjamin:

- GS     *Gesammelte Schriften*, 7 vols., suppl., ed. Rolf Tiedemann, Hermann Schweppenhäuser, et al. (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1972–1989).
- GB     *Gesammelte Briefe*, 6 vols., ed. Christoph Gösde and Henri Lonitz (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1995–2000).
- SW     *Selected Writings*, 4 vols., ed. Michael W. Jennings et al. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1996–2003).
- CWB    *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin*, trans. Manfred R. Jacobson and Evelyn M. Jacobson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994).

Translations in this book are by Howard Eiland unless otherwise indicated. Previously published translations have been revised for this volume.

# Translator's Introduction

Walter Benjamin's earliest published writings date back to 1910, when he was a high-school student in Berlin. That year, as he turned eighteen, he published poems and short stories in various styles—lyrical, allegorical, expressionistic—in the student-run periodical *Der Anfang* (The Beginning), for which venue he always made use of the multivalent Latin pseudonym “Ardor.” The following year, he began publishing theoretical essays on the general subject of “youth” and its “awakening”; these were overtly polemical pieces. In the feverish years before the First World War, Benjamin played an active role in what is known today as the German Youth Movement, a politically heterogeneous phenomenon which he and many others looked on as primarily a movement of educational and cultural reform, one whose goal was the reform of consciousness in general, nothing short of a “new humanity.” Thus, his programmatic writings on academic reform, comprising about a quarter of the contents of this volume, represent not so much direct appeals to action as efforts to reorient and liberate their readers' general outlook.

Already, in 1905–1906, at the country boarding school Haubinda, where he had been sent because of his delicate health, the young Benjamin came under the influence of Gustav Wyneken, one of the leading

educational reformers in Europe during the first decades of the twentieth century and a founder of the *Freie Schulgemeinde* or Free School Community, a pioneering progressive and coeducational secondary school located in a village in the Thuringian Forest in central Germany. It was the charismatic Wyneken who taught that the awakening of youth must take the form of living culture, which he understood to be a transformation of tradition in the light of present-day experience. At Haubinda, Benjamin studied German literature with Wyneken, and it was in this class that his interest in philosophy was born. The marriage of literary and philosophical perspectives in this popularizing exposition of the modern—Wyneken combined an emphasis on objective spirit with a Nietzschean tragic philosophy of life—proved especially fruitful in the formation of an historical-minded and consciously nihilistic messianism. In the course of his last two years in high school and his first two years of university study at Freiburg and Berlin, Benjamin dedicated himself with a high-minded critical zeal to his generation's widespread student activism, writing articles, giving speeches at youth congresses, organizing and leading discussion groups, and ultimately, in February 1914, assuming the presidency of the Berlin University chapter of the Independent Students' Association (*Freie Studentenschaft*), which he held until the outbreak of war in August. At the same time, he continued writing poetry and fiction along with philosophical essays and dialogues, literary-aesthetic criticism, travel diaries, and other notations, while maintaining an intellectually rich correspondence with friends and associates.

Benjamin as a young man was ripe for a proud and radical mode of thought. Growing up the eldest son in the populous household of a wealthy, assimilated Jewish family in the burgeoning west end of Berlin, with summer residences in nearby Potsdam and Neubabelsberg, he received instruction from private tutors until he was nearly nine and afterward graduated from one of Berlin's better secondary schools, the *Kaiser-Friedrich-Schule* in Charlottenburg, where he studied French from the first year on, and later Latin and Greek, and where he received high praise for his writing. His academic success did not keep him from inwardly rebelling, however, against the rigid Prussian conventionalism of both teachers and pupils. The two years at Haubinda



had given him a sense of mission and inspired him with an ideal of open exchange in the service of intellectual seriousness. On graduating from the Kaiser Friedrich School in March 1912, he published a short piece, "Epilogue," criticizing the arbitrariness and purposelessness of the classroom instruction: "We could no more take our work seriously than we could take ourselves seriously."

In his first semester at the University of Freiburg in the summer of 1912, he maintained an exceptionally heavy course load that ranged from Religious Life in Late Antiquity, Medieval German Literature, and General History of the Sixteenth Century, to Kant's *Weltanschauung*, The Philosophy of Contemporary Culture, and Introduction to Epistemology and Metaphysics. But he still found time to carry on his mission "to restore people to their youth," as he puts it in a letter. Freiburg was the first of a number of German universities to permit students to organize "school reform units," after a proposal by Gustav Wyneken; these were designed to broaden the educational horizon beyond the scope of vocational and professional training. Benjamin soon began working for the Freiburg reform unit, which sponsored a lecture series and evening discussion groups as a supplement to official course offerings and as an alternative to the activities of established student associations like the fraternities and dueling corps. But with their antiauthoritarian model of a "free school community," which called for nonhierarchical relations between teachers and students, and with their radicalizing of certain liberal educational ideals of the nineteenth century, such as the intellectual integration of academic disciplines and the cultivation of individual personality within a community of scholars, the Wynekenians ran into resistance from more-conservative elements of the independent student body. In fact, the Independent Students' Association at Freiburg struck Benjamin as "a horde of emancipated phrase-mongers and incompetents," and by the end of the summer semester he had resolved on leaving Freiburg for the University of Berlin, where he could attend classes and work for reform while living at home. He had a book-lined study in his parents' newly acquired villa on Delbrückstraße, decorated with a reproduction of Matthias Grünewald's *Isenheim Altarpiece* (1515).

Benjamin would return to Freiburg for the summer 1913 semester, but otherwise he remained at the University of Berlin—where he enrolled in philosophy—until the fall of 1915. There he took part in various school-reform and youth-group functions on and off campus, and he renewed contact with the student magazine *Der Anfang*, which, after a period of preparatory work in which he was evidently involved, launched its third and final series in the spring of 1913; quarrels eventually broke out among student factions seeking editorial control, and publication ceased in July of the following year. Between May and October, while publishing in other journals as well, Benjamin produced five pseudonymous articles on youth for the new *Anfang*, his last being the little essay “‘Experience,’” which highlights a characteristic concern. As he repeatedly suggests in these articles, youth is the capacity for experience that exceeds the rational framework of life, is readiness for a “radically new way of seeing,” whereas the “philistine” or “bourgeois” conception of experience is precisely the outgrowing of youth—youth as merely a transition to the practical realities of adulthood. The nostalgic bonhomie of school reunions and alumni groups was a prime target of his scorn.

We get a sense of the atmosphere surrounding the reorganization of the journal *Der Anfang* from the retrospective account of a participant, cited by the editors of Benjamin's *Gesammelte Schriften* (Collected Writings):

One day I was invited to a meeting to consider setting up a new journal. I found myself in a circle of young men I'd not met before. They had flowing hair, wore open shirts, . . . and they spoke—or, rather, preached—in solemn, mellifluous phrases about turning away from the bourgeois world and about the right of youth to a culture befitting its worth . . . The concept of leader and of follower played an important role. We read Stefan George . . . One of us, the most gifted, resides in Paris as an émigré philosopher and has become a Marxist . . . The youth movement was exclusively middle class . . . Conscious of this limitation, I drafted a clumsy proclamation, arguing that the youth of the working class belonged with us . . . Wyneken [who oversaw the running of the journal in 1913–1914] sent the essay back filled with strongly negative comments: it's too early, we still have to concentrate on ourselves.

Hence . . . the danger of intellectualism that grew up in our circle . . . Politics was considered unintellectual and unworthy. (Memoir of Martin Gumpert, 1939; cited GS2, 867-870)

To be sure, in his articles, speeches, and letters from the years before the war, Benjamin consistently repudiates any alignment of "youth" with existing partisan politics, seeing that the latter is everywhere the vehicle of political parties, not ideas. "In the deepest sense," he remarks in a letter of January 7, 1913, politics comes down to one thing: the art of choosing the lesser evil. His unpublished "Dialogue on the Religiosity of the Present," from the fall of 1912, nonetheless touches on the possibility of an "honest" and "individualistic" socialism, as distinguished from the conventional socialism of the day. Writing more than a decade later, on May 29, 1926, to his close friend Gershom Scholem in Jerusalem, Benjamin will declare that radical political *Aktion* can be of value even in the absence of meaningful political goals, for "there are no meaningfully *political* goals." Such political action or "observance," he tells Scholem, will also be a religious observance. And he means: beyond all churches. It will be something decided "at every moment." If youth keeps its *distance* from politics in the narrow sense, then what Benjamin in a 1912 pamphlet calls the "ethical program" of school reform, youth's protest against school and family in the name of a more comprehensive community of learning, will presumably serve politics in a broader sense: namely, the politics that begins in education and comes to fruition in culture.

As for the charge of "intellectualism," Benjamin takes this up toward the beginning of his essay "The Life of Students," which brings together the main themes of his early reformist discourse. To measure student life by the idea of learning or study, he argues, is not a sign of *Intellektualismus* but a necessity of criticism. For what distinguishes the present-day life of students, in their spineless acquiescence to the vocational demands of the age, and to the criterion of "applicability" above all, is essentially unwillingness to be absorbed in an idea. At issue in such conformism and faint-heartedness is the distorted self-understanding of the university institution itself, specifically the working of the professional "apparatus" within the modern academic disciplines; which have

gradually lost sight of their common origin in the idea of knowledge. In no uncertain terms, Benjamin presents his indictment of the instrumentalizing of education, "the perversion of the creative spirit into the vocational spirit," as an aspect of the advancing spiritual crisis concealed in the increasingly secure organization of life.

How, then, to reorient the disciplines of learning to their immanent unity of thought? Benjamin does not concern himself with practical directives for the renovation of academic life, other than to stipulate, in "The Life of Students," that it is not a matter of confronting lawyers with literary questions or doctors with legal ones (as some of his colleagues have proposed), so much as subordinating the special fields of knowledge to the idea of the whole represented by the university itself. It is the concept of the university as an open-ended working ideal that is the true seat of authority and the basis of any genuine vocation for learning and teaching, indissoluble as these enterprises essentially are. And it was the role of students, in their propensity for both uncompromising idealism and radical doubt, to constitute an intellectual vanguard in the learning community: to keep alive a space for questioning, for recollection of the underlying crisis of modernity, and in this way to foster "the culture of conversation," thereby preventing the degeneration of learning into a mere accumulation of information and making all study in a fundamental sense philosophical.

Of course, for the student body to become "the great transformer," the life of students must itself be transformed. This, as we've indicated, is the immediate historical problematic in which the messianic concept of awakening, which plays a part in Benjamin's thinking at every stage of his career, is first developed. Youth is the "Sleeping Beauty" (title of his inaugural *Anfang* essay) that slumbers and does not yet wake to itself. To help bring about an awakening of "the youthful life"—the idealism that *starts* from pessimism and from unending "struggles with society, state, law"—this, in Benjamin's view, is the task of the young generation. For it is a sure sign of age to see in the existent all there is. Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, as "the tragedy of modern man," is adduced in this connection. The prince's disgust with the world does not preclude his embrace of a mission: "Though the world be ever so bad, you came to make it better." Moreover, comments Ben-

jamin, despite the fact that Hamlet ultimately succumbs to the world, he remains victorious. The tragic sense of life, in other words, colors the idea of fulfillment in the philosophy of youth: "the redemption of the unredeemable . . . is the universal meaning we proclaim" (letter of June 23, 1913, to a school friend, Herbert Belmore).

As Benjamin envisions it, youth's awakening to itself means blasting inherited notions of ego and identity and opening them up. At the same time, there is an emphasis on the individuation and radical finitude of absolute spirit. It is an awakening to the drastic sense that "all our humanity is a sacrifice to the spirit," as he puts it in the letter to Belmore cited above, a sacrifice allowing "no private feelings, no private will and intellect." Youth awakens to its own untoward presence (*Gegenwart*), which it can only await (*erwarten*) in readiness. It is a question not of possession but of actualization.<sup>1</sup> Writing on September 15, 1913, to his friend and companion-in-arms Carla Seligson, a medical student in Berlin, Benjamin expands on the subject:

Today I felt the awesome truth of Christ's words: Behold, the kingdom of God is neither here nor there, but within us. I would like to read with you Plato's dialogue on love, where this is said more beautifully and thought more deeply than probably anywhere else.

1. The concept of possession is targeted in the undated "Notizen zu einer Arbeit über die Kategorie der Gerechtigkeit" (Notes for a Work on the Category of Justice), which Gershom Scholem copied out of Benjamin's notebook into his own diary on October 8–9, 1916: "To every good [*Jedem Gute*], as delimited in the order of time and space, there attaches the character of possession [*Besitzcharakter*], as an expression of its transience. Possession, however, as encompassed in the same finitude, is always unjust. Hence no system based on possession or property . . . can lead to justice. / Rather, justice resides in the condition of a good that cannot be a possession. This alone is the good through which other goods are divested of ownership [*besitzlos werden*]. Virtue can be demanded, whereas justice, in the end, can only *be*—as a state of the world or state of God. . . . The immense gulf separating law and justice . . . is something indicated in other languages as well." See Gershom Scholem, *Tagebücher 1913–1917* (Frankfurt: Jüdischer Verlag, 1995), 401–402; in English (abridged) as *Lamentations of Youth: The Diaries of Gershom Scholem, 1913–1919*, trans. Anthony David Skinner (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 442.

This morning I gave this some more thought: to be young means not so much serving the spirit as *awaiting* it . . . This is the most important thing: we must not fasten on any particular idea, [not even] the idea of youth culture . . . For then (if we do not turn ourselves into mere workers in a movement), if we keep our gaze free to see the spirit wherever it may be, we will be the ones to actualize it. Almost everybody forgets that *they themselves* are the place where spirit actualizes itself. But because they have made themselves inflexible, turned themselves into pillars of a building instead of vessels or bowls that can receive and shelter an ever purer content, they despair of the actualization we feel within ourselves. This soul is something *eternally actualizing*. Every person, every soul that is born, can bring to life the new reality. We feel it in ourselves and we also want to establish it from out of ourselves.

The intimate correlation of political and theological in Benjamin's thinking finds "youthful" expression in this letter. The theological here is certainly not a matter of piety, which he considers a useless expenditure of energy, and it is as far removed from mysticism as it is from organized religion.<sup>2</sup> In "The Religious Position of the New Youth," published in May 1914, Benjamin, in the spirit of Kierkegaard and late Tolstoy, likens the young generation to the "first Christians," for whom the sacred—that is, the ultimate and essential—could appear in the most inconspicuous thing, in any object or person at any moment. And in the "Dialogue on the Religiosity of the Present," he voices the complaint that our social activity has lost its "metaphysical seriousness," and he calls for a modern (that is, nondogmatic and noneschatological), a worldly religiosity, one rooted in a "new con-

2. Benjamin's interest in his own Jewishness was awakened by his association with the Wynekenians, a large proportion of whom were Jewish. Before that, he says, his sense of being Jewish was little more than an exotic "aroma" in his life. On the question of the "Jewish spirit," and on Benjamin's critique of "practical Zionism" from the viewpoint of culture, which is always *human* culture, see the five letters written between September 1912 and February 1913 to his fellow student Ludwig Strauss, a poet and later literary historian at Hebrew University in Jerusalem (GB1, 61–88). See also "The Centaur" (Chapter 45 in this volume) and the section "Sexual Awakening" in *Berlin Childhood around 1900* (SW3, 386).

sciousness of personal immediacy" that would lend new nobility to daily life. In its modernity, such religiosity reflects the Romantic insight into the "night side" of nature or, in post-Nietzschean terms, the ultimate groundlessness of being. As we read in the short essay "Socrates" (1916), "The radiant is true only where it is refracted in the nocturnal."

Youth's presence to itself is dialectical in this sense. Its radiance depends on its gravity. That is, genuine community—which is necessarily a community of individual consciences—can flower only from the soil of the "deepest solitude." The cultivation of solitude is a precondition of (philosophical) community; but, as Benjamin explains in a letter of August 4, 1913, to Carla Seligson, only "an idea and a community in the idea" can ever lead to meaningful solitude. This paradoxical situation results in a certain ambivalence toward both the individual and the social, taken in themselves. The "eternally actualizing" soul of youth is at once a concert of singularities and a reverberation of the collective within the singular. This means that youth's sense of itself is inevitably dissonant, uncertain—"as uncertain as our own I" ("The Religious Position of the New Youth").

The concentration on youth's singular collective presence involves a broadening and deepening of the idea of presence itself and the present moment. Nietzsche had already attacked the scientific-objectivist premises of nineteenth-century historicism in his essay "On the Advantage and Disadvantage of History for Life," which is cited in Benjamin's 1913 *Anfang* article, "Teaching and Valuation." Nietzsche argues that the past can be interpreted only from out of "the highest energy of the present," for "the past always speaks as an oracle." In the dense, expressionistic "The Metaphysics of Youth," begun probably in the summer of 1913, when he was attending a seminar on the philosophy of Henri Bergson at Freiburg, Benjamin lays down his own modernist metaphysics along these lines, conceiving the present as reservoir of the unmeasured dream energies of the past: "Past things become futural," and, therefore, "what we do and think is filled with the being of our fathers and ancestors." The evocation of a layered, intertwined vertical temporality is distinctly Bergsonian. Bergson follows Nietzsche in dissolving what we customarily regard as matter into a tissue

of events, a pulsating vibratory reality; the present emerges as an interval and depth of duration through which the past to some extent persists: This ontological, rather than psychological, understanding of memory—it is the *being* of our ancestors that inhabits us—was to have a lasting influence on Benjamin. Bergson further distinguishes the “concrete time” of vital process and intuition from the “abstract time” associated with scientific measurement; our customary concepts have been formed, he says, on the model of solids, and our logic is preeminently the “logic of solids.” (At the back of this stands the Nietzschean critique of classical concepts of substance, identity, continuity, and causality, in favor of a more dynamic conception.) In “The Metaphysics of Youth,” Benjamin likewise distinguishes “developmental time”—the time of calendar, clock, and stock exchange—from “youthful time,” which he thinks of as “immortal time.” This “pure time” flows intermittently within the everyday chronological, with its chain of experiences, but it also transcends what contains it, just as the pregnant inner silence transcends the words of the conversation arising from it. (The first part of the essay is entitled “The Conversation.”) This is to say: we transcend ourselves—“we, the time of things.” Everything that happens, Benjamin contends, surrounds us as landscape; the landscape is our past and we are its future, we who expand outward into the world only insofar as, in consciousness of death, we draw inward toward the “womb of time,” source of all radiating and gravitating, all “resurrections of the self.”

There is a similar distinction, at the beginning of “The Life of Students,” between conventional historiography, presupposing a causal progression of events within a homogeneous continuum, and a non-linear history in which the meaning of the past emerges only in relation to the “focal point” of the present—a striking anticipation of Benjamin’s later “monadology” and his theory of the “dialectical image” as the site of a sudden historical constellation, a messianic convergence of past and present. According to this view, the task of the historian is first of all to excavate the *present* moment, so as to bring to light—and waken—the fossilized historical energies latent within it. Unlike the historicist view, which believes it can repossess the past “as it really was,” the constellation of awakening reveals the historical



object in its meaning for a "here and now" that is itself transformed, and not just intellectually, in the confrontation. One awakens from the dream of the past in waking to it, down to its most hidden recesses (the taste of a madeleine dipped in tea). But its meaning is "distilled" in the lightning flash of interpretation.

The metaphysics and the politics of youth are complemented, in Benjamin's writings from the years 1914–1916, by a poetics and a theory of language: namely, in the essays "Two Poems by Friedrich Hölderlin" and "On Language as Such and on the Language of Man," probably the two best-known works of Benjamin's early period. (Mention might be made here, as well, of his writings on the aesthetics of color, especially the dialogue of 1915, "The Rainbow: A Conversation about Imagination," which directly bears on a theory of perception and meaning that dissolves the logic of solids.) Everywhere through the early writings, most elaborately in the longer essays, runs a dialectical mode of thought involving the transcendence—not abandonment—of traditional metaphysical oppositions (such as form and content, word and thing, spirit and nature), together with a critique of the instrumentalizing of spirit, whether it be the reduction of the work of art to a mere copy of preestablished facts<sup>3</sup> or the reduction of language to the system of signs and the communication of information. At their philosophic core, these writings embody a dynamic field theory of reality, in which space and time are understood in terms of each other—the essay on Hölderlin treats of "temporal plasticity" and "spatial happening"—and in which center and periphery are seen as functions of the simultaneous concentration and expansion of the field of force. Nature is here the manifold continuum of transformations, a fearful eventism beyond all static atomism. It is the "magic" (that is, immediate) intelligibility of the world as such, the mute language and, as it were, weather of things articulating itself by degrees in the human language of names, which translates and liberates it—at the highest level, in poetic art. For it is art that brings to light the gravity of existence, the inexpressible depth in which we are known by the unknowable. And that is the unique truthfulness of art. Some two

3. But there is also a critique of the mystifications of *l'art pour l'art*. See "Dialogue on the Religiosity of the Present" (Chapter 13 in this volume).

decades later, in a letter of May 31, 1935, to his worldly friend and ally, Theodor Adorno, Benjamin will claim to have long surpassed the "blithely archaic" philosophizing of his earlier years, with its romantic "ensnarement" in nature. It remains the case, however, despite the manifest differences in focus and subject matter between early and late Benjamin, and despite a certain increase in urbanity over the years, that none of the "romantic" motifs enunciated above, or the philosophic principles informing them, are absent from the later work, distinguished as it is by a method of montage. There are virtually no false steps in the youth writings.<sup>4</sup> The tendency among some critics to oppose Benjamin's early "idealism" to his later "materialism" is misleading.

Which, of course, is not to deny the various epochs of Benjamin's career as thinker and writer. Separating the severe and magisterial essays on Hölderlin and on language from the rhapsodic "The Metaphysics of Youth" is the advent of World War I, which was marked in the most intimate way for Benjamin by the double suicide of his friends Fritz Heinle and Rika Seligson (a sister of Benjamin's correspondent Carla Seligson) in a meeting house of the Independent Students in Berlin on August 8, 1914. After this event, Benjamin effectively ceased his student activism—in a letter two months later, he writes of the need for a "harder, purer, more invisible radicalism"—and he turned away from most of his comrades in the youth movement, including his former mentor, Gustav Wyneken, whom he denounced, in a letter of March 9, 1915, for his public support of the German war effort. This letter to Wyneken concludes: "The idea has slipped out of your erring hands and will continue to suffer unspeakably. The legacy I now wrest from you is that of living with the idea."

For the first three years of the war, Benjamin managed to obtain a medical deferment from the military, on one occasion staying up all night and consuming large amounts of black coffee in company with

4. An exception is the attitude toward cinema in 1913; see p. 104 below. The montage aesthetics emerges with *One-Way Street*, which was begun in 1923. Correlative to this is an emphasis no longer on community as such but on "mutual alienness," for it has become "impossible . . . in our age to give voice to any communality" ("Announcement of the Journal *Angelus Novus*" [1922], in SW1, 296).

Scholem, whom he met in the summer of 1915, and on another occasion allowing himself to be hypnotized by his talented fellow activist and wife-to-be, Dora Pollack, in order to bring on symptoms of sciatica. In the fall of 1915, he left Berlin to continue his studies in Munich, where he widened his circle of intellectual acquaintances and began living with Dora, a divorcée. They were married in April 1917, and that summer they secured a medical certificate enabling them to leave for neutral Switzerland, where they spent the duration of the war, and where Benjamin in 1919 completed his doctoral dissertation, "The Concept of Criticism in German Romanticism," which develops an idea of criticism as "the afterlife of works." He was also engaged at this time in translating the "Tableaux parisiens" section of Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du mal*, which would appear in a small dual-language edition in 1923, with Benjamin's theoretical foreword. After almost three years of Swiss "exile," as he later called it, he returned to Berlin with Dora and their son, Stefan.

During the summer of 1917, in a short essay on Dostoevsky's novel *The Idiot*, Benjamin penned a kind of epitaph for youth and the youth movement—one that sounds a note of promise in its unsubdued lament.<sup>5</sup> He speaks once again, with reference to the ultimate demise of the novel's hero, Prince Myshkin, of "the immortality of life," an immortality that is not a matter of longevity but a matter of infinite vibration: "The pure word for life in its immortality, however, is 'youth.' Dostoevsky's great lament in the book is for this: the failure of the youth movement [*das Scheitern der Bewegung der Jugend*]. Its life remains immortal but loses itself in its own light . . ."

Special thanks are due Michael W. Jennings and Peter Fenves for their advice concerning the preparation of this volume.

5. In a letter of February 23, 1918, to Scholem, Benjamin similarly invokes "the end of a great epoch in my life now behind me. The six years [that] have passed since I left school have constituted a single epoch; lived through at a monstrous tempo, an epoch which for me contains an infinite amount of the past [*unendlich viel Vergangenheit*—in other words, of eternity" (CWB, 117).

# The Poet

Around the throne of Zeus were gathered  
The Olympians. And Apollo spoke,  
His gaze turned on Zeus, questioning:  
“In your vast creation, great Zeus,  
I can discern each individual being  
And tell each from the others at a glance.  
Only the poet I seek in vain.”  
Whereupon the ruler answered him:  
“Look below on the cliffs of life, the steep  
Rocky slope, where the generations  
Wander in eternal change.  
A motley train: you see some  
With hands upraised, supplicating in misery,  
While others you see at play, in laughter,  
Picking flowers on the precipice;  
And some you see creeping along in silence,  
Their blank gaze fixed on the ground.  
Numberless the beings you find within the throng,  
Each differing in spirit and demeanor;  
But among them you seek in vain for the poet.  
Look to the margin of the great stone road,

Where sudden steep fall of rock  
Eternally thunders into the gloomy depths.  
Behold the brink of the monstrous abyss:  
There you see one standing untroubled  
Between black night and many-colored life.  
He stands there in immutable calm,  
Solitary, at a distance from the road of life.  
His penetrating gaze is directed now within,  
Now boldly upward to us in the light,  
And now, ranging wide, upon the throng.  
His hand writes down lines eternal.—  
See and know this one: it is the poet.”<sup>1</sup>

## Notes

“Der Dichter” (GS2, 832) was published, under the pseudonym “Ardor,” in *Der Anfang. Zeitschrift für kommende Kunst und Literatur* (hctographed), June 1910.

1. This poem was Benjamin’s first published work, appearing when he was still in high school. The verse form in German is unrhymed trochaic pentameter.

# At Night: Thoughts Suggested by a Schumann Composition

I lay for many hours without being able to sleep. I turned this way and that, but to no avail; my glances kept returning to the tiled stove, whose white light filtered through the darkness. Aside from this eternal white radiance I saw nothing, though I knew perfectly well where the door was situated—on one side of the oven, at the foot of my bed—there where the wall receded. I knew also that the great chest of drawers stood along the other wall across from my bed. And I knew that I could touch the windowpane if I stretched my hand across the bedstead toward the head of the bed . . .

In a little while, the moon would be shining through the window. But now all was dark. I listened as outside the March wind was playing in the trees.—The curtain trembled at the bluster . . .

I turned over and closed my eyes. When I again looked up, I saw once more the glow of the tiled stove, indistinctly white through the darkness. It was as though it sought me. For a long time I looked at it, then suddenly I was seized with fear. I could not move; I must see always the pale glow. But the clock on the wall had just ticked, quite loudly and keenly. I knew: it wanted to warn me. Moreover, it spoke always in the same tone; always its warnings were sharp and loud. I listened to it, but I could not turn my eyes away from the white glimmer that from the

wall diffused itself through the room. The clock went on warning monotonously . . .

But now it ceased warning; now it said something, loud and clear. It said that someone was coming. And very clearly, from outside on the long walkway, I heard slow, shuffling steps steadily approaching . . . And now they were very near . . . And there was no stopping them . . . Then the glow stirred and came alive and took hold of the entire room; it spread out on the floor, and now, at the clock's command, it climbed up the walls, and quickly it sprang upon me from above and from all sides. And as it came, it changed, becoming ever louder, while yellow forms broke free and advanced toward me; louder, shriller came the command, the room growing ever fuller, and they pounced more quickly on me, on feet and eyes. Immobile, with open mouth, I lay there . . . until the first landed on my chest. Then I tore myself loose and lifted up my arm and thrust it into the maelstrom . . . A hollow tone sounded . . . The room emptied out, and my eyes closed . . .

When I looked up, it was quiet, and the moon shone into the room. The clock showed one hour past midnight.<sup>1</sup>

## Notes

"In der Nacht: Gedanken bei einem Schumann'schen Stück" (GS2, 832-833) was published, under the pseudonym "Ardor," in *Der Anfang. Zeitschrift für kommende Kunst und Literatur* (hctographed), June 1910.

The reference in the title is to the German composer Robert Schumann (1810-1856), whose music has a lyrical and sometimes fantastic character. He suffered from hallucinations in later years and was committed to a mental asylum.

1. Compare the two versions of "The Moon" (1933 and 1938) in Benjamin's *Berlin Childhood around 1900* (SW3, 382-383, 405-407).

## The Three Who Sought Religion

Three young men were standing under the great fir tree on the hill and had joined hands. They could see, lying below them, the village where they had been born and, stretching into the distance, the roads they were now about to travel—on their way out into life. And the first youth spoke: "So, in thirty years we shall meet here again, and then we will see which of us has found religion, the sole and the true religion." The others agreed and, after shaking hands, they set off in three different directions, on three different roads into life.

The first had been traveling for several weeks when one day he saw the spires and domes of a mighty city rising before him. And he quickly made up his mind to go there, for he had heard wonderful things about big cities: they were said to house all the treasures of art, together with thick books filled with the wisdom of ages, and finally many churches as well, in all of which the people prayed to God. There, religion would surely also be found. Full of courage and hope, he strode through the city gates at sunset . . . And for thirty years he remained in the city, pursuing studies and seeking after the one true religion.

The second youth followed a different road, one that wound through shady valleys and wooded highlands. Singing cheerfully and without a care in the world, he wandered about, and where he came upon a



lovely spot, he lay down, rested, and dreamed. And when he was thus engrossed in the beauty of the setting sun, when he lay in the grass and watched the white clouds pass overhead in the blue sky, when in the woods he suddenly glimpsed a hidden lake flashing up from behind the trees, then he was happy and felt he had found religion . . . For thirty years he wandered in this way, rambling and resting, dreaming and looking about him.

Things were not so easy for the third youth. He was poor and could not pleasantly roam for long but had to think instead of earning his daily bread. And so he did not hesitate for long either: after a few days he had already apprenticed himself to a smith in a village so as to learn a trade. It was a difficult time for him, and in any event he had no opportunity to devote himself to the search for religion. This was the case not only during the first year but during the whole of the subsequent period: For when he had finished his apprenticeship, he did not spend time traveling through the world as a journeyman but instead found employment in a big city. There he labored assiduously over the course of many years, and, by the time the thirtieth year was drawing to a close, he had become an independent artisan, but he had not been able to seek religion and he had not found it. And toward the end of the thirtieth year, he set out on the journey to his native village.

His way led through a vast and wild mountainous region, where he traveled for days on end without meeting a soul. On the morning of the reunion, however, he wanted for once to climb one of those towering mountains whose peaks he had seen above him during his journey there. He started out quite early, several hours before sunrise, but the ascent proved merely laborious, so wholly unprepared for mountain-climbing as he was. He stood for a while on the summit to catch his breath. There he saw lying before him in the radiance of the morning sun, which was just then rising, a broad, broad plain . . . with all the villages in which he had once worked and with the city in which he had become master of his craft. And all the roads, the roads he had traveled—he saw them clearly before him—and his various work-sites.

He could not get his fill of looking at the scene!

But when he did turn his gaze away and look higher up, into the radiance of the sun, he saw in the clouds a new world rising slowly

before his eyes in the trembling light.<sup>1</sup> He became aware of mountain peaks, glistening white mountain peaks, which rose high into the clouds.

But a light of unearthly intensity up there dazzled the vision and he could recognize nothing clearly in the radiance, although he thought he could see figures inhabiting it, and crystalline cathedrals were ringing from afar in the morning light.

On perceiving this, he fell to the ground, pressed his brow against the rock, and sobbed and breathed deep.

After a while he rose to his feet and threw another glance at the wonderful world up there, which now lay before him in the full radiance of the sun. And he saw there also, quite small, faintly traced in the distance, pathways leading up into the shining, burgeoning mountains.

Then he turned around and climbed back down. And hard it was for him to find his way again in the valley there below.<sup>2</sup> By evening, however, he had reached his native village, and on the hill above the village he met his friends. Then they sat down at the foot of the great fir tree and told one another of their fortunes in the world, and how they found their religion.

The first told of his life in the great city, how he had studied and carried on research, in the libraries and lecture halls, how he had listened to the most eminent professors. To be sure, he himself had not found religion, but he was nonetheless confident of having done all that could be done. "For," said he, "in the entire length and breadth of the city, there is not one church whose dogmas and axioms I could not refute."

Then the second told of the fortunes of a life spent in wandering, and much of what he recounted caused his two friends to burst out laughing or to listen in suspense. But in spite of all his efforts he did not succeed in making his religion comprehensible to the other two, and he could never quite get beyond the words: "Yes, you see, one has to feel it!" And again: "This is something you must feel!" And the others did not understand him, and in the end they were almost smiling.

Very slowly, and still moved by his great experience, the third began to tell of his fortunes. But he told of them not as the others had described theirs, not as he actually experienced them; rather, he told

of how, that morning, as he stood on the top of the mountain, he had cast his eye over all the roads he had ever traveled.

And at the very end, hesitating, he mentioned those shining white mountain peaks. "I believe that when you look over the entire course of your life like this, then you also may see the way that leads to those mountains and dazzling heights. What is bound up in that fire, however, can very likely only be guessed at, and we must each seek to give it shape on the basis of our own fortunes in life."

Then he fell silent.

The other two did not quite understand him, but neither uttered a word in response. Instead, they looked out into the approaching night, to see if perhaps they might catch sight of the shining peaks in the distance.

## Notes

"Die drei Religionssucher" (GS2, 892-894) was published, under the pseudonym "Ardor," in *Der Anfang. Zeitschrift für kommende Kunst und Literatur* (hctographed), August 1910.

1. "... sah er langsam in den Wolken in zitterndem Schein eine neue Welt vor seinen Augen erstehen." *Schein* can mean "illusion" as well as "light."

2. Compare Plato's parable of the cave at the beginning of Book Seven of *The Republic*.

## Storm

Deep shadows fan out from the valley.  
On the heights the woods are murmuring softly;  
The tall, thick treetops bend and sway—  
Slowly they nod—and fall asleep.  
Beyond the mountains clouds are massing . . .  
But the murmur swells, and from the heights,  
With hollow rumble and mounting ferocity,  
The storm sweeps down. Flying headlong,  
It humbles the heights and in mighty blasts  
Invades the valley, and its wings spread darkness  
All around . . . The woods are in an uproar.  
The storm is howling; everywhere its sharp claws  
Tear into the land. Then in mighty recoil  
It dashes up the mountainside . . . The tree trunks are crashing;  
Higher up, it hurls itself into the clouds,  
And disappears behind the mountain . . . A distant howl  
Heralds its battle with cloud giants.—

## Note

"Sturm" (GS2, 834) was published, under the pseudonym "Ardor," in *Der Anfang. Zeitschrift für kommende Kunst und Literatur* (hctographed), September 1910.

## Spring's Hideaway

The bare walls stretch stiffly upward,  
The flat roofs rise toward the sky . . .  
But deep, deep beneath, closed round  
By the walls and by gray fences,  
Lies a garden. There the blue sky of spring  
Peers in between adjacent rooftops.  
A little grassy spot. And winding shyly, closely,  
Around the thin grass is a yellow gravel path.  
But in a corner, where the fences  
Press still closer and a high red wall  
Looms dark and brutal,  
A pear tree stands; and its long branches  
Reach over the fence . . . the dark stem  
Full of luminous, delicate white flowers.  
And now and again a mild wind blows,  
And blossoms float down into the garden.

## Notes

"Des Frühlings Versteck" (GS2, 834) was published, under the pseudonym "Ardor," in *Der Anfang. Zeitschrift für kommende Kunst und Literatur* (hectographed), September 1910.

Benjamin published one more poem, "Dämmerung" (Dusk), in *Der Anfang* (February 1911). See GS2, 835.

## Sleeping Beauty

**W**e live in an age of socialism, of the women's movement, of traffic, of individualism. Are we not headed toward an age of youth?

At any rate, we are living at a time when it is impossible to open a newspaper without running into the word "school," at a time when the words "coeducation," "boarding school," "child," and "art" are in the air. Youth, however, is the Sleeping Beauty who slumbers and has no inkling of the prince who approaches to set her free. And to bring about the awakening of youth, its participation in the struggle going on around it, is precisely the goal to which our journal aims to contribute.<sup>1</sup> It aims to show young people what value and expression are preserved for them in the youthful life of great individuals: of a Schiller, a Goethe, a Nietzsche.<sup>2</sup> It aims to show them the ways to waken in themselves a sense of community, a consciousness of themselves as the ones who, not without glory, will weave and give form to world history.

That this ideal of a youth conscious of itself as a future cultural factor does not originate with us today, that it is a notion already clearly expressed by great writers, is proved by a quick glance at world literature.



No doubt few of the ideas that occupy our times have not already been touched on by Shakespeare in his dramas, and above all in the tragedy of modern man, *Hamlet*. There Hamlet speaks the words:

The time is out of joint. O cursed spite,  
That ever I was born to set it right!<sup>3</sup>

Hamlet's heart is embittered. He sees in his uncle a murderer, in his mother a woman living in incest. And what feeling gives him this knowledge? Clearly, he feels disgust with the world. But he does not turn away from it in misanthropic willfulness. Rather, there lives in him the feeling of a mission: he has come into the world to set it right. To whom could these words better apply than the youth of today? Notwithstanding all the talk of youth, spring, and love, in every thinking young person lurks the germ of pessimism. This germ is doubly strong in our day. For how can a young person, especially one from the big city, confront the deepest problems, the social misery, without at least sometimes falling prey to pessimism? No counterarguments will serve here; only consciousness can and must be of help. Though the world be ever so bad, you came to make it better. That is not arrogance but only consciousness of duty.

This Hamlet-like consciousness of the world's baseness and of the call to make it better also animates Karl Moor.<sup>4</sup> But whereas Hamlet never forgets himself before the wickedness of the world, and represses all lust for revenge in order to remain pure, Karl Moor loses control of himself in his anarchistic intoxication with freedom. Thus, he who started out as liberator must in the end succumb to himself. Hamlet succumbs to the world and remains victorious.

Later, Schiller created another personification of youth: Max Piccolomini.<sup>5</sup> But though he may be more sympathetic than Karl Moor, as a man he is not so close to us (us youth); for Karl Moor's struggles are our struggles, the eternal rebellion of youth, the struggles with society, state, law. Max Piccolomini is involved in a more narrowly ethical conflict.

Goethe! Do we expect from him sympathy with the youth? We think of *Tasso* and seem to catch sight of Goethe's severe countenance

or his subtle sarcastic smile behind the mask of Antonio.<sup>6</sup> And yet—Tasso. There is youth once more, although on a wholly different plane; not for nothing is the hero a poet. At the court of Ferrara, propriety and decorum are the more rigorous criteria. Not “uncouth” morality. And now we realize that Tasso is youth. He keeps watch over an ideal—that of beauty. But since he cannot subdue his youthful ardor [*Feuer*] and does what no poet is supposed to do, since in his love for the princess he transgresses the boundaries of propriety, violating his own ideal, he must bow to age, to those for whom convention has become “etiquette.” Hence, the irony of his final words:

And so the sailor clings fast to that very  
Rock on which his vessel should have foundered.<sup>7</sup>

The irony is that he now clings fast to the rock of convention—he who offended against the ideal of beauty. Karl Moor founders insofar as he betrays an ethical ideal, Tasso insofar as he betrays an aesthetic ideal.

The most universal representative of youth is Faust: his whole life is youth, for nowhere is he limited and always he sees new goals that he must realize; and a man is young so long as he has not yet altogether converted his ideal into reality.<sup>8</sup> That is the sure sign of age: to see in the existent all there is. Therefore, Faust must die—his youth must end—the moment he contents himself with what is at hand and sees nothing else. If he were to live on, then we would discover in him an Antonio. With Faust it becomes clear why these heroes of youth can “never get anywhere,” why they have to perish in the moment of fulfillment or else carry on an eternally unsuccessful struggle for the ideal.

These failed champions of the ideal have their counterparts in the plays of Ibsen, especially in two stirring figures: Dr. Stockmann in *Enemy of the People* and, even more impressively and subtly, Gregers Werle in *The Wild Duck*.<sup>9</sup> Gregers Werle is sharply distinguished by that genuinely youthful trait, that faith in the ideal and that spirit of sacrifice that remains unshakeable even when the ideal cannot be fulfilled or when it brings calamity. (For happiness and ideals are often in opposition.) At the close of *The Wild Duck*, when Gregers sees the

consequences of his fanatical idealism, his resolve to serve the ideal does not waver. Should the ideal prove unattainable, then life for him is worthless and his task is henceforth "to be thirteenth at table"<sup>10</sup>—that is, to die. Something else comes to light in *The Wild Duck*. Like many of Ibsen's plays, this one, too, is agitated by problems—which are not resolved. These problems are in effect the background, the atmosphere of the times, from which the character of a Gregers emerges, one who through his own life, through the will, the intention of his moral action, resolves the problems of civilization for himself.

Youth, as such, Ibsen has represented in the figure of Hilda Wangel in *The Master Builder*.<sup>11</sup> Our interest is focused, however, on the master builder Solness himself, rather than on Hilda Wangel, who is merely the pale symbol of youth.

I come finally to the most recent poet of youth and one who for the youth of today is the poet invoked before others: Carl Spitteler.<sup>12</sup> Like Shakespeare in *Hamlet* and like Ibsen in his dramas, Spitteler presents heroes who suffer for the ideal. It is a universal ideal of humanity, more outspoken than with Ibsen. Spitteler yearns for a new humanity emboldened by the spirit of truth. The outstanding expression of his convictions are his two great works, the epic poems *Prometheus and Epimetheus* and *Olympian Spring*, and in these works, as in his splendid autobiographical novel *Imago* (which I consider the most beautiful of books for the young), he depicts—now tragically, now comically or satirically—the apathy and cowardice of the ordinary man. He, too, starts from pessimism only to arrive at optimism with his faith in the ethical personality (Prometheus, Heracles in the *Olympian Spring*). If his universal ideal of humanity and his overcoming of pessimism make him a poet for the youth, and particularly for us youth, the same may be said above all for his superb pathos, which bespeaks a mastery of language that is practically unequaled among his contemporaries.

Thus, the sphere of knowledge in which our journal aims to be active is already firmly established in the works of the greatest authors of literature.

## Notes

"Das Dornröschen" (GS2, 9-12) was published, under the pseudonym "Ar-dor," in *Der Anfang. Vereinigte Zeitschriften der Jugend*, March 1911.

1. Benjamin refers to the student-run periodical *Der Anfang* (The Beginning), which appeared in a first series between 1908 and 1910, in a second series in 1911, and in a third series between May 1913 and July 1914. Having begun his association with the journal in 1910 while still in high school, Benjamin continued writing for it through 1913. Benjamin returns to the classic fairy-tale "Sleeping Beauty" (*Dornröschen* is more literally "Little Briar-Rose") in a short, mordant "Preface to the *Trauerspiel* book," written July 1925 after the failure of his submission of a dissertation on the seventeenth-century German *Trauerspiel* (mourning play) to the University of Frankfurt and the collapse of his plans to become a university lecturer. The preface was enclosed in a letter to Gershom Scholem of May 29, 1926, and reads: "I would like to tell the story of Sleeping Beauty a second time. / She sleeps in her hedge of thorns. And then, after a certain number of years, she wakes. / But not at the kiss of a fortunate prince. / The cook woke her up when he gave the scullery boy a box on the ear which, resounding from the pent-up force of so many years, echoed through the palace. // A beautiful child sleeps behind the thorny hedge of the following pages. / May no fortune's prince in the shining armor of scholarship come near. For in the kiss of betrothal it will bite. / And so, in order to awaken it, the author has had to reserve to himself the role of chief cook. Already long overdue is the box on the ear that would resound through the halls of academe. / For there will awaken also this poor truth, which has pricked itself on an old-fashioned spindle as, in forbidden fashion, it thought to weave for itself, in the little back room, a professorial robe" (GB3, 164).

2. The writers Friedrich von Schiller (1759-1805) and Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749-1832) were the foremost representatives of German Classicism. The philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) exerted a revolutionary influence on the artists and thinkers of Benjamin's generation. The phrase "youthful life of great individuals" translates *Jugendleben der Großen*.

3. *Hamlet*, I. v. 188-189. Benjamin quotes the translation by August Wilhelm Schlegel (1798).

4. Protagonist of Schiller's first play *Die Räuber* (The Robbers; 1781), Karl Moor is a fundamentally noble, if somewhat dissolute young man, who is driven to a life of crime by the villainies of his younger brother. After being disowned by his father, he defies established authority by becoming chieftain

of a band of free-living brigands, but he soon realizes the futility of his way of life and gives himself up at the end to the law, arranging for the reward to go to a poor day-laborer with eleven children.

5. A main character in Schiller's trilogy *Wallenstein* (1800), Max Piccolomini is a young army colonel torn between his veneration of his commander Wallenstein and his inability to approve the latter's treason against the Emperor; unable to reconcile his heart with his duty, he ends in despair, finding death in a battle with Wallenstein's allies.

6. Goethe's *Torquato Tasso* (1790) dramatizes the experience of the young Italian poet, Torquato Tasso, at the court of Duke Alfonso of Ferrara: his initial acclamation, subsequent violation of court etiquette, and final distracted flight from Ferrara. The play turns on the idea of *Sittlichkeit* (morals), which is an important term in Benjamin's writings on youth (see "Dialogue on the Religiosity of the Present," Chapter 13 in this volume). The character Antonio Montecatino is a worldly-wise statesman who displays both contempt for and envy of the poet and at the end seems to offer him friendship.

7. *Torquato Tasso*, trans. Alan Brownjohn (London: Angel, 1985), p. 137 (modified).

8. Benjamin refers to the scholar and necromancer Heinrich Faust, hero of Goethe's two-part verse drama *Faust* (1808; 1832).

9. The Norwegian playwright Henrik Ibsen (1828–1906) is regarded as the creator of modern, realistic prose drama. In his play *Enemy of the People* (1882), the protagonist Dr. Thomas Stockmann stands up for the truth (about the dangers of a proposed public project) despite the collective outrage of his fellow citizens. In *The Wild Duck* (1884), young Gregers Werle, at the "summons of the ideal," likewise unearths hidden truths about the family with which he is living, only to discover that they cannot go on without "the saving lie."

10. *The Wild Duck*, trans. Una Ellis-Fermor (1950; rpt. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1982), p. 260 (Act V).

11. In Ibsen's *The Master Builder* (1892), the middle-aged architect Halvard Solness is incited to reckless and self-destructive actions by the adoring young woman Hilda Wangel.

12. The Swiss writer Carl Spitteler (1845–1924) was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1919. He was a correspondent of the philosopher Nietzsche, who arranged publishing ventures for him. His epic poem *Prometheus and Epimetheus* (1881) opposes Prometheus, as sovereign individual, to King Epimetheus, defender of convention. He won widespread acclaim for another epic poem, *Der olympische Frühling* (Olympian Spring; 1900–1905, rev. 1910),

which concerns the death and rebirth of the gods. In essays, Spitteler attacked organized religion as inauthentic. His autobiographical novel *Imago* (1906), dealing with the liberation of the creative mind from its middle-class upbringing, influenced the development of psychoanalysis. During World War I, he spoke out against the pro-Germanism of the Swiss German-speaking majority. There is evidence that Benjamin was reading Spitteler as late as 1939 (GB6, 269, 278).

## Diary, Pentecost 1911

**A**pril 11, 1911. Everywhere in Germany now the fields are being tilled.—When traveling, one should not wear one's worst clothes, because travel is an act of international culture: one steps out of one's private existence into the public.—During the journey, I read *Anna Karenina*: traveling and reading—an existence between two new, instructive and momentous realities.—One theme: religion and nature (natural religion).<sup>1</sup> The farmer is necessarily religious. Every year he experiences the miracle of the planting and harvest. For the resident of the big city, the loss of nature is perhaps accompanied by the loss of religion; in its place comes social feeling.

These are some thoughts I had during the journey. From Halle to Großheringen, the valley of the Saale is there to enjoy; but then only fields, fields that intersect, rise and fall, and between them villages with their wide main street.<sup>2</sup>

In Fröttstädt, you suddenly have the mountains before you. They were enveloped in transparent mist, their peaks quite uneven. From Waltershausen on, the train passes through beautiful forest land.

Steinfeld caught up with me at Reinhardsbrunn.<sup>3</sup> From there it was a quarter hour to our pension (Koffer). The proprietor seems a friendly, good-natured man. He subscribes to *Jugend* and the *Israelitisches*

*Familienblatt*.<sup>4</sup> The advertising section is dominated by the products of Solomon & Fäkele, sausages and dishes for the Seder. (The latter are used for the Passover feast and have different compartments for different foods. So says Steinfeld.) In the afternoon we followed the Herzogsweg past the mill to the waterfall, returning through the village, with its little squares: Dorothea–Waldemar–Lottchen–August. Always with Spitteler's counsel in mind: not gaping at nature but rather talking—about Berlin, the theater, linguistic blunders.<sup>5</sup> I'm going to stop now, in order to form the plan for tomorrow with Steinfeld.

The intention was peaceful.

Outpost skirmishes with the second upper molar.

I hope . . . !

April 12, 1911. Today is Yontev. I've just been reading in the Haggadah.<sup>6</sup> During the meal Mr. Chariz kept saying: "So, what do we make for Yontev?" (that is, *coq*). One does not say "Good 'day'" but "Good Yontev." At dinner there was a three-armed candelabrum on the table. Thank God they didn't do Seder. It might well have been very interesting and might even have moved me, but it would have seemed to me like theater, nothing holy.

Nevertheless, this evening I traveled back in world history about five hundred years.

Rain and storm ushered in the feast day. We visited Salomon and went walking with him.<sup>7</sup> How enjoyable people can be when you're alone with them. And outside one is so independent and superior, on an equal footing with them. (For just where words are lacking, a paradox has emerged . . . and so forth.)

This morning I dragged my body—which responded valiantly—over the Seebachsfelsen to the Spießberghaus, and we climbed with Gottlob to its mossy top. Below lies Friedrichroda, and opposite a charming mountain that has a crooked peak (*novarum rerum cupidus*) and the lowlands with villages and mountain rail.<sup>8</sup>—As we descended toward Friedrichroda, St. [Steinfeld] indulged in his favorite pastime, applying psychology to unoffending objects. This time it was a farmwoman. Unfortunately, she was carrying cheese with her.



In the afternoon there was a revolt of objects. Three bananas, going by air to St., who was lying in bed, shattered his pince-nez. In similar fashion, my pocketknife wound up under the bed, where it's darkest.

The tooth has decreed an amnesty for the sake of a few bonbons. In other respects, too, it has behaved admirably.

April 13, 1911. Evening was the crown of this day. Morning didn't happen because we convinced ourselves, by exerting all the forces of intellect and will, that we needn't rise before 9:15. With coffee there was matzoh, and that's how it will be; for yesterday was Yontev and we are in Pesach week.<sup>9</sup> Then we went climbing on the Abtsberg. Beneath us stretched the plain with the sun and the shadows of clouds. We walked until we reached a bench; then back and to the right, up through the forest to Schauenburg. Passed by the Alexandrinenuh and Gänsekupe hills without realizing it. The conversation concerned story closure in the novel and, in connection with this, landscape in poetic work. When Steinfeld and I are together, a literary-philosophical tension is generated.—Instead of a description, characterization, and statistical analysis of the midday meal ("What do we make for Yontev?"), there follows one of the master of the house:

A philistine, he spent nine years in Berlin and doesn't possess sufficient tact to start a conversation with his guests but manifests his boredom through low whistling and throat-clearing. Affable and, as concerns the environs of Friedrichroda, informative.—In the afternoon, domestic scenes took place in bed. Outside, splendid large snowflakes; inside, foolish things were said about graphology.<sup>10</sup> I saw letters from Steinfeld's parents.

Then we went out, bought the *Simplicissimus* (on the way back, a coconut), and walked through Friedrichroda in the direction of the train station.<sup>11</sup> Paths and meadows were wet, everything wonderfully fresh. A stretch of the main road through a gentle hilly landscape, of the kind in which Haubinda is located and which I dearly love for that reason, then up a path through the woods and along a mountain ridge.<sup>12</sup> There was a tree nursery: very small firs and larger young trees full of drooping leaves. The sunset was marvelous after the rain. Friedrichroda was veiled

in mist that glistened in the sun; the woods were irradiated with red, and individual branches and tree trunks along the path were glowing.

From incandescent clouds newly rises  
 A young world;  
 Purplish mountains of mist  
 Labor to give birth to giant bodies;  
 Golden torrents burst forth,  
 Flow from dense cloud heaven  
 Through the limpid airs of evening  
 Down to the silent earth.  
 Sinking into rocks and fields,  
 Glowing veins of gold course through  
 The sluggish depths of the earth.

Tomorrow Herbert is coming.<sup>13</sup>

April 14, 1911. Blumenthal arrived today. The picture has changed. We went walking with him, and there was passing friction between Steinfeld and me; since previously we had been on rather intimate terms, the whole excursion suffered from the presence of a third. Later, at our lodgings, I spoke with Steinfeld about the matter, and I hope that everything has been straightened out.

From this morning dates the strongest landscape impression of the trip so far. We climbed around on a high massif, came to many a rock with a beautiful vista, including one on which the sun shone down very hot and which offered a clear view of the Insejberg and of a lovely wooded valley. Before this, we had always managed to tear ourselves away from the sight, but now we could not go. We settled back and remained a quarter hour. It was 2:15 when we left; we had eaten at 1:30, and Blumenthal was coming at 3:30. On the way back, which led through the "monstrous valley bottom" and took longer than expected, I finally went on ahead and reached Herbert at the post office.

In the evening we again witnessed, in the same area as yesterday, a very beautiful sunset. Ensuing conversation:

I: Yesterday evening we were out walking and saw this thing too.

Herbert: What thing?

I: Well, sunset.

April 15, 1911. We stayed up talking and slept late, and so lost the morning hours. Today we were off at eleven o'clock and, after prolonged disagreement, made it to a rock on a steep slope leading down to a valley. We descended and by a rather rapid march arrived back in good time for lunch. In the afternoon, a stroll in the vicinity. Epilogue: early to bed. Tomorrow it's to the Inselberg.

## Notes

"Tagebuch Pfingsten 1911" (GS6, 232–235) was written April 1911 and published posthumously.

1. *Anna Karenina*, published in 1878 by the Russian novelist Leo Tolstoy, concerns in part the religious crisis of the character Levin and his saving relation to nature. Benjamin finished the novel in July. For his critique of its narrative structure and his praise of its portrayal of Russian culture and the Russian soul, see CWB, 7, 10.

2. Benjamin traveled from Berlin southwest through Halle and the Saale River valley into the Thuringian Forest, a wooded mountain range in Thuringia (Saxony) in central Germany. His pension was in the town of Friedrichroda, at the northern foot of the forest.

3. Alfred Steinfeld (1893–1915) was a schoolmate of Benjamin's at the Kaiser Friedrich School in Berlin and a member at this period of the student reading circle that regarded Benjamin as its leader. He died from a kidney infection caught while serving in the army medical corps (CWB, 77). Reinhardtbrunn is known for a handsome country estate built there by Queen Victoria's father-in-law on the site of a medieval abbey.

4. *Jugend* (Youth) was a popular, lavishly illustrated cultural weekly founded in Munich in 1896 by a follower of the architect Henry Van de Velde; it launched the German art nouveau movement known as Jugendstil, named after the magazine. Benjamin would later devote a section of his *Passagen-Werk* or *Arcades*

*Project* (Convolute S) to Jugendstil. The *Israelitisches Familienblatt* (Israelite Family Paper) was a middle-brow Jewish weekly magazine founded in 1898 in Hamburg.

