

WALTER BENJAMIN, HANNAH ARENDT: STORYTELLING IN AND AS
THEORETICAL WRITING

By

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INTRODUCTION

In the last part of her essay on Walter Benjamin written in 1968, Hannah Arendt includes a quote that highlights – especially because of its particular placement within the essay – the topics and questions of the study at hand: “Die Überzeugung, welche in meinen literarischen Versuchen mich leitet [ist], daß jede Wahrheit ihr Haus, ihren angestammten Palast, in der Sprache hat, daß er aus den ältesten logoi errichtet ist und daß der so gegründeten Wahrheit gegenüber die Einsichten der Einzelwissenschaften subaltern bleiben, solange sie gleichsam nomadisierend, bald hier, bald da im Sprachbereich sich behelfen, befangen in jener Anschauung vom Zeichencharakter der Sprache, der ihrer Terminologie die verantwortungslose Willkür aufträgt.”¹ These lines are taken from a letter Benjamin wrote to Hugo von Hofmannsthal in 1924. By and large, the relatively short letter is about the publication of the essay “Goethes Wahlverwandtschaften” (its first part) in Hofmannsthal’s journal *Neue Deutsche Beiträge*. The first thing that attracts attention is the fact that Benjamin speaks of his work as ‘literary attempts,’ thus addressing not so much his dissertation or the habilitation thesis *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels*, on which he was working at the time, but rather his essayistic efforts and work as a translator of Charles Baudelaire. In the scope of such

¹ Hannah Arendt, “Walter Benjamin,” in *Arendt und Benjamin. Texte, Briefe, Dokumente*, ed. Detlev Schöttker and Erdmut Wizisla (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2006), 93. Arendt has abridged the original passage from Benjamin’s letters, which reads: “Es ist von hoher Bedeutung für mich, daß Sie [Hugo von Hofmannsthal] die Überzeugung, welche in meinen literarischen Versuchen mich leitet, so deutlich herausheben und daß Sie sie, wenn ich recht verstehe, teilen. Jene Überzeugung nämlich, daß jede Wahrheit ihr Haus, ihren angestammten Palast, in der Sprache hat, daß er aus den ältesten logoi errichtet ist und daß der so gegründeten Wahrheit gegenüber die Einsichten der Einzelwissenschaften subaltern bleiben, solange sie gleichsam nomadisierend, bald hier, bald da im Sprachbereich sich behelfen, befangen in jener Anschauung vom Zeichencharakter der Sprache, der ihrer Terminologie die verantwortungslose Willkür aufträgt.” Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Briefe*, vol. 2, ed. Christoph Gödde and Henri Lonitz (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1996), 409.

‘literary attempts,’ Benjamin localizes the truth within language, and he renders language as a house, and even a palace.² As Arendt, too, observes in her essay, these lines by Benjamin are written in close proximity to his earlier philosophy of language and to the study on German Baroque plays. Language, according to Benjamin’s conviction, is not *Mitteilung*, communication of something, which would entail that it refers to something exterior to language. Instead, language is for Benjamin a universal, closed system of references – the medium of communicability per se. As a result, the things that appear to us – qua the disclosing function that truth is – appear within language. All in all, this methodological premise alone entails several questions that stand at the outset of the present study: What is the strange link here between appearance, which is by extension a phenomenology, and language? What does it mean for language to become a *space* for truth to appear? What is this space in language? How can it be described? Particularly, since in Benjamin’s statement the application of language is strongly connected to ‘literary attempts,’ and with regard to the author’s later essayistic and literary production, this begs the question of what nature the narrative for such a space is. In what ways can a narrative that somehow has to bring about such a space be characterized? In the context of questions like these, the following chapters will explore narrative – or storytelling, as it is predominantly called by Benjamin and Arendt – as a topic, but also as a compositional element of the authors’ theoretical writing. From the perspective of theoretical reflection,

² Compare to this statement a passage from Wittgenstein’s philosophical investigations: “Unsere Sprache kann man ansehen als eine alte Stadt: ein Gewinkel von Gässchen und Plätzen, alten und neuen Häusern, und Häusern mit Zubauten aus verschiedenen Zeiten: und dies umgeben von einer Menge neuer Vororte mit geraden und regelmäßigen Straßen und mit einförmigen Häusern.” Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus logico-philosophicus. Werkausgabe Band 1* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1984), 245. Wittgenstein wrote his philosophical investigations, which were published posthumously in 1953, in the years from 1936 to 1946.

this work has two major themes: it will be concerned with narrative and the ‘break in tradition,’ as well as with narrative and space.

Arendt places the above quote at the close of her essay on Benjamin³ and makes a bold claim: she writes that in regard to how he approached the broken tradition with his theoretical narrative, Benjamin had much more in common with Heidegger than with the “dialektischen Subtilitäten seiner marxistischen Freunde,” by which she refers foremost to Adorno, but also, to a certain degree, to Brecht.⁴ She supports her claim with a line from Heidegger’s essay *Kants These über das Sein*, in which the philosopher writes that a “Hören auf die Überlieferung” should be one that “nicht Vergangenen nachhängt, sondern das Gegenwärtige bedenkt.”⁵ She therefore juxtaposes Benjamin’s approach to history, which reads the past strictly from (or even rather: within) the standpoint of a constantly actualized present, with Heidegger’s ‘listening to tradition.’ At this point, the editors of *Arendt und Benjamin*, in their introductory article, write that Arendt in her argument had ‘eliminated’ the difference between Heidegger and Benjamin: “Arendt hat den Unterschied zwischen der gegenwartsbezogenen Intention Benjamins und der historischen Intention Heideggers in ihrem *Merkur*-Essay eliminiert, obwohl sie sich Anfang der fünfziger Jahre mit Benjamins Überlegungen vertraut gemacht hatte.”⁶

Without wanting to engage in this debate at any length, it might be worth pointing out

³ The third and last part of Arendt’s essay is more or less identical with a presentation she gave on July 26th, 1967, in Freiburg, Germany. Present in the audience was Martin Heidegger. Detlev Schöttker, Erdmut Wizisla, “Hannah Arendt und Walter Benjamin. Konstellationen, Debatten, Vermittlungen,” in *Arendt und Benjamin. Texte, Briefe, Dokumente*, ed. idem (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2006), 24.

⁴ Arendt, “Walter Benjamin,” 93.

⁵ Ibid. Also: Martin Heidegger, *Kants These über das Sein* (Frankfurt am Main: V. Klostermann, 1962), 8.

⁶ Detlev Schöttker, Erdmut Wizisla, “Hannah Arendt und Walter Benjamin,” 30.

that Wizisla and Schöttker seem to presuppose that Arendt wanted to draw Benjamin closer to Heidegger's view of history. They provide some of Benjamin's well-known statements in the context of his "kopernikanische Wendung des Eingedenkens,"⁷ eventually concluding: "Es ging Benjamin im Gegensatz zu Heidegger und Arendt um die Erkenntnis der Gegenwart."⁸ This equally bold claim indicates that somehow Arendt had disregarded Benjamin's insights into the concept of history, against her better judgment. But this is the question here: did she not perhaps rather try to bring Heidegger closer to Benjamin? Heidegger, incidentally, was among the audience when Arendt first read these passages in Freiburg in 1967. I would argue that she was therefore also addressing Heidegger with her remarks, with whom – philosophically speaking – she had a score to settle anyway. In this context, it should be considered that Arendt's whole work can, in some of her decisive philosophical and theoretical decisions, be read as a critical response and complement to Heidegger's philosophy: for example, by complementing death, as the focal point of being, with the concept of natality. This has widespread consequences, not the least of which is that Arendt brings a political perspective to a phenomenological and existential approach. Besides this, the main argument with her comparison of Benjamin with Heidegger is to repudiate a classic (Marxist) concept of dialectics in Benjamin – for which she has some quite convincing points.

⁷ Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 5, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, Hermann Schweppenhäuser, et al. (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1972-1989), 491. *Gesammelte Schriften* hereafter cited as GS with volume and page number.

⁸ Detlev Schöttker, Erdmut Wizisla, "Hannah Arendt und Walter Benjamin," 29.

The above digression demonstrates how much of the following work will unfold as a constant interplay of commentary and reflection. By probing the most relevant texts of both authors and following their lead for a certain way, this study intends to establish a network of concepts and thoughts that allows me to reflect on the formation of narrative in recent modernity, when it is confronted with the dissolution of its own tradition. What the heterogeneous constellation of friends and intellectual concepts displayed in Arendt's essay on Benjamin thus reveals, is also her own difficult relation to tradition, which she consequently renders as 'broken.' She adopts parts of Heidegger's and Benjamin's approaches to the past, but nevertheless finds herself after the war in a fundamentally original situation, in which she regards the break in tradition as an 'accomplished' fact.⁹ In this situation, the constitution and location of truth is in question for her, as well; and, subsequently, questions concerning its representation come up. In Arendt, it initially seems that the 'house' and even 'palace' which truth may, according to Benjamin, find in language, has given way to an 'abyss'¹⁰ and then to her concept of the 'gap between past and future.'¹¹ Similarly to Benjamin, Arendt cherishes the notion of storytelling throughout her work, so that there arises the question of narrative in connection with that of the space where truth may appear.

The setting for the questions introduced here spans across the work of the two authors; Benjamin, who died in 1940, had a different perspective on the dissolution of

⁹ Hannah Arendt, *Denktagebuch*, vol. 1, ed. Ursula Lodz and Ingeborg Nordmann (Munich and Zurich: Piper, 2002), 300.

¹⁰ Hannah Arendt, *Die verborgene Tradition. Essays* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2000), 11.

¹¹ Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future. Eight Exercises in Political Thought* (New York: Penguin Books, 1993).

tradition and the ensuing crisis of modernity¹² than Arendt, who began to write the main body of her work after 1945.¹³ Benjamin thus was involved in the progressive collapse of tradition from a different angle than Arendt. The notion of the ‘break in tradition,’ or also ‘break in history,’ is a point of reference throughout the following chapters, in which I will venture to analyze up close concepts of narration in connection with concepts of spatiality. At the outset of the present study, emphasis will be put on some of Benjamin’s fundamental concepts that, as a constellation of a theory of language, a theory of ideas, and a phenomenological approach, form the basis of much of his thinking and writing.¹⁴ While the actual concepts that Benjamin applies to these respective areas change throughout his work, the underlying thoughts do not change drastically and rather

¹² See in this context John McCole, who puts Benjamin’s response to the disintegrating tradition at the center of his book. Though he does not apply the notion of a ‘break in tradition,’ he observes how tradition transforms into antinomies that determine Benjamin’s thinking to a significant extent. McCole’s study specifically emphasizes Benjamin’s reception of German idealism and romanticism during his association with Gustav Wyneken and the youth movement. The book’s scope thus includes the time before the First World War. Its author looks at the question of tradition from the perspective of intellectual discourses. He attempts to locate Benjamin in what Pierre Bourdieu calls an “intellectual field,” and renders German “orthodox academic culture” altogether in terms of a landscape of such fields, with the main exponents as some sort of powerful functionaries, whom he calls “mandarins” in reference to Fritz Ringer: *The Decline of the German Mandarins*. – John McCole, *Walter Benjamin and the Antinomies of Tradition* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1993), 26.

¹³ On the significance of the ‘break in tradition’ for Arendt’s work, see, for example: Ingeborg Nordmann, *Hannah Arendt* (Frankfurt am Main: Campus Verlag, 1994). Nordmann puts the ‘break in tradition’ at the beginning of Arendt’s approach to philosophy, writing that the author “bewahrt Philosophie als Bruchstück.” (Ibid., 39) Furthermore, Nordmann’s book puts Arendt’s response to history in the context of Benjamin and Heidegger.

¹⁴ For an introduction into this specific context, see Winfried Menninghaus, *Walter Benjamins Theorie der Sprachmagie* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1980). Menninghaus’ very thorough approach to Benjamin’s theory of language constitutes in many ways a firm basis on the grounds of which a reading of some of the author’s most difficult and inaccessible texts that also stand at the center of the present study, is possible. Among these texts are Benjamin’s early essay “Über Sprache überhaupt und über die Sprache des Menschen” and the “Erkenntniskritische Vorrede” from *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels*. One of the main merits of Menninghaus’ book, which I aim to acknowledge in this work, is his functional, common-sense approach to Benjamin’s conceptuality that attempts to reduce and push back the line where understanding surrenders and Benjamin’s work turns ‘metaphysical’ or ‘esoteric.’ The point where I depart from Menninghaus’ study lies in my attempt to emphasize and reconstruct the connection of a theory of language with a theory of ideas, as well as a phenomenology, in Benjamin. I see this consistently as a fundamental methodological constellation throughout the author’s work.

undergo a process of a constant enrichment. In the course of investigating the phenomenon of storytelling in Benjamin, I will touch on key topics of his work, such as his image conceptions¹⁵ or the issue of remembrance.¹⁶ In general, though many scholars have dealt with Benjamin's unique style of writing and its philosophical and aesthetic preconditions, there still seem to be only a few monographs that put the specific question of a narrative theory in the author's work at their center.¹⁷ A similar observation has to be made concerning the role which the conceptuality of space plays in Benjamin's thinking and writing. The fact that places inspire many of the author's works – for example, *Berliner Kindheit um neunzehnhundert*, *Einbahnstrasse*, or the *Passagen-Werk* – has been the subject of many interpretations which note that Benjamin's writing was highly

¹⁵ For a broader historical and theoretical context on questions concerning Benjamin's image conceptions, see Josef Fürnkäs, *Surrealismus als Erkenntnis. Walter Benjamin – Weimarer Einbahnstraße und Pariser Passagen* (Stuttgart: J.B. Metzler, 1988), and Bettine Menke, *Sprachfiguren. Name – Allegorie – Bild nach Walter Benjamin* (Munich: Fink, 1991). Fürnkäs primarily turns to Benjamin's prose works, with a focus on *Einbahnstraße*, and develops the author's understanding of images in the context of these texts as "Denkbilder." Particularly important for the present study are Fürnkäs' explanations concerning the notion of image and body space in the context of Benjamin's reception of surrealism and his approach to history. – Menke's book offers a focused, deconstructive analysis of the main concepts linked to Benjamin's application of images throughout his work. Her reading of Benjamin's image conceptions such as allegory, image space, or aura is based on an understanding of the image–text relation as "Sprachfiguren," figures of speech. Menke therefore provides an investigation of images not in their metaphorical function, but as modes of knowledge themselves that constitute their object rather than representing it. Such an immediate relation between the image character of language and meaning also underlies the approach to images favored by this work.

¹⁶ For a detailed study on the relation between remembrance and strategies of writing in Benjamin, see Nicolas Pethes, *Mnemographie. Poetiken der Erinnerung und Destruktion nach Walter Benjamin* (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 1999).

¹⁷ Exceptions are, for example, the earlier study by Edzard Krückeberg, *Der Begriff des Erzählens im 20. Jahrhundert. Zu den Theorien Benjamins, Adornos und Lukács'* (Bonn: Bouvier, 1981), which dedicates a chapter to Benjamin's concept of narrative; the anthology of essays by Klaus Doderer (ed.), *Walter Benjamin und die Kinderliteratur. Aspekte der Kinderkultur in den zwanziger Jahren* (Weinheim and Munich: Juventa Verlag, 1988), which despite its emphasis on children's literature contains some essays concerned with the topic of narrative in Benjamin; and Alexander Honold, *Der Leser Walter Benjamin. Bruchstücke einer deutschen Literaturgeschichte* (Berlin: Verlag Vorwerk 8, 2000). Informed by a 'theorie of reading,' the latter monograph provides an unconventional and very productive approach to Benjamin's perspective on various authors, among them storytellers such as Johann Peter Hebel, Nikolai Leskov, and Franz Kafka.

dependent on the places at which it occurred, but which also reveal how these spaces help to actually organize his writing.¹⁸ It seems to be more difficult, however, to reach to a level where the specific function of space in narrative, or generally in text, is discussed.¹⁹ The decisive distinction I would like to advance in the present study is that between space as place and topic, on the one hand, and space as a dynamic, structural, and hence immediate constitutive of narrative, on the other. With this distinction in mind, it is possible to ask not only the question of the function space has *for* narratives, but also the question of its function *within* narratives. The proposition here is that, on this latter level, spatial principles determine what the reader's mind in the process of reading can 'do' with narrative – without this being meant as a metaphor. At this point, too, the concept of body space brings the political perspective into Benjamin's writing of space, since it refers to the collective as the subject of political action. Uwe Steiner, in his introduction to Benjamin, calls this a 'strange metaphysics of the body' and suggests several traditions that might have led Benjamin to his concept of body and image space: at the center of several texts that are concerned with the political, Steiner argues, "steht eine

¹⁸ Susan Buck-Morss' well-known book *The Dialectics of Seeing. Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1991) may serve as a good example. In her interpretative approach to the massive collection of German and French quotes as well as the notes which constitute Benjamin's "never-written work" (Ibid., ix), she starts out with "temporal origins" and then "spatial origins." The author arranges Benjamin's work along the axes of a coordinate system ranging from Berlin (north) to Naples (south), and from Paris (west) to Moscow (east). (Ibid., 25) Overall she applies these spaces and the images they entail in order to organize her own approach to the conglomerate of text fragments Benjamin left behind.

¹⁹ An exception here is, for example, Sigrid Weigel, *Body- and Image-Space. Re-reading Walter Benjamin* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996). Weigel provides crucial insight into some of the concepts – like body and image space, or the 'world of universal and integral actuality' – that form the basis of how Benjamin renders space in his writing. Ultimately, however, the focus of Weigel's inquiry shifts to the question of the author's image conceptions. These topics are of course closely related in many ways, but it seems that the concern for the readily available image conceptions (e.g., 'dialectical image,' allegory) may conceal an analysis of the underlying spatial principles.

eigentümliche Metaphysik des Leibes, bei deren Konzeption weitläufige Einflüsse der philosophischen Tradition erkennbar sind, die von der Romantik über Nietzsche, die expressionistische Nietzsche-Rezeption (Kurt Hiller, Erich Unger, Salomo Friedlaender, Paul Scheerbart) und die Lebensphilosophie (Henri Bergson, Ludwig Klages) bis hin zu Gustav Theodor Fechners ‘Psychophysik’ und die an sie anschließende erkenntnistheoretische Diskussion im Neukantianismus reichen.”²⁰ Without following all the paths into tradition that Steiner offers here, this study focuses on a thorough reading of Benjamin and Arendt in order to explore the possibilities of the unique awareness of spatiality in narrative that these authors display.

While the importance of narrative for Arendt’s theoretical writing has been duly noted,²¹ the interest of the present study lies in the relation of space and narrative.²² For

²⁰ Uwe Steiner: *Walter Benjamin* (Stuttgart and Weimar: Verlag J.B. Metzler, 2004), 76.

²¹ See, for example Seyla Benhabib, *The Reluctant Modernism of Hannah Arendt* (London and New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1996) in the chapter “The Theorist as Storyteller” (ibid., 91ff.), as well as Julia Kristeva: *Hannah Arendt* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001). Kristeva sees in Arendt an “apparent defense of narration that infuses all her writings.” (Ibid., 69) See also the more recent articles by Leslie Paul Thiele, “The Ontology of Action. Arendt and the Role of Narrative,” *Theory & Event* 12, no. 4 (2009), <http://muse.jhu.edu/> (accessed March 16, 2013) and Allen Speight, “Arendt on Narrative Theory and Practice,” *College Literature* 38, no. 1 (Winter 2011): 115-130. The latter acknowledges that a “renewed philosophical attention has been directed toward the question of narrative,” but also states “that Arendt’s approach to narrative has not been given much new sustained attention.” (Ibid., 115, 116)

²² Literature dedicated exclusively to this conjecture about space and narrative seems to be scarce. An article by Gabriel Zoran, “Towards a Theory of Space in Narrative,” *Poetics Today* 5, no. 2 (1984): 309-335 constitutes the exception here. Zoran observes an “asymmetry of time and space in the narrative,” referring also generally to narrative theories: “The existence of space is pushed into a corner, so to speak. It is not altogether discarded, but neither does it have a recognized and clear-cut status within the text. It can be understood in various ways, but none is as clear and unambiguous as the term *time*.” (Ibid., 310) The author goes on to introduce several analytical categories in order to characterize the different levels on which language expresses the “spatial existence of any object.” (Ibid., 313) He therefore is foremost concerned with the existence of space and its representation in narrative. In the conclusion, he explicitly states that his paper does not deal with “the functionality of space within the overall structure of the text.” (Ibid., 333) – Generally, it seems, however, that in terms of narrative theory, the prerogative still lies strongly with questions of time. See, for example, Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1990). Or the chapter “Die Zeit des Erzählers” in Alexander Honold’s

Arendt, space not only has the (truth) revealing function of appearance; the concept also designates the more difficult to grasp ‘in-between’ which the author frequently brings up in order to outline (rather than define) relevant concepts in her thinking. Freedom, for example, is according to Arendt a human faculty that appears in between people. She renders the crisis of modern thought in the context of tradition’s disintegration as the ‘gap between past and future.’ It is this ‘gap’ that, for Arendt, entails both the impasse of modern thinking and its productive center. She claims that this ‘gap’ is the “only region perhaps where truth eventually will appear,” and that it is “perhaps the proper habitat of all reflections.”²³ But how can this ‘gap,’ which Arendt on another occasion also calls “non-time-space,”²⁴ be represented? What is its function within narrative? By turning to Arendt’s book *Between Past and Future* and particularly her readings of Kafka, this study will attempt to reconstruct, in part, what appears to be a model of narrative that includes this difficult notion of a ‘gap’ as its structural focal point.

It will quickly become clear, however, that precisely this ‘gap,’ or the ‘break in tradition’ that it has become in modernity, is as a pivot for approaching Benjamin and Arendt not a safe spot, but immediately leads to the aporetic center of both authors’ thinking. It is the ambition of this work to show how the authors turn this impasse for thinking into a productive principle in their writing. One difficulty that results from this setup is the way in which the reading and reflecting processes laid down in this study meet up with the complex situation in which the writing processes of the authors were

book *Der Leser Walter Benjamin*.

²³ Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 14, 227.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 13.

located. The question that led to certain choices in the composition of the present work was: how can my writing successfully encounter the writing of the authors in order to gain the most understanding from them and create an environment that allows for further reflection upon the possibilities and limits of (theoretical) narrative in modernity? Since Benjamin and Arendt consequently already wrote with the premise in mind that the tradition of history, culture, and thinking is (inherently) broken, I had to make sure not to re-implement coherence, causality, and normativity where the authors strove to dismantle such categories. On the other hand, it is equally true that neither Benjamin's nor Arendt's thinking drifts off into utter arbitrariness as the result of the acceptance of the break in tradition. Narrative, for example, remains for both a universal faculty of man, ultimately beyond the disintegration of tradition. Though Benjamin writes about the loss of the art of storytelling, he also observes and supports what he calls a "Restitution des Epischen" (GS3, 231) that would bring about completely "neue, sehr epische Möglichkeiten." (GS3, 232)

I have thus chosen, on the one hand, to apply a relatively loose structure of twelve chapters. The goal is for this to reflect the abolishment of linearity and strict causality that both authors assumed. Ideally, the chapters could be arranged in a spatial manner side by side, and thus remain self-contained and illuminate each other: their questions, topics, and central concepts. On the other hand, I wanted to apply what I understand to be the core task of philology – albeit from a philosophically inspired perspective: to read the texts that form the basis of our understanding thoroughly, and make them readable again. This latter approach entails a method that shifts between commentary and reflection, not

in order to reconstruct an ‘authentic’ text, but rather to expand on the original texts according to the questions this study brings to them.

The first two chapters of the present investigation, which are on Benjamin, have an introductory character. They aim to prepare the methodological and conceptual context for the following chapters. In these chapters, I am concerned with the notion of the ‘break in tradition’ in the context of some of Benjamin’s methodological fundamentals. I deal with the question of how, in the face of the break in tradition, the author’s terminology of debris and ruins is possible. Expanding on this, I attempt to tie in with the author’s theory of language what I perceive to be his approach to phenomenology. Chapter 2 aims to reveal the basic antonymical composition of Benjamin’s thinking as a direct response to the collapsing tradition, and propounds the thesis that his well-known agenda of the ‘salvation of the phenomena’ has its center precisely within these antonymical constructions.

In chapters 3 and 4, I present the way in which Benjamin, in different variations, approaches what he calls a ‘theory of epic forms,’ and how, in the process, fundamental concepts traditionally involved in such a theory – like the oppositions of theory and praxis on the one hand, and form and contents on the other hand – are brought into a crisis and disintegrate or turn around. This reconstruction of the crisis that Benjamin inscribes into modern narrative results – according to chapter 2 – in the surrender of the epic.

Since this surrender does not mean that the narrative faculty itself vanishes, Benjamin comes to expect completely ‘new epic possibilities.’ In chapters 5 and 6, I will thus investigate the consequences of the epic’s transgression for the author’s own

(theoretical) narrative. I argue that the unique way in which Benjamin uses spatial principles to compose his writing is one result. Space becomes a method that enables his texts to provide the reader with an original experience in thinking. In the last chapter on Benjamin, I put the transgression and restitution of narrative into a greater context within his work. Here, I will come back to some of Benjamin's broader notions, such as the relation of body and image space to a concept of the cosmos, or the author's concept of the historiographer as messiah and the storyteller as the 'righteous one.'

Chapters 7 and 8 situate Arendt's writing within the concept of the break in tradition and set the conceptual and methodological stage for the following chapters. I argue here that the experience of the collapsing tradition can be seen as an 'origin' – that is, a point of reference and crystallization – for the main body of Arendt's writing after 1945. Furthermore, chapter 8 renders the concept of tradition as 'inherently broken.' With this move, I want to reflect the extent to which the broken tradition, as a point of origin, determines Arendt's thinking.

In chapters 9 and 10, I connect the notion of the break in tradition with Arendt's concept of the 'gap between past and future.' The goal of these two chapters is, on the one hand, to show how Arendt investigates the condition of modern thought by means of the concept of the 'gap,' and on the other hand, to reconstruct this notion as an original narrative model. Arendt develops this model by means of a critical reading of Kafka's storytelling. With this model, she hopes to provide thinking with the ability to become emancipated from the aporetic situation in which it finds itself in modernity and to move

in “perfect equidistance from past and future”²⁵ so that it regains its powers of judgment and does not have to “jump out of the human time altogether.”²⁶

With this in mind, the last two chapters focus on Arendt’s own theoretical narrative. I will present the author’s approach to tradition through Plato’s ‘cave story’ (Arendt) and through the appearance of a storyteller in her ‘report’ of the Eichmann trial. The latter reveals the potential for human freedom which Arendt assumed to inhere in storytelling. In closing, I will have a look at her interpretation of Kafka in order to elaborate on her understanding of stories as models and examples.

²⁵ Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 12.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 11.

CHAPTER I

WALTER BENJAMIN: A PHENOMENOLOGY OF DEBRIS

Debris, ruins, “Trümmerhaufen” (GS1, 698) – the history of the modern world, and by this token also its potential narratives, appear in Walter Benjamin’s work as a phantasmagoric accumulation of disintegrated fragments. On various occasions Benjamin observes how, with the rise of modernity, the tradition of Western culture and knowledge broke down. When he gives an account of the method for his investigation of the *Ursprung des Deutschen Trauerspiels*, he maintains that the “begrifflichen Umrisse” within which “die großen Philosophien” represented the world through an “Ordnung der Ideen” had long since become “brüchig.” (GS1, 212) Key concepts of tradition like that of experience, the art of storytelling, and the aura of artworks in general are approached by Benjamin in terms of crisis, always anticipating their disappearance. In texts like “Krisis des Romans,” a book review of Alfred Döblin’s novel *Berlin Alexanderplatz*, Benjamin seems to actively emphasize and press the crisis of forms of representation ahead in order to reach out for new possibilities this might offer. He thus appears not only as a mere spectator but also an agent within the unfolding break in tradition.²⁷

²⁷ In: “Erfahrung und Armut” (GS2, 213), “Der Erzähler. Betrachtungen zum Werk Nikolai Lesskows” (GS2, 438), “Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit.” (GS1, 431) – John McCole chooses the same vantage point to “explore the origins and tensions of Walter Benjamin’s dealings with tradition.” John McCole, *Walter Benjamin and the Antinomies of Tradition* (Ithaca, London: Cornell University Press, 1993), ix. He focuses his entire project on Benjamin and the traditions of German-European thought, and specifically on the author’s reception of German idealism during the prewar years when he was associated with the reformist youth and student movements. In this context, a fundamental conflict in Benjamin’s thought appears: his break with Gustav Wyneken and the subsequent attempt to hold on to “the critical potential of his [Benjamin’s] earlier idealism,” despite realizing the “slippages that made a murderous abuse of idealist rhetoric so easy.” (Ibid., 31) As a result, McCole starts off by exploring

At the outset of this investigation of the relation of narrative and theoretical writing in Benjamin, it will be necessary to give an account of some of the author's methodological premises. In particular, questions concerning his approach to the fragmented narrative of modernity will be of interest. What are the immediate consequences of the break in tradition for Benjamin's linguistic and epistemological categories? In the context of representation and fragmentation, the question arises how the terminology of debris translates into a methodology?

The decisive turning point in terms of experience is, for Benjamin, the First World War; he first renders the concept of experience in such a way that it in fact negates the faculty of experience itself.²⁸ Instead of returning from the war enriched with experience,

Benjamin's dissertation, *Der Begriff der Kunstkritik in der deutschen Romantik*, as a "first major step toward coming to grips with the traumatic events of 1914." (Ibid., 110) He argues that Benjamin "recovers a core of authentically romantic doctrines and secures it against attempts to place romanticism exclusively at the service of either *Lebensphilosophie* or orthodox idealism." (Ibid., 114) The study at hand approaches the matter from a different angle but in front of the same backdrop: instead of tracing Benjamin's roots in and critique of the various philosophical traditions, it attempts to analyze directly the theoretical and thus conceptual form of Benjamin's argument. The guiding question here is: what is the immediate consequence of the break in tradition for the shape of Benjamin's fundamental linguistic and epistemological premises, and then by extension for his 'theoretical narrative'? – Interestingly, though McCole acknowledges that Benjamin saw the modernist tradition as being in crisis, he does not seem to fully face the theoretical implications and questions that result from a terminology that speaks of tradition and history as 'broken' and 'fragmented.' Instead, he points to "Benjamin's productive ambivalence about the decay of tradition, the dialectic of liquidationist and culturally conservative moments in his work." (Ibid., 28) He emphasizes the destructive moment in Benjamin: "[T]he more insistent his demands for liquidation and his identification with the forces of destruction, the deeper his permeation of vanishing forms of experience." (Ibid., 9) The following investigation hopes to equally acknowledge Benjamin's attempt to put this negative extreme into a constellation with a positive extreme: not to balance and pacify a *status quo*, but to bring about new possibilities for thinking *after* tradition.

²⁸ On the impact that the outbreak of the First World War had on Benjamin and his friends from the student movement, see, among others, Momme Brodersen, *Spinne im eigenen Netz. Walter Benjamin. Leben und Werk* (Bühl-Moos: Elster Verlag, 1990), 78ff. The mobilization of armed forces in 1914 divided the youth into exuberant supporters for the war and those who were disappointed in their teachers and the older generation in general. The latter were forced to realize that their idealistic beliefs in reforming modern culture and thought were now being perverted into cheap rhetoric to bring the masses into line. For Benjamin, this break in his intellectual and spiritual development was accompanied by the loss of close friends, Fritz Heinle and Rika Seligson, who chose to end their lives in the face of "Ereignisse [...], die allen mit einem Schlage die ganze Sinnlosigkeit ihres bisherigen Tuns vor Augen geführt hatten." (Ibid., 81) Benjamin, with some of his friends, eventually openly renounced Gustav Wyneken who, too, had quickly switched his attitude and supported the prevalent ideology "vom allseits bedrohten Vaterland." (Ibid., 83)

as the “Flut der Kriegsbücher” might have indicated, people, according to Benjamin, came back “verstummt” – “nicht reicher – ärmer an mitteilbarer Erfahrung.” (GS2, 439) Constitutive for experience here is its communicability: events that befall individuals turn into experience when they are shared and passed on among others. The Latin root of communicate, *communicare*, and its German counterpart *Mitteilung* in particular, point to this mechanism of tradition. In this context, the notion hence also means that the sorrow and suffering of experiences are shared and thus endured by the community. Accordingly, the break in tradition means that this activity of passing on and sharing has ceased to function; the events individuals have encountered are no longer embedded in a collectively maintained and supragenerational communicative framework. Hannah Arendt would later, in *Between Past and Future*, characterize this failing of tradition with words taken from an aphorism by René Char, who characterized the political experience he gained during his days as a member of the French Resistance as an inheritance without a testament.²⁹ This inheritance, then, cannot escape the privateness of the individual and thus does not translate into true experience shared among people. In Arendt’s understanding, this demise of political experience eventually impairs the faculty of

Brodersen concludes: “Der erste Weltkrieg stellt zweifellos eine lebensgeschichtliche und intellektuelle Zäsur in Benjamins Biographie dar.” (Ibid., 85) – A more recent account of Benjamin’s response to the war can be found in Jean-Michel Palmier, *Walter Benjamin. Lumpensammler, Engel und bucklicht Männlein. Ästhetik und Politik bei Walter Benjamin* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2009), 218ff. Palmier, who focuses more on Benjamin’s intellectual biography, is able to provide more thorough background information, and also includes an expanded look at Benjamin’s friendship with Gershom Scholem, which began during this time. (Ibid., 200ff.) In particular, Palmier illuminates the fact that and reasons why Benjamin, though he formed new and decisive friendships in this period, remained more or less silent about the war from 1914 to 1919. Despite the fact that he was in principle against the war, it seems that the full impact of the events only slowly aroused his full attention: “Er dachte nicht daran, sich dem Krieg zu entziehen. Erst der brutale Selbstmord Heinles riß ihn aus dieser Passivität.” (Ibid., 219) Palmier argues that this was in part the consequence of Benjamin’s bourgeois upbringing and lifestyle, which was never challenged by the ideals of the youth movement.

²⁹ Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future. Eight Exercises in Political Thought* (New York: Penguin Books, 1993), 3ff.

thinking and judging itself. With the break in tradition, the formal device to turn events into experience, in Char's aphorism characterized as the testament, vanished. Benjamin marks the interruption of the thread that tradition forms in this way between people by pointing out how the events of the war contravened and effectively negated the experiences people already had. These existing experiences had thus previously formed the mnemonic and conceptual background necessary to turn individual *Erlebnisse* into communicated experience. Referring to the war but also to the immediate post-war events that led to dramatic political and economic upheavals for the newly founded Weimar Republic, Benjamin describes in "Erfahrung und Armut" how strategic, economic, physical and ethical realities held to be true by the people were now subverted by unprecedented manifestations like "Stellungskrieg," "Inflation," "Materialschlachten," and ruthless "Machthaber." (GS2, 439)

In the broader context of the peculiar transformations and relations of concepts throughout Benjamin's work, which often encompasses multiple smaller essays or even mere notes, several of his key concepts with regard to crisis are linked in some way or another to *Technik*, technology. Criticism of these key concepts thus often plays out in Benjamin as a critique of modern technology. He in turn renders the break in tradition as a discrepancy or incongruity between societal progress and technological means. The broad frame of reference which technology forms in Benjamin's understanding and critique of modern progress becomes clear in the essay on *Surrealism*. Here he introduces technology as the all-encompassing expression of human activities, through which nature is turned into environment and tools; a second nature, as it were. Benjamin sees technology as irresolvably connected to the human body: Similarly to prostheses, which

are visible – technological – extensions of the body, he regards anything man creates not as something outside of the body, but as its extension. Through technology in this broad sense, man thus organizes his world. Society hence becomes a collective representation of the human body; Benjamin claims that a collective has a bodily appearance, too. He aims to grasp the “politische[] und sachliche[] Wirklichkeit” of modern man by referring to his collective appearance in masses whose “Physis” would be organized in terms of technology. (GS2, 310) The essay on “Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit” eventually arrives at a conclusive critique of technology in modernity: the Great War proved that society was not ready “sich die Technik zu ihrem Organ zu machen, daß die Technik nicht ausgebildet genug war, die gesellschaftlichen Elementarkräfte zu bewältigen.” (GS1, 507) Here the break in tradition within which Benjamin’s writing unfolds takes the form of a rift between technological potential and the desires and necessities of man living in mass societies.

Under the conditions of this cultural and societal break, history transforms, for Benjamin, into *Urgeschichte*. It becomes prehistorical and hence falls out of its narrative, which means that our recent concepts fail to apply to it. “Der alte prähistorische Schauer unwittert schon die Umwelt unserer Eltern, weil wir durch Tradition nicht mehr an sie gebunden sind.” (GSV, 576) Prehistory is lost to any conceptual approach to history, but still indirectly shapes it. In this sense, it is comparable to the discovery of the unconscious by Freud.³⁰ If it surfaces and reaches into the sphere of narrative, for

³⁰ Sigrid Weigel investigates in detail the meaning of psychoanalysis for Benjamin’s conception of remembrance. See idem, *Entstellte Ähnlichkeit. Walter Benjamins theoretische Schreibweise* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Verlag, 1997), 27ff. She shows how Benjamin’s concept of memory (*Gedächtnis als Schauplatz*) relates to Freud’s topographical theory of memory consisting of different “unverträgliche[] Systeme des psychischen Apparates” and a dialectics of “Gedächtnisspuren.” (Ibid., 34, 35) Benjamin’s concept of disfiguration as an integrated part of remembering that allows for formerly unknown similarities

example in mythological form,³¹ it appears disfigured, because contemporary concepts do not fit it and thus distort its original meaning. This transformation, in turn, is, according to Benjamin, “Folge und Bedingung der Technik zugleich.” (GSV, 576)

The question now is how the awareness of the disintegrating tradition shaped basic categories of Benjamin’s methodology. The “Erkenntniskritische Vorrede” from *Ursprung des Deutschen Trauerspiels* represents an earlier account of his linguistic, epistemological, and historical approach, which in its theoretical structure influenced most of the subsequent works, though the underlying concepts changed. Repeatedly Benjamin states that he attempts to coordinate extremes in his work, since according to him the ideal essence of the phenomenal appears in such extremes. Representation of extreme oppositions thus becomes part of his methodology. In his Baroque study he breaks down his method into the triad of idea, concept, and phenomenon. The task of concepts, he writes, is to excavate elements from the phenomenal world in order to

(according to *Entstellte Ähnlichkeit*) to suddenly and unexpectedly emerge, has its roots, according to Weigel, in Freud’s theory: “Dieses [...] Moment der *Entstellung* ist für die Struktur des Unbewußten bei Freud kennzeichnend und wird auch für andere Phänomene als den Traum, für andere Sprachen des Unbewußten bedeutsam.” (Ibid., 35) Thus the distortion of memory on the surface is intricately connected to its topographical structure. Yet it also clearly relates to the demise of tradition. It seems, therefore, that Benjamin’s increasing emphasis on spatial aspects not only in remembrance, but as a general result in thinking, emerges among other reasons also from the disintegrating tradition.

³¹ Myth is constitutive for Benjamin’s philosophy of history and all related concepts; it generally signifies a failure and limitation of human reason and the lack of willingness to reflect upon passed-down stories that reach back – temporarily and ontologically (or rather anthropologically) – to the origins and prehistory of modern history. Benjamin’s particular discovery was “im Gegenwärtigen und Jüngstvergangenem die Spuren ältester Geschichtsstufen aufzufinden.” – Günter Hartung, “Mythos,” in *Benjamins Begriffe*, vol. 2, ed. Michael Opitz and Erdmut Wizisla (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2000), 571. Myth is, for Benjamin, the power through which the unknown pushes (back) into the known, but always disfiguredly and illusively, thus striking fear into people. But it works both ways: things of the recent past, and even the newest part of the present, may slip into the realm of mythology. Architecture (e.g., in Benjamin’s case, the city of Paris) and modern technology thus exert mythological powers precisely because tradition in the form of a supragenerational symbolic framework fails. Benjamin writes in his notes on the *Passagen-Werk* that each childhood, through its curiosity and interest, binds modern technology back to the “alten Symbolwelten.” (GS5, 576)

represent ideas; and these elements “liegen [...] in den Extremen am genauesten zutage.” (GS1, 215) Psychologically and epistemologically, his thinking, insofar as it is based on this methodology, thus oscillates between the extreme negative and the extreme positive. Benjamin therefore adheres in part to what he called the “Psychologie des destruktiven Charakters” (GS1, 1244): “Das Bestehende legt er in Trümmer, nicht um der Trümmer, sondern um des Weges willen, der sich durch sie hindurchzieht.” (GS4, 398) In this sense in which Benjamin seems to embrace the destructive force of the disintegrating tradition himself, it should be said that he is not approaching the broken tradition from outside, but on the contrary moves from the very beginning within the course of its collapse. His stance towards the break in tradition is determined by this destructive impulse; he seems to have no choice but to realize and to actualize the crises that frequently emerge in his writing. Benjamin contrasts this negativity with what he calls in *Ursprung des Deutschen Trauerspiels* a certain philosophical style that comes into being with the question of representation (*Darstellung*). One of its postulates that would remain constitutive for his writing and that flatly contradicts the ‘destructive character’ is: “die Fülle der gedrängten Positivität im Gegensatz zu negierender Polemik.” (GS1, 212) At the deepest bottom of the destructive psychology, where everything lies in ruins, Benjamin attempts to bring about an overturning by picking up the fragments and acknowledging them anew in their positive givenness.³²

³² See also Hannah Arendt, “Walter Benjamin,” in *Arendt und Benjamin. Texte, Briefe, Dokumente*, ed. Detlev Schöttker and Erdmut Wizisla (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2006). Arendt observed Benjamin’s ambiguous perspective on tradition between the impulses of destruction and salvation in her essay, writing: “Unversehens verwandelt sich so der Erbe und Bewahrer in einen Zerstörer.“ (Ibid., 91) She links this ambiguity to Kafka’s approach to tradition, which she renders in a similar fashion: “Schon Kafkas Griff in den Meeresgrund des Vergangenen hatte diese eigentümliche Doppelheit von Bewahren- und Destruierenwollen an sich: ...” (Ibid., 88) Eventually, Arendt sees this contradictory attitude represented in Benjamin’s concept of the collector, and flâneur. She also emphasizes in this context Benjamin’s

In order to see more clearly the context of this overturning in relation to the question of representation, it will help to look at how Benjamin concludes his investigation of the Baroque allegory. At the end of *Ursprung des Deutschen Trauerspiels*, his emphasis of the allegory's destructive force leads him to transgress it as a form of representation. He begins by stating that allegoric representation "spricht der profanen Welt ein vernichtendes doch gerechtes Urteil." It does so because it completely devalues any all-encompassing correlation and coherence of the things in the world: for the allegory, "jede Person, jedwedes Ding, jedes Verhältnis kann ein beliebiges anderes bedeuten." (GS1, 350) Yet at the same time, precisely because the allegory is after all a form of representation, this infinite potential to refer to something else elevates and even sanctifies the profane things of the world. Any such instance of representation becomes a potential form of apotheosis because, in any form of mimesis, we ultimately try to be like god. At the heart of the allegory thus lies an antinomy: it simultaneously destroys and elevates the things of the world. What this means is that somehow allegory can *accept* the devalued and fragmented state of things, but at the same time focus their meaningfulness by sheer intellectual power, in order to elevate them. This "religiöse[] Dialektik" (GS1, 351), Benjamin claims, goes as far as (re-)sanctifying the profane world. But there remains something inherently profane in this process. This means of apotheosis, of redemption, is not achieved by a ritual of sanctification; neither is it the result of an age-old tradition. It rather is the result of an intellectual effort. Therefore, even though

terminology of tradition as a 'pile of debris,' and the according act of reading from tradition as picking up its fragments: "Die Figur des Sammlers, ihrer Herkunft nach so altertümlich wie die des Flaneurs, kann in Benjamin so eminent moderne Züge annehmen, weil die Geschichte selbst, nämlich der im Anfang dieses Jahrhunderts vollzogene Traditionsbruch, ihm diese Arbeit des Zerstörens bereits abgenommen hat, und er sich gleichsam nur zu bücken braucht, um sich seine kostbaren Bruchstücke aus dem Trümmerhaufen des Vergangenen herauszulesen." (Ibid., 91)

Benjamin goes so far as to speak of an act of sanctification, the aftertaste of a deeply profane act remains. The sacred is fundamentally tainted with the profane and vice versa. Benjamin follows this dynamic within the allegorical form through to its last paradoxical extremes, where it culminates in the allegoresis of the allegory itself and thus transgresses it. Since the allegory is ultimately an antinomian structure, it cannot be completely resolved. Only in a religious context, Benjamin observes, did Baroque authors manage to cover up the aporia inside the antinomian structure that they reproduced every time they applied allegorical forms.

Only by means of a leap of faith could they, through a theologically motivated and *temporary* synthesis of the involved contradictions, attempt to resolve the deep existential tensions and paradoxes inherent in allegorical forms. “Vergänglichkeit” turns into “Auferstehung”: “In Gottes Welt erwacht der Allegoriker.” (GS1, 406) And thus it is not by chance that Benjamin refers to Kierkegaard in this context. Yet this leap of faith is not final and permanent; it has to be renewed and claimed with every new instance of an allegorical form. Only by a leap of faith can allegory exist in the Baroque world. Only by ultimately negating itself can the allegory uphold its intellectual depth. In theological terms: only by ultimately promising not to doubt the word of god is it – secretly – possible to eat from the tree of knowledge. The allegory becomes a charade of itself, what Benjamin calls its “virtuoser Illusionismus.” (GS1, 356) Technically speaking, allegorical forms are eminently dialectical, since they put everything they touch under their jurisdiction – including finally allegory as a form itself. And this is, at the same time, the limitation of Baroque allegory as a form of representation. Benjamin does not give in to a leap of faith, and throughout his work he is time and again confronted with the

problem of how to approach the issues involved in allegorical representation on a historical scale. By looking at his concept of a “profane Erleuchtung,” the next chapter will be concerned in more detail with the question of how Benjamin attempted to include the tension between the sacred and the profane in his thinking without having to resolve it.

For now, the question is how the underlying concepts of Benjamin’s methodology work so as to create a ‘language of *Trümmer* – of debris’ in the first place. For this terminology is usually not metaphorical in the author’s writings, but rather part of an intricate analytical process that reaches from fundamental considerations about language and epistemology to the organization of his work as a whole. In the aforementioned “Erfahrung und Armut,” Benjamin introduces at that moment when experience no longer connects us to the tradition “einen neuen, positiven Begriff des Barbarentums” (GS2, 215); this oxymoron is meant to combine the creative and the destructive extremes of his philosophy. On the one hand, his goal in the face of the breaking tradition is “von vorn zu beginnen; von Neuem anzufangen; mit Wenigem auszukommen; aus Wenigem heraus zu konstruieren und dabei weder rechts noch links zu blicken.” (GS2, 215) On the other hand, he was aware that this included a destructive stance towards the passed-on contents of tradition. As a framework to guide thinking – that is, as a formal device – tradition was lost; its contents turned prehistoric and surfaced as ruins, fragments.³³ Benjamin’s own

³³ The distinction of tradition as both – as a form or medium to pass on and as its actual objects that are passed on – can be found, for example, in Gerald L. Bruns, who responds in the following passage to Gadamer’s *Truth and Method*: “Tradition is not just an archive of cultural treasures or a compendium of time-honored norms and values; it is not something we simply internalize through culture and schooling. It is a historical process, that is, we are responsible for its continuation or disruption.” Therefore, in this view, tradition is also not restricted to the fact and the act of transmitting. Instead, it is likewise one of our intrinsic and irreducible human conditions, a mode of our being. “It follows that tradition is not reducible to a proper name; there is no one thing to be called tradition, rather tradition is multiple, heterogeneous, conflicted and conflicting, open-ended, revisable, and productive of the future. Tradition exists as a back-and-forth movement between the claims of the past and our appropriation of it (meaning our action in the

writing process was subjected to the oscillating powers of its inherent extremes. In a letter from 1932 to Gershom Scholem, he concedes that the “literarischen Ausdrucksformen” of his particular thinking were increasingly determined by “Präventivmaßnahmen und Gegengifte” to counter the “Kontingenzen” and the “Zersetzung” of his thought, which was the result of the specific mode of his “Produktion.” He not only refers to his economic situation, but also to the very way of thinking and writing outlined above, concluding that his work itself resembled a “Trümmer- oder Katastrophenstätte.”³⁴

A closer look at Benjamin’s earlier works, including “Über Sprache überhaupt und über die Sprache des Menschen” and *Ursprung des Deutschen Trauerspiels*, reveals the specific epistemology that allows him to perceive history as a heap of ruins and to apply concepts as fragments in a way that undermines the conventional understanding of such an operation as *metaphorical*. In the methodological preface to his study on Baroque plays, Benjamin juxtaposes a theory of ideas with that of language and with a phenomenological approach. The epistemological methodology established there is itself a *configuration* of these three theories and their traditions; Benjamin thus circularly applies a technique at a most fundamental level of his thinking that results from that same method – namely, “Idee als Konfiguration.” (GS1, 205) In the course of adopting and juxtaposing these three different concepts, they are transformed and bring about a new

world). So perhaps it would be better to speak of traditionality: tradition is not a substantive but an event. It is the human mode of being historical.” Gerald L. Bruns, “Tradition and the Terror of History: Christianity, the Holocaust, and the Jewish Theological Dilemma,” in *The Force of Tradition. Response and Resistance in Literature, Religion, and Cultural Studies*, ed. Donald G. Marshall (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2005), 21.

³⁴ Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Briefe*, vol. 4, ed. Christoph Gödde and Henri Lonitz (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1998), 112f.

theoretical potential, quite literally a new perspective on the world. Effectively, Benjamin treats these three great philosophical trends as fragments of tradition.

In the essay “Über Sprache . . .,” the nexus of idea, language and phenomena as a problematic interconnection is present, too; but Benjamin focuses here on language and attempts to establish it as a most fundamental common denominator. The appearance of things to us – the author does not use the term phenomenon in this essay – thus finds its basis in a theory of language: “Es gibt kein Geschehen oder Ding weder in der belebten noch in der unbelebten Natur, das nicht in gewisser Weise an der Sprache teilhätte, denn es ist jedem wesentlich, seinen geistigen Inhalt mitzuteilen.” (GS2, 140, 141) Benjamin identifies human intelligibility – the limits of our cognitive realm outside of which, for us, literally *nothing* is – as language. This is no solipsism, however. The unknown exists as an assumption that we have to take into account; it may at any moment with the contingent power of factuality reach into the sphere of intelligibility. Then again, this assumption is already within language. In fact, Benjamin abstracts the concept of language to an extreme universal (which he in turn will call an idea in his Baroque study). Language, then, is generally “das auf Mitteilung geistiger Inhalte gerichtete Prinzip in den betreffenden Gegenständen” (GS2, 140); it is not limited to the exchange of words, which characterizes the special case of the *human* language. There is a language of music, of technology, etc.³⁵ Accordingly, the way in which nature, the former unknown, enters human intelligibility designates the “Sprache überhaupt” in contrast to the human language. Strictly speaking, this distinction is misleading, since language is a human

³⁵ In *Einbahnstraße*, Benjamin shows that this thought is still valid for him in 1929; he tells us about a ‘stamp-language’: “Es gibt bekanntlich eine Briefmarkensprache, die sich zur Blumensprache verhält wie das Morsealphabet zu dem geschriebenen.” (GS4, 137)

concept, and this universal abstraction is necessarily an immanent extrapolation; an assumption, as it were.

Everything that appears has the potential to trigger a communicative response. We communicate when we are in pain or see a beautiful red sunset. And Benjamin's point is precisely that we do not 'speak out' pain (the irritation of our nervous system), or the redness of the color red. This he reveals to be the illusion of any philosophy of language; and he accordingly argues that we do not speak 'about' or 'speak out' anything, but that language as an infinitely self-referential system speaks out only itself. Language only refers to language. From this point of view, any phenomenon that appears to us always has (potentially at least) a part in language. In this sense, our perspective in terms of language is necessarily immanent; there is no outside of language to our thinking. Still, according to the above-mentioned universalism of *Sprache überhaupt*, language points to something like a structural principle of the universe to which the limited disposition of the human language corresponds. In this way, Benjamin's concept of language, true to its role of being the ultimate medium, stands precisely on the divide between man and nature, between the known and the unknown. From this inherent, immanent perspective of language that extrapolates into the unknown, he argues that things communicate their "geistigen," that is, intelligible or cognitive essence. He then further abstracts from the notion of language to its essential principle, which is the principle of communicating (*mitteilen*).

Language is *medium per se*; it is the most fundamental, the primordial condition of 'mediatedness.' – "Die Antwort auf die Frage: *was teilt die Sprache mit?* lautet also: *Jede Sprache teilt sich selbst mit.* Die Sprache dieser Lampe z.B. teilt nicht die Lampe mit

(denn das geistige Wesen der Lampe, sofern es *mittelbar* ist, ist durchaus nicht die Lampe selbst), sondern: die Sprach-Lampe, die Lampe in der Mitteilung, die Lampe im Ausdruck. Denn in der Sprache verhält es sich so: *Das sprachliche Wesen der Dinge ist ihre Sprache.*” (GS2, 142) Language as the universal medium is never expression of a language, or for that matter, *of something*. As Benjamin sees it, language is expression of itself; or, to get rid of the object-construction altogether: language *is* (in its) expression. It is important to realize now that things from this perspective *are* only insofar as their “geistiges Wesen” is communicable, which means insofar as they are a “sprachliches Wesen.” Benjamin not only omits the subject position; he actually reverses it within the extrapolation of his argument. It follows that his line of reasoning is reductionistic and ends in an utter contraction, or immediacy. But the extreme universalism that this notion circumscribes defines language as an idea – that is, in Benjamin’s understanding, as a virtual space for thinking. Language becomes a signifier for the fact that there is communicability in the universe, of which we are but a part. “[J]ede Sprache teilt sich *in sich selbst* mit, sie ist im reinsten Sinne das ‘Medium’ der Mitteilung. Das Mediale, das ist die *Unmittelbarkeit* aller geistigen Mitteilung, ist das Grundproblem der Sprachtheorie, und wenn man diese Unmittelbarkeit magisch nennen will, so ist das Urproblem der Sprache ihre Magie.” (GS2, 142, 143) Language as essentially the universal medium is irreducible. No thought can step behind this fact, or to speak with Wittgenstein: “*Die Grenzen meiner Sprache* bedeuten die Grenzen meiner Welt.”³⁶ Benjamin realizes that this can indeed be characterized as “Unmittelbarkeit” – immediacy: language is always

³⁶ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus logico-philosophicus. Werkausgabe Band 1* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1984), 67.

already itself the medium; therefore, there is nothing else ‘in between.’ As such, it is itself *unmediated*; hence, nobody could ever completely express of *what* this medium – this in-between of things and men – consists. Furthermore, Benjamin argues that if magic is to be understood as signifying an immediate relation between man and nature (so as to directly alter it by saying words, that is, by *speaking out* nature), then language ought to be called magical. As a first conclusion, this means that Benjamin’s approach to phenomena specifically bases appearances (how the things of the world *are* for us) on a theory of language.

The author’s claim that language is magical anticipates the antinomian thought structure that will emerge fully in other contradicting concepts like, for example, “profane Erleuchtung” from his essay on *Surrealism*. In a number of cases, Benjamin juxtaposes the extreme sacred with the extreme profane or prosaic. This strategy is antinomian by virtue of its structure; and in its dialectical intersection, both sides involved inherit features from each another, but without being synthesized or *aufgehoben* in a Hegelian sense. These antinomies stay open and create a field of tension. Accordingly, in his essay on language, the antinomy of magic within language consists of two premises. First, the profane or prosaic: we can make infinite statements within language concerning the matter of language. Potentially, therefore, we can indeed say everything that can be said on the subject of language. Benjamin writes that the infinity within language results directly from its immediacy because nothing can be communicated *through* language; that what communicates itself within language is not constricted by anything from outside. (GS2, 143) And second, the sacred or even esoteric premise that is inevitably also expressed by the concept of magic: precisely because of

the universal claim of language being the ultimate medium and its inherent immediacy, it is impossible to completely *objectify* language. Its immediacy guarantees that everything there ever is for us can be expressed *in* language, with the sole exception of language itself. From this premise it follows that not everything can be said *about* language. This premise contradicts the first premise, but both premises remain true in their own right, and thus the underlying structure is that of an antinomy. Language's magic is hence both infinitely potential and "das Urproblem der Sprache." (GS2, 142, 3) The bottom line is that this antinomy creates a constant and irreducible reciprocal or dialectical tension: attributes of both premises shift mutually and oscillate with each other. Language is the one means to speak out things clearly, to generate meaning. But it also carries some inherent features that remain obscure. On the other hand, since magic has to be considered a valid concept for referring to certain features of language, it itself becomes a common part of discourse and therefore lifted – in part – out of obscurity. Magic, in this sense, becomes a common trait of language, of our world.

In two short texts, "Lehre vom Ähnlichen" and "Über das mimetische Vermögen," Benjamin expands his theory of language and adds some thoughts to his concept of magic in this context. The general lines drawn in "Über Sprache ..." stay true, but he expands the scope of his considerations, particularly in regard to the divide between the known and the unknown. He attempts to establish what could be called the 'unconscious of language' – which is not to be confused with the altogether pre-linguistic. By adding a historical and anthropological dimension to language, and also by subsequently taking it as a collective phenomenon, he considers language from the perspective of memory. In a way, language here becomes a part of a collective, supragenerational memory. As such, it

not only contains conscious knowledge, but also unconscious knowledge. In the distant past, Benjamin argues, language was engaged in a mimetic behavior that is not triggered anymore, and therefore is not present on the surface of communicative practice nowadays. Nonetheless, since this mimetic behavior once determined the evolution of language as a whole, it left traces in its overall structure. He assumes that these unconscious structures are still implicated in language today. As a result, it becomes an “Archiv unsinnlicher Ähnlichkeiten, unsinnlicher Korrespondenzen.” (GS2, 208, 209) According to Benjamin, mimetic powers – the power to make oneself similar – once were far more common: “Bekanntlich war der Lebenskreis, der ehemals von dem Gesetz der Ähnlichkeit durchwaltet schien, viel größer.” (GS2, 205) Today, however, similarities or correspondences mostly remain unconscious – but still determine our lives. In a sense, the thought of “unsinnliche Ähnlichkeiten” is a variation of what Benjamin wrote about “geistiges” and “sprachliches Wesen.” In both cases, the premise is that within our cognitive abilities there must be some kind of structural predisposition that mirrors fundamental structures of the universe in order for language as the universal medium of communicability to work at all. Benjamin writes: “Diese natürlichen Korrespondenzen aber erhalten die entscheidende Bedeutung erst im Licht der Überlegung, daß sie alle, grundsätzlich, Stimulantien und Erwecker jenes mimetischen Vermögens sind, welches im Menschen ihnen Antwort gibt.” (GS2, 205) So again, the perspective of communication is turned around: the correspondences *speak* to man so that he can give *answer*. Man resonates to the reality around him. However that may be, correspondences as the basis of language are now only accessible in a nonsensual (hence intellectual) way, since, as Benjamin points out, man has lost the capability of rendering knowledge of such

similarities as sensual data. They are not part of our behavior anymore. He refers to astrology as an example, claiming that it – negatively – points to the mimetic knowledge that once was present in communicative practices. Astrology tells us, according to Benjamin, “daß wir in unserer Wahrnehmung dasjenige nicht mehr besitzen, was es einmal möglich machte, von einer Ähnlichkeit zu sprechen, die bestehe zwischen einer Sternenkongstellat[i]on und einem Menschen.“ (GS2, 207) This former sensual knowledge has become nonsensual. But, as Benjamin argues, these nonsensual similarities are nonetheless still present in the deep structure of language. Man’s cognitive powers are subject to historical change; what we were once able to perceive as a clear analogy between structures in the sky and on earth, based on their presence as sensual data, now lies hidden in the complexities of language. The “geläufige[r] sinnliche[r] Bereich der Ähnlichkeit” (GS2, 207) is that area of our cognitive powers where similarities are perceived on grounds of their sensual presence. Now, Benjamin claims that this faculty of being aware of and generating similarities (mimesis) has increasingly retracted into the evolving complexities of language: language becomes the basis – “Kanon” (GS2, 207) – for all operations concerning mimesis, and mimesis, in turn, is the basis of communicability (as this is the principle of language as the universal medium). Language is the medium that dissolved “ohne Rest die frühern Merkfähigkeiten für das Ähnliche.” (GS2, 209) This is a process of abstraction: the more complex language got, the more it allowed abstraction from the given world of – sensuously informed – appearances. Benjamin sees writing as the latest step in this development: “Denn eben die hier waltende Ähnlichkeit ist die vergleichsweise unsinnlichste. Sie ist auch die am spätesten erreichte.” (GS2, 208) The more abstract language got, the more nonsensual the

contained correspondences became. Language works through a dialectics of difference and similarity – this is its analytical power: similarity can only be where there is difference, and vice versa. We seek out differences and similarities through comparison. Here lies the connection between Benjamin’s approach to phenomena and his theory of language: mimesis operates within language. Everything that appears to us is in language. And thus there is, between everything that can possibly appear, some kind of similarity on a fundamental level. The aforementioned general situation between things and the cognitive powers of man, which makes language possible at all, appears at this stage as mimesis: some kind of “unsinnliche Ähnlichkeit,” which Benjamin in “Lehre vom Ähnlichen” also significantly calls the “magische Seite der Sprache.” (GS2, 208)

For his study of German Baroque plays, Benjamin extended his initial epistemological thoughts to the triad of idea, concepts (language), and phenomena. Ideas have a peculiar ontological state; they cannot be reached or ‘had’ as a factual possession, nor realized as such in the world of things. Still, as Benjamin explains, they *are* (GS1, 210, 215). Indeed, they constitute being as a non-intentional state; devoid of the subject, the “Bestimmung der Idee als Sein” establishes a “Seinsgrund.” (GS1, 929) An example to illustrate what this means comes from geometry. Although mathematically fully definable, a perfect circle with infinitesimal roundness cannot be found in nature. A perfect circle in this sense is not realizable in the world of things. In order for us as beings of appearance to partake in the realm of ideas, we need concepts. The function of concepts, Benjamin explains, is to configure the ideas. Ideas are timeless; as such, they are metaphysical entities. Timeless means, in this context, that ideas are removed from the vicissitudes and contingencies of nature. A circle, in this universe, is always a circle

by definition; this at least can be extrapolated from within man's theoretical powers. In order to represent "die Welt in der Ordnung der Ideen" (GS1, 14), as the traditional systemic philosophies attempted, philosophers had to resort to concepts. These concepts, in turn, have become "brüchig" in the course of the collapsing tradition. Though Benjamin acknowledges the break in tradition, he ultimately holds on to the philosophical tradition of idealism as one foundation of thinking. In his own terms, it can be said that he attempted to salvage the essence of German idealism from the fragmentation of its tradition.³⁷ For Benjamin, the unconnected items of tradition are always in this way positively given and cannot be avoided. And it is this positivist attitude towards the negativity of the fragmented tradition that makes following Benjamin's concepts and their transformations such a daunting task: because he seems to apply and connect each major concept always with its complete historical heritage in mind, while at the same time subjecting it to his ultramodernist paradigm of montage. In context of his methodology, Benjamin applies montage as the very principle of technicality: a construction that displays at the same time the fact of its being constructed. He creates a theoretical montage or configuration of a theory of ideas, theory of language, and phenomenology. While ideas deal with the universal, metaphysical truth and concepts manage the combinatory and analytical faculty of the mind, phenomena describe the cognitive disposition of how the things of the world first appear to us; that is, in the

³⁷ In the argumentation at hand, the theoretical, and specifically epistemological, reasons for holding on to core principles of a theory of ideas are emphasized. Benjamin's immanent critique of idealism includes trespassing the concept of the idea. After *Urprung des deutschen Trauerspiels*, he abandoned it, but its essential theoretical implications as presented here, such as the limitation of the idea to the mental faculty of abstraction and extrapolation to infinity, as well as the idea as a virtual space, remain the basis for the later image conceptions in the context of, for example, "body and image space" ("Der Surrealismus") or the dialectical image.

language of the essay on “Über Sprache ...” their “geistiges Wesen,” before they have gained communicability. Benjamin writes: “Die Phänomene gehen aber nicht integral in ihrem rohen empirischen Bestande, dem der Schein sich beimischt, sondern in ihren Elementen allein, gerettet, in das Reich der Ideen ein. Ihrer falschen Einheit entäußern sie sich, um aufgeteilt an der echten Wahrheit teilzuhaben. In dieser ihrer Aufteilung unterstehen die Phänomene den Begriffen. Sie sind es, welche an den Dingen die Lösung in die Elemente vollziehen.” (GS1, 213, 214) When Benjamin writes that phenomena in their ‘empirical state’ are tainted by illusiveness, this suggests that in the case of phenomenology, as in other cases, he had the complete tradition of the concept in mind, rather than referring to its specific Husserlian shape.³⁸ Benjamin draws a line from the bare appearance or givenness of phenomena through the analytical faculty of the mind to the universal principles that the ideas are. This triad is, in itself, a projection and extrapolation originating in the mind: both of the other aspects, bare phenomena and ideas, mark the limits of our cognitive realm. It is as if Benjamin attempts to draw a circle, with the mind in the middle and the ideas and phenomena as the extreme boundaries. There is no direct route from phenomena to ideas. All three components of this model are ultimately subject to language as a governing principle, since obviously “ideas” as well as

³⁸ Johann Heinrich Lambert (1728-1777), an Enlightenment philosopher specifically interested in mathematics and logic, introduces phenomenology as the study of appearances in a system containing four sciences. “Endlich ist die Phänomenologie, oder die Lehre von dem Schein die vierte, und diese soll den Schein kenntlich machen, und die Mittel angeben, denselben zu vermeiden, und zu dem Wahren durchzudringen.” Lambert applies the German expression *Schein* and thus emphasizes the illusory character of phenomena and their ability to conceal rather than to show truth. Phenomenology, here, is a theory of illusiveness in contrast to truth. Johann Heinrich Lambert, *Neues Organon oder Gedanken über die Erforschung und Bezeichnung des Wahren und dessen Unterscheidung vom Irrthum und Schein* (Leipzig: Johann Wendler, 1764), Vorrede 3. The four sciences are: *Dianoilogie* – concerning thought; *Alethiologie* – concerning truth; *Semiotic* – concerning denotation; *Phänomenologie* – concerning illusion. – An approach to phenomena through their illusive nature can be found throughout Benjamin’s work. In the exposé for the *Arcades-Project*, he outlines a phenomenology of commodities in modern capitalistic societies, and points to their illusory and phantasmagorical qualities. (GS5, 55)

“phenomena” are, in the end, already established concepts. As a result, the question of the relation between phenomena, ideas, and concepts has to be dealt with inside the realm of language. We do not communicate, nor think through ideas or phenomena. The simple conclusion from this methodology is that the more the mind approaches the totality of the phenomenal world by means of its analytical powers – “kraft des unterscheidenden Verstandes” (GS1, 215) – the more truth it discloses. Benjamin calls this operation the ‘salvation of the phenomena.’ They are saved for us from being lost to illusiveness not *as* phenomena, but as truth; that is, as the configuration of ideas through concepts – as patterns or constellations.

The language behind Benjamin’s theory can be misleading. It is not the case that there are phenomena out there in the world waiting to be salvaged in the sense of being picked up; this is not a matter of tangibility. The term phenomenon already implies an act of awareness on the side of the mind. Thus the operation of salvaging happens during or in this process. The salvation of the phenomena points to an issue within the processing of the phenomena, within their being conceptualized. And this process, too, has a sociohistorical dimension connected to the rise of capitalistic, bourgeois culture in modernity and the collapse of tradition. In Benjamin’s theoretical construction, concepts have a “Vermittlerrolle”; true to language’s nature as the universal medium, concepts mediate between the material basis of our world and the ideas. (GS1, 214) According to the author’s understanding, the representation of ideas in the medium of concepts is therefore the salvation of the phenomena; representation is salvation. “Indem die Rettung der Phänomene vermittelt der Ideen sich vollzieht, vollzieht sich die Darstellung der Ideen im Mittel der Empirie. Denn nicht an sich selbst, sondern einzig und allein in einer

Zuordnung dinglicher Elemente im Begriff stellen die Ideen sich dar. Und zwar tun sie es als deren Konfiguration.” (GS1, 214) Though Benjamin’s ideas still claim their metaphysical heritage, he seeks to ground them in a common-sense approach and to give them a solid theoretical basis. It is the secularization of the idea. Thus they still, on the one hand, stand for the totality of how things are; from this perspective, they point to the absolute of being in all its infinite potentiality. But, precisely in their totality, they cannot be mediated by us, since we are, in being part of the universe, limited and not identical to its totality. Since Benjamin puts, along with language, mediality – or communicability – into the center of his cognitive theory, which is limited by definition, ideas are present for us only as an extrapolation. In geometrical terms, they constitute a virtual space within which ideal objects are arranged. As such, they denote a *mental capacity* by which we abstract, generalize, and extrapolate or ‘idealize’ – similarly to what we do in logical and geometrical procedures – from the given phenomenal appearances. In this sense, Benjamin writes that ideas are represented as the correlation or mapping (*Zuordnung*) of the things in the world. There are two different levels present in this process: the representation and thus analysis of the phenomenal givenness of the world in the medium of concepts, and, through this, the presence of ideas by means of certain constellations. The first- mentioned level of representation is syntactical and analytical; the latter is of a different nature, but present only within the first. It has spatial properties and thus an image character. Benjamin accordingly compares ideas to astronomical constellations (*Sternbild*), which represent “ewige Konstellationen,” in contrast to the actual stars that are the phenomenal elements configured by the constellations. (GS1, 215) In an almost geometric fashion, he writes that the analyzed and therefore elementary phenomena are

contained as points within these constellations. Ideas then project a virtual – or intellectual – space that serves as a grid or coordinate system for operations of knowledge. Constellations, that is, the relation or “Zusammengehörigkeit zueinander” (GS1, 215) of elementary points, characterize a spatial function. By pointing out that ideas are potentially eternal and that we, through our mental faculties, can hence have a limited part in eternity, Benjamin provides a possible way to remove our phenomenal reality from historicity and therefore the aftermath of the break in tradition.

Benjamin seek to remove ideas not only from temporality, but from any (intellectual) “Anschauung” (GS1, 215) – that is, intelligibility – whatsoever. With this move, he points out a difference between his theory of ideas and that of German idealism. He refutes the concept of “intellectus archetypus,” a term originating in Kant’s philosophy and then adopted as *intellektuelle Anschauung* by others such as Fichte and Schelling to explain the cosmos in its totality as a universal intellectual property, in contrast to *intellectus ectypus*, referring to our own limited, finite intellectual capacity.³⁹

³⁹ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment* (Indianapolis and Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 1987), 288ff. Kant deals with the distinction between *intellectus archetypus* and *intellectus ectypus* throughout the second half of his *Critique of Judgment*. In section 77, he presents the terms rather succinctly and conclusively in the context of “our cognitive power.” (Ibid., 288) Kant explains his terms here through a part-whole relationship between the limited cognitive faculties of man and the universal and absolute structure which the universe necessarily must be (i.e., the axiomatic assumption is that the universe is fundamentally and completely organized). The *intellectus archetypus* now refers to the universe as such an infinitely organized state; and it refers to objects according to this premise – these are Kant’s “things in themselves.” From such a perspective, which we can only derive and assume, thought and reality would coincide within the object. On the grand scale, Kant speaks of a “corresponding intellectual intuition (even though not ours)” (Ibid., 293); in other words, he identifies the universe as a whole with an intellectual power, in contrast to our limited intellectual power. This leads him to a philosophical theology, since ‘god’ is just another name for such a model. *Intellectus ectypus* is thus located in the realm of appearances that we inhabit; our understanding “requires images.” (Ibid., 293) Though Kant goes to great lengths in order to make the categorical difference between the two realms apparent, he also writes that there is a level of mediation through our mental powers that evidently can form concepts about this universal intellect. He writes: “But in fact it is at least possible to consider the material world as mere appearance, and to think something as [its] substrate, as thing in itself (which is not appearance), and to regard this thing in itself as based on a corresponding intellectual intuition (even though not ours).” (Ibid., 293) It seems that Benjamin takes exception to the way in which Kant renders this connection, and wants to push the universal

Benjamin's argument, however, appears somewhat weak, since it has essentially a negative form. He points out that even these bold oppositions fail to render the peculiar "Gegebensein der Wahrheit" as completely removed from intelligibility. (GS1, 216) Instead, he presents his theory of ideas as a geometrical speculation. Ideas as such are completely virtual and can only be referred to through an infinitesimal approximation. He sees here an irrefutable connection between the "exakten Wissenschaft" and a "metaphysische Tendenz," resulting in an "Infinitesimalmethode": "In beiden Fällen wird der zeitliche Bewegungsvorgang in einem Raumbild eingefangen und analysiert." (GS1, 271) Only the applied languages differ.

Concepts (necessarily plural) separate phenomena from each other, and hence arrange them according to a paradigm of differences. The way in which phenomena as elements are represented by concepts, this very structure or "configuration," thus *is* the idea – the schemata of this structure. Ideas are the "objektive virtuelle Anordnung" (GS1, 214) of phenomena in an infinitesimal approximation. Yet, again, the image-like presence of the idea through concepts (indeed through the concept of idea) is but a *limited* fraction of the potentially absolute idea; a flash, as it were. Benjamin's phrase "Zuordnung dinglicher Elemente im Begriff" (GS1, 214) can be confusing and should be read very carefully. It does not say 'arrangement' (*Anordnung*) of elements in *one* concept; thus, ideas are not the configuration of single concepts through a number of phenomenal elements, are not present in individual concepts. Benjamin's term *Zuordnung* suggests that these elements are allocated or assigned within a certain structure or schemata

organizing principle which ideas represent even further away from the grasp of concepts. They do merely flash up here and there, as constellations, or images.

through a syntax of concepts (plural), or in other words, in the medium of conceptuality. It would have been clearer if Benjamin had written “im Begrifflichen” instead of “im Begriff.” In any case, in the following sentences, he always applies “concepts” in the plural: “Und zwar tun sie [=ideas] es als deren [=concepts] Konfiguration.” He then explicitly states that a “Stab von Begriffen” (GS1, 214) is necessary to represent an idea. Thinking back to Benjamin’s essay “Über Sprache . . .,” the concept of idea characterizes precisely what was earlier called the disposition of language to mirror the structural principle of the universe or world. Ideas are thus always present in communication, but in order to emphasize specific ideas, the extremes of the phenomenal givenness must be applied to the conceptual medium. (GS1, 215)

In an effort to connect his concept of ideas back to his theory of language, Benjamin argues that the “Gegebenheit der Ideen” is contained not in an “Ursprache,” which could be rediscovered and learned, but in an “Urvernehmen.” (GS1, 216) Language as the universal medium is the only way in which ideas can be approximated. They are not present within individual concepts but somehow form a primordial precondition for language as such; that is, for universal communicability. In this way, ideas are given within the essence (*Wesen*) of language, in the way language works. For Benjamin, this means that ideas must be contained in the way things are named. The appellative power of words as names (not necessarily as proper names) provides a hint as to the nature of ideas. Philosophical contemplation becomes a technique of remembrance (GS1, 216); that is, in this context, a nonhistorical and nontemporal remembrance that specifically aims to reach out for this “Urvernehmen,” an assumed level⁴⁰ of our

⁴⁰ Meaning that the question of whether this level was in fact ever part of actual human evolution remains

cognitive powers that preconditions language and that, on the surface, appears as the faculty of naming things. With this step, Benjamin maintains that any linguistic expression is potentially a name and thus exerts denominating features. Furthermore, he places this primordial denominating power as “adamitische[s] Namengeben” (GS1, 217) into an ideal, quasi-mythical and hence truly prehistorical sphere, replacing the Greco-Roman foundation legend of the Western tradition with the Biblical *Genesis*. As a result, for Benjamin, not the actual historical figure Plato is the “Vater der Philosophie,” but rather the legendary figure Adam. By linking the denominating quality of words to a “paradisische[n] Stand” (GS1, 217), Benjamin artificially allocates its origin to the greatest possible extremes of the human story, where history turns into myth. He thus explains the denominating feature of language in terms of ideas: in the act of naming, ideas are present. Beyond their common communicative application, words therefore carry a surplus of meaning that, according to Benjamin, reaches out to this primordial state of language and that through philosophical contemplation as remembrance, in the above sense, can be brought to appearance. The ordinary application of language as common communication (not as universal communicability) obscures the proximity of words to the sphere of ideas. In social communication, speakers apply words in order to convey opinions, meaning, and other functions of speech that originate in the subject and its contextual situation. They usually do not use expressions with the totality of their denominating powers in mind; that is, not with the thought in mind of what they could mean isolated from their bonds to syntax and situation. Nobody who speaks about a chair

open.

in a common situation attempts to conjure the essence of what the expression “chair” may refer to (the ‘chairness,’ so to speak; its idea).

