

# BENJAMIN'S GROUND

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## I

A special issue on Walter Benjamin, at this time, in this country, seems to make sense: it would not be difficult to come up with an impressive list of signs and symptoms of a rapidly increasing interest in his work. Yet, this sense is to be distrusted. Those looking for a new fashion after postmodernism, poststructuralism, and deconstruction will find no ground in Benjamin. Even less can he be reclaimed in the name of a "return to historical thinking," in the name of a misread "Frankfurt School"—if a school could be read at all. But that is precisely the confusion of those who are less interested in reading than in over-views where everything can be conveniently overlooked, most of all that which disturbs the convenience.

It would be no less misleading, however, to join the rhetorical denunciations of "schools" in the name of individuality. That would only be a sentimental denegation, the other side of the coin that circulates well within the generally accepted currency of common-places. Schools and institutions have their place, or rather, they *are* the common place of language and thought without which there would be no individual speech and thought, sometimes in the plain physical sense that they support the body that thinks and writes, as did, albeit minimally, the Frankfurt Institute for Benjamin. The common places of institutions, schools, and language organize knowledge and discourse, control their production and distribution. They provide a frame within which they open channels and paths for what can be said and thought, and, more importantly, they censor and block other possible channels and paths. The readers of Freud's *Traumdeutung*

will not underestimate the productivity of censorship and blockages; neither did Benjamin, who had read Hölderlin and Kant.

Just as Benjamin's loose association with the "Frankfurt School," especially his friendship with Adorno, was part of the formation of his thought and writing, there is no doubt that the collective impact of those texts that are alluded to in the name of "poststructuralism" has contributed to a reorganization of academic discourse and literary criticism in particular in such a way that Benjamin's work, not easily fitting within the common disciplinary boundaries, can now find access and readers more easily. Yet, the easing of the reception might already be the beginning of misreading. Only where the text offers resistance to the currents and currencies of prevailing discourses can it enter into a productive and truly historical constellation with them.

The contributors of this issue were not gathered primarily as what the academic convention calls "Benjamin-experts," but as expert readers who would not be afraid to follow the text, although not in the name of some "approach" or "method," but on that nameless path of the text that leads to the point of resistance.

If we begin with the perhaps hybristic promise of Benjamin's ground, that ground is yet nothing but the silent surface of the text(s) we are going to read.

## II

Radical thought emerges from the deepest immersion into tradition. It is never a creation *ex nihilo*, but the effect of a translation and interpretation. The immense potential of the mother tongue requires the specificity of a "father"-text through which it gains its determinacy. Baudelaire and Proust were obviously such texts for Benjamin, but in a more penetrating, although perhaps less obvious way, Hölderlin's work participates in the shaping of Benjamin's thought.

In the radical experiment of his Pindar-translations, that subject the syntax of the mother-tongue without compromise to the foreign order of Pindar's Greek rhetoric, Hölderlin forged his late style that can be considered most unmistakably his own.<sup>1</sup> The work in its most

determinate shape originates from the unreserved interpenetration with the determinacy of another work. In Hölderlin's Sophocles translations, one language is no longer subjected to the other, but the two interpenetrate each other in such a way that the effect of a new language emerges. "In them," Benjamin writes, "meaning plunges from abyss to abyss until it is threatened to be lost in the bottomless depths of language" (IV.1, 21).<sup>2</sup>

This formulation is not only an allusion to "Hyperions Schicksalslied," the "Song of Fate" in Hölderlin's *Hyperion*, but even more to the curving of that arc that designates the course of meaning as well as of life: from abyss to abyss. "Vom Abgrund nemlich haben / Wir angefangen" ("From the abyss, namely, we have begun"), *FA Einleitung*, 74-75),<sup>3</sup> and "Das wunderbare Sehnen dem Abgrund zu" ("The mysterious desire towards the abyss"), *FA* 5, 593) would end everything quickly, if there were no hold or blockage in between.

Of the abyss, there is nothing to be said. To speak of it is meaningless. Only from edge to edge, discourse takes its course over "bottomless depths of language."