5. The Swiss writer Carl Spitteler (1845–1924) was a favorite of the young Benjamin and his comrades in the youth movement. See “Sleeping Beauty” (Chapter 6 in this volume).

6. *Yontev* is Yiddish for Hebrew *jom tov*, “holiday.” The Haggadah is a book containing the story of the exodus of the Jews from Egypt and the ritual of the Seder, a commemorative feast celebrated on the first night or the first two nights of Passover week.

7. Probably Friedrich Salomon (born 1890), a student at the Free School Community (see Chapter 8 in this volume) and later a member with Benjamin of the Independent Students’ Association at the University of Freiburg. The next paragraph mentions an unidentified “Gottlob.”

8. The Latin phrase in parenthesis means “eager for new things.”

9. Matzoh is the flat, brittle unleavened bread eaten during Passover (Pesach).

10. Benjamin was himself an amateur graphologist. For an indication of his thoughts on the subject, see SW2, 131–134 (1928), 398–400 (1930).

11. *Simplicissimus* was a German satirical weekly founded in 1896 in Munich; it took its name from the satirical novel, *Der Abenteuerliche Simplicissimus* (Adventurous Simplicissimus; 1668) by Hans Jakob von Grimmelshausen. Contributors included writers Thomas Mann, Rainer Maria Rilke, Hermann Hesse and graphic artists George Grosz, Käthe Kollwitz, and John Heartfield.

12. Benjamin refers to the Landerziehungsheim Haubinda, a progressive and expensive country boarding school for students of middle-school age, founded in 1901 in Thuringia; where he was enrolled for two years (1905–1906); among his teachers was Gustav Wyneken, whose radical pedagogics inspired his youth philosophy and student activism.

13. Herbert Blumenthal, later Belmore (1893–1978), was another of Benjamin’s schoolmates at the Kaiser Friedrich School in Berlin and subsequently an intimate correspondent until the rupture of their friendship in 1917. An English citizen born in South Africa, he lived in Switzerland, England, and Italy in later years, working as a writer and translator.

# The Free School Community

If here, in the pages of a periodical, I venture to characterize so noteworthy an institution as the Free School Community of Wickersdorf (near Saalfeld, in Thuringia), I should say two things at the outset. In attempting to delineate the theoretical, ideal content of the school, I must forgo a description of the actual daily life of the academic community, as important as this is in itself to a complete picture of a school. Likewise, in the attempt to underscore what is positive in the idea of the school, I cannot draw the conclusions to which I would be led by a comparison of the Wickersdorf conception with the principles embodied in the education provided by family and state. For the first, I refer to the Wickersdorf annual reports and, for the second, to the second yearbook of the Free School Community.<sup>1</sup>

The F.S.C. was not born from the need for a partial reform; its battle cry is not "Less Greek, more sports" or "No corporal punishment, but a relation of mutual respect between teachers and pupils." If many of the postulates of modern pedagogics are in fact comprised within its program, and if, above all, a free exchange between teachers and pupils (as opposed to one regulated by *official* authority) is among its basic tenets, nevertheless what is essential to the institution is not to be defined in narrowly pedagogic terms. A philosophic, metaphysical

thought is at its center—a thought that, of course, “is not dependent on the cosmological metaphysics of any party.”<sup>2</sup>

The argument is, briefly, as follows: “In pursuit of its goal, humanity continually gives birth to an enemy: its young generation, its children, the incarnation of its instinctual life, of its individual will, the properly animal part of its existence, its continually self-renewing past. Hence, there is no more important task for humanity than to appropriate to itself this existence, to introduce it into the process of human development. This is the function of education.” School is the place where it should dawn on the child’s spirit “that it is not an isolated consciousness but that, from early on, it has seen and known by means of an *objective* spirit holding sway over it and governing it, a spirit whose bearer is humanity and through which humanity is humanity.” All ideal goods—language and science, law and morality, art and religion—are expressions of this objective spirit. A long and laborious peregrination has brought humanity, the bearer of the objective spirit, to its present level of development. And the epoch in which we now are living is the most important yet in the development of the human spirit. “The signature of this epoch is the nascent emancipation of the spirit.” In socialism the spirit confronts the manifold degeneration of the struggle for existence; in evolutionism it recognizes the developmental logic of the world; in technology the spirit takes up the battle with the forces of nature. The world has become object of the human spirit, which formerly was overborne “by the predominance of matter.” As is well known, the primary philosophical exponent of this view of things is Hegel.<sup>3</sup>

With this, the task of the individual is determined. One must enter into the service of this objective spirit and carry out one’s duty by working toward the highest ideals. In the conscious derivation of this thought from the metaphysical, there is a religious factor. And, in the end, only this religious consciousness can serve as final answer to the question about the purpose, the necessity of a teaching whose absolute, supreme objective is *not* to arm young people in the struggle for existence.

But two important questions yet remain. First: Are young people really capable of such serious convictions, of such a sacred commit-

ment? A conclusive answer to this question is not possible. "Whoever looks on youth . . . as merely a period of preparation without value in itself, whoever looks on school as merely a preparatory exercise preceding the struggle for existence, which is understood as the real meaning of life—such a one can have no appreciation of any deepening and sacralizing of teaching and learning." Of course, Rousseau already voices the opinion that at no stage is the human being more receptive to great ideas, more enthusiastically given to pursuing ideals, than in the years of development.<sup>4</sup> The reasons are obvious. The interests of a working life, concern for a family, have not yet narrowed the young person's horizon. And what goes together with this but carries even greater weight: the young person does not yet know the day's monotony, the uniformity of customs—convention, "the eternal Yesterday that always was and always returns" and is the worst enemy of everything great.<sup>5</sup>

Well and good: let us assume that the young person is capable not only of understanding the task but of acting in conformity with it in a given case. Will the young person then still be *young*, still retain the naïve joy in life? No demonstration in the abstract is possible here either; a look at the annual reports or, better still, a visit to the school will be more convincing.

Among the most important educational problems tackled by the F.S.C. is that of coeducation. In Wickersdorf, unlike many other places, the issue is not focused in the sexual sphere, although this naturally plays a part. But the decisive question proves to be: Is there a specifically male or female goal that should give direction to life?

On many sides we hear this question answered in the affirmative, perhaps with a nod to Goethe's words: "The boys to be servants, the girls to be mothers."<sup>6</sup> To these voices Dr. Wyneken (the compiler of the yearbook) replies: "Does this mean, then, that what fills the time from twenty to forty years of age is also supposed to fill the time from one to twenty?" He sees here a limitation to spiritual progress; the woman is from the start restricted to a narrow field of activity, and "the old identification of sex and vocation" effectively precludes any progress for women. We, however, live at a time when a great change is taking place in the life, conception, and estimation of woman, and it would be

narrow-minded to attempt to educate women today "on the basis of preconceived ideas," in accordance with "a domestic ideal that grows more questionable every day" or in accordance with "other notions that the philistines associate with the 'eternal feminine.'"<sup>7</sup>

This is the standpoint of the F.S.C. on the question of whether both sexes should have the benefit of the *same* education. And if, against these views, one were now to raise the undoubtedly weighty objection that the predominantly physiological significance of the woman for humankind stands opposed to such a conception as we have outlined, one founded on the spiritual dimension, the answer then would run: "Even assuming that the real vocation of woman is biological, only *that* particular woman will be more than animal or slave—will be human being and companion to man—who devotes herself to such a vocation *by herself and consciously.*"

But the words concerning the necessity of one *common* education for the two sexes (in the first Wickersdorf yearbook) are informed by such a far-sighted and noble idea that I cannot omit quoting them at length:

Youth is the age of receptivity to the absolute value of life, the age of idealism. It is the only age . . . at which there can arise a social sentiment that does not rest on opportunism, does not aspire to the greatest possible happiness of the greatest number,<sup>8</sup> but that looks on society as an organization for the advancement of spirit. The unity of humanity in the spirit will be preserved wherever the young generation is dedicated to serving this spirit. Already, in youth, the two sexes should learn not only to speak and understand the same language but to speak it with each other. Here, in youth, they should form the sort of deep, meaningful bond with one another that will survive all the inevitable separations to come. Here they should not only receive the same direction in life but mutually establish it for themselves. Here, where they see each other striving and developing themselves in the same direction, they will find in one another the great faith from which alone can spring respect for the opposite sex. The memory of having once been comrades in the most sacred work of humanity, of having once looked together into "the Vale Eidophane,"<sup>9</sup> the world of idea, this memory will form the strongest counterweight to the social battle of the



sexes—something that has always existed but that in our times threatens to blaze up and imperil the spiritual and cultural goods of which humanity is the designated guardian. Here, in youth, when they can still be human beings in the noble sense of the word, they should also have seen *humanity* realized once in a while. To furnish this great, irreplaceable experience is the real purpose of the common curriculum.

There remains the sexual element. It is neither sworn off nor hushed up but vigorously affirmed. In striving for the same goals, in gaining insight into new worlds of knowledge and thought, in sharing experiences on a daily basis, boys and girls should learn before everything else to respect each other as comrades. But "to the normal boy of sixteen the girl is *essentially* a sexual phenomenon." And this consciousness is natural and cannot be completely extinguished. Nor should it be extinguished. On the contrary: "It gives to the relationship a certain *coloring*, lends it a charm and tenderness that only a shallow pedant could wish gone; and it is precisely this sensitivity which always maintains that noble distance whose working is the precondition of every lasting . . . relationship."

The lofty goal of a coeducation such as is contained in the program of the F.S.C. nevertheless requires three things: physically and spiritually healthy pupils, tactful and resourceful teachers, and, between the two groups, frankness without reserve.<sup>10</sup>

## Notes

"Die Freie Schulgemeinde" (GS7, 9–13) was published, under the pseudonym "Ardor," in *Der Anfang. Vereinigte Zeitschriften der Jugend*, May 1911.

1. The Freie Schulgemeinde was founded in 1906 by Gustav Wyneken (see note 2 below) and Paul Geheeb, together with Martin Luserke and August Halm, in the Thuringian village of Wickersdorf, some forty miles south of Weimar. The school had separate dormitories for boys and girls, but school activities were coeducational and decentralized. The program of study included philosophy, the history of religion, music, and mathematics, together with dance, theater, and physical culture.

2. Citations are from the first yearbook of the Free School Community, with the exception of one taken from the second yearbook. The author of the pedagogic section of the yearbooks is Dr. Wynéken. The publisher is Diedrichs in Jena. (Benjamin's note.) The eighteen-year-old Benjamin cites Wynéken's essays "Die Idee der Freien Schulgemeinde" (The Idea of the Free School Community), in *Wickersdorfer Jahrbuch 1908*, and "Soziale Erziehung in der Freien Schulgemeinde" (Social Education in the Free School Community), in *Wickersdorfer Jahrbuch 1909-1910*. The citation from the second yearbook is the second passage quoted here ("In pursuit of its goal . . ."). The educational reformer Gustav Wynéken (1875-1964) studied theology and philology in Berlin before taking a teaching position in 1903 at the Landerziehungsheim Haubinda, a progressive country boarding school in Thuringia, where Benjamin was a student in his German literature class in 1905-1906. After an altercation with the school's director, Wynéken left Haubinda in 1906 to establish the Free School Community, from which he was forced to retire in 1910. He exerted a decisive influence on the German youth movement through his lecture tours and writings, in particular through the book *Schule und Jugendkultur* (School and Youth Culture; 1913), which combines a Hegelian doctrine of absolute spirit with a Nietzschean vitalism. He oversaw the running of several journals and was advisor to the third series of the periodical, *Der Anfang* (May 1913-July 1914), for which he was attacked in conservative newspapers. Benjamin was closely associated with his mentor during this period but broke with him in 1915 after Wynéken's public advocacy of the German war effort (see CWB, 75-76).

3. The German Idealist philosopher Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770-1831), a professor at Berlin from 1818 to 1831, first developed his speculative dialectical concept of spirit in *Die Phänomenologie des Geistes* (The Phenomenology of Spirit; 1807).

4. The French philosopher and author Jean Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778) published his ideas about education, which involve a free and reciprocal "contract" of friendship between pupil and teacher, in the didactic novel *Émile: Ou de l'éducation* (1762).

5. On the task of "spiritualizing" convention, see "Dialogue on the Religion of the Present" (Chapter 13 in this volume).

6. In a conversation with his secretary, the philologist Friedrich Wilhelm Riemer, in 1809, the poet Goethe "said that men should be brought up to be servants and women to be mothers" (*Goethes Gespräche*, cited GS7, 558-559). The remark is echoed by the Schoolmaster in the 1809 novel, *Die Wahlverwandtschaften* (part 2, chapter 7); see Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Elective*

*Affinities*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Penguin, 1971), 209: “Boys should be educated to be servants, girls to be mothers, and all will be well.”

7: The phrase “Ewig-Weibliche” occurs at the end of the second part of Goethe’s poem *Faust*, published in 1832.

8. Wyneken refers to the philosophy of utilitarianism, and specifically to that of the English jurist Jeremy Bentham (1748–1831), who argued, in *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation* (1789), that the object of law is to achieve the “greatest happiness of the greatest number.”

9. The expression *Tal Eidophane* (the second term a compound of Greek *eidos*, “form,” and *phainesthai*, “to appear”) comes from the poem *Der olympische Frühling* (Olympian Spring; 1900–1905, rev. 1910), by the Swiss writer Carl Spitteler (1845–1924). On Spitteler’s importance to the German youth movement, see “Sleeping Beauty” (Chapter 6 in this volume).

10. At the end of Benjamin’s article are printed the words, “Fortsetzung folgt” (To be continued). Since no further numbers of the periodical appeared in the 1911 series, we must assume that the continuation was either never written or lost.

## The Pan of Evening

**T**he evening had spread a luminous, pale yellow ribbon of magic over the snow-covered mountains and the wooded hilltops beneath. And the snow on the peaks shone pale yellow. The woods, however, already lay in darkness. The glistening on the heights roused a man who was sitting on a bench in the woods. He raised his eyes and drank in the strange light from the heights, looked long into it, until nothing more was to be seen but the tremulous shining; he thought of nothing more but only saw. Then he turned to the bench and took up the walking stick leaning there. He told himself, reluctantly, that he had to return to the hotel for dinner. And he walked slowly along the wide path that led down to the valley, watching where he walked because it was rapidly growing darker and there were roots sticking up from the ground. He did not himself know why he went so slowly. "You look ridiculous and pathetic, stalking along on this wide path." He heard these words clearly—and with displeasure. Feeling defiant, he stopped walking and looked up at the snowy peaks. They too were dark now. As he noted this, he again clearly heard in himself a voice, one altogether different, which said: "alone with me." For that was its greeting to the darkness. Thereupon he lowered his head and walked on: against his will. It seemed to him that he still had to attend to a voice which was mute and

was struggling for speech. But that was contemptible . . . The valley was in sight . . . The lights of the hotel were beckoning. As he thus gazed into the gray depths below, he thought he saw a workshop down there; from a pressure on his own body, he felt how giant hands were molding masses of mist, how a tower, a cathedral of dusk was being built. "The cathedral—you are yourself within it," he heard a voice saying now. And he looked around him while he walked. But what he saw seemed to him so extraordinary, so prodigious . . . yes (quite faintly he felt it: so horrible), that he came to a stop. He saw how the mist was hanging between the trees; he heard the slow flight of a bird. Only the nearest trees were still there. Where he had just been walking, something different was already unfolding, something gray that passed over his steps as if they had never been made. He understood: as he traveled here, something else was traveling through the woods as well; there was a spell over things, making the old disappear, making new spaces and alien sounds out of the known and familiar. More clearly than before, the voice uttered a rhyme from a wordless song: "Traum und Baum."<sup>1</sup>

When he heard that, so loud and sudden, he came to his senses. His eye grew sharp; yes, he wanted his vision sharp: "rational," cautioned the voice. He fixed his gaze on the path and, to the extent it was still possible, made things out. There a footprint, a root, moss and a tuft of grass, and at the edge of the path a large stone. But a new fear gripped him—so sharply was he seeing: it was not as at other times. And the more he summoned all his strength to see, the stranger it became. The stone there by the path grew larger—seemed to speak. All relations underwent a change. Everything particular became landscape, outspread image.<sup>2</sup> He felt driven by desperation to flee all this, to find clarity in such horror. He took a deep breath and, feeling resolved and composed, looked up to the sky. How unusually cold the air was, how bright and near the stars.

Did someone cry out? "The woods," sounded a voice shrilly in his ears. He looked at the woods . . . He ran into it, hurled himself at all the tree trunks—only further, deeper through the mist, where he had to be . . . where there was someone who made everything different, who created this frightful evening in the woods. A tree stump brought him to the ground.

There he lay and wept in terror, like a child who feels the approach of a strange man in a dream.

After a while he grew quiet; the moon came out and the brightness dissolved the dark tree trunks in the gray mist. Then he picked himself up and headed back down.

## Notes

“Der Pan des Abends” (GS7, 639–641) was written ca. 1911 and published posthumously.

1. That is, “dream and tree.”
2. “Alles einzelne wurde zur Landschaft, zum großen Bilde.”

## Curriculum Vitae

I, Walter Benjamin, son of the businessman Emil Benjamin and his wife, Pauline (née Schoenflies), was born in Berlin on July 15, 1892, and belong to the Jewish confession.<sup>1</sup> In the spring of 1901, I entered the fifth grade at the Kaiser Friedrich School, having gained the requisite preparatory knowledge in private instruction.<sup>2</sup> The course of my schooling proceeded in regular fashion until the eighth grade. But shortly after Easter, 1904, I had to withdraw from school, and, after spending several months without lessons in order to recover my health, I entered eighth grade at Dr. Lietz's country boarding school, Haubinda, near Hildburghausen.<sup>3</sup> My parents decided on this step mainly because of my weakened constitution. My stay of nearly two years in Dr. Lietz's school, where I was one of the better pupils in the classes I took, was of great importance to me not only because of my physical recuperation but also because I received there, above all in the German class, the broad stimulus that has subsequently guided my aspirations and interests. My partiality for literature, which until then I had indulged in rather random reading, was deepened and given sure direction through the critical-aesthetic norms which the instruction instilled in me. At the same time this instruction awoke my interest in philosophy. On account of my age, such influences were

less noticeable than in the years to follow.—On my return to Berlin in the spring of 1907, I was readmitted on a trial basis to the ninth grade at the Kaiser Friedrich School. I could not enter a higher grade because Dr. Lietz's institution has the curriculum of a non-classical secondary school. From then on, my schooling again followed a regular course; at Easter 1909 I received the end-of-term certificate for annual service.

Since my return from Haubinda, my philosophic and literary interests have undergone a natural synthesis in the formation of specifically aesthetic interests. These I have pursued partly in exploration of the theory of drama, partly in reflection on great dramatic works—above all, those of Shakespeare, Hebbel, and Ibsen (with detailed study of *Hamlet* and [Goethe's] *Tasso*)—and partly in an intensive engagement with Hölderlin.<sup>4</sup> Generally speaking, these interests have been instrumental in my attempt to form an independent judgment in literary matters.—On the whole, my preoccupation with philosophy has based itself less on the classics than on the reading of general introductions to this discipline, from which I endeavored to obtain an overview of its problems and of the systems of the great thinkers. In addition, the contemporary concern with social questions has naturally had its effect on me, and here a taste for psychology played a part. From this has come my recent interest in the working of religion on the individual and society. With the aid of Burckhardt's *Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*, I undertook to grasp an epoch in terms of cultural history.<sup>5</sup>

Whether it will be philosophy or literature that takes precedence in my university studies is something I cannot yet decide.<sup>6</sup>

## Notes

"Lebenslauf" (GS7, 531–532) was written December 1911 and published posthumously.

1. This account of Benjamin's secondary schooling was submitted with his application to take the *Abitur* or school-leaving examination; the application is dated December 16, 1911 (see GB1, 43–44). After a series of written and oral



examinations (in such areas as Greek, Latin, German, and math) concluding on March 8, 1912, Benjamin qualified for admission to a university. Emil Benjamin (1856–1926) came from a prosperous family of merchants. By profession an auctioneer, he was a partner in Lepke's auction house in Berlin, dealers in art and antiques, and later in various other commercial enterprises. Pauline Schoenflies Benjamin (1869–1930), born to a wealthy and culturally enlightened family of merchants, managed the Benjamin household with its large domestic staff, as the family occupied a succession of dignified residences in Berlin's west end.

2. The Kaiser Friedrich School, built in 1900 in the Berlin suburb of Charlottenburg and directed by an educational reformer, was one of the city's better secondary schools. Of this institution Benjamin claims to retain not a single cheerful memory: see his "Berlin Chronicle" (1932), in SW2, 601–603, 626–629; in this volume, see "Epilogue" (Chapter 11). He had received instruction from private tutors until he was nearly nine.

3. The Landerziehungsheim Haubinda was founded in 1901 in the Thuringian Forest in central Germany by Hermann Lietz, who had been influenced by the educational system practiced at the Abbotsholme School in Staffordshire, England, which balanced academic with agricultural work. Haubinda was one of the first progressive schools in Germany. Benjamin was enrolled there for two years (1905–1906), during which he studied German literature with Gustav Wýneken, perhaps the most important intellectual influence on the German youth movement in the years before World War I.

4. Benjamin discusses Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, Goethe's verse drama *Torquato Tasso* (1790), and works of the Norwegian playwright Henrik Ibsen, in his essay "Sleeping Beauty" (Chapter 6 in this volume). For his engagement with the German poet Hölderlin, see "Two Poems by Friedrich Hölderlin" (Chapter 30 in this volume). For his reflections on the nineteenth-century German dramatist Christian Friedrich Hebbel, see his essay of 1923, "Calderrón's *El Mayor Monstruo*, *Los Celos* and Hebbel's *Herodes und Mariamne*: Comments on the Problem of Historical Drama" (SW1, 363–386).

5. The Swiss historian Jakob Burckhardt (1818–1897) established a model for cultural history with his most famous book, *Die Kultur der Renaissance in Italien* (1860), which treats the everyday life of an epoch, its political climate and the thought of its outstanding minds, as interrelated elements of a whole. Compare Benjamin's more critical comments about this book, as "almost too factual [*sachlich*]," in a letter of July 24, 1911, to Herbert Belmore (CWB, 11).

6. In April 1912, Benjamin entered the Albert Ludwigs University in Freiburg, matriculating in the department of philology as a base for literary

study. In the fall of 1912, however, he switched to Berlin's Friedrich Wilhelm University, enrolling in philosophy. For the next several years, he continued to oscillate between the two disciplines, finally combining them in his dissertations, *Der Begriff der Kunstkritik in der deutschen Romantik* (The Concept of Criticism in German Romanticism; 1919) and *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels* (Origin of the German *Trauerspiel*; 1925).

## Epilogue

It was not without hesitation that we decided to produce a regular “humor magazine,” resolving on a form that, with its more or less crude or personal wit, gives only a distorted image of those “ultimate truths” many students would like to speak aloud to their teachers.<sup>1</sup> But we were unable and unwilling to resist lifting the veil—fleetingly and with as few words as possible—on what lies behind the joking, satire, and irony; we wanted to address the deeper significance of that which the “humor magazine” lightheartedly assails only in its incidental symptoms. And hence from all the niggling and cutting things to be found in the following pages we wanted to take anything but a light-hearted meaning.

In this spirit, to begin with, wholehearted thanks to our teachers, who throughout the period of our schooling have repeatedly given proof of their hard work on our behalf.

But next we put this simple and serious question: What has the school given us? First of all: knowledge, knowledge, knowledge. Much of it may prove fruitful, but we do not need to speak of that now. In fact, the best of our teachers have always told us: “It is not finally knowledge that the school should impart to you.”—But?—Work and obedience: this is what the school wanted to teach us.

On the subject of work we heard Dr. Steinmann speak in one of the last auditorium lectures, a lecture that marked an epoch.<sup>2</sup> Before teachers and pupils assembled in the main auditorium of a school, he spoke not of geography or technology or the like, but of the school. He maintained that work is an absolute value, no matter what one works for. We would reply to him that, among young people, there is no more important question than that of the goal of one's work.

To this question the school has provided no answer. We can say, on the basis of our own experience, that all our schoolwork was continually accompanied by the tormenting feeling of arbitrariness and purposelessness. The school gave us no serious, generally binding duties, but only instructional tasks. And vis-à-vis these daily tasks, no living sense of duty could develop; our school life was governed by the eternally backward-looking customary—not by the thought of a tomorrow toward which our work would be aimed. The idea that we work for the good of the people or of humanity, that we are the conscious limbs of a greater body, could not light our way.<sup>3</sup> We shall sum the matter up in a formula, the gravity of which we fully appreciate: The school has given us—seeing that our work had no goal—no ideals. For ideals are goals. (In these thoughts we cannot help hearing the remarks of our teachers on school reform—remarks such as: “school reform favors the separation of school from instruction,” or “no matter how far we may advance, we will never reach anything without work.”) We want nothing less in the way of duties; indeed, we want more: the consciousness that we ourselves must take our work seriously.

The school has given us no ideals or serious duties. Nor has it—trite phrase—given us rights. We could no more take our work seriously than we could take ourselves seriously. We were not allowed to form any scholastic community. We were granted numerous freedoms, were able to do revisions, were able to elect a committee; in this respect, we probably had it better than pupils in many other schools. But all this is grace, not rights. These things were concessions to formidable currents of public opinion, experiments which we were bound to experience only too clearly as such. They were innovations that were not recognized as proceeding from the character of the student body.

And therefore none of these things could give rise to an open, glad exchange between teachers and pupils.

Up to now, the best part of our youth has been spent far from school, far from a school that pays no attention to this *youthfulness* and imbues it with no ideals, that takes so-called foolish pranks, nonsense and childish behavior in front of teachers, to be expressions of true youthfulness.—

We would regret it deeply if ill feeling, or perhaps a hostile modification in a course of instruction, were to follow as a consequence of these lines, which were written in a spirit of serious reflection at a remove from pathos. And there could be no more beautiful conclusion to our school days if, not in spite of these lines but on the basis of them, open exchange and frank discussions with our teachers, such as we have had to do without during our school years, became possible.

## Notes

“Epilog” (GS7, 13–15) was published anonymously in the *Bierzeitung der Kaiser-Friedrich-Schule*, spring 1912.

1. In a letter of September 6, 1913, to a comrade in the youth movement, Benjamin refers to this high-school humor magazine (*Bierzeitung*), in which he published his “Epilogue” on the occasion of his graduation, as “my generation’s humor magazine, particularly noteworthy for the fact that it was shown to teachers. Two friends and I had put it together behind the backs of the class and at the farewell banquet surprised both pupils and teaching staff” (GB1, 172). It is not known whether this “farewell banquet” has some connection with the “leave-taking ceremony for those who had graduated,” which Benjamin touches on in recalling the Kaiser Friedrich School in his “Berlin Chronicle” of 1932; at that ceremony, a “collision between a larger collective and [Benjamin]” took place (SW2, 602). The “two friends” collaborating on the magazine may have been Fritz Strauß and Franz Sachs, both of whom mention “our humor magazine” in later letters to Gershom Scholem; but Ernst Schoen, who likewise writes about the *Bierzeitung* in a letter of 1955 to Theodor Adorno (cited GS7, 559), seems also to have been involved. Benjamin’s

article is preserved only in the form of a photocopy of the single, unnumbered page on which the text is printed.

2. Dr. Steinmann taught Greek, Latin, and religion at the Kaiser Friedrich School.

3. "Nicht der Gedanke, daß wir für Güter des Volkes oder der Menschheit, deren bewußte Glieder wir sind, arbeiten, durfte uns leuchten."

## School Reform: A Cultural Movement

**T**he tactic of all those who serve the cause of school reform must be at the outset to rescue it from opprobrium, as though it were an affair for those in the know or an attack mounted by dilettantes on the professionalism of pedagogues.<sup>1</sup> "School reform is a cultural movement": this is the first principle that must be defended. It alone justifies the recurrent public clamor for school reform, the recurrent call to the people to reform the schools. And, on the other hand: only in this motto can be heard all the seriousness and all the hope of those who dedicate themselves to this task.—One thing first! It will be said in opposition to us: "What you want is certainly understandable. In our noisy democratic age, there is scarcely a new idea or awakening inspiration that is not immediately and insistently put up for the widest mass circulation; every innovation seeks to be precisely a 'cultural movement,' for this term is not just an honorific title but a sign of power." And against this objection it has to be shown that *school reform is positioned beyond the scientific theses of specialists*, that it is a way of thinking, an ethical program for our times—which surely does not mean that everyone must become a proponent of it but only that everyone is expected to take a position toward it.—In short: the school-reform movement brings to clear and urgent expression certain needs

of our time, which, like virtually all our epoch's greatest needs, belong to the ethical-cultural sphere. School reform is not less important than our social and religious problem, but it is perhaps clearer.

School reform can be considered a cultural movement in many respects. One could see in every effort at reform a cultural movement: "All that is new contains vital energies, unformed and in ferment, but full of promise . . ." With these and similar conceptions we must once and for all make a break. It is as senseless as it is objectionable to speak of cultural movements if one does not know which movements advance and which retard the culture. We would meet every abuse of the promise-filled and seductive word with clarity. In this sense, and within consciously narrowed limits (our space here is limited, too), only three elements will be indicated as culturally valuable and irreplaceable—three elements fundamental to any truly promising effort at school reform.

To vary Schiller's familiar theme: what does school reform mean and why do we want it?<sup>2</sup> Rudolf Pannwitz has very appropriately defined *education* as "propagation of spiritual values."<sup>3</sup> We embrace this definition and ask only: what does it mean to occupy oneself with the propagation of spiritual values?

It means first of all that we grow beyond our own present day. Not only that we think *sub specie aeternitatis* but also that, insofar as we educate ourselves, we live and work *sub specie aeternitatis*.<sup>4</sup> We want a meaningful continuity in all development, such that history does not fall apart in the separate wills of particular epochs or even individuals, and such that the ongoing development of humanity, in which we believe, no longer proceeds in dull biological unconsciousness but rather follows the goal-setting spirit. What we want, in other words, is *cultivation* of the natural advance of humanity: *culture*. The expression of this wish of ours is: education.

But to propagate values means something more. Not only the *propagation* of the spiritual (and, in this sense, culture becomes a problem) but the propagation of the *spiritual*: that is the second requirement. The question arises as to the values we wish to bequeath our descendants as highest legacy. School reform is not only reform of the propagation of values; it becomes at the same time revision of the values themselves. This is its second fundamental meaning for cultural life.



This double relation to culture can be seen clearly enough in the school-reform-life of our day. New methods of instruction and education are emerging. Here, it is a question of the mode of transmission, and everyone knows the variety of demands that are made. The call for truthfulness in educational methods could be considered *urgent*. One experiences it as unworthy if the teacher conveys a piece of knowledge without conviction, if he disciplines the child and even the adolescent with measures (reprimands, detention) which he himself does not take seriously, or even if, with an inward smile—"this is for his own good"—he pronounces a moral condemnation.—The connection with the cultural problem is clear. It is a matter of finding a way out of the opposition between natural, truthful development, on the one hand, and the task of transforming the natural individual into the cultural individual, on the other hand, a task that will never be completed without violence.

Nevertheless, it almost seems as if there is no struggle here as compared to the other battlefield where values are contested—the values to be bequeathed to the new generation. It is a savage tumult. Not just a few armies of a few foes, but grim-visaged war of all against all. Together with shield and sword (maybe even some poisoned arrows), everyone adorned with the flag of a party. The great adversaries who in public life confront one another in free and open rivalry, the representatives of great opposing viewpoints—religious, philosophic, social, aesthetic—yield ground on this battlefield to champions of single disciplines ("Greek," "English," "ninth-grade Latin," "tenth-grade Latin," "industrial arts," "civics," "gymnastics"). All very capable, indispensable combatants in themselves, they nonetheless beget only confusion so long as they have not found their place in the camp of one of the great adversaries—logically linked as these are to the great antitheses, whose vigorous battle cry is stifled within the precincts of the school.

But the strongest bond between culture and school reform is forged by *youth*. The school is the institution that preserves the accomplishments of humanity while continually presenting them anew. But whatever the school achieves remains merit and achievement of the past, even if occasionally of the recent past. Vis-à-vis the future it can marshal nothing more than strict attention and respect. The young, however,

whom the school serves, furnish it with precisely the future. The school receives a generation unsure of itself in everything to do with the real and with conscience, self-absorbed perhaps and unknowing, natural and uncultivated (in service to the school, it has to develop itself), but a generation at the same time full of images, which it brings with it from the land of the future. After all, the culture of the future is the ultimate goal of the school—and for this reason it must remain silent before the future that comes toward it in the form of youth. It must allow young people to act *on their own* and consequently must rest content with conferring and fostering freedom. And so we see that the most urgent requirement of modern pedagogy is to create space for the emergent culture. Youth must learn by degrees to work, to take itself seriously, to educate itself: by placing trust in such youth, humanity places trust in its own future, in the irrational which it can only honor, in the youth that is filled not just with the spirit of the future—no!—but with the spirit that feels in itself the joy and the courage of new culture-bearers. Awakening more and more is a consciousness of the unconditional value, the gaiety and seriousness, of this new youth. And there is a demand that this youth's way of thinking should spread to the public at large, should become a compass for living.

Do you understand now, fellow students, why we turn to you as culture-bearers?

Youth, new school, culture: this is the *circulus egregius* we must keep traveling through in all directions.<sup>5</sup>

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## Notes

“Die Schulreform, eine Kulturbewegung” (GS2, 12–16) was published, under the pseudonym “Eckhart, phil.,” in *Student und Schulreform*, 1912.

1. In a letter of June 21, 1912, to Herbert Belmore, written during his first semester at the University of Freiburg, Benjamin refers to himself as “a hero of school reform” and mentions that an essay he wrote, “‘School Reform: A Cultural Movement,’ will soon appear in a school reform pamphlet directed at the students” (CWB, 15–16). The pamphlet was produced by the School

Reform Unit of the Independent Students' Association at the university, the youth group in which Benjamin took a leading part; it was published in an edition of ten thousand copies and distributed free of charge throughout universities in Germany.

2. Benjamin alludes to Friedrich Schiller's famous collection of letters, *Über die ästhetische Erziehung des Menschen* (On the Aesthetic Education of Man; 1795), which asks how the cultivation of beauty can further the cultivation of humanity.

3. Rudolf Pannwitz, *Die Erziehung* (Frankfurt: Rütten und Loening, 1909), 71: "Education [*Erziehung*] is . . . the propagation of values . . . the inheritance and transmission of spirit." A German philosopher and poet strongly influenced by Nietzsche, Pannwitz (1881-1969) was the author of wide-ranging works aimed at a renewal of European culture through co-ordination of the arts and sciences. He is best known for his book, *Die Krisis der europäischen Kultur* (The Crisis in European Culture; 1917).

4. The Latin phrase *sub specie aeternitatis* (under the aspect of eternity) was given currency by the Dutch philosopher Baruch Spinoza in his *Ethica Ordine Geometrico Demonstrata*, known in English as *The Ethics* (1677), part 5, propositions 23-36. See in this connection Benjamin's "Dialogue on the Religiosity of the Present" (Chapter 13 in this volume).

5. Literally, "distinguished circuit" or "illustrious cycle," *circulus egregius* would seem to mean "vicious circle" here, though there are more direct ways of saying this in Latin.

## Dialogue on the Religiosity of the Present

I had looked up a friend with the idea of clarifying, in a conversation with him, some thoughts and doubts about art that had been on my mind for the last few weeks. It was already near midnight when our conversation about the purpose of art turned to the subject of religion.<sup>1</sup>

*I:* I'd be grateful if you could name for me anyone today who has a clear conscience in the appreciation of art. I exclude the naïve and the artists themselves. By "naïve" I don't mean those who become intoxicated with a momentary joy—as so often happens with us—but rather those for whom joy is quite naturally a summoning of the whole person. Such people don't always have good taste, and I suspect most of them are uneducated. But they know what to make of art, and they don't go in for artistic vogues. And then the artists: no problem here—don't you agree? Reflection on art is a specialty of theirs.

*He:* As a man of culture, you betray all tradition. We're trained not to question the value of art. *L'art pour l'art!*<sup>2</sup>

*I:* With good reason we're trained this way. *L'art pour l'art* is the last bastion protecting art from the philistine: Otherwise, every village mayor would be deliberating over the rights of art as over the price of meat. But *we* have freedom here. Tell me, what do you think of *l'art*

*pour l'art*? Or rather, what in general do you understand by this term? What does it mean?

*He:* It means very simply that art is not the servant of the state, nor the handmaid of the church; it is not even something for the life of children. And so forth. *L'art pour l'art* means: one does not know where one will end up with it—with art.

*I:* I believe you're right about that, as far as most people are concerned. But, again, not for us. I believe we must free ourselves from this high mystery of the philistines, this "*art pour l'art*." The saying holds good for the artist and only for the artist. For us it has another sense. Naturally, one should not go to art in order to get back one's idle fantasies. On the other hand, we cannot rest content with flat astonishment. Therefore "*l'art pour nous!*" [art for our sake]. Let us garner from the artwork what is valuable for life: beauty, knowledge of form, and feeling. "All art is dedicated to joy. And there is no more lofty and important task than to make people happy," says Schiller.<sup>3</sup>

*He:* The half-educated with their *art pour l'art*, with their ideological enthusiasm and personal indecision, their technological semiliteracy—they're the least able to take pleasure in art.

*I:* From a different point of view, it's all nothing more than a symptom. We're irreligious.

*He:* Thank God for that!—if what you're calling "religion" signifies mindless faith in authority, or merely belief in miracles, merely mysticism. Religion is incompatible with progress. Its way is typically to concentrate all driving, expansive forces in a single, sublime gravitational center in inwardness. Religion is the root of inertia. Its sanctification.

*I:* I don't at all disagree with you. Religion is inertia—if you mean by "inertia" the steadfast inwardness and the steadfast goal of all striving. We're irreligious because we no longer have regard for perseverance. Have you noticed how the concept of "end in itself," this last sanctification of purpose, gets dragged down? How every single thing that's not clearly and reliably understood becomes an "end in itself"? Because we're so miserably poor in values, we isolate everything. And then we can't help making a virtue of necessity. Art, science, sport, social life—down to the shabbiest individuality it descends, this divine end in itself. Everything represents something, has its own meaning, is unique.

*The Friend:*<sup>4</sup> What you describe here are actually the symptoms of a proud and glorious delight in living. We've become worldly—no doubt about it, my dear fellow—and it's time that even the most medieval mentalities grasped the fact. We give to things their own proper consecration; the world is perfectly complete in itself.

*I:* Granted! And what is the least we can demand from our worldliness? Delight in this new, modern world. What does all progress, all worldliness, have to do with religion if they fail to provide us with a joyful peace? I hardly need remind you that our worldliness has become a somewhat grinding sport. We are baited on all sides by delight in living. It is our damnable duty and obligation to feel it. Art, commerce, luxury—it's all obligatory.

*The Friend:* I'm not blind to any of that. But take a look around. In our life now we have a rhythm that, to be sure, has little enough of antiquity and classical composure in it. Rather, it's a new sort of intensive joyousness. However often it may reveal itself to be forced, it's there. We're audacious in our search for what makes us happy. We all of us have a strange lust for adventuring after unknown pleasures and sources of enchantment.

*I:* You're speaking in a very indeterminate way, and yet something prevents us from disputing your point. I feel you're basically speaking the truth, a truth that's far from banal—one that's so new in fact that, even in just emerging, it would already betoken religion. Nevertheless—our life is not attuned to this pure tone. For us, the old religions have been exploded over the course of the last centuries. But I daresay this has not been so entirely without consequences that we can innocently rejoice in the enlightenment. A religion would formerly have bound together powers whose free working is to be feared. The religions of the past concealed in themselves need and misery. These things have now come to light. Confronted with them, we no longer have the security our ancestors derived from belief in compensatory justice. The consciousness of a proletariat, of progress, all the powers that earlier generations, in order to find peace, were able to appease in orderly fashion through their religious services—these things cause *us* unrest. They give us no chance to live honorably, at least not where enjoyment is concerned.

*The Friend:* With the decline of social religion, the social has drawn closer to us. It confronts us more insistently, or at any rate more pervasively. Perhaps more inexorably. And we comply with it soberly and perhaps rigorously.

*I:* But what is completely lacking to us in all this is proper regard for the social. You smile; I know I'm uttering a paradox. What I mean is that our social activity, however rigorous it may be, is ailing in one respect: it has lost its metaphysical seriousness. It has become a matter of public order and personal respectability. For nearly all those who are active socially, this activity is merely one aspect of civilization, like the electric light. Sorrow has been profaned, if you will pardon the poetic expression.

*The Friend:* I hear you again pining after vanished dignity, after metaphysics. But let's try to keep in touch with life, soberly. Let's not lose ourselves in the boundless, or feel a calling every time we sit down to lunch. Is it a betrayal of culture if we descend somewhat from the heights of ardent spontaneity to the self-evident? Let me put it this way: the precondition for any culture is that the commands of the gods become human laws. What a superfluous expenditure of energy to derive everything from the metaphysical!

*I:* If only we still had the consciousness of honorable sobriety in our social life. But that's not it either. We're trapped in a ridiculous middle position: tolerance is supposed to have liberated social activity from all religious exclusionism—and yet it is precisely those proclaiming an enlightened social activity who make a religion out of tolerance, out of enlightenment, out of indifference and even frivolity. I would be the last to inveigh against the simple forms of everyday life. But when once again this normal social activity is surreptitiously made the sacred-tyrannical rule for individuals, far in excess of political or civil imperatives, then even socialism can be religion. And the "enlightened" become hypocrites vis-à-vis religion or their own claims. In a word: Flower days.<sup>5</sup>

*The Friend:* Your thinking is severe because it's unhistorical. So much is true: we're in a religious crisis. And we still can't do without the beneficent pressure of social-religious obligation, however unworthy of a free human being. We've not yet fully worked our way up to ethical independence. Indeed, this is the core of the crisis. Religion,

the guardian of ethical concerns, has been recognized as a form, and we are on the point of realizing our ethical program as something self-validating. But this work is not yet finished; there are still transitional phenomena.

*I:* Thank God! I shudder at the image of ethical independence you conjure up. Religion is recognition of our duties as divine commands, according to Kant.<sup>6</sup> Which is to say, religion guarantees us something eternal in our daily labors, and that's what we need above all. Your celebrated ethical independence would turn man into a work-machine: one goal always determining another in endless sequence. The way you conceive it, ethical independence is a chimera—the reduction of all work to the technological.

*The Friend:* I beg your pardon, but one would think you lived as totally isolated from modernity as the most reactionary East-Prussian country squire. Certainly, the technological-practical way of conceiving things has sucked the soul out of every single living phenomenon in the whole of nature, and it has ended by depriving suffering and poverty of a soul. But in pantheism we've found the common soul of all particulars, of all that has been isolated. We can renounce all sovereign divine ends because the world, the unity of the manifold, is the goal of goals. No doubt it's almost shameful to go on like this. Just turn to the works of our great living poets, Whitman, Paquet, Rilke, and of numberless others; enter into the spirit of the Free-Religious Movement; read the pages of the liberal press: everywhere you find a vehement pantheist feeling—to say nothing of monism, the synthesis of all our form.<sup>7</sup> This is the living power of technology—living despite all: namely, that it has given us the glory of those who pursue knowledge and, at the same time, the reverence of those who have contemplated the glorious structure of the world. For despite all pursuit of knowledge—am I wrong?—no generation has yet contemplated the humblest life-forms as reverently as we have. And what once animated the philosophers (from the earliest Ionians to Spinoza) and the poets (up to the Spinozist Goethe)—this feeling for nature as everywhere divine—has become our patrimony.<sup>8</sup>

*I:* If I argue against you—and I know that I'm arguing against not only you but the age itself, from its simplest to many of its most imposing representatives—then please don't chalk this up to the urge to appear interesting. I'm wholly serious when I say that I recognize no



pantheism other than the humanism of Goethe. In his writings the world appears divine throughout, for he was an heir of the Enlightenment in one respect at least: to him, only the good was essential. And what in the mouth of any other not only would appear inessential but would really have been insubstantial, an empty phrase, became in his mouth—and continues in the formulations of the poets generally to become—substance.

Don't misunderstand me. No one can dispute another's right to feelings. But the claim to possess *authoritative* feelings has to be put to the test. And here I would say that, though a particular person may sincerely feel his or her pantheism, it's only the poets who make it authoritative and communicable. And a feeling that is possible only at the summit of expression no longer counts as religion. It's art, edification, but not *the* feeling that can give our communal life a religious grounding. And this presumably is what religion seeks to do.

*The Friend:* I won't attempt to refute you, but I would like, if you don't mind, to indicate to you the enormity of what you're saying by pointing to an example: the high school. In what spirit does it educate its students?

*I:* In the spirit of humanism—so it says.

*The Friend:* In your opinion, would our schooling therefore be an education for poets and for those capable of the strongest and most creative life of feeling?

*I:* We're in agreement here. Really, I must ask, what is a person of normal ability supposed to do with humanism? Is this highly refined harmonization of knowledge and feeling a means of educating young people who thirst for values? Indeed, is humanism, is pantheism anything other than a mighty incarnation of the aesthetic interpretation of life? I think not. We may experience in pantheism the highest, most harmonious moments of happiness—but never at any time does it have the power to determine the moral life. One should neither laugh at nor weep over the world, but rather seek to understand it: pantheism culminates in this saying of Spinoza.<sup>9</sup> But please note, since you asked my opinion: the high school doesn't even give shape to its pantheism. We seldom go back directly to the classics. The work of art—this one authentic manifestation of pantheistic feeling—is banished. And, if you wish to hear still more, I'm of the opinion that this medicinal pantheism which

our school has prescribed to us is responsible for the reduction of the concept to a mere catchword.

*The Friend:* So, in the end, you charge pantheism with dishonesty as well.

*I:* Dishonesty? No, I wouldn't say that. But I *would* charge it with thoughtlessness. For the times are no longer those of Goethe. We've had Romanticism and we are indebted to its powerful insight into the night side of the natural. At bottom, the natural is not good; it's strange, dreadful, frightening, repugnant—crude. But we live as though Romanticism had never occurred, as though today were the very first day. That's why I call our pantheism thoughtless.

*The Friend:* I almost believe that I've run into a fixed idea here in your thinking. To be honest, I doubt whether I can make the simple and yet fundamental significance of pantheism comprehensible to you. With such distrustful logical rigor, you'll never understand what is wonderful about pantheism: namely, that in it precisely the ugly and bad appear as necessary and therefore divine. This conviction makes for an extraordinary feeling of groundedness, that sense of peace which Spinoza has so aptly termed *amor dei*.<sup>10</sup>

*I:* I must confess that the *amor dei* as a mode of knowledge, as insight, does not accord with my idea of religion. Fundamental to religion is a certain dualism, an intimate striving after unification with God. Some great individual may accomplish this by way of knowledge. Religion speaks mightier words, is more demanding; it knows about the ungodly also, even about hate. A divinity that is everywhere, a divinity that is supposed to participate in every experience and every feeling, is simply sentimentalism and profanation.

*The Friend:* You're wrong if you think pantheism lacks the necessary religious dualism. It doesn't at all. I said a little earlier that with all profound scientific knowledge there dwells in us a feeling of humility before the smallest living thing, even before the inorganic. Nothing is more remote from us than schoolboy-arrogance. Tell me now yourself: don't we feel the deepest sympathetic understanding for all that's going on? Just think of modern developments in the penal code. We insist that criminals, too, are human beings. We demand rehabilitation not punishment. The true religious antagonism pervades our emotional life—the antagonism between intellectual penetration and a humility that I would almost call resignation.

I: In this antagonism I see only skepticism. A humility that negates all scientific knowledge because, in the spirit of Hume, it doubts the validity of the law of causality—this or similar profane speculation—is, in my view, not religious.<sup>11</sup> It's merely emotion-sodden feebleness. Moreover, if our humility undermines the consciousness of what is most valuable to us, which is how you characterize our knowledge, then it's not the source of living religious antagonism so much as the cue to skeptical self-laceration. But I'm well-aware that it is precisely this that makes pantheism so immensely comforting: one feels equally cozy in hell and heaven, in pride and skepticism, in superhuman striving and social humility. For, naturally, without a bit of unpathetic—in other words, painless—superhuman striving [*Übermenschentum*], it won't come off. Where Creation is divine, the Lord of Creation is naturally all the more divine.

*The Friend:* Yet there's one thing missing, it seems to me, in all you're saying. You're unable to describe for me the sublimity of a sovereign knowledge. And that is a mainstay of our convictions.

I: What then is it *for us*, this knowledge of ours? I'm not asking what it means for humanity. Rather, what experiential value does it have for each person? It's experience, after all, that we must ask about. And here I see only that this knowledge has become for us something customary, something matter-of-fact with which we grow up from the age of six to the end. We're always lulling ourselves with the importance of this knowledge for any sort of problem, for humanity—for knowledge itself. But personally it does not concern us in the least; it leaves us cold, like everything customary. What did we have to say when the North Pole was first reached? A sensation, which was soon forgotten. When Ehrlich discovered the cure for syphilis, it was a matter for the skepticism and cynicism of the humor magazines.<sup>12</sup> A Russian newspaper commented that vice had now been given free rein, which could only be deplored. In short, I simply don't believe in the religious sublimity of knowledge.

*The Friend:* Then what do you have left but despair? Do you believe in nothing at all? Are you skeptical of everything?

I: I believe in our own skepticism, our own despair. I think you know what I mean. I believe no less than you do in the religious significance of our times. And, yes, I believe in the religious significance of knowledge, too. I understand the awe and terror which insight into

nature has bequeathed us, and chiefly I feel that we are all still living deep within the discoveries of Romanticism.

*The Friend:* And what do you mean by the discoveries of Romanticism?

*I:* It's what I was suggesting before: the appreciation of everything frightful, incomprehensible, and obscure that is woven into our lives. But to have recognized all this and so much more is no triumph. The knowledge has overmastered us; we are simply stupefied and subdued. There's a tragicomic law at work here, for the moment we became conscious of the autonomy of the spirit with Kant, Fichte, and Hegel, nature emerged in its immeasurable objectivity; the moment Kant uncovered the roots of human life in the practical reason, the theoretical reason had to take on the infinite task of developing modern natural science.<sup>13</sup>—So it is with us now. All the social morality we seek to establish with splendid, youthful zeal is arrested in the skeptical depths of our insights. And today less than ever before do we understand the Kantian primacy of the practical reason over the theoretical.

*The Friend:* In the name of a religious imperative you advocate an unbridled, unscientific reformism. You appear to have disavowed the sobriety that you earlier seemed to embrace. You fail to recognize the greatness, indeed the sanctity, of the renunciatory objective work being accomplished not only in the service of science but also, in this age of scientific culture, in the social realm. A revolutionary youthfulness will, of course, find no incentive here.

*I:* That's certainly true. Given the present state of our culture, the work of society should and must be aligned with an evolutionary course of action rather than with heroic-revolutionary aspirations. But I say this to you: Woe to him who loses sight of the goal in all such work, and who confidently entrusts himself to the crablike advance of evolution. For that is what's happening. Hence, it is not ever in the name of development but in the name of the goal that we emerge from the present state of affairs. And, as things stand, we cannot outwardly establish this goal. The man of culture has only one place that he can keep pure for himself, in which he can really be *sub specie aeternitatis*: that's his interior, he himself.<sup>14</sup> And the old and besetting difficulty is that we lose ourselves. Lose ourselves *through* all the glorious forms of progress you extol—lose ourselves, I would almost say, through progress. Religions, however, arise out of difficulty and

need, not out of prosperity. And if the pantheistic feeling of life extols this pure negativity, this losing of oneself and becoming strange to oneself, as absorption in the social, then it is a lie.

*The Friend:* To be sure—I didn't know you were an individualist.

*I:* I'm not—any more than you are. Individualists promote their own "I" as the determining factor. I already said that cultivated human beings, insofar as the progress of humanity is for them a self-evident precept, can do no such thing. This precept, by the way, has been taken up into the culture so unquestionably, has become so self-evident, that it is already empty, harmless, and useless as a foundation of religion for the progressive-minded.—But I have no intention of preaching individualism. I desire only that the man of culture *comprehend* his relation to society. I think we should break with the unworthy lie according to which the human being is completely fulfilled in service to society, and according to which the social, that in which we undeniably live our lives at present, is also that which in the last analysis determines personality.

Let us in fact take the socialist precept seriously, let us concede that the individual is constrained—in his inner life constrained and benighted; from this difficulty we regain an awareness of the richness and abundance, the natural being of the personality. Slowly, a new generation will dare once again to look about on its own and not only through its artists. The oppression and untruth that now confine us will be recognized. The dualism of social morality and personality will be acknowledged. From this difficulty a religion will be born. And necessarily so, because never before has the personality been so hopelessly entangled in the social mechanism. But I fear that you've not yet entirely understood me and that you believe you've detected individualism where I merely demand honesty—and not least an honest socialism, as opposed to the conventional one of today. As opposed to a socialism upheld by those who do not feel quite right by themselves.

*The Friend:* We're getting into an area where discussion is almost impossible. You provide no evidence and base yourself on the future. But look around you in the present. There you have individualism. I know you oppose it. But precisely from your point of view, I would think, you must recognize its sincerity. Nowhere, however, does individualism point toward your goal.

I: There are many kinds of individualism. I don't deny that there are even people who can be altogether honorably absorbed in the social, though they will not be the deepest and best. But whether or not the seeds of my expectation—better, of a future religiosity—lie in individualism is something I cannot at all decide. In any case, I discern beginnings in this movement. To my way of thinking, the heroic age of a new religion. The heroes of the Greeks are strong like the gods; only, they are still lacking in divine maturity, divine culture. That's how individualists appear to me.

*The Friend:* I don't require a learned construal. But show me where in the emotional life of the times you find these new religious currents, this individualistic socialism, as you find everywhere today the pantheism in people's hearts. I myself see nothing to back you up. Witty cynicism and pallid aestheticism are not the seeds of a future religiosity.

I: I would not have believed you capable of dismissing our literature with the customary withering glance from on high. It looks very different to me. Even though witty aestheticism is not the hallmark of our greatest creative achievements, you should not underestimate the penetrating, captivating power that lies in this high-spiritedness, this mania for exposing and overleaping abysses. I don't know if you'll understand me when I say that such intellectual wit is at the same time forerunner and foe of religious feeling.

*The Friend:* If you mean by "religious" a supersaturated longing for the unheard-of, then maybe you're right.

I: Let's take, though, a somewhat different view of the longing you speak of. Doesn't it originate in the mighty will to see everything unmoored—that is, not so peacefully and self-evidently anchored in the "I" as it customarily appears to be? This longing bespeaks a mystical-individualist hostility toward the customary. That is its fruitfulness. Of course, it can never have had the last word on anything, and hence its terminations are always cheeky. The tragic naiveté of the high-spirited. As I said, it keeps leaping over the chasms it opens up. I love and fear this cynicism—it's so courageous and, in the end, only a little too vainglorious not to set its own fortuitousness above historical necessity.

*The Friend:* You pay tribute to a feeling with which I, too, am familiar. Neoromanticism—Schnitzler, Hofmannsthal, also Thomas Mann on

occasion—important, worthy of love, in fact genuinely sympathetic and dangerous.<sup>15</sup>

I: Actually, it was not at all of them I wanted to speak but of others who manifestly dominate our times. Or at least typify the times. What I can say about them I say gladly. But, of course, we're entering a boundless terrain.

*The Friend:* Feelings verge on the boundless, and the object of religion is infinity. So much I bring with me from my pantheism.