To conclude Benjamin’s approach to a language and phenomenology of debris, some remarks in which he connects tradition as a “Trümmerfeld” through a “Theorie der Trauer” to “Phänomenologie” (GS1, 318) are of interest. He refers here to the tradition of the Middle Ages, which, with its framework of beliefs and concepts, defined the lives of people over a long period of time – on a political as well as a spiritual level. The Reformation marks the end of this tradition. Benjamin writes that for some people – the “tiefer Schürfenden” (probably poets and philosophers who are concerned with thinking in general) – “Dasein” had turned into a “Trümmerfeld halber, unechter Handlungen.” (GS1, 318) The agenda of the Protestant Reformation promoted spiritual salvation as an individual responsibility; public, political life, in turn, the “weltlichstaatliche[r] Bereich,” was taken over by the new bourgeois lifestyle. With this, Benjamin argues, “hat es [Reformation] im Volke zwar den strengen Pflichtgehorsam angesiedelt, in seinen Großen aber den Trübsinn.” (GS1, 318) Where tradition fails, actions can no longer justify themselves in the name of a greater framework in which they were once embedded. People had to learn that their deeds were not legitimated by traditional bonds in the way they used to be, but had to stand on their own and thus reflected directly back on their actors. Actions and their deeds appeared ‘not fully accomplished’ and inauthentic because they could not be placed in the all-encompassing frame of a salvific history. Melancholy became the determining attitude towards being in the world; and Benjamin argues that in sorrow as a “Gesinnung” (GS1, 318), the fragmented state of the world, and hence *Dasein*, appears “maskenhaft.” “Jedes Gefühl ist gebunden an einen

apriorischen Gegenstand und dessen Darstellung ist seine [=das Gefühl] Phänomenologie.” (GS1, 318) This is the decisive passage where he binds the attitude towards the world to its material (*gegenständlich*) appearance and, in this way – that is, through the material appearance of the world – establishes a phenomenology of sorrow. In this phenomenology, which finds its expression in Baroque art, sorrow or melancholy appears as the fragmented *gegenständliche* world. Accordingly, Benjamin continues by arguing that sentiment turns into a “motorisches Gebaren” that responds to the “gegenständlichen Aufbau der Welt.” (GS1, 318) Through this conjecture, Benjamin brings the attitude towards the world, here in the form of melancholy, into his phenomenological approach. But this attitude, he maintains, is not that of individual subjects; it is not “der Gefühlszustand des Dichters noch des Publikums” (GS1, 318). He gives an intersubjective or collective account of mourning, detached from the “empirische[s] Subjekt”; in fact, he seems to go one step further and almost places the sentiment entirely into the objective world, for he writes that it is bound “innig an die Fülle eines Gegenstandes” and “auf der Bahn im Gegenstande selbst,” as if it exists in the material state of the world and merely unfolds or projects into the subject. In this reversal, the subject’s attitude towards the world is a result of the world. Mourning becomes a “motorische Attitüde” (GS1, 318); it saturates every action and deed even without the individual’s knowing – it is a way of life, because the world as such is in a state of melancholy; that is, in ruins. Benjamin goes on to establish this sentiment of mourning within the paradigm of phenomenological intentions. Phenomenology, in the vein of Husserl’s philosophy, uses intention as a technical term to represent the relation between consciousness and the world. Intention, then, is merely a precondition of appearances. As

things necessarily appear to man (and are not given in any other way to us), their appearance is necessarily determined by certain intentions. Intentions in this form – as an “intentionales Bewußtsein” – describe the relation (and the fact that there is always a relation involved) between consciousness and appearance in a technical manner. Every appearance occurs in a specific perspective. According to Husserl, intention refers to the “Grundeigenschaft des Bewußtseins, Bewußtsein *von etwas* zu sein,”⁴¹ meaning that consciousness is always in a relation – a direction, as it were – towards the world, while at the same time (paradoxically) representing or even *being* the world from within. As a consequence, for any appearance there is always something involved which was known before and which is brought into this act of awareness. *Noesis* and *Noema* are Husserl’s technical terms to differentiate between the intentional act of relating to an appearance (*noesis*) and the way the appearance finally appears (*noema*).⁴² Now, while people can want, love, or hate things, etc., mourning is a categorically different term, especially in the way Benjamin renders the concept. It is difficult to represent it as an intention, since it does not seem to have the same inherent ‘directedness’ as the other sentiments.⁴³ Still Benjamin claims that mourning has a place in the hierarchy of intentions. (GS1, 318) The former sentiments are focused – at least initially – on the subject and how it, in a specific historical situation, relates to appearances. Mourning, or in general melancholy, is not.

⁴¹ Ferdinand Fellmann, *Phänomenologie* (Hamburg: Junius, 2006), 52.

⁴² See also: “The noesis is the experience philosophically considered. The noema is the intended objectivity philosophically considered, i.e. just as it is intended with its significance for us, in relation to our animating interests and concerns, and with certainthetic characteristics (e.g. the perceptual belief in the actuality of the perceived object or doubting something as merely possible).” John J. Drummond, “Intentionality,” in *The Routledge Companion to Phenomenology*, ed. Sebastian Luft and Søren Overgaard (New York: Routledge, 2012), 126.

⁴³ See also: “In its broadest sense the term ‘intentionality’ designates the directedness of mind to its objects.” (Ibid., 125)

Wanting, loving, and so on, are of course as universally communicable as mourning (meaning that every human being is capable of experiencing them), but they seem to originate initially in the subject and its specific mental structure. ('I want a cake because I am hungry.')

In this regard, these intentions are controllable by the subject to a certain degree, and they have an outgoing direction. Mourning, by contrast, is not controllable; it is not a matter of decision at all. It does not originate in the specific mental situation of the subject, but befalls us from outside due to occurrences in the world, or in this case due to the (dis)arrangement, the collapse of tradition. Still, mourning clearly does affect intentional behavior. While love for something or someone can fluctuate between "Anziehung" and "Entfremdung," and while love is a matter of degrees, mourning, Benjamin claims, is continuous in its progression: it only grows deeper.

Based on the experience of the breaking tradition, Benjamin devises his methodology from scratch. But not only that, in the course of applying the concepts from the traditions of German-European philosophies, Benjamin questions and transforms them by 'constellating' them into a theoretical montage that yields new theoretical potential. This fundamental paradigm pervades his entire body of work. By tracing it to its most basic theoretical implications, it was shown how Benjamin's specific epistemological and ontological premises were developed facing the tradition as it collapsed. This intellectual process, followed up-close in this chapter, demonstrates how Benjamin can indeed speak of tradition, and for that matter also narrative, as an accumulation of fragments. Also, already at this point of initiation, Benjamin's emphasis of space as a guiding principle for thinking under these conditions determines the theoretical blueprint of his writing.

CHAPTER II

BENJAMIN: SALVATION THROUGH SURRENDER

At the point in Benjamin's work where his image conception culminates in a universal critique of history,⁴⁴ the question of representation that he already, in *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels*, put at the very beginning of any philosophical questioning, gets itself drawn into the movement of a redeeming – or in other words, transgressing – critique. It is important to see the methodological juncture at which forms of representation fall into the space of the image conception that constitutes the foundation for this critical operation. This particularly spatial strategy results in their dissolution and transgression. As the scope of the critical approach widens to comprise history itself, the question of representation becomes that of narrative, or the epic, as Benjamin also calls it. The steps presented here prepare for a more detailed analysis, particularly of the involved spatial characteristics revealed in forms of representation.

Antinomian structures are significantly determinative of Benjamin's theoretical narrative. *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels* concludes with a critique of the Baroque allegorical form, which it dissects into its sacred and secular attributes (GS1, 350ff: "Antinomien der Allegorese"). By applying the methodological considerations from the "Erkenntniskritische Vorrede" to Baroque literature, Benjamin seeks to make visible the allegory in its ideal moments. Allegory as a form of representation, and by this token also

⁴⁴ In the context of the *Passagen-Werk*, "Über den Begriff der Geschichte," and the concept of the dialectical image.

a concept of form itself, emerges as an ideal – virtual – space defined by the extreme contrast of the sacred and the secular. In his Baroque study, Benjamin generally sees representation as apotheosis: through aesthetics man raises himself above nature; and the reason behind every act of representation is ultimately to be like god. According to the author, apotheosis through representation within the form of allegory is dialectical: “Sie vollzieht sich im Umschlagen von Extremen” (GS1, 337) – namely those between the sacred and the profane. Dialectical processes progress in time. At the core of any dialectics, Benjamin writes in the notes to the *Passagen-Werk*, lies a “Zeitdifferential.” (GS5, 1037) He first introduces allegory as an abyss between “bildlichem Sein” and “Bedeuten” in which a “dialektische Bewegung braust.” (GS1, 342) In theoretical terms, this is an intermediate step towards the separation of the temporal aspect from dialectics. Precisely because Benjamin’s concept of idea works as a virtual, infinitesimal space, the temporal features of dialectics are suspended. This also means that the allegory now puts the dialectical tension of thesis and antithesis into a space where it appears frozen. Within this allegorical space (or rather: allegory as ideal space), the elements of dialectical progression are still present in the image that now dictates the mode of its reception. The dialectical elements, suspended in an image space as they are, thus do not progress to a synthesis. As a result, Benjamin’s allegorical form as idea builds up a dialectical – or in other words antinomian – tension without a synthesis, without a release. While in classical dialectics, for example in Hegel, thesis, antithesis and synthesis are all elements of one progressing process, here the synthesis is not in the image, but instead displaced into the act of reading. This means that the synthesis becomes contingent upon cases of reading, where this act of reading as part of the dialectical constellation actually creates a

synthesis outside the medium and is fully dependent on the actual situation. The reader brings time back into the dialectical setting; Benjamin calls this in the *Passagen-Werk* the “Jetzt der Erkennbarkeit” and “[das] Zur Lesbarkeit kommen.” (e.g., GS5, 578, 579) With his method, therefore, he makes the time difference of dialectics visible in the first place.⁴⁵

Within this setup, Benjamin transgresses the Baroque allegorical form of representation. In doing so, he connects the antinomian principle with the theme of salvation. The antinomy between the sacred and the profane becomes key in transgressing forms of representation and, in the course of their transgression, releasing them from the hold of tradition. In *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels*, the author maintains that the phenomena are salvaged within the ideas; these ideas, however, are spatial constellations through the power of concepts. And these constellations, in turn, are extreme positions and extrapolations from the given. Ultimately, they are antinomic oppositions. In Benjamin, therefore, the phenomena, and by this token also concepts of form,⁴⁶ are salvaged within antinomian constellations. But how can the phenomena be saved within an antinomy? The idea is that the two antagonistic moments of this

⁴⁵ Sigrid Weigel, too, points out that “[t]he dialectic at work here does not follow a triadic formula.” She writes that Benjamin’s approach to dialectics goes back not to Hegel, but most likely to Hölderlin, “in whose work a like attempt is to be found at the precise linguistic description of a dialectical process and its illumination in all its aspects – aspects which in the very course of this process change their status and position.” Sigrid Weigel, *Body- and Image-Space. Re-reading Walter Benjamin* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), 52. It is here that Benjamin’s images are revealed to be “linguistic images (*Sprachbilder*)” concerned with “the origin of ideas and their crystallization in linguistic figurations.” (Ibid., 53) As will be shown, Benjamin’s concept of image space is thus a hybrid construction of language and (image) space – not in the sense of using metaphor or other figurative means, which represent by referring to something else, but rather because it implements certain spatial principles such as constellations within the form of language.

⁴⁶ *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels*, as well as the additional works in the context of Charles Baudelaire, can, for example, be read as an attempt to ‘salvage’ the form of the allegory. Something similar will be discussed in regard to the epic in the following chapters of this study.

antinomy represent fallacies of the mind in its encounter with the phenomena. These two aspects are, on the one hand, the desire to have the phenomena in an absolute and original way, and on the other hand, to give them up completely for lost.⁴⁷ Benjamin now attempts to place his understanding of reaching out for the phenomena right in between these two moments. What he calls salvation of the phenomena is thus an open, intricate theoretical construction charged with tension.

He carries the aporetic problem that is at the heart of every antinomian structure into the promise of salvation. The question that leads to the core of the matter is: how can the phenomena be saved in ideas, when ideas are not realizable in the world? How is something saved when I do not *have* it? On the one hand, Benjamin's epistemological triad of phenomena, concepts, and ideas indeed guarantees that the phenomena are saved from the illusive and elusive nature in which they are first given to us. The analytical function of concepts establishes differences in the undifferentiated realm of phenomena, thereby making them available in the first place. Then, secondly, the phenomena are retrieved from the sphere of concepts, as well, by allocating them, through generalized extrapolations, within the virtual space of the idea. Concepts are subject to historical contingencies, hence the dissolving tradition; Benjamin notes that, particularly in

⁴⁷ The place in between these two extremes is where the phenomena are salvaged. Arendt identifies this space in her essay on Benjamin as itself not belonging to history. In the end she represents what is ultimately also a process of abstraction again with metaphoric terms. The historiographer – Benjamin – here becomes a “Perlentaucher” reaching down into the past, not to excavate indiscriminately everything he finds, but to retrieve “Seltsame Perlen und Korallen” in order to bring them “als Fragmente an die Oberfläche des Tages.” Arendt emphasizes that this historiographer dives into the depths of the past “nicht um sie so, wie sie war, zu beleben und zur Erneuerung abgelebter Zeiten beizutragen.” The operation to salvage the phenomena of the past she calls a process of crystallization that transforms whatever it touches into new appearances: “Was dies Denken leitet, ist die Überzeugung, daß zwar das Lebendige dem Ruin der Zeit verfällt, daß aber der Verwesungsprozeß gleichzeitig ein Kristallisationsprozeß ist; daß in der ‘Meereslut’ – dem selbst nicht-historischen Element, dem alles geschichtlich Gewordene verfallen soll – neue kristallisierte Formen und Gestalten entstehen, die, gegen die Elemente gefeit, überdauern und nur auf den Perlentaucher warten, ...” Arendt, “Walter Benjamin,” p. 97.

philosophical contexts, the framework of concepts had become “brüchig.” (GS1, 212) Ideas, in contrast, are infinite; they represent – qua the actual concept of “idea” – the faculty to approximate the universally true structure of the world by means of abstraction and generalization. Thus Benjamin presents a way to salvage the phenomena from the breaking tradition. They are ‘safe’ insofar as they, qua constellations of concepts, take part in the sphere of ideas.

However, on the other hand, the claim that the phenomena are *not* saved at all, and thus are ultimately lost to us, remains valid as well, thus establishing Benjamin’s construction as a true antinomy with an aporetic contradiction at its core. In the process of the salvage operation, the phenomena are lost in two ways. Firstly, they are broken up by the analytical work of the concepts, and secondly they are also not secured, or re-established, in a systematic framework of concepts. In the vein of Benjamin’s image conception, concepts do not contribute to tradition anymore, much less rebuild it. This becomes clearer with a look at phenomena in terms of remembrance. The past, as Benjamin explains in the context of his concept of a ‘Copernican turn of history’ (GS5, 490, 491), can only be retrieved in the form of fragments. Each instance of approaching the past is determined by the relative present time from which it is actually observed through the medium of memory. Past events therefore cannot be brought forth again in exactly the same way as they originally unfolded; they cannot be ‘had again.’ Hence there is no way that remembrance could discern ‘how it actually was.’⁴⁸ From this

⁴⁸ At this point, Benjamin’s concept of history clearly breaks with the historical school of historicism. It is also fairly obvious that he identified historicism primarily with the work of Leopold von Ranke, one of the school’s founders. In his collection of aphorisms “Über den Begriff der Geschichte,” Benjamin accordingly turns against Ranke’s well known dictum that the task of historical science should be to present the past “wie es denn eigentlich gewesen ist.” (GS1, 695) He had also already referred to this phrase, however, in *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels*: GS1, 222. The aim of Benjamin’s criticism of history is thus easy to

perspective, the phenomena are necessarily lost. In terms of providing a systematic conceptual framework, Benjamin's suspension of the dialectical process within space lacks the synthesis. He denies that the inherent contradictions within the phenomenal representation are *aufgehoben* in the Hegelian sense. Benjamin's salvation in the virtual image space of an idea does not manifest the salvaged fragments within an artificially synthesized whole. Only in 'flashes' of a sudden *Erkenntnis* outside of the text may the term synthesis be applied. His salvation of the phenomena is a *virtual salvation*; they are kept in a state of limbo that maintains the tension between the elements in a potentially infinite projection.⁴⁹

In the course of his work, Benjamin develops the virtual space of the idea – which so far formed the basis for an understanding of his approach to a 'salvation of phenomena'

identify as a reversal of Ranke's claim that the historian should strive to abolish the contemporary context of his studies, and thus also as far as possible the involvement of his self. Ranke's goal for history as a science, therefore, was total objectivity, whereas Benjamin, in a reversal of this model, attempted to abandon the subject-object divide altogether. See Leopold von Ranke, *Sämtliche Werke. Zweite Gesamtausgabe*, vol. 33 (Leipzig, 1885), VII. See also: Ulrich Kittstein, *'Mit Geschichte will man etwas.'* *Historisches Erzählen in der Weimarer Republik und im Exil (1918-1945)* (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2006), 17. Kittstein presents Ranke's "Objektivitätskonzept," but also writes that already colleagues of the historian, like for example Johann Gustav Droysen, disagreed by pointing to the simple fact that any history depends on the available sources, which cannot be congruent with 'how it actually was.' (Ibid., 17-18)

⁴⁹ See also Alexander Honold, *Der Leser Walter Benjamin. Bruchstücke einer deutschen Literaturgeschichte* (Berlin: Verlag Vorwerk 8, 2000), 181. Honold also sees the strange methodological construction of Benjamin's narrator essay that attempts to put the phenomenon of storytelling into the space in between of its complete loss and its complete conservation. He observes that Benjamin made conflicting statements about the disappearance of traditional forms of art, or effects linked to them, as for example the disappearance of the art of storytelling, or the loss of the artwork's aura. Honold writes: "Soll man diese Tendenzen als Verlust oder Fortschritt bilanzieren? Zwischen Kunstwerk- und Erzähler-Aufsatz scheint in dieser Frage ein gewisser Konflikt zu herrschen, der in ein zeitliches Nacheinander nicht ohne weiteres aufzulösen ist." He eventually discovers in context of Benjamin's annotations to the narrator essay that its author attempted to keep the antagonistic tendencies between historicizing and what Honold calls here preserving in abeyance: "Auszuhalten, in der Schwebe zu halten versucht Benjamin in den Paralipomena zum Erzähler-Aufsatz allerdings den methodischen Widerspruch zwischen einer historisierenden und einer bewahrenden Perspektive." (Ibid., 181) Following up on this I argue, however, that this does not lead in the narrator essay to "deutliche Zeichen einer darstellerischen und methodischen Unsicherheit, mit der Benjamin selbst auf diese Transformation [the transformation of traditional media or forms of art in modernity] reagierte." (Ibid., 182) Instead, this space in-between that admittedly is hard, if not impossible to represent is precisely the methodological focal point of the essay's construction.

– into a complex conception of image space. This concept, in turn, is accompanied by the notion of a body space through which he adds, in the essay “Der Surrealismus,” a political dimension to his otherwise epistemological method. The greater scope of this image conception, which right at its outset emphasizes its spatial structure, leads to Benjamin’s specific way of thinking within images. In her study on *Body- and Image-Space. Re-reading Walter Benjamin*, Sigrid Weigel traces the notion of body and image space throughout Benjamin’s work. She interprets the use and transformation of the image conception as Benjamin’s genuine “mode of philosophizing”; as his way of thinking and writing – these two being, as she states, inseparable. Weigel points out that Benjamin’s images as thought-image should not be confused with traditional poetic writing and use of metaphor; they do not establish a “so-called figurative or even ‘non-literal’ (*uneigentlich*) speech – in which an image takes the place of a concept or thought that could also be expressed otherwise.”⁵⁰ Rather than representations, Benjamin constructed a notion of images “in terms of their property as writing (*Schrift*),”⁵¹ meaning that they consist of a constellation of elements that can be read. Based on these

⁵⁰ Weigel, *Body- and Image-Space*, 9. Weigel traces the notion of image space back to Benjamin’s unpublished notes “Zur Malerei” (on painting) (GS6, 113-114), “probably written in 1921.” (Ibid., 22, 23) She points out that the concept thereafter appeared frequently and in numerous variations throughout the author’s work as “graphic image (*Schriftbild*),” “dream image (*Traumbild*),” “images of history (*Bilder der Geschichte*),” “mnemonic image (*Erinnerungsbild*),” “thought images (*Denkbilder*),” and “dialectical images (*dialektische Bilder*)” (Ibid., 23). The concept of body – and Weigel splits this term into the more specific “corporeal (*Leib*)” and the general notion of body (*Körper*) – is difficult to trace in Benjamin’s work. Weigel sees its origin mostly in the earlier writings concerned with language and psychology, where Benjamin is interested “in the connection between corporeality and language both with regard to bodily signs – for example in his notes ‘On Shame’ (*Über die Scham*) of 1919-20 (GSVI, 70).” (Ibid., 23, 24) From here she draws a line to the use of bodily conceptions in Benjamin’s essay on Kafka, where his “focus is more on the aspects of alienation and forgetting associated with the body.” (Ibid., 27) Following this direction, Benjamin’s writing about the body culminates in the concept of *Entstellung*, where bodily deformations mirror the work of forgetting in the sphere of remembrance that leads to distortions within our language.

⁵¹ Ibid., 49.

observations, the focus of the present study lies on the spatial aspect of this body and image space, and on the resulting consequences for narrative forms within which these spaces are ultimately constructed. When Weigel writes that in Benjamin's texts an image space "is opened up into which the subject [...] himself enters and in which he as it were assumes functionality,"⁵² the question arises as to how exactly this functionality looks within a theoretical narrative: how does this projection or even permutation of action into contemplation reflect back on forms of representation?

In the essay on surrealism, Benjamin brings the antinomy of the sacred and the profane to a head in an effort to isolate what he considered to be the unique contribution of the avant-garde movement, as well as to defend it against its own shortcomings; hence he presents a critique of surrealism. His critique points to the way in which surrealism, as basically a poetic movement, attempts to elevate life through forms of spiritual enlightenment or even ecstasies. In this way, by consistently identifying poetic expression with a way of life (*Lebensform*), surrealism, Benjamin observes, approaches experiences more authentically – "buchstäblich" (GS2, 297) – and not through meta-levels of theories and phantasms. Later he will refer to this difference in terms of an anthropological materialism in contrast to a metaphysical materialism. The keywords of the surrealist experience or *Lebensform* are: dream, intoxication (*Rausch*: daze, ecstasy), and religious or spiritual epiphany. The issue Benjamin takes with actual surrealism is that it fails to properly translate its advance into new realms of experience into political – that is in this case, revolutionary – conduct. Surrealism succeeds in elevating and expanding life through the aforementioned forms of ecstasies, but now Benjamin holds it

⁵² Weigel, *Body- and Image-Space*, 18.

accountable for not connecting back these experiences to meaningful political action. In his notes to the *Passagen*, he will come back to this and write: “Abgrenzung der Tendenz dieser Arbeit gegen Aragon: Während Aragon im Traumbereiche beharrt, soll hier die Konstellation des Erwachens gefunden werden.” (GS5, 571) The contrasting coordinates here between dream and awakening repeat his earlier critique of surrealism.

At this point, within his objection to the surrealist movement, as it were, Benjamin places the antinomy of the sacred and the profane. Its task is “schöpferische Überwindung religiöser Erleuchtung” through a “*profanen Erleuchtung*, einer materialistischen, anthropologischen Inspiration.“ (GS2, 297) The cornerstone or precondition for the antinomy – and thus also for the aspired movement of transgression – Benjamin finds at the core of the surrealist agenda itself; for example, in Louis Aragon’s *Le Paysan de Paris* (1926), or in André Breton’s *Nadja* (1928), whose new and unfamiliar perspective on the things of the world, which emphasizes its material givenness, deeply impressed him. It is the enchantment, or in romantic terms, the *Poetisierung* of the material world, precisely in the context of modern, capitalistic, and technological progress, that begins to interest the author. Essentially this is a structure similar to the earlier-mentioned apotheosis and subsequent critical transgression of Baroque allegory. But according to Benjamin’s argument, this antinomian structure at the heart of surrealism was never fully realized in actual practice.

The potential power emanating from the antinomy that the concept of *profane Erleuchtung* embraces is specified by Benjamin as transgressing purely one-sided religious epiphany. The latter again represents, by extension, the sphere of dreams and intoxication, in whose spell the surrealists were ultimately caught. Furthermore,

Benjamin characterizes this transgression as *truly* “schöpferisch,” meaning that within the tension of the antinomy a creative act brings about something new that effectively transgresses both sides of it. However, this form of synthesis only exists potentially, or virtually, within the textual medium; it is not realizable by the same means through which the antinomy itself is brought about, but only prepared here. Only in real life experience, by adopting a way of life, could the process of transgression that Benjamin envisions here appear and be realized.

Benjamin’s concept of *profane Erleuchtung* forces together two extremes, the profane and the sacred, into one attributive phrase, and thus establishes a field of infinite, irresolvable reflections. Viewed in terminology found in *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels*, he configures here by means of concepts the respective extreme phenomena in order to project the virtual and antinomian space of the surrealist idea. Based on the linguistic structure of *profane Erleuchtung*, the two complementary expressions are inseparably fused together; at the same time, this junction is a *contradictio in adiecto*. Right after Benjamin introduces the concept *profane Erleuchtung*, he varies it slightly by adding a structurally similar phrase – “materialistische Inspiration” (GS2, 297), which adds the dimension of materialism to an understanding of the profane and that of creative (hence *schöpferisch*) inspiration to an understanding of epiphany. In a way, this second installment of the paradoxical structure can already be read as a result of the reflective forces inherent in the former: is not materialism, however sober and prosaic it presents itself, also a result of creative man – that is, of inspiration? In contrast to the profane or mundane worldliness, materialism is a movement encompassing modes of human productivity and hence creativity. And is not the term inspiration, compared to epiphany,

already a slight degradation of whatever ‘divine essence’ the term might at first evoke? Inspiration refers to man as he makes use of ‘divine’ powers. When ‘blessed’ by inspiration, we are able to create. In conclusion, the term ‘materialistic inspiration’ itself already displays the reflective inferences produced by the tension within the term ‘profane epiphany.’

Profane Erleuchtung extends the fundamental epistemological considerations from the earlier *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels*. The moment of *Erleuchtung* (which can mean both: epiphany or enlightenment) is that of a sudden insight into the configuration of things formerly incomprehensible. In his Baroque study, Benjamin explains how the sudden recognition of a mosaic reveals a “transzendente Wucht” (GS1, 208) whose effect he compares to that of a picture of a saint. It is this transcendental force to which Benjamin alludes with the cognitive side of his image conceptions. The actual image transcends the elements, or the material basis, from which it is made. In the case of the mosaic, this is quite obvious; in a sense, the mosaic is playing with this transcendence by displaying it. The elements of a mosaic do not have the same meaning as the image they form when put together. And the same holds true for a picture of a saint: the image is considered sacred, while the actual objects of which the picture consists are not.

Recognizing an image is an absolute and sudden moment; it happens in the blink of an eye, and once an image is recognized, one cannot undo the fact of having recognized the image. The elements of the image or mosaic come together in a constellation, and there is a certain point of no return, a limit beyond which it is impossible not to recognize the image. One cannot choose *not* to recognize an image. In this sense, the mode of perception of images transcends the elements that constitute them.

But this also means that this act of awareness retains a moment of incomprehensibility *within* the moment of understanding itself. The term epiphany points precisely to this moment of understanding that comes across as overwhelming; it characterizes a form of revelation in which the exact reason of its coming into being remain obscure. In purely religious terms, an epiphany is the manifestation of the divine to man: a sudden comprehension of the divine (or at least an aspect of it), elevating man closer to the realm of the gods. Within the concept of *profane Erleuchtung*, however, the sacred aspect instantly gets interspersed with aspects of its antonym, the profane. This is also the result of the syntactical constellation: the profane here is an attribute of the sacred. Both parts of the concept infinitely reject each other on the semantic level, while they are forced together on the syntactical level. As a consequence, what could be called a force field of infinitely oscillating reflection between the profane and the sacred emerges. Aesthetic elevation and divine revelation infinitely and irresolvably oscillate with insight into the profane, the secular order of things. And in turn, insight into the constellation of worldly things, the secular domain, becomes infinitely charged with basically religious elements: any such constellation contributes to redemption, “die kleine Pforte, durch die der Messias treten [kann]” (GS1, 704), as Benjamin writes in *Über den Begriff der Geschichte*. It is important to point out that this understanding of redemption abandons hope; Benjamin attempts to project religious redemption into the sphere of the profane and thereby acknowledges it only where it becomes a palpable, material realization devoid of hope.

The concept of *profane Erleuchtung* constitutes the idea of surrealism; that is, it establishes a virtual space, a force field that allows for infinite reflection of its extreme

positions. The critical task of this construction is to transgress the (actual) form of surrealism, or in Benjamin's terms: "schöpferische Überwindung religiöser Erleuchtung," (GS2, 297) a task at which, according to him, the surrealists failed. This process of transgression thus unfolds within the virtual space of the idea, where linear time is suspended. Or, to be precise, in this medium, the "bildschaffende Medium in uns" (GS5, 571, Rudolf Borchardt), the actual transgression will be prepared. The question then is, what does it mean for our faculty of reflection when Benjamin emphasizes the spatial features of the medium by whose means it progresses? For the fundamentally necessary precondition of temporality inherent in progressive reflection is of course not touched by Benjamin's transformation of its medium. If expressed within a medium temporality, the *Zeitdifferential* always necessarily turns into spatial metaphors. So, what is at stake here is the specific spatial mode of the medium in which the temporality of reflection is expressed. If the process of thinking is imagined as following along a timeline or constituting a continuum, it is effectively rendered in one dimension; it will then proceed as a sequence from one step to the next. Each such index needs only one coordinate to be specified. With his image conception, Benjamin seeks to transform the spatial quality of thought's medium into a two-dimensional model; the line opens up into a surface or a (force) field. Thinking, within a thusly transformed medium, gains perspective and the quality of simultaneity or ubiquitousness. Its gradient is not continuous, but discontinuous; any proceeding step 'forward' has to take into account its relative position and interdependency upon all the other involved 'points' within this grid or coordinate system. In this regard, the progress of thinking becomes similar to observing an image: while the observer may focus on details, the function or meaning of any such detail for

the whole is determined by the simultaneous presence of other details that constitute the image. In a linear process, each step depends, strictly speaking, only on its predecessor, the antecedent.

Transgression of, or rather *within*, an image space thus cannot be characterized as ‘leaving behind’ a certain step or concept, but has to be described as an *immanent transgression*. Such a transgression within image space, resulting from the multiplied process of immanent reflection, happens as a complete shift in the overall quality or awareness of that space. It is like gaining a fundamental new understanding of an image after having contemplated it for a lengthy period of time. Afterwards, the image is never the same again. This shift is also a shift in perspective: to look at things differently. And at this point, the transgression of the image space is actually accomplished to the point where the immanence of the process itself also ‘waits to be’ transgressed. The reason for this is that a change of perspective on the whole image space necessarily involves its outside. In other words: Benjamin’s aim was that the immanent transgression within the medium would unfold up to a point where it forced an action *outside* the textual medium, which could in some cases mean a mere change of perspective, and in others a call to political action. This last step involves the reader, of course.

At this point, I want to dwell a little longer on the political dimension Benjamin added to his image conception in his essay “Der Surrealismus.” This is necessary because, as the above shows, only this other ‘transgressed’ perspective completes it. Benjamin puts the image conception into a political context and consequently extends his terminology to address a *body space* besides the image space. He thus repeats the dichotomy of the sacred and the profane (or again, in other terms, that of the interior and

the exterior) within a different, decisive political context. In order to fully understand the scope of spatial aspects in Benjamin's work, particularly in relation to the dissolution and transgression of literary, narrative form conceptions (e.g., Baroque allegory, surrealism), it is necessary to present Benjamin's image concept in its political turn. The spatial paradigm will only be truly complete if it indeed encompasses the dichotomy of interior and exterior, for only then will the transition from contemplation to action, around which Benjamin's conception of body space centers, appear. Benjamin situates his text(s) at precisely the point where immanence becomes impossible and the text necessarily transeunt. His text thus often anticipates this moment, the text's 'other,' so to speak, which is not itself realized within the medium. Politics is the sphere where this soon-to-be-transgressed image space must be established.

As a first step, he demands, therefore, that within political discourse, within a "Raum des politischen Handelns," forms of a "moralische Metapher," and of comparison in general, ought to be abandoned in favor of a "hundertprozentigen Bildraum." (GS2, 309) Benjamin's demand aims to reduce the actual principle of analogy, the gesture of 'as if,' as far as possible within political discourse. In forms of analogy and metaphor, the inherent attribute of any image conception – to present something which it itself is not – is part of the act of presentation. This allows the protagonists to hide away behind the gesture of 'as if' and not assume direct and unconditional responsibility; the gap between subject and action grows. Benjamin presents a movement from the inauthentic to the authentic. In 'organizing pessimism' (GS2, 309), or, as he will write later in *Über den Begriff der Geschichte*, by siding with the oppressed side of tradition, he sees a way to create immediacy within the political space. Pessimism, as an ultimately nihilistic stance,

belongs to the category of the destructive character; it rejects accepted images, since it is, in its core, extreme denial, and hence in this stance it seems appropriate to abandon the prevailing forms of metaphor from the sphere of political discourse. As when Benjamin's 'destructive psychology' was mentioned before, it is important to emphasize the point where this staging (*Inszenierung*) of negativity turns over to become its positivist, constructive counterpart. According to Benjamin's argument, the destruction of the present, inauthentic images would result in establishing a new, authentic image space of complete immediacy.

However, strictly speaking, such a "hunderprozentige[r] Bildraum" (GS2, 309) is impossible; it is in fact an idea, since it is precisely the function of an image to present something that it is not. If the space of image became completely identical with the space of appearances, which we call reality, the concept of image would vanish. Thus, this ideal projection of image space itself extrapolates towards the point where imagination and reality, the inner and the outer world, contemplation and action, would be identical. In such a situation – a political utopia, to be sure – the gap between imagination and action would disappear. Benjamin makes a theoretical effort to explore the dimension of this absolute image space, and consequently observes that it cannot be determined by contemplative means alone. (GS2, 309) If image space is thought absolutely, it of course encompasses the sphere of action. Here Benjamin's own text therefore reaches for the point where contemplation turns into action; his essay on surrealism is subsequently concerned with presenting this point, the point of indifference between contemplation and action, as it were.

In certain micro-forms of communication: jokes, berating somebody, and even in misunderstandings, Benjamin sees examples in which this oscillation between action and image can be observed, “wo ein Handeln selber das Bild aus sich herausstellt und ist, in sich hineinreißt und frißt.” (GS2, 309) These linguistic gestures constitute speech acts; and in the course of their being acted out – that is, in pragmatic terms: when they are accomplishing their communicative task – they establish, sometimes only momentarily, an image of themselves. The term gesture is quite fitting here. A gesture refers to an action turned into an image. In the case of jokes, the presented image may be the necessary condition for the speech act to succeed, and thus the presentation of the image is identical with its being an action. Benjamin’s “gesuchte[r] Bildraum” projects into an ideal space that encompasses the world as a space of “allseitiger und integraler Aktualität.” (GS2, 309) Especially with this last, somewhat paradoxical notion, Benjamin seeks to push the concept of image space over its own boundaries – which are characterized by its inherent immanence – and into the sphere of temporality, where action unfolds. Benjamin characterizes the oscillating movement of this ambivalent and dynamic image space, where the exterior moves into the interior until it dissolves, in rather poetic terms as action that puts out or exposes its own image *and* pulls it in again. He explicitly speaks of the destruction – *Vernichtung* – of image space, *after which* it appears again as “Bildraum, und konkreter: Leibraum.” (GS2, 309) Only this latter construction thus addresses the absolute dimensionality and the inner dynamic (which Benjamin calls dialectical) of the spatial conception he sought.

In a variation of the established dichotomy, Benjamin writes that “politischer Materialismus und die physische Kreatur,” thus political idea and creaturely necessity,

determine the “inneren Menschen.” (GS2, 309) Within his general image conception, commitment to a political utopia is confronted with what can be called formal questions; that is, in the case of the essay on surrealism, also with questions of the dimensionality or extent of politics. Benjamin distinguishes a metaphysical materialism from an anthropological materialism, writing that the former – the contemplative and dogmatic form of materialism – is not able to transcend the latter. He repeats his earlier point that the complete dimension of the politically relevant space cannot be grasped by contemplative means alone. There remains a surplus that only ever appears in forms of praxis, of action. From this perspective, he then establishes the collective of politically connected individuals as “leibhaft,” (GS2, 310) meaning that, like the body, it represents its own confined and functional space unified through needs, necessities, movements, etc. Its physical constitution, its form and also inner organization, develops, according to Benjamin, along the terms of technology. Technology here becomes the expression of sociopolitical forms of organization. The author anticipates, in his own terms, a form of social engineering that he ties back to his juxtaposition of idealism and materialism within the conception of body and image space, “in jenem Bildraume [...] in welchem die profane Erleuchtung uns heimisch macht.”

At this point, he reveals the utopian aspect of his image conception: “Erst wenn in ihr [profane Erleuchtung] sich Leib und Bildraum so tief durchdringen, daß alle revolutionäre Spannung leibliche kollektive Innervation, alle leiblichen Innovationen des Kollektivs revolutionäre Entladung werden, hat die Wirklichkeit so sehr sich selbst übertroffen, wie das kommunistische Manifest es fordert.“ (GS2, 310) In contrast to Marx’s and Engels’ *Communist Manifesto* (or rather its many interpreters), Benjamin

does not propose a societal model (*Gesellschaftsentwurf*); his utopian projection is limited to the forming and re-forming of the space contemplation and action inhabit. Therefore he attempts to *prepare* this ideal culmination and identification (or congruency) of man's bodily, imaginative possibilities and necessities by means of the textual medium, with the goal in mind that outside of its perimeter, in the actual reading process, it might trigger something new and unprecedented. In other words, he aims for the reality of the reader to shift, which indeed would mean that reality had exceeded itself. Benjamin's texts often perform this movement as small, contained units so as to trespass upon themselves. In this way, he attempted to consciously manipulate the formal and productive preconditions of his writing.

I am now going to have a look at the last phase of Benjamin's image conception in order to reach a conclusive point at which it will be easy to see how narrative forms and what Benjamin calls 'the epic' are drawn into the trespassing movement within the image space.⁵³ By reading Nietzsche's tale of eternal recurrence, Benjamin initiates, in the course of his project on the Paris *Passagen*, a fundamental critique of a concept of

⁵³ The essay "Der Surrealismus" (1929) stands in theoretical proximity to the foregoing *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels* and *Einbahnstraße* (both 1928), and the later work on the *Passagen-Werk* (usually divided into two main work phases from 1927 to 1929 and 1934 to 1940). In terms of the image conception's development and conceptual transformation from idea to, eventually, the 'dialectical image,' the surrealism essay marks an intermediate step; a step, however, that proceeds by assimilating in each instance the totality of the previous step rather than inscribing a difference. Benjamin's concepts progress through identity rather than difference; they grow through a process of becoming enriched, which of course results in a dramatic increase of complexity. See also Sigrid Weigel for the interrelationship of Benjamin's image conceptions: "In both concepts [image space and dialectical image] representation (*Darstellung*) and idea (*Vorstellung*) coincide, and both have in common that they break the dimension of time out of the linear order in which it is traditionally structured. In the combination of image, body and space, the category of time as the fourth dimension of culture is entirely absent, eliminated; while in the dialectical image, time as a linear progression is suspended when, in the 'Now of cognizability' (*Jetzt der Erkennbarkeit*), past and present come together unmediated, that is, with no distance between them." Weigel, *Body- and Image-Space*, 19. In the following pages, I will have a closer look at this moment of suspending the "dimension of time" from dialectics and its connection to the image's spatial and cognitive qualities.

history passed on from the nineteenth century. In so doing, he basically applies the earlier-analyzed antinomic strategy to history itself as it is represented through the notion of historicism. He writes in the notes to the *Passagen-Werk*: “Es sind die unauflösbaren Antinomien, angesichts deren der dialektische Begriff der historischen Zeit zu entwickeln ist.” (GSV, 178) This represents the last phase of Benjamin’s critical image conception that he eventually summarized in *Über den Begriff der Geschichte*, where it would appear in yet a different constellation of concepts. As will become clear later, the collapse of the traditional concept of history includes the disintegration of its narrative forms.

Benjamin interprets Nietzsche’s idea of history as an extreme extrapolation of historicism, to the degree that it collapses on itself: “In der Idee der ewigen Wiederkunft überschlägt der Historismus des 19ten Jahrhunderts sich selbst.” (GS5, 174) As before, Benjamin uses an idea to create a virtual, spatial projection within which the phenomenon and conception of history (as historicism) is trespassed upon. In correspondence with the cyclic principle of the philosopher’s concept of history, Benjamin brings it to a quasi somersault. The circular movement within Nietzsche’s image of eternal recurrence describes an identity of past, present, and future, which means that the threefold distinction of temporal instances ultimately collapses. The present is automatically made into the past, and the past is drawn into the present: in regard to this structure, Nietzsche’s image of eternal recurrence represents an extreme version of historicism.

In his book *Surrealismus als Erkenntnis*, Josef Fürnkäs elaborates on Benjamin’s reception of nineteenth-century historicism. Fürnkäs argues, in particular, that Benjamin’s well-known conception of memory not as an instrument “zur Erkundung des

Vergangenen,” but as *the* medium of the past, is the result of his criticism of historicism.⁵⁴

It is with this proposition of memory as medium that Benjamin, according to Fürnkäs, breaks with an anthropological understanding of remembrance that had its beginning in eighteenth-century enlightenment and then was institutionalized during the following century. The beginnings of German idealism and philosophy of history coincide, and through the notion of memory, the past as *das Gewesene* – being that is past and thus nonetheless *is* – and the human power of “Vergegenwärtigung” (realization), localized in the idealistic construction of the subject, were considered separate entities. Memory had the synthetic task “die Zerissenheit der Gegenwart [...] kausalgenetisch aus ihrem Gewordensein zu begreifen.”⁵⁵ In this, Fürnkäs sees the elements that stagnated in historicism – in the attempted scientification of *Vergegenwärtigung*. In the transition from philosophy of history to historicism, Fürnkäs observes a “Positivierung bzw. Funktionalisierung von Gedächtnis und Erinnerung,” which made certain categories like *Vergegenwärtigung* available for history as a science but also stopped the process of reflecting on them; they turned from philosophical questions into institutionalized tools.⁵⁶

⁵⁴ Josef Fürnkäs, *Surrealismus als Erkenntnis. Walter Benjamin – Weimarer Einbahnstraße und Pariser Passagen* (Stuttgart: J.B. Metzler, 1988), 122. Fürnkäs also draws a line to Nietzsche as one of the first contemporary critics of historicism, mostly by referring to his *Vom Nutzen und Nachteil der Historie für das Leben*. I will limit myself to Benjamin’s reading of Nietzsche’s tale of eternal recurrence. Benjamin quoted Nietzsche’s small account of this thought in the *Passagen-Werk*: GS5, 176, 177. – Benjamin’s initial approach to memory as the medium of the past also marks the point at which the past turns or migrates into space. See also: “Das Gedächtnis wird nicht mehr als Instrument verstanden, das den Bezug der Gegenwart zum Vergangenen erst bewußt und damit gleichsam an der Oberfläche herstellte, sondern als dessen Medium und Schauplatz, als zu erforschende Region, in der Gegenwärtiges und Vergangenes, Erinnern und Vergessen immer schon ineinander verquickt sind und sich Schicht um Schicht überlagern.” Fürnkäs, *Surrealismus als Erkenntnis*, 128. The concern of my study, then, focuses on the question of to what degree Benjamin incorporated into the transformation of forms of representation the turning into space of temporal processes.

⁵⁵ Fürnkäs, *Surrealismus als Erkenntnis*, 122.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 124. Also: “Sie [historiography in historicism] bewegt sich auf der Ebene einer zumeist affirmativen, nicht problematisierenden Memorierung der historisch-dokumentarischen Spuren von Geschichte, die im

The space formed by Nietzsche's image of eternal recurrence is determined by identity and therefore homogeneous, a critique Benjamin would repeat in regard to historicism generally. According to him, this concept of history turns the past into myth, into *Urgeschichte* or prehistory, because everything that belongs to historiography and generally to tradition, "Überlieferung, auch die jüngste," will be indiscriminately identified with an ideal backdrop of some story of the past (e.g., ancient Greek culture, or the Middle Ages) and thus elude the reflective and mediating powers of the mind. In Benjamin's words, tradition becomes something "was sich schon in der unvordenklichen Nacht der Zeiten abgespielt hat." (GS5, 174)⁵⁷ He represents the transgression of the concept of history in various different ways throughout his work; there is, for example, his notion of the "kopernikanische[] Wendung des Eingedenkens" (GS5, 490), or an attempt to devise a theory of "geschichtlichen Aufwachens." (GS5, 59) The threshold between sleeping and awakening then becomes the borderline case of the concept of history, offering Benjamin a way to include Freudian psychoanalytical principles into a philosophy of history. But in any case, the conceptual structure remains essentially similar to that which I have analyzed here starting with *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels*. There, Benjamin wrote that the phenomena can be salvaged by being arranged in an ideal, virtual space. In his last writings, this image conception culminates

institutionell verabredeten Bezugsrahmen von Museum und Bibliothek als Ausdrücke des vom Menschen in der Geschichte je geäußerten Sinnes aufbewahrt und rubriziert werden." (Ibid., 124) – One might add that at this point historiography could be placed seamlessly into the service of affirming the Wilhelminian state. The affirmative aspect of historicist culture probably found its most visible expression in Wilhelminian architecture.

⁵⁷ Also: "Die 'ewige Wiederkehr' ist die Grundform des urgeschichtlichen, mythischen Bewußtseins. (Es ist wohl eben darum ein mythisches, weil es nicht reflektiert." (GS5, 177)

in the concept of the dialectical image: the subject matter of history itself and with it its concept – that which ought to be passed on by a tradition – is at stake.

In contrast to a historicist, linear understanding of the past, Benjamin introduces a discontinuous framework in which “das Gewesene mit dem Jetzt blitzhaft zu einer Konstellation zusammentritt,” (GS5, 577, 578) thus constellating events into an image. The medium for this procedure is memory. In this way, Benjamin eliminates the temporal aspect from the concept of history, which, according to him, determines the “Beziehung der Gegenwart zur Vergangenheit.” In the concepts both of a “Dialektik im Stillstand” and of the dialectical image, the phenomenal backdrop towards which any concept of history points (e.g., tradition, “[das] Überlieferte”) is represented as a constellation within an – ideal – image space. The tension between the involved represented objects thus is not *aufgehoben* in a synthesis, but brought to appearance. History, in Benjamin’s theoretical construction, is thus indeed salvaged through the representation of its “unauflösbaren Antinomien.” (GS5, 178) The synthesis, in this strategy, is always only going to be prepared within the medium; its realization lies outside and encompasses the sphere of man’s body space. Benjamin therefore emphasizes the act of reading. The “gelesene[s] Bild” becomes the “Bild im Jetzt der Erkennbarkeit” (GS5, 577, 578); the random and unpredictable situation in which the prepared constellation from within the medium suddenly includes the context of the reader – his unique historical situation – is the true synthesis of Benjamin’s dialectic. He calls this moment, the moment of reading, dangerous and highly critical. The same basic structure appears in *Über den Begriff der Geschichte* in a slightly different set of concepts but with the same goal of dissolving and

transgressing, within the space of its antinomy, a passed-on “Vorstellung von Geschichte,” which, according to this text, “nicht zu halten ist.”⁵⁸ (GS1, 679)

With this strategy, Benjamin aims at the core of tradition; that is, at the device or principle to purport an understanding – a dogma, as it were – of history. This tradition becomes apparent through its cultural assets, each of which in its own way represents the wealth of narrative forms. Benjamin reveals the objects of tradition as both a “Dokument der Kultur” and “ein solches der Barbarei” (GS2, 696), thereby placing the antinomic principle at the heart of tradition. The “Prozeß der Überlieferung” (GS2, 696) is not free from having benefited in some shape or form from actions that oppress others. Benjamin writes that, in order to activate this antinomy of tradition, the historiographer has to side with the “Tradition der Unterdrückten.” (GS2, 697) This would create the ideal image space of static dialectical tension – “wo das Denken in einer von Spannungen gesättigten Konstellation plötzlich einhält” (GS2, 703) – in whose indissolubility the salvation of its phenomena, according to Benjamin’s terms, could be achieved. At this point, the concept of a discontinuous history (or more specifically of remembrance, *Eingedenken*) connects to the concept of an antinomic tradition.

In some separate notes to the aphorisms on the concept of history, with the heading “*Problem der Tradition I/ Die Dialektik im Stillstande*,” Benjamin explains the

⁵⁸ Klaus Garber, in his book on reception theory in Benjamin and the reception of Benjamin’s work, gives an account of the difficult reception of historicism in the context of early German philosophy of history, as well as of more contemporary attempts to write a history of historicism. From his perspective in the 1980s, when the wave of Benjamin-reception that started in the 1960s was coming to a halt, he makes an effort to relate “das Singuläre der Benjaminschen Position” to the “Ensemble der Historismus-Kritik nach Dilthey.” Klaus Garber, *Rezeption und Rettung. Drei Studien zu Walter Benjamin* (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 1987), 28. What distinguishes Benjamin’s position, according to Garber, is that he consistently abandoned any “Basis-Kategorien historischer Hermeneutik” that in one way or the other always end up in processes of understanding (*Verstehen*) determined by *Einfühlung*. Benjamin thus would provide an alternative path for hermeneutic theories emanating from Heidegger and Gadamer. (Ibid., 28)

“Grundlegende Aporie” of tradition as follows: “Die Geschichte der Unterdrückten ist ein Diskontinuum,” while in contrast history as a continuum – as a ‘homogeneous space,’ as he writes in *Über den Begriff der Geschichte* – is the history of the oppressors, the “Unterdrücker.” (GS1, 1236) Clearly, he attempts to put his strategy into the coordinates of class struggle. He goes on to argue that the consciousness of historical discontinuity finds its expression in revolutionary action, meaning that the dimension of the antinomic and discontinuous concept of image space is only complete when it includes action – the potential, in other words, of the body space. Discontinuity becomes a constitutive element of remembrance precisely because of the bodily reality of man. Because we cannot really ‘go back into the past’ in a linear movement and thus establish a continuous connection to it, we instead, with each access of memory that necessarily happens in an instance of present time, set ourselves into a constellation with the past through an instantaneous ‘snapshot,’ a frozen image. The context, therefore, of accessing memory becomes part of remembrance. Benjamin calls the construction of the antinomic image space in *Über den Begriff der Geschichte* a “messianische[] Stillstellung des Geschehens, anders gesagt, eine[] revolutionäre Chance im Kampfe für die unterdrückte Vergangenheit.” (GS1, 703) Upon the historical materialist, the “Geschichtsschreiber” (GS2, 695), he bestows a messianic task to redeem the suppressed, oppressed past. The “Funken der Hoffnung” (GS2, 695) that, according to Benjamin, the *Geschichtsschreiber* as messiah ignites in the past, is in theoretical terms the construction of history as the antinomic image space. In the additional notes for the text on the concept of history, he explains the theological aspect of remembering, or in his terms: *Eingedenken*. Though history itself should not be presented in theological language, the past as given to us in

the form of memory has, according to him, an inherent momentum towards redemption. Any form of remembering therefore releases some of this redemptive potential. This is the theological aspect of the past, and the historian is thus a “rückwärts gekehrter Prophet.”⁵⁹ (GS1, 1235) In other words, any application of memory inherently fulfills the task to reconcile ourselves with what happened – within the present time and presence of memory as the medium. In reference to Irving Wohlfahrt, the aforementioned Josef Fürnkäs sees this deliberately unresolved conjunction of theology and politics in the vein of *apokatastasis*; that is, “spätjüdischer Apokalyptik und gnostischer Spekulationen bis hin zu Leibnitz und den Pietisten des 18. Jahrhunderts.” From this perspective, the salvation of history “scheint bei Benjamin an eine restlose Rettung aller geschichtlichen Reste gebunden.”⁶⁰ According to this viewpoint, salvation becomes an infinite process in which the positive as well as the negative details of the individual and of the collective cultural memory are incessantly brought into constellations and thus into the present. In Benjamin’s words: “Und so weiter in infinitum, bis die ganze Vergangenheit in einer historischen Apokatastasis in die Gegenwart eingebracht ist.” (GS5, 573) And this is practically impossible; the irresolvable tension between infinity and the present thus here reveals itself to be just another variation of the above-named antinomical structure of

⁵⁹ The juxtaposition of theology and politics is a determining theme throughout all of Benjamin’s thinking, beginning with his earliest writings. For a more detailed account of how Benjamin established the continuing and ultimately irresolvable relationship between theological and political categories, an “Untrennbarkeit von Politik und Theologie” as early as the period when he was abandoning the student youth movement, see Michael Bröcker, *Die Grundlosigkeit der Wahrheit. Zum Verhältnis von Sprache, Geschichte und Theologie bei Walter Benjamin* (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 1993), 26-27. Bröcker points out that Benjamin’s understanding of theology emerges from the Jewish tradition by referring to Gershom Scholem and Martin Buber. The dualistic view on god and the world, on redemption and the secular conditions of man’s life, was in its specific Jewish characteristics likely communicated by Buber, “womit nicht die auch anderen Religionen eigene ontische Trennung Gottes von der Welt gemeint ist als vielmehr die messianische Idee der Wiederherstellung ihrer Einheit.” (Ibid., 26)

⁶⁰ Fürnkäs, *Surrealismus als Erkenntnis*, 170.

Benjamin's concept of history. In this light, what looks at first glance to be a positivist approach (nothing of history is lost to historiography) likewise leads into history as the aporia. According to the argument presented here, however, Benjamin saw, precisely in this paradoxical situation, the salvation of the concept of history.

In any case, I am concerned with Benjamin's spatial strategy in terms of its formal and narrative implications; his supplemental notes provide additional cross connections between his major essays, in this case "Der Surrealismus," "Der Erzähler," and the text on the concept of history. Important for the argumentation at hand is that Benjamin, in a rare passage that brings all the different perspectives together, explicitly concludes with a reference to narrative forms. He writes: "Die messianische Welt ist die Welt allseitiger und integraler Aktualität. Erst in ihr gibt es eine Universalgeschichte. Aber nicht als geschriebene, sondern als die festlich begangene. Dieses Fest ist gereinigt von aller Feier. Es kennt keinerlei Festgesänge. Seine Sprache ist integrale Prosa, die die Fesseln der Schrift gesprengt hat und von allen Menschen verstanden wird (wie die Sprache der Vögel von Sonntagkindern). – Die Idee der Prosa fällt mit der messianischen Idee der Universalgeschichte zusammen (die Arten der Kunstprosa als das Spektrum der universalhistorischen – im 'Erzähler.'" (GS1, 1238) Benjamin thus connects the messianic thought back to the image conception from the surrealism essay.

"Universalgeschichte" in this sense has its place within the ideal dimension of a body and image space, encompassing man's contemplative (i.e., creative, imaginative) and active potential. He characterizes this as a celebration without ceremony, a certain cultural behavior or virtuosity without illusoriness. Similar to the paradoxical notion of the *profane Erleuchtung*, here he specifically projects a prosaic aspect onto the otherwise

cultic dimension of man's collective cultural behavior. But again, the antagonism of the secular and the profane is never resolved. Benjamin's path to redemption lies precisely in accepting this point – in bringing this rift, the aporia – continuously to appearance. He eventually speaks of an “integrale Prosa” beyond scripture, but not beyond language, that leads into the concept of the idea of prose. Benjamin identifies this ideal prose – in his terms, the concept of prose projected onto the virtual image space of its idea – with the idea of a universal history; that is, the messianic history. To save history is therefore, from this perspective, a matter of narrative; and, vice versa, the actual prose forms and their history, “die Arten der Kunstprosa,” can be represented as a spectrum of the idea of history. Working within the framework of such a messianic history means working on the idea of narrative – the ideal form of representation that nonetheless always prepares for the revolutionary action outside of its own perimeter. The question of my project in light of this context is: what function does narrative have in the program of a messianic history? How does the reconfiguration of narrative forms within this spatial setup look, up close?

At one point in the notes to the *Passagen-Werk*, Benjamin, with his particular conception of history in mind, contrasts forms of “Würdigung” and “Apologie” – that, according to him, stand for continuity – with fragmented, discontinuous forms. He maintains that the latter would discover “Stellen, an denen die Überlieferung abbricht und damit ihre Schroffen und Zacken, die dem einen Halt bieten, der über sie hinausgelangen will.” (GS5, 592) The figure of leaving behind, of trespassing on traditional forms of representation, is prominent here as well. In the note following up on this one, he then demands that: “Der historische Materialismus muß das epische Element der Geschichte preisgeben.” (GS5, 592, 593) The epic element of history is its narrative center, the exact

place where the instance of the narrator steps in and has the opportunity either to re-create past events as a continuum (=historism) or to break up the continuum of the “dinghafte[] ‘Kontinuität der Geschichte.’” (GS5, 592) In additional notes to the text on the concept of history, Benjamin specifically identifies “Ausschaltung des epischen Elements” as one of three moves against historism, the others being “Abbau der Universalgeschichte” and “keine Einfühlung in den Sieger.” (GS1, 1240)⁶¹ At this point, therefore, he carries the antinomic principle into the thought of history as a narrative, with completely unpredictable consequences. He goes on to make clear his – negative, destructive – perspective on the narrative of history in its historicist tradition: “Die zweite befestigte Position des Historismus ist in der Vorstellung zu erblicken, die Geschichte sei etwas, das sich erzählen lasse.” (GS1, 1240) In contrast, the historical materialist would establish history as a theoretical construction – Benjamin’s example in this vein being Marx’s *Das Kapital*. While Benjamin’s attack on historicist historiography is understandable, he seems to make a far more fundamental point here when he claims that

⁶¹ The idea of a non-epic, non-narrative approach to history concerned other modern historians, too. Kittstein refers to Johan Huizinga, who sees a fundamental historical change in the structure of “*geschichtlichen Geschehens*” since the midst of the nineteenth century that obstructed the preconditions of historical narrative. The result of this collapse of historical narrative is a loss of form in history. Huizinga argues that this transformation of history is due to the fact that in modernity processes have overtaken the course of history, which can now no longer be connected to acting individuals in an easy way. But this dramatic aspect of narrative: to tell what is happening by means of acting people, has, according to Huizinga, been constitutive for historical narrative. Kittstein concludes: “Einer Welt, die nicht von einzelnen Menschen, sondern von anonymen Kräften und kollektiven Prozessen in Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft bestimmt wird, ist das narrative Modell unangemessen; die durch ‘Formlosigkeit’ (Huizinga), durch ein ‘gewisses Sich-Verlaufen’ (Musil) gekennzeichnete Moderne entzieht sich der Darstellung im Medium der eindimensionalen Erzählung, die Interaktionen handelnder Figuren schildert.” Kittstein, *Mit Geschichte will man etwas*,’ 65-67. Huizinger writes: “Ich neige zu der Meinung, daß die älteren Epochen der Geschichte tatsächlich jene Faktoren, die der Geschichte als geistiger Schöpfung die episch-dramatische Form verleihen mussten, in sich selbst trugen. Was ich hier besonders darzulegen beabsichtige, ist das Phänomen einer Schrumpfung dieses Elementes in der Geschichte der rezenten Epochen und damit die Erscheinung einer wachsenden Formlosigkeit der neueren Geschichte.” Johan Huizinga, “Über eine Formverwandlung der Geschichte seit der Mitte des XIX. Jahrhunderts,” in idem, *Im Bann der Geschichte. Betrachtungen und Gestaltungen* (Nijmegen, 1942), 114.

history in general is something that cannot be told. This touches on the basic principle of the concept of history itself and negates it. However, as part of an elaborate strategy of the ‘psychology of the destructive character,’ this provides new possibilities for looking at a non-affirmative concept of history, unencumbered by tradition – a remembrance for the nameless, as Benjamin puts it, about whom there is nothing to tell. His strategy puts narrative itself into a paradoxical situation: on the one hand, his historical materialist wants to present everything, the positive and the negative of the past, in a fashion that seems to outplay any positivist approach. But on the other hand, the narrative of such a history does not ‘tell what is’ anymore. The question following from this paradoxical setup is what the ‘non-epic narrative’ or even ‘non-narrative narrative’ of such a history as a construction would look like. What are the consequences for narrative form? I am arguing here that the destructive force of Benjamin’s strategy, which in some instances seems bent on destroying the narrative principle itself, does so with the secret knowledge that the fragments of this process are still going to present themselves to be salvaged in new combinations. The destruction of narrative does not result in the disappearance of narration, just as the destruction of tradition does not result in the disappearance of its fragments. To surrender the epic element, *preisgeben*, therefore does not necessarily mean to annihilate it; on the contrary, it means to set it free from the traditional forms of representation to which it is bound. In several attempts from various different perspectives, Benjamin will follow a strategy to dissolve traditional forms of representation in order to do just that: to set free the epic principle in order for it to encounter new possible constellations and generate new, unprecedented forms of representation. In order to salvage the epic principle – telling what is – from the tradition

of a failed history, Benjamin has to surrender it first. He was not alone in this struggle; as I will show below, he found in Brecht's Epic Theater and Döblin's novel similar destructive approaches towards the traditional epic that nonetheless allowed for new means of literary production.

CHAPTER III

BENJAMIN: THEORY AND PRAXIS OF EPIC FORMS

“Ich sehe erst jetzt, da ich im Abschluß der Studie über Leskow begriffen bin, wie für meine Theorie der epischen Formen noch fast alles zu tun übrig bleibt.”⁶² In this statement from a 1936 letter, Walter Benjamin calls his widespread studies in the area of narrative a *theory of epic forms*, and at the same time admits defeat. He addresses what is scarcely more than a handful of notes ranging from 1928 to 1936, sometimes merely small passages scattered in a number of essays or book reviews, and the central essay “Der Erzähler,” in terms of a theory, claiming a comprehensive and systematic approach. The narrator essay is a work that, on the surface, focuses on the storyteller Nikolai Leskov; Benjamin writes in another letter to Gershom Scholem that he ‘had to’ write it, since he had obligated himself to do so for the journal *Orient und Occident*.⁶³ Yet this essay, which stands at the end of Benjamin’s attempts to deliver a comprehensive theory of epic forms, does not close the issue, but rather seems to open it up in the first place. In

⁶² 17.6.1936 to Karl Thieme. The editors of the *Gesammelte Schriften* provide an overview of the narrator essay’s genealogy within the scope of Benjamin’s work. See GS2, 1276-1288. They write that the project started with two smaller notes, *Romane lesen* and *Kunst zu erzählen* (GS4, 436-438), which contain two main themes of the later narrator essay: the opposition of novel and storytelling, and Benjamin’s claim “daß es mit der Kunst des Erzählens zu Ende geht” (GS2, 439). In a letter to Scholem from 1928, Benjamin also clearly relates his studies in narrative to Georg Lukács’ *Die Theorie des Romans* (1916) when he writes that he aims for a “neue ‘Theorie des Romans.’” Benjamin, *Gesammelte Briefe*, vol. 3, p. 420.

⁶³ See also Honold, *Der Leser Walter Benjamin*, 181. Honold portrays Benjamin’s statement more as a carefully calculated remark that should not shroud the fact that the author also praised Leskov as one of the greatest storytellers. Honold also points out that the subsequent interpretation of it as a reluctance on the side of Benjamin to write the essay in the first place stems from the editors of the *Gesammelte Schriften*. Honold writes: “Ihre [the essay “Der Erzähler”] Entstehung verdankt sich dem angeblich ‘eher widerwillig’ (so die Herausgeber, GS2, 1276) übernommenen Auftrag, Lesskows Werk in der Zeitschrift *Orient und Okzident* vorzustellen.”

the following pages, the focus will thus be on the question of what happens to the involved concepts of theory and form within the progression of Benjamin's work on a narrative theory.

Generally speaking, the author draws the question of a theory of epic forms into the constantly unfolding movement of his conceptual network, which is not limited to individual texts, but encompasses what must be literally *all* of his written texts. This dynamically evolving meshwork of concepts, in which the contents – the subject matter – of the underlying thought processes are never just abandoned, but rather carried along, so that every new stage of the conceptual progress appears as a transformation and slight disfiguration of older stages rather than a new beginning, essentially adheres to methodological criteria laid down in the “Erkenntniskritische Vorrede” from *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels*. In the course of such a conceptual vortex, the very notion of theory is bound to change. Benjamin subjects it to a process of a dialectical transformation involving its traditional counterpart, praxis. To complicate things, the notion of dialectics is at stake, as well. Within the field of tension and constant movement that this creates, aspects of the two distinct spheres of man's behavior – contemplation and action – interchange: theory is drawn into, and hence advances through, practice within writing (*not* ‘practice of writing’), through that which the text, in its manifold movements and decisions, ‘does.’

Benjamin's essay “Der Erzähler” would seem to be the most likely place to look for the announced theory of epic forms. But instead, this text is one of the places where its author stages the aforementioned dissolution of form concepts and invokes a writing in which theory unfolds through the praxis of this writing rather than being presented by

it; meaning, the essay is not *about* a theory of narration. Fragments of Benjamin's intention to present a "theory of epic forms" appear here and there throughout the essay as compact images. In an image that likens literary forms to the colors of the spectrum, Benjamin relates epic forms to "Geschichtsschreibung" – historiography. Immediately he introduces this link as a part–whole relation, writing that if one wants to investigate a particular epic form, one has to look for its relation to historiography. Historiography becomes the defining framework for epic forms. But Benjamin goes one step further. Looking from the perspective where the traditional fabric of actual epic forms dissolves, he asks whether "die Geschichtsschreibung nicht den Punkt schöpferischer Indifferenz zwischen allen Formen der Epik darstellt. Dann würde die geschriebene Geschichte sich zu den epischen Formen verhalten wie das weiße Licht zu den Spektralfarben." (GS2, 451) In order to exemplify the notion of a point of creative indifference, the author compares the relation between written history and the epic forms to the relation between white light and the spectrum colors. According to physics and modern technology, the appearance (or impression) of white is a result of the stimulation of all three (blue, green, red) types of cones on the retina. White therefore means the presence of all possible colors at maximum intensity, while black means the absence of any color/light whatsoever. What is at stake here in Benjamin's comparison is the relation itself, which he attempts to establish as an assumed, fixed point of reference; a standpoint, as it were. White characterizes the totality of what we are able to see. It can serve, so to speak, as the genre term of colors. Everything that can *potentially* be seen in terms of colors, and hence any of the spectrum colors, is contained in the color white. But not vice versa: naturally,

not every element of the color white can be found in any of the spectrum colors. Any spectrum color is always ‘missing’ something that the color white does have.

The image of spectrum colors itself does not address the matter of forms, since colors taken by themselves are inherently form-less. It does, however, draw attention to a phenomenological point that Benjamin made in *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels*: there he represents the sphere of phenomena as an indifferent realm of the totality of things that appear to us. “Kraft des unterscheidenden Verstandes,” he writes, concepts create difference (by putting phenomena into constellations) and thus salvage the phenomena as particulars from their illusive totality. The mechanism of the image of the spectrum colors works essentially the same way; it points out how, from the standpoint of indifference, meaning is created through differences.

To translate this game of differences back to the matter of historiography and the question of representation in general, the determining factor spelling out the momentum of difference is *form*. Any attempt to represent *a* (hi-)story means choosing certain events over others as pivotal, thereby creating difference within the totality of *the* history. According to the thought presented by Benjamin’s image from the narrator essay, this unfolding of differences necessarily moves the actual stories away from the totality and purity of history as a totality. The criterion according to which this increase of difference progresses is form. Form means, in spatial terms, difference; if an entity has form, this simply means that it is distinguishable from its background and from other entities. The very act of representation qua its establishment of form brings to appearance a particular history in its fragmentation of individual stories. In this way, representation may salvage

these fragmented stories from the contingency and illusiveness of history as a totality; that is, as pure, homogeneous presence.

Benjamin introduces the chronicle as an actual form of historical representation that, among the “Formen der Epik” (GS2, 451), stands closest to the general ideal of a total historiography (i.e., a totally written-out history; indeed, history as a written book). In another passage, he specifies historiography, established as the point of creative indifference for all epic forms, as “das von der Erinnerung aufgezeichnete,” in order to provide a better understanding of how a notion of historiography can have such a general and total scope. He adds that memory – Mnemosyne as the muse of the epic, according to Greek thought – is “das epische Vermögen vor allen anderen.” (GS2, 453)

Historiography, in the author’s understanding, is thus based on the collective cultural memory; as an idea, it represents what potentially could have been written down. The chronicle, taken as a form of representation, is a dry and minimalistic report, or even a mere list of events according to a calendar. As such, the chronicle displays, among the actual epic forms, the greatest possible lack of form. Its basic principles are extremely simple, so that it has survived as a form of representation until today. The point of Benjamin’s comparison with the image of the spectrum colors, then, is precisely that this lack of form means that the chronicle contains *potentially* most other more comprehensive ways to tell history. He writes: “Und im breiten Farbband der Chronik stufen die Arten, in denen erzählt werden kann, sich wie Schattierungen ein und derselben Farbe ab.” (GS2, 451) According to the logic of spectrum colors, the chronicle represents a color that features the broadest possible spectrum of colors without itself dissolving into the color white, which, according to Benjamin, is in fact the colorless

color, just like the chronicle is the most formless form. In a variation on this theme, he writes in the same essay that “die große Prosa [repräsentiert] die schöpferische Indifferenz zwischen den verschiedenen Maßen des Verses,” and eventually, that the epic (Benjamin: “das Epos”) would include “Kraft einer Art von Indifferenz die Erzählung und den Roman.” (GS2, 453) From the perspective of this ‘creative indifference,’ which Benjamin attempts to establish as a fixed point of relation for a theory of epic forms, one has to dissolve, quite literally, the static tradition of literary forms laid down in the canon of a *Literaturgeschichte*.

In conclusion, Benjamin establishes historiography as a true generic term, the one form to contain all forms. The concept of form also translates, especially in this context, as ‘idea,’ with the Greek *eidos* as the root. Benjamin thus stipulates the concept of historiography as an absolute to contain all forms of actual, written history. Following this thought, it has to be understood as the very idea of representation. According to this arrangement, the closer particular forms of representation are to this absolute, the more they lose the *formal* aspects that differentiate them as that particular form, since they align with the absolute that contains all possible formal aspects. The image of the spectrum colors is a methodological schema that establishes a gradient from absolute indifference to infinite difference. To say that form dissolves in terms of this image means that the (established) differences between actual forms of representation dissolve and are in constant flux. This image thus provides a model with which the author aims to grasp the developmental history of epic forms in one sweep.

Throughout his work, Benjamin chooses different approaches to the question of form, which are not easy to discern at first glance. With the image of spectrum colors, he

applied an exterior perspective on the matter that allowed him to consider the concept of form abstractly on the absolute scale of history. On another occasion, by telling a brief story, Benjamin develops quite a different perspective on the matter at hand. He includes what is traditionally perceived as a dichotomy, the opposition of form and contents, into the plot of an unfolding story. With the aim of bringing across a succinct point, he applies elements of classic storytelling in a masterful way and manages to demonstrate the theoretical process of dissolving the form concept by evoking a sensuous (or: haptic), spatial, and thus bodily level of awareness according to which the process is represented.

In the short text “Der Strumpf”⁶⁴ Benjamin tells a tale of a childhood memory at whose end he places, as a conclusion, the dissolution of the form–content dualism. The plot of the childhood experience recollected in the story is quickly told: A child discovers in a closet stockings, which “in althergebrachter Art gerollt und eingeschlagen ruhten.” (GS4, 977) Because of the way in which they are rolled up, they seem to the child like a bag. Such a bag, of course, invites it to put its hand inside to grasp whatever the bag might hold, “das Mitgebrachte.” The bag must seem to the child like a treasure chest holding infinite promises. While the child indeed finds something to take hold of inside the ‘bag,’ it realizes in the course of unwrapping the treasure that the bag vanishes. What initially appeared to be a bag with something inside transformed into what might at first appear to be a third, totally different entity – namely, the stocking.

⁶⁴ In the annotations to the 7th volume of *Gesammelte Schriften*, which contains the version of *Berliner Kindheit um neunzehnhundert* that Benjamin created in 1938 and called “*Handexemplar komplett*” (GS7, 691), the editors can finally distinguish between the various manuscript versions of the text, to which the author made some extensive changes. According to this, the first versions of the text fragments for the then-entitled *Berliner Chronik* were written as early as 1932, and the most extensive changes were made by Benjamin in 1938, as is apparent through the above-mentioned manuscript, only found in 1981. (GS7, 691-692) As a result, the story “Der Strumpf” can be identified as a split-off from 1938 of the “Schränke,” first written in 1932.

The childhood tale closes with a distinct doctrine at its end; a lesson to be learned from the portrayed experience: form and contents are identical. The perceived difference dissolves. Furthermore, the story applies this lesson to literary exegesis, to reading poetry: “Er lehrte mich, daß Form und Inhalt, Hülle und Verhülltes dasselbe sind. Er leitete mich an, die Wahrheit so behutsam aus der Dichtung hervorzuziehen wie die Kinderhand den Strumpf aus ‘Der Tasche’ holte.” (GS4, 977-978) In a lot of ways, this little text exhibits features of storytelling that Benjamin describes in *Der Erzähler*. At the bottom of his approach to narrative lies his well-known conception of history as a “dialektische, kopernikanische Wendung des Eingedenkens,” (GS5, 491) that is based on an understanding of memory that, in contrast to traditional concepts of history, precisely does not historicize the past. At the latest when presenting its moral, Benjamin’s story accordingly breaks with the temporal perspective implemented by the recollection of a past-time experience in the longer first part of the text. The last sentence still belonging to the time frame of the childhood experience is: “Nicht oft genug konnte ich die Probe auf diesen Vorgang machen.” (GS4, 977) After this follows the conclusion. At this point, if the lesson were learned already by the child, it would not be necessary to test the experiment again and again; the child’s interest in the game would wane quickly. Furthermore, it is clear that the concepts used in representing the lesson, like “Form und Inhalt” and “Dichtung,” are likely not those of a child. Yet the time frame in which the narrator *learned* the lesson, so as to tell it as a story, also belongs to a past time and is not identical with the time when the story was written down (which, in turn, is also in the

past, at least for us). Different layers of time resurface here; the story becomes a construction site for memory.⁶⁵

Although the entire text is in the past tense, it suddenly becomes clear that the logic of the narrative gesture – in other words, its pragmatic goal – is very distant from the past it recollects, but rather seems to point towards an indeterminate present. For this is the nature of such lessons that take the shape of universal truths: they do not apply to a definite time index, and instead the focus shifts to the time when they are ‘actualized,’ which means: when they are realized – in the context of the story itself – by the narrator, and generally speaking by the reader. The story thus does not aim merely to display a memory from the past; its end lies in an arbitrary instance of present time in which the doctrine of the story may be applied where it is realized. From the standpoint of a theory of reception, it can be said that stories such as “Der Strumpf” profess knowledge of their own ‘coming-to-legibility.’ This latter phrase nicely summarizes what the agenda of a theory of reception includes in Benjamin’s work. He applies it in the notes to the *Passagen-Werk*, where he wishes to distinguish his image theory both from the essences of phenomenology (here he addresses Heidegger), and from the categorical concepts of a *Geisteswissenschaft*: “Der historische Index der Bilder sagt nämlich nicht nur, daß sie einer bestimmten Zeit angehören, er sagt vor allem, daß sie erst in einer bestimmten Zeit zur Lesbarkeit kommen.” (GS5, 577) From a pragmatic perspective, the story’s point of realization occurs in the reading process (or, in case the story is told orally, in the listening process). The story enables the reader to have the same learning experience that

⁶⁵ See also “Schränke”: “Danach vergingen Jahre” (GS4, 284). Here again, the time index is not identical with the learning of the lesson.

the narrator displays, although only through a shortcut and not by first-hand experience. Only in this last step, which naturally cannot be contained within the story itself, does the actualization (*Aktualisierung*) of the story's conclusion in the reading experience, and thus the break with the past, succeed. The realization of the story's conclusion makes it impossible for the reader to identify with the childhood tale.

Accordingly, the story's temporal composition runs counter to the illusion of 'having the past again,' or, in other words, of identifying and empathizing (*empfinden*) with the past. It exerts an understanding of memory – *Eingedenken*, in Benjamin's terms – that applies it exclusively from the perspective in which it is accessed; memory becomes meaningful in these present-time instances in which it is consulted. Every use of memory is at the same time a step towards actualizing it. Because of this complex setup of perspectives, Benjamin's narrative abandons chronological linearity in favor of a planar, simultaneous availability of the otherwise nonsimultaneous. In the context of Benjamin's various efforts to look at history in spatial terms, this is the point where the past turns into an image. In an image, each of its possible perspectives and points is accessible at any instance of a 'here and now,' when the observer turns to it. Images are decidedly nonlinear.

The spatial arrangement of the story at hand, which is so apparent on the surface, thus has its origin in Benjamin's concept of memory. Through this, the story manages to break with the escapist illusion that its first, outspokenly fictional part displays, in which it reports the childhood memories and tempts the reader to identify with the offered fantasy. The crucial question is: to what time does the lesson that is to be learned from the story belong? It is possible to claim that it is incorporated completely in the same time

frame delineated by the recollection of the childhood experience. However, in that case the reader would have to maintain that the child, already as a child, not only had the respective experiences but also reflected on them and abstracted a – communicable – lesson from them. In essence, the reader would have to claim that the child could have written or told the story. And at this point, the nonsimultaneity of the two experiences – to have the childhood adventure and to draw a lesson from these experiences – becomes apparent.

So, what is the lesson after all? From the perspective of the child, the experience that all of a sudden the bag which was expected to contain a treasure is something completely different, is a magical one. The child, in perceiving a sudden change, does not realize that actually a *process* is involved (that of unfolding the stockings). In the earlier (1932) version of the story, “Schränke,” from *Berliner Kindheit um neunzehnhundert*, the focus on this moment as being magical, and a “Wunder,” is much greater (GS4, 284). In fact, the narrator uses the theme of magic as a transition to a second part of the story about the child’s first reading experiences (fairy tales). Contrary to “Der Strumpf,” Benjamin does not refer to *Dichtung* in “Schränke” as a possible area of application for the truth he found in the childhood memory. He does, however, emphasize that after the dissolution of the difference, which for the child is established as the two entities of a bag and “das Mitgebrachte,” a distinct *third* appears: “Eines – und zwar ein Drittes: jener Strumpf, in den sie beide sich verwandelt hatten.” (GS4, 284)

This version of the story therefore instead applies a *dialectical formula*, according to which the difference between form and contents, as thesis and antithesis, collapses into a third, entirely new entity. However, this new entity is, on closer inspection, merely

“jener Strumpf.” The narrator’s stance on “ein Drittes” is therefore deceptive. Because the truth of the matter is not something entirely new, a new entity, but really the prosaic realization that it had been a mere stocking all along. The adventure of the child was an error of perception, not an elaborate dialectical move. It is the other story, “Der Strumpf,” that slowly takes back again this approach towards a dialectic of form and contents, thus correcting the former self-deceptive stance. Both the ‘bag,’ which the child perceives to be a folded stocking, and the “Mitgebrachtes” disappear when the child tries to get to the latter. In other words, it is precisely the difference, which Benjamin in the other version of the story attempted to establish as a true dialectic, that dissolves. In “Der Strumpf,” there is no mentioning of “ein Drittes.” Instead, the narrator states that he has to be careful to get the truth out of “Dichtung,” which implies that he knows there is a point when the projection of form versus contents will collapse into identity. “Er leitete mich an, die Wahrheit so behutsam aus der Dichtung hervorzuziehen wie die Kinderhand den Strumpf aus der ‘Tasche’ holte.” (GS4, 978)

Truth, according to this last statement of the revised story, is fragile, even elusive, and in the end not what one expected. It is not the *result* of a dialectical process, but a prosaic, matter-of-fact realization along the path on which these dialectics are abandoned. Also, the emphasis shifts from a result-focused perspective on “ein Drittes,” towards the involved action, the practice of cautiously extracting the truth (this is interesting to keep in mind for the next part of this chapter). And this practice, as this story clearly demonstrates, proceeds according to spatial parameters. Truth, from this perspective, is a function of space; it is the medium in which the business of representation unfolds. Form, looked at from this perspective, is but an intermediate step; whenever the conceptuality of

form and contents is applied in order to refer to tradition, it will dissolve on the way to some realization of truth. Form, therefore, is not an expression or appearance of truth, let alone identical with it; rather, form is sacrificed by truth. In any case, this is a fundamentally different approach to dialectics: difference can be projected into identity, but it is prone to collapse again. Benjamin reveals the perceived 'real' and stable dialectic of form and contents, as a tool for the literary critic, to be an illusion. Between the two versions of this story, he implements a drastic shift in his understanding and application of dialectics.