Which discourse, which course is the object of our reading: Hölderlin's or Benjamin's? We could possibly read Benjamin's reading of Hölderlin, one of his earliest and densest texts. Its object is *das Gedichtete*, which can be translated only in an impossible neologism as "the poemized" of the poem. It is not the poem, but that which is effected and produced by the poem. Yet, it is also "at the same time product and object of the critique" (II.1, 105). Thus, the products of the poem and of the critique merge into one. The difference between poetic text and critical text seems to become weaker and weaker to the point of identity, where out of the reflexion of both texts through each other, the resonance of a new language emerges.

If such an identity, however, is proclaimed rather than produced through the patience and intensity of reading, it dissolves. The force of the resonance resounds from the irrevocable difference between the texts. To use a Hölderlinian image, they dwell "on most separate mountains." Not only the single text plunges from abyss to abyss, but the space between them is bottomless as well, however veiled this *Abgrund* might be by literary histories.

Just as the stars of a constellation have no relation to each other, there is no relation between texts. Only to the glance from astronomical distance do they form an image. Distance is the ground of their coherence.

## III

Distance and ground are spatial concepts, and spatial images prepare the scene for the signifying effects of language: surface and depth, intrinsic and extrinsic, signifier *over* signified. Hölderlin's poetic work is strongly marked by topological orders. Most obvious is the vertical relation: the blessed world of the gods "up there in the light" and the movement of the mortals "year long down into uncertainty" (FA 5, 401).

The curving of life's arc is determined by two opposing forces. The short ode *Lebenslauf* ("Course of Life") evokes them succinctly: "Hoch auf strebte mein Geist, aber die Liebe zog / Schön ihn nieder" ("High up strove my spirit, but love pulled beautifully it down"). The sublime is transformed, seemingly harmoniously, into the beautiful. The revisions indicate a dissatisfaction with this simple transformation. The high and the low do not merge that easily into the beauty of the curve. First they separate as alternatives: "Aufwärts oder hinab?" ("Upwards or downwards?"), Hölderlin writes in the first revision (FA 4, 202-03); and as if in response to this question, he notes a little further down on the page: "Aber öfter in der Tiefe" ("But more often in the depth"). There is no symmetry between the two forces. An exclamation mark replaces the question mark: "Aufwärts oder hinab!" The alternative, the either-or, is neutralized in indifference: up or down! Depth that weighs heavier on the scale of experience than that which is above must itself offer a ground for indifference and equivalence. The "lowest" *orkus* limits, as the lowest, the bottomless plunge from abyss to abyss. This grounding by and through the "lowest" remains, however, precarious and owes perhaps also too much to a spatial notion. A further revision points to another sphere: "Weht im nüchternen Orkus / Nicht ein liebender Othem auch?" ("Does not in the most sober orcus breeze a loving breath too?"), FA 4, 356-57). The opposition of height and depth is now replaced by that of the "sacred night" and the "sober orcus." Since night and orcus belong to the same realm, the significant Hölderlinian oxymoron of "sacred-sober" is united in one sphere.

The sobriety thus invoked, however, refuses to discard the spatial ground that the "higher" sense would like to displace as "mere" metaphor. The spatial order, which is also the order of writing, insists on sobriety, and thus inscribes itself again: "Herrscht

im schiefesten Orkus / Nicht ein Grades, ein Recht noch auch?" ([“Does not something straight, a right still rule even in the most oblique orkus?”], *FA* 4, 356–57). Now spatial perception and corresponding sense—“something straight, a right”—stand equally valid in the same lettered space. The “right” (*Recht*) points towards its topological ground: that which is rightly directed (*gerichtet*), i.e., the straight line, since injustice moves, as we know, on crooked paths.

The hieratic sobriety of Hölderlin’s late work flattens the lines and orients them towards the letter, that is to be cared for and interpreted. The upward standing curve of life’s course is transformed into the curved horizontal line of the rivers, paradigmatically condensed in the bend of the Rhine. Although the Rhine begins with a plunge downward, the significance of his course is shaped by the horizontal topology of the cardinal points: the desire towards East—the orient—and the forced bend toward North. Like writing, rivers inscribe the flat wilderness of the earth.