I: Bölsche once said that art anticipates the collective consciousness and sphere of life of later times.<sup>16</sup> And I believe, too, that those works of art that dominate our epoch—no, not just dominate—I believe that the works that move us most intensely at a first encounter, above all, Ibsen and naturalism, that these works carry within themselves this new religious consciousness. Take the dramas of Ibsen. In the background always the social problem—certainly. But what drives the action are the people who must orient their individual being to the new social order: Nora, Mrs. Alving, and, if you go deeper, Hedda, Solness; Borkman, Gregers, and many others.<sup>17</sup> And, further, the way these people speak. Naturalism has discovered individual speech. That's what's so very gripping, when we first read Ibsen or Hauptmann: that with our most everyday and most intimate forms of expression we have our rights in literature, in a valid world order.<sup>18</sup> Our sense of self is exalted by this.—Or take the conception of individual and society, as it appears in Spitteler's "Heracles' Earthly Journey."<sup>19</sup> This reminds us where our goal lies. And surely it's one of the most stirring, rapturous passages of writing in modern literature. As redeemer in the service of humanity, Heracles cannot safeguard his personality, not even his honor. But it is a piercing and jubilant honesty with which he admits this to himself, an honesty that in all his suffering, and precisely through such suffering, ennobles him.<sup>20</sup>—This is the precipitous living contradiction to the social inertia of our time.—And here is to be found the deepest, truly the deepest abasement to which the modern individual, punished with the loss of social possibilities, must submit: in the veiling of individuality, of all that which is inwardly in motion and in ferment. I would speak to you now of what is most concrete: religion will take its rise at this juncture. It will once again emerge from what is enslaved. But the class that

today endures this necessary historical enslavement is the class of literati.<sup>21</sup> They want to be the honest ones, want to give shape to their artistic enthusiasm, their "love of the most distant" (to speak with Nietzsche), but society repudiates them; and they themselves, in pathological self-destructiveness, must root out in themselves everything "all too human" needed by one who lives.<sup>22</sup> That's the way they are—they who would convert values into life, into convention: and our untruthfulness condemns them to being outsiders and to the extravagance that makes them unfruitful. We will never spiritualize conventions if we don't seek to infuse these forms of social life with our own personal spirit. And to that end we are helped by the literati and the new religion. Religion gives a new grounding and a new dignity to daily life, to convention, which in this way turns into cult. Are we not thirsting for convention that would have spiritual, ritual meaning?

*The Friend:* I think of the people who lead a disordered, often enough unspiritual existence in the coffeehouses, people who disavow even the simplest responsibility in their megalomania and indolence, and who embody, yes, shamelessness itself: how it is that you expect the new religion from these people is unclear to me, to put it mildly.

*I:* I didn't say that I expect the new religion from them but that I look upon them as bearers of religious spirit in our times. And I'll stick to this, though you reproach me a hundred times for unnecessary construal. No doubt these people lead, to some extent, the most ridiculous, depraved, unspiritual life. But hasn't such wretchedness sprung from a spiritual need, from longing for an honest and authentic personal life? What else are they doing than occupying themselves with their own torturous honesty? Of course, what we make allowances for in Ibsen's heroes won't do for us in our own lives.

*The Friend:* Didn't you yourself say before that this fanatical, penetrating honesty is denied the man of culture, that it dissolves all our inner and outer capacities?

*I:* Yes, and for that reason nothing is to be feared more than the spread of the world of letters. But a leavening is necessary, a fermenting agent. As little as we wish to be literati in this last sense, so much the more are they, the literati, to be regarded as executors of the religious will.



*The Friend:* Religion involves a sense of shame; it's a purification and sanctification in solitude. In the world of letters you see the blatant opposite. Hence, it is to be shunned by people with a sense of shame.

*I:* Why do you make shame alone the seat of all holiness and speak so little of ecstasy? We've surely forgotten that it was by no means in inner calm that religious *movements* once gripped whole generations. Think of shame, if you like, as a requisite arm of the instinct for self-preservation. But don't sanctify it; it is altogether natural. It will never have anything to fear from a pathos, an ecstasy, that can endure and expand. And only the impure fire of a cowardly, oppressed pathos—only that, perhaps, can destroy it.

*The Friend:* And, really, the literary man stands under the sign of this shamelessness. He succumbs to it, as to inward decay, and is ruined.

*I:* You shouldn't at all take that for granted, for he succumbs to this debilitating pathos because society has banished him, because he has only the most pitiable forms in which to live out his convictions. When we again have the strength to shape convention, to give it serious and worthy form in place of our social sham world, *then* we shall have the symptom of the new religion. The culture of expression is the highest, and we should think of it only on the basis of this religion. But our religious feelings are free.—And so we furnish untrue conventions and untrue emotional relations with the useless energy of piety.

*The Friend:* I congratulate you on your optimism and your consistency. Do you really believe that, with all the troubles that have descended on society, in this flood of unresolved problems, a new problematic—one which you do not hesitate to name religion—is necessary or even possible? Think of just one immense problem, the question of the sexual order in the future.

*I:* An excellent suggestion! To my mind, this is precisely the sort of question that can be dealt with only on the basis of the most personal honesty. As regards love and the complex of sexual problems, we shall be able to arrive at a frank assessment only after we have dissociated these problems from their mendacious amalgamation with unending social agendas. Love is first of all a personal affair between two people and absolutely not a means to procreating children; read Wassermann's *Faustina* on this.<sup>23</sup> For the rest, I do in fact believe that a

religion must be born from a deep and almost unknown need. And that for the spiritual leaders, therefore, the social element is no longer a religious element, as I already said. The people should be permitted its religion, without cynicism. That is, the people have no need of new forms of knowledge or new goals. I could well imagine speaking with someone who had an outlook very different from yours. For him, the social would have been an experience that first violently tore him out of his most naïve and unbroken integrity. He would have represented the mass of the living, and he belongs in the widest sense to the historical religions.

*The Friend:* You speak here, too, of honesty and integrity. So we're supposed to revert to this outlook of the egocentric man?

*I:* I believe you misunderstand me systematically. I'm talking about two kinds of honesty. One before the social and one that a person has after gaining knowledge of his social bonds. I abhor only the middle: the mendacious primitivism of the complicated man.

*The Friend:* And now you really believe you can institute this new honesty in the very midst of the religious and cultural chaos in which the leaders are involved? In spite of decadence and mysticism, theosophy, the Adamites, and endless other sects?<sup>24</sup> For in these things, too, every religion has its bitter enemies. They conceal the gulf between nature and spirit, honesty and lying, individual and society—or however you wish to formulate it.

*I:* So now you yourself describe mysticism as the enemy of religion. Not only does it bridge over the precipices of the religious problematic but it's also respectable and social. But consider to what extent this would be true of pantheism as well.—Of the newly awakening religious feeling, however, it's not true. So little, indeed, that in the recognition and spread of mysticism and decadence I even see symptoms of that feeling. But allow me to go over the matter in more detail. I already said that I can determine historically the moment of this new religion—the laying of its foundation. It was the moment when Kant exposed the gulf between sensibility and understanding and when he recognized the sway of the moral, the practical reason in all doings. Humanity was awakened from its developmental sleep, and at the same time the awakening took from humanity its unity. What did classicism do? It once again

unified spirit and nature: it empowered the faculty of judgment and produced unity—that which can always be only a unity of the moment, of ecstasy, in the great visionaries. Fundamentally, we cannot experience such unity—not if we are honest. It cannot become the foundation of life. It signifies life's aesthetic high point. And just as classicism was a phenomenon of aesthetic reaction, given its keen consciousness that what was at stake was the struggle over the totality of the human being, so I would call mysticism and decadence also reactionary phenomena. The consciousness that at the eleventh hour wants to be spared the honesty of dualism, that wants to flee personality. But mysticism and decadence carry on a hopeless struggle: they negate themselves. Mysticism through the studied scholastic-ecstatic manner in which it grasps the sensuous as spiritual, or both as manifestations of the true supersensible. Among these hopeless modes of speculation I include monism. They're an innocuous intellectual progeny, I'd say, but one requiring an immense expenditure of suggestible mentality. As we've already mentioned, the language of mysticism is intellectual wit, or, worse still, it is decadence—for me, the same symptom and the same unfruitfulness. It seeks the synthesis in the natural. It commits the mortal sin of making the spirit natural, taking it as self-evident, as merely causal in its functioning. It denies values (and thereby itself) in order to overcome the dualism of duty and person.

*The Friend:* You know how it goes sometimes. You follow a line of thought intensely for a while, believing yourself to be on the trail of something unprecedented, and suddenly you find yourself standing in horror before a colossal banality. That's how it is with me. I can't help asking myself what exactly we're talking about. Isn't it something terribly obvious, a foregone conclusion? Is it even *worth* talking about: that we live in a disjunction of individual and social? Everybody knows what it feels like, experiences it daily. Good, we struggle until culture and socialism triumph. And with that everything is settled. You see, I've entirely lost perspective and a proper understanding of the matter.

*I:* It's my experience, on the other hand, that one stands before a profound truth when to some degree one deepens—spiritualizes, I would say—the obvious. And that's what's happened to us in the

matter of religion. Certainly, you're right in what you're saying. But add a corollary. This situation should not be conceived as a technical necessity, as something arising from externality and contingency. Let us take it as an ethical necessity [*sittlich-notwendig*]; let us once more infuse necessity with spirit and make a virtue of it. Certainly, we live in an exigency [*Not*]. But our conduct becomes valuable only insofar as it comprehends itself ethically. Have we in that case acknowledged to ourselves what is horrible, unchecked, in the submission of the person to social-ethical ends? No! And why not? Because the fact of the matter is that one no longer understands the abundance and weightiness of individuality. As sure as I know people in daily life, I say to you they have lost the bodily sensation of their personal spiritual being.

The moment we find *that* again<sup>25</sup> and bow to the culture's ethical standards, we are humble. Only then do we get a sense of what Schleiermacher calls "absolute dependence," as opposed to a conventional dependency.<sup>26</sup>—But I doubt I can make this clear to you, because it comes out of such a new consciousness of personal immediacy.

*The Friend:* Once again your thoughts take flight. So much so that they very rapidly leave behind the whole present-day problematic.

*I:* That is the last thing I expected to hear, since I've been speaking all evening long and all night long of the difficulty [*Not*] with our leaders.

*The Friend:* Faith and knowledge are the watchwords of our religious struggles, and yet you don't say a word about their relation. I hasten to add that, from my standpoint of pantheism or monism, this question clearly does not obtain. But *you* will have come to terms with the matter.

*I:* Yes, indeed, since I argue that religious-feeling is rooted in the totality of the time, and knowledge is part of that. If knowledge were not itself problematic, then a religion that begins with the most urgent matters would not have to trouble itself about knowledge. And there have hardly been times before this when knowledge was naturally contested as problematic. To such a pass have historical misunderstandings brought things.—And this most modern of problems, of which the newspapers are full, comes into being because we don't inquire from the ground up about the religion of today. Rather, one asks whether or not one of the

historical religions can still find accommodation in the present, no matter if its arms and legs are cut off, and its head as well.—I'll stop here, since this is a favorite theme of mine that could be developed in many directions.

*The Friend:* I'm reminded of a remark that Walter Calé once made:

"After a conversation, one always believes the 'essential thing' was not said."<sup>27</sup> Perhaps you have a similar feeling right now.

*I:* That I do. But I'll say this. I think that in the last analysis a religion can never be simply dualism—that the honesty and the humility of which we spoke constitute its ethically unifying concept. I think that we can say nothing about the God or the doctrine of this religion and little about its cultic life. That the only thing concrete is the feeling of a new and unprecedented eventuality, from which we suffer. I believe also that we have already had our prophets: Tolstoy, Nietzsche, Strindberg.<sup>28</sup> And that finally our pregnant times will give birth to a new human being. I heard a song recently—a rather roguish love song. I believe in the religious man the way it doés:

If all your charms could be captured on canvas,  
 And a heathen prince were then to find the portrait,  
 He would bestow on you a magnificent gift  
 And lay his crown in your hands.  
 His entire kingdom down to its remotest province  
 Would have to embrace the true faith.  
 Throughout the land it would be written:  
 Everyone shall become a Christian and love you.  
 At once each heathen would be converted  
 And become a good Christian and love you.

My friend smiled skeptically but amiably and accompanied me in silence to the door.

## Notes

"Dialog über die Religiosität der Gegenwart" (GS2, 16–35) was written ca. September–October 1912 and published posthumously.

1. The two speakers use the formal mode of address (*Sie*) with each other.

2. Applying Kant's idea of the pure and disinterested existence of the work of art, the French philosopher Victor Cousin made use of the phrase *l'art pour l'art* (art for art's sake) in his 1818 lecture "Du Vrai, du beau, et du bien" (On the True, the Beautiful, and the Good). The idea was later given currency by such writers as Théophile Gautier, Edgar Allan Poe, and Charles Baudelaire.

3. These oft-quoted lines are from the preface to *Die Braut von Messina* (The Bride of Messina; 1803), a drama by Johann Christoph Friedrich von Schiller (1759–1805).

4. At this point in the manuscript, Benjamin changed the designation for the interlocutor ("The Friend") without going back and changing the initial form ("He").

5. *Blumentage* were organized in many German cities at the beginning of the twentieth century, particularly in 1910 and 1911, as a philanthropic activity in which gaily adorned young women would distribute artificial flowers as a way of raising money for the poor and disadvantaged. The activity was criticized as a sentimental bourgeois pose of "folkishness." Presumably at issue here for Benjamin is what the first speaker in the dialogue calls the hypocrisy of the "enlightened."

6. This is the opening sentence of book 4 (part 1) of Immanuel Kant's *Die Religion innerhalb der Grenzen der blossen Vernunft* (Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone; 1793).

7. The American poet Walt Whitman died in 1892 and was thus not exactly a "living poet" when this dialogue was written. Alfons Paquet (1881–1944) was a German poet, dramatist, novelist, and travel writer, whom Benjamin would later encounter in company with Florens Christian Rang in the 1920s. Rainer Maria Rilke (1875–1926), the celebrated Austro-German lyric poet and prose writer, was author of *Neue Gedichte* (New Poems; 1907–1908), *Die Aufzeichnungen des Malte Laurids Brigge* (The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge; 1910), and *Duineser Elegien* (Duino Elegies; 1923); he and Benjamin were in a class together (on pre-Columbian Mexican culture) in Munich in 1915. Like the work of these three writers, the Free-Religious Movement (*Die freireligiöse Bewegung*), organized in mid-nineteenth-century Germany to promote the values of enlightenment and tolerance in religion, was critical of traditional Christian dualism; it advocated a pantheistic view of the world. One of its adherents, the zoologist and philosopher Ernst Haeckel (1834–1919), was the founder of the *Deutscher Monistenbund* (German League of Monists; 1906), which similarly argued for the oneness of nature and spirit.

8. Ionia, an ancient region of western Asia Minor along the coast of the Aegean Sea, was colonized by Greek settlers before 1000 B.C. and in the sixth century B.C. was the birthplace of the pre-Socratic philosophers Thales and Anaximander, both of Miletus, and Heraclitus of Ephesus. Baruch Spinoza (1632–1677) was a Dutch philosopher of Portuguese-Jewish parentage and the most eminent expounder of pantheism; among his works are *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* (1670) and *Ethica Ordine Geometrico Demonstrata*, known in English as *The Ethics* (1677). The poet Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749–1832) came to know Spinoza's *Ethics* in 1773–1774, and he later singled out Spinoza, together with Shakespeare and the Swedish botanist Linnaeus, as having had a decisive influence on his development (letter of November 7, 1816, to Carl Friedrich Zelter).

9. The passage in question comes from chapter 1 (paragraph 4) of Spinoza's unfinished *Tractatus Politicus* (Political Treatise; pub. 1677): "Human actions I have striven neither to mock nor to lament, nor yet to execrate, but to understand."

10. "Feeling of groundedness" translates *Heimatgefühl*. Spinoza's famous phrase, *amor dei intellectualis* (the intellectual love of God) is found in the *Ethics*, part 5, propositions 32–33.

11. The Scottish philosopher and historian David Hume (1711–1776), the author of *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (1748) and *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* (1779), inaugurated a skeptical empiricism by arguing that there is no knowledge beyond the impressions of experience and that, in particular, there is no necessary causal connection among matters of fact but only customary associations that may alter.

12. The North Pole was first reached by the American explorers Robert E. Peary and Matthew Henson on dog sledge in 1909, the same year that a specific remedy for syphilis was discovered by the German bacteriologist Paul Ehrlich (1854–1915), joint recipient of the 1908 Nobel Prize for physiology and medicine.

13. Immanuel Kant (1724–1804), Johann Gottlieb Fichte (1762–1814), and Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770–1831) are, with F. W. J. Schelling (1775–1854), the foremost representatives of German Idealist philosophy. The idea of the autonomous spirit, which has an epistemological, a moral, and an aesthetic aspect, develops out of Kant's postulate that the human self is not an object but an activity, and that it is self-constituting in a way that an object is not.

14. In European philosophy, the phrase *sub specie aeternitatis* (under the aspect of eternity) originates with Spinoza (*Ethics*, part 5, propositions 23–36).

15. Arthur Schnitzler (1862–1931) was an Austrian playwright and novelist whose melancholy, satirical, and often controversial works were concerned with sexual relationship, love, and death. Hugo von Hofmannsthal (1874–1929), the Austrian poet and playwright and a member with Schnitzler of the avant-garde group Young Vienna, was, early on, associated with the conservative aestheticism of the circle around the poet Stefan George; he later published Benjamin's essay on Goethe's *Elective Affinities* in his journal *Neue Deutsche Beiträge* (1924–1925) and corresponded with Benjamin. Thomas Mann (1875–1955), the recipient of the Nobel Prize for literature in 1929 and a proponent of an anti-romantic humanism in his later novels and essays, at the beginning of his career published fiction distinguished by a refined morbidity and demonic irony.

16. Wilhelm Bölsche (1861–1939) was a German writer who popularized the theories of Darwin and natural history and who, in his treatise *Die naturwissenschaftlichen Grundlagen der Poesie* (The Scientific Basis of Poetry; 1887), sought to combine a naturalist aesthetics with a new religious approach to life.

17. The Norwegian poet and playwright Henrik Ibsen (1828–1906) has been called the father of modern drama. Mentioned here are the main characters in some of his best-known plays: Nora in *A Doll's House* (1879), Mrs. Alving in *Ghosts* (1881), Hedda in *Hedda Gabler* (1890), Solness in *The Master Builder* (1892), Borkman in *John Gabriel Borkman* (1896), and Gregers in *The Wild Duck* (1884).

18. The German writer Gerhart Hauptmann (1862–1946), published between 1889 and 1912 a series of plays, including *Die Weber* (The Weavers; 1892), that were celebrated for their stark but sympathetic naturalism. He was awarded the Nobel Prize for literature in 1912. See "Thoughts on Gerhart Hauptmann's Festival Play" (Chapter 20 in this volume).

19. "Aphrodite: Herakles' Erdenfahrt" is the title of the fifth song in the fifth part ("Zeus") of Carl Spitteler's epic poem "Der olympische Frühling" (Olympian Spring; 1900–1905, rev. 1910). Benjamin's mentor, Gustav Wyneken, refers to the Swiss writer Spitteler (1845–1924), winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1919, as one of the "greatest artists of our age," in *Schule und Jugendkultur*, 3rd ed. (Jena: Eugen Diederichs, 1919), 157. For more on Spitteler, see "Sleeping Beauty" (Chapter 6 in this volume).

20. "Honesty" here translates *Ehrlichkeit*, which is a derivative of *Ehre*, "honor," and can also mean "honorableness," "integrity," "authenticity." Wyneken makes emphatic use of the term in his writings.



21. On “the literati,” see Benjamin’s letter of September 11, 1912, to Ludwig Strauss (GB1, 63–64).

22. In part 1 of Friedrich Nietzsche’s *Also Sprach Zarathustra* (Thus Spoke Zarathustra; 1883–1884, 1892), Zarathustra exhorts his listeners to turn away from what is “all too human”—from *Nächstenliebe*, love of one’s fellow man and love of what is nearest—and to learn the *Fernsten-Liebe*, love of what is most distant and love of the future (“Von der Nächstenliebe”).

23. Jakob Wassermann (1873–1934), a popular German novelist and essayist, published *Faustina: Ein Gespräch über die Liebe* (Faustina: A Dialogue on Love) in 1912.

24. “Adamite” was a name taken by various heretical and radical Christian sects that typically rejected civil, moral, and social constraints in an attempt to gain grace through spiritual and physical disrobing.

25. Benjamin writes “von neuem finden,” which suggests “discover anew.” The preceding phrase is: “das Körpergefühl ihrer geistigen Persönlichkeit.”

26. The German theologian and philosopher Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768–1834), sometimes called the “father of modern Protestant theology,” argued in *Die christliche Glaube* (The Christian Faith; 1821–1822, rev. 1830–1831) that it is not religious creed, the letter of Scripture, or rationalist understanding that is the source of law but rather religious feeling, the sense of “absolute dependence” on a God who lives and works in us. Benjamin will later refer to Schleiermacher’s “sterile psychology” (CWB, 109 [corrected date of letter is February 28, 1918]).

27. Walter Calé, *Nachgelassene Schriften* (Berlin: Fischer, 1920), 329. Calé (1881–1904) destroyed most of his poetic and philosophic work before committing suicide. His *Posthumous Writings* aroused considerable interest on their initial appearance in 1907.

28. The Russian novelist Leo Tolstoy (1828–1910) developed in his later years an outspoken and widely influential Christian anarchism, which led him to reject the authority of the church and of organized government and to condemn private property. In works such as *A Confession* (1882) and *The Kingdom of God Is within You* (1894), he propounded his faith in nonresistance to evil and in the moral perfectibility of the individual. Benjamin later refers to the failure of “the Tolstoyan spirit” in student communities (see “The Life of Students,” Chapter 31 in this volume). The philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900) argued throughout his writings, and most pointedly in *Der Antichrist* (1888), for a self-consciously modern, “dionysian” religiosity that transcends the linear eschatology of church doctrine. The Swedish playwright

and fiction writer August Strindberg (1849–1912), a master of psychological naturalism and a forerunner of expressionism in the theater, experienced a religious crisis in the mid-1890s that resulted in a Christian-mystical faith in suffering; the experience found expression in his autobiographical novel *Inferno* (1897), in the three-part drama *To Damascus* (1898, 1904), and in the aphoristic *Zones of the Spirit* (1907–1912).

## Quiet Story

*Related on the occasion of my mother's birthday<sup>1</sup>*

An express train was crossing a rainy region. In a third-class car sat a student; he was returning from Switzerland, where he had spent a few expensive and rain-filled days. With a certain tender solicitude, he let his feelings wander, thinking to summon up a mild boredom. Sharing the yellow railway compartment, besides an elderly man, was a woman in her sixties. The student stared mercilessly at her for a minute, then stood up and went slowly toward the corridor. He looked through the glass panes of the compartments and caught sight of a female student from his university with whom he was enamored—silently up until now, as was his tendency in these matters at the early stage. And as he looked at her, he could not help feeling that this was natural. With the air of a man whose behavior has been irreproachable, he returned to his compartment.

At nine-thirty that evening, the train pulled into the university town. The student got off without looking back. When a moment later he saw the female student lugging a black suitcase in front of him, he could only approve of this transparent situation. All memory of the rainy days in Switzerland disappeared.

He was in no hurry to follow her through the railroad station—this young woman with whom he was in love (“in love despite everything,” he remarked to himself). Doubtless she would go to wait with her suitcase at the tram stop. And there she was, in fact, standing with a few other travelers in the drizzling rain. The streetcar came: not his line, he noticed. But nothing more disagreeable than waiting in the rain. The female student boarded at the front, and the conductor stowed her heavy suitcase. The dark mass of this suitcase had something fascinating about it. How ghostly it seemed, jutting up from the platform! As the streetcar began to move, the student stepped onto the forward platform.<sup>2</sup>

They were the only two. The pelting of the rain in his face was oppressive. She stood next to her suitcase enveloped in a bulky raincoat, like an oversized lap robe, in which she looked quite ugly. The streetcar traveled quickly, few people getting on. It entered an outlying district that was practically a suburb. Annoyance came raining down in the student, like a drizzle from swollen clouds. Slowly he worked himself up into a fury. He felt hatred for the agency that had run this tramline into a remote part of town. Hatred for these darkened streets with windows in which lights were burning. Ardent, undying hatred for the vile, inopportune rainy weather. He wrapped himself in his overcoat and resolved not to speak, not a word. For he was not the slave of this woman in the monstrous mackintosh. Oh no!

The streetcar was moving very quickly. A sovereign feeling overcame him, and he conceived the idea of a poetic composition.

Then there was nothing more on his mind than the thought: I'd like to see just how far she's going to travel.

Two minutes later the streetcar stopped. The lady stepped down and the conductor reached for her suitcase. The jealous rage of the young man blazed up. He seized hold of the suitcase without a word, stepped down from the car and began following her. He had advanced a hundred paces behind her when, noting an elastic gesture of her head, he thought he would address a few words to her concerning the hour and the weather, as though in apology.

At that moment he saw the girl stop before the door of a house. He heard the key turning in the lock, got a look into the darkness of a

hallway, and just had time to hand the suitcase over to the female student with an inaudible “Good evening” before the door was closed. He heard it being bolted from inside. With his hands deep in his coat pockets, he made off in the rainy darkness with long straight strides, a single word reverberating in his head: “Baggage-Man.”

## Notes

“Stille Geschichte” (GS7, 295–296) was written ca. fall 1911 or fall 1912 and published posthumously.

1. The birthday of Benjamin’s mother Pauline fell in October.
2. Evoked here is a type of early streetcar (*elektrische Bahn*) consisting of an open platform with a lantern roof.

# Estranged Land

ESTRANGED LAND is full of provinces.  
The blind feelings go begging there;  
They totter, as in high rooms.

Planet of the I!

Symbolic

Mobility, as you plunge wordlessly toward emptiness,  
And where you fall, eons become space;  
Glaring figurality will surge round me.  
Gnawing thoughts have consigned all zones  
To their “nonetheless” and “barely.”  
Rationality, decomposing, emits last odors—  
While its colorfully banded curses,  
Wings beating, have grown rigid  
At the core and decamped.  
Blindness has a godlike back  
And carries the man of hymns over wooden bridges.<sup>1</sup>

## Notes

"Entfremdetes Land" (GS7, 569) was written ca. April 1913 and published posthumously.

1. This poem was included, without title, in a letter of April 29, 1913, to Herbert Belmore. Benjamin prefaced it with the words: "So you will see that I am doing everything I can in throwing you these scraps of experience, I am enclosing a kind of 'poem' which you can just as well take for madness" (CWB, 19). There is a rhyme scheme in the second stanza of the German. The earlier translation by Manfred R. Jacobson and Evelyn M. Jacobson was consulted.

# Teaching and Valuation

## I.

The relation of teaching to values, to living values of the present, comes to light in two areas above all: in German literature and in history.<sup>1</sup> In the teaching of German, it will be primarily a question of aesthetic values, whereas in the teaching of history it will be ethical values. For the moment, we may leave it at that. We ask: does the teaching in general (and therefore the school) make valuations, and toward what goal is this valuation oriented? We do not wish to claim that *all* of the following cases are typical. But we maintain that a working system is obliged to exclude certain extreme possibilities. A few of these possibilities may be indicated without commentary:

In an eleventh-grade high school class, a number of poems by Walther von der Vogelweide are read in the original.<sup>2</sup> They are translated and some are committed to memory. Several class hours are required for all this. What the pupils retain from these hours, as far as insight into aesthetics is concerned, is the continually reiterated observation of the teacher that, in contrast to Homer, Walther von der Vogelweide makes no use of epithets.



Some observations characteristic of the aesthetic standpoint on Goethe: "Goethe is in general quite realistic; you just have to understand what he means." Or: "The distinctive feature of Goethe's works is that every word has its significance, and indeed one that is usually beautiful and apt."

Or: in an advanced class, the *Nibelungenlied* is read in translation, and then in the original; one or two passages are assigned as homework and get summarized in class.<sup>3</sup> After the translation is gone through in this manner, the teacher makes use of the reader, which the pupils also have before them, to read the poem aloud in the original, translating it in part, and in part commenting on it on the basis of indications provided by the translation. Such a process lasts scarcely less than half the scholastic year; and with that the reading of this literary work is considered complete. Not a single word is devoted to the interpretation of the contents.<sup>4</sup>

Something similar can be seen in the school's handling of *Hermann and Dorothea*.<sup>5</sup> Hour after hour is spent working together in class to prepare outlines (which, however, always accord with what the teacher has in mind). Here is one of these outlines:

#### CANTO 4: EUTERPE

##### I. The mother seeks her son

- a) on the stone bench
- b) in the stable
- c) in the garden
- d) in the vineyard
- e) in the forest

##### II. The mother finds her son under the pear tree

##### III. Conversation between mother and son

1. Hermann's decision
  - a) The plight of fellow citizens
  - b) The proximity of the enemy
  - c) Hermann's decision to fight
2. The mother's exhortation
3. Hermann's confession
4. The mother's plan of reconciliation

Every such plot scheme is supposed to be learned by heart at home and then recited with connecting details from the text—if possible, several times in one class period. The treatment of the poem in compositions involves such topics as: “To what extent is the first canto of *Hermann and Dorothea* an exposition of the entire poem?” (Note how, in the absence of any intellectual penetration, the schools so often resort to a technical mutilation of poetic works!) And: “To what extent is the thunderstorm in *Hermann and Dorothea* symbolic?” What was required in this composition was a representation of the storm as symbolic resolution of the tensions informing the epic, and above all the erotic tension between the lovers (!).

No valuation of the poem is made during the instruction. But for most of the pupils it does not have to be made; the title of the poem already turns their stomach.

*Minna von Barnhelm* is outlined.<sup>6</sup>

*Egmont* is outlined.<sup>7</sup> A sample:

#### EGMONT AND HIS SECRETARY DISCUSS:

##### I. Official business

- a) political
- b) military

##### II. Intrigues

- a) concerns with money
- b) admonition of Count Oliva

We conclude this blacklist, which no doubt every pupil could add to at will, with some characteristic comments of a teacher, elucidating the composition assignment. A pupil believes that a thesis he is supposed to argue is incorrect and backs this up cogently with the teacher. He is told in response that the compositions are primarily exercises in style; the themes treated in them are not so important that the pupils have to suffer pangs of conscience if they write something they consider erroneous.—It is in keeping with such a view that the teacher, on returning the compositions, always has the same thing to say about sharply contrasting value judgments made by different pupils: “We can live with that.”

We have tallied without interruption. And we would remark only this: where such teaching goes on, there will be, one imagines, a certain number of pupils who take questions of literature seriously.

The teaching is not concerned with a serious relation to the work of art. The work is exhaustively analyzed in terms of its plot and perhaps of its form, but it is never subject to a really fruitful—and that means comparative—analysis; the criteria are lacking. As a result, the literature of the classical period (which is by and large the object of study) appears to most of the pupils as an arbitrary game for aestheticians, something lacking any real connection to life; it appears infinitely arid to anyone who can fill his time with things “more useful.”

But this state of affairs becomes truly calamitous when it is a question of modern art. Perhaps that is saying too much, however, for in most cases it is *not at all* a question of modern art. Here, the words of a teacher in a class for high-school seniors may serve as an example: “We shall go no further than Kleist.<sup>8</sup> Nothing modern will be read.” A present-day German poet or artist ought to sit in some time on a German literature class and hear how modern art is spoken of there (moreover, the concept “modern” in these classes is very broad; there are no great opposing currents). From the heights of the lectern, a man can say ridiculous and vacuous things about the Secession: “These people want to paint only what is ugly and try for nothing but the greatest possible verisimilitude.”<sup>9</sup> There is no contradicting this. Where modernity is concerned, if we may for once speak of it, everything is permitted [*steht alles frei*]. “Ibsen—if I see that monkey’s face again . . . !” (remark of a teacher).<sup>10</sup>

Where modernity is concerned, there are no traditional, which is to say, valid, judgments. Public opinion does not yet exert any pressure, and everything is “a matter of taste”; the school recognizes no responsibility here to its own present day. Perhaps nowhere else do we see so clearly how incapable the school is of independent valuation.

Thus, the school produces a consensus among the educated, who adopt the literary credo that Goethe and Schiller are the greatest poets, but who turn away bored from their dramas and think of modern art as an object of mockery or irresponsible gossip.

Something analogous is the rule in the teaching of history. There is a very simple reason that no valuation can be made here. Political history does not admit of valuation, and there is no cultural history—for inner-history, which begins to play an ever greater role in the teaching, is not yet cultural history. The latter requires a point of view. But the perspective on our culture as the outcome of millennia is lacking. Except for scattered facts, this teaching is silent about the development of law, of the school, of art, of ethics, of the modern psyche. An objective observer might well wonder whether this way of teaching history provides a picture of culture or does not rather constitute a cultural scene itself! At one point only is the teaching of history engaged in valuation: it is the moment when Social Democracy appears on the horizon.<sup>11</sup> But what power of persuasion can a valuation have that manifestly occurs not for the sake of knowledge (in which case it would occur on a continual basis) but for reasons of expediency?

From this angle, the teaching of history displays the most unwelcome aspect. Either it comes down to a pious reiteration or regurgitation of unrelated or superficially related facts of all kinds, or else a conscious attempt is made to approach the "cultural periods." In that case a parade of catchwords from literary history commences, together with a few famous names; or, in place of a free and great valuation, the most small-minded judgment of some historical fact is ventured. The question is asked: Was Napoleon's effort to subjugate Russia justified or not? And such questions are debated endlessly in the classroom.

We have called attention to those subjects of the modern secondary school in which valuation seems to be most immediately warranted. But the classical secondary school still has its humanistic values, which deserve a place beside the cultural values of the present.<sup>12</sup> This matter will be addressed in a second article.

## II. On the Classical Secondary School

It is relatively easy to polemicize against mistakes and lapses in teaching, to attack a particular point of view informing the instruc-

tion, or to advocate a new distribution of the subject matter. It is much more difficult to enter the lists against thoughtlessness, to combat the unintellectual and unspiritual. In fact, it is impossible: these things can only be *demonstrated*. In the preceding article, we undertook this thankless task with regard to the teaching of history and German literature: The task is still more daunting with respect to subjects in the classical curriculum. We do not at all know what this study of classical antiquity aims at (whereas we have at least some idea of the goal of instruction in German and history in a modern school).

We confess to harboring at bottom great sympathy for the classical education [*die humanistische Bildung*]. We love it with a kind of stubborn defiance, for we see in it an educational vision that has preserved in itself a noble serenity and remained immune to the frenzied Darwinian utilitarianism of the rest of our pedagogy. When we read the proceedings of the "Friends of the Classical Secondary School," however, we learn to our astonishment that, amid general approbation, it is affirmed that knowledge of the Greek language is of great *utility* to doctors and lawyers. Moreover, the speaker recalls with gratitude the years in which . . . ; and there follow those phrases whereby one who has been through it all himself now sleeks back his hair and winks down at the "youngsters."

This tone, with which a gentleman comfortably lauds that "idealistic frame of mind" and knowledge of many foreign words which the school has "supplied" him, is to us something dreadful. This pompous sentimentality that after forty years still has the first lines of the *Odyssey* resounding at the family dinner table (between the fish and the meat) and still ensures that the master of the house knows the grammar of the apodosis better than his son who is a senior in high school—this all pains us.<sup>13</sup> We find the familiar relations between philistinism and the classical secondary school highly suspect, and we feel that, because our fathers have so intimately conjoined all sorts of dusty sentiments with Plato and Sophocles, it is therefore incumbent on us to free ourselves from such family atmosphere at the secondary school.

Nevertheless, we have a presentiment—some of us perhaps even an idea—of what *our* secondary school [*Gymnasium*] should be. It will not

be a school in which (in the best of cases) Hellenism is understood, in Winckelmann's sense—for "noble simplicity and calm grandeur" have long since become stock-in-trade of the better finishing schools.<sup>14</sup> Our secondary school should refer to Nietzsche and his treatise *On the Advantage and Disadvantage of History*.<sup>15</sup> Defiant, trusting in a youth that follows this philosopher enthusiastically, it should sweep away the petty modern pedagogic reformers—instead of becoming modernistic itself and trumpeting to all corners a new hidden advantage of the institution. The classical Greek world, in this secondary school, will not be a fabulous realm of "harmonies" and "ideals" but that woman-despising and man-loving Greece of Pericles, aristocratic, with slavery, with the dark myths of Aeschylus.<sup>16</sup> Our humanistic secondary school should look these things in the face. Then Greek philosophy might also be taught there—a subject no less proscribed at present than the reading of We-de-kind.<sup>17</sup> To be sure, one now learns from a handbook that Thales considered the primal substance to be water, while Heraclitus thought it was fire and Anaxagoras the *nous*, whereas Empedocles fastened on love and hate (and threw himself into Mount Aetna) and Democritus on the atoms, and that the Sophists undermined the ancient faith.<sup>18</sup> (Such teaching belongs with that which discredits philosophy the most.)

We said that we know or have a presentiment of a classical secondary school we could love. In this school Greek sculpture would be more than a dirty cardboard reproduction that periodically hangs in the classroom for four weeks. Such a secondary school could at least help us. The pedagogues will no doubt wonder why they should create for us a school that would necessarily be hostile to the present day, undemocratic, high-spirited, and would allow no easy compromises with the modern secondary school, or the technical school, or other non-classical institutions. But if in the name of the two millennia since Christ we are not permitted to have such a school, then we will take our leave, calmly and gravely, from the secondary school [*Gymnasium*].

But no more of this desiccated humanism! Now, in our reading hours, we have aestheticism without aesthetic education. Chatter about *sōphrosunē* without an inkling of the immoderateness of ancient Asia.

Platonic dialogues without a reading of the *Symposium* (in its entirety, gentlemen, in its entirety!).<sup>19</sup>

We confess it once again: we do not know what to think when presented with this classical education of today. From a given book on the classics we read the "best passages"; only the head of the class can understand Greek without a "crib"; only habitual grinds devote themselves voluntarily to classical studies. We pupils who wait within have had quite enough of the hypocrisy that covers lack of spirit and lack of judgment with the mantle of "Greek harmony"!

Blacklist:

Apropos of Horace: "We have to read Horace in this class. It doesn't matter whether we like it or not; it's on the syllabus."<sup>20</sup> Remark of a teacher.

In response to an objection raised against a line of reasoning in Cicero: "We are not here to develop our own opinions; we want to know what Cicero says."<sup>21</sup>

On the subject of "classical art": one day, in a high school class, the subject of art history is introduced, though after several weeks the instruction ceases as suddenly as it had begun. Explains the teacher: "Every week, I have to give a certain number of class hours; for a while, I had one hour a week left over, and so I included art history. Now things are back in order."

A teacher to a pupil in his last year at a classical secondary school: "Please don't think that anyone believes this enthusiasm of yours for the ancient world."

## Notes

"Unterricht und Wertung" (GS2, 35-42) was published in two parts, under the pseudonym "Ardor," in *Der Anfang. Zeitschrift der Jugend*, May and July 1913.

1. The first part of this essay on secondary education appeared as the lead article in the opening number of the third series of the periodical *Der Anfang*.

That Benjamin originally intended to publish the essay in a different context is indicated by his letter of September 11, 1912, to Ludwig Strauss, a student at the University of Berlin: "I am working with two friends on a series of essays which . . . criticize the present-day school establishment. Many examples and facts. We're planning to publish these essays in pamphlet form . . . , but this isn't certain yet. . . . The subjects include: teaching and valuation, teaching and education, the collective life of pupils, relations between teachers and pupils, school and idealism, school assignments, and so forth. The authorial tone: dispassionate or satirical" (GB1, 64-65). The pamphlet publication planned by Benjamin and two friends (probably Franz Sachs and Herbert Belmore) did not materialize. It is not known whether the essay "Teaching and Valuation" was already drafted by September 1912 or merely projected.

2. Walther von der Vogelweide (ca. 1170-1230) was the most celebrated of the Middle High German lyric poets. He is the author of the well-known lyric, "Unter der Linden."

3. The Nibelungenlied is a Middle High German epic poem written in the early thirteenth century and based on the legends of Siegfried and the Burgundian kings.

4. "Auf den inneren Gehalt wird schlechterdings mit keinem Worte eingegangen."

5. *Hermann und Dorothea* (1797), by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, is a verse epic in nine cantos, each canto bearing as title the name of one of the nine Muses. Benjamin cites an outline of canto 4, which is entitled "Euterpe" (Muse of lyric poetry and music).

6. *Minna von Barnhelm* (1767) is a comedy by the German writer Gotthold Ephraim Lessing.

7. *Egmont* (1788) is a historical drama by Goethe.

8. Heinrich von Kleist (1777-1811) was a German dramatist and short-story writer who anticipated both naturalist and expressionist tendencies in modern German and French literature.

9. The German Secession movement was founded in Munich in 1892 as a protest against nineteenth-century salon art and within a few years had spread to Dresden, Vienna, and Berlin. It was initially distinguished by a ruthless and expressive realism.

10. The Norwegian playwright Henrik Ibsen (1828-1906) is considered the creator of modern, realistic prose drama. His work is discussed in Benjamin's essay, "Sleeping Beauty" (Chapter 6 in this volume).



11. The Social-Democratic Party of Germany coalesced in the 1860s under the leadership of the socialists August Ferdinand Bebel and Wilhelm Liebknecht, eventually adopting a moderate reformist policy.

12. "Classical secondary school" translates *humanistische Gymnasium*, a secondary school with emphasis on Latin and Greek. It is distinguished from "modern secondary school," the *Realschule* (such as the Kaiser Friedrich), which includes instruction in modern languages and scientific disciplines.

13. The apodosis is the main clause of a conditional sentence.

14. Johann Joachim Winckelmann (1717–1768) was a German art historian who decisively influenced the rise of neoclassicism in the late eighteenth century. His *Geschichte der Kunst des Altertums* (History of Ancient Art; 1764) presents the art of classical Greece, broadly understood in terms of "noble simplicity and calm grandeur [*edle Einfalt und stille Größe*]," as exemplary for aesthetics.

15. The philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900) took issue with Winckelmann (see preceding note) in his first book, *Die Geburt der Tragödie* (The Birth of Tragedy; 1872), which evokes a dissonant "Dionysian" dimension in Greek tragedy as integral to the consonant "Apollonian" dimension. His treatise *Vom Nutzen und Nachteil der Historie für das Leben* (On the Advantage and Disadvantage of History for Life; 1874) is part of his book *Unzeitgemässe Betrachtungen* (Untimely Meditations; 1873–1876); the treatise mounts a critique of nineteenth-century historicism, arguing that history must be interpreted from out of the "highest energy" of the interpreter's own present day—a position fundamental to Benjamin's thinking throughout his career.

16. Pericles ruled Athens from 460 B.C. to his death in 429, fostering the art and literature of the city while successfully pursuing the Peloponnesian War against Sparta. The Athenian dramatist Aeschylus (525–456 B.C.) took the horrific story of Agamemnon, Clytemnestra, and their children as subject in his trilogy, the *Oresteia*.

17. Frank Wedekind (1864–1918) created a sensation in his day with the plays *Erdgeist* (Earth Spirit; 1895) and *Die Büchse der Pandora* (Pandora's Box; 1904), which are centered on the amoral femme fatale Lulu.

18. Thales, Heraclitus, Anaxagoras (who uses the term *nous* to mean "cosmic mind"), Empedocles, and Democritus were prominent pre-Socratic Greek philosophers. The Sophists were professional fifth-century B.C. Greek philosophers and teachers, later vilified by Plato as irresponsible manipulators of rhetoric and dialectic.

19. The Greek *sōphrosunē* means “self-control, moderation.” Plato’s *Symposium* (ca. 385–380 B.C.), one of his greatest dialogues, concerns the nature of love.

20. Quintus Horatius Flaccus (65–8 B.C.), the Roman lyric poet and satirist of the age of Augustus, is author of *Ars Poetica*.

21. Marcus Tullius Cicero (106–43 B.C.), the statesman and philosopher, is remembered as Rome’s greatest orator.

## Romanticism: An Undelivered Address to Students

Comrades! Whenever in the past we have thought about ourselves, ourselves not as individuals but as a community, as youth, or whenever we have read about the youth, we have always done so with the idea that youth is romantic. Thousands of good and bad poems say so, and from adults we hear that they would give anything to be young again. It is all a reality we may feel at certain moments with astonishment and joy: when we have done good work or climbed a mountain, built something or read an exciting narrative. At such moments we feel much as I did when one day—I remember being on a stair step at the time—it suddenly entered my mind that “I’m still young” (I was perhaps fourteen, and what made me so happy was that I had read of an airship).

Youth is surrounded by hope, love, and admiration—coming from those who are not yet young, from the children, and from those who are no longer able to be young because they have lost their faith in something better. We feel this: that we are representatives; each of us stands for thousands, just as every rich man stands for thousands of proletarians and every person of talent for thousands of the untalented. We feel that we are youth by the grace of God, if we can put it this way.

And now let us imagine that we are at a youth convention, with hundreds or thousands of young participants. Suddenly, I hear heckling: "Claptrap! Rubbish!" And I look out at the rows of benches and I see, next to the handful of hotheads who interrupt me, hundreds of people practically asleep. One or two draw themselves up a little but don't seem to pay attention to me.

Then something occurs to me:

"I spoke of 'youth by the grace of God'; I spoke of our life, as it is in the tradition, in literature, with adults. But the youth to whom I speak fall asleep or get angry. Something is rotten in the state of Denmark.<sup>1</sup> And I am grateful for your sleep and your anger, because it is of them that I wanted to speak. I wanted to ask: What do we think of romanticism? Do we possess it? Do we know it? Do we believe in it?"

Ripples of laughter and a single impassioned "no."

"Then we renounce romanticism? We aim to be perhaps the first sober youth?"

Again, a resounding "no," from which three or four voices quite clearly are set off by their "yes." Then I go on to say:

"You have given me your answer, and I myself shall answer all those who believe they have before them a timeless youth, eternally romantic, eternally secure, wending its eternal way into philistinism. We say to them: you deceive us as you deceive yourselves. With your paternal airs and your unctuous flatteries, you rob us of consciousness. You lift us up into rosy clouds until we have lost the ground beneath our feet. Then you look forward all the more to a youth that sleeps in narcotic individualism.<sup>2</sup> Philistinism paralyzes us, so that it alone can dominate the age; if we allow ourselves, however, to be paralyzed by the idealizing narcotics, then we shall quickly sink in our turn, and this youth will become the next generation of philistines."

I don't know, comrades, but I fear this puts me on the side of romanticism. Not of *the* romanticism, not of any true romanticism, but of one very powerful and dangerous—the very same, in fact, that dissolves Schiller's chaste, cosmopolitan classicism into a poetry of complacency for bourgeois fidelity and for particularism.<sup>3</sup> But I want to take a moment to look into this false romanticism. It sticks to us wherever we go, yet is nothing but the greasy garment a solicitous philis-

tinism throws over us so that we shall be unrecognizable even to ourselves.

Our school is full of false romanticism. What we are told of dramas, or of heroes in history, of the triumphs of technology and science—it is all untrue. We receive it outside a spiritual context. These things—which, we are told, are supposed to contribute to our formation—are eternally isolated facts, and culture accordingly a lucky coincidence; some schools may not even be far enough along to present it as “lucky.” For when do we ever learn of living history—that which leads the spirit to victory, that in which the spirit makes the conquests it itself prepares? They lull us to sleep, make us dull and idle, when they keep silent about history: the development of science, the development of art, the development of the state and of law. In this way, the religion of the spirit and all faith in it was taken from us. This was the false romanticism: that we were supposed to see something extraordinary in everything infinitely particular, instead of in the development of the human being, in the history of humanity. Thus, one produces an unpolitical youth, eternally limited to art, literature, and experiences of love, being in these things also unspiritual and dilettantish.<sup>4</sup> The false romanticism, comrades, this grotesque isolation from historical development to which we have been sentenced, has caused many of us to become blasé; many have had to believe in what is negligible for so long that their belief itself has become for them negligible. The lack of ideals in our young people is the last vestige of their honesty.

Thus we have it, comrades: the education of a generation of youth which one isolates, with spasmodic endeavors, from the real, which one muddles with a romanticism of objectivity, a romanticism of ideals, things invisible. We wish to hear nothing more of Hellenism and Germanism, of Moses and Christ, of Arminius and Napoleon, of Newton and Euler, until we are shown the *spirit* in them, the fanatical active reality in which these ages and these men had their being and in which their ideas were realized.<sup>5</sup>

Thus, we have the romanticism of school culture, which for us makes everything untrue and unreal.

We therefore, comrades, began impetuously to concern ourselves with ourselves. We became the much-maligned, individualistic

superman-youth.<sup>6</sup> It was really no wonder that we went along jubilantly with the first one who summoned us to ourselves, to the spirit and to honesty. This was certainly Friedrich Nietzsche's mission among the youth of the schools: to show them something of the tomorrow and yesterday and today of educational tasks. They could not handle it. And they have turned this idea also into a pose, as they have been repeatedly constrained to do.

Now I shall speak of what is saddest of all. We who wanted to be, with Nietzsche, aristocratic, different, true, beautiful—we had no order in this truth, no *school* of truth. Even less do we have a place for beauty. We have no way of addressing one another in the familiar forms without sounding vulgar. We have become so insecure as a result of the eternal pose of idealism which the school forces on us, as a result of its musty pomp, that we no longer know how to be both noble and free with one another. Rather: free and ignoble, or noble and unfree.

We need a beautiful and free community, so that the universal can be articulated without becoming commonplace. We do not yet have this possibility; we want to create it for ourselves. We are not ashamed to say that we still have to be trite when we talk about this youth. (Or else we have to adopt an unworldly academic attitude or an aesthetic posture.) We are still so uncultivated in all that we have in common that honesty and integrity seem banal.

It is much the same when the erotic—and we all feel how much candor is needed here—breaks out of the darkness in which it is concealed:

That schoolboys romp at the cinema (oh, what's the use of banning movie theaters!); that cabaret shows, good enough to stimulate the jaded sexual appetite of fifty-year-olds, are served up to young students! In the erotic realm, where the youth—at least the mature youth between the ages of twenty and thirty—ought to set the tone, this youth allows itself to be closed in and suffocated by senile and perverse ways of behaving. We have long been accustomed to overlooking the delicate and, if you will, prudish sensitivity of young people in sexual matters. The big city launches its attacks on them day and night. But one would rather pretend not to see than to create sociability among the youth.<sup>7</sup> Afternoons in which young people might come together and live in their erotic atmosphere, instead of forming a de-

pressed and ridiculous minority at the festivities of adults. (The *Symposium* is not read in the school; and when Egmont says that he visits his beloved at night, the passage is struck.<sup>8</sup>)—

Nevertheless, there is one consolation: however unseemly it is to call attention to it, the erotic still takes its course and comes to be—in secret though, rather than freely and openly.

That is the old romanticism, kept alive not by us, not by the best of us, but by those who would inculcate in us an unfruitful blind adherence to what exists. And in contrast to this, comrades, is a new romanticism, quite undefined, quite far off, which I have nonetheless, as I hope, *indicated*. A romanticism characterized by an attitude of openness—which we shall attain for ourselves in the erotic realm with the greatest difficulty, and which from there would emanate outward and pervade our daily existence and all our doings. A romanticism of truth, which would recognize spiritual connections, the history of labor, and which would transform this recognition into living experience so that, in the most unromantic and sober way, one might act in accordance with it.

This is the new youth: sober and romantic. But we do not believe that this romanticism can be dispensed with, that it could ever become antiquated, outmoded. What is never outmoded is the romantic *will* to beauty, the romantic *will* to truth, the romantic *will* to action. Romantic and youthful: for this will, which to the mature man may be necessity and long practiced activity, in us eventuates spontaneously, originarily, unconditionally, and turbulently. Always it gives to history its ethical stamp, and it gives it its pathos, though not its content.

And if here, at the close, you look around once again, you will perhaps recognize, with something like astonishment, where you really stand: at a point where romanticism has returned to the roots of everything good, true, and beautiful—roots that are unfathomable.<sup>9</sup> Where the narcotic imperative, “Wine, women, and song,” is no longer a rallying cry of sensualists. Where wine can mean abstinence, women a new erotics, and song not a tavern ditty but a new student anthem.

But I shall conclude now, as I await the accusation—which I do not fear—of having robbed youth of its ideals.

## Notes

“Romantik: Eine nicht gehaltene Rede an die Schuljugend” (GS2, 42–47) was published, under the pseudonym “Ardor,” in *Der Anfang. Zeitschrift der Jugend*, June 1913.

1. Benjamin quotes Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, 1.4.90. He takes up the character of Hamlet in his essay, “Sleeping Beauty” (Chapter 6 in this volume).

2. The problem of individualism is debated in “Dialogue on the Religiosity of the Present” (Chapter 13 in this volume).

3. The poet, dramatist, and critic Friedrich von Schiller (1759–1805) became an icon of German classicism in the century after his death. The meaning of “particularism” (*Partikularismus*) is indicated in the following paragraph.

4. On “dilettantism,” compare “Student Authors’ Evenings” (Chapter 27 in this volume).

5. Arminius (17? B.C.–A.D. 21) was a German national hero who liberated the Germans from Roman rule in A.D. 9. Leonhard Euler (1707–1783), a Swiss scientist, was the author of works on mathematics, mechanics, hydrodynamics, astronomy, optics, and acoustics.

6. Benjamin’s term, *Übermenschen-Jugend*, makes reference to the concept of the *Übermensch*, the superman who overcomes traditional humanism, in Friedrich Nietzsche’s *Also Sprach Zarathustra* (Thus Spoke Zarathustra; 1883–1884, 1891).

7. “Sociability among the youth” translates *eine jugendliche Geselligkeit* (literally, “a youthful sociability”), which recalls Kant’s famous formula *ungesellige Geselligkeit* (unsocial sociability), in his essay “Idee zu einer allgemeinen Geschichte in weltbürgerliche Absicht” (Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Intent; 1784 [fourth thesis]).

8. Plato’s dialogue on love, the *Symposium* (ca. 385–380 B.C.), concerns in part homoerotic relations. *Egmont* (1788) is a historical drama by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe.

9. The good, the true, and the beautiful are the highest ideas in Plato’s metaphysics.



## Moral Education

One may be tempted to cut short all theoretical debate concerning moral education with the blanket assertion that moral influence is an altogether personal affair that eludes every schema and norm. Whether or not this contention is correct, the fact remains that moral education is demanded as something universal and necessary; and so long as this demand is made on a theoretical basis, it must also be investigated theoretically.<sup>1</sup>

In what follows, an attempt will be made to consider moral education in and for itself. The question is not whether a relative improvement can be achieved in an inadequate religious education but in what way moral education is related to absolute pedagogic demands.

We base ourselves on the discourse of Kantian ethics (for in this question an anchorage in the philosophical is indispensable). Kant distinguishes between morality and legality, at one point putting the matter thus: "It is not sufficient to that which should be morally good that it conform to the moral law; it must be done *for the sake of* the law [*um desselben willen*]."<sup>2</sup> With this is given at the same time a wider determination of the moral will: it is "free of motives," uniquely determined by the moral law, the norm "do good."

Two paradoxical theses—from Fichte and from Confucius—throw light on this train of thought.

Fichte denies the ethical importance of a "conflict of duties."<sup>3</sup> He ostensibly gives here only an interpretation of our conscience: if, in the fulfillment of one duty, we are obliged to disregard another, then we may find ourselves in a, so to speak, technical difficulty, but inwardly we feel no guilt. For the moral law demands the accomplishment not of this or that material act but of what is ethical. The moral law is norm not content of the action.

According to Confucius, the moral law harbors a double danger: the wise man holds it too high and the fool too low.<sup>4</sup> That is to say, the empirical realization of morality is never specified in the ethical norm—and so it is an overestimation of the norm to believe that an empirical directive is ever directly given in it; but Confucius turns against the fool with his teaching that, however legal it may be, an act acquires moral value only if it was morally intended.—Thus we come back to Kant and his famous formulation: "Nothing in the world—indeed nothing even beyond the world—can possibly be conceived which could be called good without qualification except a *good will*."<sup>5</sup> This proposition, rightly understood, conveys the substance of the Kantian ethics, which alone concerns us here. "Will," in this connection, signifies nothing psychological. In the practice of his science, the psychologist reconstructs a psychological action, and the will, understood as cause, constitutes at most a factor in the materialization of this action. For the moral philosopher, what matters is the moral character of the action, and it is moral not insofar as it arises from any given motives but insofar as it proceeds from the one ethical intention; the human will grasps its obligation in relation to the moral law, and its ethical significance extends no further than this.