The transition in his understanding of dialectics that Benjamin puts into this story entails a compact theory of reading. Insofar as the story ultimately analyzes the concept of truth strictly within the limits of its own narrative, this theory of reading turns out to be a model of immanent criticism. The illustrated exercise of carefully drawing the truth from literary texts, similar to how the child attempts to get "das Mitgebrachte" from the bag, refers to a critical reading process that immanently analyzes a text. Incidentally, this particular story not only demonstrates this procedure through a notably spatial operation ("was mich in ihre Tiefe zog" (GS4, 977)), but with the dualism of form and contents, it also applies its own agenda circularly to key terms of literary exegesis, in order to dissolve it and the literary tradition connected to it.

In regard to reading actual literary works from the backdrop of the literary tradition, Benjamin's approach to dissolving the dualism of form and contents entails that what might be considered the contents of a work becomes at the same time also an essential constituent of its form. And equally, what is perceived as determining its formal appearance, and what assigns the work to a certain genre, becomes a direct expression of

its contents. Both aspects equally contribute to a total expression of the work. Form is thus not an arbitrary choice. It is, on the contrary, the categorization of texts according to established genre concepts that is revealed to be arbitrary. As a result, the form of any work of literature should be considered unique, since every contingent expression (of content) will determine a different form. Form and content lose their validity as absolute terms of a *Literaturgeschichte*, of a literary canon; they are not fixed, suprahistorical categories. What counts is the ‘truth’ – now in its second *Gestalt*: the essential expression of the work, which is only manifest within a reading process, and therefore always determined by the spatial and temporal circumstances of that very instance.

Formal criticism in this sense is immanent criticism, and Benjamin’s understanding of the critical potential immanent in the work of art has its roots in the Romanticist conception of the artwork. On the basis of the Romanticist transformation of both – on the one hand, of the work of art into a critical operation all by itself, and on the other hand, of literary criticism into a form of art – Benjamin maintains that the work’s form is always incomplete, and that criticism – based on art as the medium of reflection – becomes its completion by following its “immanente Tendenz.” (GS1, 77) These thoughts go back to Benjamin’s dissertation on *Der Begriff der Kunstkritik in der deutschen Romantik* (1919). There he introduces the second chapter with the words: “Die romantische Theorie des Kunstwerks ist die Theorie seiner Form.” (GS1, 72) In the context of a reading of Schlegel and Hölderlin, he emphasizes a concept of form that does not establish a set of fixed rules determining the representation and reception of the work of art (GS1, 76), but instead determines art as a medium of reflection and the form of an artwork as the expression of this reflection: “Die Form ist also der gegenständliche

Ausdruck der dem Werke eigenen Reflexion, welche sein Wesen bildet.” (GS1, 73) “Gegenständlich” refers in this context to a “bestimmten immanenten Aufbau[] des Werkes selbst.” (GS1, 71) On the grounds of Benjamin’s analysis of a Romanticist aesthetics, John McCole concludes that the “obverse of such strict attention to individual form is that romantic criticism must contend with a limitless plurality of forms.”⁶⁶ He adds that, for Benjamin, this was precisely one of its virtues.

Benjamin did not, however, limit his concept of immanent criticism to literary works, but sought to apply it in sociopolitical contexts and, later still, also to history itself. Hence, here aesthetic theory meets dialectics.⁶⁷ The author consequently turns immanent criticism as a formal principle into a practice of writing, or as in the example of “Der Strumpf,” a practice of storytelling. In this particular case, he subjects the form conception itself to the critical writing process, and the aspect of the text’s immanency – its interior, so to speak – takes on a tangible quality. In the course of the progressing dissolution of the form–contents dualism, Benjamin eventually transgresses the principle

⁶⁶ McCole, *Walter Benjamin and the Antinomies of Tradition*, 96.

⁶⁷ Hence the title of Inez Müller’s study: *Walter Benjamin und Bertolt Brecht. Ansätze zu einer dialektischen Ästhetik in den dreißiger Jahren*. Müller sees Benjamin’s and Brecht’s programs in the context of a general development among the political and aesthetic avant-garde after the First World War: “Die historische Avantgarde [...] wollte mit der Tradition der Autonomie- und Genieästhetik der Aufklärung und des bürgerlichen Idealismus des achtzehnten und neunzehnten Jahrhunderts endgültig brechen, indem sie eine rezeptionsästhetisch orientierte, funktionale Kunstproduktionsästhetik zu ihrem Programm erhob.” Inez Müller, *Walter Benjamin und Bertolt Brecht. Ansätze zu einer dialektischen Ästhetik in den dreißiger Jahren* (St. Ingbert: Werner J. Röhrig Verlag, 1993), 228. She builds on a critical remark by P. Bürger, who doubts that “die Konzepte einer materialistischen Ästhetik der Avantgarde in den dreißiger Jahren eine theoretisch angemessene und praktikable Alternative zur idealistischen Kunsttradition darstellten.” (Ibid., 232) See Peter Bürger, *Zur Kritik der idealistischen Ästhetik* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1983), 9. Müller adds that, behind the scenes of their materialistic agenda, both Benjamin and Brecht stayed true after all to certain idealistic promises, such as that the audience – in their view the masses of modern cities and the workers – could be educated and politically swayed by engaged forms of art: “Die Tatsache, daß beide mit ihrem ästhetischen Konzept einer epischen, dialektischen Kunst im Praktischen gescheitert sind, ist auf eine Reihe von idealistischen Fehleinschätzungen zurückzuführen.” (Ibid., 233)

of text immanency itself. This happens necessarily when he attempts to replace the aforementioned dualism with a dialectic of theory and praxis in the context of his Brecht studies, since the immanency of the text then opens up to the present-day affairs of the reader, with which it becomes infinitely juxtaposed.⁶⁸

The story illustrates a movement from outside to inside, thereby adding a perspective of depth. First there is a movement inside a closet through its door, where the child finds the clothes. The outside-towards-inside relation works on the paradigm of a container-space: objects may contain others. A laborious process begins: “Ich mußte mir Bahn bis in ihren hintersten Winkel schaffen; dann stieß ich auf meine Strümpfe.” (GS4, 977) In repeating the same pattern with a stocking as the starting point, the child perceives it as a bag: “die Hand so tief wie möglich in ihr Inneres zu versenken” – “was mich in ihre Tiefe zog.” (GS4, 977) The movement therefore represents a journey into the inner realm of the image space, which is what the phenomenal realm is constructed as by means of concepts. The revelation at the end of the child’s adventure in turn reflects back on the involved concepts’ logic. During this procedure, the concepts representing form and contents – the bag and “das Mitgebrachte” – become increasingly unstable and

⁶⁸ See, in this context, Alexander Honold, *Der Leser Walter Benjamin*, 277. In the chapter “‘Eine Seekrankheit auf festem Lande’: Kafka, mit Brecht betrachtet,” Honold writes about the interrelationship of life and reading that emerges in certain author constellations: “ebenso unhaltbar aber ist das Beharren auf Textimmanenz. Leben und Lesen haben sich aufs Gründlichste ineinandergeschoben: Anders kann man ‘Kafka’ gar nicht mehr ‘begegnen.’” (Ibid., 277) The thought behind this observation is that an author like Kafka carried the fate of his life into the very constitution of his work. In Kafka’s writing, the work is not exemplary of its author, but in the last consequence, the author’s life becomes exemplary through the work. This does not mean that Kafka’s writing can only be read with the author’s biography in mind, nor that his work gives an account only of his life. It means that the work has an exemplary significance for questions concerning how we live our lives. As a result, the threshold between an ‘inside’ of the text and the ‘outside’ where life unfolds is blurred; or rather: in a constant process of reciprocity, the sphere of action is incorporated within the textual medium. Viewed from the other perspective this means, particularly in case of Kafka, that the medium of text, qua the activity of writing, extends into the sphere of living one’s life. This multifaceted threshold or limit between text and life (or action), infinitely broken within the medium of text, is the same limit around which Benjamin’s approach to immanency circles.

imprecise. Eventually, Benjamin puts them between quotation marks in order to protect them from completely collapsing, which is going to happen in the end anyway. The story then speaks of “das Mitgebrachte” and “Die Tasche,” both of which at this stage no longer refer to an actual object within the image space of the story, but are revealed to be an illusion. “‘Die Tasche,’ in der es (‘das Mitgebrachte’) gelegen hatte, war nicht mehr da.” (GS4, 977) The main part of the story ends here in utter negativity and helplessness with the destruction of its own basic concepts. The *leap of faith* that salvages the situation is the lesson attached to the story. In the sense of Benjamin’s argument from *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels*, this really is a leap of faith because it saves the reader from being caught within the potentially infinite allegorical mourning and work of destruction happening in the first part of the story. In this case, however, it is not faith in god but rather faith in the powers of interpretation (hence in the faculty of reading) that turns the story around at its end. It is an *intellectual leap*, so to speak. Even though the translation of the “Strumpf” and “das Mitgebrachte” into form and contents appears plausible, this connection is by no means causal. No logical argument from the story’s first part really warrants the concluding lesson. Only the persuasive powers emanating from the movement within the image space allow for this leap. This step also signifies the transgression the text performs, or rather: that the reader is able to perform within the text (in the text’s interior).⁶⁹

⁶⁹ Derrida writes on the meaning of the ‘step’ for the progression of thinking and text. Transgression necessitates the step: “The crossing of borders always announces itself according to the movement of a certain step [*pas*] – and of the step that crosses a line.” Jacques Derrida, *Aporias* (Stanford California: Stanford University Press, 1993), 11. Transgression thus always includes a negative, destructive moment, as the *pas* – French for *step* and for *not* – indicates according to Derrida.

In the context of “Der Strumpf” and the dissolution of the dialectic of form and contents, Benjamin’s approach emphasizes the performatory potential of storytelling. Essentially, the sphere of action migrates into the textual medium. In order to see more clearly what is happening here, a look at Benjamin’s notes on Bertolt Brecht will help. Inspired by the discussions with the poet and playwright, who was also his friend, and by closely following his work, Benjamin became increasingly concerned with the political significance and function of his own work, as well as its sociopolitical conditions. In his remarks on Bertolt Brecht’s Epic Theater,⁷⁰ he also draws a line to his thoughts on form and contents. Approaching the same issues mentioned above, now from a perspective of the politically engaged writer, he explicitly attempts to introduce a *dialectics of theory and praxis* in order to replace the “undialectical” dualism of form and content. It seems quite plausible that the process of rewriting the story “Schränke” to “Der Strumpf” was therefore also motivated by Benjamin’s increasing interest in Brecht’s work. The

⁷⁰ See GS2, 506-539: *Aus dem Brecht-Kommentar* (1930), *Ein Familiendrama auf dem Epischen Theater* (1932), *Das Land, in dem das Proletariat nicht genannt werden darf* (1938), *Was ist das Epische Theater* (in two versions, 1931 and 1939). Indispensable for a thorough understanding of the friendship and intellectual working relationship between Benjamin and Brecht: Erdmut Wizisla, *Benjamin und Brecht. Die Geschichte einer Freundschaft* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2004). This book provides a solid genealogy of Benjamin’s essays and notes on Brecht’s work, based on all available sources, and thus corrects a number of errors or other omissions of the *Gesammelten Schriften* and its editorial supplement (critical remarks on the way in which Benjamin’s Brecht texts are presented, for example, on p. 47ff.). It also gives ample evidence of the mutual significance of the critical exchange for the two intellectuals. Wizisla repeats Hannah Arendt’s statement that in this friendship “der größte lebende deutsche Dichter mit dem bedeutendsten Kritiker der Zeit zusammentraf,” and does, by the way, refer approvingly on other occasions to Arendt’s two essays on Benjamin and Brecht. Wizisla’s book helps to characterize the peculiar ‘strategic’ aspects of Benjamin’s and Brecht’s friendship: although drawn to each other’s works and intellectual powers, it was important for both to remain autonomous in regard to their own work. In the late 1930s, Benjamin developed a critical position to some of Brecht’s politically determined literary decisions, especially those that represented viewpoints of the Soviet Communist Party. In discussions in Paris with Heinrich Blücher and Hannah Arendt, the former called attention to correspondences between Brecht’s *Aus einem Lesebuch für Städtebewohner* (1926/27) and practices of the Soviet secret police (GPU). Benjamin agreed, and concluded for his part that there were structural similarities between the Communist Party and the Nazis, a thought that in turn would stand at the center of Arendt’s *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951). For an account of these debates, see Wizisla, *Benjamin und Brecht*, 216, and also Detlev Schöttker and Erdmut Wizisla, “Hannah Arendt und Walter Benjamin. Konstellationen, Debatten, Vermittlungen,” in *Arendt und Benjamin*, ed. idem (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2006), 33-34.

question of a politically engaged form of art that would be on a level with modern technological possibilities – “auf der Höhe der Technik” (GS2, 524), as Benjamin writes – was of course central to Brecht’s new forms of the *Lehrstück* and the Epic Theater. The playwright, in turn, did also see the relation of “Stoffe und Form” as a challenge to a truly contemporary dramatic practice.⁷¹ At this point, Benjamin’s own work on the concept of the epic joins Brecht’s theatrical perspective.

Since the performative aspect of narrative is key to understanding Benjamin’s move, it will be beneficiary to first look at what he calls the story’s inherent focus on practicability, before continuing with Brecht. In the essay “Der Erzähler,” Benjamin writes: “Die Ausrichtung auf das praktische Interesse ist ein charakteristischer Zug bei vielen geborenen Erzählern.” (GS2, 441) With this, the author points to a constitutive difference between storytelling and all other literary forms, as well as media-based forms of communication in general. Storytelling is not limited to satisfying the need for information or providing aesthetic pleasure. Instead, it consciously crosses the line from contemplation into action on different levels.

On the surface, traditional storytelling is a practice because of the emphasized act of *telling*. Among the prose literary forms, storytelling is unique in that it is an immediate act, in which the actor shares the same space as the receiver of that action. In other words, the product (the story as the result of storytelling), and therefore also the time index of producing the story, is the same as its consumption. While the novel, which Benjamin

⁷¹ Brecht voiced his concerns, for example, in a small press note from 1929, “Über Stoffe und Form,” where he writes that the “Erfassung der neuen Stoffe” had to result in a “Gestaltung der neuen Beziehungen,” which again “nur durch *Form* vereinfacht werden können.” Bertolt Brecht, *Werke. Große kommentierte Berliner und Frankfurter Ausgabe*, vol. 21, ed. Werner Hecht, Jan Knopf, et al. (Berlin and Weimar: Aufbau Verlag and Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1992), 302-304. Taken from: Wizisla, *Benjamin und Brecht*, 15.

distinguishes in the narrator essay most decidedly from the story, is usually delivered to its readers as an already-finished product, indeed a commodity, the story in its original, archaic setting is dynamically created by the storyteller as the situation in which the story is told unfolds. This procedural distinction entails the completely separate spaces occupied by the novel's author and by his or her readers. This means that the storyteller may respond with his story, either subtly or directly, to the dynamically unfolding situation he or she experiences, either in the context of the recent past or even in the moments as the story is told.

With the poem, which is also traditionally read in front of an audience, the story has in common the spatial setting; and of course the epic once shared many formal aspects with poems. Likewise, storytelling shares with drama the fact that (in its original setting; of course, drama can be read as well) it needs to be presented in front of an audience, and not to a single reader. But the differences from these forms are apparent as well: the poem is still a more polished and fixed product, which is presented to the audience after it is composed. The same holds true for dramatic forms, which have to be carefully planned and rehearsed before their presentation. Only in recent modernity does the continuing differentiation and fixation of artistic forms of representation seem to have been blurred again. In theater, Brecht searched for a form that would increasingly abandon the divide between audience and actors, and possibly allow for improvisation and direct interaction. In an ideal setting, the *Lehrstück* would become a learning experience for both the audience and the actor. With this, the social function of theater would change drastically; Benjamin explains that Brecht's theater disrupts any "Funktionszusammenhang zwischen Bühne und Publikum, Text und Aufführung,

Regisseur und Schauspieler.” (GS2, 519-520) Such an interactive approach, which does not merely ‘play back’ the playwright’s assumed intentions as accurately as possible but instead puts audience and actors alike into a position to have an actual experience, is what Brecht’s theater shares with storytelling and, accordingly, what makes it ‘epic.’ In storytelling, the story becomes a speech act in its own right: the storyteller aims his speech at the audience in order to tell them something: a point, a message, a moral, sometimes merely a piece of practical advice. ‘Let me tell you a story ...’ The practical use of which Benjamin speaks involves this immediate interaction between storyteller and audience. The listening experience of the audience includes the presence of the narrator, if the narrator’s perspective is identical with the voice of the storyteller. And even in written stories, this presence is evoked. “Sie [the story] führt, offen oder versteckt, ihren Nutzen mit sich. Dieser Nutzen mag einmal in einer Moral bestehen, ein andermal in einer praktischen Anweisung, ein drittes in einem Sprichwort oder in einer Lebensregel – in jedem Falle ist der Erzähler ein Mann, der dem Hörer Rat weiß.” (GS2, 442)

The bottom line is that Benjamin’s notion of the storyteller giving advice does not indicate merely that stories may contain some useful information. Rather, the act of storytelling itself – or whatever the story in written form retains from this original power of being a speech act – literally has – or better, *is* – a ‘practical use’; that is, it is also a practice in itself. To give advice according to this is a practice deeply rooted in human social cultures: speech, gestures, and in the end also deeds, are all components of giving advice. Giving advice means putting the other in a position where he or she is able to go on alone. In the example of Benjamin’s story “Der Strumpf,” it became apparent that its

lesson is backed by an intricate poetic mechanism that enables the reader not merely to acknowledge its point but – to a certain extent – to follow through on the intellectual and sensual experience that led to it.

In his essay on the narrator, Benjamin elaborates on the practical aspect of storytelling; yet he does so by developing it from its contemplative side. He writes: “Rat, in den Stoff gelebten Lebens eingewebt, ist Weisheit.” And he adds that wisdom is the epic side of truth. (GS2, 442) He draws a line from truth, as a contemplative entity, to wisdom, as its epic expression. In the middle of this movement, or in other words: in the middle of this shift in the semantics of the involved conceptuality, Benjamin puts the *act* of giving advice, which he in turn introduces as a key moment of storytelling.⁷² By identifying truth with advice and wisdom, he pulls it into the sphere of action. Advice only works in the presence of people, within the network of communal life where experiences can be communicated. It is therefore political by nature, and so is, *mutatis mutandis*, wisdom; truth in the context of storytelling. “Rat ist ja minder Antwort auf eine Frage als ein Vorschlag, die Fortsetzung einer (eben sich abrollenden) Geschichte angehend. Um ihn einzuholen, müßte man sie zuvörderst einmal erzählen können. (Ganz davon abgesehen, daß ein Mensch einem Rat sich nur soweit öffnet, als er seine Lage zu

⁷² Benjamin’s understanding of storytelling as part of a broader concept of the epic quickly goes beyond simple formal characterizations. See, for example, Ulrich Kittstein who bases the following simple formula of narrative, which emphasizes its closeness or well-formed completeness, on Aristotle’s *Poetic*. “Erzählen bedeutet prinzipiell nichts anderes, als zwischen (mindestens) zwei sowohl zeitlich als auch qualitativ unterschiedlichen Zuständen eine Kohärenz herzustellen, die den Übergang vom einen zum anderen verständlich macht. Als Grundform der Erzählung ergibt sich daraus ein simples dreiteiliges Schema, das Anfang, Mitte und Ende umfaßt und der narrativen Struktur innere Einheit und Geschlossenheit verleiht.” Kittstein, ‘*Mit Geschichte will man etwas*,’ 27. This passage also shows well the difference between Benjamin’s approach to narrative and narratology. Formal considerations in Benjamin seem to play a role primarily in terms of assigning texts to genre concepts, and in this regard he in fact attempts to abandon the aspect of form (and contents as its counterpart) in order to replace it with those of theory and praxis. Benjamin’s understanding of narrative is decisively motivated by its sociopolitical function.

Wort kommen läßt).” (GS2, 442) Our capacity to transform experience into stories and the ability to give and receive advice are linked, according to Benjamin, on a fundamental level. Advice is not so much the answer to a particular question that could be asked out of the context of my everyday situation. (For example: why do birds fly? – There is no advice possible for this kind of question.) Rather, advice gives answer to a complete situation. The request for advice, which is always the same: can you give me advice?, brings the dynamic unfolding of an ongoing situation to a halt; it is, in this sense, the complement to told experience. At one point at least, two individuals bring the dynamic processes of their unfolding life experiences to a halt and match up their different perspectives on the world. One perspective is characterized by a lack – it is that in need of advice; while the other is characterized by a surplus which grants advice. And this only works as long as there is a willingness between people to open up to each other; as long as there exists a *sensus communis*, to borrow a concept from Kant.

“Stoff gelebten Lebens” is a paraphrase of Benjamin’s own concept of experience: experience as a signifier referring to the fact of ‘having lived a life’ and being able to put it into a narrative, being able to tell it. Benjamin’s concept of experience in this sense is a point of transition between memory as “das epische Vermögen schlechthin” and the other epic core faculty of turning memory (“Stoff”) into a narrative (*das Erzählen*). Into the narrative of experience, the storyteller ‘weaves’ the advice, which includes the storyteller’s intention, that which he or she wills to communicate, and which, in the above example of “Der Strumpf,” is the concluding lesson of the story. That Benjamin characterizes this process as ‘weaving,’ points to its textual aspects as well as to storytelling’s proximity to craftsmanship; it also, of course, echoes Penelope as an

archaic origin. A truth, therefore, communicated in the mode of advice and being disclosed from experience resulting from ‘having lived a life,’ can be called an epic moment, or wisdom. The essential and defining moment of the epic in Benjamin’s understanding is therefore precisely this *point in between*, the point of transition between contemplation and action.

With the narrator essay’s perspective on the relation between contemplation and action in mind, Benjamin’s notes on Brecht’s Epic Theater appear to be a further expansion of the sociopolitical significance and potential of the mode of storytelling (the epic). He develops the matter in such a way that Brecht’s dramatic and highly politicized approach reflects back – and in fact enriches – his approach to the epic, which is after all based not on theater but on the textual medium. In line with this strategy, Benjamin writes that Brecht substitutes the ‘undialectical’ dualism of form and contents with that of the dialectic of theory and praxis: “Es entspricht nämlich der Natur des epischen Theaters, daß der undialektische Gegensatz zwischen Form und Inhalt des Bewußtseins (der dahin führte, daß die dramatische Person sich nur in Reflexionen auf ihr Handeln beziehen konnte) abgelöst wird durch den dialektischen zwischen Theorie und Praxis (der dahin führt, daß das Handeln an seinen Einbruchsstellen [*sic*] den Ausblick auf die Theorie freigibt).” (GS2, 512)

The way it looks here, the concept of epic Benjamin that sought for found a conclusion in Brecht’s dramatic form. Benjamin draws a direct line from his insight into the dissolution of the dialectic of form and contents to what he perceives as a true dialectic of theory and praxis in Epic Theater. He repeats what the story “Der Strumpf” also demonstrated – namely, that the difference between form and contents is established

by the consciousness and necessarily collapses into identity if unfolded within the sphere of sensual reality (the phenomenal realm). The consequence of taking form and contents as guiding principles, be it for literary interpretation or, in this case, traditional theater (Benjamin switches to the past tense at this point), is that action is ultimately abandoned and not actually part of the involved reflection. Even though drama is, in the end, a *performance* art, Benjamin maintains that within the perspective of the play's horizon, which in this case is delimited by the roles the actors are playing and forced to identify with, these actors and the audience alike can only refer to the acting – to the role that is being played out – through reflections on a level that is immediately again part of the play. They can 'refer' to their actions, but only in terms of the world they are presenting.

The stipulated difference between the form of a dramatic work and its contents may help to categorize the play in question according to a tradition. But it does also distract from the actual difference that is at stake: the ethical standard that the play puts on stage and present time political conditions. Form and contents, as determining aspects, force actor and observer alike to historicize the displayed acting and, at the same time, to be drawn into it (through the mode of identification and empathy). Brecht's concept of Epic Theater, according to Benjamin, breaks up this immanent seclusion of traditional theater by taking *theory and praxis* as a governing principle. Benjamin considers this dualism dialectical. In regard to the other statement, according to which the *undialectical* contrast of form and contents is merely a projection of the mind, it would seem that a truly dialectical opposition must therefore have a basis in the sensual, phenomenal realm. However, the contrast of theory and praxis goes beyond simply being based in the phenomenal realm, since by its very nature it addresses the fundamental categorical

divide of the *vita contemplativa* and *activa*, which defines the human condition.

Therefore, while the dualism of form and contents was revealed to be undialectical precisely because it collapsed as an identity within the phenomenal realm, the relation of theory and praxis is truly dialectical because it expresses the very difference of the phenomenal from the mental. The dialectics at its core is this: an infinite, irresolvable mirroring of the one within the other, while at the same time a categorical difference exists. No acting without contemplation beforehand, no contemplation without there having been action before. But also: in order to act, one has to stop thinking, and vice versa. Benjamin ultimately calls the puzzling interrelation of these most fundamental categories of the human condition a “*dialektische[s] Urverhältnis.*” (GS2, 529)

In Benjamin’s and Brecht’s respective concepts of the epic, just as in the different media of storytelling (text) and theater, the primordial dualism of contemplation and action – in Benjamin’s words: that of theory and praxis – becomes a formative principle. With respect to Brecht’s idea of Epic Theater, this dialectic leads necessarily to an interruption of acting, and thus to the above-mentioned immanency of traditional play-acting in the mode of identification. Because of the applied dialectic of theory and praxis, acting must now, in an infinite approximation and process of mirroring, right at the time of the act itself, be considered also in terms of contemplation. The acting of the actor becomes a theory. And with the realization in that very moment, the actual acting is already interrupted. This is an infinitely circular movement: acting becomes theory, and within this ‘theoretical act’ as a realization of the dialectic, the actor points to the fact that he or she is acting. Benjamin calls these flashes of realization that necessarily define Brecht’s dramatic art “*Einbruchsstellen*” – breaking points – of action, where theory

(*read*: understanding of the sociopolitical conditions) emerges. It is easy to see that the performative – that is in this sense, the dramatic – aspect of Benjamin’s storytelling, which carries the dialectic of theory and praxis into the textual medium, is completely consistent with this concept of the epic.

Benjamin emphasizes the principle of interruption that lies at the heart of the aforementioned dialectic in the context of Brecht’s Epic Theater. Comparing it to film, he writes that Epic Theater progresses “in Stößen.” It is designed to incorporate shock as a compositional convention. “Die Songs, die Beschriftungen im Bühnenbilde, die gestischen Konventionen der Spielenden heben die eine Situation von der andern ab. So entstehen überall Intervalle, die die Illusion des Publikums eher beeinträchtigen. Diese Intervalle sind seiner kritischen Stellungnahme, seinem Nachdenken reserviert.” (GS2, 515-516) It can be said that the components of Epic Theater all aim to bring the point of transition residing within the dialectic of theory and praxis to appearance, which, according to the argument above, is the necessary result of strictly applying this dialectic anyway. These “Intervalle” are the earlier-mentioned “Einbruchsstellen” in the perception of action that turn it dialectically into theory. This kind of dialectic is therefore necessarily direct and harsh, notably without an element of reflection or *Vermittlung*. The point of such an approach to dialectics is precisely that dialectics as a topic of reflection vanishes, since in the minds of Brecht and Benjamin it ought to become a *behavior* of the politicized masses rather than a topic of intellectual reasoning. This is why, in her essay on Benjamin, Arendt points out: “Benjamin dürfte wohl der seltsamste Marxist gewesen sein, den diese an Seltsamkeiten nicht arme Bewegung hervorgebracht hat.”⁷³ And she

⁷³ Arendt, “Walter Benjamin,” 57.

goes on to claim that Benjamin and Brecht alike, despite their obvious interest in dialectics, were in fact not thinking dialectically at all: “Darüber hinaus aber, dürfte es für Benjamin entscheidend wichtig gewesen sein, in Brecht auf der Linken einen Mann gefunden zu haben, der trotz allem Gerede genau so wenig ‘dialektisch’ dachte wie er selbst [...]”⁷⁴ In light of the thought presented here, Arendt’s surprising judgment makes sense: Benjamin and Brecht were interested in dialectics insofar as it would vanish as an object of pure theory.

Benjamin’s most prominent example of the aforementioned technique of interruption is that of gestures. The gesture, he writes, works like a quotation:⁷⁵ it takes what it represents out of context and points at it – *and* to the fact that it is pointing at it. “‘Gesten zitierbar zu machen’ ist die wichtigste Leistung des Schauspielers; seine Gebärden muß er sperren können wie ein Setzer die Worte.” (GS2, 529) There are two levels stacked together here: In the act of referring to something, of pointing something out, an actor of the Epic Theater makes sure he or she expresses this gesture in such a way that it may be ‘quoted’; that is, copied or at least recognized by the audience or other actors. Looking at quotations in the textual medium, their task is to make visible the fact

⁷⁴ Arendt, “Walter Benjamin,” 60.

⁷⁵ Benjamin’s concept of the quotation in turn has different sources, reaching in part to back before his acquaintance with Brecht. It is, for example, strongly influenced by his reading of Karl Kraus. Josef Fürnkäs gives an account of the general history and transformation of the technique of quoting in modernity, and of Benjamin’s understanding of quotations. He writes: “Kraus befreit das Zitat aus der Esoterik von Büchern und Bibliotheken. Indem er ihm in der Exoterik der unablässig von Rotationsmaschinen ausgeworfenen Zeitungen und Zeitschriften ein neues Arbeits- bzw. Kampffeld anweist, deutet er bereits auf die für das 20. Jahrhundert folgenreiche Verbindung von Zitat und Massenmedien voraus, die das Zitieren in der alltäglichen, zumal großstädtischen Lebenskultur zum Vorgang von überwältigender Selbstverständlichkeit hat werden lassen.” Fürnkäs, *Surrealismus als Erkenntnis*, 258. Interestingly, Fürnkäs also observes that the dualism of theory and praxis plays a vital role in Benjamin’s Kraus essay: “Benjamin hat ‘das seltsame Wechselspiel zwischen reaktionärer Theorie und revolutionärer Praxis’ (GS2, 342), ‘die innigste Verschränkung einer, mit den vorgeschrittensten Mitteln arbeitenden, Entlarvungstechnik und einer, mit archaischen operierenden, Kunst des Selbstausdrucks’ (GS2, 345f.) dramaturgisch ins Zentrum der allegorischen Inszenierung seines Kraus-Essays gestellt.” (Ibid., 264)

that a passage of that text comes from outside. A quotation itself consists of certain signs that frame the passage in question; it is a gesture in the medium of text. What happens, therefore, in Epic Theater is a *doubling of gesture*: a gesture to point out a gesture. Gestures are also known to traditional theater, of course: every actor learns a repertoire of gestures to convey certain emotions, etc. What is new in Epic Theater is the fact that these gestures are pointed out *again*, that they are not streamlined with the overall plot of the play in order to create a ‘realistic’ fiction with which the audience may identify. Thus: “Es ist das oberste Gebot dieses Theaters, daß ‘der Zeigende’ – das ist der Schauspieler als solcher – ‘gezeigt werde.’” (GS2, 529) The concept of the ‘quotable gesture’ connects central concerns of Brecht’s and Benjamin’s works and reveals the close working relationship of the two authors. It is interesting to note that Brecht at first applied it to his own stories. In 1929 he wrote of the style of *Herr Keuner* that it ought to be quotable.⁷⁶ And on another occasion, he added: “Der zweite Versuch: ‘Geschichten vom Herrn Keuner’ stellt einen Versuch dar, Gesten zitierbar zu machen.”⁷⁷ While the concept thus came from Brecht, it is Benjamin who, as Erdmut Wizisla points out, connected it back to theater, and then of course also adopted it for his own work.⁷⁸

Epic Theater, Benjamin concludes, is “gestisch” (GS2, 521). Not the “Verlauf der Äußerungen oder der Verhaltensweisen” is essential to its dialectics, but the gesture itself (GS2, 530). Epic Theater, according to Benjamin, “discovers” (GS2, 522)

⁷⁶ Brecht, *Werke*, vol. 18, p. 29.

⁷⁷ Bertolt Brecht, *Versuche 1-3* (Berlin: Gustav Kiepenheuer, 1930), 1. Taken from: Wizisla, *Benjamin und Brecht*, 175.

⁷⁸ Wizisla, *Benjamin und Brecht*, 175-177. Wizisla finds that Benjamin first made a reference to *Gestisches* and *Geste* in this context in 1929 when he commented on Marieluise Fleißer’s play *Pioniere von Ingolstadt*: GS4, 1028.

(sociopolitical) conditions. And through the gesture, it transforms what it represents into a dialectical image, “Dialektik im Stillstand” (GS2, 530). The dialectic of theory and praxis interrupts proceedings – or in other words, processes – in order freeze and display them in a fixed image. The gesture is such an image: it opens a perspective, that is a space, and allows the observer to perceive something, a detail (*Ausschnitt*), as a whole. It is the frame that is constitutive for an image, just like the quotation marks are constitutive for a quote. Structurally, Benjamin’s dialectical image can be compared to the snapshot in photography. But in any case, the important result is that Benjamin’s unique approach to dialectics as “dialektisches Bild” is therefore revealed to be, at the core, an essential constituent of epics; it is a distinct narrative technique.

CHAPTER IV

BENJAMIN: CRISIS AND POSSIBILITIES OF THE EPIC

Benjamin's essay "Der Erzähler" (1936) is central to his efforts to present a 'theory of epic forms.' As the title suggests, the author introduces his topic by addressing 'the narrator,' or later in the text the "Figur des Erzählers," (GS2, 440) thereby consciously putting his writing, from the very beginning, into the space encompassed by the "volle Körperlichkeit" (GS2, 440) – that is in other words, the body space – of the storyteller. However, he immediately adds: "Der Erzähler [...] ist uns in seiner lebendigen Wirksamkeit keineswegs durchaus gegenwärtig." (GS2, 438) What follows then is an intricate play with spatial categories between actually increasing distance to the phenomenon in question, and finding a perspective to making it present again. As a result of these conflicting movements, the act of 'making present again' becomes discontinuous: Benjamin does not create a continuum in which the storyteller would be realized in his archaic essence. On the contrary, he does everything to evoke the end of the "Kunst des Erzählens." (GS2, 439) The temporal discontinuity in Benjamin's approach to history thus translates here into a spatial model; the act of 'making present again' generates new, unprecedented perspectives on narrative. By looking closely at the narrator essay and the book review "Krisis des Romans" (1930), the following pages will reconstruct how the author writes the crisis of the epic in order to prepare for its transgression and hence transformation into new narrative possibilities. With Benjamin's suggestion in mind that

the epic element should be surrendered, the guiding question of this chapter is how this surrender of the epic looks in the author's theoretical narrative.

In the analysis of the image of spectrum colors and of the story "Der Strumpf," it became apparent that Benjamin basically holds on to an idiosyncratic phenomenological approach, introduced in *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels*, that deploys a constellation of ideas, concepts and phenomena. His unique application of phenomenological aspects as a linguistic and idealistic approach combines scholarly and poetic ways of writing. A study of phenomena as a means to *vergegenwärtigen* – to realize, or more literally 'to make appear in my presence' – transforms temporality into space, specifically in Benjamin's understanding of history, where the past and the present become simultaneous elements within the (always-present) medium of memory. The expression, or rather: the activity of *vergegenwärtigen* is the point of transition where our faculty of remembrance progressively translates into presence what, from the perspective of temporality (i.e., present time), necessarily is always already lost.

Though a temporal expression in the everyday use of language, *vergegenwärtigen* is intrinsically a spatial concept: to bring something to the presence of my sensorium. It represents the interconnection of our bodily faculties of awareness with the abstract and only indirectly accessible 'flow of time.' Its noun, *Gegenwart*, meaning both *present time* and *presence*, fully retains this ambiguity of temporal and spatial aspects. To use Benjamin's language: through *vergegenwärtigen*, the body space (e.g., of the storyteller) becomes the scenery for the past – in this case, the tradition of storytelling and, in general, of epic forms. This scenery, then, is a space of representation where Benjamin continually puts the past as it is available for remembrance, hence disfigured and

incomplete, into a constellation with an arbitrary present time, the time of the text's readability. From a different viewpoint, this means that not only the temporal aspect of the past turns into a space of representation, but likewise the moment of present time, whose elusive temporality (the 'now' of the presence of present) is nowhere better explained than in the notion of a point. The paradox of this step lies in the attempt to represent a point as an actual space, which it is not, even in geometric terms. In any case, this allows Benjamin to detach his topic from predetermined – traditional – lines of reasoning and to readjust the relation of past and present, which as a consequence affects the relation between reader and text.

With these preconditions in mind, how does the author proceed when he attempts to *vergegenwärtigen* the art of storytelling by means of 'the narrator'?⁷⁹ Downplaying the actual assignment given to him by the journal *Orient und Occident*,⁸⁰ Nikolai Leskov only appears in the subtitle, and literally *behind* his work: "Betrachtungen zum Werk Nikolai Lesskows." With the exception of invoking "einen Lesskow" in the initial paragraph, Benjamin will not return to the Russian storyteller until section III of the essay. Furthermore, the notion of "Betrachtungen," observations, prepares the attentive reader for the play with perspectives with which Benjamin sets off his text. Leskov appears as an example of the abstract topic – the commonplace, as it were – of the narrator. Benjamin makes this very clear by placing the indefinite article in front of the author's

⁷⁹ The interpretation presented here emphasizes the spatial aspect of *vergegenwärtigen*, in order to point out the overall spatial construction of the narrator essay. For an interpretation of the essay that focuses on its temporal aspects see Honold, *Der Leser Walter Benjamin*, 163ff. Even though Honold acknowledges the "Leibhaftigkeit" of Benjamin's narrator, he quickly goes back to discuss "Die Zeit des Erzählers," as he calls his chapter on the respective essay.

⁸⁰ See, for example, the editors' notes on "Der Erzähler:" GS2, 1276.

name, as if for the sake of his argument it does not matter whether he writes about Leskov, Kafka, Hebel, or some other author. With this strategy, Benjamin indirectly applies concepts from the essay on surrealism; the body space is the concrete, while the image space is the ideal, virtual space. The introduction of “Der Erzähler” presents the point of their transition and potentially convergence. Abstracting from the concrete givenness of Nikolai Leskov, Benjamin seeks to create a blueprint or a model for the storyteller. Similar to the methodology presented in *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels*, the spatial speculation of the narrator essay therefore also builds on the triad of idea, concept and phenomena. In this sense, the conceptual grid of Benjamin’s essay generates a virtual space within which phenomena concerning the epic may be represented. From this perspective, it is again the procedure of salvaging the phenomena that lies at the center of Benjamin’s concerns. His specific method is based on his understanding that the phenomena cannot be possessed or represented in any ‘original’ or ‘actual’ way, and this is true for objects in the world as much as for the past.

The act of representing the phenomena becomes their salvation, but this salvation is not purely conservative; it retains, on the contrary, a moment of unprecedentedness and unpredictability because the phenomena can only be brought to appearance through constellations of concepts, and these constellations are devised by the differentiating mind, which always depends on the arbitrary moment of its present-time situation. In reconstructing the phenomenon of the epic, Benjamin takes fully into account that within this procedure a moment of radical unprecedentedness will appear that does not commit it to a certain tradition, but rather allows for new areas of application. In this sense,

Benjamin's essay does not answer the question of the epic, but on the contrary, opens it up.

The author approaches his topic in the narrator essay by shifting perspectives between closeness and distance, writing that in order to represent "einen Leskov als Erzähler," it was necessary not to bring him closer, but to put distance between 'us' – that is, the reader – and 'him.'⁸¹ Closeness and distance are the extremes of spatial projection; hence, this is the point where the idea of the epic, *des Epischen*, becomes a virtual space of representation. In order to construct this idea as an image space, Benjamin reverts to the most primordial phenomenal realm; he places the storyteller into a natural scenery, all the time providing information about perspective and distance. He aims to represent the body space – that is, the concrete givenness of Nikolai Leskov – within this image space, which in turn becomes identical with the abstract category of 'the narrator.' (In other words: the natural scenery, a phenomenal background that Benjamin chooses at various points throughout the essay, projects the virtual space that defines the idea of 'the narrator.')

Only if viewed from a distance, the author writes, do "die großen einfachen Züge, die den Erzähler [as an abstract category] ausmachen" (GS2, 438) appear, in or on the actual author figure of Nikolai Leskov. Throughout his essay, Benjamin seeks to identify and outline the point of transition between Nikolai Leskov and 'the storyteller,' between body and image space. This is the central line around which the text turns.

⁸¹ Benjamin subjects the 'art of storytelling,' similarly to the concept of the aura, to counter-directional intentions. Hence, these phenomena become meaningful, and are also attributed with a new beauty, in the process of their disappearance. See also: "Mit dem Erzählen verhält es sich demnach, zumindest was derlei kompensatorische Mechanismen betrifft, nicht anders als mit der Aura; auch hier ruft der Impetus des 'Näherbringens' gegenläufige Strebungen auf den Plan und umgibt das Verlorengeliebte mit einem Hof der Bedeutsamkeit." Honold, *Der Leser Walter Benjamin*, 179.

The aforementioned traits of the storyteller, Benjamin continues, “treten an ihm [Nikolai Leskov] in Erscheinung wie in einem Felsen für den Beschauer, der den rechten Abstand hat und den richtigen Blickwinkel, ein Menschenhaupt oder ein Tierleib erscheinen mag.” (GS2, 439) The image Benjamin presents as an introduction to his essay works as a snapshot of the entire text – the essay in a nutshell, so to speak. Within the virtual space of this image, Benjamin prepares a phenomenological analysis according to his understanding of the link between idea, concept and phenomena. The image displays to the observer a rock, a piece from inanimate nature, which represents the phenomenal background into which the differentiating mind projects forms, like a man’s head or the body of an animal. These represent the ‘traits’ of the storyteller that are only visible from certain perspectives, while the rock represents the concrete appearance of Nikolai Leskov. The game of differences proceeds by means of this phenomenal background, which in itself is chaotic, illusive, and therefore cannot be represented ‘in itself.’

At this point, the category of form has already vanished from the discussion; or rather: Benjamin translated the formal aspect of a ‘theory of epic forms’ into the category of visually appearing traits. Not unlike geometric vectors, these traits, then, define the virtual space of the narrator’s image space. There can be no doubt that we, as readers and observers, have at this point left behind any linearity of a reasoning that adheres strictly to a temporal succession (entailing causality). Benjamin advises us: not merely closeness or distance (which could still be interpreted in temporal terms) are important, but more so the correct *perspective* (“Blickwinkel”). This *Blickwinkel*, he argues, is the result of the

fact that the faculty of storytelling is in decline, which he in turn links to the modern inability to communicate experience.⁸²

Through its mimetic faculty to perceive and create similarities⁸³ (i.e., to perceive images in the undifferentiated phenomenal realm), the mind salvages phenomena as fragments (here: particular traits) from the otherwise-illusory phenomenal totality. These traits, in turn, construct the generalized example of ‘the storyteller’; its idea, in other words. Since this idea then consists of an arbitrary number of fragments and their constellations, it is again itself not the object of any representation, but rather ‘flashes up’ in certain moments of its application. These moments are bound to situations when the image presented comes to its ‘readability.’ Throughout his essay, Benjamin therefore provides no systematic description – neither of Nikolai Leskov, nor of storytelling. Instead, he presents a collection of fragmented ‘traits,’ formal aspects of storytelling, like, for example, its practical applicability, the duration of experience in storytelling, etc. In this process, the concept of form is no longer systematic, but itself fragmented. Keeping

⁸² Benjamin copies the relevant passage from “Erfahrung und Armut” (GS2, 213) into “Der Erzähler.” Bernd Witte translates “Mitteilbarkeit” as “transmissibility of experience” and sets in his reading of the narrator essay a different emphasis in terms of its ideal construction. He writes that Benjamin contrasts his observation of the decline of modernity with a “utopian world of the storyteller [...] situated in a completely ahistorical space” that could not be related to “any concrete social experience.” Witte points to the world of the “vollkommene[] Handwerker,” and to a “kreatürliche[s] Reich” (GS2, 463) Benjamin evokes, which he connects to the image of Jacob’s ladder from the Bible – a ladder, in Benjamin’s words, extending downward into the interior of the earth and disappearing upward in the clouds. For Benjamin, this ladder represents a collective experience in which even the experience of death would have no meaning. Witte continues: “Only here is complete transmissibility possible, only here can the transmission of earlier forms of life transcend the boundaries of life and death separating generations, only here can the experience inscribed into the story be revived and take on significance for later generations.” However, as carefully crafted theoretical models, Benjamin’s image compositions quickly surpass a mere utopian setting and instead venture to rearrange and trespass on the historical and sociopolitical ramifications of genre traditions. Bernd Witte, “Literature as the Medium of Collective Memory: Reading Benjamin’s *Einbahnstraße*, ‘Der Erzähler,’ and ‘Das Paris des Second Empire bei Baudelaire,’” in *A Companion to the Works of Walter Benjamin*, ed. Rolf J. Goebel (Rochester and New York: Camden House, 2009), 96-97.

⁸³ This is how Benjamin renders the mimetic faculty in the small essays “Lehre vom Ähnlichen” (1933, GS2, 204) and “Über das mimetische Vermögen.” (1933, GS2, 210)

the results of chapters 1 and 2 in mind, this shows precisely how the tradition of literary form breaks down and how Benjamin, in a quite literal sense, attempts to salvage it in its fragmentation. These fragments capture in an ideal extrapolation the essence of storytelling.

The fifth passage of “Der Erzähler” (GS2, 442) directly addresses for the first time the theme of actual epic forms by contrasting the novel with the story.⁸⁴ Initially it seems that Benjamin falls back to a linear and causal representation: “Das früheste Anzeichen eines Prozesses, an dessen Abschluß der Niedergang der Erzählung steht, ist das Aufkommen des Romans zu Beginn der Neuzeit.” (GS2, 442) He is clearly arranging the question of epic forms in terms of a temporal lapse of time from beginning to end. Change within this temporal setting, and furthermore reflection of this change by the faculties of the mind, unfolds according to this passage in the form of processes. Processes are the linear form the mind applies to change – to occurrences in space, that is – resulting in the construction of causality. This linearity is an effect brought about by the

⁸⁴ The plan to make the opposition of novel and story central to his theory of the epic goes back to the 1920s and also has its roots in Benjamin’s encounter with Georg Lukács’ theoretical work, predominantly with *Die Theorie des Romans* (1916) and *Geschichte und Klassenbewußtsein* (1923). Jean-Michel Palmier mentions that Lukács’ thoughts on class consciousness provided Benjamin with hints to the question of the role of intellectuals in the ongoing political struggles of the Weimar Republic. Lukács furthermore emphasized again the connection of the Marxist method with Hegel’s philosophy, thereby putting a focus on dialectics. According to Palmier, Lukács’ theoretical work indicated to Benjamin a solution to certain aporias he had carried into his work, namely in *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels*, from Kantian and neo-Kantian epistemology. These aporias concern the subject–object categories and specifically their separation in Kantian philosophy. Lukács suggested that the dialectical relation of subject and object should be read as a historical process and mediated through a presumed unity of theory and praxis. Palmier, *Walter Benjamin. Lumpensammler, Engel und bucklicht Männlein*, 421. It is this unity of theory and praxis that Benjamin aims to realize in his (re-)construction of the epic. Aside from this, Palmier observes that Benjamin’s notion of German tragedy’s decline corresponds to Lukács’ account of the epic’s development (here specifically: *das Epos*), “und das Zerbrechen der Totalität.” “Dennoch setzt Lukács zu dieser Zeit (1916) noch Hoffnung auf die Möglichkeit, mit dem Roman eine – moralisch – neue Welt zum Ausdruck zu bringen, die er bei Tolstoi und Dostojewski anbrechen sieht.” (Ibid., 427) While Lukács still holds on to the novel as the bourgeois epic form, Benjamin does not share this hope and renders it as the genre that most clearly gives evidence of the epic’s (and the bourgeois’) crisis. Instead, as I argue here, Benjamin attempts to transgress the epic and salvage it in new forms of representation.

inherent linearity of the medium text, the syntactical order of language. Benjamin then goes on to break up this linearity by adding the dimensionality of image space.⁸⁵ For Benjamin, the novel marks the dissolution of the epic's tradition. In contrast to traditional epic forms, the novel is detached from oral tradition. It does not come from tradition and does not re-enter it, he writes.⁸⁶ Thus the novel, as one of the first truly modern art forms, affects the very center of tradition's inner mechanics. Tradition relies on orality, and specifically on communicable experience, in order to bridge the gap between generations (as Benjamin demonstrated in "Erfahrung und Armut"), but the novel already abandons both of these principles in the way it is produced.

The novel, though itself an epic form, stands at the end of the traditional epic and indicates its transfiguration. But the traditional forms of the epic do not just vanish in modernity; they exist alongside the novel. Benjamin now inscribes the progressing

⁸⁵ My approach focuses on image space as a virtual and hence mental sphere, which of course in Benjamin's notion of constellations has an immediate connection, or rather correspondence, in the material world. In fact, the concept of constellations makes it clear that images are always both; they cannot come into existence without being anchored in the 'outside' world, and still they are 'in themselves' a mental phenomenon. Benjamin insists that images are to be read; while the astronomical constellation, the *Sternbild*, is his most prominent example in demonstrating images as constellations, text and scripture are the writer's counterparts for constructing constellations and transforming them into analytical models. For more information on the context of the interrelation of image, constellation, and scripture, see Bettine Menke, *Sprachfiguren. Name – Allegorie – Bild nach Walter Benjamin* (München: Fink, 1991). By referring to Stéphane Mallarmé's *Coup de dés* (1897), which Benjamin knew of, and Friedrich Kittler's *Aufschreibesysteme* (1985), Menke sees a "Notwendigkeit der Unterbrechung linearer Lektüre." (Ibid., 305) "Denn die organisierte Ausstreuung und Konstellation der Schriftzeichen auf dem weißen Blatt Papier inszeniert das alle Schriftlichkeit bestimmende Verhältnis von Untergrund, Zwischenraum und Schriftzeichen und agiert ein nicht-lineares Modell von Schrift und Text aus." (Ibid., 304) While the interruption of linearity here has its material evidence in Mallarmé's poem, Benjamin incorporated its spatial premise into the *poetic* writing of his theory. As such, Benjamin's images are textual images: "Die textuellen/texturalen Bilder (Benjamins) schließen sich *als* Bilder ab gegen das Gewebe, aus dem sie stammen und als das und in dem sie gelesen werden, gegen eine unbeendbare Bewegung, ein Weben und Verschieben, *und* sie dementieren gleichzeitig ihre Konsistenz als Bilder." (Ibid., 342)

⁸⁶ The statement that the modern novel "aus mündlicher Tradition weder kommt noch in sie eingeht," which Benjamin uses both in "Der Erzähler" (GS2, 443) and in "Krisis des Romans" (GS3, 231), is actually an unmarked quote from Alfred Döblin, *Schriften zur Ästhetik, Poetik und Literatur*, ed. Erich Kleinschmidt (Freiburg i. Br.: Olten, 1989), 231.

transformation of his own method of analysis into the observed transformation of the epic; the transformation of the one is mirrored within the other. This is what the author's essay *performs*, or demonstrates. Both movements in their juxtaposition are based on an understanding of memory as a present (*präsentisch*) but nonetheless highly dynamic medium. This means: memory as an always-present, collective framework. It has a presence on its own by being 'there' beyond the existence of the individual. It surrounds the individual like a second nature, and any access to this memory, happening in an instance of present time, necessarily 'updates' (*aktualisieren*), and hence changes, the total presence of this memory.

Benjamin renders the historical transitions between forms as "Abwandlung" and "Umwandlung." (GS2, 443) In section VI of the essay, he eventually introduces perspective into the initially linear, process-governed form of understanding: "Man muß sich die Umwandlung von epischen Formen in Rhythmen vollzogen denken, die sich denen der Verwandlung vergleichen lassen, die im Laufe der Jahrhunderttausende die Erdoberfläche erlitten hat. Schwerlich haben sich Formen menschlicher Mitteilung langsamer ausgebildet, langsamer verloren." (GS2, 443) We are to *imagine*, the author suggests, that the transition of epic forms occurred in "rhythms." The terminology of rhythm points, first of all, to the question of the measurement of time.⁸⁷ Ultimately, there does not seem to exist a constant in the universe from which to securely derive an absolute measurement of time; only infinite approximations (e.g., the speed of light) are possible, and those have only been discovered in recent modernity. One of the oldest

⁸⁷ See Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, vol. 1 (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1990), 13ff.

observations taken from nature, Ricoeur suggests in *Time and Narrative*, is that of the transition between day and night. This rhythm – though, compared to contemporary standards, hardly accurate – may well have been the primordial pattern and also the impulse for measuring what we call time. Of course, this is essentially an arbitrary way to respond to the question: what is time, the reason being that while our senses are well equipped to handle the spatial ramifications of our existence, we do not have any direct sensory input in regard to the flow of time. Assurance that indeed time has passed (= that there *is* time) can be found in the experience of the ‘now.’ The confirmation of this ‘now’ that immediately vanishes as soon as it is applied (“now I write”) creates the present, and introduces an interval – an interruption, as it were – into the overarching perception of time as a continuous line running from the past into the future.

In this context, rhythm responds to both sides, space and time; it addresses a space-time continuum. A disadvantage emerges because this concept is rather inaccurate when it comes to distinguishing time from space. But this disadvantage Benjamin turns into an advantage for his argumentation. He uses the notion of rhythm precisely to indicate the point of transition between time and space. Although it approaches the measurement of time through a spatial paradigm (and whatever is processed during this time – e.g., sound), rhythm is for Benjamin but a first step in the spatial representation of the transition of epic forms. The reason for this is that the spatiality of rhythm remains linear, one-dimensional. It moves only in one direction.

Rhythm points out regularities, patterns, frequencies in processes that unfold in time and space. These regularities are perceived as a sequence and distinguished from each other through intervals (= space). The rhythm of a sequence is equally determined

by the elements between the intervals (a sound, for example) and by the intervals themselves. A rhythm cannot be completely chaotic or erratic; in that case, it would cease to exist. For a sequence of intervals, and whatever is between the intervals, to be perceived as a rhythm, a certain quantity of the intervals has to be of the same length, which is to say: a particular interval has to occur frequently. It is the enjoyment of recognizing this sameness that defines a rhythm. Ultimately, though, rhythm is linear: the intervals appear in a sequence. The elements that determine a rhythm may have different intensities. Intervals of a rhythm can also increase or decrease in their length, and if this increase or decrease is regular in itself, this can add to the perception of the rhythm. In this way, rhythms of a second order can be established on a basic pattern. Such complexities define our understanding of musical composition; however, they are still linear in nature.

In any case, the above quoted passage does not end here, but moves on rather unexpectedly. It is as if Benjamin wanted first to meet the reader's expectations and introduce his 'argument' through a linear understanding of literary history. Suddenly, however, he puts the notion of rhythm into the context of transitions on the surface of the earth throughout "Jahrhunderttausende." (GS2, 443)⁸⁸ This second image conception has

⁸⁸ See also Hans-Heino Ewers, "Erzählkunst und Kinderliteratur. Walter Benjamins Theorie des Erzählens," in *Walter Benjamin und die Kinderliteratur. Aspekte der Kinderkultur in den zwanziger Jahren*, ed. Klaus Doderer (Weinheim und München: Juventa, 1988), 198-199, for other aspects of Benjamin's image of the earth's surface in this context. Ewers observes that, for Benjamin, the transition of forms is not synchronal. He splits the process into a transition of forms and a transition of epochs, and sees in Benjamin's approach an "über den geschichtlichen hinausgehenden erdgeschichtlich[]-archäologischen Blickes." With this, Ewers remains caught within Benjamin's image construction, but he points to what he calls a "Kombination von Formengeschichte und geschichtsphilosophischer Poetik." This dualistic approach is the reason why Benjamin can evaluate the novel and the story on two different levels. Though the novel reaches its perfection in nineteenth-century bourgeois culture, it has its roots as early as in ancient epic poetics. Benjamin: "Der Roman [...] hat Hunderte von Jahren gebraucht, ehe er im werdenden Bürgertum auf Elemente stieß, die ihm seiner Blüte taugten." (GS2, 444) The story, in contrast, has a very different relation to history. "Ihr ursprünglicher Ort ist die 'lebendige Rede' (GS2, 440), ihre Quelle die 'Erfahrung,

some very different ramifications that distinguish it from the first part of the passage. The developmental history of epic forms is now projected onto a surface that is a planar space. With this move, Benjamin dismisses the linear form promoted by the conception of rhythm and transforms it into a two-dimensional image space. The transformation of epic forms that the two image parts (rhythm and the surface of the earth) pick up is also at the same time a transition in the underlying understanding. Two image levels intersect here. Benjamin establishes the first level of image space with “Man muss sich [...] vollzogen denken,” and the second with “die sich [...] vergleichen lassen.” In both cases, the initiation of image space is clearly indicated by the applied language. This passage is therefore, methodologically speaking, the transformation of the essay’s underlying image space from one to two dimensions. The term “vergleichen” loses its credibility during the transition – it is a bluff, really: it is only a comparison on the surface of the text, but points to a deep-structural transition of the text’s theoretical dimension.

Two consequences arise from the notion of “Erdoberfläche” as it pertains to the image space in which the transition of epic forms is represented. First, the alteration of earth’s surface not only leaves traces on the surface itself, but has a third dimension, as well. The natural processes of becoming and decaying generate layers of ‘surfaces’ that bury one another and vanish for those who only look at the present surface. Older layers can only be investigated if the ones above, including the top surface, are destroyed at

die von Mund zu Mund geht’ (GS2, 440).” In terms of forms (Ewers: *formengeschichtlich*), Benjamin therefore connects the story to the idealized, archaic figures of the peasant and the sailor. Detached from any actual historical development, Benjamin can only grasp the story in this way, since it is an inherent part of man’s general developmental history – a more elementary level than the history of epochs: “Als in der Menschheit tief verwurzelte Mitteilungsförm überdauert, wie Benjamin es sieht, das Geschichtenerzählen seinen realhistorischen Lebensgrund wie auch seinen höchsten geschichtlichen Augenblick. Es überlebt sogar im Medium des Buches.” (Ibid., 200)

least in part. Thus: the deeper the layer, the more the natural forces of transfiguration will have taken effect. Strictly speaking, the temporality of the phenomena analyzed (epic forms) is lost to us and only indicated by the traces it left in the collective cultural memory. This memory is the materialization of temporality. And Benjamin's conception of image space becomes an interface to represent this memory as a paradigm of surface and depth (or layers). Depth underneath the earth's surface indicates the alternating layers of its development, which also mirrors the notion of rhythm. In the context of epic forms or, as Benjamin writes here in a broader sense, "Formen menschlicher Mitteilung," it means that their history of development (*Entwicklungsgeschichte*) appears as a process that oscillates between the slow constitution of forms (quasi organically growing) and their vanishing. These processes, however, are *appearing* in the image space, and conclusions about their existence can only be inferred *post factum*: they appear as processes but do not unfold in time *again*. The observer sees the results of processes as a still image on the surface.

In such a spatial arrangement, the time indices of processes do not occur in 'real time,' but are all potentially present simultaneously, albeit in different layers and different degrees of transfiguration. From the perspective of memory, 'transfiguration' is the result of the forces of forgetting and recombining older fragments with newer ones (because of the aforementioned simultaneous availability). If we connect a fragment of an old memory to a newer, more recent memory, even a memory of the most recent past, this memory molecule gets a completely new meaning. This new meaning always automatically distorts the original meaning of the involved fragments. It is with this understanding of 'memory as a space' in mind that the phenomenon of epic forms

becomes, in Benjamin's theoretical endeavor, the object of a construction. To salvage the epic under these circumstances means to take into account the forces of transfiguration. As a result, epic forms cannot be reproduced in what might be considered their original state. It is in this sense that the epic needs to be surrendered, as Benjamin wrote in context of "Über den Begriff der Geschichte." Any recurrence of epic forms necessarily entails some new, unprecedented quality. Though prepared in "Der Erzähler," Benjamin will elaborate on this thought more in his short book review "Krisis des Romans," which I will address below.

In the passage at hand (GS2, 443: "Man muss [...]"), Benjamin emphasizes the surface aspect of the image more than the dimension of depth, which is nonetheless implied. Usually processes occurring in some kind of a deep structure leave their traces on the surface at some point (especially in Benjamin's example of the earth's developmental history): the surface is the *post factum* result of the deep structure, not unlike how structuralists analyze the surface structure of language from a (re-)constructed deep structure. In fact, the concept of trace can only really work when we assume that it is a surface phenomenon. As a result, the two different aspects of the image space (surface and depth) do not exclude each other, but are in fact two sides of the same coin. Memory is a surface phenomenon in this sense, and so are Benjamin's image conceptions. His focus on surface is, however, not arbitrary, but a logical conclusion also in terms of a serious phenomenological approach: depth is not a reality, while surface is. Depth becomes a (re-)construction. Two dimensions are in fact sufficient to extrapolate the third; the third dimension, the dimension of depth, can be represented on a two-dimensional

plane, albeit only as an illusion. The second and third dimensions, however, cannot be extrapolated or represented from only one dimension.

Written before “Der Erzähler,” Benjamin’s book review of Alfred Döblin’s *Berlin Alexanderplatz*, entitled “Krisis des Romans” (1930), can be read as a counterpart of the later essay. In light of the argument presented here, which is concerned with the transgression and transformation of the epic phenomenon, it is necessary to discuss this text after the narrator essay, since it is in the book review that the author brings up the idea of a ‘restitution of the epic.’ As in the case of Nikolai Leskov, here Benjamin takes the opportunity to advance his own ‘theory of epic forms’ by reviewing Döblin’s novel, which was already famous in its time. A montage of different genres itself, the review exhibits an essayistic style that deploys an intriguing spatial composition. Benjamin uses terms like “die Epik,” “episch,” and eventually “das Epische” and “epische[s] Wesen” (GS3, 231), placing them in stark opposition to the novelist.⁸⁹

These concepts, German substantives and attributive adjectives, do not address a traditional notion of literary forms; they do not categorize specific poetic forms – for example, what in the English context is called ‘epic poetry’ – according to a catalog of form concepts. Instead, Benjamin introduces ‘the epic’ as an abstract term, an extreme generalization that points to a nonspecific quality of the human condition. The epic

⁸⁹ Benjamin’s contrasting of novel and story is motivated also by historical considerations, in addition to the theoretical implications addressed here. Ewers points out that the opposition of novel and story fits into a series of fundamental oppositions that have determined European poetic theory: antiquity and modernity, naïve and sentimental (*sentimentalisch*), objective and interesting, classical and romantic, natural poetics and poetics of arts (*Kunstpoesie*). “Zur Schillerschen Unterscheidung von naiver und sentimentalischer Dichtung wie zur spätromantischen Opposition von Natur- bzw. Volks- und Kunstpoesie steht Benjamins Gegensatzpaar in einer besonders engen Beziehung. Mit diesen teilt es den zugleich poetologischen und geschichtsphilosophischen Charakter.” Ewers, “Erzählkunst und Kinderliteratur,” 197. From this perspective, novel and story are genres particularly bound to specific epochs; the novel becomes the form of nineteenth-century bourgeois culture, while the story expresses a pre-bourgeois era.

becomes a phenomenon itself, instead of a category for phenomena (as is clearly indicated by the notion of an ‘epic essence’). Benjamin translates this phenomenal background into an image space; the book review begins by maintaining that *Dasein*, in terms of the epic, is an ocean (*not* ‘like’ an ocean!). There is nothing more epic than the ocean, Benjamin declares. In a similar way as in the narrator essay, he then goes on to intersect this image space with the body spaces of the epicist and the novelist. He arranges these typified body spaces as a pair of opposites. Brought into this constellation, the concepts arrange the phenomenal backdrop in such a way that its extremes define the virtual image space of the text. Apart from this, extremes are virtual by definition: “Man kann sich natürlich zum Meer sehr verschieden verhalten. Zum Beispiel an den Strand legen, der Brandung zuhören und die Muscheln, die sie anspült, sammeln. Das tut der Epiker. Man kann das Meer auch befahren. Zu vielen Zwecken und zwecklos. Man kann eine Meerfahrt machen und dann dort draußen, ringsum kein Landstrich, Meer und Himmel, kreuzen. Das tut der Romancier. Er ist der wirklich Einsame, Stumme.” (GS3, 230) This image attributes certain phenomenal qualities to the epic: vastness (of our existence and our infinite questions) and the sublime, since our senses, confronted with the vastness of the ocean/*Dasein*, seem to be constantly overwhelmed. Calmness and composure (*Gelassenheit*) are the result, since the “epische[r] Mensch” accepts this state of being overwhelmed as a given condition of existence.

However, these qualities of the epic do not exist purely by themselves; they are not entities on their own. Even though Benjamin renders *Dasein* (from which the aforementioned qualities emanate) here as a separate space beyond the individual, it establishes meaningfulness only through the way people respond to it. These epic

qualities are determined by the “Verhalten” of the many, an impersonal “they” (“man”). Within these patterns of different ways one may respond to *Dasein*, Benjamin distinguishes the “Epiker” from the “Romancier” (GS3, 230). Even though both – epic poet and novelist – gain their meaning by drawing on one and the same universal space (or spatial precondition: *Dasein*/ocean), the author maintains a categorical difference that is defined by action and not by contemplative stance: “Das tut der Epiker” versus “Das tut der Romancier.” The epic poet (“der Epiker”), he maintains, only approaches *Dasein* (i.e., the ocean) at its edge (“an den Strand legen”) and only receives (Benjamin: “sammeln” and “zuhören”) what comes out of the middle of *Dasein* from this location. Storytelling picks up its produce or artifacts, so to speak – that which gets washed up on the shore (“Strand”; “der Brandung zuhören”; “Muscheln, die sie anspült, sammeln”). This possible response to *Dasein* makes evident one extreme perimeter of the image space at hand: its edge. The epic poet stays with the many and is part of their everyday lives. As such, the practice of the epic poet is in sync with the practice of the many. “Im Epos ruht das Volk nach dem Tagwerk; lauscht, träumt und sammelt.” (GS3, 230) At stake is this one *Dasein* of the people. In fact, the storyteller is one of the people; the things he or she picks up, listens to, and collects are precisely the stories taken from the *Dasein* of the many. For the storyteller, *Dasein* does not become a mystery; he or she picks it up on the surface, at its edge. There is, in this sense, no depth to *Dasein* for the epic poet.

The novelist accordingly inhabits the other extreme position in the projection of this image space. Instead of staying at the edge, the circumference, of *Dasein*, the novelist ventures to travel the ocean, in order to cross the space of *Dasein* in an attempt to

penetrate its surface. The novelist seeks to penetrate into *Dasein*'s secret by relying solely on the intellectual means of his or her own individual perspective on *Dasein*. Just as a ship's crew that travels the high seas has to survive by what it has brought onboard the ship, the speculative possibilities of the novelist relying on his or her own perspective on *Dasein* to investigate its question are limited. While the epic poet relies on a contingent and complex social network in which *Dasein* – and hence the infinite perspectives on it – generates endless instances of advice and wisdom, he or she never renders it as a secret. The storyteller understands and accepts that *Dasein* is ultimately a mystery, but he or she does not represent it as such. What this means is that *Dasein*'s question as such is not repeated in the epic poet's representation. Though stories might appear puzzling, they aim to increase understanding and clarity in order to allow people to move around in their everyday lives, finding their way through the flotsam and jetsam of *Dasein*. In the opposition between the story and the novel that Benjamin constructs, the latter, then, is not interested in giving advice, but in first of all making *Dasein* appear as a mystery. The mystery becomes the adventure, and the aim is rather to get lost in it.

“Einen Roman schreiben heißt, in der Darstellung des menschlichen Daseins das Inkommensurable auf die Spitze treiben.” (GS3, 230-231) Benjamin extrapolates that the novel – as *pure* novel – increases the incommensurability of representing *Dasein* ad infinitum. His concept of experience depends on being communicated experience; only if private incidents can be placed in a communal framework may they become experience. In “Erfahrung und Armut” (1933, GS2, 213), the author bases his claim that experience is in decline on the fact that returning soldiers from World War I were unable to communicate what had befallen them. The reasons for this are not only the magnitude of

the events, but also that the German populace did not share a communicative framework necessary to ‘listen’ to these stories and to ‘share’ them. In order to share or communicate experience, it must in fact become *commensurable*. Therefore, the novelist’s excessive focus on *Dasein* must ultimately fail to communicate a genuine experience of precisely this journey.⁹⁰

Because of the oppositional nature of the aforementioned image space’s coordinates, it behaves like a force field. Within this force field of the epic genre, Benjamin situates Döblin and his novel. Here the epic poet, the storyteller, encounters the novelist, and the overall crisis of the epic genre is put on the stage. In the essay “Der Erzähler,” Benjamin elaborates on the crisis of the epic as an overall crisis of forms of communication. This is not the case in “Krisis des Romans”; in fact, until the very end of the book review, the author focuses on the symptoms – “den äußeren Anzeichen dieser Krisis.” (GS3, 231) The major symptom of this crisis is, according to Benjamin, not the decline of the epic, but on the contrary the “Restitution des Epischen” and an “Erstarken des Radikal-Epischen” – “der wir allerorten und bis ins Drama begegnen.” (GS3, 231) At

⁹⁰ Benjamin associates the novel with its isolated author and readers: “Die Geburtskammer des Romans ist das Individuum in seiner Einsamkeit, das sich über seine wichtigsten Anliegen nicht mehr exemplarisch auszusprechen vermag.” (GS2, 443) In contrast to the novel, the faculty of storytelling is always embedded in a collective network. This differentiation goes back as far as Döblin’s own theoretical reflections on the epic in *Bau des epischen Werks* (1928), which Benjamin uses. See also Sandra Kluwe, who examines Döblin’s understanding of the epic closely from the perspective of oral poetry research, and confirms that: “Eine individuelle Assoziation, die der kollektiv nachvollziehbaren Affinität enträt, bleibt monadologisch und entspricht somit nicht dem von Döblin favorisierten Modell einer Kommunikation zwischen Autor und Publikum.” With the term collective affinity, Kluwe characterizes the bridge that storytelling creates “zwischen dem individuellen und dem kollektiven Bewußtsein, dem individuellen und dem kollektiven Unbewußten.” Sandra Kluwe: “Das ‘Epos der Moderne’: Döblins *Bau des epischen Werks* im Lichte der Oral-Poetry-Forschung,” in *Figurationen der literarischen Moderne*, ed. Carsten Dutt and Roman Luckscheiter (Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter, 2007), 159. She does, however, also write that it is not clear from Döblin’s text how the transition from individuality to collectivity within the poet’s work (which she also calls “Überwindung der narrativen Aporie der Moderne”) is realized. Döblin, she continues, only vaguely refers to an “Eigendynamik der dichterischen Kreativität.” (Ibid., 146) It seems that Benjamin’s complex conception of experience precisely fills this gap.

the heart of his depiction of the epic's crisis, he places this paradoxical notion. The field of tension the author establishes in "Krisis des Romans" therefore takes the crisis of the epic genre to its extremes until, in a paradoxical point, it shifts from utter negativity (despair, to speak with the language of allegorical representation from *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels*) into something new, a 'restitution' of the epic. The way Benjamin renders the 'crisis of the novel' is thus consistent with what, in the second chapter of this study, was called the salvation of the epic through its surrender. For this is exactly how the crisis of the epic plays out in the image space of the book review. In Brecht as well as here in Döblin, Benjamin found artists who realized the liberation, or deliverance, of the epic's 'essence' from traditional genre conceptions. In a quote Benjamin picks up from "Bau des epischen Werkes" (1928),⁹¹ Döblin writes about the "Befreiung des epischen Werks vom Buch." He might have thought of Epic Theater, of the radio plays that were newly appearing at that time, or even of film. But Döblin, as a novelist, ultimately returns to the book. "Dem Epiker, der nur schreibt, entgehen die wichtigsten formbildenden Kräfte der Sprache." (GS3, 231) His point here is to use the genre's crisis to get some distance from it and to rediscover the epic's original qualities.

"Schlichte, geradlinig aneinanderreihende Erzählung," Benjamin declares in this context, as an "episch[e] Größe[] ersten Grades." 'Pure' epic features like this one the book review then contrasts with 'pure' features of the novel, inferred from Gide and Flaubert: "Die Stellung der Personen zu dem, was vorgeht, die Stellung des Dichters zu ihnen und seiner Technik, all das soll Bestandteil seines Romans selbst werden." (GS3, 232) At first this statement seems to introduce reflexive – "und das heißt hier zugleich

⁹¹ Alfred Döblin: *Der Bau des epischen Werks* (Berlin: S. Fischer, 1929).

auch romantische[.]” (GS3, 232) – aspects into the novel. And this appears to be a contradiction in Benjamin’s line of argument when he, a few lines later, claims that Döblin ‘counters’ precisely this ‘achievement’ with his demand that the epic poet should write ‘reflexively.’ Is not the *roman pur* already “äußerster Gegenpol zur reinen epischen Haltung, die das Erzählen ist”? However, read not as a ‘line’ of argument, but as a spatial construction, this passage begins to make sense. The image space is set up by the contrasting – ideal – extremes of pure epic (“Erzählen”) and pure novel (“Schreibroman”). Here, according to the image space outlined at the beginning of the book review, the novel (as an ideal point of reference) “ist eigentlich reines Innen”; that is, pure reflection of *Dasein* from within *Dasein*. The novelist is situated in the middle of the vast ‘ocean.’ Overall the novel still belongs – traditionally, anyway – to the epic genre. Imagined in its most extreme appearance (“Ausprägung”), however, it would *almost* transgress and leave behind the epic, since *almost* no epic aspects could be found in such an – ultimately impossible – novel. These reflexive aspects of the *roman pur* should be characterized from this perspective. They only unfold within the “reines Innen” of the novel; these are precisely those reflexive powers that bring about “in der Darstellung des menschlichen Daseins das Inkommensurable” (GS3, 231), which in an ideal state would lead to the novel being incapable to communicate itself.

Benjamin introduces Döblin’s “Entgegnung” with the comment that he is replying “auch auf diese Leistung.” The important word here is “auch.” Döblin’s response is placed by Benjamin in such a way that it refers to *both* of the former – extreme – positions, that of pure epic and pure novel. While Döblin might have thought generally of the novel in using the notion “epische[.] Arbeit,” now it refers to the complete circle

outlined by the confrontation of story and novel. This means, as a result, that Döblin's response, and what of it is realized in *Berlin Alexanderplatz*, represents the above-mentioned diagonal of the image space's force field, resulting from the clash of the two other powers. Döblin writes: "Sie werden die Hände über dem Kopf zusammenschlagen, wenn ich den Autoren rate, in der epischen Arbeit entschlossen lyrisch, dramatisch, ja reflexiv zu sein. Aber ich beharre dabei [*sic*]." (GS3, 232) What Benjamin characterizes with Döblin as 'lyric,' 'dramatic,' and 'reflexive' features – all of which are aspects that conflict with the traditional epic – points to a completely new and original quality that would truly transgress the epic as a whole. He hints at some characteristics of this new quality of the epic by referring to the technique of montage (GS3, 232), but he does not identify what exactly the result of the transgression of the epic would be, other than stating: "Die Montage sprengt den 'Roman,' sprengt ihn im Aufbau wie auch stilistisch, und eröffnet neue, sehr epische Möglichkeiten." (GS3, 232)

Benjamin closes his review of *Berlin Alexanderplatz* with a critical remark about the novel, which is exemplary for the crisis of the epic, as he perceives it. Ultimately, he argues, despite all avant-garde innovation, Döblin's novel returns to the genre's traditional structure, thereby representing the "education sentimentale" "des Ganoven" (GS3, 236). In the end, the hero of the novel returns to a petite bourgeois lifestyle, gives up his fight, becomes "schicksallos [*sic*]," and makes his peace with the world by restraining himself. This turn of the main character into a second nature is represented in the novel by adding a second first name to the hero's original name; at the end he is called Franz Karl. In a sense, therefore, *Berlin Alexanderplatz* can be outlined in such a way that it draws a parabolic line: at its apex, it is the most avant-garde, introducing

techniques like montage and hence transgressing the traditional epic (reinstating it within completely new and unprecedented configurations). At its end, however, the novel reveals its descent from traditional European and German forms like the *Bildungsroman*, but at the same time again marks the ineptitude of this form in facing the present crisis. The hero passes through a turbulent development that reveals the world of the oppressed class – but ultimately this evolution is terminated in a dead end: the contradictions are not resolved within the frame of the novel, which is ultimately bound to the bourgeois tradition. The hero fails and returns to his assigned place in society. Only by disassembling its own *form* can the novel point beyond its crisis to something new. Benjamin's book review – a critique therefore also in the best romantic tradition – works as a complement; it catalyzes and brings to appearance these intentions of Döblin's novel. All in all, however, this does not disarm the explosive meaning of the work; for Benjamin it is the pinnacle, the greatest achievement of the genre and at the same time its transgression: "Die äußerste, schwindelnde, letzte, vorgeschobenste Stufe des alten bürgerlichen Bildungsromans." (GS3, 236) – "Die Welt dieser Ganoven ist der Bürgerwelt homogen; Franz Biberkopfs Weg zum Zuhälter bis zum Kleinbürger beschreibt nur eine heroische Metamorphose des bürgerlichen Bewußtseins." (GS3, 235) Benjamin models the epic's transgression on the opposition between the extremes of pure novel and pure storytelling. This opposition he in turn demonstrates within the spatial composition of image and body space, the two categories which represent the spheres of contemplation and action. Any further investigation of the expected 'new epic possibilities' after the transgression of the epic must therefore include a response to the

relation and repositioning of contemplation and action – with a particular emphasis on the spatial characteristics of the resulting narrative.