When Hölderlin writes in a letter of March 1804 about “picturesque views of the Rhine” announced by his publisher, his interest turns toward the “balance” of the earth against the sky translated into geometrical topology: “Much depends upon the angle within the work of art and upon the square outside of it” (*StA*, VI, 437). At the same time, Hölderlin’s correspondence with his publisher reveals an increased awareness of the physical forms of the printed letters. In December 1803 he writes to Wilmans about the print of the Sophocles translations: “I think that it will be easier for the eyes with such letters to find the meaning, because with all too sharp letters one is tempted to look only at the types. The beauty of the print seems, at least to me, not to lose. The lines stand in a firmer balance.” In the same way he scans, investigates, and reads the landscape of his homeland in the second letter to Böhlendorff. And even the light, “that must go aside at times” (*Chiron*, vv. 1–2) requires locality for its appearance: “and with yourself, locally, wandering star of the day, you appear” (*Chiron*, vv. 44–45).

With a sure sense, Benjamin’s reading of “Blödigkeit,” the latest version of “Dichtermuth,” focuses on the flat locality. Hölderlin’s revisions of this poem show again a transition from height to surface. While an early version illustrates the courage of the poet in the image of the wanderer in the alps, the mountain climber turns into a swimmer (*FA* 4, 150–51 and 260–61) until finally there remains only the

walking "on truth . . . like on carpets" (FA 5, 699). Without knowing the manifold and complex revisions of the poem,<sup>4</sup> Benjamin derives from this image what he calls *das Gedichtete* as the extension of a surface.

To be sure, the intensity of reading wants to penetrate the surface: "It would mean to remain on the surface, if one would see here only the transformation of a mythological perception into a sober walking" (II.1, 114). A deeper meaning has to be found than mere walking. The walking on the truth as on carpets assumes decisive significance through a transformation from the mythological to the mythic. Benjamin grounds the mythic character of the walking ("es gründet aber der mythische Charakter . . .") in the fact that the movement of walking "takes its course according to fate." It would be difficult to find two German terms more closely associated with profundity and depth than *Mythos* and *Schicksal* (fate). All the more remarkable is their vicissitude in Benjamin's text.

Everything is centered around the "law of identity" which Benjamin describes in the following terms: "All figures gain identity in the context of the poet's fate in such a way that they are sublated in one perception (*Anschauung*), and, as sovereign as they may appear, they finally fall back into the composition [more literally: "composedness" (*Gesetztheit*)] of the poem/song" (II.1, 113). In Benjamin's reading, this constitutes the major difference from an earlier version, where the relationship of the poet to the gods and to the people—the basis of his courage—seemed weak.

What is the foundation for the intensity of this double relationship of poetry: the mythical to the gods, the political to the people? Hölderlin's own poetry and poetics tend to search for a foundation in the praxis of life. The fragment of philosophical letters (traditionally known as "About Religion") establishes the lived experience of human relations as the constitutive ground:

And everyone would thus have his own god insofar as everyone has his own sphere in which he acts and which he experiences, and only insofar as several people have a common sphere in which they act and suffer as humans, i.e., beyond necessity, only insofar they have a common god; and if there is a sphere in which all humans live at the same time and in which they feel themselves in a more than necessary relation, then, but only then, they all have a common god. (FA 14, 45)

The insistent repetition of the condition—"only insofar"—indicates the experience of the almost total lack of such a lived experience. Benjamin, whose philosophical foundation emerges, as did that of Hölderlin, from an intensive reading of Kant, demanded no less than Hölderlin the relationship of experience and thought, to the point where he said, as Scholem quotes him, "A philosophy that does not include the possibility of soothsaying from coffee-grounds cannot be true philosophy" (II.3, 938). Scholem quotes this phrase in the context of a discussion about Benjamin's attempt at a "Program of the Coming Philosophy" (II.1, 157–71).<sup>5</sup> This essay, written only a few years after the Hölderlin essay (1917–18), begins at that point where Kant's philosophy has its objective limits: in the dearth of experience of his time that continues into Hölderlin's time and poetry: "Wozu Dichter in dürftiger Zeit" ("What are poets for in meagre times?"), *Brod und Wein*, v. 122). While Kant was able to "provide a valid analysis" in the realm of epistemology (II.1, 158), his philosophy suffers from the fact that it was carried out "under the constellation of the Enlightenment" and had as its object "an experience quasi-reduced to zero, to a minimum of significance" (II.1, 159). Thus Kant was forced "to map his way through the barren forest of the real," as Benjamin writes in the essay on the *Wahlverwandschaften* (I.1, 126). When Benjamin's "Program of a Future Philosophy" aims at "the epistemological foundation of a higher concept of experience under the typology of Kantian thought" (II.1, 160), and attempts "to find the sphere of complete neutrality in relation to the terms object and subject" (II.1, 163), he takes up once more that other program known as *Das älteste Systemprogramm des deutschen Idealismus* in which Hölderlin had his share, and which the editors of the Frankfurt edition published with good reason together with the fragment of philosophical letters.