We have here a consideration that seems well suited to form the point of departure for reflection on moral education. Confronting us is the antinomy of moral education, which is perhaps only a particular case of a general antinomy.

The aim of moral education is the formation of the moral will. And yet nothing is more inaccessible than this moral will, since in itself it is

no psychological entity that could be treated by some means. There is no guarantee that we would really encounter the moral will as such in any particular empirical influence. The lever to operate moral education is lacking. Just as the pure, the only valid moral law is inaccessible, so for the educator is the pure will always out of range.

Grasping this fact in its full import is the prerequisite to a theory of moral education. It follows necessarily that, since the process of moral education is opposed in principle to every rationalization and schematization, it can have nothing to do with any type of instruction. For in instruction we possess the fundamentally rationalized means of education.—We shall content ourselves here with this deduction, so as below to flesh it out in considering the actual practice of moral education.

Is the conclusion toward which we are moving perhaps the bankruptcy of moral education? This would be the case only if irrationalism meant the bankruptcy of education. Irrationalism means merely the bankruptcy of an exact *science* of education. And the renunciation of a scientifically closed theory of moral education seems to us in fact the conclusion warranted by these reflections. Nevertheless, in what follows an attempt will be made to delineate the possibility of a moral education as an integral whole, although without systematic closure in the particulars.

Here the principle of the Free School Community, the principle of ethical community, appears fundamental.<sup>6</sup> The form that moral education assumes in it is religiosity. For this community experiences, on a continually renewed basis, a process in itself that engenders religion and that awakens religious contemplation, a process we might call “crystallizing the moral.”<sup>7</sup> As we have seen, the moral law is immeasurably far removed from every empirically determined moral concern (as something *empirical*). And yet the ethical community continually experiences the transformation of the norm into an empirical legal order. The precondition for such a life is freedom, which makes it possible for the legal to be adjusted to the norm. It is through this norm, however, that we first attain the concept of community. The reciprocity of moral seriousness (in the consciousness of communal obligation) and ratification of morality (in the order of community)

appears to be the formative principle of ethical community: But as a religious process it resists any closer analysis.

We are thus presented with a peculiar reversal of contemporary opinion. Whereas everywhere today there are voices insisting that morality and religion are essentially independent of each other, it seems to us that it is first of all in religion, and only in religion, that the pure will finds its content. The everyday life of an ethical community has a religious character.

These theoretical and positive observations have to be made before a critique of the existing moral education can be undertaken. Moreover, in the course of such critique we must not lose sight of this other way of thinking. To say it altogether dogmatically: the gravest danger of moral education is the motivating and legalizing of the pure will or, in other words, the suppression of freedom. If moral education really has as its goal the ethical formation of students, then it is faced with an impossible task. Should it choose to stay with the universally valid, then it would not get beyond what has been said here, beyond certain Kantian doctrines. The moral law cannot be grasped more nearly by means of the intellect, which is to say, in a universally valid way. For where it receives its concrete contents, it is determined by the religiosity of the individual. To overstep the boundaries thereby established, to broach the still unformed relation of the individual to morality, is something proscribed by Goethe's dictum: "The highest excellence in man is without form, and one should beware of giving it any form other than that of the noble deed."<sup>8</sup> Who today (outside of the church) still permits himself the role of mediator between human being and God? Or who might introduce this role into education, if, as we suspect, it is the case that all morality and religiosity originates in solitude with God?

That moral education has no system—that it has set itself an unrealizable task: this is a twofold expression of one and the same situation of groundlessness.<sup>9</sup>

Hence, nothing further remains than for it to conduct a peculiar sort of civic—instead of moral—education, in which everything necessary becomes once more voluntary and everything at bottom voluntary becomes necessary. One thinks one can replace moral motivation

with rationalistic examples and fails to notice that here, too, morality is already presupposed.<sup>10</sup> Thus, one makes a case for love of one's fellow men to a child at the breakfast table, describing to him the work of all those to whom he owes his happiness. It may be regrettable that children often gain such insights into life solely through moral education. But demonstrations of this sort make an impression only on a child who already knows something of sympathy and fellow feeling. Only in community, not through lessons in morals, will he learn these things.

Moreover, it may be assumed that the "specific energy" of the moral sense, of the moral capacity for empathy, increases not with reception of motivations, of a particular content, but only with acting. There is the danger that the content will greatly surpass the moral sensitivity and blunt it.

Lacking as it does the genuinely ethical motivation, moral education is marked by a certain unscrupulousness in its methods. Not just rationalistic explanations but also, and above all, psychological inducements must come to its aid. No doubt one rarely goes so far as a speaker at the Berlin Congress for Moral Education, who among other things recommended appealing to the egoism of pupils (in which case it is surely legality rather than moral education that is at stake). But likewise every appeal to heroic valor, every invocation and commendation of the extraordinary, insofar as it ends in emotional exaltation, remains alien to the steadiness of the moral temper. Kant never tires of condemning such practices.—In regard to psychology, there is the further danger of a sophisticated self-analysis in which everything appears necessary, having acquired genetic rather than moral interest. What is to be gained by analyzing and enumerating the types of lies, as one ethics teacher proposes?

To repeat: the authentically moral is inevitably circumvented. Let us cite another characteristic example, taken, like the preceding one, from Foerster's *Jugendlehre*.<sup>11</sup> A young man is physically attacked by his companions. Foerster argues: You hit back in order to satisfy your instinct of self-preservation. But who is your most unrelenting enemy, against whom defense is needed most of all? Your passion, your drive to retaliate. Hence, in the final analysis you preserve yourself insofar

as you do not hit back, insofar as you repress your inner drive. This a candidate for psychological reinterpretation. In a similar case, a boy attacked by his classmates is led to believe that, if he does not defend himself, he will ultimately be victorious and the class will leave him in peace. But reference to the outcome has no bearing at all on ethical motivation. The basic determinant of the moral is renunciation, not motivation through self-interest, nor any utility.<sup>12</sup>

Space is lacking to multiply these glimpses into the minutiae of praxis, which is certainly not without its moral perils. We shall say nothing of the technical analogies to ethics, of the moralistic treatment of the most insipid things. In conclusion, the following scene from a class in handwriting. The teacher asks: "What bad things will likely be done by someone who makes no real effort to keep his letters within the designated lines but continually spills over them?" The class is supposed to have come up with an astonishing variety of answers. Is this not the worst sort of casuistry? Nothing any longer connects such (graphological) concerns with moral sentiment.

Furthermore, this type of moral instruction is by no means independent, as it is said to be, of reigning moral conceptions, that is, of legality. On the contrary: the danger of overestimating legal convention is palpable, since the instruction, with its rationalistic and psychological grounding, can never encounter ethical thinking but only the empirical, the prescribed. Often, in this situation, ostentatious good conduct assumes extraordinary importance in the eyes of the student. The sober concept of duty is all but lost.

Should one, however, despite everything, and against better judgment, still want moral education, then one seeks out dangers. Dangerous today are no longer the archetypally Christian antitheses—neither "good-evil" nor "spiritual-sensual"—but the "sensual-good" and the "spiritual-evil," the two forms of snobbism. In this sense, Wilde's *Dorian Gray* could be made the basis of a moral teaching.<sup>13</sup>

If, therefore, moral education is very far from satisfying an absolute pedagogic demand, it nevertheless can and will have its significance as transitional stage. Not so much because it represents, as we have seen, a highly imperfect link in the development of religious education; but because it brings to light the deficiency in present-day methods of in-

struction. Moral education combats all that is peripheral and without conviction in our schooling, the intellectual isolation of our studies. It will therefore be a matter not of mastering the cultural material from the outside, as is the usual tendency of moral education, but of grasping the history of the cultural material, of the objective spirit itself. In this regard, one must hope that moral education represents the transition to a new education in history, in which, then, the present also would find its cultural-historical relevance.

## Notes

"Der Moralunterricht" (GS2, 48-54) was published in *Die Freie Schulgemeinde*, July 1913.

<sup>1</sup> 1. This text, the first Benjamin published under his own name, appeared in a quarterly journal edited by his mentor Gustav Wyneken, with whom he had studied in 1905-1906 at the country boarding school Haubinda. He discusses the article in a letter of August 4, 1913, to Carla Seligson: "In this essay, I try to explain that there is no certainty of a moral education, because the pure will that does good for the sake of good cannot be apprehended with the means the educator has available. / I believe that we must always be prepared for the fact that no one now or in the future will be influenced and vanquished in his soul, the place where he is free, by our will. We do not have any guarantee for this; we also should not want one—for the good issues only from freedom. In the final analysis, every good deed is only the *symbol* of the freedom of the individual who accomplished it. . . . Journals don't change anyone's will. . . . [The youth journal] *Der Anfang* is only a symbol. Everything it is, beyond that which is internally *effective*, is to be understood as grace, as something incomprehensible. . . . In history . . . moral progress was the free act of only a few individuals. . . . Now please keep in mind that I am far from being finished with this line of thought, and that it appeared necessary to me only in order to liberate our idea from everything utopian yet triumph over the most brutal aspect of reality" (CWB, 52).

2. Immanuel Kant, *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. Lewis White Beck (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1959), 6 (preface). Regarded today as the foremost thinker of the Enlightenment, Kant (1724-1804) published his *Grundlegung zur Metaphysik der Sitten* in 1785.

3. See Johann Gottlieb Fichte, *Das System der Sittenlehre nach den Principien der Wissenschaftslehre* (The System of Ethics as Based on the Science of Knowledge; 1798), paragraphs 23–24. The German Idealist philosopher Fichte (1762–1814) grounded his moral philosophy in the concept of duty.

4. See Ku Hung-Ming, *Chinas Verteidigung gegen europäische Ideen. Kritische Aufsätze* (China's Defense against European Ideas: Critical Essays), trans. Richard Wilhelm (Jena: Eugen Diederichs, 1911), 63–64: "Confucius says: 'I know why there is no real morality. The wise, in their intellectual pride, go too far, and the fools don't go far enough.'" Confucius, or K'ung Fu-Tzu (ca. 551–479 B.C.), was a Chinese philosopher and scholar who wandered for a dozen years from state to state teaching; his precepts, later recorded in the *Analects*, concern morals, the family system, social reforms, and statecraft. In a letter of November 21, 1912, to Ludwig Strauss, Benjamin mentions the widely noticed translation of the volume by Ku Hung-Ming, remarking on the author's "radical cultural will" and his transcendence of party politics (GB1, 77).

5. Kant, *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals*, 9 (section 1).

6. See Benjamin's essay, "The Free School Community" (Chapter 8 in this volume).

7. Benjamin's term is *Gestaltgewinnung des Sittlichen*.

8. Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Elective Affinities*, trans. R.J. Hollingdale (London: Penguin, 1971), 206 (part 2, chapter 7). The writer Goethe (1749–1832) published his novel *Die Wahlverwandtschaften* in 1809. The quoted passage, spoken by the schoolmaster, follows his statement: "The sense of the divine ought to be accessible to us everywhere, even in the most commonplace surroundings; it can accompany us wherever we are and hallow every place into a temple. I like to see family prayers conducted in the same room where the family usually eats and assembles for social occasions and dancing." The passage precedes the schoolmaster's discourse on education.

9. ". . . es ist der zweifache Ausdruck der gleichen, verfehlbaren Grundlage."

10. "Nor could one give poorer counsel to morality than to attempt to derive it from examples. For each example of morality which is exhibited to me must itself have been previously judged according to principles of morality to see whether it is worthy to serve as an original example, that is, as a model. By no means could it authoritatively furnish the concept of morality" (Kant) [Benjamin's note]. See *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals*, 25 (section 2).

11. Friedrich Wilhelm Foerster, *Jugendlehre. Ein Buch für Eltern, Lehrer und Geistliche* (Doctrine of Youth: A Book for Parents, Teachers, and Clerics; 1911). A lifelong pacifist, Foerster (1869–1966) taught pedagogy and philoso-



phy at Swiss and German universities and was the author also of *Christentum und Klassenkampf* (Christianity and Class Warfare; 1905).

12. “Die Grundstimmung des Sittlichen ist Abkehr, nicht Motivierung durch den eigenen, noch überhaupt einen Nutzen.”

13. Benjamin refers to *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891), a philosophical novel by the Irish writer Oscar Wilde (1854–1900); set in a world of cynical hedonism, it tells of a man who trades his soul for the semblance of eternal youth. In a letter of June 21, 1912, to Herbert Belmore, Benjamin remarks that Wilde’s novel “is perfect and a dangerous book” (CWB, 16).

## “Experience”

In our struggle for responsibility, we battle someone who is masked. The mask of the adult is called “experience.” It is expressionless, impenetrable, ever the same. The adult has already experienced everything: youth, ideals, hopes, woman. It was all illusion.—Often we feel intimidated or embittered. Perhaps he is right. What can our retort be? We have not yet experienced anything.<sup>1</sup>

But let us attempt to raise the mask. What has this adult experienced? What does he wish to prove to us? This above all: he, too, was once young; he, too, wanted what we wanted; he, too, refused to believe his parents, but life has taught him that they were right. Saying this, he smiles in a superior fashion: this will also happen to us—in advance he devalues the years we will live, making them into a time of sweet youthful pranks, of childish rapture before the long sobriety of serious life. Thus, the well-meaning, the enlightened. We know other pedagogues whose bitterness will not even concede to us the brief years of “youth;” serious and grim, they want to push us directly into life’s drudgery. Both attitudes devalue and destroy our years. More and more we are assailed by the feeling: our youth is but a brief night (fill it with rapture!); it will be followed by grand “experience,” the years of compromise, impoverishment of ideas, and apa-

thy. Such is life. That is what adults tell us, and that is what they experienced.

Yes, that is their experience, this one thing, never anything different: the meaninglessness of life. Its brutality. Have they ever encouraged us to anything great or new or forward-looking? Oh, no, precisely because these are things one cannot experience. All meaning—the true, the good, the beautiful—is grounded in itself. What, then, does experience signify?—And herein lies the secret: because he never raises his eyes to the great and meaningful, the philistine has taken experience as his gospel. It has become for him the warrant of life's commonness. But he has never grasped that there is something other than experience, that there are values—inexperienceable—which we serve.

Why is life without meaning or solace for the philistine? Because he knows experience and nothing else. Because he himself is desolate and without spirit. And because he has no inner relationship to anything other than the commonplace, the established routine.

We, however, know something different, which experience can neither give to us nor take away: that there is truth, even if all previous thought has been in error. Or: that fidelity shall be maintained, even if no one has done so yet. Such will cannot be taken from us by experience. Yet—are our elders, with their tired gestures and their superior hopelessness, right about *one* thing—namely, that what we *experience* will be sorrowful and that only in the inexperienceable can we ground all courage and meaning? Then the spirit would be free. But again and again life would drag it down, because life, the sum of experience, would be without solace.

We no longer understand such questions, however. Do we then still lead the life of those who are ignorant of the spirit? Whose sluggish ego is buffeted by life like waves against the rocks? No. Each of our experiences has its content. We ourselves will give it content from out of our spirit.—He who is thoughtless acquiesces in error. "You will never find the truth!" he exclaims to the researcher. "That is my experience." For the researcher, however, error is merely an aid to truth (Spinoza).<sup>2</sup> Experience is meaningless and devoid of spirit only for the spiritless. To one who strives, experience may be painful, but it will scarcely lead him to despair.

In any event, he would never obtusely give up and allow himself to be lulled to sleep by the rhythm of the philistine. For the philistine; you will have noted, only rejoices in every new meaninglessness. He remains in the right. He reassures himself: spirit does not *really* exist. Yet no one demands stricter subordination or sterner "reverence" in the presence of "spirit." For if he were to practice criticism, he would have to create as well.<sup>3</sup> That he cannot do. Even the experience of spirit, which he undergoes against his will, becomes for him spiritless.

Tell him

He should honor the dreams of his youth

When he becomes a man.<sup>4</sup>

Nothing is so hateful to the philistine as the "dreams of his youth." (And sentimentality is often the protective coloring of this hatred.) For what appeared to him in these dreams was the voice of the spirit, calling him, too, in his time, as it does everyone. Youth is for him the eternally alarming reminder of these things. Therefore he battles it. He tells young people of that gray, overwhelming experience and teaches them to laugh at themselves. Especially since "experience" without spirit is comfortable, if also hopeless.

Again: we know a different experience. It can be hostile to spirit and destroy many blossoming dreams. Nevertheless, it is the most beautiful, most untouchable, most immediate, because it can never be without spirit while *we* remain young. Always one experiences only oneself, as Zarathustra says at the end of his wanderings.<sup>5</sup> The philistine has his "experience"; it is the eternal one of spiritlessness. The youth will experience spirit, and the less effortlessly he attains to anything great, the more he will encounter spirit everywhere in his wanderings and in every person.—When he becomes a man, the youth will be compassionate. The philistine is intolerant.

## Notes

"*Erfahrung*" (GS2, 54–56) was published, under the pseudonym "Ardor," in *Der Anfang*, October 1913. Translated by Lloyd Spencer and Stefan Jost.

1. In a letter of June 23, 1913, to Herbert Belmore, Benjamin announces: "Yesterday I wrote here [in Freiburg] an article, 'Erfahrung.' Possibly the best thing I've yet written for *Der Anfang*." In a second letter to Belmore written on this date, he says, quoting his friend's letter: "The less we are troubled and confused by those awful "personal" experiences . . . You'll find out just how well that expresses my own view when you read my essay 'Erfahrung.'" A few weeks later, on July 17, he writes to Belmore: "Please read 'Erfahrung.' . . . If it is not good enough, and if it can be improved, please send it to me with your comments. . . . [Georges] Barbizon [editor of *Der Anfang*], who has accepted it, is not at all critical. I want to remain wholly receptive to art and philosophy for quite some time, perhaps until I have written a novella. Above all, I do not want to write for *Der Anfang*" (CWB, 32, 34, 44–45). The essay "Erfahrung" was, in fact, the last of Benjamin's writings to appear in *Der Anfang*. He casts a retrospective glance at this essay, and its militant idealism, in a note written probably in 1929: "In an early essay, I mobilized all the rebellious forces of youth against the word 'Erfahrung.' And now this word has become a basic element in many of my things. Nevertheless I have remained true to myself. For my attack broke through the word without destroying it. It reached the center of the matter" (GS2, 902). In the essay, Benjamin uses both *erleben* and *erfahren* to mean "experience," without explicitly distinguishing between these terms as he will do in his later work.

2. The Dutch philosopher Baruch Spinoza (1632–1677) defined error as incomplete or fragmentary knowledge; see his *Ethica Ordine Geometrico Demonstrata*, known in English as *The Ethics* (1677), part 2, proposition 35.

3. "Denn würde er Kritik üben—so müsste er ja mitschaffen."

4. Benjamin cites Friedrich Schiller's historical drama *Don Carlos* (1787), 4:21:4287–4289.

5. Reference is to the beginning of part 3 of Friedrich Nietzsche's *Also Sprach Zarathustra* (Thus Spoke Zarathustra; 1883–1884, 1892), which Benjamin evidently quotes from memory: "Man erlebt immer nur sich selber." The text reads: "*man erlebt endlich nur noch sich selber* (ultimately, one experiences only oneself).

# Thoughts on Gerhart Hauptmann's Festival Play

## I. "Historical Sense"

Humanity has not yet awakened to a steady consciousness of its historical existence. Only from time to time has it dawned on individuals and on peoples that they were in the service of an unknown future, and such illumination could be thought of as historical sense. But the present day understands by this term something very different, and those who are most animated by the feeling of a future task [*Aufgabe*] it reproaches with a "lack of historical sense." That is what it calls the sense for the conditioned as opposed to the unconditioned, for the given as opposed to the projected [*Aufgegebene*]. So strong is the "historical sense" at the present time, this sense for facts, for restriction and discretion, that our time is perhaps particularly poor in genuine "historical ideas." It calls them for the most part "utopias" and lets them founder on the "eternal laws" of nature. It rejects the task that cannot be comprehended within a reform program and that demands a new movement of *spirits* and a radical new seeing. At such a time, the young cannot but feel alienated and powerless. For they do not yet have a program. Hence, Gerhart Hauptmann was for them a liberator.<sup>1</sup>

## II. Hauptmann's Festival Play

A puppet show on the subject of Germany's national liberation. The puppets speak in rhyming verse.<sup>2</sup> The stage of the puppet theater is Europe; history—never falsified—is frequently condensed. The war of 1806 is a War Fury, Napoleon's downfall merely the fading of a picture.<sup>3</sup> Philistia comes forward and interrupts history.<sup>4</sup> What does this mean? Is it a "clever idea"? No, it has a profound and revealing significance. It is not facts that make 1813 great, and it is not persons either. As persons, certainly, these puppets are not great but primitive. Their language has no solemnity, nothing immortalized in iambs. But they spit their words out or search for them or let them go, as people a hundred years ago would have done. So it is not events, not persons, not language that in itself bears the meaning. But the facts are arranged by the spirit, the puppets are carved in the wood of their idea, and the language is always searching for the idea. For what idea? Let us ask ourselves whether, a hundred years ago, we would not have numbered among those arrogantly mocking citizens, simply because we had not managed to get a proper answer to this question.<sup>5</sup> For the "new German nation" was no program; it was only a German idea. Not fully grasped by any of these people, in none of their words clearly articulated, this idea was glowingly alive in each of their deeds; it is the spirit also of this play. Before it, human beings are puppets (without character or personal idiosyncrasies), puppets in the grip of an idea. The verse sweeps along in accordance with this idea: as though people were to keep talking until meaning was born from their words. Among those taking part were also young people, who were as thoroughly confused and thoroughly enthusiastic as their leaders.

But already there were mature and farsighted persons among them, too. Thus, the "First Citizen" says to Blücher:

Let me once hear that the world conqueror is *perdu*,  
 and I will very gladly sing your song.  
 Should you succeed in hunting him down,  
 then everything changes overnight;  
 I shall certainly not get my hackles up then

and no longer be Napoleonic.  
As things stand now, I will end up  
on the right side, once again.<sup>6</sup>

And to the younger generation people speak today just as they did back then:

Loudmouthed, immature schoolboys,  
take your primer and get to class . . .  
What! Fritz? You here? My own son? . . .  
Pretentious babble! Puerile nonsense.

Someone answers them:

O you servile souls! How I hate you.  
Inert, insensible, sluggish mass.  
A thick, slimy must, unfermented,  
unclarified—without any fire.  
No spark rouses, no ray penetrates you,  
no spirit, but every kick keeps you in line.

If townspeople and students who talk this way today had lived a hundred years ago, they would have spoken no differently. For it is not knowledge but disposition that determines their historical action, and dispositions stay the same through the ages.

At the conclusion of the struggle, Hauptmann has placed the festival, and it is here that the clamorous soul of daily existence is first given form and language.<sup>7</sup> The German mother takes on Greek features, for the festival signifies entry into the realm of culture; the struggle merely paved the way.

Athene Germania speaks:

And therefore let us celebrate Eros! Therefore this feast  
honoring the love made flesh, the love that works  
in the spirit! And from out of the spirit once again  
in word and tone, in metal and stone constructions,  
in measure and order: in all act and action.



What is gained in the struggle is nothing but freedom. It is the prime necessity in a world of competing powers. In the festival; the day and its unconscious activity can attain consciousness in the spirit. The festival celebrates *peace* as the hidden meaning of the struggle. The peace gained through struggle will bring culture.

### III. Youth and History

School and home dismiss our most serious ideas as mere phrases. Our fear of the teacher is, as it were, symbolic; he continually misunderstands us, grasps only the letter of what we are about, not the spirit. We are timid in the presence of many adults, because they take great pains to hear what we say but never understand what we mean. They pedantically take issue with thoughts that have scarcely crossed our minds.

Now we know that lack of clarity is no reproach, that no one who willed what was serious had a program ready for the curious and the skeptical. To be sure, we are lacking in "historical sense." But all the same we feel ourselves to be related by blood to history—not to that which is past but to that which is coming. We shall never understand the past without willing the future.

School makes us indifferent; it would have us believe that history is the struggle between good and evil, and that sooner or later the good prevails. So one need be in no hurry to act. The present moment itself, so to speak, has no actuality; time is infinite. To us, however, history seems a sterner and crueler struggle: Not for the sake of values already established—for the sake of good and evil. Rather, we struggle for the very possibility of values, which is constantly threatened, and for culture, which lives in perpetual crisis. For at every present moment the old values grow older; what was momentum becomes inertia, and what was intelligence becomes stupidity. Moreover, the greatest historical good—freedom—gets lost. Freedom, however, is not a program but only the will to such, a disposition.

History is the struggle between the spirited and the inert, between those oriented toward the future and those oriented toward the past, between the free and the unfree. The unfree can always display to us

the canon of their laws. But we will not yet be able to give a name to the law under which we stand. That it is a matter of duty is something we feel. In this feeling, youth will have courage for that which the others consider phrasemaking. It will take action though others call it confused. Youth is confused like the spirit of history, which shines forth only in the festival.

We are grateful to Gerhart Hauptmann for a youthful sense of struggle and festival.

## Notes

"Gedanken über Gerhart Hauptmanns Festspiel" (GS2, 56–60) was published, under the pseudonym "Ardor," in *Der Anfang*, August 1913.

1. The dramatist and novelist Gerhart Hauptmann (1862–1946) inaugurated the naturalist movement in German literature with his play on the Silesian weavers' revolt of 1844, *Die Weber* (The Weavers; 1892). He was awarded the Nobel Prize for literature in 1912. His *Festspiel in deutschen Reimen* (Festival Play in German Rhymes; 1913), a puppet play, was written at the invitation of the student body at the University of Breslau, who were seeking a contribution to the centennial celebration of the so-called Wars of Liberation of 1813. The first performance of the play, which disappointed both nationalist and socialist contingents, took place on May 31, 1913, in Breslau; it was soon afterward withdrawn from the program by order of state authorities. In a letter of June 23, 1913, to Herbert Belmore, Benjamin comments on the situation: "[I refer to] Hauptmann's youthful and divine drama commemorating the centenary of Napoleon's fall. . . . I have not been so spiritually moved, so uplifted, by art for a very long time. . . . The banning of the play is something beautiful and gratifying: I can't imagine a more historically appropriate insight into its greatness. With its banning, a piece not only of the past but also of the present has been rationalized [*rationalisiert*]. . . . Tomorrow I'll write [my article on Hauptmann's *Festspiel*]. I have already noted the direction my thoughts will take: 'The Centennial *Festspiel*, or Youth and History.' I think I have some essential things to say." In a letter of July 17 to Belmore, written after he had completed the article on Hauptmann, Benjamin expresses regret that he "didn't let the essay settle a while longer but immediately sent it off," adding, "My personal involvement . . . kept me from a more

broad-based and lively treatment. . . . Had I taken more time, a lot of the essay would certainly have turned out better" (CWB, 32, 44; see also 37–38).

2. *Knittelverse* (*Knittel* means "rhyme"), an irregular rhyming verse form that was popular with fifteenth- and sixteenth-century German poets and later revived by Goethe and Schiller.

3. In 1806, the French Emperor Napoleon Bonaparte (1769–1821) achieved military domination over Germany. In 1813, however, his armies were defeated at the "Battle of the Nations" in Leipzig, and later that year he was forced to abdicate. He raised new armies two years later but was finally overthrown at Waterloo in June 1815 and exiled to the island of Saint Helena in the South Atlantic. The *War Fury* (*Kriegsfurie*) is Hauptmann's adaptation of the avenging winged goddesses of Greek mythology known as the Furies.

4. *Philistiades* is an invented figure of Greek youth, who acts as a kind of commentating master-of-ceremonies at intervals in Hauptmann's play. In later years, writing about the "epic theater" of Bertolt Brecht, Benjamin will again highlight the device of interruption (see SW2, 585).

5. Benjamin refers to the shifting scenes of Hauptmann's *Festspiel*: following an account of Prussian defeats at Jena and Auerstedt in 1806, the German Idealist philosopher J. G. Fichte is introduced in academic gown; he delivers a lengthy monologue on the need for Germans to throw off the yoke of alien culture, which in turn provokes arguments between patriotic students, who take his words to heart, and cautious townspeople.

6. The confrontation between students and citizens is capped by the appearance of seventy-year-old Gebhard Leberecht von Blücher (1742–1819), Prussian field marshal in the Napoleonic wars, who delivers a rousing call to arms.

7. In the final section of Hauptmann's play, a mourning German mother is transformed into a German Athena; bathed in mystic illumination, she exhorts her listeners to pursue the path of love and peace and to forge unity between peoples. Her plea is followed by a grand procession of figures from all classes and professions celebrating universal good will. At the end, Athene Germania chants a paean to Eros.

## The Aviator

The empty marble tables reflected the glare of arc lamps. Günter Morland was seated before a café. The cold grenadine made his teeth ache. From within came the piercing sound of violins, as though bright spiritual voices were rushing excitedly to a close.

“Why did you sleep with a woman? It was a girl—it was a prostitute. O Günter, you were pure.”

An old woman was searching fussily for a place among the empty chairs. Günter eyed her small body intently. She was so thin, you could twist off her neck. The waiter cheated him when he paid the bill.

He flung himself into the stream of people on the boulevard. Every evening, the sky was milky brown, the small trees quite black, and the entrances to the nightclubs dazzling. Jewelers' shops held a special fascination for him. With the gold handle of his walking stick propped against his hip, he would remain standing in front of the display windows. For minutes at a time, he contemplated the hats at a milliner's and pictured them on the heads of rouged and powdered ladies.

He was hit by a gust of perfume coming from four women. They were jostling their way through the passersby, and Günter followed them without caring to conceal his action. Well-dressed men turned to look at these women; newsboys called after them raucously. Hiss-

ing, an arc lamp flared and lit up the hair of a slender blonde. They pressed up against one another. As they wheeled about, Günter came toward them with unsteady steps. The girls laughed. He passed by them stiffly, and one shoved him with her arm, making him burn. Suddenly, he appeared in the transparency of a mirror full of glancing lights. The green necktie was glowing; it sat well. But he saw himself unstrung in the midst of the lights. His arms were dangling, his face looked flat and red, and his trousers hung in deep folds. Shame had seized upon his body in all limbs at once. In the depths of the mirror loomed a stranger. Günter fled with head lowered.

The streets had emptied and voices rang out sharply, especially now that it was dark. Günter Morland was amazed that in these twenty-four hours he had not yet succumbed to some wasting illness. He gave a wide berth to other people and nonetheless kept them in sight.

Toward eleven that evening, he found himself in a square and noticed a crowd of people with heads upturned looking at the sky. An airplane, black and sharp-edged in the pinkish haze, was making a circle of light over the city; it seemed you could hear its low rumble, but the aviator remained invisible. It kept an even course, almost without accelerating. The black wing hovered calmly in the sky.

When Günter turned around, he had to sharpen his gaze in order to distinguish the prostitute he had slept with. She did not notice the look of his childish eyes as he confidently took hold of her arm.<sup>1</sup>

## Notes

“Der Flieger” (GS7, 643–644) was written ca. 1913 and published posthumously.

1. This short story cannot be dated with certainty and is perhaps a fragment. The events depicted may have been suggested by a trip to Paris Benjamin took in May 1913 in the company of two student friends, during which he apparently had his first sexual experience with a woman, whom he met on the Paris streets. (See the two letters excerpted in Hans Puttnies and Gary Smith, *Benjaminiana* [Giessen: Anabas, 1991], 135.) Benjamin’s usage here of the loan words *Café* and *Boulevard* could indicate a Parisian setting. The story is similar in style to “Death of the Father,” written ca. June 1913.

## Death of the Father: A Short Story

**D**uring the journey, he avoided making clear to himself the meaning of that telegram: "Come immediately. Turn for the worse." He had left the vacation spot on the Riviera toward evening, in bad weather. Memories enveloped him like morning light breaking in on a lingering reveler: sweet and shameful. Indignantly, he became aware of the noises of the city whose midday he was entering. There seemed to be no way to respond to the importunities of his birthplace other than to become vexed. But he felt in a twitter the voluptuousness of stolen hours with a married woman.

There stood his brother. An electric shock ran down his spine; he hated this black-clad figure. His brother greeted him hastily with a sorrowful look. A car was waiting. The ride was punctuated with a clattering. Otto stammered out a question, even as the memory of a kiss swept over him.

Suddenly the maid was standing on the staircase in the house, and he broke down as she took his heavy suitcase from him. He had not yet seen his mother, but his father was alive. There he was by the window, sitting bloated in his armchair . . . Otto went up to him and gave him his hand. "I don't get a kiss from you anymore, Otto?" his father asked gently. The son flung himself on the father, then ran out and stood on

the balcony and bawled into the street. Presently he grew weary with crying and began dreamily to remember his schooling, his practicum years,<sup>1</sup> his trip to America.

"Mr. Martin." He quieted himself and felt ashamed, now that he knew his father was still living. On hearing him sob again, the girl laid her hand on his shoulder. He looked up mechanically and saw a healthy blonde being, refutation of the sick man he had touched. He felt at home.

In the busiest quarter of town lay the library, which Otto visited regularly during his two-week stay. Each morning he worked for three hours on a dissertation with which he hoped to obtain his doctorate in political economy. In the afternoons he was there again in order to study the illustrated art journals. He loved art and devoted much time to it. In these rooms he was not alone. He was on good terms with the dignified employee who checked out the books. And when he looked up from his reading with a frown, his mind gone blank, he not infrequently encountered a familiar face from his high school years.

The solitude of these days, which he never failed to make use of, did him good, after his recent weeks on the Riviera had marshaled every nerve in the service of a passionate woman. In bed at night he sought the particulars of her body, or it pleased him to send her his weary sensuality in beautiful waves. He seldom otherwise thought of her. If he happened to be sitting across from a woman in the streetcar, he would merely wrinkle his brow impressively while wearing an empty expression, a gesture with which he aimed to acquire unassailable solitude for sweet idleness.

The activity of the household was regularly applied to the care of the dying man; it did not trouble Otto at all. But one morning he was wakened earlier than usual and led before the corpse of his father. It was bright in the room. In front of the bed his mother lay in a heap. Her son, however, felt such power that he grasped her under the arm and said in a firm voice: "Stand up, Mother." On this day, as always, he went to the library. His gaze, when it skimmed over the women, was even emptier and more impassive than at other times. When he boarded the streetcar, he hugged close the satchel containing two pages of his work.

But from this day onward he worked with less certainty. Deficiencies became apparent; fundamental problems, which up until then he had regularly glossed over, began to preoccupy him. His book-orderings would suddenly lose all reason. He was surrounded by piles of periodicals, in which he made absurdly painstaking searches for the most unimportant pieces of information. When not absorbed in reading, he never lost the feeling of a man whose clothes are too big for him. As he tossed the clods of dirt into his father's grave, it dawned on him that there was a connection between the burial service, the endless line of acquaintances, and his own blank mind. "This all has happened so often. How typical it is." And as he went from the grave with the group of mourners, his grief had become like something one is used to carrying around, and his face seemed to have broadened with indifference. He was irritated by the quiet talks that went on between his mother and brother, as the three of them sat around the dinner table. The blonde girl brought the soup. Otto casually raised his head and looked into her unwary brown eyes.

In this way Otto often brightened up the petty predicaments of these days of mourning. Once—it was evening—he kissed the girl in the hallway. His mother would always receive heartfelt words when she was alone with him; for the most part, however, she conferred with his older brother about business affairs.

As he returned from the library one afternoon, it occurred to him that he should take his leave. What more was there to keep him here? He had studying to do.

He found himself alone in the house, so he went into his father's study, as was his custom. Here, on the divan, the deceased had undergone his final hours. The blinds had been rolled down because it was hot, and through the slits shone the sky. The girl came and put some anemones on the writing table. Otto stood leaning on the divan and, as she passed by, he silently drew her to him. She pressed herself against him, and they lay down together. After a while, she kissed him and stood up, without his holding on to her.

His departure came two days later. He left the house early. Next to him walked the girl with his suitcase, and Otto talked of the university town and his studies. But on parting he merely gave her his hand,



for the railroad station was crowded.—“What would my father say?” he thought, as he leaned back and expelled the last bit of sleep from his body in a yawn.<sup>2</sup>

## Notes

“Der Tod des Vaters: Novelle” (GS4, 723–725) was written ca. June 1913 and published posthumously.

1. *Kaufmannsjahre*, a course of study for post-secondary school students that provides supervised practical application of previously introduced theory.

2. Benjamin’s letter of June 7, 1913, to Herbert Belmore, describes his original plan for this short story (his first designated as such): “This afternoon I began to compose a short story with the fine title, ‘Death of the Father.’ Outline: soon after the death of his father, a young man seduces the maid. Then: how these two events merge and one weight balances the other (the girl’s pregnancy). / The subject matter is from Herr Manning’s life, which I am learning about during the wee hours of the morning, sporadically and in terms of one or another of its endless dimensions” (CWB, 31). Otto Harald Alfred Manning (1892–1915) was an English citizen studying public finance at the University of Freiburg, where Benjamin was enrolled in 1912 and 1913.

## Romanticism: Reply of the “Unsanctified”

**I**t is awkward to argue against a sermon. The following remarks are therefore intended to augment the earlier statement.<sup>1</sup>

We want the Weltschmerz at last to become objective.<sup>2</sup> Art should not be an opiate for the will that suffers under some painful dispensation; it stands too high for that, in our view (and puberty is not to be ameliorated through lyric poetry). To be sure, the teacher concedes to us the sort of romanticism for which art is a narcotic: let the young immerse themselves in an innocuous and generalized past (Schiller and Goethe, Hölderlin and Lenau, Rembrandt, Böcklin, and Beethoven); a torrent of feelings will render them harmless.<sup>3</sup> From this school romanticism [*Schulromantik*], which reduces the spirit to a stimulant, we have awakened. Hyperion may speak for the souls of many—but they are sleeping souls.<sup>4</sup> For them, heroes and poets are a flock of beautiful dream figures to which they cling so as not to wake up.

No Schiller or Hölderlin will come to our aid. Nor are we helped by a young generation that remains absorbed in its favorite authors and lets the school be school. If it should finally open its eyes and recognize itself, this generation will see how much cowardice and unbounded lassitude was in it. Then young people will feel the scorn that

marks them as romantic. The spirit of youth will awaken in *all*; they will no longer lead separate lives within the school. "Romanticism" then will mean the *working will* to a new youth and to its school.

A spiritual reality will open up. Only then will youth *believe* in art and history; poets and heroes are a warrant for the future school. And this youth that faithfully serves the true spirit will be romantic.

But we distrust those who intoxicate themselves with a spirit they do not serve. They are the unbelieving ones.

## Notes

"Romantik—Die Antwort des 'Ungeweihten'" (GS2, 47) was published, under the pseudonym "Ardor," in *Der Anfang*, September 1913.

1. This piece was written in response to a published attack on Benjamin's essay "Romanticism" (Chapter 17 in this volume): "Romantik—die Meinung eines anderen [Romanticism: Another Opinion]" appeared in the September issue of *Der Anfang* under the pseudonym "Hyperion." Benjamin's title makes reference to this attack: "Ardor asks: 'Do we possess romanticism?' . . . And a thousand voices passionately call back 'No!' / But I and many others answer with a burst of enthusiasm: 'Yes! We possess it; we carry it within us as a sacred trust. We feel it in the somber sounds of nature, in the mysterious chords of Beethoven's music. And it speaks to us with a hundred voices in the words of the poets, who bear in their hearts the sacred fire . . . So Ardor comes to the conclusion that, for us youth, reality and romanticism mean the same thing. And he evidently does not suspect that all romanticism would come to an end if that were true. / Romanticism is everything dark and mysterious that we do not see but only surmise . . . Never will we allow our romanticism to fall into unsanctified hands [*ungeweihten Händen*]; never will we give up our longing for far-off realms" (cited GS2, 898–899).

2. "Wir wollen, daß endlich der Weltschmerz gegenständlich werde." Coined by the German Romantic writer Jean Paul in his posthumously published novel *Selina* (1827), the term *Weltschmerz* (world pain) was popularized by Heinrich Heine in the 1830s. Originally suggesting Byronic discontent and melancholy, it has been adopted as a Germanism in many languages to mean "sadness over the evils of the world, especially as an expression of romantic pessimism" (*American Heritage Dictionary*). Compare the

Baudelairean motif of *taedium vitae* (tedium of life) in Benjamin's *Passagen-Werk* (Arcades Project).

3. Benjamin refers to some of the artists mentioned by "Hyperion" in his article: the German poets Friedrich von Schiller (1759–1805), Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749–1832), Friedrich Hölderlin (1770–1843), and the Hungarian-born Nikolaus Lenau (Nikolaus Niembsch von Strehlenau; 1802–1850); the Dutch painter and etcher Rembrandt van Rijn (1606–1669) and the Swiss landscape painter Arnold Böcklin (1827–1901); and the German composer Ludwig van Beethoven (1770–1827).

4. "Hyperion" remarks that, in criticizing "Ardor's" brand of romanticism, he feels "secure in the knowledge that I speak for the souls of many" (GS2, 898).

## Youth Was Silent

*Dedicated to the Tägliche Rundschau*

Now is the time to stand firm. We are by no means going to allow ourselves to be overcome by the *fact* of the Free German Youth Congress.<sup>1</sup> To be sure, we experienced a new reality: two thousand up-to-date young people come together, and on High Meissner the onlooker saw a new physical youth, a new tension in the faces. For us, this is just a pledge of the spirit of youth. Excursions, ceremonial attire, folk dances are nothing new and—in the year 1913—still nothing spiritual.

We in ourselves would rather not greet the Youth Congress with enthusiasm until the collective spirit has been as fully imbued with the will to youth as only certain individuals are today. Until then, we will continue, in the name of youth, to weigh the Youth Congress against the demands of the spirit.

The following scene occurred during the meeting of delegates on the Hanstein.<sup>2</sup> A speaker concluded: “. . . with a salute to freedom and to German nationality!” A voice: “And to youth!” The speaker hastily corrected himself: “And to youth!”

There was worse. When the prizes for sports were being awarded, the name Isaacsohn was announced. Laughter rang out from a minority.

So long as one of those who laughed has a place among the Free German Youth, it will be without nobility and youthfulness.

This Youth Congress proves it: only a few understand the meaning of the word "youth." That from youth alone radiates new spirit, *the* spirit. They still seek their feeble, rationalized pretexts for self-discovery: racial hygiene or agrarian reform or abstinence [from alcohol and nicotine]. Hence the power-hungry could dare to defile the festival of youth with party jargon. Professor Dr. Keil cried out: "Raise your weapons high!"<sup>3</sup> Two men came to the defense of youth: Wyneken and Luserke, both from the Free School Community.<sup>4</sup> Wyneken promised to organize his forces into something like a wall around youth, vulnerable as it is to all the pressures of an election rally. For this struggle we may confidently look to the students from Wickersdorf, who in their white caps were a well-defined troop on the Meissner.

Youth was silent. If they shouted their hurrahs, it was more in support of the chauvinist Keil's speech than of Wyneken's words. It was dismaying to see them entertained by the avuncular Avenarius.<sup>5</sup> That these young people tolerate jovial bonhomie is the worst of all. That they should allow every knowing, "self-possessed" wit to rob them of the sacred seriousness with which they came together. That they go along with smiling conviviality instead of maintaining distance. This youth has not yet found the enemy, the born enemy it must hate. But who among those that assembled on High Meissner has experienced that? Where was the protest against family and school we had expected? Here no political slogan paved the way for youthful feeling. Has the way therefore remained untrodden? Here everything was still to be done. And here should be revealed what is youthful—indignation at the parental home that dulls the mind, indignation at the school that punishes the spirit. Youth was silent.—It has not yet had the intuition before which the great *âge-complex* breaks down. That mighty ideology: experience—maturity—reason—the good will of adults—it was not perceived at the Youth Congress and was not overthrown.

The *fact* of the Youth Congress remains the one thing positive. It is enough to bring us together again better prepared next year—and so

for all the years to come, until at some future Free German Youth Congress *youth* speaks.<sup>6</sup>

## Notes

“Die Jugend Schwieg” (GS2, 66–67) was published, under the pseudonym “A[r]dor,” in *Die Aktion*, October 18, 1913.

1. Regarded today as the climactic event of the antebellum German youth movement, the First Free German Youth Congress (*Erste Freideutsche Jugendtag*) took place October 10–12, 1913, on Mount Meissner and neighboring Mount Hanstein in Kassel, central Germany. A few days earlier, Benjamin had given a talk, “Ends and Means of Student Pedagogic Groups in German Universities,” at a school-reform conference at the University of Breslau (see GS2, 60–66), and he evidently stopped off in Kassel on his way back to Berlin, where he had begun his second semester of university studies. The proceedings of the Meissner congress were described in the November issue of *Der Anfang*, in an article by the journal’s editor Georges Barbizon (Georg Gretor); the report is printed in full in GS2, 909–913. Walter Laqueur has devoted a chapter to the event in his *Young Germany: A History of the German Youth Movement*, 2nd ed. (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Books, 1984), 32–38 (“At the Hohe Meissner”). Benjamin’s dedication of his essay to the *Tägliche Rundschau*, a conservative Berlin newspaper critical of the youth movement and its adult sponsors, is presumably ironic. His publishing venue here, *Die Aktion*, was the influential journal of a politically radical Expressionism; it was edited by Franz Pfemfert, who was also the publisher of *Der Anfang*.

2. The convention began, on a rainy Friday night, with a contentious meeting of delegates from the various participating youth groups on the grounds of the ruined castle atop Mount Hanstein. The next day, the scene shifted to Mount Meissner, renamed “High Meissner” for the occasion, and the weather improved.

3. Ernst Keil was an Austrian secondary-school teacher and a representative of the Austrian “Wandervogel” group.

4. See “The Free School Community” (Chapter 8 in this volume). The educational reformer Gustav Wyneken (1875–1964), a founder of the Free School Community in Wickersdorf, Thuringia, and a central influence on the German youth movement, was Benjamin’s teacher at the country boarding

school Haubinda in 1905–1906. Benjamin ultimately broke with his mentor in 1915 after Wyneken's public advocacy of the German war effort. Martin Luserke (1880–1968) helped found the Free School Community and became its director after Wyneken was forced to leave in 1910.

5. Ferdinand Avenarius (1856–1923) was well known as the editor of the journal *Der Kunstwart* (The Guardian of Art). On the last day of the Free German Youth Congress, after a stirring address by Gustav Wyneken, he delivered the concluding remarks and joked about his own stoutness. He ended with "See you again next year!" The congress was not repeated.

6. Allusion to Franz Pfemfert's laudatory article on the Youth Congress, "Die Jugend spricht!" (Youth Speaks!), which appeared in *Die Aktion* the week before the publication of Benjamin's critique. See note 1, above, on Pfemfert.



## Conversation on Love

*Agathon:* You were saying recently, Sophia, that there is only *one* love.<sup>1</sup> How am I to understand this, since there's love of one's spouse, love of one's friend, love of children—not to mention the others! Are these all various forms of the same basic matter? Or isn't it perhaps the case that love is already in itself something manifold, and our poor language has to rest content with *one* word for a diversity of things?

*Vincent:* There is only one love, Agathon. Spouses love each other with the same love as friends, as mother and son. Where differences become apparent here, something else has entered the picture: marriage—friendship—motherhood. It's not in their love that spouses, friends, or parents are differentiated—only in that other, supervening factor.

*Sophia:* And what seem to us differing expressions of love are just expressions of something that goes together with love or in its train. Sexual will is not love, any more than motherhood is love.

*Agathon:* And friendship? Intellectual and spiritual pursuits?

*Vincent:* If you've ever felt your love for a friend grow stronger and more intimate after the two of you learned something new together, then you know that friendship is not love: love cannot augment itself. But I can pursue knowledge, or I want to pursue knowledge, only with someone I could also love; only someone I love can be called my

friend. Marriage, friendship, motherhood—they can all exist in their purity only where there is love; yet they are not themselves love.

*Agathon:* You strip love of personal relations. Your love, it seems to me, is charity, love of one's fellow man.<sup>2</sup>

*Vincent:* Charity has nothing in common with love for the one who is closest to us; love for one person, one who is ours, is entirely different from love of our fellow man. The latter reposes in our breast without longing, as goal perhaps, but not as desire. Love, however, is always a longing.

*Sophia:* And there seems to me nothing untoward in the fact that love always seeks the same forms. How should something eternal and invariable show itself as constantly varied? The moment of highest friendship for you and your friend takes the form of a kiss. Here there are only degrees, not differences. Think of a mother who sees her son freed from some protracted danger. What is there at last to relieve her overfull, long tormented heart but a kiss?—What remains to a married couple at a parting that can mean eternal separation? No word—no fervent gaze—but from a kiss is born the last farewell.

*Agathon:* And are there rights in love? Are the proprietary rights of spouses, the authority of the mother, even the right of a friend to feel jealous—if there is such a right—are these things grounded in marriage, motherhood, or friendship, or in love?

*Vincent:* Love has no proprietary rights. What stands written is not: You shall not love your neighbor's wife. But: You shall not covet. . . . Marriage confers rights; love does not.

*Sophia:* When the mother gives orders, she does so as a mother, not as one who loves. She can punish, but not by relinquishing love—how could she cease to love! No, but by shutting her love up within herself, depriving it of expression, until her son has again become worthy of his mother.

*Agathon:* And jealousy? Do we have a right to envy others the presence, the possession of a beloved being?

*Vincent:* That's not jealousy. Drop the ugly word "envy"—yes; and then we may yearn for the nearness of one loved—this is indeed part of the longing we spoke of, the longing for bodily nearness. Jealousy is distrust.

*Sophia:* Here, I believe, we must first of all speak of what is properly the sole right of love: expression. There is no love that would not be

constantly impelled to become visible. Other influences may for the moment act as hindrance—but love always seeks to reveal itself to the beloved.

*Agathon:* Ought I sustain it in this impulse? The question arises as to whether I shouldn't rather prevent it from expressing itself. Isn't there a danger here of overindulgence?

*Sophia:* If you deny it this, take from it its sole right, then it dies.

*Vincent:* But how could you, Agathon, want to keep this from love, since you yourself feel love. What is it to be overindulged? It is no longer to take something precious for precious, no longer to desire what was formerly desired. To the hungry, however, no food is boring.

*Agathon:* But unrequited love—shouldn't one condemn it to silence?

*Vincent:* There is unrequited infatuation, Agathon, but is there unrequited love? . . .

*Sophia:* And, Agathon, here there could be jealousy: if we stifled expression. The silence that is not animated—the constrained, impressed silence—engenders distrust. "If you really love me, open your arms and your heart!" . . . But the lover stands there obstinately, with folded arms. How should love not go astray in a weak person when it sees its sole right unfulfilled! Where wanton self-will has taken this right from it, trust begins to waver, and jealousy first becomes possible.

*Agathon:* Take care, Vincent, that, along with the right *not* to declare my love, you don't deprive me of the possibility of wooing. To what end would I then woo? In order to win someone whom I already possess, of whose love I am already sensible?

*Vincent:* Wooing has in view not love but the declaration of love. Indeed, the readiness for declaration. In wooing, you struggle against two adversaries of love: indolence and its opposite, the fear of overindulgence.

*Agathon:* Can one love many?

*Vincent:* Many or more than one—what's the difference in this case? Where do I find any limit if this difference no longer obtains? You may love many. In the moment of declaration, however, you love only one.

*Agathon:* This may be the reason that there is no love in conversation. When I'm in love, I think only of myself and the one I love. In conversation I must be able to think the world.

*Vincent:* Say—instead of “when I’m in love”—“when I declare my love,” and I’ll agree with you. Love is something immanent; you love this one time—and always—<sup>3</sup>

*Agathon:* What do you mean by “always”? That love is eternal? Or that it’s not possible sometimes not to love someone whom one loves?

*Sophia:* Both are true, it seems to me. Love is a continuum. I don’t always have to think of my beloved. But when I think of him—then always in love. And: love is eternal. What would be strong enough to demolish its being?

*Agathon:* What if I came to love two people who hated each other?

*Sophia:* You can never come to love two people who hate each other. If you love these people, then they love you in return, and hatred would have to yield before this one great thing they have in common. Were it not to yield, then love was not anywhere present.

*Agathon:* And what if love for a third person first engendered this hate?

*Vincent:* It’s not really possible, Agathon. That wouldn’t really be love. Love, after all, engenders goodness. Not hatred—which is always something evil directed against someone good.

*Sophia:* Love betters. Whoever possesses love must become better. Here all are lovers—mothers and friends. For they wish to see the beloved prosper.

*Agathon:* Then only good people can love, Sophia.

*Sophia:* Not so—who is good? But truly—the only people who can love are those who want to be good.

*Agathon:* And also want the beloved to be good.

*Vincent:* It’s the same thing.

## Notes

“Gespräch über die Liebe” (GS7, 15–19) was written ca. fall 1913 and published posthumously.

1. The three speakers use the familiar mode of address (*du*) with one another. Coming from the Greek, the name “Agathon” means “the virtuous one” and “Sophia” means “wisdom.” In Plato’s dialogue on love, *The Symposium*, the poet Agathon is the host of the philosophical drinking party. Sophia’s affirmation of the oneness of all love recalls Socrates’ position, in the

*Symposium*, on the essential oneness of all beauty. Benjamin refers to Plato's dialogue on love, associating it with Luke 17:21, in a letter of September 15, 1913, to Carla Seligson (CWB, 54), quoted in the introduction to this volume.

2. "Charity" translates *Nächstenliebe*, literally, "love of what is nearest," "love of one's neighbor." See "Dialogue on the Religiosity of the Present" (Chapter 13 in this volume) on Nietzsche's distinction between *Nächstenliebe* and *Fernsten-Liebe*, "love of what is most distant."

3. "Liebe ist ein Immanentes, du liebst einmal—und immer—"

# The Metaphysics of Youth

## THE CONVERSATION

*Where are you, Youth, that always wakes me  
Promptly in the morning? Where are you, Light?*

—HÖLDERLIN<sup>1</sup>

### I.

Each day, like sleepers, we use unmeasured energies. What we do and think is filled with the being of our fathers and ancestors. An uncomprehended symbolism unceremoniously enslaves us.—Sometimes, on awaking, we remember a dream. In this way rare flashes of insight illuminate the ruins of our energy, heaps of rubble time has passed by. We were accustomed to the spirit, as we are to the heartbeat that enables us to lift loads and digest.

The content of every conversation is knowledge of the past as that of our youth, and horror in confronting the massive rubble fields of the spirit. We never before saw the site of the silent struggle waged by the “I” against the fathers. Now we come to see what we have unwittingly destroyed and brought to an end. The conversation laments lost greatness.

## II.

Conversation gravitates toward silence, and the one who hears is above all one who is silent. The speaker receives meaning from him; the silent one, is the unappropriated source of meaning. To him the conversation lifts words as vessels, jugs. The speaker sinks the memory of his strength in words and seeks forms in which the listener reveals himself. For the speaker speaks in order to be converted. He understands the listener despite his own words: understands that he addresses someone whose features are indelibly serious and good, whereas he, the speaker, blasphemes language.

But even if he should orgiastically enliven an empty past, the listener understands not words but the silence of the one present. For despite his flight of spirit and the emptiness of his words, the speaker is present; his face is open to the listener, and the efforts made by his lips are visible. The listener holds the true language in readiness; words enter him, and at the same time he sees the speaker.

Whoever speaks enters the listener. Silence is born, then, from the conversation itself. Every great man has only one conversation, at whose edge the silent greatness waits. In the silence, energy was renewed: the listener led the conversation to the edge of language, and the speaker created the silence of a new language, he, its first auditor.

## III.

Silence is the inner frontier of conversation. The unproductive person never gets to the frontier; he regards his conversations as monologues. From conversation he turns to enter the diary or the café.

Silence has long reigned in the upholstered rooms. Here he can make some noise. He goes among the prostitutes and the waiters like a preacher among the faithful—he, the convert of his latest conversation. Now he is master of two languages, question and answer. (A questioner is someone who never in his entire life has given a thought to language, but now wants to do right by it. A questioner is affable toward gods.) The unproductive person—breaking in on the silence

amid those who are active, thinkers and women—asks about revelation. At the end *he* feels exalted, *he* remains unbowed. His flowing words escape him; he listens, enraptured, to his voice. He hears neither speech nor silence.