CHAPTER V

THE STORYTELLER AS THEORIST: SPACE IN BENJAMIN'S WRITING

Benjamin's efforts to include the break in tradition within the reconstruction of the epic genre result in its transgression, or in his terms: surrender and salvation. He joined Döblin in expecting that something like the primordial or archaic force of the epic might be uncovered in this process. In Döblin's and Brecht's works, he found confirmation that the release of the epic faculty's essence would lead to new forms of representation if it were to be reconnected to other or modernized forms (epic theater, epic restitution through montage in *Berlin Alexanderplatz*). In order to reconstruct this transgression of the epic, Benjamin applied a complex dialectic of image and body space. The opposing extremes of this dialectic also reappear throughout his work as a dialectic of theory and praxis; the common denominator is the opposition of contemplation and action.

The concern of the present study now shifts to the consequences which the application of this dialectics has for Benjamin's own theoretical writing, and specifically for his book *Einbahnstraße*, written in 1928.⁹² How can writing be characterized in a way that goes beyond the mere employment of space as a metaphor, and instead aims to incorporate spatial principles – and hence action, performative aspects – into the textual

⁹² For an overview on Benjamin's book as "one of the very rare authentically surrealistic testimonies in Germany written between the two world wars," see Wolfgang Bock, "Lost Orders of the Day: Benjamin's *Einbahnstraße*," in *A Companion to the Works of Walter Benjamin*, ed. Rolf J. Goebel (Rochester and New York: Camden House, 2009), 71.

medium? What is *happening* in these texts that Benjamin calls *Denkbilder*?⁹³ In examples encountered so far, like “Der Strumpf,” it became clear that such texts unfold their intellectual potential only if certain thought patterns or thought movements are enacted in the mind’s eye. Benjamin’s images make extensive use of spatial arrangements to guide such imaginative processes, allowing for a non-linear approach beyond the sequential formula which the syntax of language otherwise dictates. With this approach, Benjamin breaks up traditional forms of logical sequencing, which usually proceed through a series of premises in order to be resolved in a conclusion. Abstract symbolic languages, for example, focus entirely on the linear aspects of thought processing when they break down text into variables, binary disjunctions, and conjunctions – thereby establishing thought in the form of a calculus.

Einbahnstraße addressed a broad public. After Benjamin’s habilitation treatise *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels* was declined in 1925, he focused on literary criticism in journals and in the daily press of the Weimar Republic. Applying an idiosyncratic approach to criticism that he first developed in his dissertation *Begriff der Kunstkritik in der deutschen Romantik* (1919), Benjamin used shorter text genres such as

⁹³ The fact that concepts of space are a crucial point of reference for Benjamin’s writing has of course long since been observed. See for example Susan Buck-Morss who presented one of the first comprehensive studies that interpreted and reconstructed Benjamin’s *Passagen-Werk* also along the lines of its obvious spatial composition. She argues that Benjamin’s work generally is aligned to places, that is to the cities of Berlin, Naples (on a north – south axis), and Paris, Moscow (on a west – east axis). Accordingly, she places the *Passagen-Werk* at the “null point” of this coordinate system and writes: “To the West is Paris, the origin of bourgeois society in the political-revolutionary sense; to the East, Moscow in the same sense marks its end. To the South, Naples locates the Mediterranean origins, the myth-enshrouded childhood of Western civilization; to the North, Berlin locates the myth enshrouded childhood of the author himself.” Susan Buck-Morss: *The Dialectics of Seeing. Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1991), 25. Observations like this one have been, without a question, seminal to reading Benjamin. In addition, I argue that Benjamin’s understanding and awareness for spatially constituted forms of representation has another level, where the textual medium is not only arranged according to actual places, but projects itself a space for thinking. In regard to Benjamin’s writing, space is not only a surface phenomenon, it is not only a topic and point of reference. Space in Benjamin is also a category according to which texts, and by extension the process of reading (i.e. understanding) are constructed.

the book review to advance his own theoretical ideas. Whereas these texts already consciously intervene in the public sphere, *Einbahnstraße* takes this to the next level. More than any of his other texts, with the exception, perhaps, of the essay on the reproducibility of artworks and the essay on surrealism, this book displays its political and aesthetic agenda openly. As a consequence, the dialectics of image and body space are more articulate in *Einbahnstraße* than in Benjamin's other works. Viewed from this perspective, later essays appear in some respects to be reflections on what he tried to do with this book.

Title and the original cover of *Einbahnstraße* lead the reader, right from the start, into the environment of the modern city by deploying streets and signs in their function of making these spaces accessible. The one-way traffic sign is the connection here. It links street and sign, thus giving the street a purpose and direction; a meaning, as it were. Benjamin transfers the function signs have in regard to organizing space to the composition of his book, hence into the medium of text. In *Einbahnstraße*, space is a compositional principle. From Sasha Stone's photomontage of streets, signs, and passersby on the book cover, to the book's motto confirming the identity of text and street by proclaiming "Diese Straße heißt Asja-Lacis-Straße" (GS4, 83) – from the arrangement of the many short texts resembling storefronts with signs on a long winding street to, eventually, the very form of these texts themselves: Benjamin's book is permeated with an awareness of spatiality. Where the temporality of history and the processual nature of thinking itself are arranged by images, spatial aspects become decisive.

In “Tankstelle,” the first text in *Einbahnstraße*, Benjamin is concerned with the small and hidden junctures in the “Konstruktion des Lebens,” the “Riesenapparat des gesellschaftlichen Lebens”: “man stellt sich nicht vor eine Turbine und übergießt sie mit Maschinenöl. Man spritzt ein wenig davon in verborgene Niete und Fugen, die man kennen muß.“ (GS4, 85) He puts the practice of socio-political critique into an image, which in turn ultimately is encoded within the medium of language. Based on this image space, action and contemplation emerge as two extremes of man’s faculties; hence *Einbahnstraße* suggests a tactic of “strengem Wechsel von Tun und Schreiben.” (GS4, 85) Benjamin, the “Strategie im Literaturkampf” (GS4, 108), identifies possible ways to reconfigure the spaces for political action, imagination, and consequently writing.

Literary short forms, he furthermore proposes, should be preferred over the book. Yet, from within this microscopic approach, the author again develops a universal perspective; only not as a gesture, but as a theoretical vision. By closing with the text “Zum Planetarium,” *Einbahnstraße* draws a line from an intimate perspective on the intricate details of the machine to the macroscopic and even cosmological implications of a reconfiguration of body and image space: “Menschen als Spezies stehen zwar seit Jahrzehntausenden am Ende ihrer Entwicklung; Menschheit als Spezies aber steht an deren Anfang.” (GS4, 147) With this outlook on the human condition as a culturally generated and hence changeable concept – “Menschheit” – rather than man as a biological and even racial category, the book ends. The starting point for reconfiguring body and image space is language. The full circle of *Einbahnstraße*, from “Tankstelle” to the cosmos, builds up the potential for beginning anew, thereby at the same time reaching beyond the lines of its own text.

The image spaces established throughout the book show how space changes from being a mere topic – or *topos* – to being a principle of the book’s literary composition, and finally to determining the forms of the texts themselves. As a topic or theme, urban space is actually almost absent from the various textual units. And this transition from space as place, where it is exterior to the text, to space as an inherent function of organizing thought, that is, ultimately as the realm for imagination, leads to the heart of the matter. Space thus changes from being the object of description to being the condition for producing and receiving text; the book therefore entails a different way of reading.

However, this only scratches the surface of what is at stake for Benjamin. In his small essay “Lehre vom Ähnlichen,” he observes how, throughout the evolution of man’s mimetic power, the faculty of “Produzieren von Ähnlichkeiten” (GS2, 204) has slowly retreated into the depths of language. While the objects of such mimetic powers had formerly been directly accessible to man’s five senses, Benjamin argues that now they can only indirectly be observed in the intricate and ultimately opaque structures of language. He maintains that “jene mimetische Begabung, welche früher das Fundament der Hellsicht gewesen ist” had, over a long period of time, slowly migrated into language and scripture, in which it created “das vollkommenste Archiv unsinnlicher Ähnlichkeit.” (GS2, 209) Benjamin concludes that therefore a modern, ‘profane’ understanding of reading continues to include this ‘magical’ side, which relies on our mimetic faculty. He is aware that processes of repression within the evolution of language are also reflected on the level of signs. In the course of the standardization and abstraction inherent in language, signs in and of themselves, as isolated elements, have lost virtually all significant meaning of their own; but within the nexus of words, sentences and text, they

serve to establish the complexities of communication. From this level of meaning on a higher order, however, we can never again reach back and regain a direct, sensual impression of the symbolic significance which signs might still have had in their origins. By purposely establishing image spaces within the text, Benjamin seeks to tap into language's 'archive of nonsensuous similarity,' thereby changing not so much the material conditions of writing but its mimetic conditions. In *Einbahnstraße*, the sign in all its ambiguity as signpost and linguistic sign, as image and abstraction, is the point of transition between street, text, and image.

The last passage of the entry with the heading "Chinawaren" begins: "Die Kraft der Landstraße ist eine andere, ob einer sie geht oder im Aeroplan drüber hinfliegt. So ist auch die Kraft eines Textes eine andere, ob einer ihn liest oder abschreibt." (GS4, 90) Here, Benjamin presents an impressive image space within which the street, or 'country road,' is put into juxtaposition with text in general. What looks on the surface of syntax to be a simple comparison, indicated throughout the text repeatedly by "so (ist)," actually implements an image that is configured by spatial parameters of closeness and distance, the extremes of geometric perspective. It is obvious, then, that a mere comparison of two different images is not sufficient to accommodate the full potential which Benjamin's construction harbors. The reader has to put more effort into his interpretation in order to plumb the text's depths. For the projection of space within the image is not only determined by the distance between airplane and ground, but more so by movements and entailing 'powers.' The space at hand is permeated by powers originating in two distinct movements. The verbs 'walking along it' and 'flying over it' determine the image space just as much as the nouns 'country road' and 'airplane.' In order to fully acknowledge the

depth of the image, therefore, the reader has to actively engage his or her imagination in order to follow the possible movements with the mind's eye. Moreover, the initial comparison reveals itself to be a complicated chiasmus between, on the one hand, the 'power of a country road,' which oscillates between 'walking' and 'flying,' and, on the other hand, the 'power of a text,' which oscillates between 'reading' and 'transcribing.' But there is no doubt that what is at stake here is the power of the text and the different possible ways to respond to it. Though the text deals with theoretical issues, the point Benjamin seeks to convey here cannot be discerned from an analysis of argumentative, logical structures alone.

The 'country road' text strives to evoke a situation in which body and image space may momentarily become congruent; that is, in which the reader may take action within the parameters provided by the image space. This Benjamin achieves by enabling the reader to have a genuine experience when he or she follows the movements encoded within the image space. The point of the text lies outside of its syntactical and lexical range of expression, and has to be (re-)discovered by each reader through a demanding imaginative procedure. The experience mentioned is tactile in nature; it prompts the inner eye of our imagination to fly above vast landscapes and walk through widely branched roads. The reader has to imaginatively engage actions connected to different parts of the image space: flying, walking, reading and transcribing. By doing so, he or she will need to apply all images and experiences available from memory. The 'power of the street' unfolds only for those who are willing to walk, or at least fly, above it, and who therefore relate to it in some tactile way. Benjamin links it to the "Kraft eines Textes," and thus creates a correlation whereby the powers evoked translate into an experience from within

memory, the medium for imagination. His construction aims to enable the reader to test and change the way that he or she responds to text; that is, to change his attitude towards the medium. The image space therefore also represents a field of possibilities in which new ways of responding to texts may appear between ‘reading’ and ‘transcribing.’

Ultimately, Benjamin’s goal is to generate spatial awareness within the medium of text.

“So kommandiert allein der abgeschriebene Text die Seele dessen, der mit ihm beschäftigt ist, während der bloße Leser die neuen Ansichten seines Innern nie kennen lernt, wie der Text, jene Straße durch den immer wieder sich verdichtenden inneren Urwald, sie bahnt: weil der Leser der Bewegung seines Ich im freien Luftbereich der Träumerei gehorcht, der Abschreiber aber sie kommandieren läßt.“ (GS4, 90) – This long-winded sentence, with its strange, quirky syntax and rather difficult pronoun references bordering on the verge of ungrammaticality, concludes the foregoing juxtaposition of street and text. In a way, its syntax mirrors and demonstrates the street’s ‘command’ – that is, how our attention as readers may be forced even by the surface representation of text. Through references and interjected phrases, Benjamin’s sentence mimics the way our attention would also be determined by the turns of streets we are walking. Yet Benjamin’s reflections on spatial awareness within a text run deeper than its surface. Transcribing a text, in contrast to merely reading it, Benjamin writes, ‘commands’ the soul of those dealing with it, just as – to stay in the image – walking through streets provides a more intimate experience of the surroundings than flying above them. In other words, this possible extreme response to a text ensures that it completely takes control of the reader, maybe even beyond his or her awareness. With transcribing vs. reading, as with walking vs. flying, Benjamin establishes extreme positions. In a sense, transcribing a

text takes the reading process to such extremes that it in fact nearly transforms into its opposite: writing.

At the same time, both extreme oppositions are established by spatial, tactile means: through closeness to their objects (transcribing, walking) vs. distance (reading, flying). It is in between these extreme positions that a field of possibilities emerges. This field's vertices (corner points), its geometric extremes, are defined by the activities of reading, transcribing, walking, and flying. The area in between is infused with powers – or possibilities – that allow the reader to reposition himself and to re-align the categories at stake. Indeed, the aforementioned 'power of a country road' and 'power of a text' work like vectors in a geometric grid defining a parallelogram of forces. Benjamin himself mentions the latter term in his essay "Theorien des deutschen Faschismus" (1930), using it to arrange the concepts of nature, nation, and war. The bottom line is that the 'country road' text itself applies spatial categories in order to convey a point *precisely about* spatial awareness in reading.

The key is to learn about "neue[] Ansichten seines Innern"; therefore to add perspective to one's inner realm, where imagination and memory dwell. Benjamin's theory of reading aims to introduce spatial awareness within this inner realm and to enable the reader to literally *move* inside the image space encoded in language. In Benjamin's image, a text once more becomes a street that brings about these new perspectives and cuts through the "immer wieder sich verdichtenden inneren Urwald." Not only is the jungle a common image in Benjamin's repertoire, referring to man as nature's creature and to the irrational powers of myth and illusion; the image at hand also corresponds to the book's motto, in which its author states that 'this street,' which is the

text of the book, carries the name of Asja Lacis, “nach der die sie / als Ingenieur / im Autor durchgebrochen hat.” *Einbahnstraße* as a project converges with the theory of reading which has been presented.

According to Benjamin, one is more detached from a text when it is read than when it is transcribed. Whereas the reader has enough distance from the text to gain free resources, which may cause him to get caught up “im freien Luftbereich der Träumerei,” those who transcribe it would be commanded by its flow, just as the turns of streets dictate where one may go. Furthermore, in the ‘country road’ text, different aspects of spatially aware forms of representation intersect each another. The channeling of spatial awareness that occurs throughout *Einbahnstraße*, hence seems to crystallize in this text. On the one hand, the interpretation formulated here is only possible if the reader is willing to engage creatively with the text’s inherent spatial qualities through the use of imagination. On the other hand, this spatial awareness is exactly what the text seeks to establish and support in the first place. Benjamin’s text arrives at its conclusion by applying the very method that the conclusion demonstrates. The reader has to jump into this circular structure in order to engage with a spatially guided process of understanding.

The last lines of the ‘country road’ text are telling in this regard, and reveal that Benjamin knew very well what he was demanding from his reader: “Das chinesische Bücherkopieren war daher die unvergleichliche Bürgschaft literarischer Kultur und Abschrift ein Schlüssel zu Chinas Rätseln.“ (GS4, 90) The technique of transcribing is the only way to understand China’s enigmas, meaning that, read in any other way, they would remain incomprehensible. The point here is (or one of the witticisms Benjamin promised to put into *Einbahnstraße*) that Benjamin places the text under the rubric of

“Chinawaren.” Therefore its meaning, Benjamin tells us, can only be deciphered if we master the lesson of the text itself; that is, if we are willing to step into its projected image space. Out of this circular construction, a theory of spatially aware reading and understanding emerges, in alternation of reading and action so to speak, applicable not only to *Einbahnstraße*, but throughout Benjamin’s whole range of writings.

With “Chinawaren,” Benjamin provides a theory of spatial reading and understanding; the text’s performative aspects unfold within a dialectic of body and image space where, in a constant process of juxtaposing, action is momentarily mirrored in the sphere of contemplation. These texts aim to be the one hundred percent image space which he later, in the essay on surrealism, will demand with an outspoken political edge. In order to follow this lead further, the text “Kaiserpanorama” from *Einbahnstraße* is pivotal. In “Chinawaren,” the dialectic of contemplation and action shows a decline in the former; Benjamin’s goal is to demonstrate how the image space constructed by his text is able to incorporate – momentarily – the body space, in which action has its beginning. The topic of “Kaiserpanorama,” in contrast, is the crisis of the 1920s. It seeks to bring the image of the crisis itself into a crisis, to a point where this breakdown almost forces an action outside of the medium’s reach – that is, one carried out by the reader. In this sense the two texts have opposite directions.

“Kaiserpanorama” is the heading of a text consisting of fourteen subsections, one of the earliest contributions to the book, with early versions dating back to 1923 at the height of the German hyperinflation.⁹⁴ As one of the many signs along the street that

⁹⁴ Michael Jennings, “Trugbild der Stabilität. Weimarer Politik und Montage-Theorie in Benjamins ‘Einbahnstraße,’” in *Global Benjamin: Internationaler Walter-Benjamin-Kongress 1992*, ed. Klaus Garber and Ludger Rehm (Munich: W. Fink, 1999), 518.

Benjamin intended the book to be, “Kaiserpanorama” points to a location where the reader expects to find the historical device with the same name: an entertainment medium for the masses of the late nineteenth century in the German *Kaiserreich*. “Meine Lebensaufgabe,” the inventor of the *Kaiserpanorama*, August Fuhrman, wrote in 1909, “war es, das sehenswerteste der Erde stereoskopisch aufnehmen zu lassen, in geordneten Reise- und Städte-Zyklen vorzuführen und durch einen möglichst niedrigen Eintrittspreis den Schulkindern und der großen Menge der Bevölkerung, allen Kindern unbemittelter Eltern und Waisen aber unentgeltlich zugänglich zu machen.”⁹⁵ The machine Fuhrman created was a large cylindrical construction with a number of viewing positions built into it on all sides. In Benjamin’s “Kaiserpanorama” fourteen images slowly pass in front of the observer, presenting a panoramic view of the Weimar Republic: “*Reise durch die deutsche Inflation*” (GS4, 94). The mechanical device, a precursor of modern cinema, was essentially a stereoscope. It offered the audience a virtual journey through a series of specifically prepared three-dimensional images. The viewer enjoyed the optical illusion of a particular scene, and after a certain time a mechanism would rotate the entire cylindrical interior, bringing the next panorama before the viewer.⁹⁶

Historically, the expansion of optical possibilities through instruments coincides with the advent of modernity, capitalism, and industrialization. This development may

⁹⁵ August Fuhrmann. Taken from Michael Bienert and Erhard Senf, *Berlin wird Metropole. Fotografien aus dem Kaiser-Panorama* (Berlin, Brandenburg: be.bra Verlag, 2000), bookcover. Likely: August Fuhrmann, *Goldenes Buch der Zentrale für Kaiser-Panoramen* (Berlin: Eigenverlag, 1909).

⁹⁶ For details on the mechanism, see Erhard Senf, “Das Fuhrmann’sche Kaiser-Panorama,” in *Berlin wird Metropole*, ed. Michael Bienert and Erhard Senf, p. 10. August Fuhrmann was not the inventor of stereoscopic images, but the particular device and name “Kaiser-Panorama” originated with him (ibid., p. 12). – Susan Buck-Morss compares the experience of the virtual journey provided by the *Kaiserpanorama* to the image space of *Einbahnstraße*: “The experience corresponded to that of moving along a street of commodity display windows.” Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing*, 82.

well lead back as far as Galileo Galilei, whose use of ground lenses as a telescope resulted in a fundamental shift of perspective on the place of our world within the universe. With the introduction and refinement of photography in the second half of the nineteenth century, there was a veritable explosion of unusual optical instruments, tested in all possible variations and let loose on an insatiable public. For the people of the nineteenth century, it must indeed have seemed that the visual was a newly discovered realm. These discoveries, however, came at a price: man seemed to have forfeited the ability to believe his own eyes.⁹⁷ Nietzsche's exclamation: "*with the real world we have also done away with the apparent one!*"⁹⁸ corresponds to modernity's newfound technological potentials. The *Kaiserpanorama* was but one particular enterprising implementation out of a range of similar optical technologies. In the *Passagen-Werk*, Benjamin mentions an impressive list of similar devices: "Es gab Panoramén, Dioramén, Kosmoramén, Diaphanoramén, Navalaramén, Pleoramén [...], Fantoscope, Fantasma-Parastasién, Expériences fantasmagoriques, malerische Reisen im Zimmer, Georamén; Optische Pittoresken, Cinéoramén, Phanoramén, Stereoramén, Cykloramén, Panorama dramatique." (GS5, 655) Under the lead of August Fuhrmann, the *Kaiserpanorama*'s boom lasted until the 1920s. In 1923 Fuhrmann abandoned his business; he died in 1925.⁹⁹

⁹⁷ On the history of the various types of panoramas since 1792 from an international perspective, on their role as a forerunner of cinema, and especially on the "issue of illusionism and the blurring of the line between art and reality," see Angela Miller, "The Panorama, the Cinema, and the Emergence of the Spectacular," *Wide Angle* 18, no. 2 (1996): 41.

⁹⁸ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols or How to Philosophize with a Hammer* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 20.

⁹⁹ Senf, "Das Fuhrmann'sche Kaiser-Panorama," esp. 13-15.

The *Kaiserpanorama* is one of the more harmless offspring of these times of technologically spurred megalomania. In retrospect it becomes a signature of the conditions of Wilhelmenian German society. These optical displays, entrepreneurial ventures as much as fulfillments of existing demands, usually presented pictures of remote and exotic places that most of their audience could only dream of ever actually visiting. Later, they displayed pictures of the lost war.¹⁰⁰ In any case, the *Kaiserpanorama* offered a journey through remote landscapes whose reality could never be verified; it presented wish-images of and for a society in transition. Seen in this light, the exhibition of unreachable places full of paradisaical allusions appears to be a substitute for the empire's failed colonization and war efforts. The *Kaiserpanorama* was a technological apparatus that provided the people with a glimpse into a realm of alternative realities. Later in his exposé for the *Passagen-Werk*, Benjamin would emphasize how the panoramas, specifically through their technology, expressed an "Ausdruck eines neuen Lebensgefühls." (GS5, 48) But they also reveal a gap between technological progress and the moral ability to come to terms with that progress, a gap that Benjamin found to be characteristic of modernity.¹⁰¹ Furthermore, the *Kaiserpanorama* as it represents the empire marks a threshold and tension between equal longings for the past and the future, between restorative and modernizing forces. The German Empire itself sought to make the transition into the modernity of the twentieth

¹⁰⁰ For details, see Senf, "Das Fuhrmann'sche Kaiser-Panorama," 9.

¹⁰¹ For example, in *Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner Reproduzierbarkeit*: "Sie [Steigerung der technischen Behelfe] findet sie [unnatürliche Verwertung der Produktivkräfte] im Kriege, der mit seinen Zerstörungen den Beweis dafür antritt, daß die Gesellschaft nicht reif genug war, sich die Technik zu ihrem Organ zu machen, daß die Technik nicht ausgebildet genug war, die gesellschaftlichen Elementarkräfte zu bewältigen." (GS1, 507)

century without letting go of age-old traditions. The discharge of these tensions between a radical conservatism and the adoption of modern technology was very visible in the battles of the First World War. Correspondingly, the *Kaiserpanorama* is a link between traditions of landscape photography and modern cinema. It is thus a perfect image space for representing the *Kaiserreich*, and its longing: forever caught between “no longer” and “not yet.” As a cultural medium, these panoramas were inadequate to provide a platform for the German public to evaluate and criticize the quickly progressing technological possibilities, just as the empire missed the opportunity to integrate the bourgeoisie. For Benjamin, the *Kaiserpanorama*’s images betrayed the dream of the empire’s self-image and image of the world while it was struggling to make the transition to modernity. The empire failed, as did the *Kaiserpanorama*, which was quickly outdated by cinema.

Within the *Kaiserpanorama* as an image, the past is spatialized: “raumgewordene Vergangenheit.” (GS5, 1041) For the people of the 1920s, who were already accustomed to the new medium of film, reading about the *Kaiserpanorama* must have awakened memories of their recent past: their childhoods around 1900. It could actually render the past *as* images. But more importantly, in *Einbahnstraße* Benjamin deploys the term “Kaiserpanorama” as a sign to indicate a location. Yet the text underneath this heading does not in any way provide what one might expect: there is no description of a *Kaiserpanorama* following. Nonetheless, the heading, sign, or even *inscriptio*, if viewed as an emblem, evokes memories of the *Kaiserpanorama*, and hence the recent past. Thus, parallel to signifying a location that remains a virtual placeholder, the heading is a temporal index or pointer. This past, in turn, the *Kaiserpanorama* retrieves as image space, since of course it is itself now merely a memory. Benjamin maintains, therefore,

that through memory as a medium, the past may be retrieved as image space; temporal indices appear as locations. In this way, the image of the *Kaiserpanorama* preconfigures memory as space. Benjamin's "Kaiserpanorama" truly creates its location – by retrieving the past as image: "Aquarien der Ferne und Vergangenheit" (GS4, 240).¹⁰²

And yet the fourteen sections following the heading are also not at all concerned with the past. On the contrary, they take up contemporary topics from the late 1920s. The subtitle of the text, "*Reise durch die deutsche Inflation*" (GS4, 94) works like a transition, since, with the theme of a 'tour,' it retains the logic of the *Kaiserpanorama*. In a similar fashion, Benjamin's proposed journey through German inflation is a virtual journey. He does not present a literal journey through Germany at the time of the inflation. Rather, his text concerns the Germans' state of mind in the face of economic instability. Hence, the text's complex arrangement juxtaposes the *Kaiserpanorama*, which constantly generates the past as image space, with an issue present in the public discourse and the daily press. Benjamin puts the experience of life under the conditions of crisis behind the imaginary lens of the *Kaiserpanorama*.

First, this affects the temporal perception of the text. Even though it deals with current issues, these are now filtered, as it were, through a lens that makes them appear as if they belonged already to the remembered past. The heading "Kaiserpanorama" implies that what follows in the main text is similar in its historicity to the images shown in the original *Kaiserpanorama*. Thus the title bestows on the text the impression of historicity and atavism. In the 1920s, Benjamin notes in *Berliner Kindheit* that "die

¹⁰² This Benjamin writes in his second text, entitled *Kaiserpanorama*, from his autobiographical collection of short prose texts, *Berliner Kindheit um neunzehnhundert* (1932-1934/ 1938). In that text, he actually describes the device of the panoramas itself from his childhood memories and elaborates on some of its mnemonic effects.

Kaiserpanoramen” were still around, “als die Mode [ihnen] schon den Rücken kehrte.” (GS 4 239) In the age of cinema, they were regarded as old-fashioned, as were the images they displayed. Benjamin’s strategy, therefore, is the antithesis of what he identified in his essay on “Der Erzähler” as the main purpose of the press and its information: to get closer to things. (GS 2 443-445) Instead, by presenting his topic in outdated categories, Benjamin increases the distance from it: a change of spatial as well as temporal perspective. This way of consciously manipulating the relationship between observer and object recalls Brecht’s epic theater. There, too, the object of interest becomes *verfremdet*, alienated, which means nothing other than creating a perceivable gap between audience and play, so that spectators and actors alike may adopt a critical and scrutinizing attitude towards it. In epic theater, the location for this is obvious: the stage and the auditorium, whose age-old traditional setting, Brecht realized, had to be reconceived. For Benjamin, spatial relations play an equally important role, but his medium of choice is always text. The image space of “Kaiserpanorama” hence becomes the stage – or in the words of *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels* (1928) the “Schauplatz” (GS 1 271) – where the conditions that determine how reader and text meet can be reconfigured.

Second, Benjamin’s decision to relocate his ‘report’ or ‘travelogue’ on the German hyperinflation within the setting of the *Kaiserpanorama* is at the same time a hermeneutic strategy to make visible and criticize the closed circle in which he found the Germans’ perception of the crisis trapped. The particular characteristics of the *Kaiserpanorama* as a mechanical device determine a certain system of perception involving illusion and perspective. In a sense, the apparatus creates its spectator. This system of perception in turn converges with Benjamin’s observation and criticism of the

state of mind that the German bourgeois exhibited in the face of the deteriorating situation. In this configuration, then, crisis and perception of crisis are short-circuited in one circular structure.

In “trostlose[r] Distanz” (GS4, 97), Benjamin mobilizes the ‘distancing effect’ of his images. Following another German literary tradition, Benjamin’s text resembles a strange, avant-garde adoption of the genre of the “Sittengemälde.” Fourteen such ‘paintings’ are presented in his “Kaiserpanorama.” Their themes circle around the moral disposition of the German bourgeois populace. The “Lebensart des deutschen Bürgers,” Benjamin writes, is constituted by an amalgam of “Dummheit und Feigheit” (GS4, 94). Eventually, the imminent danger of catastrophe in the Weimar Republic, aggravated by a “hilflose Fixierung an die Sicherheits- und Besitzvorstellungen der vergangenen Jahrzehnte,” concludes for Benjamin in the consummate “Bild der Dummheit” (GS4, 96). With this formulation, he explicitly connects the image character of his mode of representation with his assessment of the condition of the “Sittlichen,” the moral sphere. (GS4, 96). The images of Benjamin’s “Sittengemälde,” however, are arranged within the setting provided by the *Kaiserpanorama*. In section VI, the ‘distancing effect’ he thus applies is clearly visible: “Dem Ausländer, welcher die Gestaltung des deutschen Lebens obenhin verfolgt, der gar das Land kurze Zeit bereist hat, erscheinen seine Bewohner nicht minder fremdartig als ein exotischer Volksschlag.” (GS4, 97) From the suggested external perspective, German conditions appear ‘no less bizarre’ than the outdated images of the *Kaiserpanorama*. Benjamin characterizes the Germans themselves – and therefore the potential reader of *Einbahnstraße* – as prisoners of this image space, or more

precisely of the *Schauplatz* outlined by the ‘mode of life’ of these people: ‘squalor, and stupidity.’

Certain aspects of the *Kaiserpanorama* are more extreme than those of cinema. The reason for this is the exclusiveness (*Abgeschlossenheit*) of the image space into which it draws the observer.¹⁰³ Projection device, images, and their frames are completely isolated from the viewer and the outside world. In *Berliner Kindheit*, Benjamin remembers how the paying customers, sitting in front of a curved “Schauwand“ on “Sitzgelegenheiten davor,” had to peer through “je ein Fensterpaar in [eine schwachgetönte Ferne” (GS4, 239) inside the device. The “Fensterpaar,” however, was rather a small eyepiece containing lenses. In other words, the *Kaiserpanorama* did not really provide an auditorium: everybody had to submit to an apparatus that completely determined the rules by which its images could be viewed. In contrast to cinema, the images of a *Kaiserpanorama* are not projected on a screen but merely enhanced according to stereoscopic techniques. The observer, therefore, cannot put the single images shown inside the machine into any larger context through the aid of surroundings. It is not possible to give a frame to the images, since the viewing mechanism does not allow for an outside perspective. More so than in cinema or traditional theater, the spectator is necessarily integrated into the machine and its functioning. The moment the spectator looks through the lens, he or she fuses with the

¹⁰³ This “illusionistic representation” can be observed already in the earliest panoramas, gigantic 360-degree images into which the spectator literally had to climb: “The design of early circular panoramas was calculated to conceal this process of production; all reference to a space beyond or outside of the ocular arena of the panoramic vista was masked off through curtains that blocked out natural light as well as the frame of the building itself. Spectators wound their way up a dimly lit staircase before emerging onto the viewing platform, where the scene appeared with the revelatory force of the real.” Miller, “The Panorama, the Cinema, and the Emergence of the Spectacular,” 43.

apparatus. This is also suggested by the posture of the spectators, who cannot relax in their seats but have to position their bodies so as to be able to hold their eyes in front of the viewing glasses. In cinema and theater, the audience shares the common space of an auditorium. The viewing screen or the stage takes up a certain section of the field of vision, but never completely consumes it. In contrast, the effect of the *Kaiserpanorama* is to absorb the observer's awareness completely: the three-dimensional images allow him or her to feel as if he or she were part of the scenario. Separated from the surrounding world, the awareness of the spectator of the *Kaiserpanorama* is compelled to engage with the image shown. Even though the machinery implements a complicated method of perspective to create the illusion of three-dimensionality and spatial awareness, for the observer this means precisely the abolishment of real perspective. The possible ways to look at the images are restricted to one: the viewer's gaze may only go directly from the lens of the machine, which is almost a replacement for the eye, directly to the image. In all the putative grandeur and luminance, the visitor of the *Kaiserpanorama* is left utterly alone and isolated.

Appearances can be deceptive. The German expression *Schein* combines different notions, amongst them 'appearance,' 'brightness' or 'glow,' and 'light,' with a strong sense of 'illusiveness' and 'illusoriness.' Contrary to the role of illumination in the tradition of enlightenment, *Schein* does not generate clarity, but rather obscures its object under a veil of dazzlement and ambiguity. *Schein* stands in contradiction to *Sein*; that is, to the assumed essence of being. *Schein* suggests that the observer is distracted from perceiving the 'actual' reality or 'essence' of an object. Speaking of *Schein* implies that there is something behind what we perceive that is invisible at the moment. On the one

hand, the *Kaiserpanorama* shares with the metaphysical semantics of *Schein* the implication that appearances are generated. The stereoscopic mechanism of the *Kaiserpanorama* combines two slightly displaced flat images to create the illusion of one three-dimensional image. This, in turn, is nothing but an imitation of how our visual perception naturally works: stereoscopic (from Greek *στερεός*: solid, three-dimensional) awareness. On the other hand, the *Kaiserpanorama* masterfully conceals precisely those structures which bring about the perceived appearance in the first place: it hides its own mechanism; that is, the structural conditions of its images. It is therefore an exemplary expression of *Schein*, and, in a way, its mechanized materialization – the mechanical reproduction of *Schein*.

Schein in Benjamin becomes a social practice. Especially in the 1930s and in his studies for the *Arcades Project*, Benjamin attempted to ground the concept of *Schein* in social causes, and more precisely: in the advent of capitalism and its determination of the world of things according to the form of commodities. For Benjamin, commodities become a central source of *Schein* or “Phantasmagorie.” (GS5, 55)¹⁰⁴ In *Einbahnstraße*, there are already subtle indications of this interpretation of *Schein*: “Unmöglich, in einer deutschen Großstadt zu leben, in welcher der Hunger die Elendsten zwingt, von den Scheinen zu leben, mit denen die Vorübergehenden eine Blöße zu decken suchen, die sie verwundet.” (GS4, 96) Benjamin makes use of the German expression for banknote – *Geldschein* or, in short, *Schein* – in order to draw attention to the illusionary force within money as the principal form of transaction (one might almost say: communication). He

¹⁰⁴ See also *Einbahnstraße*: “Wie alle Dinge in einem unaufhaltsamen Prozeß der Vermischung und Verunreinigung um ihren Wesensausdruck kommen und sich Zweideutiges an die Stelle des Eigentlichen setzt, so auch die Stadt.” (GS4, 100)

intentionally plays with the ambiguity of *Schein*; for the wretched, Benjamin writes, are forced to live from the *Scheine* the passersby donate, while the very act of charity serves at the same time to cover the ‘nakedness’ of those equally forced to give. Charity and pity are revealed to be a *Schein* to cover the ‘wound’ that opens in everybody – the poor as well as the wealthy – in the face of modern misery. Money, Benjamin states, has become the “Mittelpunkt aller Lebensinteressen,” therefore establishing a “Schranke [...], vor der fast alle menschliche Beziehung versagt.” In the course of this development, he continues, “das unreflektierte Vertrauen” – that is, trust which is not blurred by additional reflection – has vanished from the ‘moral sphere.’ (GS4, 96)

Benjamin considered the newspaper a medium for the ‘literary struggle’ (GS4, 108). He was a frequent contributor to the Weimar Republic’s leading newspapers; slightly more than half of the texts collected for *Einbahnstraße* had appeared in newspapers throughout the 1920s.¹⁰⁵ He did not, however, write in an ordinary journalistic style of the day. His journalistic practice rejects the information-based, non-committed, so-called ‘objective’ and ‘neutral’ forms of the press and what could be called politically engaged literary forms of representation. In this way, the style of Benjamin’s “Kaiserpanorama,” though it may raise expectations that it will present a political commentary or even a travelogue, is also set apart from common feuilleton writing. Whereas the information delivered by the press creates “Scheinursachen” and “Scheinflagen,” (GS4, 97) Benjamin applies complex literary strategies in order to debunk and dismantle the societal system of *Schein*. It follows that the *Schauplatz* of this struggle becomes the ‘phrase’ – already identified as a main point of contention by Karl

¹⁰⁵ See also Jennings, “Trugbild der Stabilität,” 518.

Kraus and his battle against the press. Phrases – locutions – such as “Armut schändet nicht” (GS4, 96) take on stereoscopic functions and emanate *Schein*. Benjamin now sees his task in turning around these phrases in order to point them against themselves: “Ganz wohl. Doch sie schänden den Armen. Sie tun’s und sie trösten ihn mit dem Sprüchlein.” (GS4, 96) Turns of phrase – “Redewendungen” (GS4, 94) – occur frequently in everyday contexts and can be described as linguistic shortcuts to initiate complex communicative gestures that cannot be interpreted directly from their elements. They have the status of speech acts. Turns of phrase in Benjamin’s text become another incarnation of the *Kaiserpanorama* in that they generate an illusion, sometimes expressed, for example, in an image that hides their socio-historical conditions.

Benjamin turns – *wenden* – *Redewendungen* against themselves, against their own *Rede*. The two parts of the compound, *Rede* and *Wendung*, have a different literal meaning than what they mean in combination. *Wendung*, meaning literally ‘turn’ or ‘twist,’ though, may also itself take the meaning of ‘collocation’ or ‘inflection.’ Here is the point where Benjamin carries action into text: to turn around and look behind the veil of illusion, debunking the construction that brings it about. He does this by purposely confusing categories: though he takes the phrase *Wendung* to have the meaning it commonly has in the sphere of action, he insists on applying this connotation in the sphere of text and image, where it is usually taken metaphorically. *Wenden* as a verb has a pronounced spatial context; it concerns the body space and its possible movements.

Thus in *Einbahnstraße* the turns of street and text coincide. In his 1929 essay on *Surrealism*, Benjamin suggests that in the context of the political struggle the “moralische Metapher” (GS2, 309) had to be banished from the realm of the political. According to

the essay, this could be achieved by rejecting the ‘as if’ from speech and calling for an ‘organization of pessimism.’¹⁰⁶ This, he continues, would lead to a congruency of body and image space: “Erst wenn in ihr [Technik] sich Leib und Bildraum so tief durchdringen, daß alle revolutionäre Spannung leibliche kollektive Innervation, alle leiblichen Innervationen des Kollektivs revolutionäre Entladung werden, hat die Wirklichkeit so sehr sich selbst übertroffen, wie das kommunistische Manifest es fordert.” (GS2, 310) Thus Benjamin juxtaposes the body space projected from the term “turn” that expresses physical, spatial possibilities with the image space not only of the specific term, but of applied turns of phrases. For Benjamin, technology, too, is initially an area of language, for example through montage, which appears in his writings as the principle of technicality transferred into art and language. Montage displays the construction of the artwork. In a review of Paul Scheerbarth’s fictional works, he points to the fact that the author backed up his vision of a utopian species that intellectually and spiritually overcomes technology (GS2, 619) by inventing a new language for his characters. – Benjamin’s use of figures of speech in this sense is the attempt to dismantle metaphor as such. As a result, he carries action into the textual medium: the text becomes political in the strictest sense of the word. It literally takes action by ‘turning against’ parts of its own speech.

“In dem Schatze jener Redewendungen, mit welchen die aus Dummheit und Feigheit zusammengeschnittene Lebensart des deutschen Bürgers sich alltäglich verrät, ist die von der bevorstehenden Katastrophe – indem es ja ‘nicht mehr so weitergehen’

¹⁰⁶ The notes to the essay show that Benjamin took this phrase from Pierre Naville: “La révolution et les intellectuels.” Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, vol. 2, ed. Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1999), 218.

könne – besonders denkwürdig. (GS4, 94). Only because Benjamin puts the locution into unusual constellations within the context of “Kaiserpanorama” does it turn against its own conditions and become de-familiarized. The phrase “things can’t go on like this” does not simply slip into Benjamin’s text. Rather, the author makes sure that it appears as if quoted from the collective treasure of locutions and deliberately put on display. He goes to some lengths to let the phrase stand out in the text. Two typographical frames: hyphens to create a parenthesis, and quotation marks, suspend it within the flow of text. Eventually, the phrase appears to be a foreign object in the text. Suddenly it becomes unfamiliar, as if dragged out into the spotlight. The reader’s attention now shifts to questioning the structural conditions and function of the phrase outside of its long-established modes of application in general speech: what does it mean, anyway?

The inability and unwillingness to critically reflect upon and determine the reasons for current conditions that provoke the phrase “impending catastrophe” are what Benjamin calls ‘stupidity and cowardice.’ He holds a “hilflose Fixierung an die Sicherheits- und Besitzvorstellungen der vergangenen Jahrzehnte” (GS4, 94) responsible. This, he continues, prevents people from perceiving (Benjamin: “apperzipieren”) “die höchst bemerkenswerten Stabilitäten ganz neuer Art, welche der gegenwärtigen Situation zugrunde liegen” (GS4, 94). Among the past memories called up by the *Kaiserpanorama*, which are always dream and wish images of ‘the good times’ that never were, property relations inherited from the past generate a belief in ‘relative stabilization,’ which then turns into the claim for stability per se. Everything that disrupts and interferes with this deeply rooted urge for stability and security is then consequently considered ‘instability.’ In other words: the illusion or image of stability has become an ideology, which is to say,

the image's logic determines reason. With this veil of desire and fear in place, the increasing moral and economic impoverishment of modern society can no longer be recognized as what it is: actual stability, "stabilisierte[s] Elend" (GS4, 94-95). Instead, people take any indication of these very real conditions – for example, the beggar out on the streets – as the threatening exception. The apocalyptic belief, then, in an "impending catastrophe" as the *ultima ratio* and only conceivable emergency exit is the result of an interplay, or reciprocal reflection, of perceived stabilities, entailing the collective stock of dreams, and factual – unperceived – stabilities. The real challenge is to leave this infinite circle of reflections that, as if in a hall of mirrors, can only result in utter annihilation (GS4, 95). Locutions are a surface indicator of this process of collective fear and self-delusion. Like the mirrors in the hall of mirrors, or like the apparatus of the *Kaiserpanorama*, they serve to deceive. Benjamin reveals the locution to be an instance of *Schein* that originates in the consolidated socio-historical conditions of existing property relations. *Schein* in this context means nothing else than the inability to perceive the conditions of what is being perceived. The phrase "it can't go on like this" and its implicit expectation and even longing for a catastrophe are an expression and effect of this illusion, and at the same time perpetually regenerate it. From the perspective of the 1920s German bourgeoisie, the economic crisis is the exception to an otherwise seemingly guaranteed stability of 'how things used to be.' And this 'how things used to be' alternates seamlessly with a self-induced 'how things should be.' When representatives of this bourgeoisie now declare that, 'after all, it cannot go on like this,' this phrase is precisely the turning point where they give themselves away. Benjamin's construction in "Kaiserpanorama" operates on the premise that even though people

‘believe’ that the crisis is the exception, really the circumstances of the factual world have already established the crisis as the real stable factor, making the phrase possible in the first place. The locution knows more about the condition of the world than those who exclaim it.

Einbahnstraße prepares for a *mental* state of emergency. In “Kaiserpanorama,” Benjamin attempts to dismantle the mechanism that generates belief in the catastrophe. He turns the figure of speech around and against itself: “Aber stabile Verhältnisse brauchen nie und nimmer angenehme Verhältnisse zu sein und schon vor dem Kriege gab es Schichten, für welche die stabilisierten Verhältnisse das stabilisierte Elend waren. Verfall ist um nichts weniger stabil, um nichts wunderbarer als Aufstieg.“ (GS4, 94-95) This is, first of all, a drastic change of perspective on the matter at hand. The viewpoint changes towards those who have to suffer from the prevalent conditions. Benjamin reveals the state of crisis and perpetual misery of the have-nots as the other side of the coin that is otherwise called stability. He goes on to designate whatever can halt the ongoing state of demise, whatever can break the spell of what he would even years later in the notes entitled *Zentralpark* (1938, 1939) identify as the “Katastrophe in Permanenz” (GS1, 660), as the utterly extraordinary, “ein fast ans Wunderbare und Unbegreifliche grenzendes Außerordentliches” (GS4, 95). Thus at this point, ‘catastrophe’ encompasses both perspectives: the factual crisis and its delusional repression. The panoramic, all-encompassing horizon of Benjamin’s “Kaiserpanorama” is complete.

Benjamin’s next move is complicated and not easy to see at first. In order to break with the reflective circle of *Schein* cast over the awareness of the current conditions, he evokes a state of emergency (*Ausnahmezustand*). This state of emergency, however, is

not brought about within the text; rather, Benjamin's "Kaiserpanorama" merely prepares for it in the text. In a way, he therefore demands an 'intellectual' state of emergency, instead of a political. It seems that this is the only small hope the text provides for ending the circle of permanent catastrophe: preparing the grounds for a mental state of emergency. As a consequence, there is no immediate, manifest solution to the question of the postulated "marvelous and incomprehensible" in the text itself. Benjamin turns the implications of the "catastrophe in permanence" around. Again, it can be said that here the text itself momentarily has the primacy of action, "interpenetrating" the image space, thereby letting a certain perspective, nothing but a vague possibility, flash up: to break with the spirit of the crisis. "So bleibt nichts, als in der immerwährenden Erwartung des letzten Sturmangriffs auf nichts, als das Außerordentliche, das allein noch retten kann, die Blicke zu richten. Dieser geforderte Zustand angespanntester klagloser Aufmerksamkeit aber könnte, da wir in einem geheimnisvollen Kontakt mit den uns belagernden Gewalten stehen, das Wunder wirklich herbeiführen." (GS4, 95) Benjamin suggests that from within the perceived permanence of the crisis (or in other words, from within the image space of the "Kaiserpanorama," which constricts the power of awareness), people should deliberately, voluntarily turn their eyes towards whatever is the *Außerordentliches*. But the extraordinary here is precisely learning how to step outside the circle of the permanent crisis. Thus, to learn to *turn* the eyes around – in order to change perspective – and to achieve the extraordinary are the same. Benjamin's "Kaiserpanorama" represents a "literary struggle" in the truest possible sense: he fights a 'hermeneutic condition,' a spirit of crisis, with a specific 'hermeneutic strategy,' thereby briefly taking action back into the medium of text. To put it in words from the essay on

Surrealism: this is the closest approximation of a situation where, indeed, body and image space move into a constellation of congruency; that is, where the realm of possible action is momentarily drawn into the realm of imagination.

Thus far it has become clear that the complex strategy of Benjamin's text "Kaiserpanorama" works according to spatial and visual categories. Based on such a visual interpretation, the "mysterious contact" between people and their surroundings mentioned in the text makes sense: it might as well reflect the drastically changing conditions of the visual in modernity. However, for Benjamin, the base for such a new language is still writing. When defining the concept of "aura" in "Über einige Motive bei Baudelaire," he exemplifies the notion of *Aufmerksamkeit* with the gaze unto things ("der Blick"). Important for us is the postulated interaction between 'looking at' things and 'being looked at' by the things, which provides a space where perceptual techniques, a visual language as it were, can be organized: "Dem Blick wohnt aber die Erwartung inne, von dem erwidert zu werden, dem er sich schenkt." And a few lines later: "'Die Wahrnehmbarkeit,' so urteilt Novalis, ist 'eine Aufmerksamkeit.'" (GS1, 646) – If connected back to "Kaiserpanorama," it could be said that as soon as people look at things as exceptional, they become exceptional and can be the 'wonder'¹⁰⁷ that breaks the paralyzing ban that has descended on the powers of imagination and action. In times when the German populace indeed assumed that the exceptional would 'liberate' them in the person of the 'Führer,' Benjamin's thoughts sound very risky. But we have to keep in

¹⁰⁷ Carl Schmitt, to whose theoretic work Benjamin was briefly drawn, characterizes in his "Political Theology" a "decision" as a "miracle" in the political sphere establishing sovereign authority. See Kam Shapiro, "Politics is a Mushroom. Worldly Sources of Rule and Exception in Carl Schmitt and Walter Benjamin," *Diacritics* 37, no. 2-3, (Summer-Fall 2007): 123. – For Benjamin, as we see here, the "wonder" is rather a change of collective apperception in regard to socio-political conditions.

mind that his version of the state of emergency comes out of the midst of his complex work. It is rather a mimetic behavior and is concerned with abilities of the individual within the collective.¹⁰⁸ Furthermore, he was immediately convinced that fascism, with all its outward revolutionary attitude, was really just a consequence of the established conditions: it did not in fact touch the existing property relations.¹⁰⁹ Benjamin calls for a certain presence of mind (*Geistesgegenwärtigkeit*), a new kind of attention, in a time when our fundamental spatial and temporal coordinates have changed dramatically in the face of technological progress and socio-political decline. “Kaiserpanorama” is a manual for how to view things differently; that is, for how to change perspectives in a world caught in the spirit of crisis.

In both examples, that of “Chinawaren” and of “Kaiserpanorama,” Benjamin applies an intricate spatial composition based on the dialectic of image and body space. The momentarily appearing point of transition in this dialectic, where both spheres of the human condition – contemplation and action – become identical, represents the congruency of these two spaces. Since this is ultimately an ideal, virtual construction, it can only be posited within the medium of text through an infinite approximation, through the extrapolating and projecting powers of the mind. While the country road text seeks to

¹⁰⁸ When comparing Carl Schmitt to Walter Benjamin, Shapiro comes to similar conclusions as the study at hand. Rather than confirming a central sovereign (e.g., the Catholic Church, an individual ruler, or a party) to have power over the state of emergency, Benjamin sought to locate this power in the (oppressed) collective majorities. His later concept of the “*schwache* messianische Kraft” (GS1, 694) is an example. Shapiro writes: “In Benjamin, I find an account of nonauthoritarian, critical, and collective pneumatics, a kind of ‘democratic virtuosity.’” Shapiro, “Politics is a Mushroom,” 130. What he calls “democratic virtuosity” outlines various possibilities as to where in the sphere of human behavior points of origins of such a power may be found. Shapiro examines Benjamin’s notion of “politeness” more closely. The concept of “Aufmerksamkeit,” as presented here, seems to fit into his category, as well.

¹⁰⁹ For example: “Der Faschismus versucht, die neu entstandenen proletarischen Massen zu organisieren, ohne die Eigentumsverhältnisse, auf deren Beseitigung sie hindrängen, anzutasten.” (GS1, 506)

draw the sphere of action back into the medium of text in order to first of all develop a technique of spatial reading, “Kaiserpanorama” aims at a change of perspective in the perception of the world outside the immediate reach of the text. But in both cases, the particular dialectic of Benjamin’s construction enables the reader to have a real experience. Any original experience, in turn, is based on an activity; so this is where the dialectic of theory and praxis, of contemplation and action comes into play.

Since action is, in essence, the beginning of something new that will unfold unpredictably in the world, it can now be said that Benjamin’s own theoretical writing mirrors in its composition the appearance of what he, in “Krisis des Romans,” called “neue, sehr epische Möglichkeiten” (GS3, 232). In the context of his theoretical works on the epic, this expression indicates the potential of the fragmented and possibly then ‘reconstituted’ epic that would expose its original, archaic essence. Benjamin now seeks to apply the underlying structure of this restitution in his own narratives. By looking closely at how he composed his theoretical writing, the meaning of this reconstruction of the epic appears more clearly. Benjamin writes at one point that the essence of the epic is the act of telling the story. In the context of the investigation presented here, this entails the reinstatement of the narrative voice; that is, in Benjamin’s words, of the narrator’s body space. The emphasis on the presence of narrative authority within text is, however, not necessarily limited to the display of certain traditional elements of storytelling. From Benjamin’s perspective, it means, rather, emphasizing the aspect of presence – that is, space – in the medium of text, which includes its performative features as presented in this study. The reinstatement of narrative authority is only possible on the basis of dismantling the epic’s tradition. As a consequence, Benjamin’s texts, in every instance,

break up the epic genre and allow for the radical new to appear. This radical new ultimately lies outside the text and awaits its realization through the reader. Each of these small text artifacts becomes a potential for the new, the unprecedented. The end point of Benjamin's writing is never a conclusion, but an opening.

In terms of experience, Benjamin provides a hint about the epic's power in the narrator essay: "Der Erzähler nimmt, was er erzählt, aus der Erfahrung; aus der eigenen oder berichteten. Und er macht es wiederum zur Erfahrung derer, die seiner Geschichte zuhören." (GS2, 443) The crucial point here is Benjamin's claim that the storyteller is able to create experience as someone else's experience. Quite in line with the results of the present investigation of Benjamin's theoretic narrative, the storyteller, according to this passage, is able to re-create experience for or *within* the reader/listener. The notion of experience appears two times, and the second – *created* experience – does not need to be identical with the first, original experience that the storyteller takes from himself. They are, however, structurally the same, namely in the sense that they are both based on an activity. Strictly speaking, the corresponding concept of experience, in addition to its communicable aspects discussed earlier, can be summarized by the expression of 'having lived a life.' This feature of experience, emphasizing the temporal mode of the perfect tense, indicates the transition from activity to memory. Yet this transition is not seamless and smooth. From within the perspective of activity itself, its own end – insofar as it is a process – is not conceivable. Activity does not know its own end. Insofar as it is established as a process, it is sequential: one element of an action builds upon another. Action itself is unconscious; it therefore does not 'have' a memory, cannot be itself part of memory. Action only ever happens in the momentum of a present point in time. Only

afterwards can its results and the fact of activity having occurred be made part of memory by the mind's own activity. And this 'afterwards' is one of the main efforts of the mind by which it deals a shock to activity when it stops it in order to retrieve its outcome for memory. Experience is an additive phenomenon: any individual experience is always voiced in a conclusive manner from the standpoint of 'being experienced,' of 'having lived a life.'

In light of this conception of experience, then, what does it mean to make that which the storyteller takes from his or her experience into the experience of those who listen to the story? Wisdom, according to Benjamin, is "Rat in den Stoff gelebten Lebens eingewebt" (GS2, 442). Wisdom thus mirrors the concept of experience. On the one hand, therefore, experience is taken from a memory that fulfills all the demands of 'being experienced,' of 'having lived a life,' and being certain about it. On the other hand, the point the storyteller conveys in the story (that which it wants to communicate in the form of advice, for example) connects to the situation, to the lives, and to the experience of the story's listeners. It fills an empty space, a lack of experience on the side of the receiver, so to speak. However, the story does not achieve this solely by transferring information that is somehow needed. Rather, it is itself an activity; and as such, the listeners, by virtue of their activities of listening and understanding, are part of this act of storytelling. Storyteller and listeners share the same space. And in this ideal situation, the activities of telling the story and unfolding the told experience, on the one hand, and listening to the story and re-enacting the told experience, on the other hand, meet. Because of this convergence of different spaces, the told experience can be made part of memory in such a way that it is itself an experience (in Benjamin's sense). Narrative becomes a part of

life's activity, and therefore may add to the certainty of 'having lived a life' on the side of the 'receivers.' The present analysis of Benjamin's own narrative style has shown that the story itself, be it in oral or written form, extends a dialectic of image and body space in which it performs a thought pattern rather than explaining it, enabling the reader to 'have an experience.' This is, in essence, the way in which the 'restitution of the epic' affects Benjamin's own theoretical writing.

CHAPTER VI

BENJAMIN: THE STORYTELLER AS THE RIGHTEOUS ONE

The narrator essay closes with the line: “Der Erzähler ist die Gestalt, in welcher der Gerechte sich selbst begegnet.” (GS2, 465) The storyteller’s body space, here his *gestalt*, comes full circle. Benjamin harks back to the beginning of the essay, and specifically to the spatial principles that determine its composition. There, the task of representing the narrator in terms of a movement which is counterdirectional to ‘making present again’ – *vergegenwärtigen* – involved a conceptuality of body and image space. The traits (“Züge”) of the abstract *gestalt* of the narrator would appear on the concrete presence of the actual narrator Nikolai Leskov. Ingrained in this process of representing that channels sensory input and haptic experience is the dialectic of theory and praxis, or in different terms: contemplation and action. Benjamin aims to unfold this process within the textual medium, with a twofold consequence: on the one hand, aspects of the sphere of action, which always unfolds in and through a (body) space, are taken back into the medium of text. In “Der Surrealismus,” Benjamin specifies this movement of action back into the sphere of image and contemplation as an aggressive turnover. The one hundred percent image space for which he aimed was to be congruent with the sphere of action. As an ideal construction, it cannot be held on to by contemplation alone; it only appears in moments when action and contemplation are equally aware of each other, “wo ein Handeln selber das Bild aus sich herausstellt und ist, in sich hineinreißt und frißt, wo die Nähe sich selbst aus den Augen sieht, tut dieser gesuchte Bildraum sich auf, die Welt

allseitiger und integraler Aktualität.” (GS2, 309) On the other hand, as a fundamental pattern of Benjamin’s thought, this dialectical progression has a transgressing impetus. The dialectic that he tries to implement in his works is one that does not allow for a synthesis; or rather: any synthesis that might appear on the horizon is instantly devoured again by the dialectical movement the text establishes as a quasi force field between the extreme oppositions it carefully maintains. Whatever it encompasses, whatever topic or question comes into its scope, is subjected to a process of dissolution and recomposition. But this step of putting the fragments into new constellations, to use Benjamin’s terms, is always preliminary and is determined by an arbitrary present time situation – a situation of danger for the historical subject, as Benjamin writes in “Über den Begriff der Geschichte.”

Comparable to the characterization of the allegory in *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels*, this movement of continual dialectical transgression grows exponentially throughout Benjamin’s work and ultimately seizes its own basic concepts. In his last works, this universal hunger to destroy and create reaches the concept of history. In the collection of aphorisms on the concept of history, he writes that the traditional understanding of history “nicht zu halten ist.” (GS1, 697) Just as the allegory dethroned itself, according to Benjamin’s studies, his own texts have a tendency to undo eventually the very medium in which they are based. In a last effort, as it were, this de-structuring movement comes to a head at the limits of the textual medium and, in an infinitesimal approximation, aims to transgress this barrier into the sphere of action outside text. Some of the examples looked at here, like “Kaiserpanorama,” immanently restructure the sphere of action in order to change the possibilities of action in the world. From a formal

or functional perspective, it can be said that the notion of action in these texts is *overdetermined*.

Benjamin's line at the end of the narrator essay takes up precisely this all-encompassing, transgressing movement. And since its assumed endpoint, where contemplation and action become identical and are in a state of infinitesimal convergence and juxtaposition, remains an ideal, the author resorts to a paradox. The *gestalt* of the narrator, now at the end of the essay's movement, encompasses both body and image space; that is, the concrete givenness of storytellers, such as Nikolai Leskov, *and* the abstracted – transgressed – concept of the storyteller as a model. In this *gestalt* of the storyteller, Benjamin writes, the righteous one encounters himself. The paradox of this notion consists in the structure of 'encountering oneself.' It splits the identity of its object 'with itself' by injecting difference into it. This paradoxical structure thus describes a fundamental situation in which space is created: identity means indifference, means homogeneous space, which is, for all it is worth, non-space. Space, insofar as it is synonymous with our cognitive powers – that is, insofar as it is an expression of 'appearance' in the first place – comes into being through difference. Difference is constitutive of space as much as sameness is. But sameness, Benjamin also calls mimesis: the power to recognize and produce likeness in what appears to us, is not identity in the strict sense. It is, rather, the gift of taking for similar what strictly speaking is not, the gift of abstracting similar structures from different objects and skipping the actual differences. Without this gift, there would be no appearance in differences, but only chaos. In an earlier text from 1922/23, Benjamin "describes the body as an instrument of

differentiation and discrimination”;¹¹⁰ here, too, difference and the body as the origin or center of space are in a close relationship: “Den<n> alle lebendige Reaktivität ist an Differenzierung gebunden, deren vornehmstes Instrument der Körper ist. Diese seine Bestimmung ist als wesentlich zu erkennen. Der Körper als Differenzierungsinstrument der vitalen Reaktionen und nur er ist zugleich seiner psychischen Belebtheit nach erfaßbar.” (GS6, 81-82)

Beyond being a paradoxical structure, the notion of encountering oneself is one that characterizes a progression of awareness and realization. As a consequence, the paradoxical figure Benjamin puts at the close of his writing the storyteller’s body and image space summarizes and condenses the movement of the whole essay and, in the same step, reaches beyond its limits, beyond the boundaries of the textual and pictorial medium, into the sphere of action, where alone a realization of actual events may become manifest. Now, at the end of the essay, where the *gestalt* of the storyteller encompasses the complicated dialectic of image and body space, and therefore is also a self-characterization of Benjamin’s theoretical narrative, the concept of the storyteller becomes a stage – a new space, as it were – for the appearance of the righteous one. This line of thought – that a moment of reflection enters and interrupts the process of reading history if the present-time instance when the activity of reading occurs is taken into account – lies at the heart of Benjamin’s argument concerning a philosophy of history.

¹¹⁰ Weigel, *Body- and Image-Space*, 26. Weigel quotes the passage from the “Fragmente Vermischten Inhalts” when investigating the origins of the concept of body space in Benjamin’s works: “Since the publication of the ‘Miscellaneous Fragments’ (*Fragmente Vermischten Inhalts*) in volume VI of the *Gesammelte Schriften* (1985) it has at any rate become clear what a significant role reflections on the corporeal played already in Benjamin’s early notes on psychology and anthropology written shortly after the essay (similarly not intended for publication) ‘On Language as Such and on the Language of Man’ (1916).” (Ibid., 23)

Through this very step, the body space of the historical subject, his or her presence at the time of reading, enters the medium of history. Bernd Witte writes the following in an article that closes with some remarks on Benjamin's work from the perspective of a theory of media, and here particularly in regard to memory as the medium: "Only when literature transports the experience of past generations and readers understand literature as a passage to the many dead present and not present in the text, and are thus willing to rewrite what already has been written, are they in a position to make use of texts as a medium of cognition for their own lives."¹¹¹ It seems that Benjamin had quite a universal understanding of the concept of medium and also the related technologies.

Communicability, the basis of language, is the medium *per se* (see chapter one), and Benjamin went to great lengths to remind us that this medium, or better: the very principle of mediality, has its center in the body space occupied by human beings. Witte maintains that "Benjamin's arguments are based on the awareness that the media themselves have their own innate history. Not their content but their technical development is highly significant for tracing the historical past."¹¹² And this technical development of the media, as will become clear here, is the link that connects for Benjamin nature on the one hand and man on the other hand through the latter's body space.

But who is the righteous one that Benjamin suddenly conjures at the end of his essay? The notion of the righteous one itself comes from the old, rich tradition of Jewish, and particularly Hasidic, storytelling. At the center of the Hasidic community stood the

¹¹¹ Witte, "Literature as the Medium of Collective Memory," 104-105.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 108.

Tzadik, the righteous one, a spiritual leader who usually conveyed the Hasidic doctrine in form of stories and parables.¹¹³ Hasidism combines Orthodox Jewish doctrine – that is, reading of the *Torah* and *Talmud* – with mystical aspects such as the *Kabbalah*. One teaching of the *Talmud* and of the *Kabbalah*, for example, maintains that there always at all times live thirty-six hidden *Tzadikim* among the people and that they are the sole reason that the world is not destroyed. The concept of the righteous is deeply rooted in a universal understanding not only of history, but of creation in its totality. And it has redemptive implications.¹¹⁴ In these two aspects, it connects to Benjamin’s concept of history. Since the righteous are hidden by definition, but still exist, they leave room for speculation. As such, they represent an empty position, an empty signifier that points to the realization of the radical and unprecedented new, which Benjamin’s construction of image and body space aims to release – in narrative terms: “neue, sehr epische Möglichkeiten.” (GS3, 232) The righteous one, then, liberated from his or her own bonds to tradition, represents a new historical subject, a new subject of historical awareness. In this regard, the righteous one anticipates the historiographer-as-messiah from *Über den Begriff der Geschichte*. There, Benjamin puts the messiah and the historiographer in one

¹¹³ For a detailed account of the concept of the righteous in the context of Jewish tradition, see Gershom Scholem who writes that the *Tzadik* belongs to one of the “three ideal human types that carry special significance” Gershom Scholem, *On the Mystical Shape of the Godhead. Basic Concepts in the Kabbalah* (New York: Schocken Books, 1991), 81. in Judaism. In a quite prosaic, rational definition from the rabbinic perspective, the righteous person is first of all defined as “one who strives to fulfill the Law and who succeeds, at the very least, in making his merits outnumber his transgressions.” (Ibid., 81) A later definition in the context of Kabbalistic writings emphasizes the messianic function of the righteous: “We find here the first major definition of the new understanding of the ideal figure of the *Tsaddik*, as it was later formulated in Kabbalistic ethical literature: the righteous man is he who sets everything in the world in its proper place.” (Ibid., 95) In this particular mandate of the righteous, a connection can be seen in the context of Benjamin’s writings between the historiographer as messiah, and the righteous one as the storyteller.

¹¹⁴ Scholem frequently mentions that one function of the righteous is to “maintain the existence of Creation.” (Ibid.,103)

context: “In jeder Epoche muß versucht werden, die Überlieferung von neuem dem Konformismus abzugewinnen, der im Begriff steht, sie zu überwältigen. Der Messias kommt ja nicht nur als der Erlöser; er kommt als der Überwinder des Antichrist. Nur dem Geschichtsschreiber wohnt die Gabe bei, im Vergangenen den Funken der Hoffnung anzufachen, der davon durchdrungen ist: auch die Toten werden vor dem Feind, wenn er siegt, nicht sicher sein.” (GS1, 695) The historiographer – the storyteller, as he or she who overcomes tradition – ignites in the past the messianic spark of redemption.

In Benjamin’s essay on the storyteller, the righteous one reaches down to the level of *creatureliness* in man; that is, to where man is irresolvably interconnected with being part of nature. Yet here, not the narrator himself is the righteous one, but his characters. Leskov’s creatures, Benjamin writes, are led by the righteous one, who embodies “die Weisheit, die Güte, den Trost der Welt.” (GS2, 459) Again, by choosing the verb “verkörpern,” Benjamin assigns to the righteous one a place in the dialectic of body and image space. Through the concept of the righteous one, Benjamin incorporates an aspect of his philosophical thinking into his approach to the storyteller, which has its source in the dialectic of a *Naturgeschichte*. The extremes of this dialectic can be identified as nature on the one side and technology, culture, or history on the other. In this conjecture, nature as man’s ‘other’ side, as the ultimate alien to what it means to be human, leaves its traces in the man-made world. The term *Naturgeschichte* asks: to what degree do processes that are thought to be purely man-made bear natural characteristics, and to what degree is nature always already also a man-made perspective or concept? (Of course, there is already a puzzling dialectic at work at the very level of the concept of nature, since it is man-made and therefore can never be the purely other, that which has not even

touched human intelligibility.) Benjamin associates nature with negative features such as decay and silence. To man, nature, in this sense, essentially remains silent, and is even silencing, in that it breaks down over time whatever human creations it gets hold of.

Benjamin writes: “Der Gerechte ist der Fürsprecher der Kreatur und zugleich ihre höchste Verkörperung.” (GS2, 459) Through the figure of the righteous one, the creatureliness of man gets an advocate, a “Fürsprecher.” The silent and silencing forces of nature are turned around and become language. But at the same time, the righteous one is him- or herself the purest incarnation or embodiment of the creature. Therefore, Benjamin brings the irresolvable dialectical opposition to a head within the concept (the body space) of the righteous one. His dialectics without a synthesis delineate in this infinitely culminating progression the figure of crisis. The concept of embodiment itself becomes the very climax of this crisis, as it signifies both sides of the involved dialectical extremes in one term (and in this case not even in an oxymoron): the body is the purest, highest expression of human nature – its body language, as it were. In this possibility of expression in turn lies the only – earthly, profane – chance of redemption from the forces of nature. But at the same time, the very existence of the body means that man is infinitely bound and subjected to nature – to its negative, dark side, where it is always ‘the other.’ The body – embodiment – represents these extremes: redemption and suffering (*Leiden*). The paradox that Benjamin here brings to its catastrophic culmination *without* releasing its catastrophic tension is, in a way, a preparation for and a variation of the paradox that ends the essay. Encountering oneself injects just this difference into the unity of the body; it means recognizing one’s body and therefore realizing one’s own nature.

Within the force field of these extreme oppositions, the righteous one functions as an empty signifier: he represents the principle of embodiment, and even more so the progression of awareness of this space that the embodiment occupies, since he is the *gestalt* who “sich selbst begegnet.” (GS2, 465) But at the same time, the righteous one remains unknown, unidentified. Everyone could potentially be or become the righteous one, as the *Kabbalah* promises. Benjamin hints at this detail when he writes about the role the righteous one plays in Hebel’s work. Because nobody (no actual individual) is ultimately up for the role of the righteous one, it passes from one to the next, all the time. “Bald ist es der Strolch, bald der Schacherjude, bald der Beschränkte, der einspringt, um diesen Part durchzuführen. Immer ist es ein Gastspiel von Fall zu Fall, eine moralische Improvisation. [...] Er solidarisiert sich um keinen Preis mit irgend einem Prinzip, weist aber auch keines ab, denn jedes kann einmal Instrument des Gerechten werden.” (GS2, 461-462) The appearance of the righteous one therefore represents the point at the limits of the textual and pictorial media. It allows Benjamin to open up the essay at its close. In the dialectics of body and image space, the storyteller as the righteous one outlines a space encompassing extreme positions within the “kreatürliche[] Stufenreihe” that reaches down to the “unbelebte[] Natur” (GS2, 462) and up to the “Symbol des Gottmenschen.” (GS2, 460) Within the force field of these extremes, upheld by Benjamin’s insistence on keeping the progressing crisis of the involved dialectic from finally collapsing, the radical new may appear. This is the ultimate hope of the text. The unprecedented new is so completely undetermined that Benjamin does not have a name for it, just an empty space. The storyteller as the righteous one is the culmination of the dialectic of image and body space in a *moral improvisation*.

It is not by chance, then, that Benjamin goes on to hint at the creative, redemptive potential of the righteous one when he observes that he shares traits with a mother figure in the works of Leskov. “Unverkennbar ist, daß sie [Kreaturen/Gerechte] von der Imago seiner Mutter durchzogen werden.” And: “Er [Gerechte] hat bei Lesskow einen mütterlichen Einschlag, der sich zuweilen ins Mystische steigert.” (GS2, 459) Likely influenced by Johann Jakob Bachofen (*Das Mutterrecht*, 1861), Benjamin here connects the embodiment that the righteous one represents in his conception of the storyteller to a primordial level of civilization (*Kulturstufe*) where the mother is the dominant, defining cultural figure (e.g., in matriarchic communities or when a mother figure is worshiped as a goddess). Just as death signifies one extreme of the way in which man is bound to nature, the mother marks the opposite extreme through the ability to give birth. The righteous one, though, does not completely converge with the mother figure; he merely has a “mütterlichen Einschlag.” The *gestalt* of the righteous one therefore incorporates both sides, the annihilating and the creating side of the extreme opposites. Benjamin observes that in Leskov’s work the righteous one can literally embody this dialectic by being characterized as “zweigeschlechtlich”: “Zwölf Jahre lang hat ihn [a character from one of Leskov’s stories] seine Mutter als Mädchen aufgezogen. Zugleich mit seinem männlichen reift sein weibliches Teil, und seine Zweigeschlechtlichkeit ‘wird zum Symbol des Gottmenschen.’” (GS2, 460) And this ambisexuality, or hermaphroditic identity, is not limited by a social behavior, but is expressed through a biological difference; it is inscribed into the body. As a result, the righteous one is literally a whole

new creature, but one that combines in one body two extremes; it is a chimera like the Sphinx.¹¹⁵

Benjamin writes that with this step Leskov marked the “Höhe der Kreatur” and aimed to build a bridge “zwischen irdischer und überirdischer Welt.” By forcing the two extremes together into one body, the storyteller in the *gestalt* of the righteous one transgresses the creatureliness of man. Leskov’s “mütterliche Männergestalten,” Benjamin writes, “sind der Botmäßigkeit des Geschlechtstriebes in der Blüte ihrer Kraft entrückt worden.” (GS2, 460) In this they resemble angels now – except that in contrast to angels, who are sometimes understood to be asexual, the righteous one is of both sexes.¹¹⁶ According to Benjamin’s reading, this therefore does not represent an ascetic ideal. He argues that the righteous one’s austereness is not private in character and that it rather represents an opposite pole to the outright destructive characters found in Leskov, like for example the ‘Lady Macbeth from Minsk,’¹¹⁷ who unleashes her destructive

¹¹⁵ This ambiguity mirrors the visual montage of “Menschenhaupt” and “Tierleib” presented in the image at the outset of the narrator essay, where Benjamin brings up the question of the correct perspective on the appearance of the storyteller. See also Alexander Honold: “Wenn wir die vage gesetzten mythischen Akzente beim Wort nehmen, den Tierleib und das Menschenhaupt, und sie nicht als wahllose, einander widersprechende Assoziationen betrachten, sondern als zu addierende Bildelemente, dann entsteht daraus ein Wesen in Tier- und Menschengestalt, ein aus Stein gehauener Tierleib mit menschlichem Angesicht, kurzum: eine Sphinx oder ein Centaur.” Honold, *Der Leser Walter Benjamin*, 183.

¹¹⁶ The aspect of asexuality, or rather resistance to sexual temptation, also seems to be a trait generally linked to the concept of the righteous one. Nevertheless, Scholem writes that this should not be overestimated: “Even though the struggle with the Evil Urge generally includes the righteous man’s resistance to sexual temptation, such resistance does not play a crucial part in the rabbinic definition of the *Tsaddik*.” Scholem, *On the Mystical Shape of the Godhead*, 82. He points out that the righteous one is, however, a template where the battle of man with his own nature is staged: “The righteous person, who seeks to meet the demands of the Torah, is caught in a never-ending struggle with his Evil Urge, which rebels against these demands; he must constantly wage battle with his own nature.” (Ibid., 82) Here, too, a significant difference appears between Scholem’s scholarly treaty on the righteous in Judaism and Benjamin’s application of the term in the special context of this body- and image-space dialectic. In Scholem’s investigation, righteousness is presented as a quality that may be manifest in every man to some degree, and as an aim that every “person” may choose to follow. In Benjamin, the righteous one becomes the embodiment – the very (body) space – of the aforementioned struggles.

¹¹⁷ From Leskov’s 1865 novel: *Lady Mcbeth of the Mtsensk District*.

powers through her one-sided desires. The righteous one does not represent the disappearance of creativity, but rather points to a different kind of creativity beyond one-sided obsession. This new kind of creativity would take into account all the extremes, between which it would carefully and strategically move without giving in to any side.¹¹⁸ (In this sense, this is of course a perfect characterization of Benjamin's own method.) Such a creativity would not unfold in private, constrained to an individual, but would find its expression in a collective, a community. As the concept of the righteous one transgresses the creatureliness of man, it also transgresses the individual body in order to merge into the collective. Or from a different perspective: the body now encompasses the collective, is fused with it. The collective becomes a prosthesis of the individual's body. The righteous one, and thus storytelling, represents a creativity on the level of the social body.¹¹⁹

In the closing sections of "Der Erzähler," the author thus expands the embodiment – *Verkörperung* – of the storyteller to truly manifest as a social function. The function he assigns to a narrative that has undergone such an innovation or conversion extends to the sociopolitical sphere. Benjamin calls this extension of his spatial conception in the essay on surrealism, as well as in the text "Zum Planetarium" from *Einbahnstraße*, "Physis." (GS2, 310; GS4, 147) The collective, he writes in *Der Surrealismus*, is also "leibhaft,"

¹¹⁸ The general link between sexuality and creativity in a 'cosmic' context seems to be inscribed already in the concept of righteous one. "The vital force concentrated here is externally expressed in the world of creatures as sexual energy; however, the unrestrained power of the procreative drive, as the creative element in the cosmos, is harnessed and restricted within sacred boundaries. The *Tsaddik* is the one who guards and keeps it within these boundaries [...]" Scholem calls this the "erotic mysticism" of the Kabbalah. Scholem, *On the Mystical Shape of the Godhead*, 95.