It is all the more striking, therefore, that Benjamin states the successful coherence of a "completely unified and single world" in Hölderlin's poem without any recourse to historical experience. On the contrary, he criticizes the earlier version as imperfect, because it suffers from a "diminishing of its purity through too much proximity to life" (II.1, 111). There is apparently no direct relationship between life and art.

Benjamin's methodological remarks at the beginning of the Hölderlin essay develop the problem first in terms of the relationship between the poem and the "poematized" (*das Gedichtete*). *Das*

*Gedichtete* appears also as the "poetic task . . . derived from the poem itself" (II.1, 105). *Das Gedichtete* is immanent in the poem and derived from it. Indeed, one might speak of a certain pathos of immanence particularly in the early Benjamin.

The most radical critique must insist on immanence. In 1916 Benjamin writes to his friend Herbert Belmore: "at that time I learned that he who fights against the night must move its deepest darkness so that it gives out its light." He continues in the same letter: "True critique does not go against its object: it is like a chemical substance that attacks another only in that sense that, in decomposing it, it reveals its inner nature and does not destroy it" (*Br.*, 131-32).

The most intimate interior of the poem, *das Gedichtete*, is also named as its task. A task also shapes the aesthetic commentary of Benjamin; it is the first word of the essay: "Aufgabe der folgenden Untersuchung . . ." ("The task of the following investigation . . ."). In the concept of the task critique and poetry interpenetrate, just as it is "the task of the translator" to bring translation and "original" (which is not truly an original) into such a relationship that they approximate that language of which every linguistic utterance gives testimony without ever being it.<sup>6</sup>

The concept of the task removes the *Gedichtete* as well as critique from subjective expression. Although I can set for myself a task, it will be a true task only to the degree that it imposes itself on me or that it is imposed on me. The German word *Aufgabe*—that which is given, imposed—emphasizes the objective character of task, and it also denotes a mathematical problem. The mathematical connotation is significant for Benjamin's early thought. At the time when he wrote his most fundamental essay on language, "About Language as Such and About Human Language" ([*"Über die Sprache überhaupt und über die Sprache der Menschen"*], II.1, 140-57), he was interested in Scholem's studies on philosophy of mathematics and mathematical language (see *Br.*, 129). In the concept of the task one of the most enduring elements of Benjamin's thought found its earliest term: the ideal of the inexpressive or expressionlessness (*das Ausdruckslose, Ausdruckslosigkeit*). It is as essential for the critical text as for the poetic text.

More than any other modern poet, Hölderlin has affirmed this ideal for poetics at a time when the opposite aesthetic ideal, personal expression as the ground of authenticity, began to rule. Hölderlin ironically characterizes these tendencies as "the tired flight" of "love

songs" and he opposes them to the sublime and pure jubilation of "vaterländischer Gesänge," i.e., a poetry that concerns an intersubjective sphere, from where the gods and—insofar as there is one unifying sphere—the god emerge. The immense, if not impossible difficulty of such a task is demonstrated in Hölderlin's late poetry<sup>7</sup> where the interpretation and the care for the firm letter inexorably challenge the subject.