But he saves himself by fleeing into the erotic. His gaze deflowers. He wishes to see and hear himself, and for that reason he wishes to gain control of those who see and hear. Therefore he promises himself and his greatness; he flees, speaking. But always he sinks down, annihilated, before the humanity of the other; always he remains incomprehensible. And the gaze of the silent passes through him, searching out one who will come in silence.—

Greatness is the eternal silence after conversation. It is to take the rhythm of one's own words in the empty space. The genius has altogether cursed his memory in giving it shape. He is forgetful and at a loss. His past has already become fate and can never be revived. In the genius God speaks, and listens to the contradiction of language.

To the chatterer, genius seems an evasion of greatness. Art is the best remedy for misfortune. The conversation of the genius, however, is prayer. As he speaks, the words fall from him like cloaks. The words of the genius make naked, and are coverings in which the listener feels clothed. Whoever listens is the past of the great speaker, his object and his dead strength. The speaking genius is more silent than the listener, just as one who prays is more silent than God.

#### IV.

The speaker is always possessed by the present. Thus, he is condemned never to utter the past, which is nonetheless what he means. And what he says has long since embraced the mute question of the silent one, and her gaze asks him when he will come to the end. He should entrust himself to the listener, so that she may take his blasphemy by the hand and lead it to the abyss in which the speaker's soul lies, his past, the dead field to which he strays. But there the prostitute has long been waiting. For every woman possesses the past and, in any case, has no



present. Therefore, she protects meaning from understanding; she wards off the misuse of words and refuses to let herself be misused.<sup>2</sup>

She guards the treasure of daily life, but also of the night, the highest good.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, the prostitute is a listener. She rescues the conversation from triviality; greatness has no claim upon her, for greatness comes to an end in her presence. Already in her presence every manhood has had its day, and now the stream of words flows away into her nights. The present that has been eternally will again come to be.<sup>4</sup> The other conversation of silence is voluptuousness.

## V.

*The Genius:* I've come to you for a rest.

*The Prostitute:* Sit down, then.

*The Genius:* I'd like to sit down with you—I touched you just now, and it's as if I had already been resting for years.

*The Prostitute:* You make me uneasy. If I were to lie next to you, I wouldn't be able to sleep.

*The Genius:* Every night people come to your room. It's as if I'd received them all, and they'd given me a joyless look and gone their way.

*The Prostitute:* Give me your hand—your sleeping hand makes me feel that you've forgotten all your poems.

*The Genius:* I'm only thinking of my mother. May I tell you about her? She gave birth to me. Like you, she gave birth: to a hundred dead poems. Like you, she didn't know her children. Her children have gone whoring with strangers.

*The Prostitute:* Like mine.

*The Genius:* My mother always looked at me, asked me questions, wrote to me. Through her I've learned not to know people. They all, in my eyes, became mother. All women had given birth to me; no man had engendered me.

*The Prostitute:* This is the complaint of all the men who sleep with me. When they look at their lives through my eyes, they appear to themselves to be up to their necks in thick ash. No one engendered them, and they come to me in order not to engender.

*The Genius:* All the women I go to are like you. They gave birth to me and I was stillborn, and they wish to receive dead things from me.

*The Prostitute:* But I am the one who has least fear of death. [They go to bed.]

## VI.

The woman is guardian of the conversations. She receives the silence, and the prostitute receives the creator of what has been. But no one watches over the lament when men speak. Their talk becomes despair; it resounds in the hollow space and, blaspheming, clutches at greatness. Two men together are always troublemakers; they finish by resorting to torch and axe. They nullify the woman with their smutty jokes; the paradox violates greatness, Words of the same gender couple and inflame each other with their secret attraction; a soulless ambiguity arises, barely concealed by the relentless dialectic. Laughing, revelation stands before them and compels them to be silent. The dirty joke triumphs—the world was built of words.

Now they have to rise and smash their books and make off with a woman, since otherwise they will secretly strangle their souls.

## VII.

How did Sappho and her women friends talk among themselves?<sup>5</sup> How did women come to speak? For language stifles their soul. Women receive no sounds from it and no salvation. Words waft over women who are together, but the wafting is crude and toneless; they lapse into idle chatter. Yet their silence towers above their talk. Language does not convey the souls of women, because they have not placed their trust in it; their past is never concluded. The words fumble around them, and a kind of readiness enables their quick response. But language appears to them only in the one who speaks, the one who, tortured, constrains the bodies of the words in which he has reproduced the silence of the beloved. The words are mute. The language

of women has remained inchoate. Talking women are possessed by a demented language.

### VIII.

How did Sappho and her women friends talk among themselves?—Language is veiled like the past, futural like silence. The speaker summons the past in it; veiled by language, he receives his womanly past in conversation.—But the women remain silent. What they listen for are the unspoken words. They bring their bodies close and caress one another. Their conversation has freed itself from the subject and from language. Nonetheless it has marked out a terrain. For only among them, and because they are together, has the conversation itself passed and come to rest. Now, finally, it has attained to itself: it has turned to greatness beneath their gaze, just as life was greatness before vain conversation. The silent women are speakers of what has been spoken. They step out of the circle; they alone recognize the perfection of its roundness.

None of them complain when they are with one another; they gaze in wonderment. The love of their bodies does not procreate, but their love is beautiful to see. And they venture to gaze at one another. It makes them catch their breath, while the words fade away in space. Silence and voluptuous delight—eternally divorced in conversation—have become one. The silence of the conversations was future delight; delight was bygone silence. Among the women, however, the conversations were looked on from the frontier of silent delight. There arose, luminously, the youth of mysterious conversations. Essence was radiant.

#### THE DIARY

*The next place might be so near at hand  
That one could hear the cocks crowing in it, the dogs barking;  
But the people would grow old and die  
Without ever having been there.*

—LAO-TZU<sup>6</sup>

## I.

We wish to pay heed to the sources of the unnameable despair that flows in every soul. The souls listen expectantly to the melody of their youth—a youth that is guaranteed them a thousandfold. But the more they immerse themselves in the uncertain decades and broach that part of their youth which is most laden with future, the more orphaned they are in the emptiness of the present. One day they wake to despair: the first day of the diary.

With hopeless seriousness it poses the question: In what time does man live? That he lives in no time is something thinkers have always known. The immortality of thoughts and deeds banishes him to a realm of timelessness at whose heart an inscrutable death lies in wait. Throughout his life the emptiness of time surrounds him, but not immortality. Devoured by the manifold things, time slipped away from him; that medium in which the pure melody of his youth would swell was destroyed. The fulfilled tranquility in which his late maturity would ripen was stolen from him. It was purloined by everyday reality, which in a thousand ways, with event, accident, and obligation, disrupted youthful time, immortal time, at which he did not guess. Lurking even more menacingly behind the everyday was death. Now it manifests itself in little things, and kills daily so as to let live a while longer. Until one day the great death falls from the clouds, like a hand that no longer lets live. From day to day, second to second, the "I" preserves itself, clinging to the instrument—time—it was supposed to play.

He who thus despairs recalls his childhood, when there was still time without flight and an "I" without death. He gazes down and down into the current whence he had emerged and slowly, finally, redemptively loses his understanding. In the midst of such oblivion—in which he no longer knows what he intends, although his intention is redeemed—the diary begins: this unfathomable book of a life never lived, book of a life in whose time everything we experienced inadequately is transformed and perfected.

The diary is an act of liberation, secret and uncircumscribed in its victory. No unfree spirit will understand this book. When the

self, devoured by yearning for itself, devoured by the will to youth, devoured by lust for power over the *décades* to come, devoured by the longing to pass calmly through the days, kindled to dark fire by the pleasures of idleness—when this self nevertheless saw itself condemned to calendar time, clock time, and stock-exchange time, and no ray of any time of immortality filtered down to it—then it began of itself to radiate. It knew: I am myself ray. Not the murky inwardness of the one who experiences, who calls me “I” and torments me with his intimacies, but ray of that other which seemed to oppress me and which after all I myself am: ray of time. Trembling, an “I” that we know only from our diaries stands on the brink of the immortality into which it plunges. It is indeed *time*. In that self to which events occur and which encounters human beings—friends, enemies, and lovers—in that self courses immortal time. The time of its own greatness elapses in it; it is time’s radiation and nothing else.

This believer writes his diary. And he writes it at intervals<sup>7</sup> and will never complete it, because he will die. What is the interval in the diary? It does not operate in developmental time, for that has been overcome. It does not operate *in* time at all, for time is liquidated. Instead it is a book *of* time: daybook, book of days. This transmits the rays of his knowledge through space. In the diary there is no chain of experiences, for then it would be without interval. Instead time is overcome, and overcome, too, is the self that acts in time: I am entirely transposed into time; it irradiates me. Nothing further can befall this self, this creation of time. Everything else to which time happens yields to it. For to everything else our self happens as time, the “I” befalls all things in the diary, they impinge on the “I” and live in it. But time no longer happens to this self; to the birth of immortal time. The timeless befalls it, all things are gathered in it, are with it. It lives all-powerful in the interval; in the interval (the diary’s silence), the “I” encounters its own time, the pure time. In the interval it is gathered to itself; no thing intrudes into its immortal being-with. Here it gets the strength to befall things, to draw them into itself, to disregard its own fate. The interval is secure, and where there is silence nothing can befall. No catastrophe finds its way into the lines of

this book. That is why we do not believe in derivations and sources; we never remember what befalls us. Time, which radiates as the self we are, befalls all things around us as our fate. That time, our essence, is the immortality in which others die. What kills them lets us feel in death (the final interval) essentially ourselves.

## II.

The beloved of the landscape, inclining, radiates in time,  
 But the enemy broods darkly over the center.  
 His wings are sluggish. The black redeemer of the lands  
 Breathes out his crystal No, and decides our death.

On rare occasions the diary emerges hesitantly from the immortality of its interval and writes itself. It rejoices without a sound and ranges over the fates that lie within it clear and woven of time. Thirsting for definition, things approach it in the expectation of receiving fate at its hands. They send their most powerless to encounter its sovereignty; what is least determined in them cries out for determination. They delimit the human essence through their questioning existence and deepen time; and as time itself happens to things at their outermost, there vibrates within it a slight insecurity, which, questioning, gives answers to the questions posed by things. In the interchange of such vibrations, the self has its life. This is the content of our diaries: our fate declares its faith in us because we have long since ceased to relate it to ourselves—we dead who are resurrected in what happens to us.

There is, however, a place of those resurrections of the self, when time sends it forth in ever-widening waves. This is the landscape. All that happens surrounds us as landscape, for we, the time of things, know no time. Nothing but the leaning of the trees, the horizon and the sharply etched mountain ridges, which suddenly awake full of meaning insofar as they position us in their midst, at the center. The landscape transports us into its midst, trembling treetops beset us

with questions, valleys envelop us with mist, unimaginable houses oppress us with their shapes. We, their midpoint, befall these things. But from all the time in which we tremble there remains to us, within, one question: Are we time? Pride tempts us to answer yes—and then the landscape would disappear. We would be citizens. But the spell of the book bids us be silent. The only answer is that we trace a path. But as we do, the same surroundings sanctify us. Without answers, we determine things with the movement of our bodies, we form a center and, wandering, bring ourselves far and near; we thereby single out trees and fields from their like, flow over them with the time of our existence, field and mountains we determine in their arbitrariness: they are our past existence—so prophesied childhood. We are their future. In the nakedness of futurity, the landscape receives us, the grownups. Laid bare, it responds to the shudder of temporality with which we storm the landscape. Here we awaken and partake of the morning repast of youth. Things see us; their gaze propels us into the future, since we do not give them an answer but step among them. Around us is landscape where we refused the summons. A thousand jubilations of spirituality roared round the landscape—so with a smile the diary sent a single thought in their direction. Permeated by time, the landscape breathes before us, roused. We are safely hidden in each other, the landscape and I. We plunge from nakedness to nakedness. Gathered together, we come to ourselves.

The landscape sends us the beloved. We encounter nothing that is not in landscape, and in it nothing but future. It knows only the one girl who is already woman. For she enters the diary with the history of her future. We already died once together. We already were wholly identical once with that history. If we have met with it in death, then it comes to meet us in life, countless times. From the vantage point of death, every girl is the beloved woman who always encounters us sleepers in the diary. And her awakening takes place at night—invisible to the diary. This is the shape of love in the diary: we encounter it in the landscape, beneath a very bright sky. Passion has slept its fill between us, and the woman is a girl, since in her youthfulness she restores our unspent time, which she has gathered in her death. The

plunging nakedness that overwhelms us in the landscape is balanced by the naked beloved.

When our time drove us out of the distance into the landscape and our beloved strode toward us on the protected path of thought, we could feel time, which sent us forth, flooding back toward us. This rhythm of time, which returns home to us from all corners of the world, lulls us to sleep. Anyone who reads a diary falls asleep over it and fulfills what was the fate of its writer. Again and again the diary evokes the death of its writer, if only in the sleep of the one reading: our diary knows only one reader, and he becomes the redeemer as he is mastered by the book. We ourselves are the reader, or our own enemy. He has found no entry into the kingdom that flowered around us. He is none other than the banished, purified "I," dwelling invisibly at the unnameable midpoint of times. He has not abandoned himself to the stream of fate that flowed around us. As the landscape rose up toward us, strangely animated by us, as the beloved flew past us, she whom we had once wooed, there in the middle of the stream stands the enemy, as upright as she. But more powerful. He sends landscape and beloved toward us and is the tireless thinker of thoughts that come only to us. He encounters us in perfect clarity, and while time conceals itself in the mute melody of the intervals, he is at work. He suddenly rears up in the interval like a fanfare, and sends us toward adventure. He is manifestation of time no less than we are, but is the most powerful reflector of ourselves. Dazzling us with the knowledge of love and the vision of distant lands, he returns, bursting in on us, inciting our immortality to ever more distant missions. He knows the empires of the hundred deaths that surround time, and would drown them in immortality. After every sight and every flight from death, we return home to ourselves as our enemy. The diary never speaks of any other enemy, since every enemy pales before the enmity of our illustrious knowledge, is incompetent compared to us, who never attain our time, who are always lagging behind it or presumptuously overshooting it. Always wagering our immortality and losing it. This the enemy well knows; he is the tireless, courageous conscience that pricks us and spurs us on. Our diary writes what it must, while



he is active at the center of the interval. In his hand rest the scales of our time and of immortal time. When will they balance? We shall befall ourselves.

### III.

The cowardice of the living, whose "I" variously inhabits all ventures and constantly hides its features in the garments of its dignity—this cowardice must ultimately become unbearable. For every step we took into the kingdom of fate, we kept looking back—to see whether we truly *were* even when unobserved: so the infinitely offended, sovereign Highness in us finally grew weary; it turned away, full of endless contempt for the self it had been given. It mounted a throne in the imaginary and waited. In large letters the stylus of its sleeping spirit wrote the diary.

These books are concerned, then, with the accession to the throne of one who abdicates. He has abdicated from the experience of which he holds his self to be neither worthy nor capable, and from which he ultimately retreats. Once upon a time the things fell across his path, instead of coming to meet him; from all sides they pressed on one who continually took flight. Never did the noble spirit taste the love of the subordinate. He could not be sure that he, too, was meant by the things. "Do you mean me?" he asked of the victory that fell to him. "Do you mean me?" to the girl who nestled close to him. Thus he tore himself away from his consummation. He appeared as victor to the victory, as beloved to the one who loves. But love had befallen him and victory had descended on him while he was sacrificing to the Penates of his privacy. Never did he encounter the fate he ran past.

But when, in the diary, the sovereignty of the "I" withdrew and the raging against what happens fell silent, events showed themselves to be undecided. The ever more distant visibility of the "I," which relates nothing more to itself, weaves the ever nearer mythos of things, which storm on in bottomless attraction to the "I," as restless questioning, thirsting for resolution.

The new storm rages in the agitated self. If the "I" is sent out as time, within it things storm on, countering it in their distancing, humble bearing, on course toward the center of the interval, toward the womb of time, whence the self radiates outward. And fate is: this countermovement of things in the time of the self. And that time of the self in which things befall us—that is greatness. To it all future is past. The past of things is the future of "I"-time. But past things become futural. They send forth the time of the self anew when they have entered into the distance, into the interval. With events the diary writes the history of our future existence. And thereby prophesies to us our past fate. The diary writes the history of our greatness from our death onward. For once, the time of things is overcome in the time of the self; fate is overcome in greatness, and intervals in the interval. For once, the rejuvenated enemy confronts us in his infinite love, he who has concentrated all our dazzled weakness in his strength, embedded all our nakedness in his bodilessness, and drowned out all our silence with his muteness, he who brings all things home and puts an end to all men—the great interval. Death. In death we befall ourselves; our dead being releases itself from things. And the time of death is our own. Redeemed, we become aware of the fulfillment of the game; the time of death was the time of our diary; death was the last interval, death the first loving enemy, death, which bears us with all our greatness and the destinies of our wide plain into the unnameable midpoint of times. And which for a single moment gives us immortality. Manifold and simple, this is the content of our diaries. The summons our youth proudly refused takes us by surprise. Yet it is nothing but a summons to immortality. We enter into the time that was in the diary, symbol of yearning, rite of purification. With us things sink toward the center; with us they await the new radiance. For there is immortality only in death, and time rises up at the end of times.

### *The Ball*

For the sake of what prelude do we cheat ourselves of our dreams?<sup>8</sup>  
 With a wave of the hand we push them aside, into the pillows, leave

them behind, while some of them flutter silently about our raised head. How do we dare, on awakening, carry them into the brightness of day? Oh, the brightness! All of us carry around us invisible dreams; how deeply veiled the girls' faces are; their eyes are secluded nests of the uncanny,<sup>9</sup> of dreams, quite inaccessible, luminous from sheer perfection. The music elevates us all to the level of that bright strip of light—you surely know it—that shines from beneath the curtain when the violins tune up in an orchestra. The dance begins. Our hands slide off one another; our glances meet, laden, emptying themselves out and smiling from the ultimate heaven. Our bodies make careful contact; we do not rouse one another from our dreams, or call one another homeward into the darkness—out of the night of night, which is not day. How we love one another! How we safeguard our nakedness! We all have bound it in gay colors, masks, withholding nakedness and promising it. In all of us there is something monstrous to keep quiet about. But we fling ourselves into the rhythm of the violins; never was a night more incorporeal, more uncanny, more chaste than this.

Where we stand alone, on a cartload of fanfares, alone in the bright night of nights we conjured up, our fleeing soul invites a woman to come—a girl who stands in a remote suite of rooms.

She crosses the parquet floor that lies so smoothly between the dancers, as though it reflected the music; for this smooth floor to which people do not belong creates space for the Elysian, which joins the many solitudes into a round dance.<sup>10</sup> She crosses and her step sets the pace for the dancers; she presses some to leave, and they are dashed to pieces on the tables where the din of the lonely reigns, or where people are making their way as if on tightropes through the night.

When did night ever attain brightness and become radiant, if not here? When was time ever overcome? Who knows whom we will meet at this hour? Otherwise (were there an "otherwise"), we would quite certainly be here, but already at an end; otherwise, we would perhaps be pouring out the dregs of the used-up day and tasting the new one. But now we pour the foaming day over into the purple crystal of the night; it comes to rest and sparkles.

The music transports our thoughts; our eyes reflect the friends around us, how all are moving, bathed in night. We are truly in a house without windows, a room without world. Flights of stairs lead up and down, marble. Here time is captured. Only now and again it resists, quickens its weary breath in us, and makes us restless. But a word, spoken into the night, summons someone to us; we walk together, the music was already superfluous and, yes, we could lie together in the dark, although our eyes would flash like a drawn sword between people. Around this house, we know, are fluttering all the merciless realities that have been expelled. The poets with their bitter smiles, the saints and the policemen and the waiting cars. From time to time, music penetrates to the outside and submerges them.

## Notes

"Metaphysik der Jugend" (GS2, 91–104) was written in 1913–1914 and published posthumously. Translated by Rodney Livingstone.

1. "Wo bist du, Jugendliches! das immer mich / Zur Stunde weckt des Morgens, wo bist du, Licht?" These are the first two lines of Friedrich Hölderlin's poem "Der blinde Sänger" (The Blind Singer; ca. 1800). Benjamin's section title, "The Conversation" (*Das Gespräch*), recalls a prominent Hölderlinian motif.

2. A letter of June 23, 1913, from Benjamin to Herbert Belmore, has direct bearing on the themes of "prostitute" and "woman" in "The Metaphysics of Youth" (which was probably begun that summer) and may be quoted at length: "You should understand that I consider the types 'man' and 'woman' as somewhat primitive in the thought of a civilized humanity. . . . Europe consists of individuals (in whom there are both masculine and feminine elements), not of men and women. . . . What do we really know of woman? As little as we do of youth. We have never yet experienced a female culture [*Kultur der Frau*], any more than we have ever known a youth culture. . . . To you, a prostitute is some kind of beautiful object. You respect her as you do the Mona Lisa. . . . But in so doing, you think nothing of depriving thousands of women of their souls and relegating them to an existence in an art gallery. As if we consort with them so artistically! Are we being honest when we call prostitution 'poetic'? I protest in the name of poetry. . . . Truly, if we wish to reserve to our-

selves this kind of private personal dignity, we will never understand the prostitute. But if we feel that all our humanity is a sacrifice to the spirit, and if we tolerate no private feelings, no private will and intellect—then we will honor the prostitute. She will be what we are. . . . The prostitute represents the consummated will to culture. I wrote: she drives nature from its last sanctuary, sexuality. For the time being, let's say nothing about the spiritualization of sexuality. This precious item in the masculine inventory. And we speak of the sexualization of the spirit: this is the morality [*Sittlichkeit*] of the prostitute. She represents—in Eros—culture; Eros, who is the most powerful individualist, the most hostile to culture—even he can be perverted; even he can serve culture" (CWB, 34–36). See also section II of "Socrates" (Chapter 36 in this volume).

3. There is an untranslatable play on words in the German here: she guards the treasure of *Alltäglichkeit* ("everydayness"), but she also guards the *Allnächtlichkeit* (which Benjamin coins on the model of the preceding term).

4. "Die ewig gewesene Gegenwart wird wieder werden."

5. Sappho was a Greek lyric poet whose work, of which only one ode and a few fragments survive, was known and greatly admired throughout antiquity. She was born on the island of Lesbos toward the end of the seventh century B.C., but little is known of her life or her circle of female friends.

6. Benjamin quotes from a 1911 German translation of the founding text of Chinese Taoism, the *Tao-Te-Ching*, whose reputed author, Lao-tzu (an honorific meaning "Old Master"), is said to have lived in the sixth century B.C. We have used the translation by Arthur Waley, *The Way and Its Power* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1936), 241–242.

7. "Und er schreibt es in Abständen . . ." The reader should keep in mind throughout "The Diary" that *Abstand* can mean both "interval" and "distance." Benjamin generally draws on both senses of the term simultaneously in order to designate a structural feature—at once spatial and temporal—of what he calls the diary (*Tagebuch*).

8. The essay's third section, "Der Ball," is dated "January 1914" in the handwritten copy made by Gershom Scholem; the manuscript of the other two sections, which likewise exists only in the copy made in 1918 by Scholem, is undated. Scholem refers to the manuscript of the essay as "unfinished" (*unvollendet*) in his memoir, *Walter Benjamin: The Story of a Friendship*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken, 1981), 59. And in a letter of July 6–7, 1914, to Herbert Belmore, Benjamin himself remarks of the essay, "My series [*Zyklus*, literally 'cycle'] needs to be completed" (CWB, 71). He nonetheless considered it sufficiently complete to be copied and circulated among some of

his friends, and he may also have tried around this time to get it published (see CWB, 68).

9. Another play on words: "heimliche Nester der Unheimlichen."

10. In Greek mythology, the Elysian Fields was the abode of the blessed after death.

## Student Authors' Evenings

Whatever apathy, mental vacuity, inadequacy is inherent in student society—no one doubts that it will betray itself in art. It is of this betrayal that I wish to speak.<sup>1</sup> My remarks have reference to the unforgettable catastrophe of the authors' evening held one year ago, and they concern, as well, my view of students and art.

I shall contrast the student authors' evening with one of those "readings from the author's own works" that are held in the public houses of greater Berlin. A paying public has gathered—the curious, the uncertain, along with holders of free tickets—most of the group simply out for pleasure. Money has brought them together; whether or not intellect and spirit will be summoned, at least from the ranks of the public, is not the issue. The crowd applauds; the individual may listen attentively. It all depends on the spirit of the author: if he or she is a dilettante and wants to arouse interest or even to entertain, then everything is in order and art does not enter the picture. Perhaps he is a poet. In that case, his reading will be over the heads of those assembled; together with his art he will be "carried away." The rapture of the individual follows him. Here, the crowd has nothing to do with art and art nothing to do with the crowd. Money acts as a disinfectant.

The spirit enters as an individual into the places of public artistry, and whoever sits alongside has had to pay.

The hygienic process that clears art from our theaters, lecture evenings, concerts is the sign of a terrible poverty. The saying still holds true: poor but clean.

Such a hygiene of poverty has no place in the student authors' evening, and that is the least one can say for the latter (since here art can still flee with its adherents by untrodden ways). Heathenism, self-satisfied estrangement from art cannot be forgiven in the academic community. Thoughtlessness is a sin. Daily contact with the intellectual and spiritual deprives one of the right to appear before art in the manner of paying citizens.

In other words, a student authors' evening cannot determine at will the degree of its spirituality. From the outset it stands under a law, one prescribed by art: to come together, in the presence of art, as a community. It is not money that breeds community.

We should take this inescapable conclusion seriously. For a student authors' evening; only one of the two possibilities can serve. It presupposes community—that of students—and it cannot do without it. Hence, a student authors' evening means: an evening in which the communal spirit of the students comes to terms with art. And with this the relation between author and public is transformed.<sup>2</sup> In contrast to what goes on in the public lecture hall, which bears no communal name, the public now becomes important. By the same token, the author no longer stands indifferently over the public, in the name of art, much less in the midst of an indiscriminate public united by nothing more than mutual insipidity.

Rather, it is art itself that binds author to public. This *will to art* constitutes the authors' evening. Precious indeterminacy in judgments about art disappears. The public does not expect the enlightened poet—what would such a figure have to do with students and authors? The public makes no sort of fuss, being greedy neither for experience nor for literature; but it waits in expectation of itself, of the dilettante, which it hears professing its faith in art.<sup>3</sup> In this way, the aim of an education in art, and therefore of a student literary group, attains its broadest determination.<sup>4</sup> Cultivation of the dilet-



tante, cultivation of the public. Now the dilettante is ennobled not through *art*—in regard to which he bears the stigma of the non-expert, the dabbler—but through *striving*. It is no doubt possible to attest the seriousness and absoluteness of creation even outside the sphere of great art, to steel oneself thereby to recognize genius, and for this task the dilettante is suited. He appears with the student body's profession of faith. The sorry absolutism, this primitive accosting of art and fumbling around in it, he brings to a halt. He will be an imitator, will learn the craft from the bottom up. He will seriously school himself in a particular artistic movement or tendency, one that more compellingly than others speaks to his feeling for life and his inclinations. By its light he will study and work; he will think with it and propagate it. The dilettante will learn his way around an area from which, as an adept, he can turn receptively toward other fields. He will thus educate the public by fostering insight into the diligent citizenly side of genius. Into the genius itself of genius they cannot and need not be introduced.<sup>5</sup>

This is the sense in which we may understand student authorship and conceive of a student public. The latter must be united in its rejection of popular sentiment, its repudiation of all the miserable immediacies born of personal naiveté. It must be ready for the vision of the new, unprecedented, revolutionary that grips those in its own ranks who are productive. It must be united in its rejection, firmly resolved in its denial, of unproblematic classicism and flawless versifying. The one in whom the troop of dilettantes will initially have to profess its faith is the man of letters. He goes in advance like a legionnaire, covered with the dust and grime of a higher service that he believes in without understanding. He has long since forgotten the manners of his upbringing. He has recognized artistic convention in its cowardice. He has not hesitated to put his own inoffensive private existence on the offensive in public controversy. Obsessed with all the exigencies of the present time and knowing the inexorability of art, he has devoted himself to the service of genius, sparing it fatal contact with the public.

About the ethic of the artist we may say that it is submerged in his work in ways that are scarcely fathomable. It is manifest in his greatness

as an artist. For the *work* gives the artist the right to speak. This is not the case with the dilettante. His personality, his seriousness, his ethical purity must vouch for what he undertakes to present artistically. Hence, these undertakings are not to be regarded as art, as revelation. They are testimonies to the human struggle of one who, from out of the depths, points toward those who have found forms. To these forms the dilettante submits. He incarnates the human conditioning of art, its rootedness in its own time, its immanent tendency.<sup>6</sup> As educator, he will show others the way leading from their human conditioning, their ethical orientation, to art and the new genius. This way can be seen only insofar as humanity itself—which is simultaneously bound and unbound by the forms—is continually rediscovered, is seen ever anew. The dilettante is properly the one to educate others in this seeing. And the man of letters of whom we've spoken is nothing other than the highest and purest development of this dilettante.

I conclude: A student authors' evening ought to provide a forum for people whose ethical personality is a driving force. Only then will the public know what student author, student public really means. But it appears impossible to listen to poems by people who know nothing of artistic seriousness, whose feeling for the tragic remains problematic, whose knowledge of their own time is lacking. Impossible to hear talk of incontrovertible feelings from those who are known only for their busy industry. Impossible also to see uncertain talents indulging their own propensities. What is possible is only: to listen to someone whose ethical being surrenders itself to art so as to have a presentiment of it. Whose incapacity is ennobled through the personal travail that binds him to the embattled art of his day. Whose work bears witness to the struggle of one in whom form has not yet triumphed.—

All the leaders of the student body should at some point in the year give a public reading of one of their works. A selection of works produced—and, I fear, a more rigorous selection of the true leaders—will then be possible. For just as true dilettantism presupposes the ethical human being, so culture also demands from precisely these ethical beings, as a duty, service in the present-day struggle of art: dilettantism.<sup>7</sup>

## Notes

"Studentische Autorenabende" (GS2, 68-71) was published in *Der Student* (journal of the Berlin Independent Students' Association), January 1914.

1. In the original journal publication of this address, a prefatory notice, signed "The Editors of *Der Student*," reads: "These remarks were to be presented at the student authors' evening of December 16, 1913. They were rejected by a majority of the jury for fundamental reasons." It is evidently this particular authors' evening that Benjamin critiques in "Erotic Education" (Chapter 28 in this volume).

2. *Publikum* means both "public" and "audience."

3. "Das Publikum . . . ist in Erwartung seiner selbst, des Dilettanten, den es zur Kunst sich bekennen hört." The term "dilettante" comes from the Italian and means originally "lover of the arts." Benjamin uses it in this sense here and in section 5 of his 1935 essay "Johann Jakob Bachofen" (SW3, 15), an essay written in French. See also GS2, 968, on Bachofen's "'dilettantisme' élevé" (lofty "dilettantism").

4. "Education in art" translates *Kunsterziehung*, a central term in the theory of education formulated by Benjamin's mentor, Gustav Wyneken.

5. Benjamin distinguishes between *die arbeitsame Bürgerlichkeit des Genius* and *das Geniale des Genius*.

6. "Er verkörpert das Menschlich-Bedingte der Kunst, ihr Zeitgeborenes, ihre immanente Tendenz."

7. "Struggle of art" translates *Kunstkampf*.

## Erotic Education

*On the occasion of the last Student Authors' Evening in Berlin*

More important than the platitude about a lack of erotic culture is the fact of the *twofold* erotic unculture [*Unkultur*]: of the familial and of prostitution.<sup>1</sup> In vain the attempt to fuse these two forms of spiritlessness in the gloriole of youthful philistinism: in the "relationship." What we heard was essentially relationship-poetry. That is to say: modern expressions set to rhythms reminiscent of Geibel.<sup>2</sup> Or, in terms of content: pan-erotic excesses with familial reserve. One conjured up Byzantine-Romantic names, such as "Theodora," and candied them with sugary love poetry. Another sang hymns to Orpheus in order to conceal poetic blindness under the mantle of Greek culture and allude with impunity to sea and love. Someone set a scene of provocative inanity by bringing a rape into a Roman arena. The classical backdrop is the earmark of familial docility, and on the program were poems that could be presented, if not to any father, then certainly to any uncle.

In addition—it should not go unmentioned—there were fossils preserved from the purely familial epoch, and no doubt it was interesting to learn of their survival. Such things as *Youth: A Sketch Alfresco*, in which the erotic is ushered into the cozy home place, and the son loves the "good wife" of his father.

A single author pointed the way forward—A. E. Günther—with resolute, carefully oriented sketches that were full of ideas. Another maintained respectable neutrality: Erich Krauss.<sup>3</sup>

But so long as the students continue to saturate their poetry with family feeling in this way, and do not dare to see *spiritually* what is *actually before them*, namely, the erotics of the prostitute (which they turn into a charming little dally)—so long as this continues, they will remain immured in dank and musty relationship-poetry and nothing they produce will have form or vision.

## Notes

“Erotische Erziehung” (GS2, 71–72) was published, under the pseudonym “Ardor,” in *Die Aktion*, January 17, 1914.

1. This short piece presumably refers to the student readings of December 16, 1913, the jury for which rejected Benjamin’s article “Student Authors’ Evenings” (Chapter 27 in this volume). “Erotic education” was part of the reform program of Benjamin’s mentor, Gustav Wyneken; see “The Free School Community” (Chapter 8 in this volume) on the question of coeducation.

2. Emanuel Geibel (1815–1884) was a popular lyric poet and playwright, the center of a literary circle in Munich calling itself *Die Krokodile* (The Crocodile Society), which was concerned with traditional forms. “Relationship-poetry” translates *Verhältnispoesie*.

3. Nothing further is known of these two student authors.

## The Religious Position of the New Youth

**T**he movement of awakening youth shows the direction of that infinitely distant point at which we know religion. And movement in general is for us the deepest guarantee of its proper direction. The youth now awakening in Germany is equally far removed from all religions and all ideological alliances. It occupies no religious position either. But it means something for religion, and religion begins to be meaningful for it in an entirely new sense. Youth stands in the center, where the new comes into being. Its need is the greatest and God's help nearest it.

Nowhere so much as in the youth can religion take hold of the community, and nowhere else can the impulse toward religion be more concrete, more inward and pervading. For the educational pathway of the young generation is aimless without it. It remains empty and anguished without the site where it divides in the deciding either-or. This site must be common to an entire generation; it is where the temple of its god stands.

The religious longing of the older generation came to this place late and in an isolated manner. It was a decision taken in hiding, at one's own particular crossroads, not the one and only. The decision carried no guarantee in itself; it was lacking in religious objectivity. It has always been thus with the solitary individual vis-à-vis religion.

And now there is a younger generation that is as one with religion; religion is its body, through which it suffers its own needs and privations. *A generation would once again stand at the crossroads, but the crossroads is nowhere to be found.* The youth have always had to choose, but the objects of their choice used to be well defined. The new youth stands before a chaos in which the objects of its choice (the sacred ones) disappear. No "pure" and "impure," "sacred" and "taboo," light its way, but only schoolmaster words, "permitted-prohibited." That it feels lonely and at a loss testifies to its religious seriousness, speaks for the fact that, to its way of thinking, religion no longer signifies some form of spirit or a traversable road that crosses the path of thousands and that it, too, could travel every day. Rather, it craves nothing more urgently than the choice, the possibility of choice, of sacred decision in general. The choice itself creates its objects—this is its knowledge. It is knowledge in immediate proximity to religion.

The youth that professes faith in itself *signifies* religion, which does not yet exist. Surrounded by the chaos of things and persons, none of whom are sanctified, none tabooed, it calls out for choice. And it will not be able to choose with utmost seriousness until by some grace the holy and unholy have been newly created.<sup>1</sup> It is confident that the sacred and the accursed reveal themselves at the moment when its collective will to choice has reached maximum intensity.

But meanwhile it lives a scarcely comprehensible life, full of devotion and mistrust, admiration and skepticism, self-sacrifice and self-interest. This life is its virtue. It may dismiss no object, no person, for in each (in the advertising kiosk and in the criminal) the symbol or the sacred can arise. And yet—it cannot entirely entrust itself to anyone, can never quite rediscover its inner world in the hero it honors or the girl it loves. For the relation of the hero and of the beloved to the ultimate and essential—to the sacred—is dark and uncertain. As uncertain as our own I, which we have not yet found in the choosing. It would seem that this youth shares many traits with the first Christians, to whom the world likewise appeared to be so utterly overflowing with the sacred—which could arise in each and all—that it deprived them of the power to speak and act. The doctrine of nonaction is something close to this youth.<sup>2</sup> And yet its boundless skepticism

(which is nothing other than boundless trust) compels it to love the struggle. God can arise in struggle, too. To struggle is not to condemn the enemy. But the struggles of youth are judgments of God. Struggles in which this youth is equally prepared to triumph and to be overcome. Because all that matters is that from these struggles the figure of the sacred reveal itself. Moreover, this struggling keeps it away from mysticism, which would merely simulate redemption for the individual so long as the religious community does not yet exist. Youth knows that struggling does not mean hating, and that it is a sign of its own imperfection if it still encounters opposing forces, if it has not yet infused all with youth. In the struggle, in victory as in defeat, it aims to find itself, choosing between the sacred and the unconsecrated. It understands that in this moment it will no longer know an enemy without in the process becoming quietistic.<sup>3</sup>

But it will dawn slowly on people today that such a youth is no object for cultural debates, disciplinary measures, or baiting by the press. Against its enemy it fights in a cloak of invisibility. Whoever struggles against it cannot know it. But this youth will nonetheless ennoble its finally powerless adversary with history.

## Notes

"Das religiöse Stellung der neuen Jugend" (GS2, 72-74) was published in *Die Tat. Sozial-religiöse Monatsschrift für deutsche Kultur*, May 1914.

1. The phrase "... bis die Gnade das Heilige und Unheilige neu geschaffen hat" literally means "until grace has newly created the holy and unholy."

2. Here and at the end of this paragraph, Benjamin refers to the heretical Christian theology known as "quietism," which enjoined the absorption of the individual will in contemplation.

3. Compare the concept of "enemy" developed in the last paragraph of section 2 of "The Diary," in "The Metaphysics of Youth" (Chapter 26 in this volume).



## Two Poems by Friedrich Hölderlin: “The Poet’s Courage” and “Timidity”

The task of the following study cannot be classified under the aesthetics of poetry without further explanation. This discipline, as pure aesthetics, has devoted its best energies to exploring the foundation of individual genres of poetry—among them, most frequently, tragedy. Commentary has been devoted almost exclusively to the great works of the classical period; a commentary on a work outside classical drama tended to be philological rather than aesthetic. Here, an aesthetic commentary on two lyric poems shall be attempted, and this intention requires several preliminary remarks on method.<sup>1</sup> The inner form, which Goethe characterized as content, shall be demonstrated in these poems.<sup>2</sup> The poetic task, as precondition for an evaluation of the poem, is to be established. The evaluation cannot be guided by the way the poet has fulfilled his task; rather, the seriousness and greatness of the task itself determine the evaluation. For this task is derived from the poem itself. The task is also to be understood as the precondition of the poem, as the intellectual-perceptual structure of that world to which the poem bears witness.<sup>3</sup> This task, this precondition, is understood here as the ultimate basis accessible to analysis. Nothing will be said about the process of lyrical composition, nothing about the person or world view of the creator; rather, the particular and

unique sphere in which the task and precondition of the poem lie will be addressed. This sphere is at once product and subject of the investigation. It itself can no longer be compared with the poem; it is, rather, the sole thing in this investigation that can be ascertained. This sphere, which is configured differently in each poetic work, will be termed the poetized.<sup>4</sup> In it will be revealed that peculiar domain that contains the truth of the poem. This "truth," which precisely the most serious artists so insistently claim for their creations, is to be understood as the objectivity of their creative procedure, as the fulfillment of the artistic task in each case. "Every work of art has an a priori ideal, a necessity in itself to exist" (Novalis).<sup>5</sup> In its general form, the poetized is the synthetic unity of the intellectual and perceptual orders. This unity gains its particular configuration as inner form of the particular creation.

The concept of the poetized is in two respects a limit-concept. It is first of all a limit-concept with respect to the concept of the poem. As a category of aesthetic research, the poetized differs decisively from the form-content schema, insofar as it preserves within itself the fundamental aesthetic unity of form and content and, instead of separating them, bears the impress of their necessary immanent connection. Since what follows concerns the poetized of individual poems, this cannot be adduced theoretically but only in the individual case. Neither is this the place for a theoretical critique of the form-content concept, relative to its aesthetic significance. In the unity of form and content, therefore, the poetized shares one of its most essential characteristics with the poem itself. It is itself constructed according to the fundamental law of artistic organism. From the poem it differs as a limit-concept, as the concept of its task, not absolutely and not in virtue of any operative principle but solely through its greater determinability; not through a quantitative lack of determinations but rather through the potential existence of those that are effectively present in the poem—and others.<sup>6</sup> The poetized is a loosening up of the firm functional coherence that reigns in the poem itself, and it cannot arise otherwise than by disregarding certain determinations, so that the meshing, the functional unity of the other elements is made evident. For the poem is so determined through the effective existence of all its defining features, that it can be apprehended in a unified way only as

such. Insight into the function, on the other hand, presupposes a variety of possible connections. Thus, insight into the organization of the poem consists in grasping its ever stricter determination. In order to lead to this highest degree of determination in the poem, the poetized must disregard certain determinations.

Through this relation to the functional unity of the poem, unity at once perceptual and intellectual in character, the poetized emerges as a limit-determination with respect to the poem. At the same time, however, it is a limit-concept with respect to another functional unity, since a limit-concept is possible only as a limit, a boundary, between two concepts. This other functional unity, now, is the idea of the task, corresponding to the idea of the solution as which the poem exists. (For task and solution can be separated only in the abstract.) For the creator, this idea of the task is always life. It is in life that the other extreme functional unity is found. The poetized thus emerges as transition from the functional unity of life to that of the poem. In the poetized, life determines itself through the poem, the task through the solution. What is fundamental is not the individual life-mood of the artist but rather a life-context determined by art. The categories in which this sphere, the transitional sphere of the two functional unities, can be grasped have not yet been developed, and may be associated most readily perhaps with the concepts of myth. It is precisely the feeblest artistic achievements that refer to the immediate feeling of life, whereas the strongest, with respect to their truth, refer to a sphere akin to the mythic: the poetized. One could say that life is, in general, the poetized of poems. Yet the more the poet tries, without transformation, to convert the unity of life into a unity of art, the plainer it is that he is a bungler. We are used to finding such shoddy work defended, even denanded, as "the immediate sensation of life," "warmth of heart," "sensibility." The significant example of Hölderlin shows clearly how the poetized affords the possibility of judging poetry according to the degree of coherence and greatness of its elements. The two characteristics are inseparable. For the more a lax diffusion of feeling replaces the inner greatness and configuration of the elements (which we term, approximately, "mythic"), the more meager the coherence becomes and the more we are confronted with either an

endearing, artless natural product or some concoction alien to art and nature. Life, as ultimate unity, lies at the basis of the poetized. But the more prematurely the analysis of the poem—without encountering the structuration of perception and the construction of a spiritual world—leads us to life itself as the poetized, the more material (in a strict sense), the more formless and insignificant, the poem proves to be. Whereas the analysis of great works of literature will encounter, as the genuine expression of life, not myth itself, to be sure, but a unity produced by the force of the mythic elements straining against one another.

The nature of the poetized as a region delimited in two directions is attested by the method of its presentation. The method cannot be concerned with demonstrating so-called ultimate elements, for there are no such things within the poetized. Rather, what is to be demonstrated is nothing other than the intensity of the coherence of perceptual and intellectual elements, and first of all in reference to individual examples. But precisely in this demonstration it must be evident that it is not elements but relations that are at stake, since the poetized itself is, after all, a sphere of relation between the work of art and life, whose unities themselves are wholly ungraspable. In this way the poetized will reveal itself as the precondition of the poem, as its inner form, as artistic task. The law according to which all apparent elements of sensation and of ideas come to light as embodiments of essential and, in principle, infinite functions is called the law of identity. This term denotes the synthetic unity of functions, which may be recognized, in each particular configuration it assumes, as an a priori of the poem. The disclosure of the pure poetized, the absolute task, must remain—after all that has been said—a purely methodological, ideal goal. The pure poetized would otherwise cease to be a limit-concept: it would be life or poem.—Until the applicability of this method to the aesthetics of the lyric as such and perhaps to other domains is tested, further exposition is not in order. Only then could one distinguish the a priori of an individual poem, that of the poem in general, or even that of other literary genres or of literature in general. What will emerge more clearly, however, is that with regard to lyric poetry, a judgment, even if it cannot be proved, can nonetheless be substantiated.

Two poems by Hölderlin, "The Poet's Courage" (*Dichtermut*) and "Timidity" (*Blödigkeit*), as they have come down to us from his mature and his late periods, will be investigated according to this method. The method will demonstrate that the poems are comparable. A certain relationship connects them, so that one could speak of different versions. A version that belongs between the earliest and the latest ("The Poet's Courage," second version) will not be discussed here, since it is less essential.

### THE POET'S COURAGE

1. Are not all the living related to you?  
Does not the Parca herself nourish you for service?  
Then just wander forth defenseless  
Through life, and have no care!
2. Whatever happens, let it be a blessing for you,  
Be devoted to joy! What then could  
Offend you, heart! Or what  
Befall you there where you must go?
3. For, ever since the poem escaped from mortal lips  
Breathing peace; benefiting in sorrow and happiness,  
Our song brought joy to the hearts  
Of men; so, too, were
4. We, the poets of the people, gladly among the living,  
Where much joins together, joyful, and pleasing to everyone,  
Available to everyone—so indeed is  
Our progenitor, the sun god,
5. Who grants the cheerful day to poor and rich,  
Who in fleeting time holds us, the transitory ones,  
Upright on golden  
Leading strings, like children.
6. His purple flood awaits him, takes him too,  
When the hour comes—look! And the noble light,  
Knowing of change,  
Goes down the path with equanimity.

7. And so pass away then, when once the time has come  
 And the spirit nowhere lacks its right; so dies  
 Once in the seriousness of life  
 Our joy, a beautiful death!

## TIMIDITY

1. Are not many of the living known to you?  
 Does not your foot stride upon the true, as upon carpets?  
 Therefore, my genius, only step  
 Naked into life, and have no care!
2. Whatever happens, let it be opportune for you!  
 Be rhymed for joy! What then could  
 Offend you, heart, or what  
 Befall you there where you must go?
3. For since men like heavenly beings, a solitary animal,  
 And the heavenly ones themselves were led, toward ingathering,  
 By the poem and the chorus of princes,  
 According to their kinds, so, too, were
4. We, as tongues of the people, gladly among the living,  
 Where much joins together, joyful, and the same to everyone,  
 Available to everyone—so indeed is  
 Our Father, the god of heaven,
5. Who grants the thinking day to poor and rich,  
 Who, at the turning of time, holds us, who fall asleep,  
 Upright on golden  
 Leading strings, like children.
6. Good too are we and capable, sent to someone to some end,  
 When we come, with art, and bring one  
 From among the heavenly beings. Yet we ourselves  
 Bring apt hands.

Reflection on the first version reveals a considerable indeterminacy in the perceptual and a lack of coherence in the detail. The myth of the poem is still rank with mythology. The mythological reveals itself as myth only to the extent it is coherent. The myth is recognizable from

the inner unity of god and destiny. From the way *anankē* reigns.<sup>7</sup> In the first version of his poem, Hölderlin's subject is a destiny—the death of the poet. He celebrates in song the sources of the courage for this death. This death is the center from which the world of poetic dying was meant to arise. Existence in that world would be the poet's courage. But here only the most vigilant intuition can have a presentiment of this lawfulness radiating from a world of the poet. The voice arises diffidently at first to sing a cosmos, whose own decline is signified by the death of the poet. But the myth is developed from mythology. The sun god is the poet's ancestor, and his death is the destiny through which the poet's death, at first mirrored, becomes real. A beauty whose inner source we do not know dissolves the figure of the poet—scarcely less that of the god—instead of forming it.—Still, the poet's courage is grounded, curiously, in another, alien order—that of relationship with the living. From it he gains connection with his destiny. What significance does the relationship with the people have for poetic courage? The deeper right by virtue of which the poet relies on and feels himself related to his people, to those who are alive, cannot be felt in the poem. We know that this thought is one of the consolations of poets and that it was especially dear to Hölderlin. Yet we do not feel that natural connectedness with all people established here as condition and foundation of poetic life. Why doesn't the poet celebrate—and with greater right—the *odi profanum*?<sup>8</sup> This question may, indeed must, be asked when the living continue to find no spiritual order.—In the most surprising way, the poet reaches with both hands into alien world orders, reaches for people and God, in order to build up in himself his own courage—the courage of poets. But the song, the inwardness of the poet, the significant source of his virtue, appears, where it is named, weak, without power and greatness. The poem lives in the Greek world; it is animated by a beauty fashioned on a Greek model, and it is dominated by the mythology of the Greeks. The characteristically Greek principle of formation, however, is not fully manifest. “For, ever since the poem escaped from mortal lips / Breathing peace, benefiting in sorrow and happiness / Our song brought joy to the hearts / Of men . . .” Only very feebly do these words convey the awe that filled Pindar—and with him the late

Hölderlin—in the presence of poetic form.<sup>9</sup> By the same token, the “poets of the people,” “pleasing” to everyone, do not serve, when seen in this way, to lay a perspicuous world foundation for this poem. The figure of the dying sun god testifies most clearly to an unmastered duality in all its elements. Idyllic nature still plays its special role opposite the figure of the god. Beauty, in other words, has not yet wholly become form. Neither does the representation of death flow out of a pure context of figuration. Death itself is not—as it is later understood to be—form in its deepest interconnection; it is the extinguishing of the plastic, heroic element in the indeterminate beauty of nature. The space and time of this death have not yet emerged as a unity in the spirit of form. The same indeterminacy of the formative principle, which contrasts so strongly with the invoked Hellenism, threatens the entire poem. The beauty that, almost by means of mood, connects the beautiful appearance of the poem with the serenity of the god, and this isolation of the god, whose mythological destiny carries merely analogical significance for the poet, do not arise from the midst of a fully formed world whose mythological law would be death. Instead, a world that is only weakly articulated dies in beauty with the setting sun. The relation of the gods and men to the poetic world, to the spatiotemporal unity in which they live, is structured neither intensively nor with a purely Greek character. It has to be fully recognized that the basic feeling underlying this poem, one by no means free of conventionality, is the feeling of life, of a life diffused and undefined; and that this accordingly gives rise to the atmospheric coherence of the poem’s elements, isolated in their beauty. Life as an undoubted basic fact—lovely perhaps, perhaps sublime—still determines this world of Hölderlin’s (while also veiling thought). The wording of the title points to this in a curious way, since a peculiar lack of clarity distinguishes that virtue to which the name of its bearer has been attached, thus suggesting that the purity of this virtue has been sullied through too great proximity to life. (Compare the locution *Weibertreue*.)<sup>10</sup> The severe conclusion sounds a note almost alien to the chain of images: “And the spirit nowhere lacks its right.” This powerful admonition, born of courage, here stands alone, and only the greatness of a single image from an earlier verse anticipates it (“holds us . . . / Upright on



golden / Leading strings, like children"). The connectedness of the god with men is forced, by way of rigid rhythms, into a great image. But in its isolation it cannot bring to light the basis of those allied powers, and it loses itself. Only the power of transformation will make it clear and fit to be expressed: the poetic law has not yet fulfilled itself in this Hölderlinian world.

What the innermost coherence of that poetic world which is suggested in the first version signifies, and how an increase in profundity occasions a revolution in the structure, how from the structured center a structuring movement necessarily imposes itself from verse to verse—this is what the final version shows. The early draft was found to be premised upon a nonperceptual representation of life, a concept of life both unmythic and untouched by destiny, deriving from a spiritually exiguous sphere. But where there was isolation of form and lack of relation between events, there now appears a perceptual-intellectual order, the new cosmos of the poet. It is difficult to gain any kind of access to this fully unified, unique world. The impenetrability of the relations resists every mode of comprehension other than that of feeling. The method requires from the outset that connected things be taken as the point of departure, in order to gain insight into the articulation. Beginning with the formal configuration, let us compare the poetic construction of both versions, in this way striving to advance slowly toward the center of the connections. We have already noted that in the earlier version the relationship of the people and the god to each other (and also to the poet) remains indeterminate. Opposed to this in the later poem is the powerful consolidation of the individual spheres. The gods and the living are indissolubly bound together in the destiny of the poet. The traditional and simple hierarchy of mythology is overcome. It is said of the poem, which leads men "toward ingathering," that it leads them "like heavenly beings"—and leads the heavenly ones themselves. The actual basis of the comparison is thus overcome, for it is said immediately afterward that the poem leads the heavenly ones, too, and no differently from men. Here, at the center of the poem, the orders of gods and men are strangely counterpoised, the one balancing the other. (Like two scales: they are left in their opposing positions, yet lifted off the scale beam.) From this emerges, very graphically, the

fundamental formal law of the poetized, the origin of that lawfulness whose realization gives the later version its foundation. This law of identity states that all unities in the poem already appear in intensive interpenetration, that one can never grasp the elements purely in themselves but only the structure [*Gefüge*] of relations, wherein the identity of each individual being is a function of an infinite chain of series in which the poetized unfolds. This is the law of identity—the law according to which all essences in the poetized are revealed as the unity of what are in principle infinite functions. No element can ever be singled out, void of relation, from the intensity of the world order which is felt at the heart of the poem. With respect to all individual structures—to the inner form of the verses and images—this law will prove to be fulfilled, so as to bring about, finally, in the midst of all poetic relations, the identity of the perceptual and intellectual forms among and with one another—the spatiotemporal interpenetration of all configurations in a spiritual quintessence, the poetized that is identical with life.—Here, however, it is necessary to mention only the present configuration of this order: the balancing of the spheres of the living and the heavenly ones (this is how Hölderlin most often names them), in an arrangement far removed from the mythological. And following the heavenly ones, even following the naming of poetry, there once again arises “the chorus of princes, / According to their kind.” So that here, at the center of the poem, men, heavenly beings, and princes—falling headlong, as it were, from their old orders—are linked to one another. That this mythological order is not decisive, however, and that a quite different canon of figures runs through this poem, is seen most vividly in the tripartite arrangement in which princes still claim a place beside heavenly ones and men. This new order of poetic figures—of the gods and the living—is founded on the significance that both have for the destiny of the poet, as well as for the sensuous order of his world. Their real origin, as Hölderlin saw it, can come to light only at the end, as the abiding foundation of all relations, and what is evident earlier is only the difference in the dimensions of this world and this destiny, a difference these dimensions assume with respect to the gods and the living; only at the end is revealed the full and undiminished life of these once so isolated worlds of figures in the poetic

cosmos. But now the law, which appeared to be the formal and general condition for the construction of this poetic world, begins, strange and powerful, to unfold.—In the context of the poetic destiny, all figures acquire identity; for here they are together raised up and sublated within a single vision, and as sovereign as they may seem, they finally fall back into the boundedness of the poem. The growing precision of the figures, their intensification, is seen most forcefully in the changes made to the first version. At every point, the concentration of poetic power will create space for itself, and a rigorous comparison will make the basis of even the slightest deviation understandable as one that subserves unity. What is most important about the inner intention must thereby come to light, even where the first version conformed to it only feebly. Life in song, in the unwavering poetic destiny that is the law of the Hölderlinian world—this we pursue through the interconnection of figures.