¹¹⁹ Benjamin describes storytelling as a social technique; his description in this essay is completely different from the language, which was influenced by Brecht, that he uses in "Der Autor als Produzent."

has a *physis*. The later essay on the narrator therefore connects to the spatial concepts of *Der Surrealismus* and *Einbahnstraße* and hints at the possibility of rearranging or reconfiguring this very *physis*. With his approach to space as an all-inclusive moment of human existence whose cognitive reconstruction should always have its point of origin in the body space of man, Benjamin consciously moves away from a philosophical tradition that promotes a rift between subject and object. Rather, his understanding of space is closer to twentieth-century phenomenologist philosophers such as Edmund Husserl and Gaston Bachelard, who established “space in the form of ‘lived space,’” particularly with a basis in human activity. Edward S. Casey writes about this concept of space based on a total perspective: “[...] the immensity to which Bachelard and Husserl point no longer isolates the human subject but actively *includes* her, whether in a house as experienced by the child who grows up there or in the midst of a considerable expanse like a landscape. In place of the dichotomy of ego and universe – or that of an act of faith and a transcendent God – there is a sensed continuity of self and space.”¹²⁰ On the grounds of such a continuity, Benjamin aims to rewrite this space in order to provide the potential for changing the conditions of life in modern societies.

Benjamin sees the collective as a prosthesis of the individual body space, the link being technology. At the end of the essay on the storyteller, it becomes clear that the connection of the body- and image-space dialectic with a narrative theory is for the author the key to potentially changing man’s *physis*. This means, quite literally,

¹²⁰ Edward S. Casey, “Space,” in *The Routledge Companion to Phenomenology*, ed. Sebastian Luft and Søren Overgaard (New York: Routledge, 2012), 204-205. Thus: “Despite all their manifest differences in formation and style, Husserl and Bachelard are philosophical brothers, both emphasizing the priority of first-person experiences and their close link with the unfolding vistas of the perceived or imagined world: vistas that call upon our responsive action. For both thinkers, an open space beckons to us but in a setting that implicates us as perceivers, imaginers, and actors.” (Ibid.)

reassessing our awareness of our own bodies, and by extension their function in the world. Through the *gestalt* of the righteous one encountering himself, Benjamin brings the various aspects of this spatial, bodily awareness within the storyteller to a head – to a crisis, as it were – ready to transgress and rewrite it. In Benjamin’s understanding, the embodiment of narrative is therefore a way to change its conditions, and furthermore rethink the human condition in modernity.

Together with its sociopolitical role, Benjamin establishes a universal, cosmic relevance for this *physis*.¹²¹ The spatialized narrative progresses on both levels. The cosmological frame speaks to the relationship between man and nature, which in turn is determined by technology.¹²² The reason for this twofold approach is an observation that Benjamin repeatedly states throughout his work: that a gap opens between a general social regression and a technological progression. He expresses this rift most clearly in “Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit,” where he writes (as in “Erfahrung und Armut”) that its tension may release itself in war. War, with all its destructive power, proves, according to the author, “daß die Gesellschaft nicht reif genug war, sich die Technik zu ihrem Organ zu machen, daß die Technik nicht ausgebildet genug war, die gesellschaftlichen Elementarkräfte zu bewältigen.” (GS1, 507) If technology is to become the society’s organ – a prosthesis to its *physis*, so to speak – then the relation of society and technology has to be rethought. The implications underlying

¹²¹ In regard to the aforementioned righteous one, Scholem states his ‘cosmic relevance:’ “The *Tsaddik* is thus conceived as a cosmic potency, supporting and maintaining the world both above and below.” Scholem, *On the Mystical Shape of the Godhead*, 85.

¹²² For the intersection of a cosmic perspective and narrative see also Honold, *Der Leser Walter Benjamin*, 168. Honold briefly discusses “den Schnittpunkt von Alltag und Kosmos” in Johann Peter Hebel’s storytelling, and respectively in Benjamin’s reading of the storyteller.

this dilemma find a preliminary culmination not where it is expressed most clearly, as for example in the artwork essay, but rather in Benjamin's spatialized theory of narrative.

While *Einbahnstraße* begins with a look at the "Riesenapparat des gesellschaftlichen Lebens" and particularly advises the contemporary writer to gain knowledge of its "verborgene Nieten und Fugen," (GS4, 85) it closes in "Zum Planetarium" with a cosmological outlook. Comparing antiquity to modernity, the author argues there that ancient people approached the experience of the cosmos "im Rausche." (GS4, 146) In this case, man assembles a sense of his place in the cosmos, and hence his relationship to nature, through exhilarating, intoxicating experiences, which establish the world as a boundless totality. With the rise of modernity, Benjamin sees an imbalance developing in this relationship. Modern science in the shape of early astronomy (Benjamin names Kepler, Kopernikus, and Tycho de Brahe) began to shift the focus to an "ausschließlichen Betonen einer optischen Verbundenheit mit dem Weltall." (GS4, 146) Benjamin thus sees modern estrangement from nature and earth as beginning with an increasing and exclusive focus on facts, or rather the appearance of facts – a shift from the exploration of our inner world ("Rausch") to that of our outer world. This echoes a statement from the very first sentence of *Einbahnstraße*: "Die Konstruktion des Lebens liegt im Augenblick weit mehr in der Gewalt von Fakten als von Überzeugungen." (GS4, 85) The scientific method that evolved on these grounds is linear and homogenizing in nature and promotes the separation of subject and object: each fact receives its validity from another fact that came before; all facts are organized according to strict norms and criteria like temporal progression or distance. The overall structure of knowledge organized along such lines is homogeneous in tendency because the claim is that every

individual fact is equal before such norms (i.e., before the ‘laws of nature’). Ultimately, in such a scientific approach, anything considered factual becomes meaningful already without the human mind involved, as if ‘facts’ existed as ‘facts’ already in nature and were not made into facts by man. This Benjamin contrasts with an experience of intoxication that clearly connects to his thoughts on a spatial dialectics as it is presented in this study. He writes: “Ist doch Rausch die Erfahrung, in welcher wir allein des Allernächsten und des Allerfernsten, und nie des einen ohne des andern uns versichern.” (GS4, 146) Spatial categories like those of closeness and distance collapse, in this experience, into episodes of congruency; distance appears within closeness, and vice versa. As a result, the perspective unfolding from such an experience is a total – in a sense, a cosmic – perspective. The world and its appearances are thus situated from the start within the sphere of man’s intelligibility; the inner realm of the human mind seamlessly connects into – and even, in flashes, becomes identical with – the ‘outer’ realm of nature.

Benjamin continues by maintaining that therefore “rauschhaft mit dem Kosmos der Mensch nur in der Gemeinschaft kommunizieren kann.” (GS4, 146-147) Awareness of the world in a total perspective, beyond the subject–object divide, is not limited to the individual, but must also be a collective experience. The concept of body and image space encompasses the collective, its *physis*. Benjamin regards the First World War as a failed attempt to realize (unconsciously) this cosmic experience once again, but through modern means. The war, he states, was “ein Versuch zu neuer, nie erhörter Vermählung mit den kosmischen Gewalten.” This effort to regain a cosmic perspective within the world for the first time progressed “in planetarischem Maßstab, nämlich im Geiste der

Technik.” (GS4, 147) But since the technological possibilities far exceeded the social capacity to control it, technology ‘betrayed’ mankind, according to Benjamin. The consequence he draws from this experience is that the purpose of technology should not be “Naturbeherrschung” – “so lehren die Imperialisten” – but rather “Beherrschung vom Verhältnis von Natur und Menschheit.” (GS4, 147) He therefore suggests that technology as the modern means of defining man’s standing within the cosmos should be rethought. It is the character of the relation between man and nature that is at stake. Benjamin then adds: “Menschen als Spezies stehen zwar seit Jahrzehntausenden am Ende ihrer Entwicklung; Menschheit als Spezies aber steht an deren Anfang. Ihr organisiert in der Technik sich eine Physis, in welcher ihr Kontakt mit dem Kosmos sich neu und anders bildet als in Völkern und Familien.” (GS4, 147)¹²³

“Menschheit” in contrast to the biological terminology of “Menschen,” refers to mankind as the social and cultural collective, which Benjamin here also labels with the genre term ‘species.’ It is this collective as a body space, having a *physis*, that the text aims to rewrite.¹²⁴ Technology is the new mediator between man and nature; as such, it is a true medium. It is the medium in which Benjamin, in *Einbahnstraße*, locates the

¹²³ The corresponding line from “Der Surrealismus” reads: “Auch das Kollektivum ist leibhaft: Und die Physis, die sich in der Technik ihm organisiert, ist nach ihrer ganzen politischen und sachlichen Wirklichkeit nur in jenem Bildraume zu erzeugen, in welchem die profane Erleuchtung uns heimisch macht.” (GS2, 310) The essay on surrealism adds to the perspective of body space the dialectic with an image space.

¹²⁴ See also Sigrid Weigel, who sees in Benjamin’s materialism a process of re-reading. “This is not materialism *avant la lettre*, but quite literally a *re-reading* of the material – things, writing, gestures, for example – which, having progressed through the school of political and anthropological materialism, introduce into the political sphere its primary matter – the body – while at the same time emphasizing the manner in which this matter is constituted and structured as image.” Weigel, *Body- and Image-Space*, 4. Interestingly, the examples Weigel presents as ‘material,’ such as writing and gestures, also are prime examples of media. The introduction of body and image into the political sphere then leads in Benjamin not only to a process of re-reading, but also to the attempt to establish within the reader the potential to rewrite his *physis* – the body’s constitution.

process of rewriting man's collective *physis*, our disposition towards the relationship between technology/culture and nature. At its roots, Benjamin's understanding of technology, however, is based in language. Just as language has in its stylistic variety certain techniques at its disposal, technology as the material expression of man is an extension of language. His approach to the concept of montage demonstrates this very clearly. Montage is the purest expression of modern technology, since it is the constitutive principle of technology in the first place. As the very principle of technicality, it then has just as much a place in modern engineering as in language.

The process of rewriting man's *physis*, as *Einbahnstraße* tells us right at the beginning, can accordingly be instigated "in strengem Wechsel von Tun und Schreiben." (GS4, 85) As much as this book is in itself an example of how the author might have envisioned such a narrative that is on par with the modern manifestation of technology, only the later texts that surround his 'theory of epic forms' begin an in-depth reflection of the involved dialectic of body and image space (or of this dialectic in the shape of theory and praxis). In the present investigation of both Benjamin's approach to a spatialized narrative and his application of the same in his own theoretical writing, it was shown how he subjected narrative to a complex interaction with various theoretical traditions that were, for their part, involved in the ongoing breaking of tradition. Basically, Benjamin holds on to a triad consisting of a theory of language, a theory of ideas, and his own approach to a phenomenology. In each step in which his theoretical reflection advances, all involved concepts constantly undergo a process of transformation that is tailored to what Benjamin perceived as the moment of danger that now determines any act of remembrance. To access the past means, according to "Über den Begriff der Geschichte":

“ein Bild der Vergangenheit festzuhalten, wie es sich im Augenblick der Gefahr dem historischen Subjekt unversehens einstellt.” (GS1, 695) Though the author’s conceptual framework is thus highly eclectic, always invoking paradoxical notions and contradictions, underneath its surface there is a continuation of thinking that never gives up any past thought as lost, but rather incorporates it into its progression. Benjamin’s development of a complex body- and image-space conceptuality that includes a dialectic of contemplation and action and, at one point, merges with a rethinking of the function of narrative in modernity, is one of these threads that run through the whole of his work. His interactive application of spatial categories that carry performative aspects back into the medium of text does not shy away from attempting to rethink the function and potential of the human body under the conditions of modernity.

CHAPTER VII

THE BREAK IN TRADITION AS THE ORIGIN OF HANNAH ARENDT'S WRITING

The “break in tradition,” German *Traditionsbruch*, is the origin of Hannah Arendt's writing – considering that she wrote the main body of her work after 1945.¹²⁵ Still recovering from the initial shock about the ‘news’ from Europe, she decided to stand up and turn around in order to face “was geschehen ist.”¹²⁶ This turning around movement to face the cataclysm of modern history quickly became a formative moment

¹²⁵ The concept appears, for example, in the 1961/1968 book *Between Past and Future*, where she, according to her own words, is concerned with “the modern break in tradition and with the concept of history with which the modern age hoped to replace the concepts of traditional metaphysics.” Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 15. But she also already mentions it as a ‘break in the flow of history’ in the 1951 book *The Origins of Totalitarianism*: “We can hardly avoid looking at this close and yet distant past with the too-wise eyes of those who know the end of the story in advance, who know it led to an almost complete break in the continuous flow of Western history as we had known it for more than two thousand years.” Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York and London: A Harvest Book, 1976), 125. In this case, she is referring to the First World War, which *almost* cut the link to the tradition, while arguing that the Second World War completed this break. In her notes, published posthumously as *Denktagebuch*, she mentions in reference to the *Traditionsbruch*: “Der Bruch erfolgte erst nach dem Zweiten Weltkrieg, als er als Bruch gar nicht mehr notiert wurde. Hannah Arendt, *Denktagebuch*, vol. 1, ed. Ursula Lodz and Ingeborg Nordmann (Munich and Zurich: Piper, 2002), 300. With my construction of an ‘origin’ of Arendt's writing I do not want to suggest a radical break in the actual course of historical events: in terms of historical continuity there is no ‘zero hour.’ The origin of Arendt's writing refers to a ‘mental event’ that took its beginning as early as 1943 when the author heard about the death camps. See also: “Holocaust-Forschung und -Geschichtsschreibung sowie ‘Holocaust’-Gedenken, das wird allzu häufig vergessen, beginnen nicht erst im Jahr 1945, nach dem Ende des Krieges. Auch hier gibt es nicht einfach eine ‘Stunde Null’, sondern Kontinuitäten und Brüche, die sich überlagern. Nicht nur die NS-Täter versuchten, unter dem Titel ‘Judenforschung’ eine affirmative Erforschung ihrer eigenen antijüdischen Politik und antisemitischer Vorläufer, eine ‘Holocaust’-Forschung und -Geschichtsschreibung mit nationalsozialistischen Vorzeichen ins Werk zu setzen. Auch die Opfer hatten bereits, parallel zu an ihnen verübten Verbrechen, begonnen, als Akt des Widerstands, zur Aufklärung in der Gegenwart und Überlieferung an die Nachwelt, die Verbrechen an ihnen, ihre Widerstandsaktivitäten und ihre von den Nationalsozialisten zum Untergang bestimmte Lebenswelt zu dokumentieren. Die Opfer bewahren und überliefern damit ihren eigenen Blick auf die Ereignisse, der sich nur radikal von dem der Täter unterscheiden kann und deren versuchte Geschichtskonstruktion nachhaltig in Frage stellt.” Dirk Rupnow, *Aporien des Gedenkens. Reflexionen über ‘Holocaust’ und Erinnerung* (Freiburg i. Br. and Berlin: Rombach Verlag, 2006), 89.

¹²⁶ Hannah Arendt, *Die verborgene Tradition. Essays* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2000), 7.

in Arendt's work. When Günter Gaus asked her in the 1964 TV interview when she had heard for the first time about 'Auschwitz,' she answered with a statement that reveals the pattern of a shock. She had heard about it in 1943 when she was in the US, and at first she could not believe it: "Und dann haben wir es ein halbes Jahr später doch geglaubt, weil es uns bewiesen wurde. Das ist der eigentliche Schock gewesen."¹²⁷ It is clear from Arendt's answer that she tries to approximate the center of an experience that she cannot put into language. The Shoah, Holocaust, Auschwitz – subsequent ciphers of the Nazi's systematic murder and almost complete annihilation of the Jewish people in Europe appear in Arendt's early responses as 'it,' or "was geschehen ist." The factuality of something whose brutish evidence cannot be denied still escapes the capacity to name it.

Arendt repeats her first reaction two times: "Dies aber haben wir nicht geglaubt"; and, as if being thrown back into this situation of unresolved shock, she attempts to encounter it with reason: "auch weil es ja gegen alle militärische Notwendigkeiten und Bedürfnisse war. Mein Mann ist ehemaliger Militärhistoriker, er versteht etwas von den Dingen. Er hat gesagt, laß dir keine Geschichten einreden; das können sie nicht mehr!"¹²⁸ Arendt assigns the role of a history still governed by common sense and rationality to an outside perspective: to her husband Heinrich Blücher, in the function of an expert of military history. Yet it is this very act of resorting to history as a rational process and trusting in its ability to explain the factual consequences of human action that now fails, and takes harm. A reconciliation of the mind with the world in which we live seems out of reach, and whatever image of a world and its history promised such redemption

¹²⁷ Hannah Arendt, *Ich will verstehen. Selbstauskünfte zu Leben und Werk*, ed. Ursula Ludz (Munich and Zurich: Piper, 1996), 59.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, 59-60.

through understanding, is shattered. The tradition from which this thinking came, if indeed there ever was one, is broken; the faculty of thinking itself traumatized. In the end, the author applies a potentially paradoxical phrase to approach the core of the issue: “Dies hätte nicht geschehen dürfen. Da ist irgend etwas passiert, womit wir alle nicht fertig werden.”¹²⁹ This paradoxical figure throws the mind into a dilemma: it finds itself in a situation in which it has to acknowledge a reality (“Da ist irgend etwas passiert”) and at the same time is forced to reject it (“Dies hätte nicht geschehen dürfen”).

It is this experience of a trauma, an irresolvable issue not limited to the private sphere, but concerning the modern human condition, that henceforth sets into motion a writing process with a unique shape, pace, and dimension. Arendt’s writing, in every single instance of beginning a new thought process, remains determined by a twofold momentum of being conscious of the aporia at the heart of her thinking and of ‘turning

¹²⁹ Arendt, *Ich will verstehen*, 60. For another account of the catastrophic events of the twentieth century, and how they determine and challenge our understanding of its history, see also Edith Wyschogrod: “I shall define the scope of the event to include three characteristic expressions: recent wars that deploy weapons in the interest of maximum destruction of persons; annihilation of persons, through techniques designed for this purpose (for example, scorched earth, deportation), after the aims of war have been achieved or without any reference to war, and the creation of death-worlds, a new and unique form of social existence in which vast populations are subjected to conditions of life simulating imagined conditions of death, conferring upon their inhabitants the status of the living dead.” Edith Wyschogrod: *Spirit in Ashes: Hegel, Heidegger, and Man-Made Mass Death* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1985), 15. Initially, the author deploys extreme expressions in order to render the specific gravity of the incidents that have defined much of the course of twentieth century history: “destruction” and “annihilation” of persons, “scorched earth;” she also points to fact that the mass murder of people was in some cases not connected to the purpose of war, but went beyond it “after the aims of war have been achieved.” (Ibid.) Eventually, though, Wyschogrod, too, ends up applying paradoxical notions (“death-worlds,” “living dead”) to approximate something that precisely cannot be contained in her attempt to “define the scope of the event.” (Ibid.) In an article Gerald L. Bruns points out that Wyschogrod argues “that our century [the twentieth century] is qualitatively different from any prior period in history,” though he does not apply the terminology of a ‘broken tradition.’ Gerald L. Bruns, “Tradition and the Terror of History: Christianity, the Holocaust, and the Jewish Theological Dilemma,” in *The Force of Tradition. Response and Resistance in Literature, Religion, and Cultural Studies*, ed. Donald G. Marshall (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2005), 26.

back and facing what happened' in spite of it. The 'break in tradition' is not a topic of Arendt's writing, but rather a defining, structural motive.

This figure of looking back and facing a devastated history is central to Walter Benjamin's image of the *Angelus Novus* from "Über den Begriff der Geschichte," a text that Arendt knew and held in high regard, since it was among the documents she received personally from Benjamin.¹³⁰ There, the "Engel der Geschichte" stares at history as it transforms into a landscape of debris: "Ein Engel ist darauf [the painting by Klee] dargestellt, der aussieht, als wäre er im Begriff, sich von etwas zu entfernen, worauf er starrt. Seine Augen sind aufgerissen, sein Mund steht offen und seine Flügel sind ausgespannt." (GS1, 697) Benjamin's image of a broken history in which the angel of history – probably the modern historiographer, whom the author on other occasions frequently associated with the powers of redemption – wants to pause in order to wake the dead and repair the damage, but cannot because "ein Sturm weht vom Paradiese her, der sich in seinen Flügeln verfangen hat" (GS1, 697-698); this characterizes quite exactly the situation Arendt found herself in after the war. The way in which Arendt now began to consequently redefine her writing reveals a deep loyalty to her intellectual friend. His death in 1940 marks for her on a personal and intellectual level the catastrophe that otherwise took shape in global and historical dimensions. From this perspective, the task

¹³⁰ A small but comprehensive collection of texts directly concerning the relation of Arendt and Benjamin can be found in: Detlev Schöttker, Erdmut Wizisla (eds.), *Arendt und Benjamin. Texte, Briefe, Dokumente* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2006). Besides an informative introduction, it includes Arendt's essay on Benjamin and the manuscript version of Benjamin's "Über den Begriff der Geschichte" that Arendt got from him and brought to the US in 1941. The book also contains letters that show Arendt's lifelong efforts to see Benjamin's works published. The introductory essay and additional documents collected in this book cover the 1967/1968 debate around the first edition of Benjamin's letters. This heated debate took place in the journal *Merkur* and soon included Arendt's essay, which, too, was published in this collection. Schöttker and Wizisla also point to some intellectual controversies, such as Arendt's interpretation of Benjamin's – in her view – non-Marxist and non-dialectical approach to Marxism and dialectics that differed from Adorno's viewpoint.

of looking back and facing history as something broken, as a “Trümmerhaufen” (GS1, 698), is a legacy Arendt took up, one that stands at the beginning of her questions about what kind of writing could successfully embody this impossible task.¹³¹

In 1948, the book *Sechs Essays* was published in Germany.¹³² As the first major book publication by Arendt after the war, this collection of essays, written mostly during the 1940s, exhibits the early contours of the aforementioned ‘turning about’ momentum of her writing. It reveals symptoms of shock, but then instantly there is the attempt to ‘come to grips’ with the issue that defies thinking and does not even have a proper name. Concepts and thought patterns are forming here that will recur throughout Arendt’s later work. At the same time, there is still a noticeable uncertainty with regard to the involved concepts and the philosophical and historical scope of the problem. In this book, therefore, the author’s initial reaction and her attempt to theorize it appears, and it is possible to observe it, both as the origin of her writing process, and as the initial writing of the concept of the break in tradition.

Arendt opens the book with a dedication to Karl Jaspers. It is very clear that her publication is addressed to Germans and, as she reveals later, to Europeans; but at the same time this is also impossible.¹³³ The book begins with this impossibility: “Denn es fällt ja heute einem Juden nicht leicht, in Deutschland zu veröffentlichen, und sei er ein

¹³¹ The image of the ‘angel of history’ is quite suggestive for Arendt’s work and should, precisely because it is a real image, be regarded with caution. It has already found its way into recent Arendt scholarship, as shown, for example, by the title of an anthology for the Trondheim Arendt-Symposium: Bernd Neumann, Helgardt Mahrtdt, and Martin Frank (eds.), *The Angel of History is looking back. Hannah Arendt’s Werk unter politischem, ästhetischem und historischem Aspekt* (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2001).

¹³² The book was republished in 1976 with the title *Die verborgene Tradition: Acht Essays*, still under the supervision of Arendt, who died in 1975. Arendt removed the essay “Was ist Existenz-Philosophie?” and added the essays “Aufklärung und Judenfrage” and “Der Zionismus aus heutiger Sicht.”

¹³³ Arendt, *Die verborgene Tradition*, 8.

Jude deutscher Sprache. Angesichts dessen, was geschehen ist, zählt die Verführung, seine eigene Sprache wieder schreiben zu dürfen, wahrhaftig nicht, obwohl dies die einzige Heimkehr aus dem Exil ist, die man nie ganz aus den Träumen verbannen kann.”¹³⁴ Why would a Jew – even a German-speaking one – want to publish in Germany in 1948? This undertaking alone puts the author in a difficult position. There are as good as no Jews left in Germany, and those who *are* there want to leave. “Angesichts dessen, was geschehen ist”¹³⁵ – without naming it, Arendt puts the attempt to ‘face what happened’ right at the beginning of the intellectual writing process of the years to come. There is in Arendt’s writing always a tension and subsequently a certain deviation from fixed concepts commonly approved by tradition, which results from the attempt to translate this impossibility into language whenever she spots it.

Introducing pairs of words like “Exil” – “Heimat” and “Juden” – “Deutsche,” Arendt creates dichotomies that hint at the insurmountable abyss that had opened. She identifies herself as a Jew – “wir Juden” – addressing the German psychiatrist and philosopher Karl Jaspers as a teacher and friend: “Lieber Verehrtester.”¹³⁶ Language, “die Verführung, seine eigene Sprache wieder schreiben zu dürfen,” presents a moment of hope, a possibility to bridge the gap. For Arendt, the German language is strongly connected to *Heimat*, the ‘homeland.’ Even in exile, the language, as the mother tongue, remains a refuge, a place to go back to. But does not this intrinsic bond to the German language, in light of the obvious conflicts and estrangement, cause the unbridgeable rift

¹³⁴ Arendt, *Die verborgene Tradition*, 7.

¹³⁵ Ibid.

¹³⁶ Ibid.

to grow even deeper? Arendt concludes here: these are dreams that have to be banished. German becomes an unreal language, displaced into the sphere of dreams. The dichotomies remain and stay open; or rather, they fail to accurately express the true dimension of the abyss. They are also not to be trusted, since their categories (“Heimat,” etc.) already belong to a lost tradition. Albeit concealed, there appears here the impulse in Arendt’s text to approach the abyss. Paradoxically, it seems to be the unavoidable failure to conceptualize it completely through which her writing then gains its momentum. This is the impossibility of her text, verging on absurdity: ‘We can’t go any further. Very well, let’s move on ...’¹³⁷

The gap between writer and audience suggests a strong imbalance: the surviving Jew speaking to the former oppressors. Victim and perpetrator. The door for misunderstandings, misconceptions would be wide open. However, the situation Arendt finds herself in shortly after the war is anything but clear cut; comprehension seems to be blurred by unsettled or not yet even found questions, gray areas of understanding where possibilities and limits are not known and only slowly take shape. To form a question

¹³⁷ For the significance of Arendt’s first book after the war, and particularly the difficulty of the addressee expressed in her letter to Jaspers, see also: Barbara Hahn, *Hannah Arendt. Leidenschaften, Menschen und Bücher* (Berlin: Berlin Verlag, 2005), 12-13. The problem appears here as the abrupt and subsequent impossibility of communication, which always needs at least two participants. Not even in her dreams, Hahn writes, could Arendt think of the possibility of returning to Germany. And then: “Bereits mit dieser Wendung [that of pushing the German language into the realm of dreams] ist eine so große Distanz geschaffen, daß die Adressierung an Menschen dort um so schärfer zum Problem wird. Dort muß jemand wohnen, der die Stimme der Emigrantin hören kann. Der um den Bruch weiß. Denn jeder Satz, geschrieben in dieser Sprache, die sich in Träumen meldet, wirft die Frage auf, zu wem dort, auf der anderen Seite des Atlantiks gesprochen werden kann.“ (Ibid., 12) The impossible situation that nevertheless turns into a possibility for Arendt appears here precisely in the empty space between the first and the second sentences of this quote. The problem is there, undeniably. Still, *dort muß* – there *has to be* somebody to pick up the offer of communication, and thus possibly reconstruct a lost public space. However: “Diese Öffentlichkeit ist nicht einfach gegeben.” (Ibid., 12) It can only appear if the new political realities are also acknowledged in the process of addressing and dating one’s writing: “In Deutschland und auf deutsch spricht sie [Arendt] als Emigrantin. Als jemand, der nicht in dieses Land zurückkehrt. In Amerika ist ihre Stimme anders bestimmt: Hier spricht sie als eine, die in diesem Land eine Zuflucht gefunden hat. Dieses Land ist ihr politischer Ort.” (Ibid., 13)

means, now more than ever, to strike a new path into the unknown. Arendt's motto seems to be: even if one should stray off the beaten track, it is better than not being on any path at all.

There is the event that happened and that has no name but has to be faced. Arendt tries to call it "Versuch der Ausrottung" and then "Vernichtung."¹³⁸ During the interview with Gaus, she points to the "Fabrikation der Leichen."¹³⁹ Nothing seems adequate, and Arendt ends up with the phrase that was to stick with her for some time: 'it' is that which under no circumstances should have happened, the impossible.¹⁴⁰ It disrupts the frame of a political understanding in which "alles irgendwie einmal wiedergutmacht werden kann."¹⁴¹ In venturing into the core of the matter, the break in tradition, it seems that there can only be *Holzwege*.¹⁴² There are concepts lingering along in Arendt's text that are remnants from a past before the rupture: "Exil" and "Heimkehr," "Rahmen deutscher oder europäischer Geschichte," "eigene Geschichte."¹⁴³ They form dichotomies that

¹³⁸ Arendt, *Die verborgene Tradition*, 7.

¹³⁹ Arendt, *Ich will verstehen*, 59. Also: Arendt, *Die verborgene Tradition*, 10.

¹⁴⁰ Arendt, *Die verborgene Tradition*, 10.

¹⁴¹ Arendt, *Ich will verstehen*, 59.

¹⁴² Heidegger uses the term "Holzweg" as a title for a collection of essays spanning from 1935 to 1946, a title that also suggests the movement and transformation of his thought in these years. The expression is mostly known from the German proverb "auf dem Holzweg sein" – to be off the track. In the motto for his book, Heidegger uses it as a metaphor for thinking by pointing to the etymological origins of the term. *Holz*, wood, is an old name for 'forest.' The paths cut through the forest by woodcutters are thus called *Holzwege*. "Im Holz sind Wege, die meist verwachsen, jäh im Unbegangenen aufhören." Martin Heidegger, *Holzwege* (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1972), 3. The aforementioned proverb gets its meaning from the fact that these pathways, though specially prepared by woodcutters, do not have a goal. They are paths that deliberately lead to where one cannot move on, the "Unbegangenen." As such, they refer to the aporia, the unwalkable way, the impasse. Heidegger ascribes a certain tension to the proverb when he furthermore writes that certain people, "Holzmacher und Waldhüter," who are experts on the forest, "wissen, was es heißt, auf einem Holzweg zu sein." (Ibid., 3) He thus aims for a kind of thinking that is comfortable precisely when it is 'off the beaten track.'

¹⁴³ Arendt, *Die verborgene Tradition*, 7.

cannot capture the magnitude of the problem. Because what happened but should never have happened never fits into any frame of European history. The frame bursts. The beloved concepts and habits of this tradition are now merely dreams – leftovers from the imagery of a fading memory that still clings to the surface of present words. Arendt's writing, at this point, is caught in a limbo state between not being able to apply accustomed categories anymore and not yet having a language to even ask the proper questions. However hard she might try, the momentum of the writing process, even in its ever-recurring backwards view, cannot actually go back. Like Benjamin's angel of history, it is driven away from what it faces.

The disjointedness between writer and addressee (the Germans) becomes obvious through the way Arendt sets up her book with its dedication letter. By addressing Karl Jaspers, instead of the German people, she attempts to bridge the divide: "Lieber Verehrtester, haben Sie Dank, daß Sie mir erlaubt haben, dies Büchlein Ihnen zu widmen und Dank dafür, daß ich das, was ich bei seinem Erscheinen in Deutschland zu sagen habe, Ihnen sagen darf."¹⁴⁴ Arendt substitutes her actual addressee with Karl Jaspers in order to escape the impossible position in which her writing is situated. Jaspers, the professor and intellectual role model, is a suitable connection point to a German-speaking audience not actually existent anymore. He represents the pretense of a 'home' lost to her. This shields the course of the writing from being inhibited by fears and uncertainty: uncertainty about whether there is someone able to listen to her words. Fear also of being misunderstood, and that communication in which the facts about that which has to be faced can be established, is impossible. "Mir scheint es offenbar zu sein, daß die

¹⁴⁴ Arendt, *Die verborgene Tradition*, 7.

Mehrheit beider Völker, des deutschen wie des jüdischen, sich unter einem Juden, der in Deutschland zu Deutschen oder, wie in meinem Falle, auf diesem Wege zu Europäern sprechen will, schwerlich etwas anderes vorstellen kann als einem Lumpen oder einen Narren.”¹⁴⁵ Again, in the instant when her writing touches the point where the addressee has to be identified clearly as the Germans, Arendt substitutes these Germans with, at the very least, Europeans.

Along the lines of having suffered a shock and afterwards slowly regaining control of the situation and evaluating what has happened, the text from the letter to Jaspers goes back to the most basic forms of establishing reason, of reasserting it. In fact, the movement of Arendt’s thought is that of reassurance about the presence and validity of ‘facts’ in the first place. It seems like the most human and elementary thing to do after one’s world has been turned upside down: to seek reassurance of the ground on which one stands. Any sort of orientation is only possible when there are spatial indices, the ground being the most elementary one, since gravitation is pulling us towards it. Even before we open our eyes, our sense of balance can give us a basic orientation. Arendt thus expands the problem of ‘turning around’ and facing the aporia of the broken tradition into a spatial dimension.

Her reaction resembles a taking of inventory after the total breakdown. What is left? Does the world even still exist?¹⁴⁶ What is at stake here is the simple human predisposition to trust one’s own five senses and to recognize the world in terms of ‘facts.’

¹⁴⁵ Arendt, *Die verborgene Tradition*, 8.

¹⁴⁶ In this regard, this reaction is not unlike Günter Eich’s post-war poem “Inventur,” which is considered a characteristic example of the prevalent mood after the war to begin anew by determining and recollecting a minimal set of things and certainties.

As the habit of communicating the world and establishing its reality in terms of ‘facts’ does not work anymore, the writer seems to be thrown back onto the most basic framework; so basic, indeed, that its imagery coincides with that of rudimentary orientation of the body in its space. Arendt calls this framework the ‘common ground of facts’ (in German the proverbial “Boden der Tatsachen”).¹⁴⁷ Her use of this image suggests just this: in order to get up again after a fall, there has to be a ground in the first place. In order to be able to meet and communicate with a fellow human being in this situation of crisis, there has to be a common ground. For Arendt, the world, in a phenomenological and also existential way, seems to be defined not so much by a horizon¹⁴⁸ as, in this case, by the ground on which we stand.

The ‘common ground of facts’ now becomes highly problematic for Arendt as a basis for reasoning. As she sees it in her dedication letter, it ‘opened up’ to reveal an ‘abyss’ (“Abgrund”).¹⁴⁹ The experience of a catastrophically changed reality demonstrated that the ‘common ground of facts’ was in itself fundamentally flawed and unreliable. Arendt approaches the issue and tries to make it visible by again invoking dichotomies between peoples. These dichotomies constitute, firstly, the ‘common ground

¹⁴⁷ Arendt, *Die verborgene Tradition*, 8.

¹⁴⁸ At this situation of crisis and new beginning, where Arendt attempts to go back to a basic set of categories on which to base her thinking, she emphasizes the ground rather than the concept of the horizon that Husserl introduced into phenomenology. Husserl applies the horizon as a fundamental framework to render the spatial features of perception centered in the human body. The point of the horizon is that the scope of intuition transcends perception. “The directly given side of a spatial object refers beyond itself to other sides of the same object. This referring beyond is the ‘inner’ horizon of what is genuinely given. There is also an ‘outer’ horizon, namely the background against which an object is given, the surrounding in which it is given [...], and this background might be temporal, spatial, theoretical, cultural or some combination.” John J. Drummond, “Intentionality,” in *The Routledge Companion to Phenomenology*, ed. Sebastian Luft and Søren Overgaard (London and New York: Routledge, 2012), 129. The concept of ground that Arendt prefers here has strong ties to the sphere of common sense.

¹⁴⁹ Arendt, *Die verborgene Tradition*, 10.

of facts,' providing by virtue of their tensions the substance of experience, the "Material der Erfahrung." This is basically the experience of modernity with its center in nineteenth-century thought. It is an experience that spans a traditional understanding of the people's living together, a precarious balance of trust and mistrust. As an early reaction to the events around the Second World War, this text by Arendt shows how her thinking is still halfway caught in rather Eurocentric concepts belonging to a former tradition. The dynamic of opposition and alliance that had defined the political experience of the various countries and peoples for the length of modernity was, in Arendt's view, itself the guarantor of a traditional framework for experience. "Denn zu den Tatsachen, zu der Welt, in der wir heute leben, gehört ja auch jenes fundamentale Mißtrauen zwischen den Völkern und den einzelnen, das durch das Verschwinden der Nazis nicht verschwunden ist und nicht verschwinden konnte, weil es sich auf ein überwältigendes Material an Erfahrung stützen und berufen kann."¹⁵⁰ However, this framework of dichotomies and tensions itself has lost its equilibrium and broken down. Arendt's text demonstrates the process of realizing how fundamental this break is. In effect, the 'common ground of facts' has quite literally become a battlefield. Instead of providing a space where people can meet to share the common world, it exhibits dividing lines isolating people through insurmountable mistrust. Since it was precisely this world of facts that led to the catastrophe, this ground has to be left behind in order to be able to move on: "So etwa sieht heute der Boden der Tatsachen aus, auf den beide Völker geworfen sind. Auf der einen Seite steht die von den Nazis geplante und bewußt durchgeführte Komplizität des gesamten deutschen Volkes; auf der anderen Seite steht

¹⁵⁰ Arendt, *Die verborgene Tradition*, 9.

der in den Gaskammern erzeugte blinde Haß des gesamten jüdischen Volkes. Diesem fanatischen Haß kann sich der einzelne Jude sowenig entziehen wie der einzelne Deutsche jener von den Nazis über ihn verhängten Komplizität, solange sich nicht beide entschließen, den Boden solcher Tatsachen zu verlassen.”¹⁵¹

By reducing the matter to the extreme positions involved – Jews and Germans – the dividing line that grew into an “abyss” becomes visible. But one problem is that the categories used here to ‘face what happened’ are precisely those which made it possible. With this, Arendt is approaching the impossibility of her situation on a different level. The experience and the language necessarily to be applied in order to face the catastrophe are the language and experience that in part caused it. There does not seem to be a neutral standpoint outside of this circle generated by the crisis itself. What constitutes the impossibility, from this perspective, is the dilemma, on the one hand, to know and accept the evidence of the catastrophe and, on the other hand, to have no adequate language to speak about it. There is at this point no language *after the fact*, and thus also no thinking as after-thought.

On a different note, the structure of this paradoxical situation resembles the figure of ‘no longer and not yet.’¹⁵² The text from Arendt’s letter to Jaspers is situated between

¹⁵¹ Arendt, *Die verborgene Tradition*, 9-10.

¹⁵² A line that Arendt frequently applies in order to outline the situation of thinking after the collapse of tradition. It is also the title of a 1946 book review of Hermann Broch’s *The Death of Virgil*. Here, she repeats some of her early thoughts concerning the break in tradition and the “opening of an abyss of empty space and empty time.” Hannah Arendt, “No Longer and Not Yet,” in idem, *Essays in Understanding 1930-1954. Formation, Exile, and Totalitarianism*, ed. Jerome Kohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1994), 159. She points out very clearly that the break in tradition abandons any historical continuity and instead captures the mind in a limbo state: “For the decline of the old, and the birth of the new, is not necessarily an affair of continuity; between the generations, between those who for some reason or other still belong to the old and those who either feel the catastrophe in their very bones or have already grown up with it, the chain is broken and an ‘empty space,’ a kind of historical no man’s land, comes to the surface which can be described only in terms of ‘no longer and not yet.’” (Ibid., 158)

no longer being able to base reason on a tradition that has led to the catastrophe, and not yet having a language that may establish a new position. The dilemma of this situation attracts thinking and pushes it away at the same time. Between the obvious reflex to name that which evidently has happened and the impossibility of relying on a tradition that has in some fashion caused the involved events, language seems to slip away. The impossibility, then, is to continue relying on the ‘common ground of facts’ as usual in the face of what happened. As a result, the mind is faced with a discontinuity in its own base in experience.

Whoever decides to stay on this ‘ground of facts’ is prone to reproduce and radicalize the established lines of the divide (Germans vs. Jews): “das uns nur antreiben könnte, weiter Vernichtung zu betreiben, wie man in Auschwitz Leichen fabrizierte”; or, in any case, he or she will be unable to achieve a reliable, informed, and thus potentially critical view on ‘that which happened.’ According to Arendt, therefore, this ‘common ground of facts,’ which has changed into an abyss, has to be left behind if the writing process is to go on. At the time of *Sechs Essays*, her writing is in this unresolved situation: not to be able to go on, and at the same time not to be able to stay.

“Aber in keinem [in none of the essays from the book], glaube und hoffe ich, habe ich mich auf diesen Boden der Tatsachen gestellt, in keinem habe ich die von diesen Tatsachen geschaffene Welt als notwendig und unzerstörbar akzeptiert.”¹⁵³ The way out of this impossibility is a discontinuous step; an explosion, as it were. No causality could ever resolve the underlying dilemma. Such an explosion propels Arendt’s writing. That which happened and has to be faced, that which ‘under no circumstances should have

¹⁵³ Arendt, *Die verborgene Tradition*, 8.

happened¹⁵⁴ and is furthermore located in “Auschwitz,” did not, after all, *cause* the deterioration of the common ground of facts. This disintegration of a collective framework in which to establish and reassert our reality is in Arendt’s view rather the culmination of a long process that is deeply rooted in the history of modernity. As a result, Arendt writes that the ‘common ground of facts’ had transformed into an abyss (“Abgrund”), and that everybody who, retrospectively, tried to claim a position on these treacherous grounds would be drawn into it.¹⁵⁵ She applies an imagery of “Grund” and then “Abgrund” in order to ascertain the dangerous situation in which her writing process finds itself. If it does not achieve to step over, outside, away from the passed-on ‘common ground of facts,’ it will be swallowed by the established forces of determination; that is, by the fabrication of a world necessarily going down in the way it is inscribed in the ‘logic’ of its ‘facts’ (‘Jews are what Germans believe they are’; ‘Jews have to blindly hate every German’ ...). The ‘common ground of facts’ has, in a ‘diabolical’ way, become its own negative, its own other in the conception of the *Ab-Grund*. Obviously this is also a dichotomy: *Grund* and *Ab-Grund*. Ground is what people can stand on and where they can meet each other in order to communicate and to share their different views on the world. Accordingly, the abyss is empty space, a sphere of isolated free fall.

Arendt is very conscious of the dangers her writing has to confront in this situation. As she proceeds, her writing may end up in the *Ab-Grund*, the antonym of

¹⁵⁴ Arendt, *Die verborgene Tradition*, 10.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid. The pronoun references in the original sentence are not entirely clear: “In Auschwitz hat sich der Boden der Tatsachen in einen Abgrund verwandelt, in den jeder hineingezogen wird, der nachträglich versucht, sich auf ihn zu stellen.”

ground (which in German also denotes reason and cause). The line of reasoning could get lost on *Ab-Wege* or *Holzwege*. “Was ich bei Ihnen gelernt habe und was mir in den folgenden Jahren half, mich in der Wirklichkeit zurechtzufinden, ohne mich ihr zu verschreiben, wie man sich früher dem Teufel verschrieb, ist, daß es nur auf die Wahrheit ankommt und nicht auf Weltanschauungen, daß man im Freien leben und denken muß und nicht in einem noch so schön eingerichteten ‘Gehäuse’ und daß die Notwendigkeit in jeder Gestalt nur der Spuk ist, der uns locken möchte, eine Rolle zu spielen, anstatt zu versuchen, irgendwie ein Mensch zu sein.”¹⁵⁶

A danger of *sich verschreiben* is inherent in the activity of writing. On the surface, this German expression can mean to commit oneself (one’s soul, even) to someone else. A few lines later, Arendt mentions that this sort of “verschreiben,” of committing herself to Karl Jaspers and his cause, was indeed a real “Versuchung.” But she did not give in to it. “Damals war ich manchmal versucht, Sie nachzuahmen bis in den Gestus des Sprechens hinein, weil dieser Gestus für mich symbolisch geworden war für einen sich unmittelbar verhaltenden Menschen, für einen Menschen ohne Hintergedanken.”¹⁵⁷ But it seems that precisely Jaspers’ teachings and his example prevented this kind of identification on the personal level. *Verschreiben* in this sense can be avoided. Arendt plays with the imagery of *sich dem Teufel verschreiben*, to sell one’s soul to the devil. The devil in his diabolical function again evokes the other side of reality, its *Ab-Grund*.

Verschreiben also means to misspell, to write incorrectly, to make a mistake, an error in writing. This inherent danger in the process of writing thus marks a point of

¹⁵⁶ Arendt, *Die verborgene Tradition*, 8.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid.

departure from the ways one is supposed to write; it represents the possibility of leaving behind the aforementioned ‘common ground of facts’ upon which she can no longer base her writing. In the situation of ‘no longer’ and ‘not yet,’ *verschreiben* seems the only viable way to move on. Anchored in tradition but confronted with experiences that radically negate tradition, this language finds itself pushed into the open. Writing in the shape of *verschreiben* has no choice but to be ‘off the beaten track.’

Unfortunately, the prospect of leaving behind the ‘common ground of facts’ does not look any better, even though there is no alternative. “Ist der Boden der Tatsachen zu einem Abgrund geworden, so ist der Raum, in den man sich begibt, wenn man sich von ihm entfernt, ein gleichsam leerer Raum, in welchem es nicht mehr Nationen und Völker gibt, sondern nur noch einzelne, für die es nicht mehr sehr erheblich ist, was die Mehrzahl der Menschen jeweils gerade denkt, und sei es die Mehrzahl des eigenen Volkes.”¹⁵⁸ For the text at hand, for this probing movement of writing that aims to leave the preexisting ways of writing behind, the beyond of the passed-on ‘common ground of facts’ looks like empty space. The danger of Arendt’s move is radical entropy, the dissemination of structure, of connections between elements that generate sense. The result would be the end of communication and utter isolation rather than a new way of sharing and enduring the differences of perspective on the world. With this rather bleak outlook, Arendt’s introductory letter to her book ends. Her writing process seems trapped in the dilemma of being determined either by a catastrophic tradition doomed to repeat itself, or by an empty space in the beyond. Can this new space that Arendt nonetheless envisions be filled anew with connections, with sense? She expresses some hope in her

¹⁵⁸ Arendt, *Die verborgene Tradition*, 11.

letter, as she is still convinced that there are individuals in this new diaspora (that has now befallen everybody) who try to meet with each other, who can talk to each other.

The first essay of *Sechs Essays* represents preliminary work that would later appear in *Origins of Totalitarianism*. “Über den Imperialismus” bears features of an initial reaction to the catastrophe that had to be faced, and thus repeats and continues the established thought structure of the introductory letter. The style and gesture of the essay’s writing suggest surprise and amazement on an intellectual level. On a formal level, the topic is simply “imperialism,” which in itself is a rather classical choice of topic for nineteenth-century history. But viewed from beyond the abyss outlined above, this topic presents itself as distorted.

“Denn gemessen an dem schließlichen Resultat der Verheerung aller europäischen Länder, des Zusammenbruchs aller abendländischen Traditionen, der Existenzbedrohung aller europäischen Völker und der sittlichen Verwüstung eines großen Teiles der westlichen Menschheit – ist die Existenz einer kleinen Klasse von Kapitalisten, deren Reichtum die soziale Verfassung ihrer Länder und deren Produktionskapazität die ökonomischen Systeme ihrer Völker sprengte und die daher mit gierigen Augen den Erdball absuchten nach profitablen Investitionen für überflüssiges Kapital, wahrlich eine Bagatelle.”¹⁵⁹ Arendt attempts to draw a line from nineteenth-century imperialism to the Second World War – a connection that fails. Common categories of historical reasoning, as well as traditionally perceived space-time structures of causal relations, seem out of joint here. It is not so much the fact of imperialism that arouses interest, but the impossibility of setting it into a coherent relation with what Arendt calls here the

¹⁵⁹ Arendt, *Die verborgene Tradition*, 13.

resulting devastation of all European countries, the collapse of all occidental traditions, etc.

Here, at this point, the break in tradition appears as a failure of the structural integrity of reasoning and judging themselves. Speaking of a “schließliche[s] Resultat” reveals Arendt’s attempt to establish a chain of reasoning, even a causal relation. From the perspective of imperialism, there must, according to this reasoning, be a way to ask how fascism and National Socialism were possible. However, the line of thought breaks off at this moment; this way cannot be walked by the mind, so to speak. It is the result that renders its assumed antecedent impossible. “Diese unselige Diskrepanz zwischen Ursache und Folge liegt historisch wie sachlich der unmenschlichen Absurdität unserer Zeit zugrunde.”¹⁶⁰ Lack of coherence, and the gap left behind by the impossibility to bridge the discrepancy between cause and consequence, leads to the perception of absurdity on Arendt’s side. Still, the perceived ‘discrepancy’ does not lead Arendt to conclude that this might actually be an insurmountable gap and complete break in tradition, not yet. There is still a way to go from this observation of a mere discrepancy in the applied framework of causality – the tool of reasoning of Western logocentrism – to the notion that the tradition of thought itself collapsed here.

In this fashion, Arendt starts her study on imperialism not so much with an introduction of the historical background, but with this surprising turn that renders the phenomenon of imperialism imprecise and harder to grasp, at best. Arendt’s text complicates its own beginning and revokes the ground on which it should represent its topic. Phenomena of history hence appear through the glasses of absurdity as a ‘bloody

¹⁶⁰ Arendt, *Die verborgene Tradition*, 13.

spectacle' and in "karikierende[r] Verzerrung."¹⁶¹ Facts, the common ground on which reasoning moves – or rather, the underlying events – become 'comical.' But these comical incidents of historical scope – Arendt mentions that it took a world war to get rid of a 'clown' such as Hitler – also hurt the dignity of man, the mind's faculty of reconciling with the world.¹⁶² This is the situation in which the reasoning mind, the writing subject, finds itself, after the events that 'have to be faced.' Arendt immediately responds by implementing a paradoxical turning-around movement in her thinking and writing that will accompany all of her works.

In the course of the break in tradition, historical reality – that is, a contemporary sense of reality that depends on past events as facts – and the very possibility of factuality became distorted and thus do not provide Arendt with the means to investigate the causes that led to the catastrophe. For Arendt, therefore, the past is necessarily not a continuous space; only a discontinuous access to tradition is possible. She therefore particularly relies on the passed-on texts of the tradition. Texts remain, after all, material traces of the past, but allow in the act of reading a distanced and discontinuous approach. For Arendt, to 'go back' into the past to reach for a beginning – an origin, as it were – initially means to go back to the beginning of the text, of writing.

The break in tradition that Arendt experienced first-hand led her to the question of its underlying concept. What is the tradition? Where did it begin, where did it end? In several texts, the author approaches these questions again and again from multiple perspectives, going back to the origins of fundamental categories of Western history. In

¹⁶¹ Arendt, *Die verborgene Tradition*, 13.

¹⁶² Arendt writes: "Daß es eines Weltkrieges bedurfte, mit Hitler fertig zu werden, ist gerade darum so beschämend, weil es auch komisch ist." (Ibid.)

order to situate Arendt's complex approach to tradition, it will be helpful to look at some of her university lectures, which represent in many cases the foundation of her published works. It is here in these lectures where she first lays down her questions and seems to follow more freely their multiple leads. The complexities and the inherent contradictions of the concept of tradition thus come to light.

In a lecture on "Karl Marx and the Tradition of Political Thought,"¹⁶³ Arendt attempts to locate the 'origins' of contemporary problems and questions by looking at the source texts of Western philosophy. She quickly focuses in on the relation between philosophy and politics that represents on a different level the dichotomy of thinking and acting as the fundamental condition of human beings. The problem of tradition is intricately entangled with how the relation of thinking and action was argued and represented at the very dawn of Western tradition when an understanding of philosophy and politics first formed. Beginning with Plato and Aristotle, it can be said that the dualism of thinking and action, as it progresses through history, becomes a constitutive element of the concept of tradition.

"But it remains true that Plato as well as Aristoteles [*sic*] became the beginners of occidental philosophic tradition and that this beginning, as distinguished from the beginning of Greek philos. thought, was made in a time when everything political had

¹⁶³ The first and second drafts of this lecture, written in 1953 and held at Princeton University, are available online in the collection of *The Hannah Arendt Papers* at the Library of Congress. Parts of this lecture, in particular the second draft, constitute what would become the essay "Tradition and the Modern Age" from *Between Past and Future*. The first draft is concerned mainly with Marx and with Arendt's argument that Marx' philosophy was, to a degree, responsible for the end of tradition. I include these notes from Arendt's lectures because here she brings together the question of the beginning of tradition with the question of politics.

come to an end.”¹⁶⁴ Arendt refers to the end of the Greek polis. Tradition is, right at its origins, a political issue. She identifies in the “end of the city state”¹⁶⁵ a clash of the categories of thinking and action. At the same time, the related institutions of philosophy and politics formed and subsequently passed on the conflict throughout tradition until Hegel and Marx. Thus in a way, tradition can be reduced to the dynamics resulting from the asymmetry between thinking and action. The problem crystallizes for Arendt in the question: “how can man live outside politics; if he is to live in a polis, and this very quickly, in what sometimes seems a strange resemblance to our own times, how can man live without belonging to a polis, in the state of apoluty or what we today would call statelessness.”¹⁶⁶ In the beginning of political life, Arendt discovers a tension between the now-introduced necessity of living within a political space (within the polis) and a life outside this order. She also sees this tension arise anew – but under different conditions, of course – in the contemporary phenomenon of statelessness. For in a world that is globally structured by various political systems, there is, strictly speaking, no place for the stateless. The great danger that Arendt saw here was that these people might be declared ‘superfluous.’

In general, the question she asks here can be rephrased as: what is politics at all? Where are its limits? If life in a community that defines its very existence by providing the space for political action is determined so thoroughly by politics, the question arises,

¹⁶⁴ Hannah Arendt, “Karl Marx and the Tradition of Western Political Thought,” in: The Hannah Arendt Papers at the Library of Congress: Speeches and Writings File, 1923-1975, n.d., Essays and lectures, Christian Gauss Seminar in Criticism, Princeton University, Princeton, N.J., First draft 1953, 1 of 4 folders.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid. Also: “Plato and Aristotle wrote in the fourth century, under the full impact of a politically decaying society and under conditions where philosophy quite consciously either deserted the political realm altogether or claimed to rule it like a tyrant.” Ibid., 2 of 4 folders.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid.

when is man political and when not? From this perspective, it appears that the still-functioning polis life had first of all brought into the world the possibility of politics, but at the same time its question. This question can then be applied to action and thinking in general: when do we think and when do we act? And more intricately: what are we doing when we think?¹⁶⁷

“More serious was the abyss which opened immediately between thought and action and which never since has been closed. Thought, that is all the thinking activity which is not simply the calculation of means to obtain an intended, willed end, but is concerned with meaning in the most general sense, came to play the role of an ‘after-thought’ after action had decided reality. Action, on the other hand, became meaningless, the realm of the accidental and haphazard on which no great deeds any longer shed their immortal light.”¹⁶⁸ The existence of politics yields the question of thought and action, since conducting politics (people meeting together as equals and sharing their different viewpoints on the world) is inevitably the result of both. Using the same expression as in the aforementioned letter to Jaspers, albeit in English, Arendt observes the opening of an abyss between action and thinking. What this indicates is that the questions with which Arendt confronts tradition are of course also the result of tradition’s collapse in modernity. There is on some level a structural similarity between the modern aporia of history and the fundamental rift between acting and thinking which Arendt situates at the origins of politics and philosophy. But this does not imply a causal or ‘historical’ relation

¹⁶⁷ A question that appears all through Arendt’s work until *The Life of the Mind*.

¹⁶⁸ Hannah Arendt, “Karl Marx and the Tradition of Western Political Thought,” in: The Hannah Arendt Papers at the Library of Congress: Speeches and Writings File, 1923-1975, n.d., Essays and lectures, Christian Gauss Seminar in Criticism, Princeton University, Princeton, N.J., First drafts 1953, 2 of 4 folders.

between the two sides, since the perception, the appearance itself of the one is determined by the other.

In her argument, Arendt emphasizes that she is not talking about thinking in a narrow sense in which it would be regarded as a means to an end. In that case, which is too limited for Arendt's purposes, thinking would be regarded merely as an instrument for preparing the next action. But Arendt relates to thinking on a "most general" level, where it may engage in questions concerning all of the human condition, where it is concerned with the general situation of man in the world. And it is this sort of abstract thinking that, according to Arendt, grew more and more separated from action. Instead of an all-encompassing contemplation that would prepare the world in which man acts, here action has always already determined the structure of reality, and contemplation is then only the response, the reflection on what has occurred. Contemplation becomes, as a result, utterly reactive and passive.

The rift between contemplation and action that Arendt introduces here is strongly reminiscent of the incongruence between image and body space that Benjamin put at the heart of his concerns with modern politics. It seems that in terms of politics both came to the conclusion that, in modernity, thinking moved ever farther away from the possibilities and responsibilities of action. What is needed, then, is a new approach, implying a new narrative that would be able to put the relation of contemplation and action on a new foundation. In such a total perspective, the potential and the dangers of action would be fully reflected by contemplation, while in turn action would ideally become a one hundred percent realization of contemplation. It seems that Arendt saw this ideal partly realized in the early examples of Greek polis life (at least for those men who were

enabled to take part in the political life of the polis). In modernity, this almost total incorporation of contemplation and action into one space was lost.

Arendt maintains in her lecture on “Socrates” that Western tradition begins with Plato departing from the teachings of Socrates and thereby breaking with the polis. Plato himself therefore had to ‘break’ with the Greek past – that is, with its ‘tradition’ – by rewriting and rearranging it in his philosophy and theory of politics. However, at that time, as Arendt observes, the very concept of tradition was unknown. On closer inspection, there was no such thing as a Greek tradition. In the second draft of the lecture series on Karl Marx, she further specifies that tradition in fact began with the rise of the Roman Republic, since the concept of tradition is itself of Roman heritage. “Our tradition, properly speaking, begins with the Roman acceptance of Greek philosophy as the unquestionable, authoritative [*sic*] binding foundation of all thought, which made it impossible for Rome to develop a philosophy, even a political philosophy, of its own and therefore left its own specifically political experience without adequate interpretation.”¹⁶⁹ According to Arendt, the discrepancy between philosophy and politics found its manifest expression in the hegemony of ancient Roman culture. At the end of the day, she does not provide a historical analysis of tradition, but constructs an etymological and philological argument. This argument’s basis is thetical in nature. From the start, the beginning and the end of tradition become a theoretical construction after the fact of tradition’s complete collapse.

¹⁶⁹ Hannah Arendt, “Karl Marx and the Tradition of Western Political Thought,” in: The Hannah Arendt Papers at the Library of Congress: Speeches and Writings File, 1923-1975, n.d., Essays and lectures, Christian Gauss Seminar in Criticism, Princeton University, Princeton, N.J., Second draft, Part II 1953.

In the context of Roman culture, the concept of tradition more concretely characterizes the act of passing on from generation to generation. Arendt points out that the Romans created their empire on the principle of passing on its foundation – that is, the foundation of the city of Rome – thereby declaring the foundation and the principle of passing on to be sacred. Since the Roman religion “made it a holy duty to preserve whatever had been handed down from the ancestors, the maiores, the greater ones,”¹⁷⁰ tradition became sacred. “It preserved and handed down authority, which was based on the testimony of the ancestors who had witnessed the sacred foundation. Religion-authority-and traditio[n] thus became inseparable from each other, expressing the sacred binding force of an authoritative beginning to which one could remain bound only through the strength of tradition.”¹⁷¹ Religion, authority and tradition became a trinity, each one utterly dependent on the others. Arendt expands on this line of thought considerably in her book *Between Past and Future* in the chapter “Tradition and the Modern Age.” There she describes the difficulty of characterizing the beginning and the end of tradition with an image. Only at the beginning and at the end, she argues, do the “elementary problems of politics”¹⁷² come to appearance. Picking up a notion of the historian Jacob Burckhardt, she applies the metaphor of harmony in order to compare the course of tradition with the sound of a chord: “Only beginning and end are, so to speak, pure or unmodulated; and the fundamental chord therefore never strikes its listeners more

¹⁷⁰ Hannah Arendt, “Karl Marx and the Tradition of Western Political Thought,” in: The Hannah Arendt Papers at the Library of Congress: Speeches and Writings File, 1923-1975, n.d., Essays and lectures, Christian Gauss Seminar in Criticism, Princeton University, Princeton, N.J., Second draft, Part II 1953.

¹⁷¹ Ibid.

¹⁷² Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 18.

forcefully and more beautifully than when it first sends its harmonizing sound into the world and never more irritatingly and jarringly than when it still continues to be heard in a world whose sounds – and thought – it can no longer bring into harmony.”¹⁷³

Harmony, in musical terms, is a formal principle that arranges sound in space and time. Along the lines of this metaphor, Arendt argues that the beginning and the end have a quality on their own according to which the phenomenon they encompass expresses itself most clearly. The chord, which represents at least a triad (religion, authority, tradition!) of sounds, appears most in harmony at its beginning, and is most disharmonic at its end. Hence the metaphor of harmony demonstrates the intrinsic quality of beginning and end itself. In this regard, the metaphor tells something about the beginning and end of tradition. Tradition becomes a formal principle whose ‘authority’ consists in its power to ‘harmonize’ the contingency of history/reality. Tradition appears most clearly at its origin, as its high regard in ancient Roman culture indicates. Arendt locates the end of tradition over the span of modernity. When it ended, ‘harmony’ – its power to exercise authority over what is worth being passed on and what is not – was lost. Tradition lost its character of being a formal principle for people facing the contingencies of reality, leaving only dis-c(h)ord.

More generally, Arendt connects this thought on the beginning and end of tradition to a line from Plato praising the power of the beginning: “‘The beginning is like a god which as long as it dwells among men saves all things’ [...] is true of our tradition; as long as its beginning was alive, it could save all things and bring them into harmony. By the same token, it became destructive as it came to its end – to say nothing of the

¹⁷³ Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 18.

aftermath of confusion and helplessness which came after the tradition ended and in which we live today.”¹⁷⁴ Arendt associates a distinct quality or power with the incident of a beginning, which radiates throughout that which follows the beginning until it fades away. In this regard, a beginning has a power to ‘save all things,’ meaning: it exerts a formative power over the phenomena linked to it. Salvation in this sense is a formal or structural principle. Plato’s line also implies that the faculty of beginning is only possible among men in the plural (“dwells among men”). Beginning becomes constitutive for politics. Furthermore, Arendt suggests here that the end of tradition came gradually in a number of steps, but that nonetheless there was a definite end. She also implies that the end of tradition was not merely a loss of the power introduced by its beginning, but rather a destructive force on its own that caused the confusion ‘in which we live today.’

While these passages say a lot about Arendt’s tentative approach to the phenomenon of tradition and the involved concepts of beginning and end, they also reveal the methodological problems she faced. She is rather definite when identifying the beginning of tradition with Plato’s departure from Greek polis culture and the transition to Roman cultural hegemony. But her characterization of tradition’s end is not definite at all, as further readings will show. The confusion and disarray occasioned by the end of tradition obviously also has an effect on its conceptual analysis. As a result, the tradition that Arendt aims to question in order to investigate the causes of the catastrophic course taken by modernity seems to elude precisely these attempts. Tradition’s end affects the questions that can be directed at it; any concept of tradition seems to be lost before its question can even be asked. The problem Arendt’s writing is concerned with is that the

¹⁷⁴ Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 18.

collapse of tradition damaged the tradition of language, as well. In this regard, it also depends quite literally on the place from which it is approached.¹⁷⁵ There is no tradition of ‘tradition,’ or in other words: no narrative of tradition, thus no conceptual continuum that allows her to simply ‘go back’ to before the fact. Strictly (or historically) speaking, there is no origin of a tradition (anymore), nor an end. Rather, the break in tradition, this point that is itself impossible to locate – is an impossibility itself, as it were – first of all becomes an origin for Arendt’s writing.

This origin is not an origin in historical terms, but in terms of thinking: it is itself a void, an aporia that enables the mind – *on a case-by-case basis* – to make a beginning. Arendt writes the following about Heidegger in her notes: “Heidegger nimmt nicht nur an (was andere vor ihm taten), dass jedes Werk ein ihm spezifisch Unausgesprochenes in sich hat, sondern dass dies Unausgesprochene seinen eigentlichen Kern bildet (psychologisch gesprochen der Grund seines Entstehens ist: Weil dies Eine unaussagbar war, wurde alles Andere geschrieben), also gleichsam der leere, in der Mitte liegende Raum, um den sich alles dreht und der alles andere organisiert.”¹⁷⁶ In Arendt’s writing, this empty space in the middle of the work becomes a pressing issue, a “fact of political

¹⁷⁵ Hahn, *Hannah Arendt*, 72-73. “Ein Vergleich der englischen mit der deutschen Fassung des Essays zeigt, daß die Frage nach dem ‘wann’ vom Ort abhängt, von dem aus der Gedanke gesponnen wird. Wieder bekommen die amerikanischen Leser eine andere Wendung der Gedanken als die deutschen.” (Ibid., 72) Comparing the different versions of Arendt’s essay “Was ist Autorität?” / “What is Authority?” from the respective versions of *Between Past and Future / Fragwürdige Traditionsbestände im politischen Denken der Gegenwart*, the conclusion is that the English essay ends on a hopeful note with respect to the collapse of tradition, while the German essay ends with a darker outlook. The authority of beginning and thus the basis for the political is, according to Arendt, still strong in the US, and thus the failing of tradition could potentially make space for a new beginning – the reason for this being that the only successful revolution in recent modernity is, in Arendt’s view, the American Revolution, whereas all revolutions in France or Germany failed and were succeeded by terror. In Germany there is therefore no real experience of a political foundation, a political beginning, which bears heavily on any attempt to change the political reality. Any such attempt in Germany – experience tells us – is in great danger of ending in violence rather than in the founding of a new political body.

¹⁷⁶ Arendt, *Denktagebuch*, vol. 1, p. 353-354.

relevance”¹⁷⁷ even, that pushes itself towards the surface of her writing, as will be shown. She does not avoid it, but attempts to construct a theoretical narrative that consciously incorporates this “leere[n], in der Mitte liegende[n] Raum” as a formative principle that ‘organizes’ her writing. Another impossibility: to gain structure from empty space, the void.

¹⁷⁷ Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 14.

CHAPTER VIII

ARENDT: TRADITION AS A BROKEN CONCEPT

Because the very concept of tradition seems inherently broken, whenever Arendt attempts to pinpoint its ‘beginning’ or ‘end,’ she arrives at a slightly different story of the involved issues. Beginning and end are no absolute coordinates anymore, but relative in regard to the stories being told. The condition of tradition after its collapse, and by extension the aporia of modern thought, lead to the question of narrative, which is at the center of this study. In order to form this question, it will be necessary to take a thorough look at how Arendt approaches tradition. For this I will turn to a 1953 university lecture by the author on “Karl Marx and the Tradition of Western Political Thought” and to her essay “Tradition and the Modern Age” from *Between Past and Future*, which is in part based on the aforementioned lecture.

Arendt determines the categorial boundaries of tradition in general through the dichotomy of philosophy and the political, or in even more general terms, the dichotomy of contemplation and action. By shifting between these two angles and by reaching back into the past as far as the origins of political and philosophical understanding itself, she attempts to get hold of the concept of tradition. The essay on these matters begins as follows: “Our tradition of political thought had its definite beginning in the teachings of Plato and Aristotle. I believe it came to a no less definite end in the theories of Karl Marx.” The author engages the question of tradition through the tension that lies in the notion of a “political philosophy,” which “necessarily implies the attitude of the

philosopher towards politics.”¹⁷⁸ Initially, she restricts her perspective and speaks specifically about the tradition of political thought. Within this frame, Plato represents the attitude of the philosopher who wants to impose his standards on the political, while Marx represents the philosopher turning away from philosophy “so as to ‘realize’ it in politics.”¹⁷⁹ Beginning and end are thus initiated by moments of turning around the perspective between politics and philosophy.

In trying to reveal the beginning and end of tradition, Arendt, in a way, constructs her own version of the story; every story has a beginning and an end. She begins her essay with this dual framework. As Plato had turned away from the political culture of the Greek polis, maintaining that “those aspiring to true being” must leave behind the sphere of living together and instead reach for the “clear sky of ideas,” Marx turned this around again, saying that the truth must be ‘realized’ in the political sphere. Between the corner points of these two philosophers – two bookends of tradition, as it were – ‘political philosophy’ unfolded for the longest time. According to Arendt, this meant that philosophy turned away from politics in order to then return to it, imposing its standards on human affairs.¹⁸⁰ This is how the rift between action and thinking, mentioned in the last chapter, determined the dynamic of tradition. Standards for the political thus were not derived from actual issues surrounding communal life, but from the disclosed sphere of thinking alone. Political philosophy indeed became an afterthought. Marx’s response in turn is extreme in its own way, since he – from within philosophy – attempted to

¹⁷⁸ Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 17.

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 18.

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 17, 18.

completely turn away from philosophy by ‘realizing’ it in politics. His project, Arendt argues, was ultimately not about a philosophical reflection on politics, but about the abolishment of philosophy in a society that would have no need of it anymore.

Accordingly, Arendt writes in “Tradition and the Modern Age” that Marx inverted the traditional hierarchy of “thought and action, of contemplation and labor, and philosophy and politics.”¹⁸¹ However, still tradition had a considerable “hold”¹⁸² on him, which led to “flagrantly contradictory statements” in his work in form of ‘predictions’: for example, that in a completely “socialized humanity” (*vergesellschaftete*) the state would simply vanish, or that “the productivity of labor will become so great that labor somehow will abolish itself.”¹⁸³ Ironically, the ideal state that Marx envisions resembles the Greek polis, which also was not a state in the modern sense of the word and where, indeed, those who were able to take part in the business of politics – the free men in contrast to the slaves and barbarians, specifically – were free from labor. In this sense, these ‘contradictions’ thus led Marx back to the prehistory of the political tradition.

Arendt concedes that Marx’s work is able to describe certain developments that only in recent modernity are fully perceivable. Traditional government gives way more and more to administration, and in this sense vanishes, and industrialization did lead to a dramatic increase of leisure time. She argues, however, that Marx was wrong in his assumption that these developments would be the result of a “socialization of the means

¹⁸¹ Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 18.

¹⁸² *Ibid.*, 20.

¹⁸³ *Ibid.*, 18, 19.

of production.”¹⁸⁴ Instead, it seems the increase of leisure time is precisely the result of the capitalization of production that expresses itself in monopolization, an increase of the power of commodities, and the shift of labor either to countries with low wages or to machines. In Arendt’s view, Marx was, on the one hand, still caught in the categories of tradition, but was on the other hand confronted with tendencies (e.g., industrialization) that could not be integrated into this tradition anymore: “the perception of certain trends in the present which could no longer be understood in the framework of the tradition, and the traditional concepts and ideals by which Marx himself understood and integrated them.”¹⁸⁵ His work is situated in the tension between this ‘no longer and not yet.’

Marx’s turn against tradition was nonetheless already a conscious move – a “rebellion,” even. Because the concepts, as well as the understanding from which Marx drew, still belonged to tradition, while the phenomena he needed to integrate into this framework were completely new, he resorted to placing paradoxical notions at the base of his work. Arendt calls this the “challenging and paradoxical mood” of his writings.¹⁸⁶ These paradoxes are not paradoxical in a strictly logical way; they become so because they turn against traditional values. Arendt lists three Marxian propositions that fill this role: “Labor created man,” “violence is the midwife of every old society pregnant with a new one,” and “the philosophers have only interpreted the world differently; the point is, however, to change it.”¹⁸⁷ She then goes on to show how these statements transgress the

¹⁸⁴ Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 20.

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 21.

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

traditional meaning of the concepts they contain. By claiming that labor created man, for example, Marx spoke against the traditional notion of god, saying that man created himself, “that his humanity is the result of his own activity.” Man is furthermore, according to this statement, defined as *animal laborans*, instead of the traditional *animal rationale*. In any case, what this shows is that Marx did not lead tradition into its own contradictions by way of logical deduction. Rather, the premises Arendt takes from Marx’s work are *thetical* in nature. They are not initiated by argument and reason. Instead, the beginning of the end of tradition is itself a conscious positing of propositions that would necessarily transgress it. The motive or urge to proceed in this way occurred because the reality of modernity could not be contained within tradition anymore. Arendt writes that these statements are “framed in traditional terms” but “formulated as paradoxes” and thus “meant to shock us.”¹⁸⁸

Arendt compares Marx with Hegel, observing that Hegel’s philosophy, with all its extreme implications, still remained within tradition. Ultimately, though, she will also concede that Hegel’s philosophy contributed to ending tradition. In her notes, published in the *Denktagebuch*, she writes that the main and most important difference between Hegel and Marx is “dass Hegel seine weltgeschichtliche Betrachtung nur auf die Vergangenheit projizierte und in der Gegenwart als ihrer Vollendung ausklingen lies, während Marx umgekehrt sie ‘prophetisch’ auf die Zukunft projizierte und die Gegenwart nur als Sprungbrett verstand.”¹⁸⁹ Hegel restricted his philosophy to purely contemplative terms, not giving it any direction into the future. When Arendt writes that

¹⁸⁸ Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 24.

¹⁸⁹ Arendt, *Denktagebuch*, vol. 1, p. 72.

Marx turned Hegel's philosophy around, this means basically that he changed the direction and the object of the dialectical method he adopted from Hegel. In terms of the divide between action and thinking, or in Arendt's words the *vita activa* and the *vita contemplativa*, the idealist aim of Marx's philosophy is not only to turn around the relation between these two categories, but also to abolish their difference according to the dialectical movement of *aufheben*. The call for *realizing* the substance of the sphere of contemplation within the sphere of action means exactly this.¹⁹⁰ Hegel, Arendt explains, rather discovered or read dialectics in the dynamics of the past. The instance of present time is where the line of historical reflection becomes a full circle. Dialectics for Hegel was a means to understanding history in a total perspective that points to the present time. Thus contemporary conditions in this model are always legitimated by the past, and contemporary man has, qua this dialectics, the means to reconcile with the past. Philosophical thinking in Hegel ultimately results in a tautological form: from a strictly present-time perspective (the perspective of understanding) contemplation cannot do anything else but accept the things that are as the things that are. To reconcile with reality means, in Hegel's view, to achieve acceptance of what is, by recognizing it. The rift between thinking and action seems to have reached its climax in Hegel's philosophy, where thinking is consequently developed as an afterthought.

Action, which triggers processes that cannot be completely predicted, remains uncertain; it is then simply not the responsibility of the philosopher. Reading Hegel in

¹⁹⁰ This resembles the congruency of action and contemplation in Benjamin's conception of body and image space, which it indeed at least in part inspired, as for example Benjamin's reference to the Communist Manifesto in the surrealist essay shows. The difference, in a nutshell, is that Benjamin did not project this method as an infinite progression into the future, but that, on the contrary, the temporal aspect of this dialectics is suspended, and history fragmented into still images.

this way means that his seeming “Zufriedenheit mit den gegenwärtig bestehenden Zuständen”¹⁹¹ – that is, that parts of his work culminate in the characterization of the Prussian state of his time as the status quo of the unfolding world history – does not necessarily imply that this is also the ideal state of affairs for any future. Hegel’s understanding of history merely states that history – if we reconcile with it perfectly – is indeed the ideal representation of the present time.

When Arendt writes that Hegel had “[p]olitisch [...] seine weltgeschichtliche Betrachtung bereits diskreditiert und widerlegt,”¹⁹² she interprets the philosopher in the above sense. A political approach to philosophy, in contrast to a philosophical interpretation of politics, necessarily has to deal with the question of action, and action unfolds into the future. This question of a ‘politics of philosophy’ led Marx to his agenda of ‘realizing’ philosophy through action, or as he put it, instead of interpreting the world, it is what should now rather be changed. Hegel thus remained a philosopher in traditional terms, though he advanced the inherent rift in the tradition of philosophy between (thought on) action and thought to its extremes, whereas Marx transgressed the confinements Hegel imposed on philosophical thought. From the perspective of Hegel’s idealistic philosophy, including the *absolute* through the concept of a world-spirit is valid. With this, he anticipates the infinite progression and approximation of the dialectical thought process. In doing so, ideas remain ultimately unreachable standards for thinking, not for action. They are not meant to be realized in the world – that is, into the future – but are projected into the past. The projection of the absolute of world-history closes at

¹⁹¹ Arendt, *Denktagebuch*, vol. 1, p. 72.

¹⁹² Ibid.

the instance of present time. Its realm is the ‘has-been,’ and it is the assumed totality of all that has been that makes thinking about the present appear in the form of a tautology: what is – is. For each present-time incident has a ‘cause’ in the past that dialectically – through *aufheben* – resulted in this incident. The function of this tautology is reconciliation with reality. – Which, again, does not necessarily mean that this reality *ought* not to change in the future. This approach projects the infinity of the absolute into the circle that the past forms with the present time. The future penetrates this circle in the moment when present time becomes past in the form of present perfect, as an afterthought, not as anticipation, prediction, or even utopia.

Yet it was also Hegel who, as Arendt sees it in *Between Past and Future*, through the mental operation of his philosophy of history stepped outside the framework of tradition. He treated history as an accomplished, absolute artifact. This view on “world history as one continuous development [...] implied that he himself stood outside all authority-claiming systems and beliefs for the past.”¹⁹³ By taking a position outside of tradition – of history, really – in order to look upon it, Hegel introduced perspective into the thinking of the historical process. This should have resulted in the possibility of arranging and representing historical data in a nonlinear fashion; Arendt speaks of “the overwhelming mass of the most divergent values, the most contradictory thoughts and conflicting authorities.” Instead, however, Hegel clung to the principle of historical continuity itself, thereby reducing the contingency of history “to a unilinear, dialectically consistent development actually designed to repudiate not tradition as such, but the

¹⁹³ Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 28.

authority of all traditions.”¹⁹⁴ Hegel replaced the formerly perceived linearity and harmony of tradition (of the contradicting and contingent data of history) with the linearity of the dialectical principle, which arranged the data by intellectual force: a calculus for history. Even if Hegel did not in fact want to repudiate tradition, he nonetheless established an outside perspective, thus replacing its authority with that of an intellectual principle.