Pure language that, according to Benjamin, "no longer means or expresses anything, but is, as inexpressive and creative word, that which is meant in all languages" (IV.1, 19), participates as the inexpressive in the highest forms of linguistic utterances. In his essays on Moliere's *Le Malade imaginaire*, Benjamin speaks of the "depth of the inexpressive in tragedies" (II.2, 612). Expressionlessness and expression are unified as extremes in the image of the skull: "Incomparable language of the skull: complete expressionlessness—the blackness of the eye cavities—together with the wildest expression—the grinning rows of teeth" (IV.1, 112; see also IV.2, 936–37). The empty depth, the deep emptiness designate the place of the inexpressive, while the surface that blocks the glance into the depth appears as expression of an interiority that is empty.

In the image of the skull, the mystery of life in the work of art is enunciated:

No work of art may appear completely alive without becoming mere appearance and thus ceasing to be a work of art. Life, trembling in it, must appear petrified (*erstarrt*) and as if spellbound in one moment. Life, trembling in it, is beauty, the harmony that permeates the chaos and only seems to tremble. It is the inexpressive that commands this appearance to a halt, that spellbinds life and intervenes in the harmony. That trembling effects beauty, this petrification the truth of the work. Just as the interruption is capable of getting out the truth from a liar through the commanding word where it interrupts, thus the inexpressive forces the trembling harmony to a halt and immortalizes its trembling through the intervention. . . . The inexpressive is the critical force that, although it cannot separate appearance from truth, is yet able to prevent them from mixing. (I.3, 832)

With the concept of life a sphere is addressed that speaks with a particular pathos in the contemporary philosophy, literature and

criticism, be it as *Lebensphilosophie*, or be it, to mention only one example, in the early essayistic and aesthetic work of Lukács. Benjamin's involvement in the youth movement brought him into close contact with *Lebensphilosophie*. The categorical invocation of Life in the Hölderlin essay could be explained in this context: "The idea of the task is, for the creator, always Life. In it lies the other extreme functional unit. The *Gedichtete* shows itself as the transition from the functional unit of Life to the functional unit of the poem" (II.1, 107). One can hear in this phrasing, however, not only the language of the contemporary philosophy but also the resonance of Hölderlin. "Life" is a key term in his poetics, so much so that one could define the poetic procedure as a movement from life to "Life": emerging from a phase that is "still unreflected pure sensation of life," the poetic process has to go through a repeated inner reflection and dissonances until suddenly, "with one magic blow after another" a new kind of reflection and language calls for "the lost life more beautifully" (FA 14, 319).

Benjamin's concept of life is closer to Hölderlin than to contemporary *Lebensphilosophie*. The latter tends to determine the relationship of life and art in two opposite directions: either art is considered to emerge directly from life and grounded in *Erlebnis*, or the relationship is staged in the pathos of an opposition as popularized in Thomas Mann's narratives. Benjamin's determination of the relationship does not fit such alternatives. It does not appear as opposition, because the *Gedichtete* is the "transition from the functional unit of life to that of the poem," nor can art be derived directly from life, since "the weakest achievements in art relate immediately to life, the strongest however, according to their truth, to a sphere related to the mythical" (II.1, 107).

It is tempting in such cases to appeal to the all-solving magical potion "dialectic." The simple declaration that something is "dialectical" is, however, often only the refusal to work through the intricacies of a relation. Particularly in his early writing, Benjamin's thinking is marked by a strong dualism that does not allow for easy and lazy reconciliation. This tendency is articulated most clearly, not by chance, in the "Dialogue about Religiosity" ([1913], II.1, 16-35). There is a theological dimension in this mode of thought. Against a harmonious-pantheistic reconciliation of all spheres, religion is based upon dualism, albeit one that comes out of intensive "striving for unity with God" (II.1, 22). Dualism and striving for unity are complemen-

tary, but in such a way that unification is thinkable only in the radically other sphere of a messianic time. Everything else is declared by the I speaking in the dialogue as false mysticism or "decadence": "It [decadence] searches for a synthesis in the natural realm. It commits the deadly sin of making the spirit natural, of taking it for granted" (II.1, 32).

A radical cut separates the two spheres and determines the relationship of art and life. The transition from the functional unit of life to that of art is less a bridge than a leap over the abyss between the two.