In very sharply profiled orders, gods and mortals move in contrasting rhythms through the poem. This becomes clear in the progression from and back to the middle verse. A rigorously ordered, albeit concealed, sequence of dimensions is realized. In this world of Hölderlin's, the living are always clearly the *extension* of space, the outspread plane, in which (as will become evident) destiny extends itself. Majestically—or with an amplitude reminiscent of the oriental—the invocation begins: "Are not many of the living known to you?" What was the function of the opening verse in the first version? The relation of the poet to all the living was invoked as the origin of courage. And nothing remained but an acquaintance with, a knowing of, the many. The question concerning the origin of this determination of the multitude through the genius, to whom it is "known," leads into the correlations that follow. A great deal, a very great deal, is said of Hölderlin's cosmos in those next words, which—strange once again, as though coming from the world of the East, and yet much more original than the Greek Parcae—confer majesty upon the poet: "Does not your foot stride upon what is true, as upon carpets?" The transformation of the opening of the poem, with its significance for the nature of courage, proceeds. The reliance on mythology gives way to the context of one's own myth. For here, if one were content to see nothing more than the

conversion of the mythological vision into the more sober one of walking, or to see nothing more than how dependency in the original version. ("Does not the Parca herself nourish you for service?") turns, in the second version, into assertion ("Does not your foot stride upon what is true?")—all this would mean remaining only on the surface of the poem.—In an analogous way, the word "related" of the first version was intensified and changed to "known": a relation of dependency has become an activity.—Yet the crucial fact is that this activity is once again converted into the mythic, into that from which the dependency in the earlier poem flowed. The mythic character of this activity, however, is based on its taking a course prescribed by destiny; indeed, it itself already comprehends the fulfillment of destiny. The existence of the people, its proximity to the poet, testifies to the way in which the activity of the poet always reaches into orders determined by destiny and thus is eternally preserved and transcended in these orders while preserving and transcending them. The poet's knowledge of the living, like their existence, is based on the order that, according to the sense of the poem, may be termed the truth of the situation.<sup>11</sup> The possibility of the second verse, with the tremendous vigor of its image, necessarily presupposes the truth of the situation as the ordering concept of Hölderlin's world. The spatial and intellectual orders prove to be conjoined through an identity of that which determines and that which is determined—an identity proper to both. In both orders, this is an identity not of the same or the equal but of the identical; through it they interpenetrate to the point of identity with each other. Decisive for the spatial principle, then, is that it fulfills in perception the identity of what determines and what is determined. The situation is the expression of this unity; space is to be understood as the identity of situation and situated. Immanent to everything determinative in space is its own determinacy. Every situation is determined only in space, and only in space is it determinative. Just as the image of the carpet (since a plane is here laid down as the foundation of a spiritual system) should remind one of its exemplariness in being patterned and should evoke the spiritual arbitrariness of the ornament in thought—ornament thus constituting a true determination of the situation, making the situation absolute—so the order of truth it-

self, on which one may stride, is occupied by the intensive activity of the gait as an inner, plastically temporal form. This spiritual domain is something one can stride upon; and it necessarily allows the strider, so to speak, his every arbitrary stride in the region of the true. These spiritual-sensory orders in their quintessential embodiment constitute the living, in whom all the elements of poetic destiny are deployed in an inner and particular form. Temporal existence in infinite extension, the truth of the situation, binds the living to the poet. In the same way, too, the coherence of the elements in the relation between people and poet comes to light in the final verse: "Good too are we and capable, sent [*geschickt*] to someone to some end." According to a (perhaps general) law of lyric, the words attain their perceptual meaning in the poem without sacrificing the figurative. Thus, two orders interpenetrate in the double meaning of the word *geschickt*.<sup>12</sup> Determining and determined, the poet appears among the living. As in the participle *geschickt*, a temporal determination completes the spatial order in the event—namely, of being-found-fitting. This identity of orders is once more repeated in the determination of purpose or destination: "to someone to some end." As if, through the order of art, the act of animating had to become doubly clear, everything else is left uncertain and the isolation within great extension is hinted at in the phrase "to someone to some end." Now it is astonishing how, at this point, where the people [*Volk*] is in fact characterized in the most abstract way, an almost wholly new figuration of the most concrete life arises from the interior of the line. Just as what is skillful will emerge as the innermost essence of the poet (as his limit with respect to existence), so what is skillful appears here before the living as that which has been sent; the identity arises in one form: determining and determined, center and extension. The activity of the poet finds itself determined with respect to those who are alive; the living, however, determine themselves in their concrete existence—"to someone to some end"—with respect to the essence of the poet. The people exists as sign and script of the infinite extension of its destiny. This destiny itself, as will become clear later, is poetry, the song. And so, as the symbol of song, the *Volk* has to bring Hölderlin's cosmos to fulfillment. The same thing is seen with the transformation that created "tongues of

the people" from "poets of the people." The precondition of this poetry is more and more to convert the figures borrowed from a neutral "life" into members of a mythic order. Through such transformation, people and poet are integrated with equal force into this order. Particularly palpable in these words is the withdrawal of the genius in his mastery. For the poet, and with him the people from whose midst he sings, are wholly transposed into the circle of the song, and a planar unity of the people with its poet (in the poetic destiny) is the conclusion once again. Now, depersonalized, the people appears (may we compare this with Byzantine mosaics?) as if pressed in the surface around the great flat figure of its sacred poet. This is a different people, more definite in its essence than that of the first version. Corresponding to it is another conception of life: "Therefore, my genius, only step / Naked into life and have no care." Here "life" lies outside poetic existence; in the new version it is not the precondition but the object of a movement accomplished with mighty freedom: the poet *enters into* life; he does not wander forth in it. The incorporation of the people into that representation of life in the first version has turned into a connectedness, in destiny, between the living and the poet. "Whatever happens, let it be opportune for you [*gelegen dir!*]" At this point the earlier version has the word "blessed" [*gesegnet*]. It is this same procedure—a dislocation of the mythological—that everywhere constitutes the inner form of the revision. "Blessed" is a notion that depends on the transcendental, the traditionally mythological, and that is not grasped from out of the center of the poem (let us say, from the genius). "Opportune" [*gelegen*] reaches back again fully into the poem's center; it means a relation of the genius itself, in which the rhetorical "let be" of this verse is transcended and preserved through the presence of this "opportunity" [*Gelegenheit*]. Spatial extension is given anew and with the same meaning as before. Once again, it is a matter of the lawfulness of the good world, in which the situation is at the same time something situated through the poet and through him opportune, just as for the poet the true must be something traversable: Hölderlin once began a poem: "Be glad! You have chosen the good lot."<sup>13</sup> Here the chosen one is meant; for him there exists only *the* lot, hence the good one. The object of this relation of identity between poet and destiny is the living. The con-

struction "be rhymed for joy" presupposes the sensory order of sound. And here too, in rhyme, the identity between determinant and determined is given—the way, let us say, the structure of unity appears as half a doubling. Identity is given as law, not substantially but functionally. The rhyming words themselves are not named. For, of course, "rhymed for joy" no more means "rhymed with joy" than "opportune for you" turns the "you" itself into something that is laid down, something spatial. Just as that which is opportune was recognized as a relation of the genius (not *to* him), so is rhyme a relation of joy (not *to* it). Rather, that dissonance of the image, which in its insistent emphasis sets up a tonal dissonance, has the function of making the spiritual order of time that is inherent to joy perceptible, audible, in the chain of an infinitely extended occurrence corresponding to the infinite possibilities of rhyme. Thus, the dissonance in the image of the true and of the carpet has evoked traversability as the unifying relation of the orders, just as "opportunity" signified the spiritual-temporal identity (the truth) of the situation. Within the poetic structure, these dissonances bring into relief the temporal identity inherent in every spatial relation and hence the absolutely determining nature of spiritual existence within the identical extension. The bearers of this relation are quite clearly the living. A path and opportune goal in keeping with precisely these extremes of figurality must now become visible in a manner different from that appropriate to the idyllic world-feeling conditioning these verses in the earlier period: "What then could / Offend you, heart, or what / Befall you there where you must go?" At this point, in order to feel the growing power with which the verse approaches its end, the punctuation of both drafts may be compared. Only now is it entirely comprehensible how in the following verse mortals, with the same importance as heavenly ones, are brought closer to poetry, now that they have found themselves fulfilled by the poetic destiny. To be understood in its penetrating impact, all this must be compared with the degree of form that Hölderlin in the original version lent to the people. There the *Volk* was delighted by poetry, related to the poet, and one could speak of the poets of the people. In this alone the more rigorous power of an image of the world might already be surmised—an image that has found what was previously pursued

only from afar; the fateful significance of the people in a mode of vision that turns them into a sensuous-spiritual function of the poetic life.

These relations, which until now have remained obscure, especially as concerns the function of time, achieve new distinctness when their peculiar transformation with respect to the form of the gods is followed. Through the inner configuration that is proper to the gods in the new world structure, the essence of the people is established more precisely than it could be through contrast. As little as the first version knows a significance of the living—who have their inner form in an existence drawn into the poetic destiny, determined and determining, true in space—just as little is a particular order of the gods recognizable in it. Passing through the new version, however, is a movement in a plastic-intensive direction, and this movement lives most strongly in the gods. (Alongside the direction that, represented in the people, has a spatial trajectory toward infinite happening.) The gods have turned into most particular and definite figures, in whom the law of identity is conceived in a wholly new way. The identity of the divine world and its relation to the destiny of the poet is different from identity in the order of the living. There, whatever happens, in its determination through and for the poet, was recognized as flowing from one and the same source. The poet experienced the true. In this way the people were known to him. In the divine order, however, there is, as will be shown, a particular inner identity of form. This identity we found already intimated in the image of space and, so to speak, in the determination of the plane through ornament. But having come to govern an order, it brings about a concretizing of the living. A peculiar doubling of the form arises (connecting it with spatial determinations), in that each figure once again finds its concentration in itself, bears in itself a purely immanent plasticity [*Plastik*] as expression of its existence in time. In this direction of concentration, things gravitate toward existence as pure idea and determine the destiny of the poet *in* the pure world of forms. Plasticity of form is revealed as that which is spiritual or intellectual. This is how the “cheerful day” turned into the “thinking day.” It is not a matter of an epithet characterizing the quality of the day; rather, the day is granted the gift that is precisely the condi-



tion of the spiritual identity of essence: thinking. In this new version the day now appears to the highest degree formed, at rest, in accord with itself in consciousness, as a figure having the inner plasticity of existence, to which corresponds the identity of the event in the order of the living. From the perspective of the gods, the day appears as the formed quintessence of time. And as a thing that persists, so to speak, it gains a much deeper meaning—namely, that the god concedes it. This idea that the day is conceded is to be rigorously distinguished from a traditional mythology, according to which the day is bestowed. For here something is already intimated that later is shown with a weightier power: that the idea leads to the concretizing of the form and that the gods are wholly delivered over to their own plasticity, are able only to concede or to begrudge the day, since in their form they are closest to the idea. Here again, one might mention the heightening of the intention in the domain of pure sound—through alliteration. The significant beauty with which the day is here elevated as principle of plasticity and, at the same time, of contemplation is again found intensified at the beginning of “Chiron”: “Where are you, meditative one, that always must / Turn aside at times? Where are you, Light?”<sup>14</sup> The same vision has inwardly transformed the second line of the fifth verse and refined it to the highest degree, compared with the corresponding passage in the early version. Quite in opposition to “fleeting time,” to the “transitory ones,” it is that which persists—duration in the form of time and of men—that has been developed in the new version of these lines. The phrase “turning of time” (*Wende der Zeit*) plainly comprehends the moment of persistence as well, the moment of inner plasticity in time. And that this moment of inner temporal plasticity is central can become entirely clear only later, like the central importance of other hitherto demonstrated phenomena. The phrase “us, who fall asleep” has the same expressive function. Manifest once again is the deepest identity of form (in sleep). Here one would do well to recall the words of Heraclitus: Waking, we indeed see death—but in sleep we see sleep.<sup>15</sup> Our concern is with this plastic structure of thought in its intensity, that for which the contemplatively fulfilled consciousness forms the ultimate basis. The same relation of identity that here leads, in an intensive sense, to the temporal plasticity

of form, must lead in an extensive sense to an infinite configuration of form—to a confined plasticity, as it were, in which form becomes identical with the formless. At the same time, the concretizing of the form in the idea signifies: its ever more unbounded and infinite expansion, the unification of figures in that absolute form which the gods assume. It is this form that provides the object by which the poetic destiny delimits itself. The gods signify to the poet the immeasurable configuration of his destiny, just as the living guarantee even the widest extension of happening as something within the domain of poetic destiny. This determination of destiny through configuration constitutes the objectivity of the poetic cosmos. At the same time, however, it signifies the pure world of temporal plasticity in consciousness; the idea becomes dominant in it. Whereas previously the true was included in the activity of the poet, it now emerges sovereign in sensory fulfillment. In the formation of this world image, any sort of dependence on conventional mythology is ever more rigorously eliminated. The more remote term “progenitor” is replaced by “father,” and the sun god is transformed into a god of heaven. The plastic, indeed architectonic, significance of the heavens is infinitely greater than that of the sun. But at the same time one sees here how the poet progressively overcomes the difference between form and the formless; and heaven signifies as much an extension as a diminishment of form, in comparison with the sun. The power of this context illuminates the lines “Upright on golden / Leading strings, like children.” Again the rigidity and inaccessibility of the image recalls an oriental mode of vision. Because the plastic connection with the god is given amid unformed space (and emphasized in its intensity by means of color, the only instance of color in the new version), this line has an especially strange and almost deadening effect. The architectonic element is so strong that it corresponds to the relation that was given in the image of heaven. The forms of the poetic world are infinite and at the same time limiting; according to the inner law, the form has to be sublated in the existence of the poem, and has to enter into it, to the same degree as do the animated powers of the living. Even the god must in the end be of service to the poem and carry out [*vollstrecken*] its law, just as the people had to be the sign of its extension [*Erstreckung*]. This comes about at the

end: "and bring one / From among the heavenly beings." The structuring, the inwardly plastic principle, is so intensified that the fate of the dead form breaks over the god, so that—to remain within the image—the plastic dimension is turned inside out, and now the god becomes wholly object. The temporal form is broken from the inside out as something animated. The heavenly one *is brought*. We have here an overarching expression of identity: the Greek god has entirely fallen prey to his own principle, the form. The highest sacrilege is understood as hubris, which, fully attainable only by a god, transforms him into a dead form. To give oneself form—that is the definition of "hubris." The god ceases to determine the cosmos of the poem, whose essence—with art—freely elects for itself that which is objective: the poem's cosmos brings the god, since gods have already become, in thought, the concretized being of the world. Here, already, can be recognized the admirable organization of the last verse, in which the immanent goal of all structuration in this poem is summed up. The spatial extension of the living determines itself in the temporally inward intervention of the poet—this is how the word *geschickt* [capable, sent] was explained—in the same isolation in which the people became a series of functions of destiny. "Good too are we and capable, sent to someone to some end"—if the god has become object in his dead infinity, the poet seizes him. The order of people and god, as dissolved in unities, here becomes unity within the poetic destiny. Manifest is the manifold identity in which people and god are overcome as the conditions of sensory existence. The center of this world rightfully belongs to another.

The interpenetration of individual forms of perception and their connectedness in and with the spiritual, as idea, destiny, and so on, has been pursued in sufficient detail. In the end it cannot be a matter of investigating ultimate elements, for the ultimate law of this world is precisely connection: as the unity of function of that which connects and that which is connected. But an especially central site of this connectedness must still be noted, one in which the boundary of the poetized with life is pushed forward the farthest, and in which the energy of the inner form shows itself all the mightier, the more the life in question is fluid and formless. At this site the unity of the poetized

becomes visible; the whole extent of the connections is comprehended, and the variation in the two versions of the poem, the deepening of the first in the second, is recognized.—One cannot speak of a unity of the poetized in the first version. The development is interrupted by the detailed analogy of the poet with the sun god; thereafter, it does not return with full intensity to the poet. In this version, in its detailed, special treatment of dying as well as in its title, there is still the tension between two worlds—that of the poet and that of the “reality” which is menaced by death and which here appears only disguised as divinity. Subsequently, the duality of the worlds disappears; with death, the quality of courage falls away; and in the unfolding nothing is given except the existence of the poet. It is therefore crucial to question the basis for a comparison of two drafts that differ so markedly in detail and exposition. Again, what makes it possible to compare the poems is not any similarity of elements but only connection in a function. This function resides in the solely demonstrable functional quintessence: the poetized. The poetized of both versions—not in its similarity [*Gleichheit*], which is nonexistent, but in its “comparability” [*Vergleichheit*]—shall be compared. The two poems are connected through their poetized and, to be sure, through their stance toward the world. This stance is courage, which, as it is understood more deeply, becomes less a quality than a relation of man to world and of world to man. The poetized of the first version initially knows courage only as a quality. Man and death stand opposite each other, both rigid; they have no perceptual world in common. To be sure, the attempt was already made to find a deep relation to death in the poet, in his simultaneously divine and natural existence, but it was made only indirectly, through the mediation of the god, to whom death in a mythological sense properly belonged and to whom the poet, again in a mythological sense, was brought near. Life was still the precondition of death; the figure originated in nature. The resolute formation of vision and figure from out of a spiritual principle was not undertaken; thus, there was no interpenetration of vision and figure. In this poem, the danger of death was overcome through beauty. In the later version, all beauty springs from the overcoming of danger. Earlier, Hölderlin had ended with the dissolution of the figure, whereas at the end of the

new version the pure ground of configuration appears. And this is now attained on a spiritual basis. The duality of man and death could be based only on a facile feeling of life. It ceased to exist, once, the poetized drew itself together into a deeper coherence, and a spiritual principle—courage—from out of itself formed life. Courage is surrender to the danger that threatens the world. Concealed within this principle is a singular paradox, which alone makes it possible fully to understand the structure of the poetized in the two versions: the danger exists for the courageous person, yet he does not heed it. For he would be a coward if he heeded it; and if it did not exist for him, he would not be courageous. This strange relation is resolved insofar as the danger threatens not the courageous one himself but rather the world. Courage is the life-feeling of the man who gives himself up to danger, in such a way that in his death he expands that danger into a danger for the world and at the same time overcomes it. The greatness of the danger originates in the courageous person—for only in striking him, in his total submission to it, does it strike the world. In his death, however, it is overcome; it has reached the world, which it no longer threatens. In his death is liberation and at the same time stabilization of the immense forces that every day, in the form of bounded things, surround the body. In death these forces that threatened the courageous person as danger have already abruptly changed, are calmed in it. (This is the concretization of the forces, which already brought the essence of the gods closer to the poet.) The world of the dead hero is a new mythical one, steeped in danger—precisely the world of the second version of the poem. In it a spiritual principle has become completely dominant: the unification of the heroic poet with the world. The poet does not have to fear death; he is a hero because he lives the center of all relations. The principle of the poetized as such is the supreme sovereignty of relation. In this particular poem, it is figured as courage—as the innermost identity of the poet with the world, emanating from which are all the identities of the perceptual and the intellectual in this poem. That is the basis on which the isolated figure repeatedly transcends itself in the spatiotemporal order, where, as formless, omniform, process and existence, temporal plasticity and spatial happening, it is transcended. All known relations are united in

death, which is the poet's world. In death is the highest infinite form and formlessness, temporal plasticity and spatial existence, idea and sensuousness. And in this world every function of life is destiny, whereas in the first version, with its more traditional conception, destiny determined life. It is the oriental, mystical principle, overcoming limits, which in this poem again and again so manifestly overcomes the Greek shaping principle, and which creates a spiritual cosmos from pure relations of intuition, of sensuous existence, where the spiritual is only an expression of the function that strives toward identity. The transformation of the duality of death and poet into the unity of a dead poetic world, "saturated with danger," is the relation in which the poetized of both poems resides. Only now does reflection on the pivotal third verse become possible. It is evident that death, in the form of "ingathering" [*Einkehr*], was transposed to the center of the poem; that in this center lies the origin of song, as origin of the quintessence of all functions; that here the idea of "art" and the idea of "the true" arise as expressions of the reigning unity. What was said about the overcoming of the order of mortals and heavenly ones in this context appears fully assured. One can assume that the words "a solitary animal" designate men; and this fits in very well with the title of this poem. "Timidity" has now become the authentic stance of the poet. Transposed into the middle of life, he has nothing remaining to him except motionless existence, complete passivity, which is the essence of the courageous man—nothing except to surrender himself wholly to relation. It emanates from him and returns to him. Thus the song seizes the living, and thus they are known to it—no longer related. Poet and poetry are not differentiated in the cosmos of the poem. The poet is nothing but a limit with respect to life; he is the point of indifference, surrounded by the immense sensuous powers and the idea, which preserve in themselves the law of the poet. How utterly he signifies the untouchable center of all relation is most powerfully conveyed in the last two verses. The heavenly ones have become signs of infinite life, which, however, is delimited vis-à-vis the poet: "and bring one/From among the heavenly beings. Yet we ourselves/ Bring apt hands." Thus, the poet is no longer seen as form; he is now only the principle of form—that which delimits, which bears even his own body.

He brings his hands—and the heavenly beings. The forceful caesura of this passage effects the distance the poet should have from all form and from the world, as their unity. The structure of the poem confirms the justice of Schiller's words: "Therein consists . . . the true artistic secret of the master: he obliterates the matter through the form. . . . The sensibility of the spectator and listener must remain completely free and inviolate; it must emerge from the artist's magic circle pure and perfect, as if it had come from the hands of the Creator."<sup>16</sup>

In the course of this study, the word "sobriety" was deliberately avoided, though it might often have served for purposes of characterization. Only now do we adduce Hölderlin's words "sacredly sober," for now their interpretation has been prepared.<sup>17</sup> It has been said of these words that they express the tendency of Hölderlin's later creations. They arise from the inner certainty with which those works take their place in the spiritual life of the poet, where sobriety now is allowed, is called for, because this life in itself is sacred, subsisting beyond all exaltation in the sublime. Is this life still that of Hellenism? No more is this the case than is the life of a pure work of art ever that of a people, or that of an individual, or anything other than its own life, as we find it in the poetized. This life of the poet is molded in the forms of Greek myth, but—decisive point—not in them alone; precisely the Greek element is overcome in the last version and offset by another element that (without express justification, to be sure) we called the oriental. Almost all the changes in the later version—in the images as well as in the introduction of ideas and, ultimately, of a new meaning of death—tend in this direction; all arise as unlimited in contrast to the phenomenon limited by its own form, reposing in itself. That here a decisive question lies concealed—and perhaps not only in regard to the understanding of Hölderlin—cannot be demonstrated in the present context. The contemplation of the poetized, however, leads not to the myth but rather—in the greatest creations—only to mythic connections, which in the work of art are formed into a unique configuration, unmythological and unmythic, such as we cannot define more precisely.

But if there were words with which to grasp the relation between myth and that inner life from which the later poem issued, it would be

those Hölderlin wrote at a period still later than that of this poem: "Legends that take leave of the earth, / . . . They turn toward humanity."<sup>18</sup>

## Notes

"Zwei Gedichte von Friedrich Hölderlin" (GS2, 105–126) was written in winter 1914–1915 and published posthumously. Translated by Stanley Corngold.

1. The lyric poet, novelist, and dramatist Friedrich Hölderlin (1770–1843) composed the two poems analyzed here, "Dichtermut" (The Poet's Courage) and "Blödigkeit" (Timidity), in 1801, during the most productive period of his life, the years 1795–1806. These years saw his enthusiastic reception of republican ideas from France, his hapless wandering from one tutoring post to another, his unhappy secret liaison with a married woman, and his deepening solitude. In 1807 he was declared insane and, after a spell in a clinic, was moved to a carpenter's house in Tübingen, where he spent the rest of his life, and where he continued intermittently to write poetry. Benjamin includes a letter of Hölderlin's from 1802 in his collection of letters, *Deutsche Menschen* (German Men and Women; 1936); see SW3, 180–182. In his memoir, *Walter Benjamin: The Story of a Friendship*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken, 1981), Gershom Scholem recalls: "On October 1[, 1915, Benjamin] spoke about Hölderlin and gave me a typewritten copy of his essay, 'Two Poems by Friedrich Hölderlin,' which contained a profoundly metaphysical analysis, written in the first winter of the war, 1914–1915, of the poems 'Dichtermut' and 'Blödigkeit.' Only later did I realize that this gift was a sign of his great trust in me. Hölderlin, who had been rediscovered by [the poet] Stefan George and his group, was regarded by the circles in which Benjamin moved between 1911 and 1914 as one of the supreme figures in poetry. . . . Benjamin [referred] to Norbert von Hellingrath's edition of Hölderlin as well as to Hellingrath's study of Hölderlin's Pindar translations; Hellingrath's study had made a great impression on him" (17). Hellingrath (1888–1916), a member of the George circle, was the editor of the first critical-historical edition of Hölderlin, which began appearing in 1913; in 1910 he had published an edition of Hölderlin's highly original translations of the fifth-century B.C. Greek lyric poet Pindar, together with his dissertation on these translations. That the latter study was an inspiration for Benja-



min's own esoteric essay on Hölderlin is confirmed by a letter of February 27, 1917, to Ernst Schoen: "Have you read that Norbert von Hellingrath died in the war? I had wanted to give him my Hölderlin study to read when he returned. The way Hellingrath framed the subject in his work on the Pindar translations was the external motivation for my study" (CWB, 85). The internal motivation can be gathered from a passage Benjamin deleted from his first draft of an article on Stefan George commissioned in 1928, on the occasion of the poet's sixtieth birthday, by the Berlin weekly, *Die literarische Welt*; in the deleted passage, Benjamin says that his Hölderlin essay was dedicated to his friend Fritz Heinle, a young poet who had committed suicide on the eve of World War I (see GS2, 921). Whether the essay additionally has roots in a "talk about Hölderlin" given by Benjamin when he was still in high school (see CWB, 146) cannot be determined, since no record of the talk has survived.

2. See Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Werke*, Weimar Edition (1887–1919), Abteilung I, 14:287. Goethe's term is *Gehalt*. Benjamin develops the terms *Sachgehalt* (material content) and *Wahrheitsgehalt* (truth content) in his essay of 1921–1922, "Goethes Wahlverwandtschaften" (Goethe's *Elective Affinities*), in SW1, 297–360.

3. "Intellectual-perceptual" translates *geistig-anschaulich*. *Geistig* also means "spiritual."

4. Benjamin's term, *das Gedichtete*, is a substantive formed from the past participle of the verb *dichten*, "to compose artistically." The English translation, "the poetized," has a precedent in Ralph Waldo Emerson's address, "The American Scholar" (1837): "Instead of the sublime and beautiful, the near, the low, the common, was explored and poetized."

5. Novalis, *Schriften* (Jena: Diederichs, 1907), 2:231. Cited also in "Dostoevsky's *The Idiot*" (Chapter 43 in this volume). Benjamin makes further use of the writings of Novalis, pseudonym of Friedrich, Freiherr von Hardenberg (1772–1801), in his dissertation of 1919, "Der Begriff der Kunstkritik in der deutschen Romantik" (The Concept of Criticism in German Romanticism), in SW1, 116–200.

6. "Effectively present" translates *aktuell vorhanden*.

7. *Greek anankē* means "necessity."

8. Reference is to the Latin poet Horace, who wrote at the beginning of his third book of *Odes* (23 B.C.), "Odi profanum vulgus" (I hate the crowd of the uninitiated).

9. On Pindar, see note 1 above.

10. The compound noun *Weibertreue* (woman's fidelity), to which Benjamin compares the compound *Dichtermut* (poet's courage), has a cynical connotation.

11. "Situation" translates *Lage*, which literally means "lay," as in "lay of the land."

12. As an adjective, *geschickt* means "capable," "skillful." As past participle of the verb *schicken*, it means "sent." It is closely related to the noun *Schicksal*, "destiny."

13. The poem in question is "An Landauer" (To Landauer; 1800).

14. Hölderlin, "Chiron" (1801). Compare the epigraph to "The Metaphysics of Youth" (Chapter 26 in this volume), from an earlier Hölderlin poem, of which "Chiron" is a revision.

15. Benjamin refers to the pre-Socratic Greek philosopher Heraclitus, fragment 21 (Diels).

16. Friedrich Schiller, *Über die ästhetische Erziehung des Menschen* (On the Aesthetic Education of Man; 1801), Letter 22.

17. Hölderlin wrote the term as one word, *heiligenüchterne*, in his poem "Hälfte des Lebens" (Half of Life; 1802–1803).

18. Hölderlin, "Der Herbst" (Autumn; ca. 1832–1843).

## The Life of Students

There is a conception of history that, trusting in the infinity of time, distinguishes only the tempo, rapid or slow, with which human beings and epochs advance along the path of progress. Corresponding to this is the incoherence, the imprecision and lack of rigor in the demand such a conception makes on the present. The following remarks, in contrast, concern a particular condition in which history rests concentrated, as in a focal point, something seen from time immemorial in the utopian images of thinkers.<sup>1</sup> The elements of the ultimate condition do not manifest themselves as formless progressive tendencies, but are deeply embedded in every present in the form of the most endangered, excoriated, and ridiculed creations and ideas. The historical task is to give shape to this immanent state of perfection and make it absolute, make it visible and ascendant in the present. This condition cannot be circumscribed with a pragmatic description of details (institutions, customs, and so on); in fact, it eludes them. Rather, it can be grasped only in its metaphysical structure, like the messianic realm or the idea of the French Revolution. Thus, the contemporary historical significance of students and of the university, the form of their existence in the present, merits description only as metaphor as image of a suprême metaphysical estate of history. Only in

these terms is it comprehensible and possible. Such a description is neither a call to arms nor a manifesto, ineffectual as these both would be; but it gives an indication of the crisis that lies at the heart of things and that brings on the decision to which the cowardly succumb and the courageous submit. The only way to deal with the historical position of the student body and the university is the system. So long as various preconditions for this are absent, there remains but one alternative: by means of knowledge, to liberate the future from its deformation in the present. This is the sole aim of criticism.

The question to be addressed is that of the conscious unity of student life. This is the starting point, for there is nothing to be gained by distinguishing specific problems in student life—problems of science, the state, virtue—if the courage to submit is missing from this life. What distinguishes student life is in fact the reluctance to submit to a principle, to be absorbed by an idea. The name of “science” or “scholarship” [*Wissenschaft*] serves primarily to conceal a deep-rooted and broadly reinforced indifference. To measure student life by the idea of science does not necessarily imply panlogism or intellectualism—as is commonly feared—but is a legitimate criticism, since science is normally adduced as the students’ bulwark against “alien” demands. At issue, then, is inner unity, not critique from outside. Here one may object that, for the vast majority of students, academic study is nothing more than vocational training. Because “academic study has no bearing on life,” it must serve exclusively to determine the lives of those who pursue it. Among the most innocently mendacious reservations people have about science is the expectation that academic study must lead to a profession for all and sundry. Yet scholarship, far from leading inexorably to a profession, may in fact preclude it. For science by its nature does not permit you to abandon it; in a way, it places the student under an obligation to become a teacher, but never to embrace the official professions of doctor, lawyer, or university professor. It leads to no good if institutes at which one acquires titles, credentials, and other prerequisites for life or a profession are permitted to call themselves seats of learning. The objection that the modern state cannot otherwise produce the doctors, lawyers, and teachers it needs is irrelevant. It only illustrates the revolutionary magnitude of the task

entailed in creating a community of learning, as opposed to a corporation of qualified functionaries. It only shows how far the modern disciplines, in the development of their professional apparatus (through knowledge and skill), have been drawn away from their common origin in the idea of knowledge, an origin that, in their eyes, has become a mystery, if not a fiction. Anyone who accepts the modern state as a given and believes that everything must serve its development will be forced to reject these ideas. One can only hope that such a person will not call for state protection and support for "research." For the true sign of corruption is not the collusion of the university and the state (something that is by no means incompatible with honest barbarity), but the theory and guarantee of academic freedom, when in reality people assume with brutal complacency that the aim of study is to steer its disciples to socially adapted individuality and service to the state. No tolerance of opinions and teachings, however free, can be beneficial, so long as there is no provision for the life that these ideas—the free ideas no less than the strict ones—carry with them, so long as people can naively deny this immense divide by pointing to the link between the universities and the state. It is misleading to raise expectations in the individual if, in the fulfillment of these expectations, individuals are deprived of the spirit of their collective whole, and the only remarkable and even astounding point to be emphasized here is the extent to which institutes of higher learning are characterized by a gigantic game of hide-and-seek in which the two collective bodies, students and teachers, constantly push past one another without ever seeing one another. The students are always inferior to the teachers because they have no official status, and the legal basis of the university—personified in the minister of education, who is appointed by the sovereign, not by the university—is a barely veiled alliance of the academic authorities with the organs of the state, a correspondence carried on over the heads of the students (and in rare, welcome instances, over the heads of the teachers as well).

The uncritical and spineless acquiescence in this situation is an essential feature of student life. It is true that the so-called independent student organizations, and other socially oriented groups, have attempted to resolve this problem.<sup>2</sup> This attempt ultimately has in view

the complete assimilation of the institution to bourgeois norms, and nothing has shown more clearly that the students of today as a community are incapable of even formulating the question of scholarly life, the life of learning, or grasping its irreducible protest against the vocational demands of the age. In order to elucidate the students' chaotic conception of academic life, it is necessary to criticize the ideas of the "independent" students and of those close to them. To this end, I shall quote from a speech I gave to a student audience in the hope of contributing to the renewal.<sup>3</sup>

There is a very simple and reliable criterion by which to test the spiritual value of a community. It is to ask: Does the totality of the productive person find expression in it? Is the whole human being committed to it and indispensable to it? Or is the community as superfluous to each individual as he is to it? It is so easy to pose these questions, and so easy to answer them with reference to contemporary types of social community. And the answer is decisive. Everyone who achieves strives for totality, and the value of an achievement lies precisely in that totality—in the fact that the whole, undivided nature of a human being should come to expression. But when determined by our society, as we see it today, achievement does not contain a totality; it is completely fragmented and derivative. It is not uncommon for the social community to be the site where a joint and covert struggle is waged against higher ambitions and singular goals, while more deeply rooted development is obscured. The socially relevant achievement of the average person serves in most cases to suppress the original and underived aspirations of the inner man. We are speaking here of academically trained people, people who for professional reasons have some kind of inner connection with the spiritual struggles, with the skepticism and critical attitudes, of students. These people appropriate a milieu entirely alien to themselves and make it their workplace; at this remote post they create a limited activity for themselves, and the entire totality of such labor consists in serving the interests of an often abstractly conceived general public. There is no internal or intrinsic connection between the spiritual existence of a student and, say, his concern for the welfare of workers' children or even for other students. No connection, that is, apart from a concept of duty unrelated to his own, most proper labor. It is a concept based on a mechanical dissocia-

tion: on the one hand, he has his stipend from the people; on the other, he has his work for society. The concept of duty here is calculated, derivative, and distorted; it does not arise from the work itself. And this duty is carried out not by suffering in the cause of truth, not by bearing all the scruples of a researcher, or indeed by any intention connected with the person's spiritual life. But rather by a crude and extremely superficial opposition, comparable to that between the ideal and the material, or the theoretical and the practical. In a word, that social labor is not the ethical intensification, but only the timid reaction, of a spiritual life. Yet the deepest and most crucial objection is not that such socially relevant labor is simply left floating, abstractly opposed to the true work of a student, and so constitutes an extreme and thoroughly reprehensible form of the relativism that, incapable of a synthesizing life, anxiously and fastidiously strives to ensure that everything spiritual is accompanied by the physical, every thesis by its antithesis; the decisive factor, then, is not that the totality of such labor is in reality empty general utility. What is decisive is that despite all this it lays claim to the gestures and attitude of love, where only mechanical duty exists. The latter is often nothing more than a deflection of purpose, an evasion of the consequences of the critical, intellectual existence to which the student is committed. For in reality a student is only a student because the problem of spiritual life is closer to his heart than is the practice of social welfare. Finally—and this is an infallible sign—the social work of students engenders no renewal of the concept and valuation of social work in general. In the public mind, such work still seems to be a peculiar mixture of duty and charity on the part of individuals. Students have not been able to demonstrate its spiritual necessity and for that reason have never been able to establish a truly serious community based on it, but only a community where zeal for duty is allied to self-interest. That Tolstoyan spirit that laid bare the huge gulf between bourgeois and proletarian existence, the concept that service on behalf of the poor is the task of mankind and not a spare-time student activity, the concept that here, precisely *here*, it was all or nothing, that spirit that took root in the ideas of the most profound anarchists and in Christian monastic orders, this truly serious spirit of a social work, which had no need of childlike attempts to empathize with the soul of the workers or of the people—this spirit failed to develop in student communities.<sup>4</sup> The attempt to organize the will of an academic community into a social community of work

founded on the abstract nature of the object and its unconnectedness. The totality of the willing subject could not find expression, because in that community its will could not be directed toward the totality.

The symptomatic importance of these attempts on the part of the independent students, including Christian-Socialists and many others, is that in their desire to promote their utility in the state and in life, they reenact in the microcosm of the university that same conflict that we have noted in the relationship of the university to the state. They have gained a sanctuary in the university for egoisms and altruisms of almost every kind, for every foregone conclusion in the world at large; only radical doubt, fundamental critique, and the most important thing of all—the life that is dedicated to total reconstruction—are excluded. What we have here is not the progressive spirit of the independent students as opposed to the reactionary power of the dueling fraternities. As we have tried to show, and as we can see from the uniformity and passivity of the universities as a whole, the independent student organizations themselves are very far from putting into effect a carefully meditated spiritual will. Their voice has not made itself heard on any of the issues that have been raised here. Their indecisiveness makes them inaudible. Their opposition runs on the well-oiled tracks of liberal politics; their social principles have not developed beyond the level of the liberal press. The independent students have not thought out the true problem of the university, and to that extent it is bitter historical justice that on official occasions the dueling fraternities, who in the past did experience and struggle with the problem of academic community, now appear as the unworthy representatives of the student tradition. On fundamental issues the independent student does not display a more serious will or greater courage than what is found in the fraternities, and his influence is almost more pernicious than theirs, in that it is more deceptive and misleading: for this undisciplined, bourgeois, and small-minded movement claims the role of champion and liberator in the life of the university. The modern student body cannot be found in the places where the conflicts over the spiritual rebirth of the nation are raging—in the arena of its new struggle for art, or at the side of its writers



and poets, or at the sources of religious life. This is because the German student body does not exist as such. Not because it refuses to join in the latest "modern" movements, but because, as a student body, it completely ignores all these movements in their depth; because as a student body it constantly drifts in the wake of public opinion, following the broadest currents; because it is courted and spoiled by every party and alliance, is the child praised by all because in a certain sense it belongs to all, while it remains in every respect devoid of the nobility that up to a century ago gave German students a visible profile and enabled them to step forward in prominent places as the champions of a better life.

The perversion of the creative spirit into the vocational spirit, which we see at work everywhere, has taken possession of the universities as a whole and has isolated them from the nonofficial, creative life of the mind. The mandarin contempt for the activities of independent scholars and artists who are alien and often hostile to the state is a painful proof of this. One of the most celebrated German university professors referred in a lecture to those "coffeehouse literati according to whom Christianity is finished." The tone of this statement altogether corresponds to its accuracy. And if a university organized in this way works against academic study, which at least simulates direct relevance to the state through "applicability," how much more openly hostile will be its stance toward the Muses. Insofar as it directs students toward the professions, it must necessarily overlook immediate creativity as a form of community. In reality, the hostile and uncomprehending estrangement of the academy from the life that art requires can be interpreted as rejection of any immediate creativity that is unconnected with official position. This is fully confirmed by the immaturity and schoolboy attitude of the students. From the standpoint of aesthetic feeling, the most striking and painful aspect of the university is no doubt the mechanical reaction of the students as they listen to a lecture. Only a genuinely academic or sophistic culture of conversation could make up for this level of receptivity. And, of course, the seminars are worlds away from such a thing; since they, too, rely mainly on the lecture format, and it makes little difference whether the speakers are teachers or students. The organization of the university has ceased to be grounded in

the productivity of its students, as its founders had envisaged. They thought of students essentially as teachers and learners at the same time; as teachers, because productivity means complete independence, regard for knowledge, no longer for the teacher. But where office and profession are the ideas that govern student life, there can be no true learning. There can no longer be any question of devotion to a form of knowledge that, it is feared, might lead them astray from the path of bourgeois security. There can be neither devotion to learning nor dedication of one's life to a younger generation. Yet the vocation of teaching—albeit in forms quite different from those current today—is an imperative for any authentic conception of learning. Such dangerous devotion to learning and youth must already live in the student as the capacity to love, and it must be the root of his creativity. On the other hand, his life follows in the train of older generations; he acquires learning from his teacher, without following him in his profession. With a light heart he renounces the community that binds him to the creators and that can derive its general form exclusively from philosophy. He should be creator, philosopher, and teacher all in one, and this in his essential and determining nature. His profession and life will take shape on that basis. The community of creative human beings elevates every field of study to the universal: in the form of philosophy. Such universality is not achieved by confronting lawyers with literary questions, or doctors with legal ones (as various student groups have tried to do). It can be brought about only if the community ensures by its own efforts that before all specialization of studies (which cannot exist without reference to a profession), and beyond all the activities of the professional schools, it itself, the community of the university as such, will be the progenitor and guardian of the philosophical form of community—something grounded not in the problems posed by the narrow scientific discipline of philosophy but in the metaphysical questions of Plato and Spinoza, the Romantics and Nietzsche. This, rather than conducted tours through welfare institutions, would signify the closest link between profession and life, although a deeper life. And would prevent the rigidification of study, its degeneration into a heaping up of knowledge. Like the amorphous waves of the populace that surround the palace of a prince, the student body ought to encircle the

university—which will impart existing methods of knowledge together with the cautious, bold, and yet exact attempts at new methods—as the site of a permanent spiritual revolution, where at the outset new ways of questioning would be incubated, more far-reaching, less clear, less exact, but perhaps sometimes proceeding from a deeper intuition than is the case with scientific questions. The student body could then be considered, in its creative function, as the great transformer, whose task is to seize upon the new ideas that generally spring up sooner in art and social life than in science and convert them, through its philosophical approach, into scientific questions.

The secret domination of the idea of profession is not the most insidious of those distortions, whose appalling effect is that they all strike the center of creative life. In exchange for various surrogates, a banal conception of life barter the spirit. It succeeds in ever more thickly veiling the peril of spiritual life and in ridiculing the few surviving visionaries as starry-eyed dreamers. On a deeper level, erotic convention deforms the unconscious life of students. Just as the vocational ideology of the professions fetters the intellectual conscience, as though it were the most natural thing in the world, so the concept of marriage, the idea of the family, weighs upon *eros* with the force of an obscure convention. *Eros* seems to have vanished from an epoch that extends, empty and undefined, between being the son in a family and being the father in a family. What might unify the existence of one who creates and of one who procreates, and whether this unity is to be found in the family—these questions could not be posed so long as there was the tacit expectation of marriage, an illegitimate interlude in which the most one could do was erect barriers to temptation. The *eros* of creators—if any community were in a position to appreciate and to struggle for this, it would have to be that of students. But even where all the external conditions of bourgeois life were absent and there was no prospect of establishing a bourgeois situation, that is, a family; even where, as in many European cities, a hydra-headed mass of women based their entire economic existence on students (through prostitution)—even there the student failed to ask about the *eros* proper to him. He must surely have questioned whether, in his own case, procreation and creativity should remain separate, whether the one

should apply to the family and the other to the profession, and whether, since both are distorted by this separation, either would flow from the existence peculiar to himself. For painful and insulting though it may be to put such a question to contemporary students, it cannot be avoided, since in them—by their very nature—these two poles of human existence are closely connected chronologically. We are faced with a question that no community can leave unresolved, and which nevertheless no people since the Greeks and early Christians have in principle mastered; it has always weighed upon the great creative minds: how could they do justice to the image of mankind and foster community with women and children, whose productivity is of a different kind? The Greeks, as we know, resolved the problem by force. They subordinated the procreating *eros* to the creative *eros*, so that in the long run, by excluding women and children from the life of their state, they brought about its collapse. The Christians provided the possible solution for the *civitas dei*: they repudiated separate existence in either sphere.<sup>5</sup> The most progressive among the students have never gone further than endless aestheticizing talk of camaraderie with women students; they do not shrink from hoping for a “healthy” neutralization of the erotic in both men and women. In fact, with the aid of prostitutes the erotic has been neutralized in the universities. And where it wasn’t, it was replaced by unrestrained harmless-ness, that oppressive cheerfulness, and the unladylike young coed was boisterously welcomed as successor to the ugly old spinster teacher. It is difficult to resist the general observation here that the Catholic Church has a much more lively and timorous instinct for the power and necessity of *eros* than does the bourgeoisie. In the universities, an immense task lies buried, unresolved, and denied—one greater than the countless tasks that provoke the zeal of society. It is this: proceeding from the spiritual life, to unify that which—in the intellectual independence of the creative (in the fraternities) and in the unmastered force of nature (in prostitution)—sadly confronts us, distorted and fragmented, as a torso of the one spiritual *eros*. The necessary independence of the creative and the necessary inclusion of the woman who is not productive in the man’s sense in a single community of the

creative—through love: this task of formation must naturally be demanded of students, because it is the form of their lives. But here such murderous convention reigns that students have not even brought themselves to confess their guilt in the matter of prostitution, and people imagine that this immense and blasphemous devastation can be halted by appeals to chastity, because once again they lack the courage to open their eyes to the true, more beautiful eros. This mutilation of youth goes too deep to waste many words on it. It should be given over to the consciousness of thinkers and to the resolution of the brave. It cannot be reached through polemic.

How does a younger generation that can permit such an obscuring of its own idea, such warping of the contents of its life, look upon itself? What image does it have of itself inwardly? This image carries the stamp of the fraternities, and they are still the most visible embodiment of the student conception of youth, at which other student organizations, led by the independent students, hurl their social slogans. German students are to a greater or lesser degree obsessed with the idea that they should relish their youth. That entirely irrational period of waiting for employment and marriage had to be given some sort of content, and it had to be a playful, pseudo-romantic one that would help pass the time. A terrible stigma attaches to the much-vaunted joviality of student songs, to the new ascendancy of the student fraternity. It represents fear of the future and simultaneously a reassuring pact with the inevitable philistinism that one likes to picture fondly to oneself in the shape of the "old boys."<sup>6</sup> Because one has sold one's soul to the bourgeoisie, marriage and profession included, one insists on those few years of bourgeois freedoms. This exchange is agreed upon in the name of youth. Openly or in secret—in a bar or amid deafening speeches at student meetings, the dearly purchased intoxication is maintained, and nothing is to disturb it. It is the consciousness of dissipated youth and of sold-out old age that longs for peace and quiet, and on this the attempts to give a soul to student life have finally foundered. Yet, just as this way of life makes a mockery of

every given reality and is punished by all natural and spiritual powers, by science through the agency of the state, by *eros* through the agency of prostitutes, so, too, is it punished by nature, devastatingly. For students are not the younger generation; they are the aging generation. To acknowledge the onset of age requires a heroic decision on the part of those who 'have lost their years' of youth in German schools, and to whom university study seemed finally to open up the youthful life that had eluded them year after year. Nevertheless, what matters is for them to recognize that they have to be creators, therefore solitary and aging, and that already in their midst is an abundant generation of children and youths, to whom they can dedicate themselves only as teachers. For them, it is the strangest of feelings. This is why they cannot find themselves in their own existence and are ill-prepared from the start to live with children—for that is what teaching is—because at no point have they risen into the sphere of solitude. Refusing to recognize their age, they idle their time away. The sole condition for creation is the acknowledged yearning for a beautiful childhood and worthy youth. Without this, 'no renewal of their lives will be possible: without the lament for lost greatness.'<sup>7</sup> It is the fear of solitude that is responsible for their erotic dissoluteness, the fear of surrender. They measure themselves against their fathers, not against their successors, and salvage the semblance of their youth. Their friendship is without greatness and without solitude. That expansive friendship of the creative, which is oriented toward infinity, and which is concerned for humanity as a whole even when it is just two together or when they are alone with their yearning, has no place in the lives of university students. Instead there is only that fraternizing that is both limited and unbridled, and that remains the same whether they are drinking in a bar or founding societies in cafés. All these institutions of student life are a marketplace of the provisional, like the bustling activity in lecture halls and cafés; they are simply there to fill the empty waiting time; diversions from the voice that summons them to build their lives out of the unified spirit of creation, *eros*, and youth. There is a chaste and abstemious youth that is full of reverence for those who are to succeed it, and to this youth Stefan George's lines bear witness:

Inventors of rolling verse and sparkling  
 Nimble dialogues: time and separation  
 Allow me to engrave on the tablets of my memory  
 The former adversary. Do likewise!  
 For on the rungs of intoxication and emotion  
 We are both descending; never again will  
 The praise and jubilation of youth so flatter me;  
 Never again will verses thunder so in your ear.<sup>8</sup>

Faintheartedness has alienated the life of students from insights like this. But every form of life, with its specific rhythm, follows from the imperatives that determine the life of the creative. So long as students withdraw from such a life, their existence will punish them with ugliness, and hopelessness will strike the hearts of even the dullest.

At issue is still this extreme and endangered necessity; there is need of strict direction. Each person will discover his own imperatives, if he makes the highest demand on his life. Each will be able, by means of knowledge, to liberate the future from its deformation in the present.

## Notes

“Das Leben der Studenten” (GS2, 75–87) was published in *Der Neue Merkur*, September 1915. Translated by Rodney Livingstone.

1. “The Life of Students” appeared in two versions during Benjamin’s lifetime: first in the monthly *Der Neue Merkur* in 1915, and then in an expanded version (containing the lines from Stefan George at the end) in the anthology *Das Ziel* (The Goal), published in 1916 by Kurt Hiller, a former publicist of literary Expressionism now propounding a political program called “Activism.” Benjamin later regretted his participation in this second publication and distanced himself from Hiller’s rationalist position. In the first paragraph of the essay, the terms “condition” and “state” both translate *Zustand*; “focal point” translates *Brennpunkt*.

2. Benjamin refers to the Independent Students’ Associations (*Freie Studentenschaften*), which had been organized in many German universities at the beginning of the twentieth century in opposition to established student

associations such as fraternities and dueling corps. The Independent Students' Associations were the primary university arm of the larger movement known today as the German Youth Movement, which had grown out of a number of small groups of youths who enjoyed rambling through the countryside around Berlin (the *Wandervögel*, or "walking birds"). By 1912 the Free German Youth (*Freideutsche Jugend*), the umbrella organization for the movement, contained elements ranging from the pacifist idealists with whom Benjamin was associated to virulently nationalist, anti-Semitic conservatives.

3. Benjamin was elected president of the Berlin Independent Students' Association in February 1914 for the coming summer semester. He delivered his inaugural address in May, and this is the speech from which he quotes in "The Life of Students" (the address itself is not preserved). He was reelected in July, but with the outbreak of war in August, he turned away from concerns with school reform and broke off relations with most of his comrades in the youth movement.

4. The Russian novelist Leo Tolstoy (1828–1910) in his later years evolved a nonviolent Christian anarchism, which led him to reject the authority of churches, to oppose organized government, and to condemn private property, while affirming the moral development of the individual as the basis of any social progress. Tolstoyism became an organized sect and around 1884 began to gain proselytes. Tolstoy's radical creed is expounded in such works as *A Confession* (1882), *The Kingdom of God Is within You* (1894), *What Is Art?* (1896), and *The Law of Love and the Law of Violence* (1908).

5. The Latin *civitas dei* means "city of God."

6. The "old boys" (*alten Herrn*) are former members of a fraternity who still retain influence in the organization and are sources of patronage for the next generation.

7. The phrase "lament for lost greatness" (*Klage um versäumte Grösse*) echoes the end of the second paragraph of Benjamin's "The Metaphysics of Youth" (Chapter 26 in this volume).

8. Stefan George, "H.H.," in *Das Jahr der Seele* (The Year of the Soul; 1897).



## A Child's View of Color

Color is something spiritual, something whose clarity is spiritual, or whose mixture yields nuance, not a blur. The rainbow is a pure childlike image.<sup>1</sup> In it color is wholly contour, is that which marks boundaries for the person who sees with a child's eyes; it is not the coating overlaid on the substance, as it is for an adult. The latter abstracts from color, regarding it as a deceptive cloak for individual objects in time and space. In the contouring color, things are not objectified but filled by an order in infinite nuances; color is the particular, not as lifeless object and rigid individuality but as something winged that flits from one form to the next.<sup>2</sup> Children make soap bubbles. Likewise, colored pickup sticks, sewing kits, decals, tea sets, even pull-out picture books and, to a lesser extent, folded-paper constructions—all depend on this nature of color.<sup>3</sup>

Children enjoy the alteration of color in a variable transition of nuances (soap bubbles); or in the clear and emphatic heightening of the quality of colors in oleographs, paintings, and the images produced by decals and magic lanterns. For them color is of a fluid nature, is the medium of all changes, and not a symptom. Their eye is not directed toward the plastic per se, which they distinguish through their sense of touch. The range of distinctions within a given mode of sensuous

apprehension (sight, hearing, and so on) is presumably larger in children than in the adult, whose ability to correlate the senses is more developed. The child's apprehension of color brings the sense of sight to its highest artistic development, its purity, insofar as it isolates that sense; it elevates this development to a spiritual level, since it views objects according to their color content and hence does not isolate them but rather secures in them the unifying perception that is characteristic of the world of imagination [*Phantasie*]. Only through such perception of colors, and in intercourse with them, can imagination be fully developed, can it be satisfied and disciplined. Where it applies itself to the plastic arts, it becomes overly lush; no less so where it turns to history; and in music it remains unfruitful. For the fact is that imagination never has to do with form, which is a concern of law, but can only perceive the living world—from the human being outward—creatively in feeling. This takes place through color, which for that reason cannot be pure and particular where it remains dull and flat, but instead, where it is not confined to illustrating objects, can be nuanced and shaded, full of movement, arbitrary, and always beautiful. In this regard, coloring-in has a purer pedagogical function than painting, so long as it retains transparency and freshness and does not make for a blotchy skin over things. Adults, productive persons find no footing in color; for them color is possible only in relation to law. They have a world order to provide, and their task is not to grasp innermost principles and essences but to develop them. In a child's life, color is the pure expression of the child's pure receptivity, insofar as it is directed toward the world. It contains an implicit instruction to a life of the spirit, which no more depends on circumstances and contingencies for its creativity than color, for all its receptivity, conveys the existence of dead, causal substances.

Children's drawings take colorfulness as their point of departure. In general, their goal is color in its greatest possible transparency, and there is no reference to form, area, or concentration into a space. For pure seeing is directed not toward the space and the object but toward the color, which, to be sure, appears to the highest degree objective, but not spatially objective. Painting as art starts from nature and proceeds through concentration on form. The objectivity of color is not

based on form but, without affecting the perception empirically, goes right to the spiritual object through isolation of the act of seeing. It dissolves the intellectual associations of the soul and creates a pure mood, without thereby giving up the world. Colorfulness does not stimulate the animal senses [*affiziert nicht animalisch*] because the continuous imaginative activity of the child springs from the soul. But because children see this so purely, without allowing themselves to be disconcerted in their soul, it is something spiritual: the rainbow/it refers not to a chaste abstraction but to a life in art.

The order of art is paradisiacal because there is no thought of fusion in the object of experience as a result of excitement; rather, the world is full of color in a state of identity, innocence, harmony. Children are not ashamed, since they do not reflect but only see.<sup>4</sup>

## Notes

"Die Farbe vom Kinde aus Betrachtet" (GS6, 110–112) was written in 1914–1915 and published posthumously. Translated by Rodney Livingstone.

1. This fragmentary text belongs with two other of Benjamin's early writings on color included in this volume, "The Rainbow: A Conversation about Imagination" (Chapter 33) and "The Rainbow, or The Art of Paradise" (Chapter 34).

2. In this sentence, "object" translates *Sache* and "objectified" translates *versachlicht*. In the following paragraphs, "object" translates *Gegenstand* and "objectivity" translates *Gegenständlichkeit*. Also, "the particular" translates *das Einzelne*.

3. On color in children's games, compare Benjamin's feuilleton piece of 1926, "A Glimpse into the World of Children's Books" (SW1, 443). See also the section "Colors" (ca. 1938) in Benjamin's *Berlin Childhood around 1900* (SW3, 380).

4. "Die Kinder schämen sich nicht, denn sie haben keine Reflexion, sondern nur Schau." This contrasts with a passage in a fragment from 1920–1921: "Highly developed sense of shame among children. That they so often are ashamed [*sich so häufig schämen*] goes together with the fact that they have so much imagination, especially at the earliest age" (GS6, 120 [fragment 87]).