From the viewpoint of the political, in the realm of action, this endless process of contemplation has to be left behind in order to take action in the first place. The outcome of action remains unpredictable because each action sets off a process of events unfolding in the contingent reality of our world. However, Marx, in turning around Hegel’s philosophy, does more than merely prepare the grounds for leaving behind thinking: he does not, on a grand scale, acknowledge the necessary uncertainty of action. Marx wanted to hold valid for the realm of action what was before considered valid only in the realm of thinking. His project culminates in the claim that one could, as it were, reconcile with the future. The dialectical method in Marx is not restricted to being applied, as an afterthought, to the objects of contemplation; but his aim is to realize its structure in the given world-order to come, in that realm that first of all has to be sculpted by action. Whereas in Hegel’s philosophy the *absolute* revealed itself in the actions of men, now the absolute was to be realized through actions. Dialectics became a method of acting.¹⁹⁵

¹⁹⁴ Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 28.

¹⁹⁵ Thus: “Marx’ Einwand gegen Hegel sagt: Die Dialektik des Weltgeistes bewegt sich nicht listig hinter dem Rücken der Menschen, deren scheinbar eigenständige Willens-Handlungen sie für ihre Zwecke benutzt, sondern ist die menschliche Art und Weise der Tätigkeit. Solange diese Tätigkeit ‘unbewusst’ war (d.h. solange die Gesetze der Dialektik nicht entdeckt waren), stellte sich diese Tätigkeit als ein Geschehen dar, in der das ‚Absolute’ sich offenbart. Wenn wir uns des Vorurteils entledigen, dass ein ‘Absolutes’ hinter unserem Rücken durch uns sich offenbart, und die Gesetze der Dialektik kennen, können wir das

Arendt argues in the lecture “Karl Marx and the Tradition of Western Political Thought” that the triad of tradition, authority, and religion was brought down at the beginning of modernity, when “the old belief in the sacredness of foundation in a far-distant past gave way to the new belief in progress and the future as an unending progress.”¹⁹⁶ She goes on to say that Marx, with his reformulation of Hegelian dialectics, emphasized the notion of limitless progression as a historical belief unleashed into the future. According to the basic dialectical pattern, thesis and antithesis result in a synthesis which again may become the thesis for a new dialectical step. In this principle, “dass dies Denken sich gleichsam von einem einzigen Punkte loslassen kann, dass eine wesentlich nicht mehr abbrechbare Entwicklung mit der ersten Setzung, der ersten Thesis, eingeleitet ist,” lies the potential infinity of the observed process thinking.¹⁹⁷ This also means that thinking only then becomes chained to the force of infinite processes when it subjects itself to such formal laws. Arendt sees this development as a transformation of a formerly analytical thinking into a dangerous tool for ideologies, and describes it in three steps: in Hegel, dialectics was discovered in the past; in Marx, it became a method for action; and in totalitarian terror, it was misused as ideology. According to her, this thinking, which

Absolute verwirklichen.” Arendt, *Denktagebuch*, vol. 1, p. 132.

¹⁹⁶ Hannah Arendt, “Karl Marx and the Tradition of Western Political Thought,” in: The Hannah Arendt Papers at the Library of Congress: Speeches and Writings File, 1923-1975, n.d., Essays and lectures, Christian Gauss Seminar in Criticism, Princeton University, Princeton, N.J., Second draft. Part II 1953.

¹⁹⁷ The complete passage, taken from the lecture “Von Hegel zu Marx”: “Das Formale, das Marx von Hegel übernahm, ist bekanntlich jener Dreischritt von Thesis über Antithesis zu Synthesis, bei dem die Synthesis von sich aus wieder zum ersten Schritt des nächsten Dreischritts also wieder zur Thesis wird, von der sich dann von selbst Antithesis und Synthesis in einem unendlichen Prozess ergeben. Wichtig ist, dass dies Denken sich gleichsam von einem einzigen Punkte loslassen kann, dass eine wesentlich nicht mehr abbrechbare Entwicklung mit der ersten Setzung, der ersten Thesis, eingeleitet ist.” Hannah Arendt, “Von Hegel zu Marx,” in: The Hannah Arendt Papers at the Library of Congress: Speeches and Writings File, 1923-1975, n.d., Essays and lectures, n.d.

unleashed the process character of dialectical thinking into the future and hence potentially subjugated all reality to a uniform agenda “für das alles Wirkliche sich in Stadien eines einzigen gigantischen Entwicklungsprozesses auflöst,”¹⁹⁸ was prepared by Marx but was still unknown to Hegel.

However, though Marx unknowingly prepared the way for modern ideologies, “eigentlich ideologische[s] Denken” was unknown to him. Arendt writes that ideology begins where the potentially infinite progress of logical deduction ceases to be dependent on experience. Under such conditions, then, logic seizes upon ideas and ‘perverts’ them into premises.¹⁹⁹ Ideology is the modern battleground where contemplation and action are confused, where ideas are dragged down to earth and into the realm of everyday political affairs. In political propaganda, the logic of ideas becomes a dictate for action. Arendt maintains that Marx prepared ‘liberating’ dialectics from those contents “die sie in Schranken gehalten und an substantielle Wirklichkeit gebunden hatte.”²⁰⁰ And finally, she draws a line from the resulting process thinking, which helped to create the ideologies of the nineteenth century, to the totalitarian terror of the following century.

¹⁹⁸ Hannah Arendt, “Von Hegel zu Marx,” in: The Hannah Arendt Papers at the Library of Congress: Speeches and Writings File, 1923-1975, n.d., Essays and lectures, Library of Congress, Washington.

¹⁹⁹ “Zwischen der Hegelschen Philosophie, welche das Absolute – den Weltgeist oder die Gottheit – in seiner dialektischen Bewegung so zur Darstellung bringt, wie es sich menschlichem Bewusstsein offenbart, und den totalitären Ideologien, in denen sich die Logik irgendwelcher ‘Ideen’ bemächtigt und sie zu() Prämissen pervertiert, steht der dialektische Materialismus, in dem ein in der Erfahrung Gegebenes und Nachweisbares die materiellen Produktionsverhältnisse, sich aus sich selbst dialektisch entwickeln.” Hannah Arendt, “Von Hegel zu Marx,” in: The Hannah Arendt Papers at the Library of Congress: Speeches and Writings File, 1923-1975, n.d., Essays and lectures, Library of Congress, Washington. Arendt’s critique of the connection between dialectical materialism and modern ideologies seems to continue where the discussions between her, Blücher, and Benjamin broke off in the 1940s. For some information on the background of this short-lived discussion round, see Detlev Schöttker and Erdmut Wizisla, “Hannah Arendt und Walter Benjamin. Konstellationen, Debatten, Vermittlungen,” 32ff.

²⁰⁰ Hannah Arendt, “Von Hegel zu Marx,” in: The Hannah Arendt Papers at the Library of Congress: Speeches and Writings File, 1923-1975, n.d., Essays and lectures, n.d.

“Dadurch wurde das Prozessdenken ermöglicht, das so charakteristisch[] für die Ideologien des 19. Jahrhunderts ist und das schliesslich in der vernichtenden Logik totalitärer Herrschaftsapparate mit ihrer von keiner Realität mehr zu hemmenden Gewalt geendet hat.”²⁰¹ These ideologies represent, for Arendt, the increasing divergence of (political) action from an awareness and acceptance of reality – precisely that which above, in the scope of Hegel’s philosophy, was still called reconciliation with the past. In modern ideologies, the logic of the idea – of the imaginable, in other words – is, in the most extreme cases of totalitarian regimes, not bound to the ever-changing, contingent factuality of ‘what is.’ The imaginable unfolds according to its own logic, alone, in an abstract space. Only infinity, the absolute, boundless expansion, is the *telos* of this logic. The guiding principles of action become ‘everything goes’ and ‘all or nothing.’ Applied then again in the very real sphere of the social coexistence of men, this leads to horrendous consequences in which whole groups of people become a field of experimentation for the aforementioned logics.

Besides Marx and Hegel, Arendt mentions Kierkegaard and Nietzsche as the main “rebels” against tradition in modernity. All of them want to reassert what they think is essential to human beings against the traditional, philosophical abstraction of man as the *animal rationale*. Kierkegaard focuses on the “concrete and suffering” as the essence of man, Marx emphasizes the “productive and active force,” and Nietzsche “life’s productivity” and “man’s will and will-to-power.” In order to implement these propositions as fundamental premises of their philosophies, they had to turn against

²⁰¹ Hannah Arendt, “Von Hegel zu Marx,” in: The Hannah Arendt Papers at the Library of Congress: Speeches and Writings File, 1923-1975, n.d., Essays and lectures, n.d.

tradition. Arendt characterizes their approach to tradition as mental “turning-operations.”²⁰² She writes: “[T]hey arrive at the conclusion that this enterprise in terms of the tradition can be achieved only through a mental operation best described in the images and similes of leaps, inversions, and turning concepts upside down: Kierkegaard speaks of his leap from doubt into belief; Marx turns Hegel, or rather ‘Plato and the whole Platonic tradition’ (Sidney Hook), ‘right side up again,’ leaping ‘from the realm of necessity into the realm of freedom’; and Nietzsche understands his philosophy as ‘inverted Platonism’ and ‘transformation of all values.’”²⁰³ These inversions and turns run counter to the ‘direction’ and ‘flow’ of tradition, if it is interpreted as a linear progression in time and history whose stability and linearity depends on the acceptance of what is passed down. Thus they are each in their own right small countertraditions planted in the progression of tradition itself, and in this way interrupt and distort it. As Arendt sees it, these turning points in tradition, which also manifest as thinking in oppositions (dialectics is its method), are not “a matter of course,” but rather are “grounded in a first great turning operation on which all others ultimately are based because it established the opposites in whose tension the tradition moves.”²⁰⁴ From the start, tradition carried with it, and even was constituted by, what ultimately would contribute to its end. Arendt finds this first turning-around moment in Plato’s philosophy, which turned against its heritage in Greek polis culture. According to Arendt, Plato turned around the “whole human being,” meaning he redefined the constitution of the

²⁰² Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 30.

²⁰³ *Ibid.*, 35.

²⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 36.

human condition, expressed predominantly in the relation of action and contemplation. Furthermore, he did so in the form of a story, when he summarized his philosophical agenda in the parable of the cave. Ironically, he puts the story in the mouth of Socrates, who tells it in the dialogue with Plato. Whatever set of values was held to be valid for describing human affairs was turned upside down in the cave parable. And at the same time, the newly instigated framework that is defined by the structure of opposites (e.g., the inside and outside of the cave) became one of the founding texts of the Western philosophical tradition.²⁰⁵

Arendt also points out that Plato's "reversal" of Greek heritage – here specifically of Homer (the Homeric Religion), since it was, strictly speaking, before tradition – is not comparable to the turnings-around that create oppositions and that work inside the frame of tradition. The dichotomy of "predetermined opposites" was still unknown to him, and to the "Homeric world." Instead, Plato's beginning of tradition grew from a political act. According to Arendt, it was "solely for political purposes" that Plato shaped his doctrines in the form of a reversal, thereby establishing "the framework within which such turning operations are not far-fetched possibilities but predetermined by the conceptual structure itself."²⁰⁶ From now on, the framework for representing philosophy and the human condition in terms of opposites is preconfigured. All later dichotomies, like the Christian notion of heaven and hell, therefore receive their meaning ultimately from this initial setup.

²⁰⁵ Thus: "In a sense, Plato's *περιαγωγή* [turning around] was a turning-about by which everything that was commonly believed in Greece in accordance with the Homeric religion came to stand on its head." Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 37. More on Plato's cave parable in chapter 12.

²⁰⁶ Ibid.

Arendt concludes that the ‘turnings-around’ which Marx, Kierkegaard, and Nietzsche unleashed within tradition were much more radical than what the manifested framework of oppositions allowed for. They went for the “core of the matter” by questioning the “traditional hierarchy of human capabilities.” As a consequence, their philosophies end up asking again what the “quality of man is.”²⁰⁷ In this way, these thinkers challenged man’s essential understanding of his own conditions; but they nonetheless stayed with their premises in the realm of thought, even though, like Marx, they prepared their ‘turning-around’ operations for being turned into a program for action.

In the 1953 lecture on Karl Marx, Arendt provides still other approaches to the break in tradition. Here she situates the “end of tradition” in the nineteenth century, writing that it “has remained impenetrably silent whenever confronted with specifically modern questions.”²⁰⁸ In this version of tradition’s end, it does not collapse, but simply goes silent. A few lines later, however, Arendt again qualifies this end as the “break of traditional continuity.” The desperate problem eventually arose when there was nothing to replace this tradition and it simply left an empty space behind – a gap, as Arendt will call it. Tradition appears in Arendt’s investigation as a pool of advice or as a framework of “standards”²⁰⁹ that surrounds people and to which they can turn.²¹⁰ Questions

²⁰⁷ Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 39.

²⁰⁸ Hannah Arendt, “Karl Marx and the Tradition of Western Political Thought,” in: *The Hannah Arendt Papers at the Library of Congress: Speeches and Writings File, 1923-1975*, n.d., *Essays and lectures*, Christian Gauss Seminar in Criticism, Princeton University, Princeton, N.J., Second draft. Part II 1953.

²⁰⁹ *Ibid.*

²¹⁰ See also Josef Pieper, *Tradition. Concept and Claim* (Wilmington: ISI Books, 2008), 19. Pieper is quite skeptical in regard to the concept of tradition, and renders it in the following passage as a hidden framework that precisely does not itself enter the awareness of the involved people. If something that is handed down according these unconscious principles becomes the object of intentional reasoning it would lose its character of tradition: “It is an essential part of the concept of tradition that no experience and no

concerning the condition of human affairs are drawn to these standards. Arendt then suggests that it was in this sense that tradition went silent.

In yet another variation of the problem, Arendt identifies “forebodings of an impending catastrophe” in the works of Montesquieu and Goethe.²¹¹ She quotes Montesquieu from *L’Esprit des lois*: “The majority of the nations of Europe are still being ruled by customs. But if through a long abuse of power, if through some large conquest, despotism should establish itself at a given point, there would be neither customs nor climate to resist it.” According to Arendt, Montesquieu (1689–1755) observed that laws and customs that stabilize the body politic and society “had lost their validity.” The framework on which politics and communal life rests was shaken.²¹²

Lastly, she also presents Goethe as a witness to the failing tradition. Goethe adds to the observation a different perspective corresponding to an over- and underworld. Goethe writes to Lavater: “Like a big city, our moral and political world is undermined with subterranean roads, cellars, and sewers, about whose connection and dwelling conditions nobody seems to reflect or think; but those who know something of this will find it much more understandable if here or there, now or then, the earth crumbles away,

deductive reasoning can assimilate and surpass what is handed down. And when such assimilation takes place, when something which had been believed becomes something verified and critically established, then in that same moment the process loses its character as tradition (if it ever really possessed it). It is therefore not correct to use the noun ‘tradition’ to describe the process of learning that takes place collectively over generations and ages. In reality we are dealing with two completely different strands in the web of the historical process.” Pieper furthermore attempts to restrict the concept of tradition to the mere activity of passing something down: “We need to remember our previous characterization of tradition: the handing down of something received so that it can be received again and handed down again. We need to take this definition much more literally than is perhaps usually done.” (Ibid., 20)

²¹¹ Hannah Arendt, “Karl Marx and the Tradition of Western Political Thought,” in: *The Hannah Arendt Papers at the Library of Congress: Speeches and Writings File, 1923-1975*, n.d., *Essays and lectures, Christian Gauss Seminar in Criticism, Princeton University, Princeton, N.J., Second draft. Part II 1953.*

²¹² Ibid.

smoke rises out of a crack, and strange voices are heard.”²¹³ Goethe’s image gives substance to the other side of tradition’s end. Instead of mere silence, in Goethe’s view the absence of tradition is not just an impassive expanse where something used to be. Rather, he imagines the process of deterioration as something undermining the construction of society and culture. He renders the failing of tradition in structure-like images that depict the underside of communal life: roads, cellars, and sewers. It is as if the nothingness of the vanishing tradition becomes something. Goethe’s images suggest a necropolis, a negative image of the surface world, the world of the living. This would mean that in the absence of tradition something emerges; and that the course of disintegration is not an absolute event, but proceeds gradually. Arendt picks up this image of a surfacing necropolis when she writes that only with the Second World War and the Shoah was the final blow to tradition dealt, such that a subterranean world rose to the surface: “Both passages [Montesquieu, Goethe] were written before the French Revolution; it took mor[e] than 150 years until the customs of European society gave way and the subterranean world could rise to the surface, so that its strange voice was hear[d] in the political concert of the civilized world.” And she adds in a handwritten marginal note: “It is only then, I think, that we can say that the modern age, beginning in the 17th century, actually had brought forward the modern world in which we live today.”²¹⁴ The interruption of tradition – its absence – reveals something for which there seems to be no language. Instead of going silent, the failing tradition has here a “strange voice” that

²¹³ Hannah Arendt, “Karl Marx and the Tradition of Western Political Thought,” in: *The Hannah Arendt Papers at the Library of Congress: Speeches and Writings File, 1923-1975*, n.d., *Essays and lectures, Christian Gauss Seminar in Criticism, Princeton University, Princeton, N.J., Second draft. Part II 1953.*

²¹⁴ *Ibid.*

resembles the distorted harmony she observed in the image by Jacob Burckhardt. The break in tradition gave way to something that formerly was suppressed, a realm of human possibilities – good or bad – antagonizing the tradition, as well as the ‘civilized world.’ Wishes? Dreams? At any rate, Arendt distinguishes between modernity in general, which according to her begins with the seventeenth century, and what she calls ‘the modern world in which we live today.’

* * *

In conclusion, Arendt’s multifaceted approach to tradition reveals a fundamental problem underlying its very concept. Throughout the presented lectures and essays, the author develops several different approaches to the break in tradition. Again and again, she asks the question of tradition’s end, and as the above account shows, she gets a different answer in each instance. With every new look at tradition, it presents itself in a different light. Her observations reach from Montesquieu to Marx, Hegel, Nietzsche, Kierkegaard, and also Kafka and Benjamin,²¹⁵ until she arrives at the two world wars. Even though all these thinkers and authors in one way or another either observed aspects of the disintegrating tradition or contributed to its demise in the sphere of thinking, they do not specifically address a concept of tradition. It seems, therefore, that such a concept only really became a phenomenon after its collapse, particularly looking from Arendt’s

²¹⁵ In regard to Benjamin, Arendt wrote in the essay on her late friend: “Insofar as the past has been transmitted as tradition, it possesses authority; insofar as authority presents itself historically, it becomes tradition. Walter Benjamin knew that the break in tradition and the loss of authority which occurred in his lifetime, were irreparable, and he concluded that he had to discover new ways of dealing with the past. In this he became a master when he discovered that the transmissibility of the past had been replaced by its citability and that in place of its authority there had risen a strange power to settle down, piecemeal in the present and to deprive it of ‘peace of mind,’ the mindless peace of complacency.” Hannah Arendt: *Men in Dark Times* (San Diego, New York, and London: A Harvest Book, 1995), 193. As Arendt observes here, the break in tradition “occurred in his lifetime,” while her own writing, though also in a situation to find new ways to deal with the past, started anew after the war under yet different, more severe conditions.

perspective. The paradoxical situation is that there is no tradition of tradition, and thus no consistent and reliable source through which to establish its concept in the first place. There is not a concept of tradition (or a tradition in general) from which to properly assess the condition of tradition. Instead, from the viewpoint of Arendt's work, the concept is inherently broken; it itself expresses the discord and turmoil of modern thinking and knowledge. The concept of tradition and a concept of modernity, looked upon from a looming 'post-modernity' – that is, modernity as a failed developmental history of thinking – are congruent. What looks, on the surface of Arendt's text, to be a wavering, insecure account of tradition reveals itself to be the only possible way to think authentically, impartially, and unprejudicially within the medium of that which is passed on. The inherently broken concept of tradition allows Arendt to break up any illusion of a consistent, homogeneous tradition that might or might not have existed; and it also prevents her from reasserting the troublesome modernity as a basis for thinking. In the lecture "From Hegel to Marx," she comes very close to explaining this point when she states: "Erst in diesem ['das totalitäre Zwangsfolgern aus einer Prämisse'] reisst der Faden der Tradition wirklich und dieser Riss ist ein Ereignis, das niemals aus Gedankenvorgängen oder ideengeschichtlich nachweisbaren Einflüssen 'erklärt' werden kann. Betrachten wir diesen Riss unter dem Gesichtspunkt des Weges von Hegel zu Marx, so können wir sagen, dass er in dem Augenblick eintritt, wenn nicht 'die Idee,' aber die aus der Idee entfesselte Logik die Massen ergreift."²¹⁶ Again, Arendt attempts to pinpoint the end of tradition. However, she also concludes that it cannot be determined within a

²¹⁶ Hannah Arendt, "Von Hegel zu Marx," in: The Hannah Arendt Papers at the Library of Congress: Speeches and Writings File, 1923-1975, n.d., Essays and lectures, n.d.

conventional frame of history. A history of ideas renders a frame that implies a linear progression of the development of ideas. But such a linear structure would then be added to the raw data of contingent events only retroactively. The break in tradition, however, is not an incident that would have a single, identifiable index in such a history. Arendt argues that the break in tradition cannot be “explained,” emphasizing this expression. An explanation always comes from outside; explaining has a basis in a preformed framework and in a given set of opinions and convictions that then are applied to an issue. In the context of Benjamin’s investigation of narrative forms, the alternative to a mode of explaining was identified as a narrative experience. A certain form of narrative allows for a performative structure in order to (re-)create experience within the listener or reader (see chapters 4 and 5).

Two things are happening at this point: First, the end of tradition, though ultimately triggered by events in history, is, for Arendt, a matter of thought itself; it can only be acknowledged by thinking, if at all. In this passage, she identifies the breaking point, again arbitrarily (“Betrachten wir diesen Riss unter dem Gesichtspunkt [...]”), as an event, an incident within the realm of contemplation. She writes that the force of logic – that is, thinking turned into process thinking – ‘seized the masses’ and thus ended tradition. From this perspective, it is the step from Hegel to Marx – but only from this perspective. Second, the question of narrative, of writing, necessarily comes up.²¹⁷ What would be the adequate narrative form for acknowledging the disintegration of narrative’s essential ground and still moving on in order to ‘face what happened’? The end of

²¹⁷ Arendt uses the term *storytelling* to refer to what commonly is also called *narrative* in English. See also: “Narrative, then, or, to use Arendt’s term, *storytelling*, is a fundamental human activity.” Seyla Benhabib, *The Reluctant Modernism of Hannah Arendt* (London and New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1996), 92.

tradition cannot be represented in the course of history; that is, ultimately with the tools of said ended tradition. Only a newly instigated thinking, which has accepted the break in tradition and acts on this premise, is able to relate to a tradition that is inherently fragmented.

In Arendt's notes, published as *Denktagebuch*, an entry can be found in which the author expresses the paradoxical approach to tradition that fluctuates between acknowledging tradition in its disintegration and, in the course of this act, realizing the inherent fragmentation and even inadequacy of its very concept. She writes:

“Traditionsbruch: Eigentlich, d.h. in diesem Fall römisch gedacht, der Bruch in der Nachfolge, ‘successio’, der Generationen, die voneinander das Überlieferte empfangen und es weitergaben und sich so gleichsam durch die Jahrtausende, in chronologischer Reihenfolge, an der Hand hielten. Der Bruch war vorgezeichnet im Generationsbruch nach dem Ersten Weltkrieg, aber nicht vollzogen, insofern das Bewusstsein des Bruches noch das Gedächtnis an die Tradition voraussetzte und den Bruch prinzipiell reparabel machte. Der Bruch erfolgte erst nach dem Zweiten Weltkrieg, als er als Bruch gar nicht mehr notiert wurde.”²¹⁸ Whereas in the case of Marx, Nietzsche, and Kierkegaard Arendt argues that the break in tradition concerns the realm of thought, here she presents tradition in terms of the succession of generations and of passed-on beliefs and values (*das Überlieferte*). From this – again different – perspective, she distinguishes the First and Second World Wars as two steps in the collapse of tradition. Tradition's disintegration, according to this passage, was prefigured (*vorgezeichnet*) in a rupture between generations *after* the First World War. Still, Arendt writes, the break was not

²¹⁸ Arendt, *Denktagebuch*, vol. 1, p. 300.

completely accomplished (*vollzogen*), since there was an awareness of what was going on which presupposed remembrance of tradition. What this means is that the notion of a broken tradition, as it was established here in terms of an inherently broken concept, has its origins in this interval between the wars, where a concern about tradition was still awake, and its demise on the horizon.

It was within this interval that the work of Walter Benjamin unfolded, in terms of actual historical reality as well as in the way his writing in its major theoretical steps visibly *performed* the break in tradition. While Benjamin's work was caught in the interplay of re-reading tradition ("Urgeschichte des 19. Jahrhunderts") and breaking with it, Arendt consciously situates the main body of her work after the fact of the broken tradition. In the quoted passage, she continues by stating that the rupture was completed after the Second World War and adds that at that point it was, however, not even noted as a fact anymore. By bringing up the wars – and indirectly, of course, the Shoah – Arendt shifts the focus from the realm of thoughts to that of exterior events. The break in tradition as a completed fact is ultimately the result neither of the turning-around operations within the realm of thought, nor of the increasing failure of tradition to answer to modern issues.

In the end, the rupture as an accomplished fact was the result of extreme events in the actual world that finally declared tradition null and void, once even remembrance of it had failed altogether. In the essay "Tradition and the Modern Age" from *Between Past and Future*, Arendt expands her conception of the break in tradition accordingly.²¹⁹ She

²¹⁹ See also: "Arendt distinguishes between the nineteenth-century 'revolt' against the authority of tradition and the twentieth-century 'break' with tradition." Benhabib, *The Reluctant Modernism of Hannah Arendt*, 91.

distinguishes history from tradition and states that the break in tradition was accompanied by a break in history.²²⁰ She writes: “However, neither the twentieth-century aftermath nor the nineteenth-century rebellion against tradition actually caused the break in our history.” This break in history is the culmination of a disintegrating tradition and the totalitarian terror of the twentieth century.²²¹

In another passage from the essay, Arendt applies the concepts of tradition and history in the same context. In light of the totalitarian regimes of the twentieth century, the rupture appears unprecedented and nondeliberate. The reason is that “totalitarian domination” establishes the first all-new form of ‘government’ since the beginning of tradition. Arendt adds that it cannot be “comprehended through the usual categories of political thought,” and that its crimes “cannot be judged by traditional moral standards or punished within the legal framework of our civilization.” Both the actual incidents – the terror and crimes – and the failure of tradition to answer to the issues led to a break in the “continuity of Occidental history.” As a result, the break in tradition is now “an accomplished fact. It is neither the result of anyone’s deliberate choice nor the subject to further decision.”²²²

²²⁰ The most relevant passage is, however, from “Karl Marx and the Tradition of Western Political Thought”: “The end of our tradition, furthermore, is obviously neither the end of history nor of the past generally speaking. History and tradition are not the same. History has many ends and many beginnings, each of its ends being a new beginning, each of its beginnings unavoidably putting an end to what was there before. We can date our tradition with more or less certainty, we cannot date our history.” Hannah Arendt, “Karl Marx and the Tradition of Western Political Thought,” in: *The Hannah Arendt Papers at the Library of Congress: Speeches and Writings File, 1923-1975*, n.d., Essays and lectures, Christian Gauss Seminar in Criticism, Princeton University, Princeton, N.J., Second draft. Part II 1953.

²²¹ Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 26. Also here: “This sprang from a chaos of mass-perplexities on the political scene and of mass-opinions in the spiritual sphere which the totalitarian movements, through terror and ideology, crystallized into a new form of government and domination.” (Ibid., 26)

²²² Ibid.

The break in history cannot be explained by the “silence of the tradition” or by the rebellious thinkers and their ‘turning-around’ operations. These matters, though they demonstrate the troublesome nature of tradition and of modernity in general, remained within “a traditional framework.” In the realm of thought, Arendt writes, “only radicalization, not a new beginning” is possible.²²³ The break in history was ultimately brought about by events, actions. Causality, however, is, in Arendt’s view, a mental phenomenon; the mind imposing its ‘laws’ on the contingency of nature. In the realm of events alone, there is, strictly speaking, no causality. Nevertheless, thinking that entails causality precedes and prepares for action, which leads to events; and also it is the mind that applies its causality when observing events. Causality, in other words, has its own history through which it is bound to tradition.²²⁴ Arendt’s proposition that this tradition “can never explain what actually happened” should be read in this light. As an event, the break in history occurred and constituted a reality. However, afterwards, the mind could no longer ‘reconcile’ with this reality. There is a leap, a gap, between the obvious and undeniable reality and the power of observation and explanation exerted by the mind.

The provocative and debatable conclusion from this premise would be that the mind now, after the fact, can no longer determine whether the events that led to the catastrophe were the result of thinking and deliberation at all. On the contrary, from this

²²³ Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 27-28.

²²⁴ See also: “In Arendts Verständnis ist Kausalität eine völlig unangemessene Kategorie, weil mit ihr eine zwangsgesetzliche Entwicklung suggeriert wird. Zusammenhänge ergeben sich jedoch nicht a priori, sondern erst, wenn sich die verschiedenen Elemente zu festen Formen kristallisiert haben. Erst dann, aus dem Rückblick, kann ihre Entwicklungsgeschichte rekonstruiert werden. Die Kausalbeziehung ist eine historische Synthese, die einen Zusammenhang thematisiert, der über die zufällige Koinzidenz hinausgeht, aber niemals den Charakter eines Gesetzes hat.” Ingeborg Nordmann, *Hannah Arendt* (Frankfurt am Main: Campus Verlag, 1994), 51.

perspective the ensuing events and their horrific consequences might look as if they were the result of a cessation of thinking, a failure of the mind to insist on attuning reality with categories of thinking. This point played an important role in Arendt's book *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, in which she observed firsthand this failure of the mind in the person of Adolf Eichmann.

In her work, Arendt seeks to point out not only the breakdown of tradition, but also the chances for a new beginning that this might indicate. The "chief function" of tradition, according to her, is "to give answers to all questions and to channel all questions into pre-determined courses."²²⁵ After the disintegration of this framework, Arendt sees new possibilities for a thinking liberated from its age-old restraints. In Marx, Nietzsche, and Kierkegaard, she discovered indications of this new thinking, for they were "the first who dared to think without the guidance of any authority whatsoever." Though the loss of the authority that this past culture had once claimed as a guide for thinking might be deplorable, Arendt writes that this might also allow us to "look upon the past with eyes undistracted by any tradition, with a directness which has disappeared from Occidental reading and hearing ever since Roman civilization submitted to the authority of Greek thought."²²⁶ The dangers of this new situation are evident, as well. Thinking, potentially bound to no guiding framework at all, may generate any meaning

²²⁵ Hannah Arendt, "Karl Marx and the Tradition of Western Political Thought," in: The Hannah Arendt Papers at the Library of Congress: Speeches and Writings File, 1923-1975, n.d., Essays and lectures, Christian Gauss Seminar in Criticism, Princeton University, Princeton, N.J., Second draft. Part II 1953.

²²⁶ Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 28-29.

from the fragmented past, thus disintegrating itself in complete arbitrariness and contingency.²²⁷

Arendt also observes that the loss of tradition's authority extends to the faculty of remembrance: "without a securely anchored tradition [...] the whole dimension of the past has also been endangered." This has a twofold consequence: the past is in danger of being forgotten, and this could mean that "humanly speaking, we could deprive ourselves of one dimension, the dimension of depth in human existence."²²⁸ Arendt maintains that this dimension of depth, as an existential category, may only be reached through remembrance. The past is a dimension for thinking that always 'occurs' in the moment of present time; without remembrance, thinking would be deprived of this dimension. In conclusion, Arendt still holds on to the hope that, with the "chain fettering each successive generation to a predetermined aspect of the past" gone, now the past would open up "with unexpected freshness and tell us things no one has yet had ears to hear."²²⁹ In *Elemente und Ursprünge totaler Herrschaft*, this thought of a liberation from tradition culminates in her calling for a thinking "ohne Geländer."²³⁰ That this form of thinking

²²⁷ Ingeborg Nordmann points out that the break in tradition converges with the general situation of (philosophical) thinking that, to a degree, always needs distance to the restrictions of tradition. In Arendt's approach, this distance that liberates thinking is no longer incorporated into a concept of linear time, but is instead precisely the result of its interruption: "In der Unabhängigkeit von jeder Tradition läßt sich unschwer jene Ortlosigkeit wiedererkennen, die das Philosophieren überhaupt kennzeichnet. Damit scheint Arendt aber auch zu sagen, daß Philosophie erst nach dem Traditionsbruch zu ihrer eigenen Gestalt findet, eine Reminiszenz an die Hegelsche Eule der Minerva, die erst bei einbrechender Dämmerung ihren Flug beginnt. Dennoch ist die Übereinstimmung mit dem Denkmodell Hegels nur scheinbar. Denn für Arendt entsteht die Chance der Philosophie nicht als Folge der Entwicklung in der Zeit, sondern durch Unterbrechung der Zeit." In chapters 9 and 10 specifically, the structure of this interruption, the 'gap between past and future,' will be examined. Nordmann, *Hannah Arendt*, 45.

²²⁸ Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 94.

²²⁹ Ibid.

²³⁰ Hannah Arendt, *Elemente und Ursprünge totaler Herrschaft. Antisemitismus, Imperialismus, totale Herrschaft* (Munich and Zurich: Piper, 2003), 42.

first has to be learned (again) is also expressed in Arendt's *Between Past and Future*, where she writes that the essays collected in this book have the purpose of exploring how one can learn to "move in this gap" between past and future.²³¹ – This 'gap' being the point where the aporia of the broken history culminates.

For Arendt, the 'break in history' is a factual situation that the thinking and writing process has to take into account. What is more, it becomes the impetus for her writing. The question that now enters the focus of the study at hand is how both the acceptance of the aporia of history and the impulse to understand and face what happened affect Arendt's writing.²³² With tradition gone, the familiar narratives for telling the stories history provides are gone as well; the framework for making sense of reality's contingency. After all, the aporia of thinking history is also an aporia of its narrative.

Arendt uses images to point to a new kind of narrative that allows for a 'thinking without banisters' and a 'moving within the gap between past and future.' Beyond these images, however, she also explores the formal characteristics of a narrative adequate for such a task. This new set of formal considerations on narrative is explicitly not supposed

²³¹ Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 14.

²³² In a short chapter on "The Theorist as Storyteller," Seyla Benhabib arrives at similar questions in her study on Hannah Arendt: "Thus, there is a continuum between the attempt of the theorist to understand the past and the need of the acting person to interpret the past as part of a coherent and continuing life story. But what guides the activity of the 'storyteller' when tradition has ceased to orient? What structures narrative when collective forms of memory have broken down, have been obliterated or manipulated beyond recognition?" Benhabib, *The Reluctant Modernism of Hannah Arendt*, 92. She then puts the questions she raises in the context of Arendt's Benjamin interpretation. She specifically refers to Arendt's image of the pearl diver from the Shakespeare passage she quotes in the essay on Benjamin ("The Pearl Diver / Full fathom five thy father lies, / Of his bones are coral made, / Those are pearls that were his eyes. / Nothing of him that doth fade / But doth suffer a sea-change / Into something rich and strange." – *The Tempest*, I,2). The storyteller, an inspiration from Benjamin's work, becomes a pearl diver and collector who arbitrarily but insistently takes hold of history's fragments. Benhabib sees here the greatest influence of Benjamin's "Über den Begriff der Geschichte" on Arendt's "views of historical narrative." (Ibid., 93)

to “replace” tradition.²³³ Instead, Arendt looks for a structure that both allows for the newfound freedom after tradition’s collapse and still saves thinking from becoming meaningless.²³⁴ Ingeborg Nordmann refers to this balance that Arendt aimed for as a “Bemühen um Rettung der Vergangenheit, das zugleich transformativ und konservativ ist.” She reads Arendt here in relation to both Benjamin and Heidegger, and maintains that the greatest difference from these thinkers lies in her emphasis of “Gleichgewicht[] als formgebende Kraft und die Ablehnung jedes apokalyptischen Tons.” This precarious balance translates into political categories: without “Dauerhaftigkeit” – some kind of stability – neither politics, nor a public realm, nor a common world is possible.²³⁵ In order to find different, new criteria that on the one hand allow for this durability, and on the other hand guarantee the newfound detachment of thinking, Arendt – according to Nordmann – applies structures determined by a “Sowohl-als-auch.” Narration, or storytelling, is one of these structures, besides the categories of thinking and politics, that

²³³ Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 14.

²³⁴ Barbara Hahn, also referring to *Between Past and Future*, writes: “Doch im Rückblick scheint der Verlust dieses Gewichtes [the break in tradition] keine Leichtigkeit ermöglicht zu haben, mit der wir uns durch eine neue Welt bewegen könnten. Etwas scheint schwerer zu drücken als vorher. Aus dem ‘Ende der Philosophie’ [...] folgt nicht einfach der Beginn des Denkens. *The Life of the Mind* versucht, die Gründe dafür auszuleuchten. Sie liegen darin, daß aus dieser Befreiung – noch – keine angemessene Politik gefolgt ist.” Hahn, *Hannah Arendt. Leidenschaften, Menschen und Bücher*, 14. While my study does not explore the political implications of the issue Hahn points out, it does attempt to show that Arendt also looked for solutions to these problems in connection with her own theoretical narrative in order to at least be able to understand them. One could argue that to a degree Arendt’s writing indeed achieved this kind of *Leichtigkeit* in its overall movement and command of the fragmented tradition. In her introduction to Hannah Arendt, Ingeborg Nordmann begins with a passage that Arendt took from Lessing, and that she thinks best describes Arendt’s writing: “Ich bin nicht verpflichtet, die Schwierigkeiten aufzulösen, die ich mache. Meine Gedanken mögen immer weniger sich verbinden, ja wohl gar sich zu widersprechen scheinen: wenn es denn nur Gedanken sind, bei welchen (die Leser) Stoff finden, selbst zu denken.” Hannah Arendt, *Von der Menschlichkeit in finsternen Zeiten. Gedanken zu Lessing* (Munich: Piper, 1960), 24; and also: Nordmann, *Hannah Arendt*, 11. It seems that in this statement much of the liberty Arendt established in her writing finds its expression. The question of my study, then, focuses on the theoretical implications of this liberty or *Leichtigkeit*, of which Arendt was very conscious.

²³⁵ Nordmann, *Hannah Arendt*, 46.

probably provides both: it is a reliable framework that nonetheless is dynamic and has its limits; a framework that, though it has a long tradition of its own, unfolds according to its own laws and can be applied ‘case-by-case’ rather than asserting an absolute scope. “Das Vermögen zu erzählen ist unbestritten, doch die Erzählung verläuft nicht nach wissenschaftlichen Gesetzen [...]”²³⁶ The structure and transformation of this narrative will be scrutinized in the following chapters. Not unlike Benjamin’s “Erkenntniskritische Vorrede” from *Ursprung des Deutschen Trauerspiels*, Arendt’s preface for *Between Past and Future* serves the purpose of weaving together imaginative with analytical thinking to create a far-reaching speculation on the issue presented here: the question of thinking and writing after the break in history.

²³⁶ Nordmann, *Hannah Arendt*, 47.

CHAPTER IX

ARENDR: TO MOVE IN THE GAP BETWEEN PAST AND FUTURE

In the preface to *Between Past and Future*, Arendt writes with regard to the break in tradition that “the human mind had ceased, for some mysterious reasons, to function properly.”²³⁷ She adds that “the predicament” that could be observed throughout tradition’s troublesome course was that “thought and reality have parted company, that reality has become opaque for the light of thought and that thought, no longer bound to incident as the circle remains bound to its focus, is liable either to become altogether meaningless or to rehash old verities which have lost all concrete relevance.”²³⁸ The dichotomic structure that determines fundamental categories of Western thought, according to Arendt inscribed into tradition by Platonic philosophy, is reflected in such oppositions as contemplation and action, subject and object, or interior and exterior. The tension between difference and identity in these oppositions determined, for a long time, the framework that thinking could fall back on. Ultimately triggered by events, and not propositions generated by thought, this framework gave way to an obvious breakdown, which then in the course of the Second World War and the Shoah had become an established fact. Thinking, no longer able to reconcile itself with reality, that is, no longer able to establish a proper sense of ‘what is,’ got caught up in this aporia.

²³⁷ Arendt: *Between Past and Future*, 9.

²³⁸ *Ibid.*, 6.

This little introduction into the modern aporia of thinking is of course itself a narration, a tale of modernity, as it were, that merely demonstrates the dilemma faced by any approach that accepts the break in history as a determining condition. The reciprocal relation of thinking to itself finds no resolution in a narrative framework anymore. Instead, any such attempt to represent its activity within a story only leads to the renewal of the aporia. Thinking, instead of concerning itself with the phenomena of the world that cause it to wonder, then becomes its own problem. It is at the point where narration as representation marks the transition from contemplation to the sphere of action that the aporia of the mind becomes an issue of “political relevance,”²³⁹ as Arendt writes. In narrative, contemplation and action converge and, ideally, form a harmony.

In regard to the Shoah, this means in effect that ‘what happened’ transformed thinking into an aporia for everybody. That ‘what happened’ is not itself the ‘abyss.’ It becomes this *insofar as* we need to think it. This small but far-reaching difference helps to identify some of the confusion associated with questions of ‘representing the Shoah.’²⁴⁰ For Arendt the precarious significance of this difference became evident when she faced Adolf Eichmann during his trial and shaped her conclusions into the book *Eichmann in Jerusalem*. For the question of the “banality of evil,” which caused so much controversy, is indeed not restricted to judging the character of certain persons, but also says something about their deeds. The consequences of this thought are frightening, and Arendt’s paradoxical notion of the evil that appears as a banality is meant to direct

²³⁹ Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 14.

²⁴⁰ Generally on issues concerning the representation of the Shoah: Rupnow, *Aporien des Gedenkens. Reflexionen über ‘Holocaust’ und Erinnerung*. See especially the chapter: “Die Unbeschreibbarkeit des Beschreibbaren: Zu Heimrad Bäcker’s *nachschriften*” (Ibid., 119-130).

attention to the abyss that has opened between thinking and action: now the character of this evil only appears the more horrendous.²⁴¹

The Shoah is unique in its occurrence because of the way we are confronted with it in retrospect through our thinking, which immediately transforms into an aporia. But we do also have to acknowledge that these things were still done by men and consisted of an endless chain of individual actions. Similar as with the person of Adolf Eichmann, whom Arendt observed point-blank, up close we see individual actions that in their particularity do not live up to the abysmal evil we expect to see. In their particularity, actions and events lose their meaning. Taking advantage of this, by the way, is of course a common strategy of perpetrators defending their involvement in state terror.

By pointing out that they were only following orders, they particularize their actions, implicating thereby that they did not know much about the consequences and also were not competent to understand the ‘big picture.’ On the level of individual events alone, it is easy to dismiss the difference between particular actions because the connection between them gets lost. As a result, their meaning cannot be established anymore. Suddenly, from the perspective of the involved subject, there is no obvious

²⁴¹ See also Ingeborg Nordmann who writes that according to Arendt the ‘totalitarian evil’ is an “Oberflächenphänomen.” Nordmann, *Hannah Arendt*, 85. Arendt positioned her concept of the ‘banality of evil’ against Kant’s concept of a ‘radical evil.’ This evil could not be explained adequately by seeking its ‘root’ within man’s moral constitution. It does not have any ‘depth’ in this sense. Instead Arendt attempted to approach this new phenomenon by taking its appearance within the political world into account; that is, how the individual behaves among others. Her concept of banality was not meant to characterize the ‘essence’ of evil, but its appearance. Nordmann writes: “Das Banale ist nicht das Wesen des Bösen.” (Ibid., 86) This evil, then, has its source not in some fundamentally evil will, but precisely in the absence of certain faculties that the individual needs to live among the company of others and to share the world: “Die Banalität des Bösen ist weder ein Phänomen der Moral noch des Willens, sondern der fehlenden Urteilskraft, der Unfähigkeit, die Differenz zu denken.” (Ibid., 89) The argument I am making here expands this perspective also to the deeds committed, in order to characterize the faculty of narrative, whose function it is to tell the story of deeds and events, as being damaged by the appearance of the ‘banality of evil.’

connection between trains full of people being sent to Eastern Europe and the deaths of these people. This is what Arendt means when she says that thinking and acting parted company: actions were committed without attempting to think them in a larger framework. It is precisely when we put these isolated actions back into the context in which they belong – when we are confronted with the ‘big picture’ and try to understand it – that our thinking fails. To put it differently: we fail at that moment when we try to render ‘what we have to face’ as a story.²⁴²

In *Between Past and Future*, Arendt turns to the parabolic stories of Franz Kafka in order to characterize and analyze this situation of modern thought. She writes: “Yet the only exact description of this predicament is to be found, as far as I know, in one of those parables of Franz Kafka which, unique perhaps in this respect in literature, are real *parabolai*, thrown alongside and around the incident like rays of light which, however, do not illuminate its outward appearance but possess the power of X rays to lay bare its inner structure that, in our case, consists of the hidden processes of the mind.”²⁴³ Here Arendt calls the aporia “this predicament,” and she suggests that poetic techniques like

²⁴² In this book Arendt renders the break in tradition that leads to the failure of narrative as ‘the gap between past and future.’ For the connection between this crisis and narrative, see also: “The events of the twentieth century, however, have created a ‘gap’ between past and future of such a magnitude that the past, while still present, is fragmented and can no longer be told as a unified narrative. Under these conditions, we must rethink the gap between past and future anew for each generation; we must develop our own heuristic principles [...]” Benhabib, *The Reluctant Modernism of Hannah Arendt*, 91-92. The following analysis of Arendt’s model for the gap between past and future (chapters 9 and 10) attempts to shed some light precisely on this possibility of a ‘rethinking,’ and the ‘heuristic principles’ that might underlie Arendt’s model. For another account of the involved issues in context of ‘narrating evil’ in recent modernity, see María Pía Lara, *Narrating Evil: A Postmetaphysical Theory of Reflective Judgment* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007). The author turns to Kant and Arendt in order to devise a theory of reflective judgment (in contrast to determinant judgments) that strongly connects this form of judgment to narrative. According Lara this focus on reflective forms of judgment presupposes “that only the particular can serve as an example to begin the process of understanding the way certain narratives can disclose hidden dimensions about the cruelty between humans. It is for this reason that stories prove to be fruitful examples of particular actions.” (Ibid., 9)

²⁴³ Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 7.

that of parabolic short prose may penetrate the barrier which prevents understanding of the matter. She characterizes Kafka's stories as 'real parables,' and attempts to identify what makes them special in this respect. Applying the metaphor of light, she describes the relation between the object of the parable – the “incident” – and its particular methodological approach.

Traditionally, the literary parabolic form is characterized as a text that establishes in the reader's mind two parts of a comparison, sometimes called the image part and the objective part (*Bild- und Sachhälfte*). The reader deduces the abstract meaning behind the ostensible image of the story; this process of merging both aspects of the text results in a point at which the whole image construction suddenly 'makes sense.' In retrospect this is the moment that first constitutes the comparison. At this point of comparison, in traditional terms the *tertium comparationis*, the parable establishes a lesson or moral and exerts its didactic purpose. The parable accomplishes its didactic goal ultimately not by simply presenting the lesson to be learned (although it might be stated explicitly), but more so because the reader has to actively develop it by following the leads of the parabolic construction through to its point of comparison. The literary concept of the parable thus follows, in some respects, its geometric counterpart the parabola, in which two curves that seem to run side by side on a two-dimensional plane meet in one unique vertex. When Arendt refers to Kafka's parables as “thrown alongside and around the incident like rays of light,” she is referring to their geometric heritage. The closest resemblance to the geometric characteristics of lines and points which one can find in nature is, after all, light. And light, to expand Arendt's image, only travels in curves if it is affected by huge gravitational forces, space-time anomalies in our universe like black

holes. One might say that black holes are a fitting image for the forces the aporia exerts upon thinking: it is drawn to the aporetic center but is never able to resolve it. There is no way to represent the aporia's 'inside' so to speak; instead, thinking seems to dissolve the closer it gets.

Arendt reads Kafka's work as a response to tradition's crisis; his application of the parabolic form is particularly relevant in this case. The 'vertex' of the parable is located at the aporia, and hence is another representation of what she would call 'the gap between past and future.' Looking at the parabola as an analytical tool, its two curves represent the attention the text focuses on its object – the "incident." With her approach to Kafka's parable, Arendt establishes a (geometric) space for her thought. She unfolds the activity of the mind within this geometric grid in two separate steps: first she prepares the parameters that define this space by her reading of Kafka's parable, and then she expands on this with her analysis of the 'gap between past and future.' What makes Kafka's parable special in Arendt's view is its analytical power. Rather than presenting their object, "illuminat[ing] its outward appearance," they would "lay bare its inner structure" – "the hidden processes of the mind." Precisely where the aporia dwells. Instead of grazing the "incident" on its surface, the 'arms' of the parabola/parable, its powers of representation, would go right through it like "X-rays."

This shifts the traditional function of the parable considerably. It does not present a lesson to the reader anymore, nor even really what Benjamin identified as a constitutional aspect of storytelling: advice. Instead, the aim of Kafka's parable is to provide a template for the potentially unending process of understanding. Arendt's geometrical interpretation of Kafka's "real" parables results in her characterization of

these stories as thought spaces – and Kafka’s work as a “thought landscape.”²⁴⁴ The question remains, then: what enables them to ‘penetrate’ their object, and even give insights from within the aporia, where no thought is said to be able to trespass?

Essentially, the impulse underlying Arendt’s approach to the parable is a consequence of the response she had devised already in the letter to Jaspers, where she outlined her program to ‘face what happened,’ even though the common modes of representation had become an impossibility.²⁴⁵

Arendt turns to the poets, and more specifically to the powers of imagination. On the last pages of *On Revolution*, published in 1963, Arendt writes on the “lost treasure” of the revolutions (or more generally that of true political action), a theme she had already mentioned in the preface to *Between Past and Future* (1961). She concludes the book by writing that the “storehouse of memory is kept and watched over by the poets, whose business it is to find and make the words we live by.”²⁴⁶ In light of this statement, she suggests that “in order to find an approximate articulation of the actual content of our lost treasure”²⁴⁷ we should turn to the poets – in this case Sophocles and René Char, a modern poet and member of the French Resistance during the Second World War, whom Arendt also quotes in *Between Past and Future*. The poets, in conclusion, can bring language where there was no language before, where phenomena do not yet have a name, or have lost it. However, though she expects decisive answers to come from the poets, she

²⁴⁴ Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 10.

²⁴⁵ Arendt’s letter “Zueignung an Karl Jaspers,” published as an introduction to her first book after the war: *Sechs Essays*. See chapter 7.

²⁴⁶ Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (New York: Penguin Books, 2006), 272.

²⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

ultimately relocates what she calls in the essay on Benjamin the gift of “thinking poetically”²⁴⁸ into the narrative form, into storytelling. In the preface to *Between Past and Future*, she develops a method of thinking based equally on imaginative and analytical skills by means of her interpretation of Kafka.²⁴⁹ She announces her intention first in figurative language: the purpose of the essays collected in this book is to learn how to “move in this gap” – the ‘gap between past and future.’²⁵⁰ Arendt suggests that the question of thinking should be confronted in the presence of its impossibility. At this point she inserts one of Kafka’s parables into her text:

“He has two antagonists: the first presses him from behind, from the origin. The second blocks the road ahead. He gives battle to both. To be sure, the first supports him in his fight with the second, for he wants to push him forward, and in the same way the second supports him in his fight with the first, since he drives him back. But it is only

²⁴⁸ Arendt: *Men in Dark Times*, 205. Or in the German essay: “dichterisch zu denken.” Arendt: “Walter Benjamin,” p. 97.

²⁴⁹ And not of Benjamin. Ingeborg Nordmann puts Heidegger, Benjamin, and Kafka – in front of the backdrop of Arendt’s work – into a constellation. She argues that Arendt turns to Kafka specifically in order to express her own difference to Benjamin: “Um die einzigartige Haltung Benjamins zitieren zu können [in her essay on Benjamin], und das bedeutet, daß sie nicht durch die eigene Lektüre modifiziert werden darf, und zugleich die Differenz ihm gegenüber nicht verschweigen zu müssen, führt Arendt einen dritten Schriftsteller ein, der gegenüber den dichterisch Denkenden Benjamin und Heidegger ein denkender Dichter ist, nämlich Kafka [...]” Nordmann, *Hannah Arendt*, 42-43. In contrast to Arendt’s characterization of Benjamin as ‘dichterisch zu denken,’ Nordmann introduces the term “denkender Dichter” in order to express the difference between Benjamin and Kafka. The difference lies in the different approach to and application of language. While in the first concept the emphasis is on ‘denken,’ in the latter it is on ‘Dichter.’ According to Nordmann, Benjamin aimed in his writing for a montage of quotations (“ohne Anführungszeichen”) behind which the author, ideally, would disappear. This would then bring forth the “Eigenwert der Dinge”; language appears arbitrary in its myriad ways of application. In contrast, Kafka is a poet who puts emphasis on creating language while still holding on to the rigor of thinking. As a result, Benjamin’s language is unsystematic, and the surface of his widespread network of concepts holds a certain – intended – contingency. Kafka’s language, on the other hand, is minimalistic, and in its slenderness utterly precise. Nordmann adds: “Und es ist letztlich diese Differenz ausschlaggebend für Arendts Entscheidung, in ihrem abschließenden Werk *Vom Leben des Geistes* weder Heidegger noch Benjamin, sondern Kafka an exponierter Stelle ihres Gedankenganges einzuführen. An Kafka nimmt Arendt eine ‘sprachliche Kargheit’ wahr, die ihn von Benjamin unterscheidet.” (Ibid.)

²⁵⁰ Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 14.

theoretically so. For it is not only the two antagonists who are there, but he himself as well, and who really knows his intentions? His dream, though, is that some time in an unguarded moment – and this would require a night darker than any night has ever been yet – he will jump out of the fighting line and be promoted, on account of his experience in fighting, to the position of umpire over his antagonists in their fight with each other.”²⁵¹

In the traditional parable there are two layers, the image and the object part, that at one point interconnect to establish the ‘message’ of the text. Here, in Kafka’s short story, the setting is quite different, though. It shows the reader a fight in suspense, in other words therefore an image of an event. There is no simple message to which it would lead up. Instead, as if it were a reverse-engineered parabola, it seems to start out by establishing the description of a point – in the encounter of the two antagonists – in order to then explore whatever riddle it has set into motion with the unrelenting force of reason. The point of departure – and a lot of Kafka’s stories do have this single point of departure – is already what Arendt earlier called the parable’s “incident.”

Arendt observes a general paradigm of reversal in Kafka’s work; she writes: “it [Kafka’s riddle] consists primarily in a kind of breath-taking reversal of the established relationship between experience and thought.”²⁵² While the traditional parable can be said to feature a direction from experience towards thought, Kafka bases his story on a single thought. In the course of such a ‘story of a thought,’ then, the reader is endowed with an experience in thinking. Traditionally a parable culminates in a thought, which it prepares

²⁵¹ Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 7.

²⁵² *Ibid.*, 10.

by carefully establishing an image part that implicates on the level of interpretation an objective part. In this way the basis in common experience (and its subsequent transformation through representation) pre-configures the space (i.e. possibilities) available for thinking. The resulting lesson from the guided thinking process is always intended by the specific construction of the text. The parabolic form quite literally constricts the space available to present possibilities for thinking; it reduces the contingency resulting from its basis in experience gradually, the more it approaches its culmination.

Kafka's parable, as Arendt observes, works exactly the other way around: it begins by presenting a minimal, constricted thought and then opens up a space in which this initial situation might be explored in all its possibilities. The outcome of this construction is unforeseeable by its author; it is potentially infinite. This infinity thus has its cause in the fact that Kafka bases his story not on experience, but on thinking itself. When Arendt (again) approaches the break in tradition in *Between Past and Future*, she refers to René Char and the experiences of the French Resistance during the Second World War. She states that the members of the Resistance achieved for a short time a genuine political experience, which, however, got lost because they failed to tell it as a story afterwards. Instead of telling the story, Char expresses his experiences with a paradoxical notion; he writes that there is an inheritance without a testament.²⁵³ Arendt translates this missing testament as the vanished tradition. Without a "pre-established

²⁵³ Arendt, in fact, begins her books with these lines by René Char: "*Notre héritage n'est précédé d'aucun testament* – 'our inheritance was left to us by no testament.'" Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 3.

framework of reference,”²⁵⁴ Arendt writes, the “completion” of the events and actions in which the members of the Resistance were involved could not be thought afterwards. This “thinking completion,” – the “articulation accomplished by remembrance,” however, is necessary in order to tell the story.²⁵⁵ Going back to Kafka, it seems, then, that his stories anticipate this incompleteness caused by the disintegration of tradition. His stories are hence both a symptom and an adequate form of representation for the break in tradition. He abandons the remembrance of experience, but keeps to the form of storytelling in order to engage thought.²⁵⁶ As a consequence, thinking in these stories does not lead to completion, but instead itself assumes an open-ended structure, unpredictable in its outcome. This structure, in turn, is the same that Arendt assigns to action – once an activity begins, its outcome is not foreseeable.²⁵⁷ Therefore, thinking in Kafka’s stories approximates the form of action; it becomes an activity in its own right – an experience, as Arendt writes.²⁵⁸

²⁵⁴ Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 6.

²⁵⁵ Ibid.

²⁵⁶ In a letter to Gershom Scholem from June 12th 1938 Benjamin gives a comprehensive and critical account of Max Brod’s biography of Kafka (*Franz Kafka, eine Biographie*, 1937). In regard to Kafka’s relation to tradition he writes: “er [Kafka] gab die Wahrheit preis, um an der Tradierbarkeit, an dem hagadischen Element festzuhalten.” Benjamin: *Gesammelte Briefe*, vol. 6, p. 111.

²⁵⁷ Arendt analyzes the concept of action in the context of beginning and freedom, for example in the essays “The Concept of History” and “What is Freedom” from *Between Past and Future*. Through action, man begins processes which are in their outcome ultimately unpredictable: “Action, on the contrary [in contrast to fabrication], as the Greeks were the first to discover, is in and by itself utterly futile; it never leaves an end product behind itself. If it has any consequences at all, they consist in principle in an endless new chain of happenings whose eventual outcome the actor is utterly incapable of knowing or controlling beforehand.” Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 59-60. Through action, man exerts his gift to begin events, which in turn is the source of freedom: “Men are free – as distinguished from their possessing the gift for freedom – as long as they act, neither before nor after; for to be free and to act are the same.” (Ibid., 153)

²⁵⁸ Because of the inseparable intersection of performing actions and interpreting them, Seyla Benhabib assumes that the structure of action is narrative. “Actions, unlike things and natural objects, live only in the narrative of those who perform them and the narrative of those who understand, interpret, and recall them. This narrative structure of action also determines the identity of the self.” Benhabib, *The Reluctant*

Arendt approaches Kafka's storytelling on a formal level in order to (re-)establish a narrative that allows her to approach and incorporate the break in tradition. Looking at Kafka's parable, it can also be read as the attempt to take the parabolic form apart from within the story. Kafka represents the parabolic structure of the text on its own surface, and makes it readable. In the story there appear three entities, whom Kafka outlines only very sparsely. Two of them are characterized merely through their function of being the "antagonists" of 'him.' 'He,' at least, is granted a personal pronoun, the only indication that there is a complete person involved at all. The story says nothing about whether the other two are antagonists of each another; they are antagonists because of 'him.' They move on a road – a line – towards each other to meet at one point where 'he' is. This line, not actually mentioned in the text, is the result of the path that the two antagonists take in order to meet with him; a trace, in other words. It is somewhat implied by the text that this is the only possible, the quasi-natural, way of moving, and also that the space of the road is the only available space in which to move, for the time being. The reader may thus deduce the path – that is, the space – the story outlines: "from behind, from the origin" and "the road ahead." Because the story applies absolute, indefinite concepts like "the origin" or "ahead," the pathway of the antagonist's movement can be thought of as potentially infinite – divided, as it were, by the meeting point. Arendt will, at later point in her interpretation, read the two resulting directions as the past and the future. But in any case, the two antagonists naturally exert antagonistic forces with respect to 'him.' This force is a force of movement with direction. Kafka's story essentially reduces the road (usually a surface) to a line (strictly speaking one-dimensional) because it is defined

solely by the unidirectional movements of the antagonists; one of them is enough to “block[] the road ahead.” On a line, there is quite literally no space to contain more than one body – or points for that matter – parallel to each other in one cross-section. This pathway, of course, does not necessarily have to be straight; a curve can still be called a line – or a line can be taken as a special case of a curve, namely one without a curvature. These are in any case merely terminological differences.

Therefore, Kafka’s story can be read as tracing the form of a geometric parabola. There are two projections, two lines or curves that meet in a third point. The story Kafka tells converges with the geometric form of a parabola. But, then again, what story does Kafka’s parable tell? Is it not also a story about the parabolic *form*? Categories of form and contents seem confused here, well-nigh invalid. Just as the two projections of the parabolic form are embodied as “antagonists,” so is the point where they clash through the personal pronoun “he.” On the level of the story’s tale, this plays out as a constant “battle” between ‘him’ and both antagonists. Indeed, Kafka makes sure that the point where the two forces clash is precisely in the middle of ‘him,’ because both antagonists “support” him equally in their struggle against the other. One might say that the battle happens within ‘him,’ who is the focal point of the conflict. ‘He’ thus represents the vertex of the geometric construction; taken again as a reference to the literary form of the parable, ‘he’ eventually represents the *tertium comparationis*.

At this point the parable on all its different levels of representation in Kafka’s story explodes into endless imaginative possibilities, subverting and turning around the traditional properties of the parable’s genre. Kafka’s parable performs the break with its genre’s tradition. According to a traditional understanding, the meeting point of the

parabolic projections is the *result* of the story, its *telos*. In Kafka's parable, while the parabolic curves are embodied indifferently as "two antagonists," the author bestows far more individuality and power of the human self unto the 'third point,' by rendering it as 'him.' Instead of being a passive constant in the parabolic formula, now this point is the one inconsistent and highly contingent variable. Kafka writes accordingly: "For it is not only the two antagonists who are there, but he himself as well, and who really knows his intentions?"²⁵⁹ With this sentence Kafka turns the traditional parabolic formula completely around: The *tertium comparationis* now is not only the site of the collision, but at the same time the *source* of the parable's intentions. Since 'he' – as the vertex of the parable – is a personal pronoun whose reference, furthermore, may change from application to application (with the act of reading), these intentions cannot be known; they are the subject of interpretation.

Or, looking at it in another way: since the conflict represented by the tale has its origin within 'him,' this personal pronoun becomes, in a radical reduction, itself the representation of the whole. As a consequence one can say that Kafka's parable, through poetic imagination and analytic attention, brings into the realm of appearance the inside of 'him'; that is, of the point of conflict. But this point of conflict, as will become clear from Arendt's further interpretation, is also the *aporia* of thinking. Arendt thus found in Kafka's story a way to approach the *aporia* through representational means, in order to transform the impossibility, where there is no space, into a space for thinking.

Arendt's own interpretation of the parable, strictly speaking, proceeds from this situation. It is based on Kafka's break with the narrative tradition, whose consequences,

²⁵⁹ Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 7.

analyzed above, can be summarized as a reversal and liberation of narrative form. Furthermore, Kafka inscribed this reversal of the parabolic form into the general breaking of tradition in such a way that it becomes suitable to bring in the core matter of the modern mind's aporia. Arendt insists that Kafka's parable "records a mental phenomenon, something which one may call a thought-event."²⁶⁰ She accordingly maintains that her own interpretation and the "imagery" she applies to "indicate metaphorically and tentatively the contemporary condition of thought can be valid only within the realm of mental phenomena."²⁶¹ Thus, if applied to historical or biographical time, "these metaphors" make no sense. But this also means, with regard to the 'experience of thinking' Arendt discovered in Kafka's parable and also her term "thought-event," that in this approach to narrative, action and contemplation converge. Arendt considers thinking, in this context, an activity.

For her own purposes – to analyze the aporia of modern thought in the context of the break in tradition – Arendt applies (and later on extends) Kafka's parabolic form, itself quintessentially expressed in the story "He." In this transformation of the parable's application, she presupposes that, in regard to the aporetic situation of thinking, (its) temporality becomes a problem. In this situation, with temporality having become a problem for the understanding, the mind, according to Arendt, became entangled with a nondeliberate or forced awareness of itself; she writes that the mind, if it is "unable to bring peace and to induce reconciliation, [...] finds itself immediately engaged in its own

²⁶⁰ Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 10.

²⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 13.

kind of warfare.”²⁶² The battle Kafka depicts in his story, which occurs within ‘him,’ is this warfare of the mind against itself. Arendt accordingly interprets this conflict as the clash of the forces of past and future at a point where ‘he’ is.

She observes that there are “two or even three fights going on simultaneously”.²⁶³ between the antagonists as well as between ‘him’ and each of the temporal instances. Arendt then immediately realizes that if she takes the two antagonists to represent temporal instances meeting within ‘him,’ then the reality of past and future, based on a conventional temporal concept, and the involved conflicts, are first of all the result of ‘him’ being there in between. Past and future, and the issue of the struggle, as well as ‘his’ dream to “jump out of the fighting line”²⁶⁴ – to find a place outside of the impasse – all have their existence due to the presence of the mind. Kafka’s complete story, from this perspective, is one great introspection into the mind’s impasse: “However, the fact that there is a fight at all seems due exclusively to the presence of the man, without whom the forces of the past and of the future, one suspects, would have neutralized or destroyed each other long ago.”²⁶⁵

Kafka’s story thus turns this point of (‘his’) presence that has turned into a problem (for itself) into a space, part of what Arendt calls the “thought-landscape” of Kafka’s work. As a result, the problem of thought (and by extension temporality) is drawn into appearance and can thus be explored and manipulated. Future and past appear

²⁶² Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 8.

²⁶³ *Ibid.*, 10.

²⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 7.

²⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 10.

in Kafka's parable as antagonistic forces; but also the point in between, in spatial terms the point of presence and in temporal terms that of present time, which Kafka renders with the personal pronoun 'he,' seems to be a force to be reckoned with. Kafka likewise personifies the two other forces as 'his' "antagonists." On the level of such a personification, that which Arendt calls forces are intentions; that is, the purpose and direction of deciding and acting people. – Initially, the situation looks desperate: a deadlock within an utterly minimalistic structure, two antagonistic forces fixed on a line and pitted against each other through the unforgivable laws of logic. There is no way out, it seems, from this endless and ultimately fruitless fight. Yet it is precisely through Kafka's insertion of 'him,' in other words through the narrative decision to personify the forces involved, that the cage of logic breaks up.

As Kafka writes after the first half of the story: "But it is only theoretically so."²⁶⁶ Only in abstraction, in the reductive sphere of causality, does the scenery appear to contain no way out. This tells us that as soon as man, who is after all the subject of this narrative,²⁶⁷ is put back into the calculation, the deadlock breaks up and a space of possibilities opens. Where there are men, there are possibilities, and the faculty of abstraction must ultimately surrender before the incalculable subject. For "who really knows his intentions?"²⁶⁸ Contingency is ultimately on the side of men. In contrast to 'him,' who really is the source of these erratic powers, the "antagonists" appear more de-

²⁶⁶ Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 7.

²⁶⁷ The subject of narrative in Kafka's story, particularly because of its intricate relation to the break in tradition, is in danger. This is also a question of the modern self. Seyla Benhabib writes: "But to be without a sense of the past is to lose one's self, one's identity, for who we are is revealed in the narratives we tell of ourselves and of our world shared with others. Narrativity is constitutive of identity." This identity has, in Kafka's story, become a battle zone. Benhabib, *The Reluctant Modernism of Hannah Arendt*, 92.

²⁶⁸ Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 7.

humanized; they do not possess as much identity as the personal pronoun who is the main protagonist of the story. Still, even though past and future appear as forces, these forces are of a strange nature. They are quite different from other forces of nature we encounter, for their source and motivation springs from within man and his presence in the world. These ‘forces’ therefore may behave quite erratically.

Though the forces of past and future only exist because of ‘him,’ still they press upon ‘him’ from both sides. Arendt observes how, contrary to common conceptions of a past wandering infinitely backwards (from the present) and a future running off infinitely ahead of us, here the past presses from behind into the future, and the future presses back into the past. Such are the directions of the antagonistic powers: “This past, moreover, reaching all the way back into the origin does not pull back but presses forward, and it is, contrary to what one would expect, the future which drives us back into the past.”²⁶⁹ Past and future ultimately are established by ‘him.’ With this act, ‘he,’ the subject, confirms his presence, the present time momentum of his being there in between. But at the same time, indeed with each passing instance of present time, past and future constitute powers that appear as if coming from far behind and ahead to battle within ‘him.’ The medium for this space in which the forces appear is of course remembrance.

In this model, then, events that have happened and potentially become remembrance determine the present time and by extension the future, since they become the basis on which to forecast the future (e.g., by hope and desire). In turn, the future – that is, events that have not (yet) happened, but might happen – also determines the present time and by extension the past, firstly because the present time in each moment

²⁶⁹ Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 10-11.

automatically already becomes the past, and secondly because the past is in part judged by conditions that we want to occur in the future. In this way, past and future become a reservoir of forces oppressing ‘him’ in between.

All of this, the accumulation of forces that threaten ‘him’ from two sides, ultimately is, as Arendt writes, a mental phenomenon; it occurs within memory. The past can only reach into the future because it is never really past, not really lost, but always with us. Arendt quotes Faulkner: “the past is never dead, it is not even past.”²⁷⁰ The same, in a somewhat paradoxical turn, could be said about the future: the future for us is not something that does not concern us (“dead,” in Faulkner’s words) because it has not yet happened, but really what (in our minds) already has potentially happened – and what we therefore desire or fear. The future is not difficult to see. Again, in this paradoxical turn, the future is in a way already part of our recent past. Under these conditions it almost appears as if the present time vanishes altogether under the constant crisscrossing of the past into the future, and the future into the past. The point in between, the point of presence and present time, becomes the enigmatic question.

Kafka’s parable enables Arendt to take an unusual viewpoint that offers intricate knowledge of the impasse the modern mind has run into after the break with tradition. This results in an understanding of temporality that deviates from and even counters conventional concepts of time. This new perspective quickly brushes away notions of time as a line running infinitely into the past and into the future and constituting a continuum: “Seen from the viewpoint of man, who always lives in the interval between past and future, time is not a continuum, a flow of an interrupted succession; it is broken

²⁷⁰ Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 10.

in the middle, at the point where ‘he’ stands; and ‘his’ standpoint is not the present as we usually understand it but rather a gap in time which ‘his’ constant fighting, ‘his’ making a stand against past and future, keeps in existence. Only because man is inserted into time and only to the extent that he stands his ground does the flow of indifferent time break up into tenses; it is this insertion – the beginning of a beginning, to put it into Augustinian terms – which splits up the time continuum into forces which then, because they are focused on the particle or body that gives them their direction, begin fighting with each other and acting upon man in the way Kafka describes.”²⁷¹

Any notion of temporality as a continuous line, be it an illusion or the actual – if troublesome – achievement of a tradition, “is broken in the middle,” just as it was said previously that the insertion of ‘him’ as the ‘third point’ collapses the traditional form of the parable. In Arendt’s interpretation of Kafka’s story, the collapse of a traditional form of representation and that of traditional temporality coincide. In a similar way, Arendt reads the notion of the present not “as we usually understand it but rather [as] a gap in time which ‘his’ constant fighting, ‘his’ making a stand against past and future, keeps in existence.”²⁷² The fleeting, elusive moment of present time that is always already past but which nonetheless is the confirmation of presence in the world and the constant point where the past and the future as we know it is constituted, is a “gap” in time. In a way this is a construction of temporality *ex negativo*, which includes a paradoxical proposition at its center. Arendt therefore calls the one moment when we are most aware, that is, the moment of awareness and presence of mind itself – in other words, the place where we

²⁷¹ Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 11.

²⁷² Ibid.

are when we think – a “gap” in time. We have no bodily senses that provide us with direct orientation in time (as is the case with space), and in the moment we are aware, when our mind takes action, we cause rather than envision the conditions of temporality, which we may then afterwards with that same act of the mind put into some coherent conception of temporality. Any concept of time is an afterthought.

That is to say, there are three different levels involved in this model. First, there is the natural, constant way in which events in the universe unfold even without our involvement, our presence. We cannot know anything about this, since clearly we are unable to observe anything without us being present. But we must assume that, as difficult and treacherous as these words already are, the universe would indeed go on without us. This is what Arendt calls “the flow of indifferent time.”²⁷³ The second level in this argumentation describes the fact that through the existence and continuous reconfirmation of awareness itself, of us as being present, this other – indifferent – time is disturbed, and thus temporality – i.e., the necessity to think about it in the first place – comes into being. This, however, does not automatically include already a conception of temporality, which would be the third level. In this sense one may say that our being there *causes* temporality – and its problem. From this viewpoint it seems that temporality is a disturbance of the status quo which indifference represents.

It is our presence, or being there, that itself in its moment of being has no awareness of time, but causes all the problems and questions of our temporality to spring forth. We can then infer and reflect upon the structure of these problems, or what causes them. By reading Kafka’s parable, Arendt prepares her own model of temporality in

²⁷³ Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 11.

order to confront the ‘abyss’ which thinking has become in modernity. In this model, time, and by extension the concept of history, become discontinuous. Man has no sense for time as a linear, continuous flow, even though we may imagine time in such metaphors. In each moment of time when we establish our thoughts and our communication with others according to temporal coordinates (he said, he will say, ...), we do this as part of an act of awareness that reconfirms our presence. This is most clearly expressed whenever I say ‘now’ as in ‘now I am writing.’ But, as was established earlier, this moment, this point of awareness in which we might relate our being according to temporal terms, is itself *outside* of time. It is also a gap in whatever temporal conceptions of past and future we may construct. As a concept we can understand, it first has to enter memory in order to then be picked up by the reflecting mind. But then it is already past. Any ‘now’ I might utter is already past. Therefore, for our mind, which always itself lives in the elusive moment of its awareness, of its presence or present time, the past does exist, and so does, in conjecture, the future – within memory; but the very moment of presence – paradoxically – does not.

There is a difference between memory and the moment of awareness. Memory, thought independently of the mind, is nothing but a passive storage of data. However, that is of course not at all how memory ultimately works. The mind always is involved in remembrance. Memory is meaningful only the instant it is accessed. Any moment of accessing memory in turn changes it, and thus leads to a revision of it, because the context of that present time when memory is accessed determines that event, which in turn itself enters memory. In “indifferent time,” that is, time without points of awareness, there would be no tenses. (Of course, the notion of indifferent time is paradoxical, since it

is synonymous with ‘no time.’) There would be no points in time. Awareness is what, with each instance of its presence, necessarily has to situate itself – its act – by relating it to past, present or future; to other events of presence, as it were. In other words, each access of memory itself necessarily receives a temporal index. And this temporal index is in turn determined by the actual moment it was created. In this way, any act of awareness – when we think – “stands [its] ground”²⁷⁴ against past and future. Each of these acts of awareness that confirms our presence constitutes, as Arendt calls them in “Augustinian terms,” “the beginning of a beginning.”²⁷⁵ Strictly speaking, they fall out of time. Taken by themselves, they have rather the appearance of action: as a beginning, such a point of awareness “that splits up the time continuum into forces” is unprecedented and unconditioned. At the same time, this act of awareness represents the fundamental precondition of ‘beginning’ in the first place: the beginning of a thought process, but also, equally, the decision to halt thinking and take action. This moment that Arendt tries to capture here therefore also represents the point of transition between contemplation and action.

It seems that Arendt attempts to distinguish two different events within the act of awareness: first that of the “insertion” of man into time, and then the “beginning” of thought or action. Arendt also calls these acts of awareness here a “particle or body that gives them [the forces of past and future] their direction.”²⁷⁶ And since these forces are always closing in from both sides on that very particle of awareness, it is always also the

²⁷⁴ Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 11.

²⁷⁵ Ibid.

²⁷⁶ Ibid.

battle Kafka describes. Temporality from the perspective of the mind is, in its very origin, troublesome. However, following Arendt's argumentation in *Between Past and Future*, it is so because of the break in tradition. Temporality as a problem forced itself into the focus of the mind because of the inherently troublesome tradition (chapters 7, 8).²⁷⁷ Kafka's parable, which builds on a conception of remembrance from this tradition, is evidence of this. The break in tradition is reflected in the parable, and in Arendt's concept of the gap in time. Thus, at the heart of this 'gap' lies also the aporia of modern thought.

²⁷⁷ Seyla Benhabib draws a line from the activity of narrating the past to the ontological condition of our existence, our *Dasein*. She rightfully writes that, despite the break in tradition, this fundamental function of the narrative for our being there does not cease to exist. "The narrative structure of action and of human identity means that the continued retelling of the past, its continued reintegration into the story of the present, its continuous reevaluation, reassessment, and reconfiguration, are ontological conditions of the kinds of beings we are. If *Dasein* is in time, narrative is the modality through which time is experienced. Even when the thread of tradition is broken, even when the past is no longer authoritative simply because it has been, it lives within us and we cannot avoid placing ourselves in relation to it. Who we are at any point is defined by the narrative uniting past and present." Benhabib, *The Reluctant Modernism of Hannah Arendt*, 92. I believe, however, that Arendt, in her analysis of the gap between past and future as the aporia of modern thought, also points to a crisis of precisely this "time" in which *Dasein*, according to Benhabib, is.

CHAPTER X

ARENDT: THINKING BETWEEN 'NO LONGER AND NOT YET'

Thinking is constant flux, out of time and out of space, the very categories it deals with. Arendt writes that it is drawn to “things that are no longer and [...] things that are not yet.” Here, where she presumes the “moment of truth”²⁷⁸ to be, at this impossible time-space, she constructs a model for thinking after the break in tradition. In order to do so, she extends the framework that she abstracted from Kafka’s parable “He.”²⁷⁹ Within the image space of this story, Arendt has an initial confrontation with the impasse that the tradition of thought has become. Before continuing to present the expansion of the structure underlying Kafka’s story, it will be necessary to determine the point where Arendt leaves his representation of the situation behind. The battle with the forces of past and future depicted in the parable repeats itself again on a formal level in Arendt’s methodological introduction to *Between Past and Future*, but this time with a different outcome.

²⁷⁸ Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 9.

²⁷⁹ Since Kafka’s parable will come up a couple of times in this chapter I will quote it again here: “He has two antagonists: the first presses him from behind, from the origin. The second blocks the road ahead. He gives battle to both. To be sure, the first supports him in his fight with the second, for he wants to push him forward, and in the same way the second supports him in his fight with the first, since he drives him back. But it is only theoretically so. For it is not only the two antagonists who are there, but he himself as well, and who really knows his intentions? His dream, though, is that some time in an unguarded moment – and this would require a night darker than any night has ever been yet – he will jump out of the fighting line and be promoted, on account of his experience in fighting, to the position of umpire over his antagonists in their fight with each other.” (Ibid., 7)

Though ultimately triggered by events, the break in tradition is, according to Arendt, a mental phenomenon.²⁸⁰ As such, however, it is unique in that it forms an aporia for thinking; that is, it paradoxically represents the impossibility of thinking. Arendt turns to the poetic and intellectual powers of Kafka's storytelling in order to 'pave a path' for thinking where there is no path. Yet though Kafka's story provides an exclusive view, quite literally into the core of the matter, it is at the same time also a symptom of the problem it represents and thus not its solution after all. Kafka's story records the very moment in which thought is still caught in tradition, but where this tradition has become impossible, so that thinking is drawn into a constant fight with itself. As a result, it envisions, rather than realizes, a position beyond the problem it so masterfully depicts. His parable therefore also inhabits the place in between 'no more and not yet' in regard to its significance as a step in trespassing on tradition. Being a tale of the inner conflicts of the modern subject, it is probably the closest possible representation of the 'gap between past and future.'

Arendt observes that, though Kafka describes "how the insertion of man breaks up the unidirectional flow of time," which is the point identical with the troubled awareness of the modern self Arendt wants to analyze, he still retains "the traditional image according to which we think of time as moving in a straight line."²⁸¹ However, this arrangement with 'him' on the line in the middle of the antagonistic forces brings to appearance the outright impossibility of the situation: because for 'him,' it is both impossible to move anywhere on the road and impossible to stay where 'he' is. At this

²⁸⁰ Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 13.

²⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 11.

juncture, Kafka's tale *prepares* for the alternative without being able to accomplish it. Kafka's 'he' has a dream that at some time, "in an unguarded moment," hence a moment when 'he' would be able to outsmart himself, 'he' would "jump out of the fighting line."²⁸² The author's willingness to analyze and reverse the traditional form of parabolic representation has already become clear in the previous chapter. In Kafka's parable, therefore, the intellectual effort of representing the break in tradition is matched by the willingness to rewrite the form of its narrative. The fact that this text successfully moves on these different levels of reflection and yet retains a story in "utter simplicity and brevity"²⁸³ makes it such an ideal vantage point for Arendt's investigation of the break in tradition. The tale of Kafka's story as an introspection of 'him' demonstrates how, in narrative, temporal conditions are transformed into spatial structures. Since this reflection of temporal and spatial conditions has its center in 'him' – the abstract subject of all narrative – Kafka's text exposes the innermost constitution of narrative in general.

However, according to Arendt, though Kafka's story provides this analysis of the break in tradition, it does not draw the conclusion that the "notion of a rectilinear temporal movement"²⁸⁴ would, in all its consequences, have to be abandoned. The parable envisions this step to some extent but then stops short of realizing it and instead ends in a dream. "Since Kafka retains the traditional metaphor of a rectilinear temporal movement, 'he' has barely enough room to stand and whenever 'he' thinks of striking out

²⁸² Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 7.

²⁸³ *Ibid.*, 10.

²⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 11.

on ‘his’ own ‘he’ falls into a dream of a region over and above the fighting line [...].²⁸⁵

By dreaming of a place beyond the line, which previously was taken to be the only valid mode to describe ‘his’ reality, he inevitably challenges the very notion of time as a line.

Therefore, Kafka’s story contains yet another transition in regard to thinking the break in tradition, and this has a decisive consequence for the potential of reflection that narrative provides. As with Benjamin before (chapters 4, 5), here there occurs a move in the spatial order of thinking within narrative from one to two or even three (“over and above the fighting line”) dimensions. Perspective, introduced in thinking, becomes palpable.²⁸⁶

For Kafka, though, this additional dimensionality is but the region of dream, not a reliable condition for thought, as it seems. Arendt traces this dream back to “the old dream which Western metaphysics has dreamed from Parmenides to Hegel of a timeless, spaceless, suprasensuous realm as the proper region of thought.”²⁸⁷ Not giving in to the

²⁸⁵ Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 11.

²⁸⁶ In his phenomenological approach to the spaces of poetics Gaston Bachelard assigns to remembrance the functionality of space, which drastically breaks with the natural flow of time. He observes that memory is incapable of reproducing what is essential to temporality and what he calls with reference to Bergson duration. Time, he continues, can therefore only be thought as an abstract line, which does precisely not contain the experiences that form the basis of remembrance. In memory the remnants of events – “Fossilien der Dauer” – contain their spatiality, but not their duration. Bachelard writes: “Hier ist der Raum alles, denn die Zeit lebt nicht im Gedächtnis. Das Gedächtnis – seltsam genug! – registriert nicht die konkrete Dauer, die Dauer im Sinne Bergsons. Die aufgehobene Dauer kann man nicht wieder aufleben lassen. Man kann sie nur denken, und zwar auf der Linie einer abstrakten, jeder Stofflichkeit beraubten Zeit. Nur mit Hilfe des Raumes, nur innerhalb des Raumes finden wir die schönen Fossilien der Dauer, konkretisiert durch lange Aufenthalte. Das Unbewußte hält sich auf. Die Erinnerungen sind unbeweglich, und um so feststehender, je besser sie verräumlicht sind. Eine Erinnerung in der Zeit zu lokalisieren, ist ein Geschäft des Biographen und hat eigentlich nur mit einer Art von externer Geschichte zu tun, einer Geschichte zum externen Gebrauch, die den andern mitgeteilt werden soll. Tiefer als die Biographie soll die Hermeneutik die Zentren des Schicksals bestimmen, indem sie die Geschichte aus ihrem verbindenden zeitlichen Gewebe herauslöst, das ohne Wirkung auf unser Schicksal ist. Dringlicher als die Bestimmung der Daten ist hier die Kenntnis der Intimität, jedenfalls die Lokalisierung in den Räumen unserer Intimität.” Gaston Bachelard, *Die Poetik des Raumes* (München: Hanser, 1975), 41. On the following pages the concern then is how these spaces form the basis for thinking, and narration, that is, a narration in whose spaces thinking proceeds.

²⁸⁷ Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 11.

language of dream, Arendt eventually attempts to construct this other plane of thought within her own model. She writes: “Obviously what is missing in Kafka’s description of a thought-event is a spatial dimension where thinking could exert itself without being forced to jump out of the human time altogether.”²⁸⁸ This is the task set up by Kafka’s story and now brought to a conclusion by Arendt: to extend what was traditionally held as the valid space for thinking from one to at least a second dimension, without being drawn into the sphere of dreams.

Though the fact of temporality determines thinking (for example, through our mortality), insofar as thinking is also necessarily its own *representation*, temporality is not directly ‘in’ thinking as its object. It is not immediately tangible, while space, on the other hand, is the very medium and means by which thinking represents itself. But it does so only in narrative; thinking represents itself, and hence it becomes a space through the mode of narrative. In narrative, thinking puts itself into relation to the thoughts of others. Thus, when Arendt asks for a new “spatial dimension where thinking could exert itself,” even though the particular moment of thinking is a “non-time-space,” this necessarily can only be achieved in the context of narrative.

Tradition for the longest time defined the space for thought; that is, it defined the temporal model underlying remembrance as linear. According to Arendt, the conditions of thinking under the presence of tradition are both conserved and trespassed upon in Kafka’s story. The possibility of leaving the conventional framework behind, though, in order to seek a region for thinking beyond its traditional boundaries, has always been known to philosophers. This is what Arendt calls the “dreams of Western metaphysics.”

²⁸⁸ Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 11.

The problem, then, with thinking in the context of these philosophies is that it ‘jumps out of the human time altogether.’ They imagine a region beyond the traditional dimensionality of thinking without critically reflecting on its underlying conditions, which represent the structure of its narrative. To put it differently, they attempt to devise an alternative space for thinking, but they do not develop a proper narrative whose temporal and spatial parameters would be adequate to connect this thinking back to reality; that is, to a level where narrative binds thinking to what it should acknowledge as ‘how things are.’ A chief function of narrative for Arendt is, after all, the representation of truth, which she also renders in the words “to say what is.”²⁸⁹ As a result, in these philosophies (and Arendt likely refers to the tradition of German idealism), both approaches to thinking and its dimensionality claim their right to represent ‘reality,’ one of them just with the further promise to reach beyond what is commonly taken to be reality and to present the ‘actual,’ the ‘real’ reality.

The properties of this ‘transcendence’ of reality probably characterize the condition of dreaming quite well: because the experience of a dream that we are unable to completely transfer into the world of appearances is the uncanny experience of two different states of consciousness. In dreams, two different sets of spatial and temporal frameworks seem to claim validity at the same time – seem to exist in one and the same moment, as it were. What makes the experience of dreaming so unearthly and spellbinding for us is not just that it shows us images we would not see in our common world, but that these images paradoxically seem to contain both: stasis and movement of their meaning at the same time. In dreams, the represented reality seems to constantly

²⁸⁹ In the essay “Truth and Politics.” Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 229.

phase out into a turmoil of ‘not being identical with itself.’ Confronted with this experience, our language seems helpless, and our narrative powers at their limits.

* * *

Arendt now goes on to construct a model, based on Kafka’s experience, of the space-time of thinking that adds an additional dimension to thinking *without* drifting off into the realm of dreams. This is only possible by incorporating the break in tradition into the model – as its origin. In what could be called a ‘geometric speculation,’ she adds a second dimension to the line which, according to tradition, used to define the temporality of thinking (strictly speaking, of the remembrance within which thinking occurs). Already because of its geometric basis, Arendt’s model is notably a space “ideally constituted”²⁹⁰ for thinking. This space now expands from being a line into a plane figure that, as Arendt states, has the shape of a parallelogram.

(Euclidian) geometry, as a language devised to abstract from nature, is constituted essentially by points; about these it can make exact statements according to an underlying coordinate system (itself constituted by lines and points). A plane or other geometric objects like lines and circles are defined within this abstract and strictly defined language through the relation of, ultimately, a series of points to each other. From the perspective of geometry, a line is an infinite series of points. Everything else: shapes and even lines are – strictly speaking – already projections, in a sense idealizations and fallacies of our imagination, full of contingencies. A circle is a set of points relating to each other in a specific way that can be more or less exactly expressed in mathematical formulas. Ultimately though, the exactness with which geometry represents the possible forms

²⁹⁰ Arendt: *Between Past and Future*, 13.

found in nature is limited, since it has to take into account infinity (e.g., π). At this point, the criterion of imagination enters again into the sphere of abstraction. After all, the origin of shapes, of all forms that in the language of geometry need more than points to be properly expressed, lies in imagination. In the step from one to two and then three (or even more) dimensions, the reality of space seems to be intrinsically connected to imagination. Shapes seem to be more the product of our imagination, which simplifies contingencies and complexities into simple forms, than of an exact calculus. Furthermore, since Arendt assigns directions to the lines of her geometric framework (past and future), thus treating lines effectively as vectors, she does not rely solely on geometry, but adds propositions of physics. As a result, she calls the image space she constructs a “parallelogram of forces.”²⁹¹

The question now is, based on this preliminary assessment, how does the interruption of rectilinear time that results in an infinite series of discontinuous points of insertions create the projection of a parallelogram? And then, how can this become a model to narrate thinking after the break in tradition? Arendt writes: “The insertion of man, as he breaks up the continuum, cannot but cause the forces to deflect, however lightly, from their original direction, and if this were the case, they would no longer clash head on but meet at an angle. In other words, the gap where ‘he’ stands is, potentially at least, no simple interval but resembles what the physicists call a parallelogram of forces.”²⁹² This “insertion of man” is itself not an act external to the model Arendt constructs here. Man is not inserted by an outside power. On the contrary, what Arendt

²⁹¹ Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 12.

²⁹² *Ibid.*, 11-12.

calls “insertion” is the act of (self-)awareness – escalating into the aporia under the condition of the break in tradition. The thinking subject ‘inserts’ itself into a passed-on understanding of time – which means that it interrupts it with this act of reconfirmation of the self.

The focal point of Arendt’s model coincides with this moment of insertion: it is its realization *and* eloquent expression. After all, based on Kafka’s parable, the model is an introspection *of* this point. According to Arendt, it relates both to the fact that, generally speaking, an act of thinking about its own conditions has always been this insertion (Arendt: “an experience to those few who made thinking their primary business”),²⁹³ and by extension, to the situation of thinking after the collapse of tradition. The “insertion of man” by man refers to the elusive moment of present time *and* the representation of this moment as man’s presence, therefore the awareness of presence (or even ‘presence of presence’).²⁹⁴ At this point, which, according to the author and true to the nature of geometric points, is by itself a non-time-space, language seems to buckle and collapse into a tautology. The point of presence is both, in one singularity: the very possibility of presence (its appearance) and its utmost (or in temporal terms: immediate) impossibility. In her construction of the parallelogram of forces, Arendt is not concerned with all these intricacies, but instead reflects on the consequences of the “insertion.” The interruption of

²⁹³ Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 14.

²⁹⁴ Here I focus on what could be called the ‘spatial outcome’ of this elusiveness. Any thinking that turns towards the question of time accordingly is only available through the spatial perspective that seems to open at precisely this point. Looking at the elusiveness of the here and now strictly with the question of the being of time in mind, may lead to what Paul Ricoeur calls the “skeptical argument” of time: “time has no being since the future is not yet, the past is no longer, and the present does not remain.” This argument leads to paradoxes, since in our language we clearly “speak of time as having a being.” Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, vol. 1, p. 7.

the continuum that it initially causes is twofold in its meaning, and hence has a spatial and a temporal side: the insertion breaks up the continuum of indifference towards our presence (or in other words, being-there, *Dasein*), in which we usually live and go about our everyday affairs perfectly happily, and it breaks with a passed-on understanding of a linear temporality of thought.

Now, Arendt maintains that, with man breaking up the continuum, the forces of past and future are ‘deflected’ in a certain way. The continuum signifies both indifference, which in its absolute equals the nonexistence of time and space, and also the tradition of man’s temporality as a line. Past and future in this model (and according to Kafka’s parable) are rendered as vectors; they have a direction, which always initially points towards ‘him,’ who represents the point of insertion, of presence. Arendt calls this their “original direction,”²⁹⁵ which is in fact the aforementioned line. Her model therefore integrates very different levels of understanding within one and the same representation. On the one hand, it is a philosophical framework according to which questions concerning the being of man arise, or in Arendt’s words: concerning the human condition. The interruption of the aforementioned continuum (i.e., of indifference) is after all also the point where we become aware of our being in time and space. It is therefore also simply the moment that preconditions the question of our being. On the other hand, the model includes a depiction of the tradition, and its transformation into an alternative understanding of the space-time in which thinking may occur. Only by including the line *and* its deflection does the parallelogram of forces take shape. Arendt presents an image space that depicts and unfolds a development; it is therefore itself also a template for an

²⁹⁵ Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 11.

experience in thinking. This image would not appear as a parallelogram at all if it did not contain the transition from one mode of representation to the other.

A model that represents time as a line makes an absolute statement about temporality. It attempts to visualize temporality in an objective mode, as if we could indeed choose an external position in order to then observe how time unfolds infinitely into the past and into the future. The trouble, of course, is that this uncomplicated mode of representation simply does not give an account of the subject's involvement. And this involvement of the subject becomes the pivot of Arendt's model. The forces of past and future do not meet head-on in her depiction of 'his' battle. In that case, they would eventually cancel each other out – and wear 'him' down in the process. Instead, the two vectors representing the forces of past and future meet at an angle and hence “deflect, however lightly, from their original direction.”²⁹⁶ This, according to Arendt, would form a parallelogram of forces. In geometrical and physical terms, such a parallelogram of forces is the result of two forces that overlap at a certain point and create a field saturated by their combined powers. It is an auxiliary means of calculating the resulting powers at any given point within its space. Therefore, in regard to the components Arendt mentions (past, future, 'him'), a parallelogram emerges only if two additional lines are inferred from the existing ones. The resulting space in the shape of a parallelogram would extend either above or below the line that represents the traditional construction of time, which includes the point where “he breaks up the continuum.” According to this schema, the space of the parallelogram would appear outside the point where 'he' is:

²⁹⁶ Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 11-12.

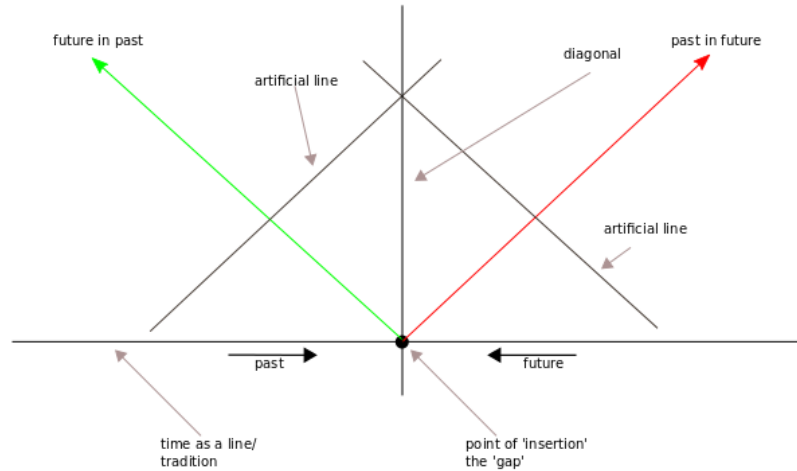


Figure 1. Parallelogram of Forces with point-like origin

However, looking carefully at how Arendt specifies the construction of the parallelogram, something else is happening here, which has its basis in the way Kafka originally narrated the situation in his parable. Beyond the geometric language applied here, ‘he’ is not just a point, but inhabits a space. This presence of space that is the immediate consequence of the aforementioned introspective which Kafka applies is also assumed by Arendt in her description of the parallelogram. She specifically characterizes the ‘gap’ as a place where ‘he’ “stands.” And this place then becomes the parallelogram of forces. She adds that the parallelogram of forces is “where Kafka’s ‘he’ has found his battlefield.”²⁹⁷ Accordingly, Arendt’s model can be depicted in at least two different ways. The strictly geometric representation (image 1) has to be accompanied by a second version. Just as Kafka’s parable as a whole was revealed to be an introspection of ‘him,’

²⁹⁷ Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 12.

Arendt delimits the explanatory scope of her model to the point of the subject's insertion. The parallelogram of forces, she maintains, characterizes what is going on *within* this point, within the gap between past and future. To make this possible at all, she therefore has to project space (a planar shape, a second dimension) into what is usually considered a non-time-space, the point where the forces of past and future clash. The field that represents the forces resulting from this clash would have to surround the – ideal – center of 'him':

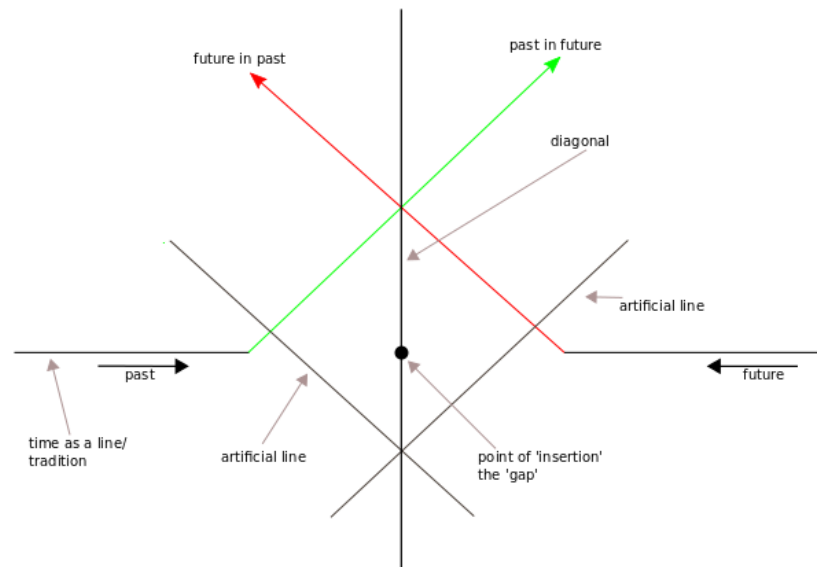


Figure 2. Parallelogram of Forces with spatial origin

This paradoxical operation, which mathematically speaking (in terms of 'traversing the point') is in all likelihood nonsense, is possible through the faculty of imagination alone. Arendt herself becomes cautious in this situation, writing that the gap "potentially at

least”²⁹⁸ resembles the space of a parallelogram. This caution is also a direct echo of what in Kafka’s story, too, is the turning point: “but this is only theoretically so.”²⁹⁹ With this statement, Kafka challenges an understanding of time as a line where the two antagonistic forces clash head-on, in order to prepare the re-institution of ‘him’ as a full-blown subject in the model, with all the dangers of contingency in place (“who really knows his intentions?”).³⁰⁰ It is this admittance of vagueness, then – the human factor, so to speak – in which all hopes are located, and where a space of possibilities opens up in spite of everything, at least potentially. The point becomes potency in its own right. The poetic deliberation necessary to envision what, in geometric terms, is impossible has its roots in Kafka’s parable. Arendt’s transformation of the point where man inserts himself into time into a space is an expansion of the introspection Kafka presented in his story. Past and future only become forces – that is, ‘vectors’ – insofar as they are projections from within our minds.

According to the concept of the parallelogram of forces, the conditions within the space defined by the two overlapping forces can be calculated by means of the diagonal of the parallelogram. Arendt, too, adds this diagonal describing it as a “third force”:
“Ideally, the action of the two forces which form the parallelogram of forces where Kafka’s ‘he’ has found his battlefield should result in a third force, the resultant diagonal whose origin would be the point at which the forces clash and upon which they act.”³⁰¹

²⁹⁸ Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 11-12.

²⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 7.

³⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

³⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 12.

The sequence in which the elements of the model appear in this sentence is of some importance in clarifying what is going on. First, the “action of the two forces,” past and future, intrude upon ‘him,’ who in the course of this unfolding becomes the point of insertion. This forms the parallelogram of forces, since, as a result of this conflict, the forces are deflected from their former lines of trajectory. Only now – that is, after the parallelogram has formed – do these forces “result in a third force, the resultant diagonal.” This diagonal has its origin in the point where the forces of past and future clash; that is, where ‘he’ is.³⁰² In this way, the diagonal represents a cross section of the surrounding forces, and thus relates to and depends on them. Arendt observes an important difference between the represented elements of the model: while the original forces of past and future, insofar as they still represent the tradition, both come from infinity and clearly end (at least, end with respect to the original heading) at the point where they clash, the diagonal has a definite beginning in this point, while its ends lie in infinity. She also adds that the reason for this might be because the two forces which add up to create the third force are themselves fed from infinity: “This diagonal force, whose origin is known, whose direction is determined by past and future, but whose eventual end lies in infinity, is the perfect metaphor for the activity of thought.”³⁰³ According to Arendt, the ideal construction of the diagonal, on the basis of her model, is a metaphorical representation of the activity of thought. Thinking is directly dependent on the forces of past and future and, at the same time, itself marks the point (or now: the space) where past and future are in conflict. The unfolding process of thinking, though rooted in this clash, is therefore not

³⁰² This proposition is possible in both versions of my diagram.

³⁰³ Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 12.

necessarily identical with past and future, but rather *emancipates* itself in a diagonal third direction. The subject, as the point of conflict, becomes the *beginning* of this emancipated thought. Thinking, then, is the cross section through the milieu saturated by the conflict of the forces of past and future.

The diagonal – thinking – traverses the space created by the act of insertion of the subject into the continuum of time. This is where and how thinking moves: on a diagonal between past and future. Within the space outlined by the parallelogram, thinking emancipates itself from the line which traditionally constituted time and runs diagonal and at an angle to it in an increasing or decreasing distance from the point of its origin. Here lies the difference from Kafka's story. Though his parable prepares all the necessary elements for Arendt's model, he does not see the possibility of a space beyond the line where thinking could move and at the same time still be in some way connected to the line. Instead, Kafka's 'he' is left to dream of an unconnected space beyond. In order to reach this space, 'he' would have to jump out of the line. Kafka re-established the subject position, but he did not fully realize this subject as a space. Instead, he still treated it as a point, though with the contingency of intentions. In regard to temporal and spatial dimensions, his subject remains remarkably without substance. The diagonal within is simply not in the original parable.

Arendt interprets Kafka's story accordingly. Kafka's 'he,' she writes, would not have to jump out of the fighting line if he could exert his forces along "this diagonal, in perfect equidistance from past and future, walking along this diagonal line, as it were, forward and backward with the slow, ordered movements which are the proper motion

for trains of thought.”³⁰⁴ Moving along this diagonal, thinking may choose the mode in which it refers to past and future freely, moving backwards and forwards among its various points of contact. The trace through which thinking passes is not congruent (anymore) with the course of past and future. In this model, thinking is thus emancipated, both from the ‘deflected’ forces of past and future, for which it represents a cross section, and from the tradition according to which past and future used to be rendered as a line. This ‘diagonal thinking’ is discontinuous in regard to remembrance, since it has the past (as history) and the future (as conjecture) at its disposal, independently of the framework in which these temporal vectors might at first appear. In the established distance that thinking may now achieve lies its critical potential; that is, in other words, its newfound awareness of differences. Contents from collective memory become discontinuous artifacts, broken away from their putative contexts. The task of the mind, then, is to put these artifacts once again into contexts where they may reveal an unexpected potential for meaning. There are risks and chances linked to this approach, as Arendt knew. The past may get lost when it is disconnected from a narrative framework; however, she also expresses hope that in the course of a new approach to the remnants of tradition “the past open[s] up to us with unexpected freshness and tell[s] us things no one has yet had ears to hear.”³⁰⁵

Though the diagonal points to infinity, it still “remains bound to and is rooted in the present,”³⁰⁶ which is always where the activity of thinking happens. For Arendt, the

³⁰⁴ Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 12.

³⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 94.

³⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 12.

diagonal is an adequate metaphor for a critical thinking whose progression and space of possibilities is potentially infinite, but that is still bound to acknowledge ‘what is’ as its basis. With this, her model responds to the increasing rift between reality and thinking that she observed at the beginning of her investigation into the condition of modern thought.³⁰⁷ It is this present, nonetheless, that, within the movement of thought, for an – improbable – moment, the blink of an eye, becomes a space. Thinking in respect to the diagonal is defined by the tension between its present-time moment and this moment as a ‘presence of mind’ where it achieves distance, and hence difference. This is the way in which Arendt’s characterization of thought as a movement within the ‘gap between past and future’ is applicable.

In Kafka’s parable, this space does not become visible, since it is missing the diagonal. Arendt writes that only on this diagonal could he “probably see and survey what was most his own, what had come into being only with his own, self-inserting appearance – the enormous, ever-changing time-space which is created and limited by the forces of past and future; he would have found the place in time which is sufficiently removed from past and future to offer ‘the umpire’ a position from which to judge the forces fighting with each other with an impartial eye.”³⁰⁸ The space that the diagonal unfolds and traverses, just as a tent pole upholds the space underneath a tarpaulin, is the

³⁰⁷ The diagonal also represents the connection to what is passed on by the broken tradition. Ingeborg Nordmann fittingly characterizes Arendt’s connection to the tradition as an approach between a bond and the necessity of rejecting it. Tradition was ‘completely’ lost as a framework for guiding thinking, but the remnants of what it passed on do exist. In this sense, the break with tradition cannot be absolute, according to Nordmann: “Das theoretische Vermögen, um das es Hannah Arendt ging, sollte sich dagegen aller sichtbaren und unsichtbaren Fäden, die es mit der Tradition verbanden, bewußt werden und sich von ihnen lösen, soweit die Fragen der Gegenwart es erforderten. Der Bruch mit der Tradition konnte aber niemals absolut sein.” Nordmann, *Hannah Arendt*, 82.

³⁰⁸ Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 12.

result of a deliberately performed introspection; it comes into being because of an act of self-awareness, which is at the same time the point where 'he' inserts himself into time and interrupts its continuum. The moment of introspection as a space is characterized by the tension between identity with its present-time moment and the difference it immediately establishes. This in turn is also the interruption of tradition, because tradition is the framework that lets man's temporality appear as a continuum in the first place.

Arendt's model is a consequence of Kafka's parable and the result of a radical introspection to a point where it turns into an act of self-awareness, so that the mind can look 'back' and 'survey' the 'landscape' in which it 'dwells.' At its close, Arendt's expansion of Kafka's image also turns into a model for judging – the culmination and end point of all successful thinking. In judging, thinking turns into decision making, and thus into the point where it may ultimately come to a halt in order for action to begin. Therefore, from the newly introduced space of past and future, and specifically also its conflict within 'him,' ideally, the break in tradition itself may be judged. The defining parameter for judging is here impartiality, in contrast to objectivity. In the essay on "The Concept of History" from *Between Past and Future*, Arendt turns to historiography in modernity and places objectivity against impartiality. She traces the modern dichotomy of nature and history back to the "nineteenth-century opposition of the natural and historical sciences, together with the allegedly absolute objectivity and precision of the natural scientists."³⁰⁹ While in ancient times greatness was the decisive aspect for determining whether something was worth becoming part of history, now seemingly scientific rules, thought to be valid with the same sort of necessity inherent in natural

³⁰⁹ Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 48.

laws, were assumed to be behind history. History thus turned into a process, just as nature was increasingly looked upon as a conglomerate of processes. However, the implied notion of objectivity as an absolute separation of the observed processes from the subject's involvement was already an illusion in the nineteenth century, and has been abandoned completely by the natural sciences in the twentieth century. The observer is part of the experiment, "becomes one of its conditions, a 'subjective' factor is introduced into the 'objective' processes of nature."³¹⁰ Questions put before nature, Arendt concludes, have always been questions asked and answered by men; the confusion was "to assume that there could be answers without questions and results independent of a question-asking being."³¹¹ Objectivity, however – the point of reference in the quarrel between natural and historical sciences – has a different background in the case of historiography. For 'historical objectivity' has its roots not only in the nineteenth-century dreams and confusion of an absolutely "pure vision" through the "extinction of the self,"³¹² but also in the ancient aspect of impartiality, which already Homer and Herodotus had introduced into the historical narrative. This completely separated place beyond the involvement of the self, which thus has an untainted view of history, is of course also the place that Kafka's 'he' dreamed of. Consequently, Arendt's model re-inserts into the historic narrative its dependence on the subject, in a way similar to that already practiced by modern science. Nineteenth-century history in the guise of science

³¹⁰ Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 48.

³¹¹ *Ibid.*, 49.

³¹² *Ibid.*

radicalized the aspect of impartiality into the claim of “nondiscrimination”.³¹³ neither praise nor blame should determine the historian’s gaze upon the past. While the natural sciences advanced into directions that soon debunked the myth of objectivity, historiography did not, Arendt argues, take its standards from the natural sciences of its own age, but referred to the scientific and philosophical standards of the Middle Ages, “which consisted mainly in observing and cataloguing observed facts.”³¹⁴

In contrast, Arendt suggests connecting historical judgment back to the ancient notion of impartiality as the faculty for not only seeing one’s own side but also for acknowledging the perspectives of others. Impartiality, according to the author, is the “highest type of objectivity we know” (without becoming confused in the way stated above), and it has its roots in the narratives of Homer and Herodotus. The former “decided to sing the deeds of the Trojans no less than those of the Achaeans, and to praise the glory of Hector no less than the greatness of Achilles.”³¹⁵ The space for impartiality is the story. It leaves behind “the common interest in one’s own side and one’s own people” and “discards the alternative of victory or defeat.” In this latter aspect, impartiality of the narrative goes beyond the modern assumption that history, in an “‘objective’ judgment,” would actively take the role of deciding (take sides).³¹⁶ In modernity, the ancient notion of impartiality was lost, but the desire to still give an ‘objective’ account of history remained, resulting in confusion about the matter.

³¹³ Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 49.

³¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 50.

³¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 51.

³¹⁶ *Ibid.*

In regard to Arendt's narrative model for thinking in 'perfect equidistance' to past and future, it can thus be said that she realizes the dream Kafka's 'he' has of becoming the umpire, not by means of absolute objectivity, but rather by impartiality. Since the model is, from the start, an introspection by the subject, this notion of impartiality does not in fact preclude the self's involvement. But this spot on the diagonal, where an impartial view on the matters of history and the remnants of tradition is achieved, is, according to Arendt, very hard to attain. "More likely," she argues with reference also to the majority of Kafka's stories, the 'he' constituted in Kafka's parable will be "unable to find the diagonal which would lead him out of the fighting line and into the space ideally constituted by the parallelogram of forces," and instead will "die of exhaustion."³¹⁷ If the mind cannot achieve this diagonal, Arendt adds, it becomes oblivious and wanders away from its "original intentions"; and though it is aware of the existence of the gap in time – which thinking represents – it is unable to feel at home in this place. Instead, this place, as in Kafka's parable, becomes a "battlefield."³¹⁸ The mind becomes tangled up in a vicious circle of constructing and destructing its own conditions and forms of representation. In this state, it is unable to freely take command of the material that memory forces upon us. As a result, it loses its faculty of judging and becomes indecisive, so to speak. The freedom which thinking may, ideally, achieve in the space of the parallelogram therefore implicates its liberation from the burden of having to deal with itself; that is, with its own conditions and perplexities. Thought generally is never just thought in itself; in its expression, contingent on our desire to communicate with others, it

³¹⁷ Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 13.

³¹⁸ Ibid.

relies on our worldly institutions, and hence on some kind of framework that lends form to it. As troublesome as the concept of tradition is, until its break became an accomplished fact, through the better part of modernity, it fulfilled the task of such a framework.

Arendt's approach to the "contemporary conditions of thought,"³¹⁹ building on Kafka's story, marks the point where tradition is completely transgressed. This transgression can only be complete because the model retroactively includes the break in tradition and also establishes a space beyond this break. In the model reconstructed here, tradition plays its part as the underlying line, insofar as it explains where the forces of past and future came from to build the parallelogram of forces. The line – tradition – is still there, but only as a part of an introspection encompassing the subject of thinking and its aporia. In the expansion of the subject's introspection, the traditional subject-object dichotomy vanishes. Or rather: the classical oppositions of philosophy remain meaningful, but Arendt's model, insofar as it is a focal-point of the subject, represents their point of transition. It is therefore within the space of this model (the parallelogram) because it is, after all, the introspection of this 'point of transition,' where these oppositions are in a constant flux and are in this sense *aufgehoben*. Thinking becomes an activity in regard to this schema.³²⁰

³¹⁹ Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 13.

³²⁰ The constant commutation between fundamental categories like that of contemplation and action that Arendt traces back to this 'place' where thinking occurs, is also represented in an ancient quote by P. Cornelius Scipio Africanus (Arendt connects it to Cato, passed on by Cicero). Arendt used this quote at the end of *The Human Condition* and planned to use it as the motto for *The Life of the Mind*. In her translation: "Never is he more active than when he does nothing, never is he less alone than when he is by himself." In: Hannah Arendt: *The Human Condition* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998), 325. The model that Arendt constructs in *Between Past and Future* characterizes precisely this 'non-place' where we are active even though we might appear to be doing nothing and where we appear to be alone and yet are engaging in a dialogue with ourselves and with the thoughts of others. This quote and the correct source

Already in *Between Past and Future*, Arendt accordingly puts thinking as the culmination of human activity on a level with living in general. Only when we think, she writes, “does man in the full actuality of his concrete being live in this gap of time between past and future.”³²¹ She distinguishes this experience of thinking as an immediate relation to oneself – and, qua remembrance, which according to Arendt is “one, though one of the most important, modes of thought,”³²² to others – from “the world and the culture into which we are born.”³²³ At the close of the preface to her book, the author calls the gap between past and future, which, again, ultimately only came to appearance as a result of tradition’s collapse, “the path paved by thinking” and a “small non-time-space in the very heart of time.”³²⁴ She adds that this experience of thinking was always accessible only for “those few who made thinking their primary business.”³²⁵ For the majority of people, awareness of thinking, in this fashion as a self-reflecting progression between identity and difference with oneself, was “bridged over” by tradition “throughout the thousands of years that followed upon the foundation of Rome.”³²⁶ With the complete collapse of this tradition, then, the experience of the ‘gap’ became “a tangible reality and perplexity for all; that is, it became a fact of political relevance.”³²⁷

appears in: Arendt, *Denktagebuch*, vol. 1-2, p. 251, 983.

³²¹ Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 13.

³²² *Ibid.*, 6.

³²³ *Ibid.*, 13.

³²⁴ *Ibid.*

³²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

³²⁶ *Ibid.*, 13.

³²⁷ *Ibid.*, 14.

At this point, Arendt's observations about the political relevance of the 'gap between past and future' connect to her book *On Revolution*. There the author also relates the question of representing the 'gap' to its potential consequences in the sphere of action and appearances. Knowledge of the 'gap' or 'hiatus,' as Arendt argues, had been constricted to "human imagination" and speculation, and it was not an object of real historical time. Up to this point, this is basically the same argument as in *Between Past and Future*. The reason for its elusiveness is that the concept of the 'gap in human time' contravenes common conceptions of "time as a continuous flow"; the 'gap' is not a conventional historical datum.³²⁸ Yet Arendt now adds to this her observation that, with the appearance of revolutions, the 'gap' reached into history to a certain degree: "but what had been known to speculative thought and in legendary tales, it seemed, appeared for the first time as an actual reality. If one dated the revolution, it was as though one had done the impossible, namely, one had dated the hiatus in time in terms of chronology, that is, of historical time."³²⁹ Revolutions become the expression of the 'gap' in history. Suddenly, with revolutions, something of this knowledge from another time, from a 'non-space-time,' reached into the reality of history that is shared by all people. According to Arendt, this is knowledge otherwise passed on in "legendary tales." She is very cautious in her phrasing of this turning-over of what normally resides within the 'gap' into historical time: "it seemed," "it was as though" are indicators of this. Though it is evident that something from the 'gap' reaches into a level of appearance that is perceivable within the available conceptual framework, it remains unclear what exactly this is. In

³²⁸ Arendt, *On Revolution*, 198.

³²⁹ Ibid.

Between Past and Future, Arendt states that the “treasure” of the revolutions “thus far has remained nameless.” She adds: “Does something exist, not in outer space but in the world and affairs of men on earth, which has not even a name? Unicorns and fairy queens seem to possess more reality than the lost treasure of the revolutions.”³³⁰ The treasure points to a public, political experience in which the collective, imaginary space of thinking converges with action visible for everybody. The author finds remnants of this treasure in past concepts of a “public happiness” and “public freedom.”³³¹ This treasure is therefore a focal point of a bodily (i.e., publicly visible) and imaginative awareness – in short, the point of presence whose narrative structure Arendt attempts to reconstruct with her model. It is also the same kind of structure revolving around the spheres of contemplation and action that Benjamin attempted to cast into the dialectic of body and image space.

Similar to the appearance of revolutions in history, as explained above, with the collapse of tradition, something from this ‘gap’ that ultimately always escalates into the aporia for thinking reached over into the common world of human activity. This is where, for Arendt, the situation gets precarious, where the ‘gap’ affects the fundamental concepts by which we regulate our being-together in the world. She maintains that today we are “neither equipped nor prepared for this activity of thinking, of settling down in the gap between past and future.”³³² As a result, her work, specifically in regard to its political and philosophical aspects, is dedicated to “gain[ing] experience in *how to*

³³⁰ Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 5.

³³¹ Ibid.

³³² Ibid., 13.

think”³³³ under the presented conditions; and that means learning how to think ‘without a banister’ after the bridge covering the gap between past and future is gone. Arendt makes a point of stating that this kind of experience in thinking is fundamentally different “from such mental processes as deducing, inducing, and drawing conclusions whose logical rules of non-contradiction and inner consistency can be learned once and for all.”³³⁴ The experience of thinking which she has in mind is of a practical nature; it is thinking as a human – communal behavior³³⁵ – that has a direct connection to being communicated and shared with others and that is based in the faculties of remembrance and imagination.³³⁶ The fundamental agenda underlying this thinking as a behavior that expresses itself in the judgments we make (which in turn translate into decisions in the sphere of action) is impartiality. Impartiality teaches us to consider different perspectives in the communal space which thinking becomes.

³³³ Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 14.

³³⁴ Ibid.

³³⁵ The appearance of evil as ‘banal’ has its source, according to Arendt, in ‘thoughtlessness,’ and this thoughtlessness becomes the basis of totalitarian regimes. Arendt also connected the increasing inability to think with the growing loneliness of individuals in modern bourgeois society. Loneliness, then, is directly connected to thoughtlessness and to the terror of totalitarian regimes, who, in a sense, ‘organize’ loneliness. In this context, see: Roger Berkowitz, “Solitude and the Activity of Thinking,” in *Thinking in Dark Times. Hannah Arendt on Ethics and Politics*, ed. idem, Jeffrey Katz, and Thomas Keenan (New York: Fordham University Press, 2010), 237ff. In the kind of thinking which Arendt wants to develop, solitude is not loneliness. Solitude is the necessary precondition for the activity of thinking, necessary to begin the dialogue between ‘me and myself.’ But it depends on us not to let this solitude change into loneliness, and thus thinking into secluded brooding.

³³⁶ This ‘gap’ is not only the place where thinking exerts itself in a politically meaningful way, but also – particularly since remembrance is a mode of thinking, as was stated above – the place where a concept “des reinen und ursprünglichen Politischen” may be envisioned. Ingeborg Nordmann sets Arendt’s search for the concept of the political in relation to the ‘gap between past and future’: “Die Verwendung des Begriffs des reinen und ursprünglichen Politischen im Zusammenhang mit der Polis zeigt an, wie sie [Arendt] ihre Vergegenwärtigung verstanden wissen will. Der Ort der Vergegenwärtigung ist jene merkwürdige Lücke zwischen Vergangenheit und Zukunft, die einer Zäsur gegen das unaufhaltsame und sinnlose Weiter gleichkommt. In diesem Zwischenraum meldet sich das Gedächtnis, und es steht quer zur Zeit. Sieht man die Polis in diesem Kontext, so verliert sie jede normative Bedeutung.” Nordmann, *Hannah Arendt*, 99. But in order for this ‘gap,’ this ‘space in between’ to become a space for *Vergegenwärtigung*, it has to be crossed by the diagonal Arendt constructed with her model.

The template for organizing this ‘thinking experience’ is narrative. Kafka and his work of storytelling bear testimony for Arendt that a new approach to narrative in its fundamental function for thinking is possible. His stories are in this sense, too, exercises in gaining experience of living in the ‘gap,’ of thinking under the conditions of a broken tradition. Storytelling in general, and specifically in the context of its departure into modernity instigated by Kafka, can be seen as an expression or exemplification of Arendt’s model of narrative presented here. The model acts as a lens – with the perspective of the broken tradition, as it were – through which each story and ultimately the whole fragmented narrative of the broken tradition can be read anew and – ideally – be incorporated into a new beginning for thinking. In precisely this way, Arendt picks up, for example, Plato’s “allegory of the cave”³³⁷ in her essay “Tradition and the Modern Age” as a template for reading the whole of Western tradition from beginning to end. Tradition may have collapsed, but the more fundamental gift of narrative did not. Instead, the transformation of narrative helped to envision a new place for thinking, however hard to attain. Storytelling itself becomes a framework where contemplation and action converge; the story is imbued with the power ‘to begin’ something.

In *Between Past and Future*, as in other works, Arendt chooses to apply the form of the essay. Storytelling appears in her work not as the genre of her choice (as is the case in, for example, Benjamin), but as a structural gesture. It is a framework, a model for developing her own theoretical narrative – in close proximity to the actual storytellers who become more important contemporary witnesses than scientific history. Concerning thinking and writing in modernity, Arendt found herself in the same situation as Kafka

³³⁷ Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 17.

and then Benjamin, searching for a “place in time which is sufficiently removed from past and future to offer ‘the umpire’ a position from which to judge the forces fighting with each other with an impartial eye.”³³⁸ Only now had tradition completely given way, and as a consequence, thinking was thrown back upon its own problems as never before, while the contents of past (and presumably those of the future, as well) were in real danger of being lost altogether.

³³⁸ Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 12.

CHAPTER XI

ARENDT: WHO SAYS WHAT IS ALWAYS TELLS A STORY

The non-time-space of the ‘gap between past and future’ is, according to Arendt, the space where truth may appear. Having presented the author’s approach in reconstructing this ‘gap’ as a model for a theoretical narrative, this chapter will turn to her investigation of the concept of truth in relation to politics in order to expand on the question of the political relevance the ‘gap’ has gained in recent modernity. The opposition of contemplation and action thus returns once again and determines the approach to the “story of the conflict between truth and politics.”³³⁹ In the essay “Truth and Politics” from *Between Past and Future*, Arendt is concerned with the essence and the representation of truth, always in relation to its significance for the political sphere. She furthermore strongly associates this essay with her “report” on the Eichmann trial. In a footnote right at the essay’s beginning, she states that it “was caused by the so-called controversy after the publication of *Eichmann in Jerusalem*.”³⁴⁰ The exterior reasons for the question of truth to come up for Arendt are therefore political. With the question of how the political sphere relates to truth, the question of truth’s representation is also established. At the end of this chapter, I will return to *Eichmann in Jerusalem* in order to present an example of the appearance of truth by means of storytelling.

³³⁹ Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 229.

³⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 227.

Arendt of course does not fail to state the fundamental importance of truth for human existence in general, even compared to other qualities such as freedom or justice. While the question of whether the latter could be sacrificed for the survival of the world or not (“*Fiat iustitia, et pereat mundus*”)³⁴¹ is at least debatable, this is not even possible in the matter of truth, since the human world would simply cease to exist: “What is at stake is survival, the perseverance in existence (*in suo esse perseverare*), and no human world destined to outlast the short life span of mortals within it will ever be able to survive without men willing to do what Herodotus was the first to undertake consciously – namely, λέγειν τα ἔόντα, to say what is.”³⁴² Our very being in the world is irresolvably intertwined with truth. World, in the sense of an edifice to outlast man’s limited life span, to reach from generation to generation, is constituted by truth. But this truth only holds up the world as long as it is communicated through our shared narratives. The world is a framework that connects people, and in which those things appear as reality that all people necessarily have to agree on as ‘what is.’ Right at the beginning of her argument, Arendt links truth to the capacity to ‘say what is.’ She will later in the essay expand this specific act of contributing to the appearance of the world to the notion: “Who says what is [...] always tells a story”,³⁴³ truth is hence an inherent element of telling the story.

During her further investigations, Arendt distinguishes rational truth from factual truth in modernity as two different modes of how truth appears.³⁴⁴ This, however, merely

³⁴¹ Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 228.

³⁴² *Ibid.*, 229.

³⁴³ *Ibid.*, 261.

³⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 231. See also Ingeborg Nordmann, who calls Arendt’s account of factual truth a “Verteidigung der Tatsachenwahrheit.” She further writes: “Die Tatsachenwahrheit verkörpert das genaue Gegenteil zum

indicates the way in which we reach the truth. In the end, all truths have in common that once they are accepted as such, they are “beyond agreement, dispute, opinion, or consent.”³⁴⁵ This is the reason why all political systems have, at some stage, trouble with the truth, because they rely on the possibility of change, manipulation, and persuasion.³⁴⁶ Most relevant for the further investigation of the conflict with the political sphere, Arendt concludes, are factual truths. Lying, as the opposite of ‘telling what is,’ is thus to actively tell the wrong facts, or to actively attempt to change how the world is conceived. Arendt traces back the involved concepts to their beginning at the dawn of political understanding in the context of the Greek polis. In early antiquity, she observes, the opposite of truth was not regarded to be the lie, but rather opinion. It thus seems that in antiquity the line between truth and politics was drawn clearer. Since the fabrication of opinions was the task of the politician, truth, and thus the telling of ‘what is,’ was not. This does not mean, though, that truth was never politically relevant and in turn that the political is not relevant for truth. Arendt reveals a mutual relationship of dependency. Truth needs to appear; in fact, truth is a constituent element of appearance in the first place, which is necessary in order to inform political decision making. In turn, it is the task of the political sphere to guarantee the space in which truth may appear.

absoluten Wahrheitsanspruch geschichtlicher Gesetze und Prozesse. Die Tatsache ist die Übersetzung des Ereignisses in Sprache. Durch sie findet das Ereignis einen Platz im Gedächtnisraum.” Nordmann, *Hannah Arendt*, 54. The following investigation is concerned with the complex context of event, factuality, and language, and the category of language directly leads to that of narrative. The space of remembrance Nordmann mentions is, after all, the space Arendt reconstructed with her model of the ‘gap between past and future,’ a narrative model.

³⁴⁵ Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 240.

³⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 241.

If the space where people meet and share their views on ‘what is’ ceases to exist, for example through political oppression, this would ultimately damage the faculty of thinking itself. Thinking, again, occurs in that ‘gap’ where truth may appear. Arendt refers to Kant in order to illustrate her point: “Kant [...] stated that ‘the external power that deprives man of the freedom to communicate his thoughts publicly, *deprives him at the same time of his freedom to think*’ [italics added], and that the only guarantee for ‘the correctness’ of our thinking lies in that ‘we think, as it were, in community with others to whom we communicate our thoughts as they communicate theirs to us.’”³⁴⁷ Thinking must be informed by exterior facts; it can only ‘correctly’ accompany the world in which we live, and correlate with it, if it is aligned with the views of others. Our thinking needs the deviating perspectives that others have on the world. The more private thinking grows, the more meaningless it becomes. In this context, truth plays a vital role, since it defines the way in which the world and therefore others and their thoughts appear. It only works in this space between people, where people meet and share their different views on the world. In fact – based on the ancient notion of truth as *aletheia – appearance* is exactly its function: to disclose the things of the world in front of the people as that which they are (or rather: as that which they appear to be). In this sense, truth is the function of unconcealing in the world. The mode of representation for this unconcealing is, in Arendt’s words, ‘telling what is.’ For her, then, what is at stake in the struggles of recent modernity and in the advent of totalitarian state terror, is the “common and factual reality itself.”³⁴⁸

³⁴⁷ Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 233-234.

³⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 237.

The opposition between truth and opinion is also a topic in Plato's cave allegory, which Arendt discusses in greater detail in the essay "Tradition and the Modern Age." Here the philosopher reaches for truth in the skies of eternal ideas, outside the cave in which the multitude of people live. In this idealized setting, pure and unrivaled truth can only ever be had by the isolated individual who focuses entirely on contemplation and distances himself as much as possible from the common affairs of men. Pure truth in this sense means absolute isolation from the world of people. Structurally it seems that this kind of truth shares similarities with that which became 'rational truth.' The problem is that as soon as the individual philosopher again joins the multitude of people and attempts to communicate his truth, it becomes tainted by the viewpoints of the many and is gradually transformed into an opinion. While truth is self-evident for the individual, it loses this status the more it is again shared among the many. People again have to agree to this truth, and hence have to be persuaded of it. Arendt writes that at least the philosopher can retreat into the realm of contemplation, where he can be sure of the truths. But ultimately one has to go out (or in Plato's case, back into the cave) and share one's truths, which basically means to represent them, to tell them to others. And this process involves the necessity of making these truths understood, which leads to their transformation. Truth thus exists between these two extreme modes of isolated contemplation and sharing with others. We have to find a balance, time and again.

There is also danger involved in representing truth, especially if it clashes with the political sphere and threatens its power. Plato's cave allegory, Arendt writes, ends with a note on the danger in which tellers of truth live: "If they [those forced to acknowledge

the truth] could lay hands on [such a] man [...] they would kill him.”³⁴⁹ In the aftermath of her book on the Eichmann trial, which she designated in its subtitle as a report, the author experienced this kind of trouble herself. In the essay on “Truth and Politics,” she comments on the role the reporter occupies in modernity: in contrast to Plato’s philosopher, the reporter is always in the middle of society and always already concerned with human affairs. Thus she cannot take refuge but – qua being a reporter – always depends on the goodwill of the many: “However, the reporter of factual truth is even worse off. He does not return from any journey into regions beyond the realm of human affairs, and he cannot console himself with the thought that he has become a stranger in this world.”³⁵⁰ Arendt, though, is not only concerned with the reporter, but more so with the status and condition of factual truth in modern political environments. The problem, then, is that the reporter of factual truth is always bound to the realm of human affairs. The reporter depends on the many to accept her report as truth, and because of the nature of factual truths – which are singular, in contrast to rational truths, which can be eternal (but not all are, of course) – she ultimately only has one shot at making sure the facts are acknowledged by the public. If, in the public realm, a report of the factual is discredited, the truth may get lost for a long time or even for good. And in contrast to the philosopher, the reporter of facts cannot easily and by choice go back to the source of this truth and renew her resolve and therefore the strength of her insight. Arendt adds to this her observation that factual truth nowadays seems to be greeted with more hostility than ever

³⁴⁹ Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 229.

³⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 237.

before,³⁵¹ and in the course of political struggles is either treated as a secret or as an opinion. A common strategy for dismissing the representation of truths in the political sphere is, accordingly, to label them as opinions, which can then easily be refuted. The decline of their status threatens reality and, in consequence, the political sphere. Factual truth is, according to Arendt, always related to other people and exists because it is spoken about: “It is established by witnesses and depends on testimony.” As such, though, it is “political by nature.” Factual truth informs political thought, just as rational truth informs philosophical speculation. Where the one is denied, the other takes damage. Arendt adds: “Facts and opinions, though they must be kept apart, are not antagonistic to each other; they belong to the same realm.”³⁵²

The author admits that the ontological status of a ‘fact’ is debatable and puzzling in its details – all the more so, since any fact has to be “picked out of a chaos of sheer happenings (and the principles of choice are surely not factual data) and then be fitted into a story that can be told only in a certain perspective, which has nothing to do with the original occurrence.”³⁵³ She questions the concept of a fact in general and connects the problem to its mode of representation, which always involves a narrative. Facts are always historicized; that is, they are (re-)told in a certain situation, and this act of telling necessarily adds a perspective to them. Facts thus are never without this added perspective; they cannot be presented in or as the state in which they unfolded, nor as the

³⁵¹ Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 236.

³⁵² *Ibid.*, 238.

³⁵³ *Ibid.* Reported facts are always subject of a (narrative) construction. See also: “... to the extent that historians are implicated in the understanding and explanation of past events, an absolute event cannot be attested to by historical discourse. Understanding – even the understanding of another person in everyday life – is never a direct intuition but always a reconstruction.” Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, vol. 1, p. 97.

original event that inspired them; they cannot be ‘had again.’ Yet this claim that they should appear without the perspective of an observer – completely ‘objective’ – has always accompanied the history of factuality.³⁵⁴ Arendt indicates that narrative is the function responsible for transforming facts from being a single, witnessed incident into a man-made artifact, a story to appear to others. After all, this step is incorporated in the constitution of facts, since they need to appear in order to be called facts in the first place. This is both a problem, since the appearance and acceptance of facts as truths in the public realm depend on many variables (choice, perspective, context, sequence, etc.), but also a chance, since there is a framework through which they can appear, which hence lends them durability. In narrative, facts become meaningful; only if the individual facts, broken free from the original contexts in which they actually happened, are placed back into a story, do they make sense to others. Arendt reminds us that nonetheless the bare evidence of facts occurring in the world independently from human affairs must not be touched and cannot be doubted. This she calls the “existence of factual matter”³⁵⁵ – ontologically speaking, a level beneath the appearance and representation of facts. In order to demonstrate the impact of the purely factual, Arendt actually tells a story within her essay:

“During the twenties, so a story goes” forms the introduction to her tale, which she continues by relating an anecdote in which Clemenceau was interviewed by a representative of the Weimar Republic about the question of guilt concerning the beginning of the First World War. Asked the question of whether that “controversial

³⁵⁴ See chapter 10: One of the tasks of Arendt’s narrative model of the ‘gap’ is precisely to reintegrate the observer into the narrative perspective.

³⁵⁵ Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 238.

issue” would burden future generations, he answered: ““This I don’t know. But I know for certain that they will not say Belgium invaded Germany.””³⁵⁶ What this anecdote shows is the persuasive power that facts can have in their raw givenness as evidence. The core of the matter, then, is simply that something indeed happened; and while everybody may debate the appearance of this evidence, no one can go behind the ‘fact’ that it happened without seriously denying the commonly accepted reality. With his anecdote, Clemenceau reaches for this level of factual validity, beyond the historical debate. By turning directly to the underlying question raised in the anecdote (did Germany start the First World War?), stripping it of its complexities (the European game of power politics at the time), and turning around its direction (did Belgium invade Germany?), he manages to bring the involved matters to a point that simply cannot be discussed, due to its self-evidence (the thought that Belgium had invaded Germany is simply ridiculous). The way in which this self-evidence of the factual penetrates our world is its transcendental power. Arendt adds, however, that unfortunately even this level of self-evidence of the factual is not safe anymore in modernity and could be manipulated by a “power monopoly” great enough. She is, of course, referring to totalitarian forms of terror that attempt to rewrite the factuality of the world itself.

The self-evidence of raw factuality is intricately connected to its narrative, into which it does not directly translate.³⁵⁷ The problem is that the time of narrative is

³⁵⁶ Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 239.

³⁵⁷ A narrative is always already more than a mere chronic of past events. With the story that Arendt puts here in her essay she is pointing to this particular function of narrative, this surplus of bringing about meaningfulness beyond a simple list of facts. See also: “For a simple narrative already does more than report events in their order of appearance. A list of facts without any ties between them is not a narrative.” Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, vol. 1, p. 148.

postfactual; hence, facts are always only facts in retrospect – their actual event always lost to time. Their self-evidence has to be reconstructed by narrative. Arendt writes about the nature of facts that they “have no conclusive reason whatever for being what they are; they could always have been otherwise, and this annoying contingency is literally unlimited.”³⁵⁸ Only in historical perspective does a sequence of events appear to be fixed. But Arendt calls this an “existential[] illusion: nothing could ever happen if reality did not kill, by definition, all the other potentialities originally inherent in any given situation.” She concludes that factual truth is ultimately “no more self-evident than opinion.”³⁵⁹ On this level where facts are ‘fitted into the story,’ they have to be made plausible as much as opinions – not by the same rhetorical means, but basically in the same manner. They are outfitted with a narrative perspective. Factual truth is beyond debate and opinion only once it has been *accepted* as truth. As soon as the event is over and it turns into memory, facts are not self-evident at all. This power of factuality, however, can be restored through narrative, as the example of Clemenceau’s anecdote shows. While factual truths thus persuade by being told – reported as it were – from case to case, because they are, strictly speaking, never the same and occur in infinite particularity, philosophical truth that can and even must be generalized, persuades by example.

In order to demonstrate how philosophical propositions fare in the public realm, Arendt refers to the Socratic statement: “It is better to suffer wrong than to do wrong.”³⁶⁰ Though the truth or general ethical value of this proposition may be immediately

³⁵⁸ Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 242.

³⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 243.

³⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 247.

accepted by people, and though the philosopher can make compelling and convincing arguments to ‘prove’ it,³⁶¹ it loses its quasi-axiomatic validity as soon as it is confronted with the opinions of the multitude. Arendt writes that from the perspective of citizens, of acting beings “concerned with the world and the public welfare rather than with his own well-being [...] the Socratic statement is not true at all.”³⁶² With the change of perspective from the individual, the private ‘correctness’ of thought, to the public and political, where one is concerned not with self-contradictions but with actions conducted in front of and looked upon by a multitude of others, the essential truth of the above axiomatic proposition increasingly dissolves. One reason for this is that the part where I would conceive of a deed as contradicting myself is simply concealed by (assumed) necessities generated by others. In the political sphere, my individual deeds, so to speak, suddenly become ‘deeds of a second order,’ subordinated under the ‘common good.’ Well-known arguments like ‘I might suffer from this, but it is for the greater good’ fall into this category. Another reason why these kinds of axiomatic statements lose validity in the face of the public multitude is that they are approached from a potentially infinite number of different perspectives with potentially infinite different instances of factual applications and interests.

Arendt argues that the only way to carry some of the axiomatic force of ethical, philosophical truths into the public is by example. And here, too, antiquity provides an original precedent. She turns once again to Socrates and the well-known story of his trial

³⁶¹ Arendt presents the following argument: since I am ‘two in one’ when I think, it is better not to live in contradiction with myself; thus I should not do something that I would not wish to have done to me by somebody else because I could not defend this in front of myself.

³⁶² Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 245.

and death. The philosopher, she writes, decided to set an example by accepting the death sentence rather than leaving Athens. In so doing, he made a public, politically relevant decision on the basis of his philosophical reasoning. Such a teaching by example is, according to Arendt, the “only form of ‘persuasion’ that philosophical truth is capable of.” By example, philosophical propositions can inspire action and become “verified as well as validated” within the public realm.³⁶³ By means of creating *fait accompli*, Socrates points to the underlying philosophical reasoning of his decision, and it is this ‘pointing to,’ constituted by the fact of his death, which, like any factual truth, once established cannot be avoided or refuted easily. The essential point of an example, then, is that it changes reality; that is, it sets up an experience for others to witness that cannot be denied. The experience of such an example says: there is at least one person, if not more, for whom the principle that motivated the deed had the truth or validity of an axiom (and Socrates, of course, was not just any person, but a person of public interest). It is important to note that the example thus stands at the crossroads between reality and narrative: it characterizes action, a behavior conducted by people, but also its narrative form. By being exemplary, narrative may bring truth out of the realm of contemplation and into the realm of appearance and action. Socrates died for his conviction in order to set an example – a standard, as it were – for the validity of a certain philosophical truth in the world of men. At this point, he thus turned his life into a story that could and would be told over generations until today.³⁶⁴

³⁶³ Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 247-248.

³⁶⁴ See also Julia Kristeva, *Hannah Arendt* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), 48. Kristeva gives an account of the “the meaning of an example” in the context of Arendt’s approach to biographical writing. With *Rahel Varnhagen. Lebensgeschichte einer deutschen Jüdin aus der Romantik*, Arendt did not write an autobiography, but staged Rahel Varnhagen’s life as an example, a “laboratory” (Ibid., 50) for her

The capacity for storytelling to return the force of truth to the factual, not by simply presenting the presumed facts, but by telling them in such a way that they may assume the function of examples, is a formidable weapon against (organized) lying. The opposite of factual truth, Arendt argues, is neither “error nor illusion nor opinion, no one of which reflects upon personal truthfulness, but the deliberate falsehood, or lie.”³⁶⁵ The significance of the lie is that the liar tells something which ‘is not’ in order to conceal ‘what is.’ As such, it is actively engaging the world in order to ‘rewrite history,’ as Arendt calls it. Lying is thus a form of action, an “attempt to change the record.”³⁶⁶ The teller of truth, in contrast, is not a man of action, though the philosopher who sets an example, like Socrates, moves on the border line of becoming an acting person. What Arendt means here is that the teller of truth is not a man of action, a political being, *by means of* the truth he is telling. Truth (factual or rational) does not itself provide a basis for action. The “mere telling of facts, leads to no action.”³⁶⁷ It does this only in the case of the example. The exception occurs when a community embarks upon “organized lying on principle.” In such an environment, the teller of truths automatically begins to act, even without knowing it, simply because his or her perspective on the world critically

own thought, as Kristeva also calls it: “The kaleidoscope of this writing could not be called a confession or a ‘romantic autobiography,’ even given the broadly diverse forms of this protean genre today. Rather, Arendt’s book is an enacted example: the ‘special case’ of Rahel is maneuvered, even manipulated, by the author in the name of a staging or screenplay that lets us see the marriage as well as the breakups that takes place between the heroine and the playwright.” (Ibid., 49) Kristeva applies the language of theater in order to emphasize the performative aspect of these examples in the context of thinking, and also to clearly distinguish the different perspectives of spectator and actor. In this sense, the example is not a ‘case study,’ but an “individual or an event that stimulates the imagination.” (Ibid., 49-50) – “This alchemy between making something visible and participating in it from a distance is precisely what frames the judgment of Arendt the biographer.” (Ibid., 51)

³⁶⁵ Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 249.

³⁶⁶ Ibid.

³⁶⁷ Ibid., 251.

disturbs the system of lies which the community attempts to hold up.³⁶⁸ In a society where lying has become the official policy, the teller of truth automatically affects the political business, since the decision to tell the truth in this situation creates the beginning of a change in the world. Lying, Arendt concludes, is a form of violence.³⁶⁹ In modernity, she argues, lying has become a principle not for some aspects of politics (e.g., diplomacy), but for the whole of the image of the world which the political system stands for. In totalitarian regimes, the art of lying has been perfected in the attempt to rewrite the whole of reality. In these cases, the single lie cannot, from inside the system, be spotted and identified anymore because no one is able to find incongruities. The single lie is embedded in an all-encompassing network of other lies. Arendt calls this the “making of another reality” – a “complete rearrangement of the whole factual texture.”³⁷⁰ She then asks why this network of falsehood can after all still ultimately never become a “substitute for reality and factuality.”³⁷¹ The reason is that the system of lies at one point becomes so vast, and therefore irresistible to all individuals encompassed by it, that it also persuades the liars themselves.

As Arendt observed in totalitarian terror, the logic of organized lying is precisely that it secludes itself and the community it feeds on from the outside reality. At some point, those who initiated the lies and organized them will themselves be unable to distinguish the truth. A reason why, at some point, everybody is taken over by the system

³⁶⁸ Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 251.

³⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 252.

³⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 253.

³⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 254.

of lies is, according to Arendt, that everything, truth or lie, which is shared among many people and is not “unshared,” is irresistible for the individual. The liar falls victim to the lies. As a consequence, the system of organized lies, which was probably initially set up in order to control the multitude, cannot be controlled anymore. Since it ultimately does not evolve in a completely empty space, but is still dependent on the resources the world provides, and also until now was in no case able to encompass the whole world, the system will at some point collapse, once the outside world of actual facts catches up with it. Storytelling in such an environment of organized lying is nothing but dangerous for the official system, but also for the storyteller, because even if it is not intended, stories will sooner or later reveal a truth and therefore tear down the system of lies. Storytelling is necessarily concerned with truth, even if it should adhere to the ‘official’ doctrine of lies; it has an inherent agenda of impartiality towards the choice of what it tells. Therefore it will automatically, sooner or later, give an account of truth, even if only indirectly. Stories are, of course, known to be quite effective in subverting the censorship of oppressive political systems.

Still, the ‘truthteller’ occupies a standpoint outside the political realm. In this sense, then, the story is not political, but of course may act upon the political from this perspective. The important question is whether the storyteller, insofar as he is a ‘truthteller,’ realizes and accepts this standpoint. Truth can be destroyed, Arendt writes, by persuasion or violence, but it cannot be replaced, which is its one advantage: it is always available because of its givenness, and thus can always easily be picked up.³⁷² For Arendt, the space outside the political realm, where the ‘truthteller’ has to make his stand,

³⁷² Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 259.

is characterized by the “various modes of being alone” because this is a space “outside the community to which we belong and the company of our peers.” She adds: “Outstanding among the existential modes of truth-telling are the solitude of the philosopher, the isolation of the scientist and the artist, the impartiality of the historian and judge, and the independence of the fact-finder, the witness, and the reporter.”³⁷³ The reporter is thus counted among this group, an occupation which Arendt would assume in her own way during the trial of Eichmann. These characterizations, she insists further on, are not arbitrary and not on the same level as a ‘job.’ Instead, she aims to establish the reporter, along with the other occupations, as an existential mode of being. Being a reporter might also, by coincidence, be a job to earn money in order to cover the necessities of life. As a mode of being, however, the occupation of being a reporter, a finder and teller of truth, concerns every man. It is not meant specifically as a job for which one needs to have an education and a diploma in order to be allowed to do it, but as a potential course of action open to all. Everybody may choose in certain cases to ‘be a reporter,’ and indeed might be forced into such a situation. “They are modes of human existence as such.”³⁷⁴ ‘Telling what is,’ or, in the case of philosophy, as a mode of being ‘to occupy oneself exclusively with the business of thinking,’ does not have to be learned by anybody; it can potentially be done by every human being. These ‘modes of being’ can usually be adopted by choice and do not determine all of our life; one is not a philosopher in this sense twenty-four hours a day. Therefore, we are also not isolated

³⁷³ Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 259-260.

³⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 260.

from the community of other people all the time, which means, as Arendt observes, that these modes of being do not necessarily conflict with the political sphere.

As a conclusion to this argument on the precarious situation of the reporter of truth in his relation to the political sphere, Arendt maintains that in modernity, as opposed to antiquity, the line between the political sphere and those areas of activity that are concerned with bringing about the truth, is confused. The problem is not that the political class might generally have a problem with the appearance and presence of truth, or with the way in which truths enter the world; that is, the fact that they cannot be negotiated and manipulated by rhetoric once they are established. From the author's perspective, this is just the nature of how things are. Concerning truth, however, people have expectations that politicians ultimately cannot fulfill because, strictly speaking, truth is not a thing of the political sphere. This does not of course mean that the truth does not matter for the political class or that politicians are allowed to lie. It just means that it is not the task of the politician to bring forth and in general (as a mode of being) report the truth. The political sphere operates in modes of persuasion; the politician's *métier* is that of opinions of the many and how they can be changed or organized. In order to do so and still do justice to the reality of things – hence, in order to build images and opinions that guarantee that the society can last in the world and is grounded in reality – the politicians have to rely on those who tell the truth and whose task it indeed is to report the truth. The process of forming opinions about the world, which rests upon the faculty of judgment, should always rely on a firm basis in the truth of matters. Otherwise, the political class, and thus the society, loses touch with reality. In turn, this also means that the fact finder and truth teller, according to Arendt, should not be held responsible for the political

course or even for any upheaval which the revealed truths might stir, because he or she is – in the capacity of truth teller – simply not part of the political process. Arendt speaks of the “non-political and, potentially, even anti-political nature of truth” in the case of conflict between the two spheres of human activity.³⁷⁵

In order to wrap up Arendt’s approach to the location of truth and the function of narrative in this context, let me return to the initial concerns of this chapter. The space for truth to appear, Arendt initially says, is the ‘gap between past and future.’ The abstract entity of this ‘gap,’ in turn, was reconstructed as a model for narrative after the collapse of tradition. Truth, however, also represents the function of disclosing what appears to us in the world; in this sense, truth is an attribute of the appearance of factuality. By this token, it is linked to the faculty of ‘telling what is.’ Through this latter activity, individual truth is shared by the many, and thus upholds what we perceive as our reality. Our sense for reality therefore seems to result from the interplay of factuality and truth. Arendt now places the task of narrative precisely in the center of this interplay. Reality, which depends on the reporter of factual truth, and in turn is the ground on which the political sphere bases its opinions and judgments, comes into existence only through narrative. To make this point, Arendt places a central proposition in her essay on “Truth and Politics” that casts a light on the complex relation of reality and narrative. She writes: “Reality is different from, and more than, the totality of facts and events, which, anyhow, is unascertainable. Who says what is – λέγει τὰ ἑόντα – always tells a story, and in this story the particular facts lose their contingency and acquire some humanly

³⁷⁵ Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 260.

comprehensible meaning.”³⁷⁶ As soon as facts are reported, and therefore made available for others, they form a story. The haphazard occurrence of events in the world, according to this statement, eludes understanding. Narrative becomes part of a cognitive approach, since the original events cannot be made intelligible in any other way. As a universal cognitive mode, it connects all people; it is not that everybody tells the same stories, but that, as a fundamental faculty, narrative is shared by everybody to ‘put things into perspective.’ This act of putting things into perspective entails, at the same time, the insertion of the subjective perspective into the commonly shared world.³⁷⁷ Arendt simply points here to the difference between the mere presence (whether intelligible or not) of the world’s factuality in its pure givenness, and human understanding, which in turn is different from mere intellect. Intellect, according to the last essay from *Between Past and Future*, “The Conquest of Space and the Stature of Man,” is the mere power to store and calculate data, which nowadays can be done by computers even faster and more extensively than man is able to do it.³⁷⁸ In contrast to this, the author places the human mind, which does not in a quasi-encyclopedic manner indifferently take in everything that appears to it. The phenomenal world, therefore, is not present for us in a homogeneous grid; if that were the case, it would be impossible for our minds to discern differences. The human mind, which is ultimately a collective entity, since we are always

³⁷⁶ Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 261-262.

³⁷⁷ In this function of narrative lies its fundamental political meaning for Arendt. See also: “Arendt insists that the existence of a shared world is dependant on the possibility of articulating many different views of the same reality. Without a plurality of stories concerning human actions and the consequences thereof, the reality of the web of human affairs will become insubstantial to the point of simply evaporating.” Veronica Vasterling, “Cognitive Theory and Phenomenology in Arendt's and Nussbaum's Work on Narrative,” in *Human Studies* 30, no. 2 (June 2007): 86.

³⁷⁸ Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 269.

thinking in terms of the commonly shared world even if we are alone, is highly selective in terms of what it picks up from the realm of phenomena and what is stored in memory. Furthermore, the mind does not store particulars – single, isolated entities. Every element that loses its relation to its fellow elements within the mind is lost for good. Everything is integrated into an always already present universe of relating particulars. In this sense, narrative, that which Arendt refers to as storytelling, is actually a much closer representation of how the mind works. By picking up what appears to us, the mind does not simply re-create the sequences of events as they occur, but continuously creates new sequences and integrates events into the appropriate existing sequences. In other words, the mind constantly forms narratives – stories.

In other contexts, Arendt expands on the more complex relation between reality and narrative. In the essay “The Concept of History,” she writes that modern history “stands and falls on the assumption that the process in its very secularity tells a story of its own [...]”³⁷⁹ She therefore adds a level of narrative between the pure givenness of factuality and the actively told story. For the modern concept of history, she observes, time becomes the secular constitutive factor. As time indifferently advances, the contingency of factuality constantly ‘falls into place’ and therefore creates discrete sequences all its own. Arendt applies the term story already on this (epistemological) level, where events unfold even without our own involvement; that is, strictly speaking, before any story is told.³⁸⁰ In her book *On Revolution*, the theme of storytelling is

³⁷⁹ Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 67.

³⁸⁰ Thus: “History – based on the manifest assumption that no matter how haphazard single actions may appear in the present and in their singularity, they inevitably lead to a sequence of events forming a story that can be rendered through intelligible narrative the moment the events are removed into the past – became the great dimension in which men could become ‘reconciled’ with reality (Hegel), the reality of

omnipresent; the author frequently mentions the way in which revolutions would unfold a new story within history.³⁸¹ As she links the modern concept of history to its process-character,³⁸² revolutions become interruptions of processes already in place. In essence, they represent the human faculty to begin something anew, which for Arendt is also the main constituent of freedom.³⁸³ She writes: “The modern concept of revolution, inextricably bound up with the notion that the course of history suddenly begins anew, that an entirely new story, a story never known or told before, is about to unfold, was unknown prior to the two great revolutions at the end of the eighteenth century.”³⁸⁴

Man is able to start new processes and thereby act in history, constantly interrupting it. The greatest culmination of this power to begin anew are revolutions in which suddenly the whole of history is at stake. With every such new beginning, man sets in motion the unfolding of processes of events, which, as Arendt sees it, form new stories – then to be narrated. The change of perspective from actor to spectator is where she localizes the point at which the first mode of story as ‘untold story’ turns into narrated story, writing that “all stories begun and enacted by men unfold their true meaning only when they have come to their end.”³⁸⁵ Therefore, the ‘whole story’ can only be told

human affairs, i.e., of things which owe their existence exclusively to men.” Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 85.

³⁸¹ For example: Arendt, *On Revolution*, 19, 31, 37.

³⁸² For example: Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 63.

³⁸³ From the essay “What is Freedom?”: “[...] man is free because he is a beginning” and: “Because he is a beginning, man can begin [...]” Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 167.

³⁸⁴ Arendt, *On Revolution*, 18-19.

³⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 42-43. Arendt’s thought of stories that unfold from action can also be found in her book *The Human Condition*. There she draws the line between spectator and actor on the one hand and the author of stories even more distinctly, writing that, though the “life stor[ies]” reveal an agent, “this agent is not an author or producer.” The whole passage is of some relevance to the thought depicted here, I will therefore

retrospectively, when the events that unfold have moved into the past and the actor has stopped acting in order to become a spectator. However, Arendt applies the term story to both sides of the equation – not without a reason. For, in order to understand the realm of human action, we obviously have to take into account precisely the perspective of the actor, who begins processes that first of all unfold a sequence of events, which afterwards can be narrated as a story. Arendt calls neglecting to consider the story also in its ‘untold mode’ a “fallacy of modern philosophy,” making it inadequate to completely understand the phenomenon of action. Since she subsequently uses the term story for both different levels of approaching reality, it stands to reason that it indeed includes both modes. Already in the investigation of the ‘gap between past and future’ as a narrative model, it became clear that the story in itself represents the transition between action and contemplation. The point Arendt is making here is therefore a confirmation of this theory of a narrative model in which action and contemplation coexist and, in an ideal point,

quote it in its entirety: “The disclosure of the ‘who’ through speech, and the setting of a new beginning through action, always fall into an already existing web where their immediate consequences can be felt. Together they start a new process which eventually emerges as the unique life story of the newcomer, affecting uniquely the life stories of all those with whom he comes into contact. It is because of this already existing web of human relationships, with its innumerable, conflicting wills and intentions, that action almost never achieves its purpose; but it is also because of this medium, in which action alone is real, that it ‘produces’ stories with or without intention as naturally as fabrication produces tangible things. These stories may then be recorded in documents and monuments, they may be visible in use objects or art works, they may be told and retold and worked into all kinds of material. They themselves, in their living reality, are of an altogether different nature than these reifications. They tell us more about their subjects, the ‘hero’ in the center of each story, than any product of human hands ever tells us about the master who produced it, and yet they are not products, properly speaking. Although everybody started his life by inserting himself into the human world through action and speech, nobody is the author or producer of his own life story. In other words, the stories, the results of action and speech, reveal an agent, but this agent is not an author or producer. Somebody began it and is its subject in the twofold sense of the word, namely, its actor and sufferer, but nobody is its author.” Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 184. Arendt locates the concept of the story here in the midst of the ever dynamic and contingent sphere of action: in the same way as individual actions have incalculable consequences, so do stories come into existence within a “web of human relationships.” The author seems to cut the story almost completely from any authorship: “it” – that is action with its infinite contingencies “produces” stories. It is in this sense that Arendt here – more distinctively than in *Between Past and Future* – distinguishes the author from the actor. Individuals are the beginners (and hence authors) of actions, but they are not the authors of the story that is being told retrospectively about these actions. Thus, no story tells, in this sense, ever anything about its author – only the ‘life story’ of others. Our actions gain their reality only in the stories of others.

coincide. The story is both an act in itself and a representation of this act; it is the sequence of events unfolding as a consequence of humanly initiated beginnings, and it tells their story. However, awareness of the fact that with our actions we already create stories in the world eludes us most of the time. Arendt gives a historical example in which these two aspects of the story coincided and crystallized into a single expression: the successors of the French Revolution understood themselves as “agents of history.”³⁸⁶ Those taking themselves to be agents claimed also at the same time to possess a particular understanding of the acts in which they were involved and of their historical consequences. In their actions, history and its representation coincided. Arendt’s distinction between different levels of the story mirrors the distinction between story and plot, or *fabula* and *sjuzhet*, established by Russian Formalism. But Arendt usually does not apply different terms; she always calls all these different instances of narrative ‘story.’