# The Rainbow

## A Conversation about Imagination

*For Grete Radt<sup>1</sup>*

*Margarethe:* It's early in the morning; I was afraid of disturbing you. And yet I couldn't wait. I want to tell you about a dream before it's faded.

*Georg:* I'm always pleased when you visit me in the morning, because I'm all alone with my paintings then and don't expect you. You've come through the rain; it was refreshing. So tell me now.

*Margarethe:* Georg—I see that I can't do it. A dream can't be told.

*Georg:* But what have you dreamed? Was it beautiful or terrible? Was it some sort of experience? And with me?

*Margarethe:* No, nothing like that. It was quite simple. It was a landscape. But it glowed with colors; I've never seen such colors. Not even painters know them.

*Georg:* They were the colors of imagination, Margarethe.

*Margarethe:* The colors of imagination—yes, that's so. The landscape was radiant with them. Every hill, every tree, the leaves: there were infinitely many colors in them. And infinitely many landscapes. As if nature were coming alive in a thousand different incarnations.

*Georg:* I know these images of imagination. I believe they are in me when I paint. I mix the colors and then I see nothing but color. I almost said: I am color.

*Margarethe:* That's how it was in the dream; I was nothing but seeing. All the other senses had been forgotten, had disappeared. And I myself was nothing; I was not my understanding that deduces things from images transmitted by the senses. I was not someone seeing; I was only the seeing itself. And what I saw was not things, Georg, but only colors. And I myself was something colored in this landscape.

*Georg:* What you describe is like being intoxicated. Remember what I told you about that rare and delicious feeling of drunkenness I knew in earlier times. I felt myself to be quite light in those hours. Of everything around me I was aware only of that through which I was in the things: their qualities, through which I penetrated them. I myself was a quality of the world and floated over it. It was filled with me as though with color.

*Margarethe:* Why have I never found in painters' images the glowing, pure colors, the colors of the dream? For the source of these colors, the imagination, that which you compare to intoxication—the pure reception in self-forgetting—this is the soul of the artist.<sup>2</sup> And imagination is the inmost essence of art. I've never seen that more clearly.

*Georg:* Imagination may be the soul of the artist, but it is not yet for that reason the essence of art. Art creates. And it creates objectively, that is, in relation to the pure forms of nature. Think now—as you have often done with me—about the forms: Art creates in accord with an infinite canon, which grounds infinite forms of beauty.<sup>3</sup> These are forms that all reside in form, in relation to nature.

*Margarethe:* Do you mean to say that art imitates nature?

*Georg:* You know I don't think so. It's true that the artist always wants only to grasp nature in its ground; he wants to receive it purely, formally recognize it. But residing in the canon are the inner creative forms of conception [*Empfangen*]. Consider painting. It doesn't proceed first of all from imagination, from color, but rather from the spiritual,<sup>4</sup> the creative, from form. Its form is to grasp living space. To construct it according to a principle; for what lives can be received only by being generated. The principle is the canon of painting. And whenever I've reflected on the matter, I've always found that, for painting, the principle is spatial infinity—just as, for sculpture, it's spatial dimension. It isn't color that is the essence of painting but surface. In it, in its depths, space lives by conforming to its own infinity.<sup>5</sup> In the surface, the being-of things opens to space, not really

*in it.* And color is first of all the concentration of the surface, the in-building<sup>6</sup> of infinity into it. Pure color is itself infinite, but in painting only its reflection appears.

*Margarethe:* How are the painter's colors distinguished from those of the imagination? And isn't imagination the primal source of color?

*Georg:* That it is; although this is a matter for wonder. But the painter's colors are relative as compared to the absolute color of imagination. Pure color is found only in perception; only in perception is there the absolute.<sup>7</sup> Painterly color is merely the reflected splendor of imagination. In such color the imagination has recourse to creating, makes transitions with light and shadow, grows poor. The spiritual ground in the image is the surface; and when you've truly learned to see, you see this: the surface illuminates the color, not vice versa. Spatial infinity is the form of the surface; it is the canon, and color comes from it.

*Margarethe:* You won't be so paradoxical as to say that imagination has nothing to do with art. And even if art's canon is spiritual and entails the formative creation of liveliness—which, of course, refers, in infinitely many ways, to nature alone—the artist nevertheless also conceives. Simple beauty, the vision, the joy of pure contemplation appears to him not less but rather more, and more deeply, than to others.

*Georg:* How do you understand what appears in imagination? Are you thinking of it as a prototype [*Vorbild*] and the creation as copy [*Abbild*]?

*Margarethe:* The creator knows no prototype and therefore none in imagination either. I'm thinking of it not as prototype or model but as primal image [*Urbild*]. As that which appears—that in which he is consumed, in which he abides, that which he never leaves, and which has originated in imagination.

*Georg:* The Muse gives the artist the primal image of creation. It's true what you say.—And what else is this primal image than the warrant of the truth of his creation, the guarantee that he is one with the oneness of spirit, from which mathematics no less than plastic art originates, history no less than language? What else does the Muse guarantee the poet by means of the primal image than the canon itself, the eternal truth in which art is grounded? And that intoxication which flows through our nerves during the highest intellectual clarity—the consuming intoxication of creation—is the conscious-

ness of creating within the canon, according to the truth we fulfill. In the hand that writes poems or the hand that paints pictures, in the musician's fingers, in the motion of the sculptor, the single move, the complete absorption in the gesture which he regards as divinely inspired in himself—he himself, the molder, as a vision, his hand guided by the hand of the Muse—in all this the imagination holds sway as perception of the canon in the one who sees and in the things. As unity of both in the perception of the canon. It is only the power of imagination that connects the intoxication of one who enjoys—I spoke of that—to the intoxication of the artist. And only where the latter strives to make the primal image into a model, only where he seeks to take possession of the spiritual without giving it form, and views amorphously, only there does the work become fanciful [*phantastisch*].<sup>8</sup>

*Margarethe:* But if imagination is the gift of pure conception in general,<sup>9</sup> aren't we defining its nature too broadly? For then imagination is in every movement that is wholly pure, wholly unselfconscious, and as though done in the perceiving of it—in dance and song and walking and speaking as much as in the pure seeing of color. And why have we wanted nonetheless to see imagination preeminently in the phenomenon of color?

*Georg:* Certainly, there is in us a pure perception of our movement, and of all our doing, and on this is founded, I believe, the imagination of the artist. And yet color remains the purest expression of the essence of imagination. For no creative capacity in the human being corresponds precisely to color: The line is not received so purely, because in our mind we can alter it through movement; and the tone is not absolute, because we have the gift of voice. They don't partake of the pure, inviolable, the manifest beauty of color.—Of course, I recognize that sight is part of a distinctive region of the human senses to which no creative capacity corresponds: color perception, odor, and taste. Notice how clearly and sharply language registers this. It has the same to say of these objects as of the activity of the senses themselves: they smell and taste. Of their color, however, it says: they look. One never speaks this way of objects in order to designate their pure form. Do you get an inkling of the mysterious deep realm of spirit commencing here?

*Margarethe:* Didn't I have a presentiment of such a realm before you did, Georg? But I want very clearly to separate color from the

mysterious realm of the senses. For as we delve deeper into this second realm of receptive sensation to which no creative capacity corresponds, the objects of this realm become more substantial and the senses less able to experience pure qualities. They can't be grasped in themselves alone in a pure, autonomous act of attention but only as qualities of a substance. But color originates in the inmost core of imagination precisely because it is quality alone; in no respect is it substance or does it refer to substance. Hence, one can say of color only that it is quality, not that it has a quality. It's for this reason that colors have become symbols for people with no imagination. In color, the eye is turned purely toward the spiritual; color spares the creator the need to go through form in nature. It allows the faculty of sense in pure reception to encounter the spiritual immediately, to encounter harmony. The one who sees is wholly within the color; to look at it means to sink the gaze into a foreign eye, where it is swallowed up—the eye of imagination.<sup>10</sup> Colors see themselves; in them is the pure seeing, and they are its object and organ at the same time. Our eye is colored. Color is generated from seeing and it colors pure seeing.

*Georg:* You've spoken very beautifully of how, in color, the properly spiritual essence of the senses—the reception—appears, and of how color, as something spiritual and immediate, is the pure expression of imagination. And I understand only now what language is saying when it speaks of the look of things. It's pointing precisely to the sight of color. Color is the pure expression of world view, in the sense of seeing with the world [*Weltanschauen*], overcoming the one who sees. Through imagination, color is in touch with odor and taste, and the most refined persons will develop the imagination freely through the entire range of their senses. I, for one, believe that choice spirits have intimations of aroma, even of taste, arising purely from within, as others have visions of color. Just think of Baudelaire. These extreme imaginings will even be a guarantee of innocence, since only the pure imagination, from which they flow, is not profaned by atmosphere and symbols.

*Margarethe:* You refer to innocence as the region of imagination in which sensations still live purely as qualities in themselves, untroubled as yet in the receiving spirit. Isn't this sphere of innocence the sphere of children and of artists? I see now clearly that both live in the world of color, and that imagination is the medium in which they



conceive and create. A poet has written: "If I were made of fabric, I would color myself."<sup>11</sup>

*Georg:* To create in receiving is the consummation of the artist. This receptive conception by imagination is a conception not of the prototype but of the laws themselves.<sup>12</sup> It would unite the poet with his figures in the medium of color. To create entirely on the strength of imagination is presumably to be divine. It would mean creating entirely on the strength of laws, immediately, and free from any reference to laws through forms. God creates by an emanation of his being, as the Neo-Platonists say; this being would finally be nothing other than the imagination from whose essence the canon emerges. Perhaps this is what our poet recognized in color.

*Margarethe:* "So only children dwell entirely in innocence, and in blushing they themselves relapse into the existence of color. Imagination is so pure in them that they're capable of this."<sup>13</sup>—But look: it's stopped raining. A rainbow.

*Georg:* The rainbow. Look at it. It's just color; nothing of it is form. And it's the emblem of the canon that emerges divinely out of imagination, for in it the unfolding of beauty is that of nature. Its beauty is the law itself, no longer transformed in nature, in space; no longer beautiful by virtue of equality, symmetry, or rules. No longer beautiful through forms derived from the canon, no, but beautiful in itself. In its harmony, since canon and work are as one.<sup>14</sup>

*Margarethe:* And doesn't all beauty in which the order of the beautiful appears as nature go back to this bow as emblem?

*Georg:* It's so. The canon resides in pure perception and is manifest solely in color. For in color nature is spiritual and, considered from its spiritual side, it is purely of color. It is really the primal image of art in keeping with its existence in imagination. Nature lives at its most inward in imagination, as the community of all things neither creating nor created. In pure perception nature has conceived. All objectivity in art goes back to this.

*Margarethe:* If only I could tell you how familiar to me color is! A world of memory surrounds me. I think of colors in the life of children. How everywhere there color is what is purely received, the expression of imagination. To linger within harmony, over nature, innocently. The polychromatic and monochromatic; the beautiful strange technics of my oldest picture books. Do you know how the contours there were everywhere dissolved in a rainbow-

like play, how heaven and earth were brushed with washes of transparent color! How the colors always floated over things, winged, coloring them very thoroughly and devouring them. Think of the many children's games that depend on pure perception in imagination: soap bubbles, tea parties, the moist colorfulness of the magic lantern, watercolors, decals. The colors were always as blurred as possible, dissolving, quite monotonously shaded, without transitions of light and shadow. Woolly sometimes, like the colored yarn used in embroidery. There were no masses, as with the colors of painting.<sup>15</sup> And doesn't it seem to you that this unique world of color, color as medium, as something without space [*als Raumloses*], was admirably represented by polychromy? A diffused, spaceless infinitude of pure reception—that's how the art world of the child was configured. Its only dimension was height.— Children's perception is itself diffused in color. They don't deduce. Their imagination is intact.

*Georg:* And all the things you speak of are just various sides of one and the same color of imagination. It is without transitions and yet plays in numberless nuances. It is moist, and dissolves things in the coloring of its contour, a medium, pure quality of no substance, many-colored and yet monochromatic, a colored filling-out of the *one* Infinite through imagination. It is the color of nature—of mountains, trees, rivers, and valleys, but above all of flowers and butterflies, the sea and clouds. Through color, the clouds are so near imagination. And for me the rainbow is the purest manifestation of this color that spiritualizes and animates nature throughout, that leads its origin back into imagination and makes of nature the mute, apperceived primal image of art. In the end, religion transposes its sacred realm into the clouds and its blessed realm into paradise. And Matthias Grünewald painted the halos of angels on his altar with the colors of the rainbow, so that the soul as imagination shines through the sacred figures.<sup>16</sup>

*Margarethe:* Imagination is also the soul of the dreamworld. The dream is pure reception [*Aufnehmen*] of appearance in the pure sense. It was of dream that I began speaking; now I could tell you even less of my dream, but you yourself have caught sight of its essence.

*Georg:* In imagination lies the ground of all beauty, which appears to us in pure reception [*Empfangen*] alone. It is beautiful—indeed, it is

the essence of beauty—that the beautiful can only be received, and only in imagination can the artist live and be absorbed in the primal image. The more deeply beauty enters into a work, the more deeply it is received. All creation is imperfect; all creation lacks beauty.<sup>17</sup> Let's be silent.

## Notes

"Der Regenbogen: Gespräch über die Phantasie" (GS7, 19–26) was written ca. January–February 1915 and published posthumously.

1. Grete Radt (1891–1979) was close to Benjamin from 1913 on, and was his first fiancée (1914–1916). The sister of Benjamin's friend Fritz Radt, she was active in the youth movement and a contributor to *Der Anfang*. She later married another close friend of Benjamin's, Alfred Cohn, and remained in touch with Benjamin to the end of his life.

The two speakers in this, the last of Benjamin's early dialogues, use the familiar mode of address (*du*) with each other. The dialogue is associated with other writings on painting and color from the period: see SW1, 48–51 (1914–1915); GS6, 109–127 (1914–1920).

2. In this sentence, "reception" translates *Aufnehmen*, literally the "taking up" and "taking in." It also translates *Empfangen* in one case below (see note 9). In "The Rainbow, or The Art of Paradise" (Chapter 34 in this volume), there is a notation: "pure reception [*Rezeption*]*—color / pure-production—form*" ("Aphorisms on the Theme").

3. On the idea of the canon, compare fragment 94 from 1917–1918 (GS6, 126): "The canon as *form* is to be defined conceptually. But form is only one side of the canon; the other side is content, which is not to be grasped conceptually. / The completed musical work is canon, *in* language and no longer audible; the *topos* [place] of the canon is language. Completion of music ruptures in the poetic, in the uncompleted.—The canon is in perception [*Anschauung*]."

4. *Geistig* means both "spiritual" and "intellectual."

5. "Nicht die Farbe ist das Wesen der Malerei, sondern die Fläche. In ihr, in der Tiefe, lebt der Raum seiner Unendlichkeit nach." *Nachleben* means "to conform to," "to live up to."

6. Benjamin uses the term *Einbildung*, "imagination," in such a way as to bring out its root meaning, which is translated here. In "The Rainbow, or The

Art of Paradise," he writes: "Beauty is based on concentration, and all beauty in art on concentration of form."

7. "Perception" here translates *Anschauung*, which can also mean "intuition."

8. On the distinction between the imaginative and the fanciful or fantastic, see the fragment "Imagination" (1920–1921), in SW1, 280.

9. "Gabe der reinen Empfängnis überhaupt." *Empfängnis* is derived from the verb *empfangen*, which in the transitive usually means "to receive" and in the intransitive "to conceive," "to become pregnant." In the fragment, "A Child's View of Color" (Chapter 32 in this volume), Benjamin speaks of the pure *Empfänglichkeit* (receptivity, susceptibility) of the child, and in the fragment "Imagination" he says that pure conceiving (*Empfängnis*) is "the basis of every work of art" (SW1, 281). Compare "Little Tricks of the Trade," written between 1929 and 1933 (SW2, 730 ["After Completion"]). The idea of *Empfängnis* as receptive conception also plays a part in Benjamin's 1916 essay "On Language as Such and on the Language of Man" (Chapter 40 in this volume).

10. Compare the section "Colors" (ca. 1938) in Benjamin's *Berlin Childhood around 1900* (SW3, 380).

11. The poet is Benjamin's friend Christoph Friedrich Heinle (1894–1914). See GS6, 121 (fragment 89).

12. "Empfangend zu schaffen ist die Vollendung des Künstlers. Diese Empfängnis aus Phantasie ist keine Empfängnis des Vorbilds sondern der Gesetze selbst." In this paragraph, the preposition "aus" is variously translated as "by," "on the strength of," and "from" (penultimate sentence). The preposition figures in the line quoted by Margarethe right above: "Wäre ich aus Stoff . . ."

13. See the brief fragment, "Erröten in Zorn und Scham" (Blushing in Anger and Shame; 1920–1921), in GS6, 120: "That [children] so frequently feel ashamed goes together with the fact that they have so much imagination, especially in earliest childhood."

14. "In der Harmonie, da Kanon und Werk zugleich ist." If "da" here is really supposed to be "die," the sentence would read: "In the harmony that is at once canon and work."

15. Benjamin had written: "There was nothing quantitative [*Es gab nichts Quantitatives*], as with the colors of painting." His wife Dora crossed out "nichts Quantitatives" and inserted the correction "keine Mengen" into the manuscript.

16. Matthias Grünewald (real name, Mathis Gothardt Nithardt; d. 1528) was a German painter whose visionary religious works are distinguished by expressive figural distortion and iridescent color. Benjamin refers to his larg-

est and most famous painting, the *Isenheim Altarpiece* (1510–1515), which he visited in Colmar, Alsace, as a student in 1913, and a reproduction of which hung in his study in his parents' villa in Berlin. He returns to Grünewald's halos in his 1916 essay "Socrates" (Chapter 36 in this volume).

17. ". . . alle Schöpfung ist unschön."

## The Rainbow, or The Art of Paradise

*From an Old Manuscript*<sup>1</sup>

It is a difficult question: where the beauty of nature comes from. For it must be altogether different from the beauty of painting and of plastic art, since these arts are not fashioned in imitation of natural beauty. And yet nature likewise has its beauty neither sporadically nor by accident; rather, its beauty comes of its own spirit.<sup>2</sup> This is shown by the fact that good souls who have managed not to be inculcated with artificial simplicity are able to dwell in nature and find nature—above all, children—beautiful. But nature is not beautiful by virtue of its space, by virtue of proximity or distance, immensity or smallness, abundance or scarcity. Space is not, by nature, beautiful, and art is based on space (inasmuch as space is made beautiful through transformation). Nature, however, is not based on space. Wherever it is a matter of such spatial properties, nature is beautiful not in light of mere perception but only in some sentimental and edifying regard, as when one pictures the Alps or the immensity of the sea./ Beauty is based on concentration, and all beauty in art on concentration of form. To the human being, form alone is given for the expression of his spirit, and all creations of the spirit rest on perfection of form. Art comes from generation [*Erzeugung*] and, inasmuch

as it comes to the generated spirit, truth will always be encountered in it. Space is properly the medium of generation in art, and art is creative only to the degree that it productively sets forth what is spiritual about space. Other than in art, space has no spiritual apparition. In sculpture, space is in a certain way generated, and that this happens will not be doubted. Space is made objective in proportion to its dimension. The space of nature, in this view, is undimensional, torpid, a nothing, if it is not animated by humble empirical means. Without such animation, three-dimensional space is unintelligible. Sculpture has to do with a space that emerges through generation and that is therefore as intelligible as it is unlimited.

Painting, too, generates space spiritually; its generation of form is likewise grounded originally in space, but it generates space in another form. Sculpture bases itself on the existence of space, painting on the depth of space. In this regard, depth is not to be thought of as a dimension. The spatial depth that is generated in painting concerns the relation of space to objects. This relation is mediated through the surface. In the surface, the spatial nature of things is developed in itself, as something unempirical, concentrated. Not the dimension but the infinity of space is constructed in painting. This happens through the surface, in that, here, things develop not their dimensionality, their extension *in* space, but their being *toward* space. The depth yields infinite space. In this way, the form of concentration is given, but this now requires for its fulfillment, for the allaying of its tension, a presentation of the infinite in itself and no longer as dimensional and extended.<sup>3</sup> The objects require a form of appearance that is grounded purely on their relation to space, that expresses not their dimensionality but the tension of their contour [*ihre konturale Spannung*], not their structural but their painterly form, their being in depth. For without this the surface does not attain to concentration, remains two-dimensional, and attains only delineated, perspectival, illusionary depth—not, however, depth as an undimensional form of relation between spatial infinity and object. The required form of appearance that accomplishes this is color in its artistic significance.

The colorfulness of an image is measured by how much the color develops the content of infinity from the spatial form of the object,

how much it sets an object into the surface and from out of itself gives depth to the object.

Clothing and adornment not mentioned in the dialogue.<sup>4</sup>

#### APHORISMS ON THE THEME<sup>5</sup>

The gaze of imagination [*Phantasie*] is a seeing from within the canon, not in accordance with it; therefore purely receptive, uncreative.<sup>6</sup>

Works of art are beautiful only in the realm of ideas [*nur in der Idee*]; to the extent that they are in accordance with the canon rather than within it, they are not beautiful. (Music, Futurist painting?)

All the arts are ultimately based on imagination.

Color does not relate to optics the way line relates to geometry/

The beauty of nature

and of the child

pure reception—color

filling out, contour / spiritual

are the medium of color

unintellectual nature of

reception [*Rezeption*]. Pure

seeing

special handling of color

in watercolors and the like

contour, monochromaticism,

nuances,

handling of ground and air

relief drawing—instead of

perspectival

The beauty of art

pure production—form

the medium of forms:

space / empirical

dimensionality, (sculpture)

infinity (painting)

in painting

pure painting, technical

design and modeling

through color.

In painting, a color cannot be considered as standing in itself alone; it stands in relation and has substance as surface or ground, in one way or another is shaded and connected to light and darkness. Color as



perceived by children exists entirely in itself, and can be related to no higher concept of color (through development).<sup>7</sup>

The clouds<sup>8</sup>

## Notes

“Der Regenbogen oder die Kunst des Paradieses” (GS7, 562–564) was written ca. mid-1915 and published posthumously.

1. This fragmentary text takes up some of the themes of “The Rainbow: A Conversation about Imagination” (Chapter 33 in this volume), even though the word “rainbow” occurs only in the title. It was evidently conceived as a recasting of the earlier dialogue into the form of a treatise having the character of a pseudoepigraph, a work carrying a false title or falsely ascribed to an older authority. Compare “A Child’s View of Color” (Chapter 32 in this volume).

2. “. . . ihre Schönheit ist von eignem Geist.”

3. “Allaying of its tension” translates *Befriedigung ihrer Spannung*. The next sentence indicates that what is at stake in the *Form der Konzentration* is not simply the alleviation but the expression or articulation of a tension.

4. Reference is to “The Rainbow: A Conversation about Imagination.”

5. With the exception of the paragraph beginning “In painting,” the following section of notes, perhaps indicating topics to be covered in an envisioned continuation of the text, is crossed out in the manuscript. Compare “Aphorisms on Imagination and Color” (1914–1915), in SW1, 48–49/ GS6, 109, where some of the same notes appear.

6. On the idea of the canon, see “The Rainbow: A Conversation about Imagination” and note 3 to that text.

7. See “The Rainbow: A Conversation about Imagination” for more on color in the life of children.

8. The motif of “clouds” appears at the end of “The Rainbow: A Conversation about Imagination.”

## The Happiness of Ancient Man

The human being who comes into the world after antiquity knows perhaps only one mental state in which, with complete purity and complete greatness alike, he sets his inwardness in relation to the whole of nature, of the cosmos: namely, pain.<sup>1</sup> Sentimental man, as Schiller calls him, can attain an approximately pure and great—that is to say, approximately naïve—sense of himself only at the high price of gathering his whole inner being to a unity divorced from nature.<sup>2</sup> His highest human simplicity and integrity rests on this separation from nature through pain, and in this opposition appears alike a sentimental phenomenon and a reflection. It might well be thought that reflection has taken hold of modern man with such intensity that in plain, simple happiness that knows no opposition to nature he finds the inner man too insubstantial and uninteresting to be unfolded freely outward from the depths, as opposed to remaining hidden, enclosed, in a kind of shame. For the modern man, too, happiness naturally signifies a state of the naïve soul *kat' exochēn*, but nothing is more characteristic than the modern's attempt to reinterpret in sentimental terms this purest revelation of the naïve.<sup>3</sup> The concepts of innocence and of the childlike, with their welter of false and corrupt representa-

tions, serve to fuel this process of reinterpretation. Whereas the naïve—the great—innocence lives in immediate contact with all the forces and forms of the cosmos, and finds its symbols in the purity, power, and beauty of the form, for the modern man this means the innocence of the homunculus, a microscopic, diminutive innocence, having the form of a soul that knows nothing of nature and that, thoroughly ashamed, does not dare acknowledge its condition even to itself, as though a happy man—to repeat—were a construct too empty and unsupported not to collapse in shame at the sight of itself. Thus, the modern sensation of happiness has something at once paltry and furtive about it, and it has spawned the idea of the happy soul that belies its happiness in continual activity and artificial restriction of feeling. The same significance attaches to the idea of childhood happiness, for in the child it likewise does not see the sensitive, pure being in whom feeling is expressed more immediately than in another; rather, it sees an egocentric child, one that, by its unknowingness and absorption in play, reinterprets nature and reduces it to unacknowledged feelings. In Büchner's *Lenz*, in a reverie of the ailing man who longs for peace, the small happiness of the sentimental soul is described this way:

"You see," he resumed, "when she used to walk through the room, singing half to herself, and every step she took was a kind of music, there was so much happiness in her, and that overflowed into me; I was always at peace when I looked at her or when she leaned her head against me, and—she was wholly a child; it seemed as if the world were too wide for her: she was so retiring, she would look for the narrowest place in the whole house, and there she'd sit as though all her happiness were concentrated into one little point, and then I thought so too; then I could have played like a child."<sup>4</sup>

It is decisive for the image which ancient man has of happiness that that small modesty that would bury happiness in the individual, concealing it deep within him where it cannot be reached through reflection (as a talisman against misfortune), becomes in ancient man its most

fearful contrary, becomes the sacrilege of reckless pride, becomes *hubris*. For the Greek, *hubris* is the attempt to present oneself—the individual, the inner person—as bearer of happiness; *hubris* is the belief that happiness is an attribute, and precisely that of modesty; it is the belief that happiness is something other [*etwas anderes*] than a gift of the gods, a gift they can withdraw at any hour, just as at any hour they can decree immeasurable misfortune for the victor (witness the returning Agamemnon).<sup>5</sup> Now, this is to say that the form in which happiness is visited upon ancient man is victory. His happiness is nothing if not this: that the gods have destined it to be his, and it is his destiny to believe that the gods have given it to *him* and to *him* alone. At this exalted hour that makes the man a hero, it was to keep reflection far from him, to lavish him at this hour with all the blessings that reconcile the victor with his city, with the groves of the gods, with the *eusebeia* of the ancestors, and finally with the power of the gods themselves—it was for this that Pindar sang his hymns to victory.<sup>6</sup> Both, then, are meted out to ancient man in happiness: victory and celebration, merit and innocence. Both with the same necessity and rigor. For no one can boast of his own merit when he is a champion in the games; against even the most outstanding the gods could send one more glorious, who throws him in the dust. And he, the victor, will in turn give thanks all the more to the gods who have granted him victory over the most heroic. Where is there room here for the stubborn presumption of merit, the adventurer's expectation of happiness that enables the bourgeois to get by in life? The *agōn*—and this is a deep-rooted meaning of that institution—accords to each the measure of happiness which the gods have decreed for him.<sup>7</sup> But, again, where is there room here for the empty, idle innocence of the unknowing with which modern man conceals his happiness from himself? The victor stands there visible to all, lauded by the people; innocence is absolutely necessary to *him* who holds aloft the vessel of victory like a bowl full of wine, one spilled drop of which, falling on him, would stain him forever. He does not need to renounce or belie any merit the gods have given him, nor does he need to reflect on his innocence, like the small, unquiet soul; what he needs is fulfillment of the blessings, so

that the divine circle that once elected him will keep the stranger near it, among the heroes.

The happiness of ancient man is consummated in the victory celebration: in the fame of his city, in the pride of his district and his family, in the exultation of the gods, and in the sleep that carries him away to the heroes.

## Notes

“Das Glück des antiken Menschen” (GS2, 126–129) was written ca. June 1916 and published posthumously.

1. In a letter to Herbert Belmore written toward the end of 1916 (CWB, 84), Benjamin places this essay first in a list of five of his recent essays that ends with “On Language as Such and on the Language of Man” (composed November 1916). The second essay on the list is “Socrates” (composed ca. June 1916); the third is “*Trauerspiel* and Tragedy,” and the fourth is “The Role of Language in *Trauerspiel* and Tragedy.” The five essays, none of which were published during the author’s lifetime, are translated in this volume in the order indicated in Benjamin’s letter.

2. Benjamin refers to the famous essay, “Über naive und sentimentalische Dichtung” (On Naïve and Sentimental Poetry; 1795), by the poet and playwright Friedrich von Schiller (1759–1805).

3. “Happiness” here translates *Glück*, which also signifies “luck, good fortune.” *Kat’ exochēn* is an ancient Greek expression meaning “par excellence.”

4. Georg Büchner, *Leonce and Lena*, Lenz, *Woyzeck*, trans. Michael Hamburger (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972), 52. The playwright Büchner (1813–1837) composed his only known novella, the unfinished *Lenz* (1835), on the basis of factual evidence from the life of J. M. R. Lenz (1751–1792), a leading German dramatist of the *Sturm und Drang* period who suffered intermittent mental illness. In the passage quoted by Benjamin, Lenz recalls his brief and unsuccessful courtship of Goethe’s friend, Friederike Brion, in 1772.

5. On his return to his city of Argos, after leading the Achaeans to victory at Troy, the legendary Greek hero Agamemnon is murdered by his wife

Clytemnestra and her lover Aegisthus, in revènge for his sacrifice of their daughter Iphigenia ten years earlier.

6. Pindar (522?–443? B.C.) was a Greek lyric poet remembered especially for his odes honoring victors in the games. *Eusebeia* means “piety.”

7. *Agōn* is Greek for “struggle.” It referred to the organized contest (athletic, literary, or other) at public festivals in ancient Greece.

# Socrates

## I.

What is most barbaric about the figure of Socrates is that this man estranged from the Muses constitutes the erotic center of relationships in the circle around Plato.<sup>1</sup> But if his love lacks the general power of communicating itself, if it lacks art, how does he sustain it? By means of will. Socrates forces *eros* to serve his purposes. This outrage is reflected in the castratedness of his person. For, in the last analysis, that is what the Athenians abhor; their feeling, even if subjectively base, is historically in the right. Socrates poisons the young; he leads them astray. His love for them is neither "end" nor pure *ei-dos*, but rather a means.<sup>2</sup> Such is the magician, the maieutician who interchanges the sexes, the innocently condemned one who dies out of irony and in defiance of his opponents.<sup>3</sup> His irony is nourished by the horror, yet he nonetheless remains the oppressed, the outcast, the despised one. He is even something of a clown.—The Socratic dialogue needs to be studied in relation to myth. What did Plato intend with it? Socrates: this is the figure in which Plato has annihilated the old myth and received it. Socrates: this is the offering of philosophy to the gods of myth, who demand human sacrifice. In

the midst of the terrible struggle, the young philosophy attempts to assert itself in Plato.<sup>4</sup>

## II.

Grünewald painted the saints with such grandeur that their halos emerged from the greenest black.<sup>5</sup> The radiant is true only where it is refracted in the nocturnal; only there is it great, only there is it expressionless, only there is it asexual and yet of supramundane sexuality. The one who radiates in this manner is the genius, the witness to every truly spiritual creation. He confirms, he guarantees its asexuality. In a society of men, there would be no genius; genius lives through the existence of the feminine.<sup>6</sup> It is true: the existence of the womanly guarantees the asexuality of the spiritual in the world. Wherever a work, an action, a thought arises without knowledge of this existence, there arises something evil, dead. Where it arises out of this female element itself, it is flat and weak and does not break through the night. But wherever this knowledge concerning the feminine prevails in the world, there is born what is proper to genius. Every deepest relation between man and woman rests on the ground of this true creativity and stands under the sign of genius. For it is false to designate the innermost contact between man and woman as desirous love, since of all the stages of such love, including male-female love, the most profound, the most splendid and most erotically and mythically perfect, indeed almost radiant (if it were not so wholly of the night), is the love between woman and woman. How the mere existence of the woman guarantees the asexuality of the spiritual remains the greatest mystery. Human beings have not been able to solve it. For them genius is still not the expressionless one who breaks out of the night, but rather an expressive one who hovers and vibrates in the light.

In the *Symposium*, Socrates celebrates the love between men and youths and acclaims it as the medium of the creative spirit.<sup>7</sup> According to his teaching, the knower is pregnant with knowledge, and in general Socrates understands the spiritual only as knowledge and virtue: The spiritual one, however, while perhaps not the begetter, is certainly



the one who conceives without becoming pregnant. Just as, for the woman, immaculate conception is the exalted idea of purity, so conception without pregnancy is most profoundly the spiritual manifestation of male genius. This manifestation, for its part, is a radiance. Socrates extinguishes it. The spiritual in Socrates was sexual through and through. His concept of spiritual conception is pregnancy; his concept of spiritual procreation is discharge of desire. This is revealed by the Socratic method, which is entirely different from the Platonic. The Socratic inquiry is not the holy question that awaits an answer and whose echo resounds in the response: it does not, as does the purely erotic or scientific question, intimate the *methodos* of the answer. Rather, a mere means to compel conversation, it forcibly, even impudently, dissimulates, ironizes—for it already knows the answer all too precisely. The Socratic question besets the answer from without, it corners it as dogs would a noble stag. The Socratic question is not delicate, nor is it so much creative as receptive; it has nothing of genius about it. Like the Socratic irony that lies hidden in it—if one allows a terrible image for a terrible thing—it is an erection of knowledge. Through hatred and desire, Socrates pursues the *eidōs* and attempts to make it objective, since its display is denied him. (And ought Platonic love to mean un-Socratic love?) To this terrible domination of sexual views in the spiritual corresponds—precisely as a consequence of this—the impure mixture of these concepts in the natural. Socrates' talk in the *Symposium* refers to seed and fruit, procreation and birth, in demonic indistinguishability, and presents in the speaker himself the terrible mixture of castrato and faun. In truth, Socrates is a non-human [*ein Nicht-Menschlicher*], and his discussion of *eros* is inhuman, like the discussion of someone who has not the faintest idea of things human. For this is how Socrates and his *eros* stand in the gradation of the erotic: the female-female, the male-male, the male-female, specter, daemon, genius. Socrates was served ironic justice with Xanthippe.<sup>8</sup>

## Notes

“Sokrates” (GS2, 129–132) was written ca. June 1916 and published posthumously. Translated by Thomas Levin.

1. This short essay was preserved in a copy made by Gershom Scholem, who dates it “summer 1916.” In his memoir, *Walter Benjamin: The Story of a Friendship*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken, 1981), Scholem mentions that, during a visit he made to Benjamin and his wife-to-be, Dora Polak, in mid-June 1916, Benjamin “read us . . . excerpts from a few pages on Socrates he had written at that time [*damals*] . . . In this work he propounded the thesis that Socrates was ‘Plato’s argument and bulwark against myth’” (30 [trans. modified]). See also Benjamin’s letter to Herbert Belmore from the end of 1916 (CWB, 84). The Athenian philosopher Socrates (ca. 469–399 B.C.) was, according to some accounts, the son of a prosperous stonemason; he left no writings and is known only through the writings of others—above all, those of his aristocratic disciple Plato (ca. 427–347 B.C.). In a trial before the Athenian Senate, he was convicted of impiety and of corrupting the youth of Athens and sentenced to die by drinking a potion of hemlock. Although he could have escaped the city, he chose to remain and accept his punishment.

2. The Greek word *eidos*, meaning “appearance, form, idea,” is a central term in the philosophical idealism of Socrates and Plato.

3. At the end of Plato’s dialogue on knowledge, *Theaetetus* (210b–d), Socrates remarks that his mother practiced the craft of midwifery and that he himself is a midwife (*maia*—hence “maieutician”) of souls, one who induces the birth of thought through a logical sequence of questions that bring forth the knowledge with which a respondent is “pregnant.”

4. See Nietzsche, *Die fröhliche Wissenschaft*, 340 (Benjamin’s note). See, in English, Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science* (1882, 1886), aphorism 340, “The Dying Socrates,” where Nietzsche diagnoses a secret pessimism in “this mocking and amorous demon [*Unhold*] and rat-catcher of Athens.” Benjamin returns to the figure of the dying Socrates, citing Nietzsche’s reflections on the subject in section 13 of *Die Geburt der Tragödie* (The Birth of Tragedy; 1872), in his 1928 *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels* (GS1, 292–293, 297); see *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, trans. John Osborne (London: Verso, 1977), 113–114, 118.

5. Matthias Grünewald (real name, Mathis Gothardt Nithardt; d. 1528) was a German painter whose visionary religious works are distinguished by expressive figural distortion and iridescent color. Grünewald’s halos are

recalled also in “The Rainbow: A Conversation about Imagination” (Chapter 33 in this volume)

6. On the feminine or womanly (*das Weibliche*) in relation to genius, see the section “The Conversation,” in “The Metaphysics of Youth” (Chapter 26 in this volume).

7. The reference is to Plato’s dialogue on love, *Symposium* (211d–212b).

8. Xanthippe was Socrates’ wife, a younger woman whom he married when he was about fifty and who bore him three sons. According to ancient writers other than Plato, she was a fierce shrew.

## On the Middle Ages

**I**n his characterization of the medieval spirit, Friedrich Schlegel sees the negative moment of this epoch in the reigning unconditional orientation toward the absolute, which makes itself felt in art as mannered imagination, in the philosophy and theology of scholasticism as a no less mannered rationalism.<sup>1</sup> This characterization is further developed through the contrast with the Asiatic orientation of spirit. The Asiatic spirit is likewise distinguished, in philosophy and religion, by an unrestrained immersion in the absolute. Nevertheless, an abyss separates it from the medieval spirit. The greatest of its forms are anything but mannered. Its innermost difference from the spirit of the Middle Ages resides in the fact that the absolute, out of which it unfolds the language of its forms, is present to it as the most powerful content. The spirit of the Orient has at its disposal the real contents of the absolute, something already indicated in the unity of religion, philosophy, and art, and, above all, in the unity of religion and life. It is often said that in the Middle Ages life was governed by religion. But, in the first place, the governing power was the ecclesia, and, in the second, between the governing principle and the principle of the governed there is always a divide. What is above all characteristic of the spirit of the Middle Ages is precisely the fact that, as its tendency to-

ward the absolute becomes more radical, this tendency becomes more formal. The gigantic mythological legacy of antiquity is not yet lost, but the measure of its real foundation is lacking, and there remain only impressions of its power: Solomon's ring, the philosophers' stone, the Sibylline Books.<sup>2</sup> Alive in the Middle Ages is the formal idea of mythology—that which confers power, the magical. But this power can no longer be legitimate: the Church has abolished the feudal lords—the gods—who conferred it. Here, then, is an origin of the formalistic spirit of the epoch. It aims to achieve power indirectly over a nature purged of gods; it practices magic without a mythological foundation. There emerges a magical schematism. We may compare the magical practices of antiquity with those of the Middle Ages in the area of chemistry: the ancient magic utilizes the substances of nature for potions and unctions that have a specific relation to the mythological realm of nature. The alchemist seeks—through magical means, to be sure—but what? Gold. The situation of art is analogous. Art originates, with ornament, in the mythic. The Asiatic ornament is saturated with mythology, whereas the Gothic ornament has become rational-magical; it works—but on men, not on gods. The sublime must appear as the high and the highest; the Gothic presents the mechanical quintessence of the sublime—the high, the slender, the potentially infinite sublime. Progress is automatic. The same profound externality, empty of gods but full of yearning, is found again in the pictorial style of the German Early Renaissance and of Botticelli.<sup>3</sup> The mannered quality of this fantastic art derives from its formalism. Where formalism would secure access to the absolute, the latter in a certain sense becomes smaller in scale, and just as the development of the Gothic style was possible only within the oppressively constricted spaces of medieval towns, so also could it arise only on the basis of a view of the world which, in conformity with its absolute scale of magnitude, is certainly more circumscribed than that of antiquity, as it is more circumscribed than that of today. At the height of the Middle Ages, the ancient view of the world was in large measure finally forgotten, and, in the diminished world [*dieser verkleinerten Welt*] that remained, there was born the scholastic rationalism and the self-consuming yearning of the Gothic.

## Notes

“Über das Mittelalter” (GS2, 132–133) was written ca. summer 1916 and published posthumously.

1. Friedrich von Schlegel (1772–1829) was a leading light of early German Romanticism. He was the author of the fragmentary novel *Lucinde* (1799); an editor of the periodical *Athenaeum* (1798–1800), in which he published his philosophical and critical aphorisms and his “Gespräch über die Poesie” (Dialogue on Poetry); and in his later years he lectured widely on ancient, medieval, and modern philosophy and history. In a letter of July 2, 1916, to Geršom Scholem, Benjamin mentions that he is reading Friedrich Schlegel’s 1828 lectures on the philosophy of history (GB1, 324). The manuscript of Benjamin’s short essay on the Middle Ages exists only in the form of a copy made by Scholem, who dates it “summer 1916.”

2. Solomon’s ring, in medieval Jewish, Islamic, and Christian legend, was a magical signet ring engraved with the name of God and said to have been possessed by King Solomon, to whom it gave the power to command demons and speak with animals. The philosophers’ stone, in medieval alchemy, was a substance that was believed to have the power of transmuting base metals into gold; it was also called the elixir of life. The Sibylline Books were originally a collection of Greek oracles which were supposedly uttered by prophetesses known as sibyls, and which were kept in a temple of ancient Rome to be consulted at times of crisis; the Middle Ages had access to a text by this name that was actually a pastiche of pagan mythology produced anonymously by Jewish, Christian, and Gnostic authors from the second to the fifth century A.D.

3. Early Renaissance art in Germany, exemplified by painters of the Cologne School like Wilhelm von Herle (who died in 1378) and Stephan Lochner (ca. 1400–1451), was dominated by a version of the International Gothic, a lyrical “soft style” involving the deployment of graceful, slender figures in a stagelike architectural setting. The paintings of the Florentine master Sandro Botticelli (1445–1512), such as the famous *Primavera* (ca. 1482) and *Birth of Venus* (ca. 1485), are likewise distinguished by low relief and gracefully posed figures.

## *Trauerspiel* and Tragedy

It may be that a deeper understanding of the tragic will have to come not only, and not primarily, from art but from history.<sup>1</sup> At the very least, it may be supposed that the tragic marks a boundary of the realm of art no less than of the field of history. The time of history passes over into tragic time at distinct and outstanding points of its course: namely, in the actions of great individuals. Between greatness, in the sense of history, on the one hand, and tragedy, on the other, there is an essential connection—which of course cannot be resolved into identity. But this much is certain: historical greatness can be represented in art only in the form of tragedy. Historical time is infinite in every direction and unfulfilled at every moment. This means we cannot conceive of a particular empirical event that would have a necessary relation to the specific time in which it occurs. Time is for the empirical event only a form, but, what is more important, as a form it is unfulfilled. The event does not fulfill the formal nature of the time in which it lies. For we should not assume that time is nothing but the measure by which the duration of a mechanical change is reckoned. This sort of time is indeed a relatively empty form, and to think of its being filled makes no sense. The time of history, however, is something different from that of mechanics. The time of history determines

much more than the possibility of spatial changes of a specific magnitude and regularity—regularity as measured by the moving hands of a clock—simultaneously with spatial changes of a more complex structure. And without specifying the something more and something other which historical time determines—in short, without defining its difference from mechanical time—we may say that the determining force of the historical form of time cannot be fully grasped by, or wholly concentrated in, any empirical eventuality. Rather, an event that is complete in historical terms is altogether indeterminate empirically; it is, in fact, an idea. This idea of fulfilled time appears in the Bible as its dominant historical idea: as messianic time. But, in any case, the idea of fulfilled historical time is not understood as the idea of an individual time. This determination, which naturally transforms the meaning of fulfillment, is what differentiates tragic time from messianic time. Tragic time relates to the latter as individually fulfilled time relates to divinely fulfilled time.

Tragedy is distinguished from *Trauerspiel* through 'the different ways they relate to historical time.'<sup>2</sup> In tragedy the hero dies because no one can live in fulfilled time. He dies of immortality. Death is an ironic immortality; that is the origin of tragic irony. The origin of tragic guilt lies in the same sphere. Such guilt has its roots in the tragic hero's very own, individually fulfilled time. This time proper to the tragic hero—which, like historical time, cannot be further defined here—marks all his deeds and his entire existence as if with a magic circle. When the tragic development suddenly makes its incomprehensible appearance, when the smallest misstep leads to guilt and when the slightest error, the most improbable coincidence, results in death, when the words of appeasement and resolution that are seemingly available to all remain unspoken—then we are witnessing the effect of the hero's time on the action, since in fulfilled time everything that happens is a function of that time. It is almost a paradox that this function becomes manifest in all its clarity at the moment when the hero is completely passive, when tragic time bursts open, so to speak, like a flower whose calyx emits the astringent perfume of irony. Not infrequently it is in moments of complete calm—during the hero's sleep, as it were—that the fatality of his time fulfills itself, and



likewise the meaning of fulfilled time in the tragic fate emerges in the great moments of passivity: in the tragic decision, in the retarding moment, in the catastrophe. The measure of Shakespearean tragedy resides in the mastery with which it sets off the different stages of tragedy from one another and makes them stand out, like repetitions of a theme. In contrast, classical tragedy is characterized by the ever more powerful upsurge of tragic forces. The ancients know of tragic fate, whereas Shakespeare knows of the tragic hero, the tragic action. Goethe rightly calls him Romantic.<sup>3</sup>

Death in the tragedy is an ironic immortality, ironic from an excess of determinacy; the tragic death is overdetermined: that is the real expression of the hero's guilt. Perhaps Hebbel was on the right track when he said that individuation was original sin.<sup>4</sup> But it is all-important to ask what it is that the sin of individuation offends against. In this way the question of a connection between history and tragedy can be formulated. We are not speaking here of an individuation to be comprehended with reference to man. Death in the *Trauerspiel* is not based on that extreme determinacy which individual time confers on the action. It is not conclusion; without the certitude of a higher life and without irony, it is the *metabasis* of all life *eis allo genos*.<sup>5</sup> In mathematical terms the *Trauerspiel* is comparable to one branch of a hyperbola whose other branch lies in the infinite. The law of a higher life prevails in the restricted space of earthly existence, and all things play until death puts an end to the game, so as to continue, in another world, the greater repetition of the same game. It is this repetition on which the law of the *Trauerspiel* is founded. Its events are allegorical schemata, symbolic mirror-images of a different game. We are transported into that game by death.<sup>6</sup> The time of the *Trauerspiel* is not fulfilled, yet it is finite. It is nonindividual, but without historical generality. The *Trauerspiel* is in every respect a hybrid form. The generality of its time is spectral, not mythic. Its innermost relation to the peculiar mirror-nature of game and play [*Spiegelnatur des Spiels*] is indicated by the fact that it has an even number of acts. As in all other respects, Schlegel's *Alarcos* is exemplary here, just as in general it is an outstanding work with which to conduct an analysis of the *Trauerspiel*.<sup>7</sup> Its characters are of royal rank and station, as must necessarily

be the case in the consummate *Trauerspiel*, given the symbolic level of meaning. This form of drama is ennobled by the distance that everywhere separates image and mirror-image, signifier and signified. Thus, the *Trauerspiel* is certainly not the image of a higher life but only one of two mirror-images, and its continuation is not less phantasmal than itself. The dead become ghosts. The *Trauerspiel* artistically exhausts the historical idea of repetition; it thus fastens on a problem that is completely different from that of tragedy. In the *Trauerspiel*, guilt and greatness call not so much for determinacy—let alone overdetermination—as for greater expansion, the most general extension, and not for the sake of the guilt and greatness, but simply for the repetition of those circumstances.

The nature of temporal repetition, however, is such that no closed form can be based on it. And even if the relation of tragedy to art remains problematic, even if it may be both more and less than an art form, it nevertheless remains in every case a closed form. Its temporal character is exhausted and delimited in the dramatic form. But the *Trauerspiel* is in itself unclosed, and the idea of its resolution no longer lies within the realm of drama. And here is the point where—proceeding from the analysis of form—the distinction between tragedy and *Trauerspiel* decisively emerges. The remains of the *Trauerspiel* are called music.<sup>8</sup> Perhaps it is the case that, just as tragedy marks the transition from historical time to dramatic time, the *Trauerspiel* marks the passage from dramatic time into the time of music.

## Notes

“*Trauerspiel und Tragödie*” (GS2, 133–137) was written in 1916 and published posthumously. Translated by Rodney Livingstone.

1. This essay is mentioned in Benjamin’s letter to Herbert Belmore from late 1916 (CWB, 84). It is third in the list of five essays (thought to have been composed between June and November of that year) which he recommends to his friend. Together with the next essay on the list, translated below as “The Role of Language in *Trauerspiel* and Tragedy,” it anticipates Benjamin’s later

dissertation on the subject, composed between 1923 and 1925 and published in 1928 as *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels* (Origin of the German *Trauerspiel*), the first page of which carries the legend "Entworfen 1916 [sketched out in 1916] . . .," and the first chapter, of which is entitled "Trauerspiel und Tragödie." See also Benjamin's letter of October 7, 1923, to Flörens Christian Rang, which speaks of "my original theme, '*Trauerspiel* and tragedy,'" and of "deducing the form of the *Trauerspiel* from the theory of allegory" (CWB, 210).

2. The term *Trauerspiel* (mourning play) here refers to a series of dramas written in seventeenth-century Germany that dealt with the fate of royal personages. The works in question were little known in Benjamin's day.

3. Benjamin refers to part 2 of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's essay of 1815, "Shakespeare und kein Ende" (Shakespeare and No End). He echoes Goethe's pronouncement in a short piece written in 1918, "Shakespeare: Wie es euch gefällt" (Shakespeare: *As You Like It*): "For the greatest Romantic is Shakespeare, though he is not only that" (GS2, 610).

4. Christian Friedrich Hebbel (1813–1863) was a German poet and dramatist, best known for his "bourgeois tragedies," such as *Maria Magdalena* (1844) and *Agnes Bernauer* (1855). Benjamin alludes to Hebbel's 1843 essay on dramatic theory, "Mein Wort über das Drama!" (My Views on the Drama!).

5. The phrase *metabasis eis allo genos* (transformation into another kind) occurs in Aristotle's chief cosmological treatise, *De Caelo* (On the Heavens; 350 B.C.), 268b.

6. "Seine Geschehnisse sind gleichnishafte Schemen, sinnbildliche Spiegelbilder eines andern Spiels. In dieses Spiel entrückt der Tod." The reader should keep in mind throughout this part of the essay that *Spiel* means both "game" and "play." The term *Schemen* can be read as either the plural of *Schema*, "scheme," or the plural of *Schemen*, "phantom"; the latter reading, though seemingly less plausible here, would correspond to the translation of *schemenhaft* as "phantasmal," below.

7. Friedrich Schlegel's *Alarcos*, a verse tragedy (Schlegel calls it a *Trauerspiel*) in two acts, was first performed in 1802 at the Weimar Court Theater under Goethe's direction.

8. "Der Rest des Trauerspiels heisst Musik." On the musical dimension of the *Trauerspiel*, see "The Role of Language in *Trauerspiel* and Tragedy" (Chapter 39 in this volume).

## The Role of Language in *Trauerspiel* and Tragedy

The tragic rests on a lawfulness governing the spoken word between human beings.<sup>1</sup> There is no tragic pantomime. Nor is there a tragic poem, tragic novel, or tragic event. Not only does the tragic belong exclusively to the realm of human speech in the drama; it is actually the only form originally suited to human dialogue. That is to say, no tragedy exists outside human dialogue, and there is no form of human dialogue other than the tragic. Wherever a non-tragic drama appears, there is no original unfolding of that law which is proper to human discourse but only the manifestation of a feeling or relation in a linguistic context, in a linguistic phase.

The dialogue in its pure manifestations is neither sad nor comic, but tragic. To that extent, tragedy is the classic and pure dramatic form. The sad has its full gravity and its deepest and unique expression neither in the words of the drama nor in words generally. Sadness is not confined to mourning plays, *Trauerspiele*, and, what is more, the *Trauerspiel* is not the saddest thing in the world: a poem can be sadder, as can a story or a life.<sup>2</sup> For mourning is not, like the tragic, a ruling force, the indissoluble and inescapable law of orders that attain closure in the tragedy; rather, it is a feeling. What metaphysical relation does this feeling have to language, to the spoken word? That is the riddle of

the *Trauerspiel*. What inner relation at the heart of mourning releases it from the existence of pure feeling and lets it enter the order of art?

In tragedy, words and the tragic arise together, simultaneously, in the same place each time. Every speech in the tragedy is tragically decisive. It is the pure word that is immediately tragic. How language in general can fill itself with mourning, and be the expression of mourning, is the basic question of the *Trauerspiel*, alongside that other question: How can mourning as a feeling gain entry into the linguistic order of art? The word, operating in conformity with its pure conveyed meaning, becomes tragic.<sup>3</sup> The word as pure bearer of its meaning is the pure word. But alongside this word there is another that transforms itself, as it moves from the place of its origin toward a different point, its estuary. The word in transformation is the linguistic principle of the *Trauerspiel*. There is a pure emotional life of the word in which it purifies itself by developing from a sound of nature to the pure sound of feeling. For this word, language is only a transitional phase in the cycle of its transformation, and in this word the *Trauerspiel* speaks. It describes a path from natural sound via lament to music. In the *Trauerspiel*, sound is laid out symphonically, and this is both the musical principle of its language and the dramatic principle of its division and its splitting into characters. It is nature that only for the sake of the purity of its feelings ascends into the purgatory of language, and the essence of the *Trauerspiel* is already contained in the old adage that all of nature would begin to mourn if ever it were endowed with language. For the *Trauerspiel* is not the spherical transit of feeling through the pure world of words on a course leading back, in music, to the liberated sorrow of blessed feeling; rather, midway through this passage, nature sees itself betrayed by language, and that tremendous stemming of feeling becomes mourning. Thus, with the double-dealing of the word, with its *meaning*, nature comes to a standstill, and whereas creation wished only to pour forth in purity, it was man who bore its crown. This is the significance of the king in the *Trauerspiel*, and this is the meaning of the *Haupt- und Staatsaktionen*.<sup>4</sup> These plays represent the stemming of nature, a tremendous damming up of feeling, as it were, to which a new world suddenly opens up in the word, the world of meaning, of unfeeling historical

time; and once again the king is both man (an end of nature) and also king (bearer and symbol of meaning). History emerges together with meaning in human language; this language is immobilized in meaning. The tragic threatens, and man, the crown of creation, is salvaged for feeling only by becoming king; a symbol, as the bearer of this crown. And the nature of the *Trauerspiel* remains a torso in this sublime symbol; sorrow fills the sensuous world in which nature and language meet.

The two metaphysical principles of repetition interpenetrate in the *Trauerspiel* and establish its metaphysical order: cycle and repetition, circle and two. For it is the circle of feeling that is completed in music, and it is the two of the word and its meaning that destroys the tranquility of deep longing and diffuses sorrow throughout nature. The interplay between sound and meaning in the *Trauerspiel* remains something spectral, terrifying; in its nature it is possessed by language, the prey to an endless feeling—like Polonius, who is gripped by madness in the midst of his reflections.<sup>5</sup> The play must find its redemption, however, and for the *Trauerspiel* that redemptive mystery is music—the rebirth of feelings in a suprasensuous nature.