* * *

At the close of her essay on “Truth and Politics,” Arendt states that the “political function of the storyteller – historian or novelist – is to teach acceptance of things as they are.” This acceptance, which she equates with truthfulness, is the precondition of the faculty of judgment.³⁸⁷ The acceptance to which she refers to is basically Hegel’s reconciliation with the past. It does not mean subjugating the individual under the dictate of the status quo; acceptance does not extend the past into the future, and it is not an apology to the past. Rather, acceptance here goes hand in hand with realization and understanding. In order to truthfully ‘tell what is,’ to make a judgment that will change the future, the past

³⁸⁶ Arendt, *On Revolution*, 43.

³⁸⁷ Arendt: *Between Past and Future*, 262.

has to be told *impartially*, without taking sides; and the story, though it might hurt, must be accepted as reality. But what if the story to be told cannot contain the truth anymore? What if the truth bursts the conventional, traditional standards created to tell its story? As a consequence, proper judgment would be impossible. When Arendt went to Adolf Eichmann's trial in Jerusalem, she observed this failure of judgment firsthand – on both sides: in the accused, she recognized a fundamental inability to think, and hence to break with the 'reality' the totalitarian terror had attempted to create; in the court, she saw the inability to judge. The footnote at the beginning of "Truth and Politics" suggests that the issues involving *Eichmann in Jerusalem* and the ensuing controversy "may also serve as an example of what happens to a highly topical subject when it is drawn into that gap between past and future which is perhaps the proper habitat of all reflections."³⁸⁸ In the preface to *Between Past and Future*, Arendt expresses the need to establish a narrative able to approach and, ideally, "to move in this gap."³⁸⁹ When she writes that the issue of Eichmann's trial was drawn into the 'gap,' this characterizes precisely the moment at which thinking becomes the aporia, and at which it has an impact in the political world as a 'gap,' a void. In the case of the Eichmann trial, this means that the jurisprudence that ideally should work independently of politics (the Eichmann trial, however, naturally also had a political significance for the state of Israel) could no longer in good faith rely on the juridical tradition. The passed-on juridical system, strictly speaking, was inadequate and could not continue to invoke and apply the existing law. Instead, the necessity of rethinking the basis of modern jurisdiction in the face of a new form of crime forced itself

³⁸⁸ Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 227.

³⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 14.

into appearance. The topic of the Eichmann trial may have been drawn into the gap – “the only region perhaps where truth eventually will appear”³⁹⁰ – but this gap had become a problem.

Eichmann in Jerusalem manifestly shows the political relevance of the involved problems. Arendt’s main grievance with the Israeli trial of Eichmann was the “failure” of the court to recognize the fundamentally new and unprecedented character of the “crimes against humanity” and, accordingly, the missed opportunity to create a new legal practice on the grounds of an international court. In her opinion, the Jewish judges were caught up in categories of “their own history,”³⁹¹ and thus they could not recognize “the catastrophe that had befallen them under Hitler [...] as the most recent of crimes, the unprecedented crime of genocide”; rather, the matter appeared to them “as the oldest crime they knew and remembered.” Arendt thus claims that no one involved in the trial “arrived at a clear understanding of the actual horror of Auschwitz”; the prosecutor as well as the judge saw in the genocide “not much more than the most horrible pogrom in Jewish history.”³⁹² From the perspective of *Between Past and Future*, the trial failed to break away from a tradition within which it could not hope to understand what it was dealing with, let alone render justice in a satisfactory way that would set a new standard for cases of genocide.³⁹³

³⁹⁰ Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 14.

³⁹¹ Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem. A Report on the Banality of Evil* (New York: Penguin Books, 2006), 267.

³⁹² Ibid.

³⁹³ See also *ibid.*, 257 – the epilogue of *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, where she discusses the notion of a ‘crime against humanity.’

At the center of this problem stood Eichmann, who provided Arendt with an example of the appearance taken on by the evil that is behind these crimes.³⁹⁴ The reality of Eichmann eluded all traditional concepts of evil, and instead prompted Arendt to ask its question again by reversing all expectations commonly associated with the presence of evil. She accordingly observed “the conspicuous helplessness the judges experienced when they were confronted with the task they could least escape, the task of understanding the criminal whom they had come to judge.”³⁹⁵ Her ‘report’ reveals how the trial on these grounds necessarily had to run into an impasse, where – to speak with the language of the aporia – the inherent reasoning process of the trial, which should result in clear judgment based on a moral understanding, simply could not go.

For Arendt, the proceedings of the trial themselves therefore increasingly represented the futile processes in which thinking was caught.³⁹⁶ Though Arendt agrees with the final verdict on Adolf Eichmann in the epilogue of her book, the path to this judgment ended in an impasse. The chapter “Evidence and Witnesses” from *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, however, also contains passages that demonstrate how elements of storytelling suddenly came to interrupt the “endless sessions”³⁹⁷ of the trial.³⁹⁸ Arendt

³⁹⁴ On the difference between approaching this evil as an appearance – that is, a phenomenon – rather than devising a ‘theory’ around it, see Richard J. Bernstein, “Are Arendt’s Reflections on Evil Still Relevant?” in *Politics in Dark Times. Encounters with Hannah Arendt*, ed. Seyla Benhabib (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 294.

³⁹⁵ Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, 276.

³⁹⁶ And processes, as Arendt writes in the essay “What is Freedom?” from *Between Past and Future*, are inherently ruinous. Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 168. The connection between Arendt’s characterization of the process character of thinking (or in general human activities), and specifically *Eichmann in Jerusalem* is also drawn in an article by Susannah Young-ah Gottlieb. She writes about the “profoundly unsettling report on the trial of Adolf Eichmann,” that it “serves as the bleak culmination to her [Arendt’s] reflections on the ruinous character of automatic thought-processes.” Susannah Young-ah Gottlieb, “Hannah Arendt: Reflections on Ruin,” *New Formations* 71 (Spring 2011): 111.

³⁹⁷ The complete quote is revealing: “Only to find out, in the endless sessions that followed, how difficult it

reports on the appearance of two witnesses, Zindel Grynszpan and Abba Kovner, whom she characterizes in Hassidic terms as “righteous.” Similar to Benjamin’s reference to the righteous in context of his study on the narrator, here righteousness becomes the highest embodiment of the storyteller and his virtues. By telling their stories, these witnesses were able to present an “unantastbare[] schmucklose[] Wahrhaftigkeit”³⁹⁹ in an unequalled way that both revealed the shortcomings of the trial and established an understanding of the broader problems involved. Arendt renders the moment when Kovner’s story hit the courtroom in quite intense language, applying metaphors of light and darkness to illustrate the unexpected, even disruptive power the story gained: the time he needed to tell his story was “like a sudden burst of light in the midst of impenetrable, unfathomable darkness [...]”⁴⁰⁰ Kovner’s story shows a single German sergeant, Anton Schmidt, who helped Jewish partisans without expecting any help in

was to tell the story, that – at least outside the transforming realm of poetry – it needed a purity of soul, an unmirrored, unreflected innocence of heart and mind that only the righteous possess.” Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, 229.

³⁹⁸ See also Thomas Schestag, who attempts to reconstruct a theory of poetry in Arendt, and sees the interruptive powers of storytelling accordingly in its poetic core. Where narrative becomes exceptionally meaningful it suddenly disrupts the context of its own occasion. The author argues that for Arendt the disruptive power of poetry lies in the fact that it turns language, and by extension narrative, into artifacts: “Dichtung: das bedeutet im Erzählzusammenhang der Rede Hannah Arendts, eine Zäsur: die Zäsur bedeutender Rede. Stillstellung, Innehalten, Pause. In der Dichtung kommt ein Erzählen zu Wort, das in jedem Wort die Erzählzusammenhänge, die es unterhält, unterbricht. Nicht ein für alle Male, zu guter oder schlechter Letzt, sondern immer wieder, unvorhergesehen – anders. Das eigentümliche Vermögen, von dem her Dichtung zum Durchbruch kommt, und von dem her der Inbegriff der Dichtung in der Unterbrechung liegt, sieht Arendt in der Verdinglichung gelegen, die Sprache in der Dichtung annimmt.“ Thomas Schestag, *Die unbewältigte Sprache: Hannah Arendts Theorie der Dichtung* (Basel: Engeler, 2006), 26. As was shown in the study at hand the instance of “Verdinglichung” can also refer to the moment where narrative (again) reaches out into the realm of action, where in the space of the story something can be started that transgresses the limits of narrative and continues to unfold in the world that we all share.

³⁹⁹ The German version of: Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem. Ein Bericht von der Banalität des Bösen* (Munich and Zurich: Piper, 2001), 343; the English passage just reads “shining honesty.” Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, 230.

⁴⁰⁰ Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, 231.

return and who was eventually executed in 1942. In the composition of Arendt's book, this example, in particular, is a focal point where her account of the trial passes into a philosophical message. The stories of these witnesses are based on a factual past and thus have the power of examples, as it was characterized above. The generalized argument Arendt derives from them receives its persuasiveness from the story's basis in factuality. In its simplicity, the story about Anton Schmidt is comparable to Clemenceau's anecdote. Arendt asks: "how utterly different everything would be today [...] if only more such stories could have been told."⁴⁰¹

With his story, Kovner reached with an inverse approach – since he provides a 'positive' example of a 'good' German – to the core of the problematic issues that the trial did not face. Anton Schmidt becomes the exception to Adolf Eichmann, and at this point it seems that the whole – conventional – strategy of the court to painstakingly prove the crimes Eichmann had committed was turned around. For Arendt, this story showed in an instant that, however encompassingly totalitarian terror evolves – despite its claims to turn everybody into perpetrators or to annihilate a complete people – in the end it must fail. "The holes of oblivion do not exist. Nothing human is that perfect, and there are simply too many people in the world to make oblivion possible. One man will always be left alive to tell the story." The important consequence from this is that nothing can ever be "practically useless."⁴⁰² This represents the only real objection against Eichmann's plea that he just did what any other person in his position could and would have done as well. It provides the necessary truth from outside the system of (self-)deception

⁴⁰¹ Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, 231.

⁴⁰² *Ibid.*, 232-233.

Eichmann had established. Arendt emphasizes Eichmann's argument in her epilogue by pointing out that what he tried to say was that where everybody is guilty, ultimately no one is.⁴⁰³ Kovner's story proves Eichmann wrong and enables Arendt, in conclusion, to pass judgment on Eichmann and defend his execution, even though the trial itself had failed to render justice. "For the lesson of such stories is simple and within everybody's grasp. Politically speaking, it is that under conditions of terror most people will comply but *some people will not* [...]."⁴⁰⁴ Thus Arendt closes with a sort of universally applicable last line of defense, writing that, "humanly speaking," for the world to "remain a place fit for human habitation," no more is required. With the break in tradition after the collapse of modernity in mind, Arendt does not give in to a relativism of fragmented stories. Instead, the mode of storytelling, man's capacity to 'tell what is,' is for her a universally applicable focal point at the transition between contemplation and action.⁴⁰⁵

⁴⁰³ Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, 278. Following Arendt's observations, Nordmann illustrates this seclusion from reality by referring to Eichmann's language, which was infused with stereotypes to cover the rift between his world and reality. "Eichmanns Stimmungen und Redeweisen, an die er sich erinnert, stehen in krassem Widerspruch zu dem, was wirklich passiert ist. Sein Bewußtsein ist besetzt mit Stereotypen und gängigen Redeweisen, die einen nach außen wirksam abgedichteten Raum bilden. Mit anderen Worten: Seine standardisierten Ausdrucks- und Verhaltensweisen sind nicht korrigierbar durch den Kontakt mit der Realität." Nordmann, *Hannah Arendt*, 87.

⁴⁰⁴ Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, 233. The transition from story to judgment is ultimately itself again an empty space in between, a 'gap.' For in these stories, which deliver truth and enable judgment, the judgment itself is never present, it is never contained in the story. Nordmann observes that this is indeed a method underlying the greater context of Arendt's theoretical writing. She states: "Der Geschichte kann folglich nur dann das letzte Wort entrissen werden, wenn der Ort des moralischen Urteils im Text unausgesprochen, das heißt leer bleibt. Von dieser Leere aus verwandelt sich die Darstellung aus der Endgültigkeit des Geschriebenen in die Offenheit des Dialogs, in dem sich der Autor zur Disposition stellt und der Leser zu einem Urteil herausgefordert wird. Die ungewöhnliche Montagetechnik Arendts hat in dieser Leere ihr organisierendes Zentrum." Nordmann, *Hannah Arendt*, 56. Arendt's personal address to Eichmann in the epilogue of *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, which is therefore also not included in the main part of the book, and which results in her own judgment of Eichmann, is probably the only big exception to this general method.

⁴⁰⁵ This is indeed the somewhat-hidden arrival point of *Eichmann in Jerusalem*: considering all the dark motives and arguments the book has to deal with, it ultimately ends on a positive note. In fact, one could argue that the whole book aims to defend this last, tiny bit of optimism. Arendt's notion that there will always be one man left to tell the story mirrors the Talmudic passage about the 36 righteous persons who

In *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, the interruption of the trial's expected proceedings through the appearance of two storytellers marks the point from which Arendt draws both her conclusive critique of the trial as inadequate for judging the new phenomenon of genocide, and her own sentencing of Eichmann on the basis of her argument. Just as the story in Arendt always also denotes the progression of newly begun events in the world, it furthermore (literally) bears witness to how man can defy the forces of necessity which, in the twisted ideology of totalitarian terror, have come to determine the possibilities of man to act; in other words, it bears witness to the space in between men where the unique faculty of freedom can be achieved. Someone has to begin the story.

are needed so that the world will not be destroyed. Building on this argument, Susan Neiman goes so far as to call *Eichmann in Jerusalem* a theodicy: "*Eichmann in Jerusalem* can function as a modernist theodicy, hence be redemptive in the ways McCarthy described [who in a letter compared her reading of the book to listening to Mozart and Händel], because it offers an account of evil that leaves Creation unscathed. Evil exists, to be sure, but it is not a necessary part of the world, or even a particularly deep one. Nor is it, therefore, a necessary part of the human condition: There is no such thing as original sin." Susan Neiman, "Banality Reconsidered," in *Politics in Dark Times. Encounters with Hannah Arendt*, ed. Seyla Benhabib (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 307.

CHAPTER XII

ARENDT: THE AUTHORS OF MIRACLES

Storytelling, as this study has shown, is situated at a strange place in Arendt's thought, in between fundamental oppositions such as action and contemplation, or past and future. It seems to be the most adequate mode of expression to catch the very essence of this 'in-between' and retrieve it into the narrative of her theoretical writing, as far as this is possible. In regard to the abstract model Arendt established on the basis of Kafka's parable in the preface of *Between Past and Future*, two questions now arise. First, how does Arendt proceed to include the mode of storytelling in her theoretical writing? In her reading of Kafka, or the appearance of the storyteller in *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, this study has already provided examples of the author's use of storytelling. In order to relate this application of storytelling more closely to the model character as Arendt construes it, this chapter will be concerned particularly with Plato's allegory of the cave. This leads, then, to the second point, where, in order to explore the background of Arendt's understanding of the concept of the model, her earlier approaches to Kafka will also be addressed.

In the first essay of *Between Past and Future*, "Tradition and the Modern Age," the author immediately turns to one of the oldest stories told. She reads Plato's "allegory of the cave," which "describes the sphere of human affairs – all that belongs to the living together of men in a common world" in such a way that it encompasses the whole of "our

tradition of political thought.”⁴⁰⁶ The first of her “exercises” in thinking therefore begins by *improvising* a frame that detaches her questions from tradition (in this case specifically the tradition of political thought), and also a conventional approach to history. What Arendt’s application of Plato’s cave allegory shows is that she addresses history and its broken tradition by framing it with a beginning and an end. The idea of an independently and universally existing frame of reference in the form of the ‘great tradition,’ whose beginning has vanished in the darkness of the past and whose end cannot be conceived from within its scope, shifts to narratives with definite beginnings and endings. In this case, Arendt specifically addresses the tradition of political thought, stating that it had its “definite beginning in the teachings of Plato and Aristotle” and its “definite end in the theories of Karl Marx.”⁴⁰⁷

Beginning and end are defining elements of storytelling. Though stories may recount in their narrative the actual beginning of witnessed events, insofar as they constitute a beginning themselves through the act of telling, they also create their own beginning. With the very first sentences, stories usually define the space of possibilities according to which their tale unfolds, thus creating their own set of rules seemingly out of nothing. Since each story is itself a beginning, it assumes features similar to the appearance of facts and events in the world. Its emergence at a specific point in time is ultimately unprecedented and in all its consequences unforeseeable, just like events, because it was neither concluded nor causally inferred from any form, argument, or other

⁴⁰⁶ Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 17.

⁴⁰⁷ Ibid.

supraframework.⁴⁰⁸ The end of a story, in turn, can only be conceived when the involved events (either actual events or ‘thought-events’ (Arendt)) have reached their completion “in the minds of those who then are to tell the story.”⁴⁰⁹ By this token, the end exerts its authority over the story and distinguishes it, as a completed artifact, from the continuously unfolding events of our surrounding reality. Plato’s allegory of the cave, however, does not contain the end of the tradition it addresses, according to Arendt’s reading. Because she chooses to take it as a representation of tradition in the first place, it only indirectly refers to its end. Her claim – that Marx’s turning around of philosophy in order to ‘realize’ it marks the end – only works on the grounds of the framework Plato’s story provides. When Arendt approaches the tradition in terms of Plato’s story, she therefore separates it completely from the assumption that it would (still) represent a superordinated, naturally unfolding process in history. In accordance with her narrative model of the ‘gap,’ her introduction to the subject matter of the essays to follow thus establishes the aforementioned “equidistance to past and future.”⁴¹⁰

In what way does Plato’s cave parable, which Arendt eventually calls a “cave-story,”⁴¹¹ encompass the tradition? It does so in retrospect, as an abstraction of its reality. Arendt reads Plato’s story as a model by which to think tradition; within this model, she breaks down its structure into its defining oppositions (e.g., contemplation – action),

⁴⁰⁸ This narrative feature can, for example, be observed very clearly in Kafka’s *The Trial*, which begins with the famous first lines: “Jemand mußte Josef K. verleumdet haben, denn ohne daß er etwas Böses getan hätte, wurde er eines Morgens verhaftet.” The first sentence of the novel implicates a dislocation of the main protagonist’s reality, while at the same time limiting the narrative perspective to his viewpoint. The complete novel is then indeed the irresolvable *process* of how this dislocation may unfold.

⁴⁰⁹ Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 6.

⁴¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 12.

⁴¹¹ *Ibid.*, 108.

which then in turn create a field of tension in between. She also writes, however, that “to think in terms of such opposites is not a matter of course, but is grounded in a first great turning operation on which all others ultimately are based because it established the opposites in whose tension the tradition moves.”⁴¹² She finds this first turning operation in Plato’s philosophy, summarized in the allegory of the cave. Accordingly, the first all-deciding reversal was “the turning-about of the whole human being,” and the philosopher tells his definition of the human condition “as though it were a story with beginning and end and not merely a mental operation.”⁴¹³ Plato’s ‘cave-story’ therefore itself represents the beginning of tradition,⁴¹⁴ and contains its fundamental structure. Whatever questions could be asked and whatever stories could be told or started – according to the guideline of this tradition, they necessarily moved between the opposites of contemplation and action. The game of ‘turning-about operations’ was, right from the beginning, ingrained in tradition. In this sense, one could say that Plato’s allegory is the story to contain all stories.

With her interpretation of Kafka’s parable in the preface to *Between Past and Future*, Arendt reconstructed from the story in general something like an *ad hoc* implementation of a framework through which the collapsed tradition could be approached while at the same time incorporating its very aporia. In the course of her reading, her application of this framework to various stories reveals that the framework

⁴¹² Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 36.

⁴¹³ Ibid.

⁴¹⁴ And at this point indeed the beginning of tradition in a general sense. In her essay, Arendt also quickly widens the scope of her conceptuality from “tradition of political thought” to “beginning and end of the tradition.” (Ibid., 17-18)

has the character of a model. In terms of abstracting the basic structure of tradition, Kafka's storytelling, and here specifically the parable "He," thus complements Plato's allegory of the cave. Arendt frames the tradition with these two stories: Plato at tradition's beginning, Kafka at its end. This means that the basic faculty of storytelling – which, in its power to abstract from reality, distinctly comes to appearance at tradition's beginning and end – never was a product of tradition, but always came from outside of it. It is this unique aspect of storytelling that enables Arendt in structural terms to truly transcend and transgress tradition. Similarly to Kafka's parable, Plato's 'cave-story' is a structural focal point, or a point of crystallization, from which to begin a thought process. As such, the philosopher's story serves as an improvised model allowing Arendt to move about the tradition without actually being bound to a tradition. The concept of a model in this context works both ways: it abstracts from a reality and by this token is a mode of representation, *and* it provides a space or, more specifically, framework for the process of reflection. Stories then can be short-term substitutes for the guideline which tradition formerly represented; not as a 'bridge' to cover the 'gap' that thinking has become in modernity,⁴¹⁵ but as a place – a model – for thinking and acting within it.

Arendt reads Plato's cave allegory as a model of the human condition that contains all of "the sphere of human affairs."⁴¹⁶ She discovers three turning points within the story. The first turning-around occurs when the cave dwellers free themselves from their chains and look to the rear end of the cave, where they find an "artificial fire

⁴¹⁵ See also: "For very long times in our history, actually throughout the thousands of years that followed upon the foundation of Rome and were determined by Roman concepts, this gap was bridged over by what, since the Romans, we have called tradition." Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 13-14.

⁴¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 17.

illuminating the things in the cave as they really are.”⁴¹⁷ In cognitive terms, this represents the beginning of awareness about the world. Instead of only seeing the things as they appear to us – “eyes glued to the screen on which shadows and images of things appear”⁴¹⁸ – people start wondering why they appear to us as they do. The phenomenon of ‘wondering’ itself, in Aristotle’s and Plato’s understanding the origin of philosophical understanding (*thaumazein*), appears on the stage. The cave-dwellers start realizing, first of all, that ‘what is’ is a phenomenon to be questioned. With this step, the assumption is born that behind the things as they appear to us we might find the things as they ‘really’ are – the ‘things in themselves,’ as Kant would later refer to this moment of understanding. This first act of turning-about that Plato records in his story has since then been one of the most fundamental questions of philosophy: a question around which philosophical thought has circled again and again. The second turning-about contained within Plato’s story is that from the cave to the “clear sky, where the ideas appear as the true and eternal essences of the things in the cave, illuminated by the sun, the idea of ideas.”⁴¹⁹ This second turn is already a conclusion informed by observations from the first step. It is an extrapolation, an abstraction only possible through the powers of thought. In fact, it only exists as a mental phenomenon. Clearly this is true also within Plato’s story, since one has to leave the cave in order to be able to reach out for the ideas. There is no material connection between steps one and two. Of course, all of these moves

⁴¹⁷ Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 36.

⁴¹⁸ Ibid.

⁴¹⁹ Ibid.

are only suggested to the philosopher in the first place, to the “lover of truth and light.”⁴²⁰ Plato’s claim here is that the philosopher can dwell completely in the realm of ideas. However, in that case he is almost completely separated from the common people left behind in the cave, those who are concerned with the ordinary affairs of things as they appear and happen to us within the contingency of the world. Necessarily, therefore, there will be issues of translation between these two different spheres of being. Here the third turning moment comes to pass when those who have made it their profession to think, who strive to live in the realm of ideas, have to come back into the cave, “leaving the realm of eternal essences and moving again in the realm of perishable things and mortal men.”⁴²¹ After all, they, too, are living and dying creatures, and only the faculty of thought allows them to momentarily ‘be someplace else’ in the company of immortal things. It is at this point, when those who thought in isolation share their insights with the many, that their truths become infused with opinions and hence lose their power.

All of the shifts that result from the turning-about moments bring with them, according to Arendt, “a loss of sense and orientation.”⁴²² In Plato’s cave allegory, this is expressed in terms of sensory awareness: the eyes are either blinded by the unusual light when man turns to the sky where the ideas reside, or are accustomed to the light and have to readjust to the “dimness of the cave.”⁴²³ Wherever man chooses to be, it seems that he will gradually lose the ability to move and live in the realm he left behind. In other words,

⁴²⁰ Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 36.

⁴²¹ Ibid.

⁴²² Ibid.

⁴²³ Ibid.

the language and modes of understanding that work for one sphere do not work without complications for another. Besides these, Arendt observes a different “inversion” of a more general nature in Plato’s “violent polemics against Homer and the Homeric religion, and in particular in the construction of his story as a kind of reply to and reversal of Homer’s description of Hades.”⁴²⁴ This reversal is not played out by the characters of the story. Instead, the story’s significance as a whole is directed against a tradition – that of the Greek world.⁴²⁵ Arendt observes similarities between how Plato characterizes the cave, which works as a model representing the common realm of human affairs, and how Homer characterizes Hades – “life after death in the underworld.”⁴²⁶ Plato therefore turns the “Homeric ‘position’” around, saying that our ordinary life (bodies), and not some afterlife (souls), is caught in an underworld. The ‘true world,’ then, is not the world in which we live, to which everyone is granted instant and lifelong access, but the sky of ideas, which can only be observed by the mind. “It is as though the underworld of Hades had risen to the surface of the earth.”⁴²⁷ Arendt argues, however, that Plato’s reversal was not “actually” a turning “upside down or downside up” of Homer because the required pattern of thinking in opposites was still alien to Plato and more so to Homer. This implied that the framework or “dichotomy within which such an operation alone can take place” did not yet exist. Only the tradition following Plato’s philosophy provided such a framework, in which matters concerning the human condition could be turned around to

⁴²⁴ Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 36.

⁴²⁵ Though Arendt points out that, strictly speaking, the concept of tradition was unknown to the Greeks. (Ibid., 37)

⁴²⁶ Ibid., 37.

⁴²⁷ Ibid.

opposite angles again and again. Plato's story nonetheless marks this beginning, the beginning of a circle. "[T]hereby he [Plato] established the framework within which such turning operations are not far-fetched possibilities but predetermined by the conceptual structure itself." His motivation to install his philosophy in this way was, according to Arendt, "solely for political purposes";⁴²⁸ he wished to discredit the polis that had sentenced his teacher, Socrates, to death.⁴²⁹ The intention behind Plato's story is to advocate his philosophy, and therefore philosophy in general, as a standard for the political. It is, from this perspective, more like a political pamphlet pointing out and distinguishing those few who strive to reach for the ideas. Insofar as his allegory is itself the representation of an ideal state of affairs that points out the ideal possibilities – that is, the extremes of the human condition – it appears itself as such a standard.⁴³⁰

Only in Arendt's interpretation does Plato's 'cave story' become a model for critically investigating the tradition. But what is the difference between ideas or standards and stories as models? The difference in the context of Arendt's approach to storytelling becomes clear with a look at how ideas fared in the course of Marx's reversal of the traditional relation between philosophy and politics. When she criticizes Marx's notion of

⁴²⁸ Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 37.

⁴²⁹ See also Bhikhu Parekh, who chooses this conflict as a starting point for investigating Arendt's understanding of the tradition of political philosophy. Even more to the point is this formulation: "According to Arendt the birth of the Western tradition of political philosophy coincided with the death of Socrates. His trial and condemnation was a traumatic experience for his disciples including Plato whose intense and continuous preoccupation with it gave it a unique historical significance." Bhikhu Parekh: *Hannah Arendt and the Search for a New Political Philosophy* (New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1981), 20.

⁴³⁰ In the essay "What is Authority?" Arendt describes how Plato actually uses other parables specifically designed not for the philosopher, but for the purpose of swaying the many in order to "establish the 'authority' of the philosopher over the polis." Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 109.

“making history”⁴³¹ in her essay “The Concept of History” from *Between Past and Future*, she relates the notion of “model” to that of “idea,” into which Plato translated the Greek word for shape: “the εἶδος or ‘shape’ from which Plato had derived his ‘ideas.’” According to this essay, in Marx’s understanding, the identification of action with making and fabricating was complemented by a corresponding relation in the sphere of contemplation: the identification of “the contemplative gaze of the historian with the contemplation of the model [...] that guides the craftsmen and precedes all making.”⁴³² Therefore, Marx imbued contemplation with ends. The idea as model became the exact turning point in the philosopher’s reversal of the purpose of contemplation and action. If the ideas of philosophy are thought of as models, like the blueprint of a chair is thought of as a set of directions for fabricating an actual chair, the inherent infinitude of ideas is abandoned and confused.⁴³³ Ideas, and in Marx’s case generally the philosophy, and hence contemplation, of politics are taken as a sort of manual, or even scientific plan, to be directly realized through action. In Plato, ideas, too, are standards for judging and

⁴³¹ Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 77.

⁴³² *Ibid.*, 78.

⁴³³ That ideas became standards and measurements to be applied in the sphere of common affairs was already Plato’s doing, as Arendt knew. He transformed them from essences into ‘measurements’ or ‘yardsticks.’ Nevertheless, they still retained their fundamental infinity and hence ultimately their unattainability. These standards are, after all, the result of the thinking of a philosopher who isolates himself from the common people. This was what created the rift between philosophy and politics in the first place. Also: “Ideally, the political regime is one that accords with philosophical insight. In a corrupt regime, however, the philosopher will avoid entanglement in politics and free himself from the opinions and passions of the *polis*. This Platonic vision, Arendt believes, is normative for Western political thought. Stripped of its Platonic imagery, it holds that serious political thought proceeds from first principles arrived at through a purified form of reasoning, which depends not on the opinions and passions of the society in which the philosopher happens to live, but on universal, transhistorical principles that transcend ‘mere’ particulars. For Platonists, this is the only means for distinguishing between political philosophy and mere ideological discourse. In other words, the very idea of political *philosophy* necessitates an *apolitical* starting-point.” Frederick M. Dolan: “Arendt on philosophy and politics,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Hannah Arendt*, ed. Dana Villa (Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 263-264. Marx attempted to close this rift by redefining the place of ideas as completely attainable ends of the desires generated by the masses.

action, but they ultimately remain “higher aims,” never fully reachable by the many. There remains a gap between the aims of contemplation and action; and the goal of Plato’s cave allegory is precisely to point this out with the intention to reinforce the status of the thinker. Arendt states that with his approach to contemplating politics, Marx transformed what, for the purpose of reflecting, which searches meaning and meaningfulness, must ultimately remain located in the “unknown and unknowable,” into “planned and willed intentions.”⁴³⁴ Meaning and meaningfulness taken solely as activities of the mind have to be regarded as potentially infinite, without a solution and without an end. However, Marx wanted to understand the aim or *telos* of the potentially infinite process of reflection; Arendt refers, for example, to Hegel’s “progressive unfolding and actualization of the idea of freedom”⁴³⁵ as an end to human action and an end-product of a manufacturing process.

In response to Marx’s inverse approach to philosophy, she argues that it results in the confusion of categories: neither ideas nor meaning itself can be the product of human activity in the way in which objects are the product of fabrication. Meaning cannot be the result of action (except in the sense in which one speaks about the activity of the mind); instead, it is the outcome after human actions in the form of deeds have come to an end. But in the modern confusion, meaning is aimed at with the same intentions as actions are usually initiated, that is, with an end in mind. Therefore, according to Arendt, the world filled up with purposes – potential ends to achieve – that could never completely be fulfilled, rendering whatever was already achieved increasingly meaningless. Thus the

⁴³⁴ Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 78.

⁴³⁵ Ibid.

“growing meaninglessness of the modern world” is a consequence of the identification of meaning and end, which increasingly results in the loss of the ability to make vital, fundamental distinctions between categories like meaning and end or the general and the particular.⁴³⁶

In conclusion, both ways of understanding the model character of the representation of thought through narration, exemplified by Plato and Marx, lead to an impasse. Both approaches to contemplation ultimately lose their critical power. In Plato’s cave allegory, the sphere of ideas is reserved for the few who specialize in thinking and who are willing to isolate themselves from the many.⁴³⁷ His tale tells us that there is a rift between contemplating the truth and making it visible in the political sphere; that is, the sphere that concerns the affairs of common men. If those who visited the outside of the cave should decide to return to the inside, they have great difficulties in again communicating their insights to their fellow people. Marx’s approach to ideas, and by extension to the realm of contemplation, is in Arendt’s reading that of realizable blueprints. It is as if Marx stubbornly refutes the distance which Plato puts between the sky of ideas and the life in the cave, saying simply that nobody ever seriously tried to bring the truth of the ideas back into the cave. But as Arendt argues, the danger of this reversal is that the potentially infinite process of reflection is cut short when considered as a specific means to an end. In order to avoid both impasses, each one leading to the loss of the critical potential which thinking and its representation in the form of standards

⁴³⁶ IbiArendt, *Between Past and Future*, 78.

⁴³⁷ In the original text, though, the people in the cave are bound, and Socrates, who tells the story in Plato’s dialogue, asks what would happen if one of them were to be freed and forced outside. He tells the story with the distinct steps of a development.

or examples can have, Arendt's approach situates itself in between. Her understanding and application of storytelling as models attempts to accommodate to both extremes: it aims to provide a space for the potentially infinite reflection of the mind, which is, however, at the same time bound to the common affairs – the common sense, as it were – of people, where it is made visible.⁴³⁸ As examples, the stories Arendt picks up are supposed to be comprehensible and meaningful for everybody, and they contain examples that can potentially be followed. But the concept she tries to advance of stories as models is not limited to representational purposes: it is also a space for critical thinking and impartial judgment.

* * *

Another trace of Arendt's notion of narrative as model leads to her early readings of Kafka that predate her interpretation of the author's parable "He" in *Between Past and Future*. The questions at the close of this investigation into the model character Arendt assigns to storytelling revolve around broader political considerations as well as to what degree her approach to narrative is based in a literary analysis of Kafka. In order to pursue these concerns, two early essays Arendt wrote on Kafka should be addressed: "Franz Kafka: Appreciated Anew" and "The Jew as Pariah: A Hidden Tradition."

⁴³⁸ Nordmann calls the relation of storytelling to phenomena, and hence its visual character in Arendt's writing, a visual montage, emphasizing, too, the open character of Arendt's narrative construction. Nordmann writes: "Dieses Erzählen hat Arendt als eine visuelle Montage auseinandergefaltet, indem sie wie der Zitate-Sammler Benjamin die Phänomene weniger erklärt als vielmehr offenbart. Brüche und Lücken zeigen sich an den äußeren Rändern der Fragmente, die sie zusammenfügt. [...] Arendt beschreibt eine vielfach strukturierte Oberfläche, die ihrem Wunsch, sich im Raum zwischen den Phänomenen zu bewegen, entspricht." Nordmann, *Hannah Arendt*, 126. The story as a model in Arendt's sense is an adequate framework for revealing reality and making it visible in its fragments in order to begin a potentially infinite process of reflection.

In the first essay, written as early as 1944 and then republished a number of times in German and English versions, Arendt initiates what might have become a career as a prolific literary critic by putting the Kafka scholarship, which had steadily grown since the 1920s, into perspective. She argues that the various “schools” that had by then “claimed”⁴³⁹ Kafka, be it in their theological readings with “kabbalistic overtones,” or in their psychoanalytical variants, were all based on “misinterpretation” and “misunderstanding.”⁴⁴⁰ Instead of approaches that get lost in “seemingly deeper interpretations”⁴⁴¹ and confuse pre-made motives with what the texts actually say, Arendt seeks to present an understanding based on simplicity and common sense “without preconceived notions.”⁴⁴² While wresting Kafka’s work from the claims of literary schools and separating him from any literary traditions of the realist, the psychoanalytical, or simply the classical novel, she does not shrink from drawing broad, general lines, reducing Kafka’s work to a “main theme”: “the conflict between a world depicted in terms of a seamlessly functioning machinery [...], and a protagonist trying to destroy it.”⁴⁴³ Her criticism eventually includes Kafka’s pre-war readership, which she reproaches as being “fascinated by paradoxes and confused by the interplay of contrasts as such” and thus “no longer willing to listen to reason.”⁴⁴⁴ In her view, readers were

⁴³⁹ Hannah Arendt: *Reflections on Literature and Culture*, ed. Susannah Young-ah Gottlieb (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2007), 94.

⁴⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 98.

⁴⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 103.

⁴⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 98.

caught up in the obvious abstract nature of Kafka's stories and novels, and the game of contradictions they provide. The danger was thus that people might forget that his work, too, was a result of historical developments to which it in some form constituted a response. Arendt insists on putting the historical and political conditions of the author's work into focus. Indeed, these matters appeared, in the words of one of Kafka's parables, which she puts in the middle of her essay, as "a common confusion."⁴⁴⁵ Likely still dismayed by her own experiences with the "intelligentsia" of the late Weimar Republic, she writes that "his [the reader's] interpretations of Kafka revealed more about himself than about Kafka," that in fact they revealed only "his fitness" for the upcoming "world-order."⁴⁴⁶ She is of course referring to the Nazis' rise to power. Right from the beginning, already in 1944, Arendt therefore reads Kafka in the context of the great historical upheavals brought about by the twentieth century. Today many of Arendt's early observations about the author's work belong to the canon of Kafka scholarship. Still, from the perspective of today's many literary theories promoting multifaceted approaches to texts, her interpretation must appear restrictive and even confrontational.

The author, however, may easily become a victim of the same confusion and misunderstanding which she herself so aptly analyzed. While her essay bears many of the signs of a work of literary criticism, it is in fact something different. Her inquiry and judgment is, from beginning to end, motivated by political concerns and informed by the political realities of the twentieth century. She is reading Kafka with political categories and questions in mind. And it is in this sense – not as a literary critic, but as a political

⁴⁴⁵ Arendt: *Reflections on Literature and Culture*, 105.

⁴⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 98.

thinker – that her argument that the various readings of Kafka were shortsighted, distracted, and confused, stands. Her interpretation of Kafka’s work is strictly based on his Jewish heritage and identity. Kafka was confronted with the question of ‘assimilation’ and the ensuing problems firsthand. In her article “The Jew as Pariah: A Hidden Tradition” (1944), Arendt gathers together a small group of Jewish intellectuals and artists (Heinrich Heine, Bernard Lazare, Charlie Chaplin, Franz Kafka), who were, as Jews, disconnected from “political freedom,” “the life of the nations,” and their own people.⁴⁴⁷ In this isolation, they developed their talents, through which they connected back to the society from which they were separated. In this essay that culminates in a section on Kafka, Arendt establishes a conception of the pariah, who “still achieved liberty and popularity by the sheer forces of imagination.”⁴⁴⁸ The challenge for the pariah is to not fortify himself or herself at the outside of society and find a home there, thus losing contact with reality, but to constantly and in an exhaustive battle from this position at the fringes of society direct all actions and thoughts into the middle of this society. To think these two movements together – that is, an existence as an outcast *and* an interest in society – is to really capture the essence of the pariah.⁴⁴⁹

Arendt writes that *The Castle* is “the one novel in which Kafka discusses the Jewish problem.” According to her, the hero of the novel is “plainly a Jew,” not because

⁴⁴⁷ Arendt: *Reflections on Literature and Culture*, 70.

⁴⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁴⁹ Ingeborg Nordmann summarizes Arendt’s concept of the pariah as follows: “In ihrer Biographie Rahel Varnhagens gibt sie [Arendt] dieser komplexen Situation von objektiver gesellschaftlicher Randstellung und spontaner Befähigung zu einem eigenen unabhängigen Urteil zum ersten Mal den Namen ‘Paria.’” Nordmann also points out that Arendt took the concept from Max Weber, “bei dem der Paria soziologisch die gesellschaftliche Randstellung einer bestimmten Gruppe bezeichnet.” Nordmann, *Hannah Arendt*, 18-19.

he exhibits typical Jewish traits, but because “he is involved in situations and perplexities distinctive of Jewish life.”⁴⁵⁰ The protagonist of *The Castle*, K., thus characterizes exactly the situation of the Jewish people in modernity. He belongs nowhere, neither to the community of the villagers – that is, the common people – nor to the castle, where the privileged functionaries of power reside. He is “nothing at all”; his very existence is in danger because it is not confirmed by anyone. He is truly and utterly alone among people. In this isolation, any sense of self or of reality – that is, of being part of a world – deteriorates. Eventually, for Arendt, K. represents and foreshadows as a typological figure one of that group of people which became the victims of the catastrophes of the twentieth century: the “superfluous” and stateless.⁴⁵¹ The K. from *The Castle* represents the dilemma of the “modern would-be assimilationist Jew.” He is caught between the same choices: either ostensibly to join the people – the Jewish people, or in K.’s case the people from the village – but really to be in service of the rulers, or to abandon both and live without any protection or identity among the masses. K. is isolated because he attempts the impossible: to settle down in between and to establish his identity in a no man’s land. Kafka hence plays through the drama of the modern Jew, who, pressed and manipulated by all sides, does “what the whole world wants the Jew to do” – namely, to become “indistinguishable.”⁴⁵² The problems arise precisely when he attempts this seeming last chance. In order to become indistinguishable, he has to separate himself from his own people and “behave as if he were indeed utterly alone.”⁴⁵³ But since he will

⁴⁵⁰ Arendt, *Reflections on Literature and Culture*, 84.

⁴⁵¹ Ibid.

⁴⁵² Ibid., p. 85.

never really be accepted by the others with whom he wishes to assimilate, precisely because his move is only “as if,” he will freeze in this situation of in-between and thus remain alone. While his wish initially was to become indistinguishable from the gentile people, now this force works against him, increasingly diminishing his existence.

Kafka never mentions any Jews in his novels. Yet because he reduces the involved historical experience to a formula of general and elementary conflicts, his stories become universal and exemplary, not only for representing the specific Jewish predicament. In Arendt’s view, the “experiment” of assimilation in Kafka’s novel “assumes a significance for the whole problem of mankind, and not merely for the Jewish question.” The reason for this is that K., in his struggle to become indistinguishable, soon ends up fighting only for the most common and universal things to which “all men have a natural right.”⁴⁵⁴ His struggle, however, leads only to his realization that these universal rights do not even exist for the villagers.

In the various forms that this universalism takes in almost all of Kafka’s works, Arendt discovers the beginnings of a theory of political power for the twentieth century; namely, a theory of ‘bureaucratic power,’ which she would later develop into her comprehensive analysis of totalitarian terror.⁴⁵⁵ The nexus of those wide-sweeping

⁴⁵³ Arendt, *Reflections on Literature and Culture*, 85.

⁴⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵⁵ Bureaucracy is, in Arendt’s understanding, a link between imperialism and totalitarianism that also had strong connections to racism, considering that it was established in great part by the colonial powers in their respective colonies. See also: “Bureaucracy, which was developed in Algeria, Egypt and India, expressed the racist’s disdain for inferior foreign peoples, but converted this into a belief in the benign and protective virtues of secretive and paternalistic administration.” Finn Bowring: *Hannah Arendt. A Critical Introduction* (London: Pluto Press, 2011), 180.

observations can be found in her initial interpretations of Kafka.⁴⁵⁶ The bureaucratic aspect of political power, in other words a regime of administration that dominates politics and public affairs, has its roots in the absolute monarchies of the eighteenth century. It found its first apex in the Austro-Hungarian multinational state in which Kafka lived, and, according to Arendt's essay, showed its horrific perfection in the administration of murder and lawlessness in National Socialist Germany. Thus, for Arendt, bureaucracy is the manifestation of political power in the first half of the twentieth century. Bureaucracy is its expression or extension, its most efficient way to permeate and control all strata of a society and make its people, in a sense, even more into subjects of this power than was possible in the early monarchical systems. The trick of bureaucratic power emanation is that it disperses real political power (for Arendt, the freedom of people to meet, decide, and begin new things) by implementing a hierarchy and letting people partake in it, so that those who are privileged have the impression of being part of the power. In bureaucratic power, common people become privileged to rule over their fellow people. This new hierarchy blurs the traditional lines drawn between rulers and subjects, the few and the many; at the same time, wherever it dominates, it prevents the establishment of true political decision making, since it acts as an inhibitor of human spontaneity and thus freedom. The established political institutions thus increasingly turn around and, in a reversal, move against their alleged purposes. In its most extreme realization, such a bureaucratic system with totalitarian tendencies

⁴⁵⁶ For example: "It appears even more plausible that the mystification of power inherent in the movements [which claimed one-party dictatorship] should be more easily achieved the farther removed the citizens are from the sources of power – easier in bureaucratically ruled countries where power positively transcends the capacity to understand on the part of the ruled, than in constitutionally governed countries where the law is above power and power is only a means of its enforcement [...]" Arendt: *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 255-256.

eventually implies that “the interpretation of the law [becomes] an instrument of lawlessness.”⁴⁵⁷ The mechanism acts like a façade to hide the presumed power structures behind it. The effect is that the more widespread and refined the bureaucratic system is, the more the people subjected to it are also involved in its crimes. It is as Arendt writes: the moment one becomes involved in this system, one is condemned to be victim and perpetrator at the same time. In consequence, from the outside the whole apparatus appears vast and efficient, magnificent, when really it is not. The parts and elements, that is, the individual persons responsible only for functional aspects of the machinery, appear – as Arendt discovered and found confirmed in, for example, Adolf Eichmann – ‘banal,’ as petty bureaucratic officials, once they are cut loose from the machinery of the whole system. This does not mean that the whole matter is banal. On the contrary, this observation makes visible the magnitude of the phenomenon – its true horrors – in the first place.

In Kafka’s other novel, *The Trial*, but also in *The Castle* and to a certain extent in his first novel, *Amerika* (original title: *Der Verschollene*), the main protagonist basically is in conflict with these bureaucratic powers, which appear as “juridical processes” and represent, at least for K., the world “in which one may adapt oneself to existing conditions.”⁴⁵⁸ In a reversal of the traditional *Bildungsroman*,⁴⁵⁹ Kafka’s heroes, instead of growing into full-fledged members of society, are stripped of their humanity by “the

⁴⁵⁷ Arendt, *Reflections on Literature and Culture*, 97.

⁴⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 96.

⁴⁵⁹ In a broader perspective Arendt positions Kafka against the German ideal of *Bildung* in the first place. Kafka’s writing against the process character of the modern world revealed the “ironically destructive nature of *Bildung*.” Young-ah Gottlieb, “Hannah Arendt: Reflections on Ruin,” 116. His novel *The Trial*, with the German title *Der Proceß*, recounts the story of a man subjected to these processes, who finally surrenders.

functioning of the evil bureaucratic machine.”⁴⁶⁰ Instead of being educated (*gebildet*), these figures are transformed (*verwandelt!*) and subjected until they are “fit to assume the role forced upon [them], which is to play along as best [they] can in a world of necessity, injustice, and lies.”⁴⁶¹ From the perspective of Arendt’s theory of totalitarian terror, the power of *The Castle* is not true political power, but on the contrary its ruin. This is also, in all likelihood, the reason why in Kafka’s novel the power and its source, though it is said to have its residence in the castle, remain diffuse and cannot be identified. At no point can it clearly be connected to individuals: it is always only enacted, carried out. Power in Kafka’s fictitious world is always in the state of being dispersed. His novel therefore is a novel on the disappearance of man’s political faculties; that is in other words, the disappearance of man’s freedom.

Arendt likens the power of the bureaucratic processes in Kafka’s *The Trial* to a “machine that grabs and kills.” The machine’s power, that which drives all of the processes, hides behind the “appearance of necessity that is caused by the way in which human beings admire necessity.”⁴⁶² The nature of this necessity thus lies in its appearance; it is *taken to be* necessary. According to Arendt, the human mind, which is capable of translating everything into thought processes, implying thereby causal relationships, is

⁴⁶⁰ Arendt, *Reflections on Literature and Culture*, 97.

⁴⁶¹ As many critics have since noticed, Arendt, too, realized that Kafka’s novel “implies a critique of the pre-war Austrian bureaucratic regime.” Arendt, *Reflections on Literature and Culture*, 96. Finn Brown points to the fact that Arendt’s understanding of bureaucracy is based more on Kafka’s literary works than on Max Weber’s sociology. “Arendt’s description of bureaucracy, whose obscure and anonymous functionaries feel no obligation to legal rules because the ‘only “law” they obeyed was the “law” of expansion,’ appears to owe more to Franz Kafka than to Max Weber’s classical sociological study of the phenomenon.” Brown, *Hannah Arendt*, 180. The quotation from Arendt is taken from: *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 215.

⁴⁶² Arendt, *Reflections on Literature and Culture*, 96.

immediately captivated and convinced by processes wherever it spots them. Nature, with its truly determined and automated processes, is the role model that pushes aside man's inherent gift of freedom. The mind seems more easily convinced by such seemingly automated processes that resemble natural processes, than to expect the exception. It is easier to give in to processes that are on their way already than to do the one thing that might interrupt them, which is to begin something anew, to take action. In this way, for the K. of *The Trial*, everything concerning his existence has been turned into such processes: "The machine is kept in motion by the lies told for the sake of necessity."⁴⁶³ A world order subjected to automatic processes that are exacted in bureaucratic fashion, where the administration of necessity outweighs the interest in beginning something anew, loses its grounding in reality. Any new beginning, the taking of action, confirms reality. People caught in the bureaucratic machine (those who have 'responsibilities' as much as those subjected to it) are not interested in confirming or confronting reality, but are much more inclined to adhere to the ongoing uninterrupted processes that so completely control their lives. In a circular movement, they want to back up the necessity of their situation and thereby make it appear to be a necessity in the first place. Lies in this circle do not even appear as lies, but as necessities, or sometimes as compromises. Arendt calls this the "game of necessity."⁴⁶⁴ Like in a game, the rules are set and create a secluded sphere shut off from the outside reality in which they are taken to be necessary and followed until the bitter end; that is, until somebody wins and others lose the game. This is the way 'the lie is fashioned into the world order.'

⁴⁶³ Arendt, *Reflections on Literature and Culture*, 96.

⁴⁶⁴ Ibid.

Arendt's own take on determinism has its roots here, in her early readings of Kafka's work. It is based on an axiomatic assertion, a universally true statement – namely, that “insofar as life ultimately and inevitably leads to death, its end may always be predicted.”⁴⁶⁵ While nature achieves its own kind of immortality through its cyclic structure of growth and decay, man has other means of evading mortality through the artifacts he designs and through birth, in which case he adheres to his own nature. But as an individual, man is bound to fall prey to nature at some point. Within these broad strokes, a concept of determinism makes sense. Though, insofar as (almost) everything is built upon nature and is always in danger of falling back into nature, this determinism has only one direction; it has a profound apocalyptic character. “The way of nature is always that of ruin, and a society that blindly subjects itself to the necessity of the laws it has made for itself must necessarily perish.”⁴⁶⁶ The essential principle of nature is that of necessity.

To confirm and broaden Arendt's earlier thoughts, it will help to have a look at the 1961 essay on “What is Freedom?” from *Between Past and Future*. This will also, eventually, emphasize the unique role that storytelling may play in the context of this determinism. In the aforementioned essay, Arendt analyzes necessity through the concept of processes and links this to her reflections on freedom. She writes that man is always surrounded by processes, be they natural or, on a universal scale, cosmic processes. If man-made, she characterizes them as historical. What all processes have in common, what is essential to them, is that they are inherently automatic: “The truth is that

⁴⁶⁵ Arendt, *Reflections on Literature and Culture*, 101.

⁴⁶⁶ Ibid.

automatism is inherent in all processes, no matter what their origin may be.”⁴⁶⁷ This means that, once started, they run on potentially infinitely and can only be stopped from outside. In causality, which in Arendt’s view is, for all we know, a mental phenomenon – a mode of explanation to put phenomena into relations – the principle of necessity (i.e., the automatism of processes) migrates into the sphere of thinking.⁴⁶⁸ All processes, man-made or not, are subject to entropy, or as Arendt calls it, are “ruinous,”⁴⁶⁹ meaning they consume or, strictly speaking, transform the energy that feeds them. The automatism observed in processes is hence their inherent tendency to dissipate energy, spreading it in a homogeneous structure, thereby canceling out difference. In the realm of living things, this usually means decay and death. Arendt looks at how this affects the human condition: “It is in the nature of the automatic processes to which man is subject, but within and against which he can assert himself through action, that they can only spell ruin to human life. Once man-made, historical processes have become automatic they are no less ruinous than the natural life process that drives our organism and which in its own terms, that is, biologically, leads from being to non-being, from birth to death.”⁴⁷⁰ The more man gives in to processes and transforms the world into processes, the more prone to

⁴⁶⁷ Arendt: *Between Past and Future*, 168.

⁴⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 144.

⁴⁶⁹ Susannah Young-ah Gottlieb traces Arendt’s concept of ruinous processes back to an early concept by Heidegger: “Ruinanz,” which in *Being and Time* became “Verfallenheit.” Heidegger develops his concept in a strictly phenomenological and existential frame that results in a circular structure. In Young-as Gottlieb’s words: “Factical life moves in the direction of ruin by building itself up ‘against,’ by forming itself ‘against,’ by educating itself ‘against’ the very danger that it itself *is*, namely the danger of collapse. Ruination, in other words, consists in attempting to make oneself secure against ruin.” Young-ah Gottlieb, “Hannah Arendt: Reflections on Ruin,” 111-112. In contrast, Arendt put the concept of ruinous processes in her broader theory of action and contemplation. While Heidegger’s ruinous revolt of life against its own factuality results in its death, Arendt places the idea of natality – and by extension that of beginning – as a counter movement against ruination.

⁴⁷⁰ Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 168.

decay and collapse it will become. Arendt writes that, with the nineteenth-century scientification of history (=historism), it more and more was conceived of as a process that could be initiated by men; but man-made processes are also subject to the inevitable ruinous tendencies.

While man has the power to defy nature by means of his own artifacts or, in the case of society, the rules that define our living together, if these rules are taken as quasi natural laws not allowing for human spontaneity – that is, if they are endowed with a necessity otherwise precisely not found in the human sphere – then these constructs must fall to ruin. Accordingly, catastrophe is always easy to predict, since such a ‘prediction’ adheres to the inherent logic of a process-stricken world. Disaster always looms and always seems more probable than the exception; apocalyptic prophecy is therefore always in great danger of becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy because man seems drawn to necessity. “Propelled by such delusions,” Arendt concludes, once again in her essay “Franz Kafka, Appreciated Anew,” “man in his freedom only assists nature in its ruinous tendency.”⁴⁷¹ If necessity becomes man’s obsession, she argues, it does not matter whether the connected belief or ideology is one that propagates ruin or progress. Therefore the nineteenth-century belief in progress as an “inevitable superhuman law”⁴⁷² must ultimately end in catastrophe.

In regard to Kafka, Arendt maintains that he is more than a mere prophet of the future. His work reveals the structures of modern bureaucratic distribution and dissipation of power, thereby making visible the process character of modern thought. The heroes of

⁴⁷¹ Arendt, *Reflections on Literature and Culture*, 101.

⁴⁷² Ibid.

his stories are always in a struggle against the processes into which the modern world has turned.⁴⁷³ This is the “secret theology” of Kafka’s stories: a (profane) revelation of the conditions of political power in modernity. Kafka’s *The Trial* reveals the “faith of bureaucrats to be a faith in necessity as such, and the bureaucrats end up as the functionaries of necessity.” As such, man degrades himself, because though he is more than nature, he then submits completely to necessity, becoming a “part of nature” – “a tool of active destruction.”⁴⁷⁴ In the face of this catastrophic scenery, Kafka’s “style-less perfection”⁴⁷⁵ brings about a new quality in narrative, displayed in his complete focus on thinking and truth. Instead of representing a wealth of experience, the experience emanated by Kafka’s works is an experience in thinking. The characters in his works, for example, are solely defined by their “job,” their function, and their “quest” “to win a trial, to obtain a residence and work permit, and so forth.” They are defined like variables in a great mathematical formula through their respective (social) gestures. In this world, then, the main protagonists, the K.s, stand out and get into trouble “because they have no well-defined place in this world of professionals – that is, because their role is utterly indeterminate.”⁴⁷⁶ Kafka’s characters are therefore reduced to the “essence of [their] job[s],” which consequently entails at least the pretense of being unable to fail at it. There is no room, at least in their self-awareness and outward expression or proclamation, for

⁴⁷³ See also: “The image of Kafka that traverses Arendt’s essay [“Franz Kafka, Appreciated Anew”] is of a man engaged in a struggle. It is no accident, from this perspective, that one of his earliest writings is called ‘Descriptions of a Struggle’. The struggle is not so much for something as against something, namely against automatic processes; ...” Young-ah Gottlieb, “Hannah Arendt: Reflections on Ruin,” 115.

⁴⁷⁴ Arendt, *Reflections on Literature and Culture*, 101.

⁴⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 95.

⁴⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 102.

fallibility. They need to “at least pretend to command a sort of superhuman perfection.”⁴⁷⁷ Kafka, Arendt further observes, “immediately confronts us with the result of [...] a development.”⁴⁷⁸ That is, he does not develop his characters from an initial conflicting situation – they do not in fact develop at all. The only development that can be observed in the novels is the path of the main protagonist, which is usually characterized by degradation, ruin, exhaustion, and death. The author does not “describe the originary conflict between a functionary’s private life and his function”; thus this whole side of human experience is not present in the stories. The characters in these stories are “varying models of man as such, whose only distinctive feature is an unyielding focus on that which is universally human.”⁴⁷⁹

According to Arendt’s reading, then, Kafka’s works reveal the structure of the advancing bureaucratic terror, boiled down to the conflict between the man of goodwill and a world turned upside down. The author’s intention, however, to abstract from historical experience and present modern conditions of existence in the most universal statements and generalized conflict structures with the utmost simplicity in expression and style had the opposite result: it confused his readers and appealed to a false sense of depth underneath. Establishing spaces of understanding and abstraction, the conflicts within Kafka’s works appear both simple and complex. Simple, because they are relentlessly being dragged to the surface and confronted with common sense; complex, because of the sheer enormity of the absurdity which Kafka’s upside-down worlds

⁴⁷⁷ Arendt, *Reflections on Literature and Culture*, 103.

⁴⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁷⁹ Ibid., 103-104.

generate and throw at the protagonists. The enormity and horror of the world depicted in Kafka's stories, then, does not lie in a theological background, nor in a psychological, quasi-pathological condition of his creatures, but simply in the fact that behind all of the exaggerations and extrapolations this is how the real world actually is. Kafka shows how the "world order," from the perspective of common sense and basic human rights, has turned over. For Arendt, then, the reality of death camps and of show trials where the victims had to argue for their own death sentences demonstrated how even the most absurd of Kafka's stories had been overtaken by reality. Stranger than fiction, indeed.⁴⁸⁰ Kafka's stories in which he depicts the seemingly endless and futile processes of the protagonist's attempts to reconcile with the world, are complex in the precision with which they trace the absurd contradictions of actual conditions until their conclusion. The obscurity and complexity of his work is not the intention, but an image of how things are. And this can be called both *banal* in its simple factuality that spreads through all aspects of our ordinary lives, and *evil* in its reversal of human rights and dignity.

Expanding on the abstract nature of the writer's "narrative art" – his "quest for truth" – Arendt makes some remarkable observations about the image character of Kafka's works, which constitute a preliminary stage to her analysis in *Between Past and Future*. She observes his "radical disinterest in facades, mere aspects, or the purely phenomenal character of the world." It is radical insofar as Kafka, with his abstract method, seeks to penetrate this world of appearances. His real concern, accordingly, is not with reality in the sense of how it appears to us, "but with truth," which always has

⁴⁸⁰ A line Arendt also applies in "What is Freedom?" in order to characterize reality as the result of processes interrupted by 'infinitely improbable' coincidences. Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 170.

been rather a function of disclosing the appearing, phenomenal world exacted by the faculty of thinking.⁴⁸¹ What Arendt has in mind is thinking as a distinct sphere of human activity that is capable of generating structures that may debunk what we hold to be reality. This entails the faculty of judgment. Judgments are different from the reality they point to; yet they establish a specific distance and hence perspective *on* reality. In Kafka's storytelling, the narrative provides an image space within which impartial judgment can be constituted.

While the surrealist's photomontage, according to Arendt, uses the material of the appearing world itself to generate revealing contradictions, Kafka's method "invents such aspects freely." His aim is hence to construct models: like "a blueprint of a building, Kafka practically devises the blueprint of the world."⁴⁸² As previous chapters of this study have shown, this image space of the narrative is not limited to representation, but establishes an interactive stage on which thinking regarded as an activity can unfold.⁴⁸³ Although these blueprints are rooted in reality, Arendt accordingly argues that they owe their discovery to a thought process much more than to sensory experience. Therefore, in order to understand these models, the reader has to apply as much "power of imagination" as went into creating them. Like judgments, these models are the "very products of thought" and can only be comprehended if they are mentally reproduced. Through a

⁴⁸¹ Arendt, *Reflections on Literature and Culture*, 104.

⁴⁸² Ibid.

⁴⁸³ Kristeva briefly refers to Arendt's earlier essays on Kafka, and to the concept of narratives as models which she derived from the author's storytelling. She writes: "Kafka, who is more of a thinker than a naturalist novelist because he thinks what he feels, sketched out models for thinking where the reader expects to find characters." Kristeva, *Hannah Arendt*, 88.

reading of the parable “A Common Confusion,”⁴⁸⁴ Arendt illustrates Kafka’s “art of abstraction.” She argues that here the author constructs “a model of confusion itself” by abstracting from any real life experience connected to the matter and reducing it instead to its barest, elementary, merely relational details of the sort ‘A meets B.’ These elements, in their seemingly free play, establish a spatial dimension, thus creating a blueprint-like environment in which the phenomenon of ‘confusion’ can be explored from various points of view.

Still more interestingly, Arendt calls the dimensionality of Kafka’s models “comically colossal,” referring to “Kafka’s humor” and “Kafka’s laughter,” thereby charging the parable’s spatiality with an ethical quality.⁴⁸⁵ Kafka’s stories thus exercise and facilitate an existential attitude or moral disposition towards the actual world that helps it to endure in spite of man’s shortcomings. Contrasting with the age-old tradition of storytelling, according to which the story tells *what is*, Kafka’s stories as models

⁴⁸⁴ The parable reads: “A common occurrence: to bear it, a common confusion. A. has important business to conduct with B. in H. He goes to H. for a preliminary meeting, completes the journey there and back in ten minutes each way, and upon returning home boasts of his remarkable swiftness. The next day he once again goes to H., this time to conclude his business. Since this is expected to require several hours, A. leaves very early in the morning. But although all accompanying circumstances, at least in A.’s estimation, are exactly the same as the day before, this time it takes him ten hours to reach H. When he arrives there quite exhausted in the evening, he is told that B., annoyed at his absence, had left a half-hour before to go to meet A. in his village, and that they actually should have met each other on the road. A. is advised to wait. But anxious about his business he sets off at once and hurries home. This time he completes the trip, without particularly noticing it, practically in an instant. At home he learns that B. had actually arrived there early in the morning – immediately after A.’s departure, indeed that he had met A. on the threshold and reminded him of their business; but A. had replied that he had no time to spare then, and that he was in a hurry to leave at once. Despite this incomprehensible behavior on the part of A., however, B. had stayed on to wait for A. He had indeed asked numerous times already whether A. was not back yet, but he was still up in A.’s room. Overjoyed at still being able to see B. and explain everything to him, A. rushes upstairs. He has almost made it to the top when he stumbles, twists a sinew, and, almost fainting from the pain, incapable even of uttering a cry, merely whimpering in the dark, he hears B. – hard to make out whether at a great distance or right next to him – stomping down the stairs, enraged, and vanishing once and for all.” Arendt, *Reflections on Literature and Culture*, 105-106.

⁴⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 106.

implement a “reversal of original and imitation” and “cast[] what is narrated as the original, with reality appearing as an imitation.”⁴⁸⁶ The narrative becomes *original* and therefore establishes itself as a reality that is more immediate and authentic to our mental activity than the reality to which it relates. This is the source of Kafka’s humor, since it creates a distance between reality – in which we are otherwise completely embedded – and our self-awareness or even self-confidence. The author’s stories thus open a space where thinking can move outside its traditional bonds to the world: thinking in spite of the world. In this sense, Kafka’s laughter is liberating. Because of their ethical dimension, his stories, according to Arendt, contribute to the unique human gift of freedom. Meaning, they provide a space where the strangeness and cruel absurdity of reality can be outmaneuvered, where the conception of confusion is “more confounding than any actual one,”⁴⁸⁷ in order to reclaim the spontaneity to begin something anew, or simply to change one’s perspective. Kafka’s work supports a moral attitude by example and as an exercise that allows man to interrupt the ruinous processes that society has forced upon him. The stories do not *contain* “human freedom,” nor are they a manual for how to achieve it, nor an appeal for revolution; but as an exercise in thinking and developing a moral disposition, they contribute to freedom.

But in what way is narrative, rendered according to these descriptions, able to interrupt the automatism inherent in processes? Arendt’s essay “What is Freedom?” will help to shed some light on the issue. Arendt calls the interruption in this essay of the ruinous tendencies characteristic of all processes that determine our lives, which from

⁴⁸⁶ Arendt, *Reflections on Literature and Culture*, 106.

⁴⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 107.

within a process-stricken world must look like salvation, a miracle. And these miracles, too, can be brought about by man. The author draws a line between the three categories of beginning, action, and freedom, all of which characterize for her the unique human faculty of being able to defy the process character of nature to which we are ultimately bound.⁴⁸⁸ Action she characterizes through its beginning, or to be precise: as being a beginning; it is volitional and initiates new events in the world. She in turn connects the property or potential to begin something in the world back to our fundamental condition of natality. Paraphrasing Augustine, she illuminates this connection: “Because he is a beginning, man can begin; to be human and to be free are one and the same.”⁴⁸⁹ In contrast to a philosophical tradition that, since Kant, attempted to localize freedom as an inner realm within man through the notion of ‘free will,’ Arendt chooses an exterior perspective: freedom comes into being between men interacting with each other. Freedom thus defines the condition of acting men rather than thinking individuals and their privateness. Arendt maintains that this faculty of beginning actions anew is a means to interrupt the inherent automatism of processes, since every action starts a new process whose consequences are ultimately unpredictable. From within a system determined by processes, such an interruption cannot be conceived and thus appears as something unexpected. As a consequence, she calls the faculty of beginning, as well as freedom in general, a miracle: Whether miracles are described as originating in a “divine agent” or

⁴⁸⁸ In his brief analysis of Arendt’s concepts of freedom and action, Jonathan Schell points to the “miraculous human power of action thereafter [after being born into the world] to bring forth the new and unexpected into the world – even in the face of such seemingly hopeless difficulties as the conjunction of totalitarianism and the bomb.” Jonathan Schell, “Hannah Arendt and the Atomic Bomb,” in *Politics in Dark Times. Encounters with Hannah Arendt*, ed. Seyla Benhabib (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 253.

⁴⁸⁹ Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 167.

are performed by men, according to Arendt, they have in common that they are “interruptions of some natural series of events, of some automatic process, in whose context they constitute the wholly unexpected.”⁴⁹⁰ Through action, man brings the “wholly unexpected” into the world.

Arendt’s essay does, however, also provide a broader notion of the miracle when she applies it generally to how we conceive of reality; that is, the factuality of the world. Because of our limited perspective in the universe, we cannot survey all causes of the events that take place around us. Thus events may take the shape of new beginnings themselves, whose nature it is to “break[] into the world as an ‘infinite improbability,’”⁴⁹¹ and which nonetheless constitute what we commonly refer to as reality. She writes: “It is because of this element of the ‘miraculous’ present in all reality that events, no matter how well anticipated in fear or hope, strike us with a shock of surprise once they have come to pass.”⁴⁹² Events thus remain ultimately inexplicable; their actual occurrence transcends our limited perspective on the world.

The ending of Arendt’s essay on the question of freedom closes with a surprising remark. In contrast to nature, where the miracle – that is, the interruption of automated processes – depends on the happenstance of infinitely improbable events, history is increasingly determined by human-initiated events. “Here the miracle of accident and infinite improbability occurs so frequently that it seems strange to speak of miracles at

⁴⁹⁰ Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 168.

⁴⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 169.

⁴⁹² *Ibid.*, 170.

all.”⁴⁹³ Historical processes, Arendt writes, are constantly created and interrupted by human initiative, “by the *initium* man is insofar as he is an acting being.” In the context of historical and political processes, it is thus even advisable to expect the unforeseeable and unpredictable. In this sense, she concludes her essay on the human faculty of beginning by saying that “in the realm of human affairs, we know the author of the ‘miracles.’”⁴⁹⁴

Of course, this can be read in the ancient Latin sense of *auctor*, meaning simply ‘he who causes something to happen.’ In the general context of Arendt’s reflections on action and thinking, this is certainly the main point she wishes to make. True action between people who share a common world is manifest as a power against the ruinous implications of processes, be they natural or man-made.⁴⁹⁵ But it is also possible to follow the lead by which Arendt connects the faculty of beginning something anew to the story, or in general to narrative. In the last chapter of the study at hand, Arendt’s concept of the story was revealed to stand exactly on the point of transition between contemplation and action. This is valid not only in terms of understanding thinking as an activity, but also as far as she already applies the term on a level where events unfold. As was shown, she frequently refers to a sequence of events, unfolding as a result of the initial point which a beginning may constitute in the world, as a story. She therefore

⁴⁹³ Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 170.

⁴⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 171.

⁴⁹⁵ The study at hand does not attempt to diminish the preeminent role action plays in Arendt’s work on the political, but is trying to figure out its place in the author’s thinking strictly from a narrative perspective, in order to make visible this other side of her work. See also Kristeva, who comments on this theoretical conflict: “Narration matters, but action is what ultimately prevails, provided that it is narrated action.” In this passage, the problem is revealed to have its basis in the circular relation between action and narrative. Action matters most, but only if it is embedded in, and visible through, narrative. This circular structure appeared at various points throughout this study. Kristeva, *Hannah Arendt*, 70.

suggests a distinction between factual events as a potential but as yet untold story, and the actually narrated story. In conclusion, one may say that thus the story itself may represent a beginning on both levels: as something to unfold in the world, and as an artifact of human creativity. In this sense, we then may not only know but perhaps also become the authors of miracles.

CONCLUSION

Es wird erzählt, it is said ... That which is told forms a universally available archive; like a second nature, the “offene[r], endlose[r] Strom des Erzählens”⁴⁹⁶ surrounds us, encloses us, and enables us to establish what we call our ‘reality.’ In this total perspective, the author – that is, the subject – seems to vanish almost completely from the scene. As if they were natural phenomena, stories seem to just be there. The relation between reader/listener and storyteller is turned around: here the emphasis lies on an act of listening in on the wide and deep space of storytelling, rather than on establishing an ‘author’ and putting him or her on display: “Einmal in die Welt entlassen, ist die erzählte Geschichte um nichts mehr zurückzunehmen. Ihr Lauf läßt sich nicht aufhalten, ja bald kaum noch nachverfolgen. Man erzählt sich; viele erzählen einander; manches erzählt sich wie von selbst. Und das bringt die *rumors*, das Murmeln und Plätschern des Geschichtenflusses, doch wieder in die Nähe eines Naturschauspiels: Hört nur, wie es dort hinten erzählt!”⁴⁹⁷

Alexander Honold gives an account of Walter Benjamin’s fascination with the inconspicuous beginnings of stories: *man erzählt, bekanntlich*, which shroud them in “den Erzählton des Längstvertrauten,”⁴⁹⁸ and hence, while establishing a connection to the universe of what has been told, push the actual author into the background. However, this appearance of the long-familiar can also be applied in order to perplex the reader and

⁴⁹⁶ Honold, *Der Leser Walter Benjamin*, 160.

⁴⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 161.

⁴⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

thus unsettle the reading process and defamiliarize what is actually to be related. Under the guise of the long-familiar, the storyteller might choose to introduce something surprising or recently past. The evocation of the long-familiar presupposes trust in tradition, which, however, in the case of modern storytelling, may immediately be called into question. Therefore, this also entails the unsettling of tradition in general. Honold points out how Benjamin's essay on Gottfried Keller begins in this manner, "im falschen Land und in der falschen Kunstform – mit einer Anekdote über Joseph Haydn."⁴⁹⁹

Beyond the observation that stories (specifically in modern storytelling) are situated at the epicenter in between acknowledging tradition and abandoning it, this reveals the underlying universal existence of the narrative faculty. What this means, in a rough generalization, is that as long as there are human beings, the capacity to 'tell what is' will exist. And this fundamental ability that enables man to take a stand in the face of what happens and then be able to 'tell what is,' which automatically results in the operation of forming a narrative, renders storytelling essentially non-arbitrary. Especially since the disintegration of tradition, it has been argued that the 'great narrative' has exploded into potentially infinite, disparate stories. That may be true, but at the center of all these countless stories still lies the universal faculty of 'telling what is' to which all stories necessarily relate.

Hannah Arendt points to this primordial level of narrative in her book *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, expanding it to a (pseudo-)axiomatic statement: "The holes of oblivion do not exist. Nothing human is that perfect, and there are simply too many people in the

⁴⁹⁹ Honold, *Der Leser Walter Benjamin*, 161. Benjamin writes: "Man erzählt von Haydn, es habe ihm einst eine Symphonie sehr große Mühe gemacht. Da hätte er, um weiterzukommen, eine Geschichte sich vorgestellt." (GS2, 283)

world to make oblivion possible. One man will always be left alive to tell the story. Hence, nothing can ever be ‘practically useless,’ at least, not in the long run.”⁵⁰⁰ What makes this statement pseudo-axiomatic is the fact that it claims validity only from within the perspective of man’s existence, and not beyond. It is in this respect also circular. As long as there are stories told, there are *people* telling them. If there were no human beings in existence anymore, then the whole issue of whether somebody tells the story or not would indeed be useless. But from within the horizon of our being-there, we cannot acknowledge this being-there and the nonexistence of man at the same time. Arendt’s claim gains its validity from this state of affairs. The simple fact of our being-there, which preconditions any perspective that we can have on anything, entails that there must always be somebody left – who can tell the story.

Arendt’s proposition contains a small hope pitted against the truly bleak prospect of nonexistence. It has an inverse structure and can be read as a last stand being made by the evidence that there is hope at all. The overall composition of this statement brings it close to another passage that can be found in Arendt’s essay on Walter Benjamin. There she places the author into a constellation with Goethe and Kafka; she writes: “Er [Benjamin] brauchte nicht Kafka zu lesen, um wie Kafka zu denken. Als er noch nichts von ihm kannte außer dem ‘Heizer,’ hatte er bereits Goethes Wort über die Hoffnung an prominenter Stelle in dem Essay über die Wahlverwandtschaften zitiert – ‘Die Hoffnung fuhr wie ein Stern, der vom Himmel fällt, über ihre Häupter weg.’ Und der Satz, mit dem er ihn beschließt, klingt, als hätte Kafka ihn geschrieben: ‘Nur um der Hoffnungslosen

⁵⁰⁰ Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, 233.

willen ist uns die Hoffnung gegeben.”⁵⁰¹ Based on the line from Goethe’s novel *Die Wahlverwandtschaften* (1809), which considers hope in the then-forming modern age, Arendt compares Benjamin’s thinking directly to that of Kafka. She recognizes in Benjamin’s response to Goethe – that only because of the hopeless is there hope for us – a structure entailing an existential attitude which she also finds in Kafka. It is likely that she was thinking of a statement that Max Brod credits to his friend: “Es gibt unendlich viel Hoffnung. Nur nicht für uns.”⁵⁰²

In the context of the aforementioned passage from *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, I suggest that the constellation presented here should be expanded by adding Arendt to it. The structure of Benjamin’s statement is similar to that of Arendt’s in that it postulates the existence of hope by contrasting it with a negative statement: it derives that which is positively given by excluding that which is utterly negative. According to Benjamin, there is hope because there are the hopeless. This means that we are all – potentially – hopeless, and that this is the precondition of there being hope at all. There is, however, no immediate connection in Benjamin’s claim between the hopeless, who are designated as living beings, and hope, which is designated as an abstract entity. All in all, Benjamin’s proposition is equally as ironic as Kafka’s, since it expresses as a whole the irreducible, mutual dependency of hope with the existence of the hopeless. By comparison, the irony is far more subdued in Arendt’s statement, which thus seems to conclude on a much more positive note. But similarly to Kafka and Benjamin, she supports the existence of the

⁵⁰¹ Arendt, “Walter Benjamin,” 64.

⁵⁰² Max Brod, *Franz Kafka. Eine Biographie* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer-Bücherei, 1966), 71.

storyteller, and hence that of hope, by juxtaposing it with the idea of utter negativity – the nonexistence of man.

The intellectual, political, and existential significance of storytelling in Benjamin and in Arendt is evident. With this in mind, the goal of the present investigation was to explore the possibilities and limitations of narrative in the authors' theoretical writings. The argument running through all twelve chapters is that the experience of the break in tradition is deeply inscribed in the authors' works. Therefore their thinking and writing always shifts around patterns of destructing and recovering (or constructing). The center of this maelstrom was where the present study located the concept of narrative (in its different iterations as storytelling, or 'the epic') and attempted to demonstrate the various processes of its destruct(ur)ing and reconstructing (or in the words applied throughout this work: surrender, salvation). The resulting movement to which the phenomenon of narrative was subjected can be characterized as its transgression. Thus a main focal point of attention was on what can be called new possibilities of narrative in its post-traditional restitution. The eminent spatial character of narrative in Benjamin and Arendt was found to be one of its particular features. Space became a functional, constitutive element of narrative that results in the latter providing the reader with an original experience of thinking.

Regarding the composition of this study and the structure in which its argument is presented, the aim was to open up the question of narrative in theoretical writing and thus contribute to the analysis of modern forms of representation. As the comments from the beginning of this chapter may show, there are many possible perspectives which this study has not covered, in part because it was necessary to limit its scope to a distinctly

analytical approach. It is evident that the topic of storytelling is meaningful far beyond a mere academic interest. *Es wird erzählt.* And thus there is the smallest spark of hope.

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