The necessity of redemption constitutes the play element of this art form. For, compared with the irrevocability of the tragic, which makes an ultimate reality of language and linguistic order, every creation whose animating soul is feeling (sorrow) must be called a play and game. The *Trauerspiel* rests not on the foundation of actual language but on the consciousness of the unity of language achieved through feeling, a unity that unfolds in words. In the midst of this unfolding, errant feeling gives voice to sorrow in lament. But this lament must resolve itself; on the basis of that presupposed unity, it passes over into the language of pure feeling, into music. Mourning conjures itself in the mourning play, but it also redeems itself. This tension and release of feeling in its own realm is play. In it, sorrow is only a tone in the scale of feelings, and consequently there is, so to speak, no pure *Trauerspiel*, since the diverse feelings of the comic, the terrible, the horrifying, and many others each have their turn in the round dance. Style, in the sense of unity of feeling, is reserved for tragedy. The world of the *Trauerspiel* is a special world that maintains its great and high worth

even in the face of tragedy. It is the site of an authentic conception of word and speech in art; the faculties of speech and hearing still stand equal in the scales, and ultimately everything depends on the ear for lament, for only the most profoundly heard and perceived lament becomes music. Whereas in tragedy the eternal immobility of the spoken word prevails, the *Trauerspiel* gathers the endless resonance of its sound.

## Notes

“Die Bedeutung der Sprache in Trauerspiel und Tragödie” (GS2, 137–140) was written in 1916 and published posthumously. Translated by Rodney Livingstone.

1. In a letter of March 30, 1918, to Gershom Scholem, Benjamin writes of the latter’s essay “Über Klage und Klagelied” (On Lament and Song of Lamentation): “I read your essay . . . three times. . . . I personally owe you special thanks because, without your knowing that I occupied myself with the same problem two years ago, you have helped me in essential ways to achieve clarification. . . . Without reference to Hebrew literature, which, as I now know, is the proper subject of such an analysis, I applied the following question to the *Trauerspiel* in a short essay entitled ‘Die Bedeutung der Sprache in Trauerspiel und Tragödie’: ‘How can language in general fill itself with mourning and be the expression of mourning [*Trauer*]?’ . . . I wore myself out to no avail studying a relationship the actual circumstances of which I am only now beginning to divine. For in German the lament appears in its full linguistic glory only in the *Trauerspiel*, a form that, in the German view, borders on being inferior to tragedy. I was unable to reconcile myself to this and did not understand that this ranking is just as legitimate in German as its opposite probably is in Hebrew. . . . In contrast to your point of departure, mine had only the advantage of pointing me, from the very start, to the fundamental antithesis of mourning and tragedy, which, to judge from your essay, you have not yet recognized. . . . Let me specifically note that an unambiguous relation between lament and mourning, such that mourning must in each case seek an outlet in lament, is something I continue to doubt.—This entails a series of such difficult questions that we really must forgo any consideration of them in writing” (CWB, 120–121). A somewhat more precise indication of

the date of composition of Benjamin's short essay is provided by his letter to Herbert Belmore from late 1916; in which he lists five of his recently completed essays; this essay is fourth on the list (CWB, 84). Together with the essay listed third, "Trauerspiel und Tragödie" (Chapter 38 in this volume), it anticipates Benjamin's later dissertation on the subject, *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels* (Origin of the German *Trauerspiel*), which was written between 1923 and 1925. Benjamin touches on this connection in a letter of October 30, 1926, to Hugo von Hofmannsthal: "Your letter astounded me by its reference to the veritable, so deeply concealed core of [the *Trauerspiel* book]: the discussion of image, script, music is really the primal cell of this work, with its verbal echoes of a youthful three-page effort called 'Über die Sprache in Trauerspiel und Tragödie'" (CWB, 309).

2. The term *Trauerspiel* (mourning play) here refers to a series of dramas written in seventeenth-century Germany that dealt with the fate of royal personages. The works in question were little known in Benjamin's day.

3. "Das Wort nach seiner reinen tragenden Bedeutung wirkend wird tragisch."

4. The *Haupt- und Staatsaktionen* were political plays composed in Germany during the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries; their subject was typically the sudden fall of kings, dark conspiracies, and executions. In the previous sentence, "double-dealing" translates *Doppelsinn*.

5. Benjamin is evidently thinking of Polonius's rambling addresses to the king and queen in the second act of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (2.2).



## On Language as Such and on the Language of Man

Every manifestation of the life of the spirit in humanity can be understood as a kind of language, and this understanding, in the manner of a true method, everywhere discloses new ways of formulating the question:<sup>1</sup> It is possible to talk about a language of music and of sculpture, about a language of jurisprudence that has nothing directly to do with those in which German or English legal judgments are couched, about a language of technology that is not the specialized language of technicians. Language in such contexts signifies the principle that orients communication of spiritual or intellectual contents in the subjects concerned—in technology, art, justice, or religion. In a word: all communication of spiritual contents is language, communication in words being only a particular case, that of human language and of what underlies it or is founded on it (jurisprudence, poetry). The existence of language, however, is coextensive not only with all areas of expression of the human spirit, where language is always in one sense or another involved, but with absolutely everything. There is no event or thing in either animate or inanimate nature that does not in some way partake of language, for it is essential to each one to communicate its spiritual content. But in such usage the word “language” is in no way a metaphor. That we cannot conceive of anything that

does not communicate its spiritual essence in expression is a matter of integral substantive knowledge; the greater or lesser degree of consciousness to which such communication is apparently (or really) conjoined cannot alter the fact that we are unable to imagine a total absence of language in anything.<sup>2</sup> An existence that would be entirely without relation to language is an idea; but this idea can bear no fruit even within that realm of ideas whose circumference defines the idea of God.

What can be correctly asserted is only that in this terminology every expression, insofar as it is a communication of spiritual contents, is to be reckoned as language. And, of course, expression, in keeping with its whole and inmost being, is to be understood only as *language*; on the other hand, to understand a linguistic entity, it is always necessary to ask of which spiritual entity it is the immediate expression. This means that the German language, for example, is not at all the expression of everything that we could—presumably—express *through* it but is the immediate expression of that which communicates *itself* in it. This “itself” is a spiritual entity. It is evident, therefore, at the outset that the spiritual entity that communicates itself in language is not language itself but something to be distinguished from it. The view that the spiritual essence of a thing consists precisely in its language—this view, taken as a hypothesis, is the great abyss into which all theory of language threatens to fall,<sup>3</sup> and to keep itself suspended over, precisely over, this abyss is the task of such theory. In any investigation of the theory of language, the most primordial distinction is that between the spiritual entity and the linguistic entity in which it communicates; and this distinction seems so unquestionable that it is, rather, the frequently asserted identity between spiritual and linguistic being that constitutes a deep and incomprehensible paradox, the expression of which is found in the double meaning of the word *logos*.<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, this paradox, as solution, has its place at the center of linguistic theory, though it remains a paradox and, if placed at the beginning, insoluble.

What does language communicate? It communicates the spiritual essence corresponding to it. It is fundamental to recognize that this spiritual essence communicates itself *in* language and not *through* it.

Hence, there is no speaker of languages, if that means someone who communicates *through* these languages. Spiritual being communicates itself in, not through, a language: this is to say, it is not outwardly identical with linguistic being. Spiritual being is identical with linguistic being only *insofar* as it is communicable. What is communicable in a spiritual entity is its linguistic being. Language, therefore, in each case communicates the linguistic being of things, but their spiritual being only insofar as this is directly included in their linguistic being, insofar as it is communicable.

Language communicates the linguistic being of things. The clearest manifestation of this being, however, is language itself. The answer to the question "What does language communicate?" is therefore: "All language communicates itself." The language of this lamp, for example, communicates not the lamp (for the spiritual essence of the lamp, insofar as it is *communicable*, is by no means the lamp itself) but the language-lamp, the lamp in communication, the lamp in expression. For in language the situation is this: *the linguistic being of things is their language*. The understanding of linguistic theory depends on giving this proposition a clarity that annihilates even the appearance of tautology. This proposition is untautological, for it means, "That which in a spiritual entity is communicable *is* its language." On this "is" (equivalent to "is immediately") everything depends.—Not: that which in a spiritual entity is communicable *appears* most clearly in its language, as was just said by way of transition; rather, this *communicable* is immediately language itself. Or: the language of a spiritual entity is immediately that which is communicable in it. Whatever is communicable *of* a spiritual entity, *in* this it communicates itself. Which is to say: all language communicates itself. Or, more precisely: all language communicates itself *in* itself; it is in the purest sense the "medium" of the communication. The medial—that is, the *immediacy* of all communication of the spirit—is the fundamental problem in the theory of language, and if one chooses to call this immediacy magic, then the ur-problem of language is its magic. At the same time, mention of the magic of language points to something else: its infinity. This is conditioned on its immediacy. For precisely because nothing is communicated *through* language, what is communicated *in* language

cannot be externally limited or measured; inherent to every language is therefore its incommensurable, unique infinity. Its linguistic being, not its verbal contents, defines its boundary.

The linguistic being of things is their language; this proposition, applied to man, means: the linguistic being of man is his language. Which signifies: man communicates his own spiritual being *in* his language. The language of man, however, speaks in words. Man therefore communicates his own spiritual being (insofar as it is communicable) by *naming* all other things. But do we know any other languages that name things? It should not be objected that we know of no language other than that of human beings, for this is untrue. We know only of no *naming* language other than that of humans; to identify naming language with language in general is to rob linguistic theory of its deepest insights.—*It is therefore the linguistic being of man to name things.*

Why name them? To whom does man communicate himself?—But is this question, as applied to the human being, different when applied to other communications (languages)? To whom does the lamp communicate itself? Or the mountain? Or the fox?—But here the answer is: to man. This is not anthropomorphism. The truth of this answer is demonstrated in knowledge and perhaps also in art. Moreover, if the lamp and the mountain and the fox did not communicate themselves to man, how could he name them? For he names them; *he* communicates himself in naming *them*. To whom does he communicate himself?

Before this question can be answered, we must again inquire: How does man communicate himself? A profound distinction is to be made, an alternative presented, in the face of which an essentially false conception of language is certain to give itself away. Does man communicate his spiritual being *through* the names he gives to things? Or *in* them? In the paradoxical nature of this question lies its answer. Anyone who believes that man communicates his spiritual being *through* names cannot also assume that it is his spiritual being that he communicates, for this does not happen through the names of things—that is, through the words by which he designates a thing. And, equally, the advocate of such a view can assume only that man is communicating something to other men, for that does happen through

the word by which I designate a thing. This view is the bourgeois conception of language, the empty and untenable character of which will become increasingly clear in what follows. It says, in effect: the means of communication is the word, its object the thing, and its addressee a human being. The other conception of language, in contrast, knows no means, no object, and no addressee of communication. It says: *in the name, the spiritual being of man communicates itself to God.*

The name, in the realm of language, has solely this meaning and this incomparably high significance: that it is the inmost essence of language itself. The name is that *through* which nothing more communicates itself, and *in* which language itself communicates itself absolutely: In the name, the spiritual entity that communicates itself is *language*. Where the spiritual entity in its communication is language itself in its absolute wholeness, only there is the name, and only the name is there. The name as heritage of human language therefore guarantees *that language pure and simple* is the spiritual essence of man; and only for this reason is the spiritual essence of man, alone among all forms of spirit, entirely communicable. This grounds the difference between human language and the language of things. But because the spiritual essence of man is language itself, he cannot communicate himself by it, but only in it. The quintessence [*Inbegriff*] of this intensive totality of language as the spiritual being of man is the name. Man is the namer; by this we recognize that from him pure language speaks. All nature, insofar as it communicates itself, communicates itself in language, and so in the final analysis in man. Hence, he is the lord of nature and can name things. Only through the linguistic being of things can he rise out of himself to knowledge of them—in the name. God's creation is completed when things receive their names from man, this man from whom, in the name, language alone speaks. One can think of the name as the language of language (if the genitive here indicates a relation not of means but of the medium), and in this sense, certainly, because he speaks in names, man is the speaker of language, and for this very reason its only speaker. In their designation of man as the one who speaks (which, however, according to the Bible, for example, clearly means the name-giver: "As

the man would name all kinds of living creatures, so were they to be called<sup>ms</sup>), many languages contain this metaphysical knowledge.

The name, however, is not only the ultimate calling-out of language but also its proper calling-to. Thus, in the name appears the essential law of language, according to which to express [*aussprechen*] oneself and to address [*ansprechen*] all else is the same. Language, and in it a spiritual entity, expresses itself purely only where it speaks in name—that is, in universal naming. So in the name culminate both the intensive totality of language, as the absolutely communicable spiritual entity, and the extensive totality of language, as the universally communicating (naming) entity. As regards its communicating essence, its universality, language is incomplete wherever the spiritual being that speaks from it is not in its whole structure linguistic—that is, communicable. *Man alone has language that is, complete as regards universality and intensity.*

With this in mind, a question may now be raised without risk of confusion, a question of the highest metaphysical importance, but formulated at this point, for reasons of clarity, as first of all terminological. It is whether spiritual being—not only of man (for that is necessary) but also of things, and thus spiritual being in general—can, from the point of view of linguistic theory, be defined as linguistic. If spiritual being is identical with linguistic being, then the thing, by virtue of its spiritual being, is a medium of communication, and what communicates itself in it is—in accordance with the medial relation—precisely this medium (language) itself. Language is then the spiritual essence of things. Spiritual being is thereby postulated at the outset as communicable, or rather is situated precisely *within* the communicable, and the thesis that the linguistic being of things is identical with the spiritual, insofar as the latter is communicable, becomes in its “insofar” a tautology. *There is no such thing as a content of language; as communication, language communicates a spiritual entity—that is, a communicability per se.* The differences between languages are those of media that are distinguished, as it were, by their density—which is to say, gradually; and this with regard to the density both of the communicating (naming) and of the communicable (name) in the communication. These two spheres, which are clearly distinguished yet

united only in the name-language of man, naturally correspond on a continual basis.

For the metaphysics of language, the equation of spiritual with linguistic being, which knows only gradual differences, entails a gradation of all spiritual being [*Sein*] in degrees. This gradation, which takes place in the interior of the spiritual entity itself, can no longer be subsumed under any higher category and so leads to the gradation of all entities, both spiritual and linguistic; by degrees of existence or being, such as was already familiar to Scholasticism with regard to spiritual entities. But the equation of spiritual and linguistic being is of such great metaphysical moment to linguistic theory because it leads to the concept that has again and again, as if of its own accord, elevated itself to the center of language philosophy and constituted its most intimate connection with the philosophy of religion. This is the concept of revelation.—Within all linguistic formation a conflict is waged between what is expressed and expressible and what is inexpressible and unexpressed. On considering this conflict, one sees at the same time, in the perspective of the inexpressible, the ultimate spiritual entity. Now, it is clear that in the equation of spiritual and linguistic being, this relation of inverse proportionality between the two is disputed. For here the thesis runs: the deeper (that is, the more existent and real) the spirit, the more it is expressible and expressed, and it is consistent with this equation to make the relation between spirit and language thoroughly unambiguous, so that the expression that is linguistically most existent (that is, most fixed), the linguistically most precise and definitive—in a word, the most expressed—is at the same time the purely spiritual. This, however, is precisely what is meant by the concept of revelation, if it takes the inviolability of the word as the sole and sufficient condition and characteristic of the divinity of the spiritual being that is expressed in it. The highest spiritual domain of religion is (in the concept of revelation) at the same time the only one that does not know the inexpressible. For it is addressed in the name and expresses itself as revelation. In this, however, notice is given that only the highest spiritual being, as it appears in religion, rests exclusively on man and on the language in him, whereas all art, including poetry, rests not on the ultimate quintessence of the spirit of language but on

the spirit of language in things, although in that spirit's consummate beauty. "*Language, the mother of reason and revelation, its alpha and omega,*" says Hamann.<sup>6</sup>

Language itself is not completely expressed in things themselves. This proposition has a double meaning, in its metaphorical and literal senses: the languages of things are imperfect, and they are dumb. Things are denied the pure formal principle of language—namely, sound. They can communicate among one another only through a more or less material community. This community is immediate and infinite, like that of every linguistic communication; it is magic (for there is also a magic of matter). The incomparable feature of human language is that its magic community with things is immaterial and purely spiritual, and the symbol of this is sound. The Bible expresses this symbolic fact when it says that God breathed his breath into man:<sup>7</sup> this is at once life and spirit and language.—

If, in what follows, the essence of language is considered on the basis of the first chapter of Genesis, the aim is neither to pursue biblical interpretation in itself nor to take a passage of the Bible objectively as revealed truth for reflection, but rather to discover what emerges from the biblical text with respect to the nature of language itself; and for this purpose the Bible is *initially* indispensable only because the present inquiry follows its principles in presupposing language as an ultimate reality, approachable only in its unfolding, inexplicable and mystical. The Bible, in regarding itself as revelation, must necessarily evolve the fundamental linguistic facts.—The second version of the Creation story, which tells of the breathing of God's breath into man, also reports that man was made from earth. In the whole story of the Creation, this is the only reference to a material in which the Creator expresses his will, which is doubtless otherwise thought of as immediately creative. In this second story of the Creation, the making of man did not come about through the word (God spoke—and it was so), but this man who was not created from the word is now endowed with the *gift* of language, and he is elevated above nature.

This curious revolution in the act of creation, where it concerns man, is no less clearly set forth, however, in the first story of the Creation; and in an entirely different context it vouches, with equal inci-



siveness, for a special relationship between man and language resulting from the act of creation. The manifold rhythm of the act of creation in the first chapter establishes a kind of basic form, from which only the act that creates man significantly diverges. Admittedly, this passage nowhere expressly refers to a relationship either of man or of nature to the material from which they were created, and the question of whether the words "He made" envisages a creation out of material must here be left open; but the rhythm by which the creation of nature (in Genesis 1) is accomplished is: Let there be—He made (created)—He named. In individual acts of creation (1:3, 1:14) only the "Let there be" appears. In this "Let there be" and in the "He named" at the beginning and end of the acts, the deep and clear relation of the creative act to language is each time manifest. With the creative omnipotence of language this act begins, and at the end language, as it were; embodies the created, names it. Language is therefore that which creates and that which completes; it is word and name. In God, name is creative because it is word, and God's word is knowing because it is name. "And he saw that it was good"—that is, he had known it through the name. The absolute relation of name to knowledge exists only in God; only there is the name, because it is inwardly identical with the creative word, the pure medium of knowledge. This means that God made things knowable in their names. Man, however, names them according to knowledge.

In the creation of man, the threefold rhythm of the creation of nature has given way to an entirely different order. Language consequently has a different meaning here; the triple aspect of the act is preserved, but all the more apparent in the parallelism is the distance: in the threefold "He created" of 1:27.<sup>8</sup> God did not create man from the word, and he did not name him. He did not wish to subordinate him to language, but in man God liberated language, which had served *him* as medium of creation; he freed it from himself. God rested when he left his creative power to itself in man. This creativity, relieved of its divine actuality, became knowledge. Man is the knower in the same language in which God is creator. God created him in his image; he created the knower in the image of the creator. For this reason, the proposition that the spiritual being of man is language needs

explanation. His spiritual being is the language in which creation occurred. In the word, things were created, and God's linguistic being is the word. All human language is only reflection of the word in name. The name is no closer to the word than knowledge is to creation. The infinity of all human language always remains, in essence, limited and analytic, in comparison to the absolutely unlimited and creative infinity of the divine word.

The deepest image of this divine word and the point where human language participates most intimately in the divine infinity of the pure word, the point at which it can become neither finite word nor knowledge, is the human name. The theory of the proper name is the theory of the limit of finite language with respect to infinite language. Of all beings, man is the only one who names his own kind, as he is the only one whom God did not name. It is perhaps bold, but scarcely impossible, to adduce the second part of Genesis 2:20 in this context: that man named all beings, "*but* for man there was not found a helper fit for him." Accordingly, Adam names his wife as soon as he receives her (woman in the second chapter, Eve in the third). By giving names, parents dedicate their children to God; the name they give does not—in a metaphysical rather than etymological sense—correspond to any knowledge, for they name newborn children. In a strict sense, no person ought to correspond to his name (in its etymological meaning), for the proper name is the word of God in human sounds. By it each person is guaranteed his creation by God, and in this sense he is himself creative, as is expressed by mythological wisdom in the notion (which doubtless not infrequently comes true) that a man's name is his fate. The proper name is the communion of man with the *creative* word of God. (Not the only one, however; man knows yet another linguistic community with God's word.) Through the word, man is bound to the language of things. The human word is the name of things. There is no room here for the idea that corresponds to the bourgeois view of language: that the word has an accidental relation to its object, that it is a sign for things (or knowledge of them) established by some convention. Language never gives *mere* signs. But the rejection of bourgeois linguistic theory in favor of mystical linguistic theory likewise rests on a misunderstanding. For according to mystical

theory, the word is simply the essence of the thing. That is incorrect, because the thing in itself has no word, being created from God's word and known in its name according to a human word. This knowledge of the thing, however, is not spontaneous creation; it does not eventuate from language in the absolutely unlimited and infinite manner of creation. Rather, the name that man gives to the thing depends on how it communicates itself to him. In the name, the word of God has not remained creative; it has become, in part, receptive, if receptive to language. It is to the language of things themselves, from out of which the word of God silently radiates in the mute magic of nature, that this receptive conception [*Empfängnis*] is oriented.

But for reception and spontaneity together, found as they are in this singular conjunction only in the linguistic realm, language has its own word, and this word applies also to that receptive conception of the nameless in the name. It is the translation of the language of things into that of man. It is necessary to ground the concept of translation in the deepest stratum of linguistic theory, for it is much too far-reaching and powerful to be treated in any way as an afterthought, as has happened occasionally. It attains its full meaning in the realization that every higher language (with the exception of the word of God) can be considered a translation of all the others. With the previously mentioned relatedness of languages, understood as a relation among media of varying densities, the translatability of languages into one another is given. Translation is the carrying over of one language into another through a continuum of transformations. Translation passes through continua of transformation, not abstract zones of identity and similarity.

The translation of the language of things into that of man is not only translation of the mute into the sonic; it is the translation of the nameless into name. It is therefore the translation of an imperfect language into a more perfect one, and cannot but add something to it—namely, knowledge. The objectivity of this translation is, however, guaranteed in God. For God created things; the creative word in them is the germ of the cognizing name, just as God, too, finally named each thing after it was created. But, obviously, this naming is only an expression of the identity in God of the word that creates and the

name that knows, not the prior solution of the task that God expressly assigns to man himself: that of naming things. In receiving the mute, nameless language of things and transmitting it through names into sounds, man performs this task. It would be insoluble, were not the name-language of man and the nameless language of things related in God and released from the same creative word, which in things became communication of matter in magic community, and in man language of knowledge and name in blissful spirit. Hamann says, "Everything that man heard in the beginning, saw with his eyes . . . and felt with his hands was . . . living word; for God was the word. With this word in the heart and on the lips, the origin of language was as natural, as near and easy, as a child's game . . ."9 Friedrich Müller, in his poem "Adam's First Awakening and First Blissful Nights," has God summon man to name-giving in these words: "Man of earth, step near; in gazing, grow more perfect, more perfect through the word."<sup>10</sup> In this association of vision and naming is intimated the communicating muteness of things (of animals), communicating toward the word-language of man, which receives them in the name. In the same chapter of his poem, the poet gives voice to the understanding that only the word from which things are created permits man to name them, for the word communicates itself, if mutely, in the manifold languages of animals. This understanding is expressed in an image: God gives the animals, each in its turn, a sign, whereupon they step before man to be named. In an almost sublime way, the linguistic community of mute creation with God is thus conveyed in the image of the sign.

Insofar as the mute word in the existence of things falls infinitely short of the naming word in the knowledge of man, and insofar as the latter in turn falls short of the creative word of God, there are grounds for the multiplicity of human languages. The language of things can pass *into* the language of knowledge and name only through translation—so many translations, so many languages—once man has fallen, that is, from the paradisiacal state that knew only one language. (Of course, according to the Bible, this consequence of the expulsion from Paradise comes about only later.) The paradisiacal language of man must have been one of perfect knowledge, whereas later all knowledge

is again infinitely differentiated in the multiplicity of language, was indeed forced to differentiate itself on a lower level as creation in the name. That the language of Paradise must have been perfectly cognizant is something that even the existence of the Tree of Knowledge cannot conceal. Its apples were supposed to impart knowledge of what is good and what is evil. But already, on the seventh day, God had recognized with the words of creation: "And, behold, it was very good."<sup>11</sup> The knowledge to which the snake seduces, the knowledge of good and evil, is nameless. It is vain in the deepest sense, and this very knowledge is itself the only evil known to the paradisiacal state. Knowledge of good and evil abandons the name; it is a knowledge from without, the uncreative imitation of the creative word. The name steps outside itself in this knowledge: the Fall marks the birth of the *human word*, that in which name no longer lives intact and that which has stepped out of name-language, the language of knowledge, from what we may call its own immanent magic, in order to become, as it were from without, expressly magic. The word must communicate *something* (other than itself). That really is the fall of the spirit of language. The word as something externally communicating, a parody as it were—by the expressly mediate word—of the expressly immediate, creative word of God, and the decay of the blissful spirit of language, the Adamite spirit, that stands between them. Indeed, there exists a fundamental identity between the word that, after the promise of the snake, knows good and evil, and the externally communicating word. The knowledge of things resides in the name, whereas that of good and evil is, in the profound sense in which Kierkegaard uses the term, "empty talk," and knows only a purification and elevation, to which the talkative man, the sinner, was therefore subjected: judgment.<sup>12</sup> Of course, for the judging word, knowledge of good and evil is immediate. Its magic is different from that of name, but it is nonetheless magic. This judging word expels the first human beings from Paradise; they themselves have aroused it in accordance with an eternal law by which this judging word punishes—and awaits—its own awakening as the sole and deepest guilt. In the Fall, since the eternal purity of the name was violated, there arose the sterner purity of the judging word, of judgment. For the essential context of language, the Fall has a

threefold significance (in addition to its other meanings). In stepping outside the pure language of name, man makes language a means (that is, a knowledge inappropriate to him), and therefore also, in one part at any rate, a *mere* sign; and this later results in the plurality of languages. The second meaning is that from the Fall, as restitution for the immediacy of name that was damaged by it, a new immediacy now arises: the magic of judgment, which no longer rests blissfully in itself. The third meaning that can perhaps be ventured is that the origin of abstraction, too, as a faculty of the spirit of language, is to be sought in the Fall. For good and evil, being unnamable and nameless, stand outside the language of names, which man leaves behind precisely in the abyss opened by this question. The name, however, with regard to existing language, offers only the ground in which its concrete elements are rooted. But the abstract elements of language—we may perhaps surmise—are rooted in the judging word, in judgment. The immediacy (which, however, is the linguistic root) of the communicability of abstraction resides in the judgment. This immediacy in the communication of abstraction took on the character of judging when, in the Fall, man abandoned immediacy in the communication of the concrete—that is, name—and fell into the abyss of the mediateness of all communication, of the word as means, of the hollow word, into the abyss of chatter. For—it must be said again—the question as to good and evil in the world was empty talk after the Creation. The Tree of Knowledge stood in the garden of God not in virtue of any enlightenment it might have provided concerning good and evil but as emblem of judgment over the questioner. This immense irony marks the mythic origin of law.

After the Fall, which, in making language mediate, laid the foundation for its multiplicity, linguistic confusion could be only a step away. Once human beings had injured the purity of name, the turning away from that contemplation of things in which their language passes into man needed only to be completed in order to deprive humanity of the common foundation of the already shaken spirit of language. *Signs* must become confused where things are entangled. The enslavement of language in empty talk is followed by the enslavement of things in folly almost as its inevitable consequence. In this turning away from

things, which was enslavement, the plan for the Tower of Babel came into being, and with it the confusion of tongues.

The life of man in the pure spirit of language was blissful. Nature, however, is mute. To be sure, it can be clearly felt in the second chapter of Genesis how this muteness, named by man, itself became bliss, only of lower degree. In his poem, Friedrich Müller has Adam say of the animals that leave him after he has named them, "And I saw by the nobility with which they leapt away from me that the man had given them a name." After the Fall, however, with God's word that curses the ground, the appearance of nature is profoundly altered. Now begins its other muteness, which is what we mean when we speak of the deep sadness of nature. It is a metaphysical truth that all nature would begin to lament if it were endowed with language (though "to endow with language" is more than "to make able to speak"). This proposition has a double meaning. It means, first, that nature would lament language itself. Speechlessness: that is the great sorrow of nature (and, for the sake of her redemption, the life and language of *man*—not only, as is supposed, of the poet—are in nature). This proposition means, second, that nature would lament. Lament, however, is the most undifferentiated, impotent expression of language. It contains scarcely more than the sensuous breath; and 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. In all mourning there is the deepest inclination to speechlessness, and this is infinitely more than the inability or unwillingness to communicate. What is sad feels itself thoroughly known by the unknowable. To be named—even when the namer is godlike and blissful—perhaps always remains an intimation of mourning. But how much more mournful to be named not from the one blessed paradisiacal language of names, but from the hundred languages of man, in which name has already withered, yet which, according to God's pronouncement, have knowledge of things. Things have no proper names except in God. For in the creative word, God called them into being, calling them by their proper names. In the language of men, however, they are overnamed. There is, in the relation of human languages to that of things, something that can be approximately

described as "overnaming"—the deepest linguistic ground of all sorrow and (from the point of view of the thing) all keeping mute. Overnaming as the linguistic essence of the sorrowful points to another remarkable circumstance of language: the overdetermination that obtains in the tragic relation between the languages of human speakers.

There is a language of sculpture, of painting, of poetry. Just as the language of poetry is partly, if not solely, founded on the name-language of man, it is very conceivable that the language of sculpture or painting is founded on certain kinds of thing-languages, that in them we find a translation of the language of things into an infinitely higher language, which may still be of the same sphere. It is a question here of nameless, nonacoustic languages, languages issuing from matter; at this point we should recall the material community of things in their communication.

Moreover, the communication of things must certainly have a communal character, such that it comprehends the world in general as an undivided whole.

For an understanding of artistic forms, one should attempt to grasp them all as languages and to seek their connection with natural languages. An example that is appropriate because it is derived from the acoustic sphere is the kinship between song and the language of birds. On the other hand, it is certain that the language of art can be understood only in deepest relation to the theory of signs. Without the latter any linguistic philosophy remains entirely fragmentary, because the relation between language and sign (of which that between human language and writing affords only a very particular example) is original and fundamental.

This provides an opportunity to describe another antithesis that permeates the whole sphere of language and has important relations to the aforementioned antithesis between language in a narrower sense and the sign, with which, of course, language by no means simply coincides. For language is in every case not only communication of the communicable but also, at the same time, symbol of the non-communicable. This symbolic side of language belongs together with its relation to the sign, but extends, for example, in certain respects, to name and judgment also. These have not only a communicating func-



tion, but most probably also a closely connected symbolic function, to which, at least explicitly, no reference has here been made.

These considerations leave us, then, with a purified concept of language, however imperfect it still may be. The language of an entity is the medium in which its spiritual being communicates itself. The uninterrupted flow of this communication runs through the whole of nature, from the lowest form of existence to man, and from man to God. Man communicates himself to God through the names he gives to nature and (in proper names) to his own kind; and to nature he gives a name according to the communication he receives from her, for the whole of nature, too, is imbued with a nameless, mute language, the residue of the creative word of God, which has preserved itself in man as the cognizing name and above man as the judgment suspended over him. The language of nature is comparable to a secret password that each sentry passes to the next in his own language, but the content of the password is the sentry's language itself. All higher language is translation from the lower, until in ultimate clarity the word of God unfolds, which is the unity of this movement of language.

## Notes

"Über Sprache überhaupt und über die Sprachen des Menschen" (GS2, 140–157) was written November 1916 and published posthumously. Translated by Edmund Jephcot.

1. In a letter of November 11, 1916, Benjamin wrote to Gershom Scholem: "A week ago I began a letter to you that ended up being eighteen pages long. It was my attempt to answer in context some of the not inconsiderable number of questions you had put to me. In the meantime, I felt compelled to recast it as a short essay, so that I could formulate the subject more precisely. I am now producing a fair copy of it. In this essay, it was not possible for me to enter into mathematics and language, that is, mathematics and thinking, mathematics and Zion, because my thoughts on this infinitely difficult theme are still quite unripe. Otherwise, however, I do attempt to come to terms with the nature of language in this essay and—to the extent I understand it—in immanent relation to Judaism and in reference to the first chapters of Genesis. . . . I can't send

you the essay for a while. yet—impossible to say when—maybe in a week, maybe even later than that; as I said, it's not completely finished. From the title, 'On Language as Such and on the Language of Man,' you will note a certain systematic intent, which, however, also makes completely clear for me the fragmentary nature of its ideas, because I am still unable to touch on many points" (CWB, 81–82). The fragmentary status of the essay itself is indicated by a passage in Scholem's memoirs, in which he mentions the "questions" that occasioned the essay's composition: "Around that time [summer–fall 1916], I wrote a rather long letter to Benjamin about the relation between mathematics and language, and submitted a number of questions on the subject. His long reply to me, which he broke off in the middle, was later reworked into his essay 'Über Sprache überhaupt und über die Sprache des Menschen.' He handed me a copy in December 1916, upon his return to Berlin [from university studies in Munich], designating it the first part, to be followed by two more" (*Walter Benjamin: The Story of a Friendship*, trans. Harry Zohn [New York: Schocken, 1981], 34). What Benjamin had in mind for these two projected parts may be indicated in fragments from 1916 to 1917 translated in SW1, 87–91, and in the fragmentary essay of 1916, "Eidos und Begriff" (Eidos and Concept), first titled "Begriff und Wesen" (Concept and Essence), in GS6, 29–31. Benjamin's continuing preoccupation with the language essay speaks from his letter of February 27, 1917, to Ernst Schoen: "I am . . . giving a lot of thought to a more extensive study which I began four months ago and which I'm yearning to continue" (CWB, 85; see also 108). The essay is fifth in a list of five of his recent essays which Benjamin recommends to Herbert Belmore in a letter from the end of 1916 (CWB, 84). Concerning the essay's fundamental importance to Benjamin's later work on the theory of language, particularly in *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels* (Origin of the German *Trauerspiel*) and "Lehre vom Ähnlichen" (Doctrine of the Similar), see CWB, 101 (1917), 242 (1924), 261 (1925), and 414 (1933).

2. "Spiritual essence" translates *gesitiges Wesen*. The term *Wesen*, in this essay, is also translated as "being" and "entity."

3. Or is it rather the temptation to place the hypothesis at the beginning that constitutes the abyss of all philosophizing? (Benjamin's note).

4. The Greek word *logos* means both "word" and "reason."

5. Genesis 2:19 (Benjamin's emphasis). We translate here the German version by Martin Luther cited by Benjamin. In the next sentence, Benjamin continues the emphasis on "called" with his terms *Ausruf*, and *Anruf*, both derived from *rufen*, "to call." This distinction is then echoed in that between *aussprechen* and *ansprechen* in the next sentence.

6. Johann Georg Hamann, letter of October 18, 1785, to F. H. Jacobi. Known as “the Magus of the North” because of his cryptic and paradoxical writing style, Hamann (1730–1788) was author of *Sokratische Denkwürdigkeiten* (Socratic Memorabilia; 1759) and other philosophical-theological works opposed to the rationalistic spirit of the Enlightenment. He criticized his friend Kant for his neglect of the problem of language and helped shape the philological consciousness of Herder and German Romanticism. The phrase “spirit of language,” in Benjamin’s essay, translates *Sprachgeist*, a term fundamental to this philological tradition.

7. Genesis 2:7.

8. “So God created man in his own image; in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.”

9. Hamann, “Des Ritters von Rosencreuz letzte Willensmeynung über den göttlichen und menschlichen Ursprung der Sprache” (The Knight of the Rose-Cross’s Last Will and Testament Concerning the Divine and Human Origin of Language; 1772).

10. “Adams erstes Erwachen und erste seelige Nächte” (1779). Friedrich Müller (1749–1825), known as “Maler Müller” (Painter Müller), was a German painter and writer of the *Sturm und Drang* period.

11. Genesis 1:31. It is actually the sixth day on which God pronounces these words.

12. See Søren Kierkegaard, *The Present Age* (1846), trans. Alexander Dru (New York: Harper, 1962), 69–72. Kierkegaard’s text was first translated into German, with the title *Kritik der Gegenwart* (Critique of the Present Age), in 1914. Benjamin incorporates passages from this paragraph on “judgment” into the conclusion of his *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels*, which was written between 1923 and 1925.

## Aphorisms

**T**he idea of comedy is the human being as logical subject. The human being as *subject* of tragedy is ironic.—The tragic mask: the expressionless countenance [*Antlitz*]. The comic mask: the pure face [*Gesicht*].<sup>1</sup>

Logos and language. The Romans were great orators and bad philosophers; the Jews were gifted logicians and begot prophets.

The true aging of the parents is the death of the child.

The academy has turned into the university and students into academicians.

The relation between man and woman contains love symbolically. Its actual content may be called genius.

Cosmogony must explain love in its highest form; otherwise, it is false.

In the ghostly, all forms of reproduction (division, procreation) are prefigured as forms of existence.

The language of dream lies not in words but under them. Words in a dream are random products of the meaning, which resides in the wordless continuity of a flow. In the dream language, meaning is hidden in the same way that a figure is hidden in a picture puzzle. It is even possible that the origin of picture puzzles is to be sought in this direction, that is to say, as dream stenograph.<sup>2</sup>

The problem of historical time is already given with the peculiar form of historical time. The years can be counted but, in contrast to most things countable, not numbered.<sup>3</sup>

Theory, of course, cannot refer to reality but belongs together with language. Implicit here is an objection against mathematics.

## Notes

"Aphorismen" (GS2, 601–602) was written ca. 1916–1917 and published posthumously.

1. This small set of reflections has come down to us, without title, in the form of a copy made by Gershom Scholem in a notebook containing copies of other writings by Benjamin from the years 1916 and 1917. It is indexed by Scholem as "Bemerkungen" (Remarks). The title "Aphorisms" was supplied by the editors of the *Gesammelte Schriften*, who point to the general affinity of these reflections with Benjamin's essays of 1916.

2. "Picture puzzle" translates *Vexierbild*, and "dream stenograph" translates *Traumstenogramm*. On the association of picture puzzles with "dream work," and with historical perception, see the essay "Traumkitsch" (Dream Kitsch) of 1925–1926 (SW2, 4).

3. "Countable" translates *zählbar*, from the verb *zählen*, which, cognate with the English "tell," has the root meaning "to recount" as well as "to count." An alternative translation is: "The years can be told but . . . not numbered." See the following sentences on *Theorie*.

## Balzac

The universality of Balzac (and perhaps of the great modern French novel in general) rests partly on the fact that, in metaphysical questions, the French spirit proceeds, so to speak, in the manner of an analytic geometry; that is, it knows of a sphere in which things are, in principle, resolvable according to a method—a method which does not look into the individual (as it were, perceptual) depth of specific problems but resolves them in a methodical way, through which their resolvability is established in advance. A problem in geometry can require genius for its geometric solution; for its analytic solution, only method is required. The problem is nonetheless *solved* in both cases. It is to this methodical procedure in the treatment of great metaphysical realities that Balzac's oeuvre owes its universality, and, measured by other (as it were, geometric) standards, it can appear as not-deep (which does *not* mean shallow or superficial).<sup>1</sup>

## Notes

“Balzac” (GS2, 602) was written ca. 1916–1917 and published posthumously.

1. This short, fragmentary piece has come down to us, without title, in the form of a copy made by Gershom Scholem in a notebook containing copies of other writings from 1916–1917, including the “Aphorisms” translated above. It is indexed by Scholem as “Balzac,” and the editors of the *Gesammelte Schriften* have used this designation as the title. The exact date of composition is unknown.



## Dostoevsky's *The Idiot*

Dostoevsky depicts the destiny of the world in the medium of the destiny of his people.<sup>1</sup> This point of view is typical of the great nationalists, according to whom humanity can unfold only in the medium of a particular national heritage. The novel's greatness is revealed in the way the metaphysical laws governing the development of humanity and those governing the development of the nation are shown to be absolutely interdependent. Hence there is no impulse of deep human life that would not have its definitive place in the aura of the Russian spirit. To present this human impulse in the midst of its aura, floating quite freely in the national and yet inseparable from it, as from its proper place, is perhaps the quintessence of freedom in the great art of this writer. This can be appreciated only by someone who is aware of the dreadful cobbling-together of disparate elements that loosely make for character in novels of an inferior sort. There, the national type, the regional type, the individual person and the social person are pasted one to the other in puerile fashion, and the repulsive crust of the psychologically palpable covering it all completes the mannequin. The psychology of the characters in Dostoevsky, by contrast, is not at all the writer's starting point. It is, so to speak, only the delicate sphere in which pure humanity is generated in transition

from the fiery, primordial gas of the national. Psychology is only an expression of the bounded existence [*Grenzdasein*] of the human being. Everything that appears to the critics today as a psychological problem is in reality not that at all; they write as if what was at issue were the Russian "psyche" or the "psyche" of an epileptic. Criticism demonstrates its right to approach the work of art only insofar as it respects the territory proper to that work and takes care not to infringe on it. It is a brazen transgression of this boundary to praise an author for the psychology of his characters, and if critics and writers deserve one another for the most part, it is only because the average novelist makes use of those threadbare stereotypes which the critic can then identify and, just because he can identify them, also praise. This is precisely the sphere from which criticism must keep its distance; it would be shameful and false to measure Dostoevsky's work by such concepts. What matters, instead, is to grasp the metaphysical identity of the national, as well as of the human, in the idea of Dostoevsky's creation.

For, like every work of art, this novel rests on an idea; it "has an a priori ideal, a necessity in itself to exist," as Novalis says, and it is precisely this necessity, and nothing else, that criticism has to demonstrate.<sup>2</sup> The entire action of the novel acquires its fundamental character from the fact that it is an episode. It is an episode in the life of the main character, Prince Myshkin. His life before and after this episode is essentially veiled in darkness, not least in the sense that he spends the years immediately preceding it, like those following it, abroad. What necessity carries this man to Russia? His Russian existence rises out of his obscure time abroad, as the visible band of the spectrum emerges from darkness. But what light is refracted during his life in Russia? It would be impossible to say what he really accomplishes in this period, apart from his many mistakes and many shows of virtue. His life passes fruitlessly and, even in its best moments, resembles that of an ailing incompetent. He is not just a failure in society's eyes; even his closest friend—if the novel's rationale did not prevent him from having one—would be unable to discover any idea or purposive goal in his life. He is enveloped almost unobtrusively in the fullest isolation: all relations involving him seem quickly to enter the field of a

force that prohibits their growing intimate. Notwithstanding the utter modesty and even humility of this man; he is completely unapproachable, and his life radiates an order whose center is precisely his own solitude, ripe to the point of disappearance. This entails something quite strange: all events in the novel, however far from him they take their course, effectively gravitate toward him, and this gravitation of all things and persons toward the solitary one gives the book its content. These things and persons are just as little disposed to reach him as he is inclined to retreat before them. The tension is, as it were, inextinguishable and simple; it is the tension of life in its ever more agitated—but never dissipated—unfolding into the infinite. Why is the prince's house, and not that of the Yepanchins, the center of the action in Pavlovsk?<sup>3</sup>

The life of Prince Myshkin is laid before us as an episode only in order to make its immortality visible symbolically. In fact, his life is no more to be extinguished—indeed, it is less extinguishable—than natural life itself, to which it nevertheless bears a profound relation. Nature is perhaps eternal, but the prince's life is most certainly—and this is to be understood in an inward and spiritual sense—immortal. His life, like the life of all in his gravitational field. The immortal life is not the eternal life of nature, though it may seem close to it; for in the concept of eternity, infinity is overcome, whereas infinity attains its greatest glory in immortality. The immortal life to which this novel testifies has nothing to do with immortality in the usual sense. For, in the latter, it is precisely life that is mortal, and what is immortal is the flesh, energy, person, spirit in their various guises. Thus the words of Goethe, spoken in conversation with Eckermann, on the immortality of the active, according to which nature is obliged to give us new scope for activity once our present field of action has been taken from us.<sup>4</sup> All of that is far removed from the immortality of life—from the life that infinitely vibrates its immortality in sense, and to which immortality gives a shape. For here it is not a question of duration. But what life is immortal, if it is not that of nature or the person? Of Prince Myshkin one may say, on the contrary, that his person withdraws behind his life, as the flower behind its fragrance or the star behind its twinkling. The immortal life is unforgettable: that is the sign by which

we recognize it. It is the life that, without monument or memento, perhaps even without witness, would be necessarily unforgotten. It cannot be forgotten. This life remains, as though without vessel or form, the imperishable life. And "unforgettable" does not just mean that we cannot forget it; it points to something in the nature of the unforgettable itself, whereby it is unforgettable. Even the prince's loss of memory during his subsequent illness is a symbol of the unforgettable character of his life; for this seemingly lies buried now in the abyss of his recollection of himself, from which it arises no more. The other characters visit him. The brief concluding chapter of the novel leaves them all with the lasting imprint of this life in which they shared—they know not how.

The pure word for life in its immortality, however, is "youth." Dostoevsky's great lament in the book is for this: the failure of the youth movement. Its life remains immortal but loses itself in its own light: "the idiot."<sup>5</sup> Dostoevsky laments the fact that Russia cannot retain its own immortal life—for these people bear within them the youthful heart of Russia—cannot absorb it into itself. It falls on alien soil; it crosses the border and runs aground in Europe, "in this windy Europe." Just as Dostoevsky's political doctrine again and again conceives regeneration from within the national heritage [*im reinen Volkstum*] as the only hope, so the author of this novel recognizes in the child the only salvation for young people and their country. That would already be evident from this novel (in which the childlike figures of Kolya and the prince are purest of all), even if Dostoevsky had not gone on, in *The Brothers Karamazov*, to represent the unlimited healing power of the childlike life.<sup>6</sup> This young generation suffers from a damaged childhood, since it is precisely the damaged childhood of the Russian individual and the Russian land that has paralyzed its energies. It is always apparent in Dostoevsky that the noble unfolding of human life from out of the life of the people takes place only in the spirit of the child. Before the child's lack of language, the speech of Dostoevsky's characters dissolves, as it were, and an overwrought yearning for childhood (in modern parlance: hysteria) consumes the women in this novel—Lizaveta Prokofyevna, Aglaya, and Nastasya Filippovna—above all. The whole movement of the book resembles

the cave-in of a giant crater. Because nature and childhood are absent, humanity can be arrived at only in catastrophic self-destruction. The relation of human life to the living being, right down to its collapse and ruin, the immeasurable abyss of the crater from which mighty energies may one day burst forth, humanly great—this is the hope of the Russian people.

## Notes .

"*Der Idiot von Dostojewskij*" (GS2, 237–241) was written summer 1917 and published in *Die Argonauten*, 1921. Translated by Rodney Livingstone.

1. Fyodor Dostoevsky's *The Idiot* (1868) tells the story of Prince Myshkin, a Christlike figure caught in the snares of St. Petersburg society; it was translated into German in 1909. On February 27, 1917, Benjamin wrote to Ernst Schoen: "A few weeks ago I read Dostoevsky's tremendous novel *The Idiot*." Toward the end of that year, he sent Schoen a copy of his essay on the novel, and in an accompanying letter he commented: "I am finally in the position of being able to keep my promise and send you some of my work. If you are already familiar with my critique of Dostoevsky's *The Idiot*, there is all the more reason for me to ask you to accept this handwritten copy as a gift. I believe that the book itself must be of infinite significance for each of us, and I am happy if, for my part, I have been able to convey this" (CWB, 85, 114). Gershom Scholem received a copy of the essay around the same time: "In November 1917, Benjamin sent me a copy of his note on Dostoevsky's *The Idiot*, written that summer, which moved me as much as my reply moved him. I had written him that behind his view of the novel and of the figure of Prince Myshkin I saw the figure of his dead friend" (*Walter Benjamin: The Story of a Friendship*, trans. Harry Zohn [New York: Schocken, 1981], 49). Scholem refers to Benjamin's friend Fritz Heinle, a young poet who had committed suicide on the eve of World War I, and to whom Benjamin's essay "Two Poems by Friedrich Hölderlin" (Chapter 30 in this volume) is dedicated. Benjamin wrote back to Scholem on December 3, 1917: "Since receiving your letter, I have often found myself in a festive mood. It's as though I have entered a holiday season, and I must celebrate the revelation in what was disclosed to you. For it is surely the case that what has reached you, and you alone, was addressed just to you and has come into our life again for a moment.

I have entered a new epoch in my life because that which detached me with planetary velocity from all human beings and pushed even my most intimate relationships, except for my marriage, into the shadows, unexpectedly surfaces somewhere else and creates a bond" (CWB, 102). Nothing is known about Benjamin's efforts to publish the essay. As regards its appearance in 1921 in *Die Argonauten*, a journal edited in Heidelberg by the Expressionist poet Ernst Blass, see CWB, 168, and GB2, 193. See also Benjamin's letter of July 1, 1934, to Leo Löwenthal, concerning the latter's article on the reception of Dostoevsky in prewar Germany (GB4, 444–445). Not precisely datable are a set of notes projecting "a new critique of *The Idiot*," one involving a comparison with Shakespeare and with fairy tales (GS2, 979–980).

2. See Novalis, *Schriften* (Jena: Diederichs, 1907), 2: 231. The passage is cited also in "Two Poems by Friedrich Hölderlin." Benjamin makes further use of the writings of Novalis, pseudonym of Friedrich, Freiherr von Hardenberg (1772–1801), in his dissertation of 1919, "Der Begriff der Kunstkritik in der deutschen Romantik" (The Concept of Criticism in German Romanticism), in SW1, 116–200.

3. The Yepanchins are a family to which the main character in *The Idiot* is related. Pavlovsk is a suburb of St. Petersburg, favored as a summer resort of the city's middle classes.

4. See *Conversations with Eckermann*, trans. John Oxenford (1850; rpt. San Francisco: North Point, 1984), 233: "To me, the eternal existence of my soul is proved from my idea of activity; if I work on incessantly till my death, nature is bound to give me another form of existence when the present one can no longer sustain my spirit" (February 4, 1829). Johann Peter Eckermann (1792–1854) began in 1823 to record a series of conversations with the poet Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749–1832), which continued until Goethe's death. The transcription was published in two volumes in 1836.

5. At the end of Dostoevsky's novel, Prince Myshkin succumbs to his nervous illness and no longer recognizes the other characters. Benjamin's sentence can be construed to mean either that the life of *youth* or that the life of the *movement* (*Bewegung der Jugend*) remains immortal. On Benjamin's participation in the German youth movement before the war, see the introduction to this volume.

6. Dostoevsky published his last novel, *The Brothers Karamazov*, in 1880.

## On Seeing the Morning Light

Though man emerge from blind travail  
How could awakening take its own measure?  
Soul's flood tide fills the ear  
Until its ebb is lost in the day  
And dream that prophesied has forgotten itself

But form comes first of all to him  
Whose hand reaches into the ancestral preserve  
Refuge of sorrow the deep woods  
In its treetops a light has ripened  
Whose shine is weary and night-chilled

How soon am I alone in this world  
Which in creating reaches out my hand stops  
And with a shudder feels its own nakedness  
If then this space is too small for the heart  
Where will it breathe through its proper magnitude?

Where waking is not divorced from sleep  
A radiance begins that is garbed like the moon  
And yet no lucidity threatens to mock it  
The meadow of man where he grazes drowsily

In dream's old darkness no longer suffers  
In old dream's light awakes: God.<sup>1</sup>

### Notes

"Beim Anblick des Morgenlichtes" (GS7, 569–570) was written ca. September 1917 and published posthumously.

1. This poem, which has a varied rhyme scheme in the German, was enclosed in a letter of September 10, 1917, to Ernst Schoen. An earlier translation by Manfred R. Jacobson and Evelyn M. Jacobson (CWB, 96) was consulted. The idea of a historical awakening occupied Benjamin throughout his career as a writer; see especially Convolutes K and N (N1,9 and N3a,3 through N4,4) in *Das Passagen-Werk* (The Arcades Project), composed 1927–1940.



## The Centaur

The centaur originally belongs to those periods of Greek nature in which the creation was given life through the spirit of water and was unfolded through it.<sup>1</sup> "Wandering around," water is here a directionless force still belonging to chaos; later it becomes the stream with a direction, the inception of the life-giving process and of the cosmos.<sup>2</sup> It is also here the stagnating and hence dead element, and here it becomes the seething and fermenting, the living element that gives life. It was presumably this existence of water in the creation that Thales had in mind when he determined it to be the first principle.<sup>3</sup> Moisture was life, although it was at the same time the formless and, as it were, inanimate element from which the living thing is formed; it was the medium of emergent life. Because it was a medium, it was the unity of opposites [*Einheit über den Gegensätzen*]. The concept of the centaur, says Hölderlin, was that of the life-giving water.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, the authentically Greek sorrowfulness of these figures was related to their existence in the life-giving element, in the unfolding creation and the force that gives life there. For where there is giving of life, there is force—where the spirit does not give life. That, however, is the word. Where the word does not give life, life takes its time coming awake, and where the creation takes its time and lingers, it is sorrowful.<sup>5</sup> This

is the Jewish serenity in the creation: that it is born from the word, full of deep seriousness but also full of heavenly joy. Greek nature comes to itself blindly, rouses sorrowfully, and finds no one to wake it. In the centaur it awakes.

## Notes

"Der Centaur" (GS7, 26) was written ca. December 1917 and published posthumously.

1. In Greek mythology, the centaurs were a race of often unruly monsters having the head, arms, and trunk of a man and the body and legs of a horse. In the summer of 1917, Benjamin became interested in a prose poem, "Le Centaure," by the French Romantic poet Maurice de Guérin (1810–1839); the work concerns the wise and melancholy leader of the centaurs, Chiron. "After I had read it," Benjamin recounts in a letter of July 30, 1917, to Ernst Schoen, "I opened Hölderlin's mighty fragment, 'Das Belebende [That Which Gives Life]' . . . , and the world of Guérin's centaurs enter[ed] the larger world of Hölderlin's fragments" (CWB, 91). He refers here to a fragmentary commentary on the fifth-century B.C. Greek poet Pindar by the German Romantic poet Friedrich Hölderlin (1770–1843); the commentary (ca. 1803) accompanies Hölderlin's highly original translations of odes by Pindar. At the end of 1917, Benjamin sent Schoen the fruit of this reading, a short, possibly unfinished meditation, with the remark: ". . . I enclose 'Der Centaur,' thoughts which I developed on the basis of Hölderlin's mighty fragment, 'Das Belebende'" (GB1, 415). As source for the printed text of "Der Centaur," there exists only a photocopy of an untitled manuscript by Benjamin dated 1921, which may or may not be identical to the composition of 1917.

2. In his Pindar commentary (see note 1 above), Hölderlin writes: "Originally, the stream had to wander around [*umirren*] before it cut a channel for itself" (cited GS7, 567). The ancient Greek concept of *chaos* (from a root meaning "to gape") signified a formless primordial space preexisting the emergence of earth and sky.

3. A citizen of the Greek colony of Miletus in Asia Minor, Thales (624?–546? B.C.) is traditionally considered the first philosopher in the West. He maintained that the fundamental principal of things—that from which they originate and that which persists through all change—is water or moisture.

His conception derives from Homer, for whom the Titan Oceanus, an immense, backward-flowing stream encircling the universe, a river without source or mouth, is the origin not only of all waters, including the rivers of Hades, but of the gods themselves (*Iliad*, 14.201).

4. Hölderlin writes in his Pindar commentary (see note 1 above): “The concept of the centaur is apparently that of the spirit of a stream, insofar as the latter makes a channel and border, with force, on the originally pathless, burgeoning earth” (cited GS7, 567).

5. “Die echt griechische Traurigkeit dieser Gestalten galt aber ihrem Dasein im Belebenden, der Schöpfung die sich entfaltet und der Gewalt, die da belebt. Denn wo belebt wird ist Gewalt, wo nicht der Geist belebt. Das ist aber das Wort. Wo nicht das Wort belebt, wird Leben mit Weile wach und wo sich die Schöpfung verweilt ist sie traurig.” The passage is notable for its paronomasia or chiming verbal permutations (on the model of Hölderlin and archaic texts).

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