Life as well as the poem appear not as substances that could be united with each other, but as functional units (*Funktionseinheiten*). Benjamin's notes to the *Wahlverwandtschaften*, quoted above, furthermore describe life as "trembling" or "quivering" (*Beben*): "Life, trembling in it [the work of art], must appear petrified and as spellbound in a moment" (I.3, 832). The German word *Beben* is not only related etymologically to *phobia*, but also physically to the impact of shock. As vibration in the right medium it produces music. Life as trembling constitutes *Stimmung*, a mood or tuning, that, as *Grundstimmung* or *Grundton*, forms the basis of poetic language in Hölderlin's poetics. Just as the distinct tone emerges through the intersection in the continuum of vibration, *Erstarrung* (petrification) intervenes in the trembling of life and brings it to a halt.

Petrification intervenes in the trembling of life and spellbinds it in the moment of truth. The magic wand of this spell is the inexpressive, circumscribed in the image of the empty eye-cavities of the skull: no longer "windows" of the soul, these expressionless cavities interrupt the specular exchange of glances.

Benjamin's grounding of the work of art in the intersection of petrification, in the moment of a caesura in the trembling continuum of life, is not unique. Büchner's Lenz advocates life against the abstractions of idealism in art and wants to catch it in its minute spasms (*Zuckungen*, also a kind of trembling). Therefore he wishes to be a Medusa-head in order to transform into stone the beautiful image of life.<sup>8</sup> Only through this violent caesura does life become art. Kristeva's foundation of poetic language in the intersection of the "thetic" with the *chora*—the Platonic trembling, shaking-shaken space—gains more than arbitrary resonance in this context.<sup>9</sup>

But here again, Benjamin could take the hint from Hölderlin. When Hölderlin takes up the question of representation in his fragment of philosophical letters, his answer begins with an incisive

caesura in the continuity of life: "Just as every satisfaction is a momentary standstill of *real* life, the more infinite satisfaction [i.e. the satisfaction of representation: "to remember one's fate," "to be thankful for one's life"] is a standstill too, only with this big difference that the satisfaction of a need is followed by a negativity, as for example animals usually sleep when they have satisfied themselves, whereas a more infinite satisfaction is also followed by a standstill of *real* life, but this one life takes place in the spirit" (FA 14, 46-47). In "Bread and Wine" people go home satisfied too, in order to sleep; the life of the day comes to an end so that an Other may rise, foreign and expressionless. The notes to the *Oedipus* translation, finally, determine the work of art as the intersection where "the living sense that cannot be calculated is brought into relation with the calculable law" (StA V, 195). Tragedy above all is marked significantly by the caesura (StA V, 196).

What kind of representation is it that emerges from the intersection of petrification and trembling? Negatively, it can be said, that it is neither a mirror of life nor a transparent window onto life. The eyes, whether considered as mirror or as windows of the soul, have dissolved in the death-skull of the work of art. How, then, can we circumscribe the inexpressive? Briefly, according to Benjamin, as surface and space. In this mode, the world of the *Gedichtete* has an affinity with the Platonic *chora*, evoked by Kristeva: a space, structured by an inner trembling or shaking.<sup>10</sup>

The trembling of the platonic space has an equivalent in the rhythm of the poem. In one of the most translucent passages of the essay, Benjamin represents Hölderlin's poetic rhythm:

Es gehen in gewichtig sehr abgehobnen Ordnungen Götter und Sterbliche in entgegengesetztem Rhythmus durch das Gedicht. [...] Die Lebendigen sind, jeweils deutlich, in dieser Welt Hölderlins, die *Erstreckung* des Raumes, der gebreitet Plan, in dem ... sich das Schicksal erstreckt.

In significant, very distinct orders, gods and mortals move in opposite rhythms through the poem. [...] The living ones are, always distinctly, in this world of Hölderlin, the *extension* of space, the expanded plane [or: plan], in which ... fate extends. (II.1, 113)

The intensity of a reading that does not want to stay on the surface

finds in the depth of the poem the pure extension of space and of surface, and the profundity of fate shows itself as the movement across this surface. As extension, fate performs the quality of space. The fact that this extension and expansion appear literally as *Plan* (both "plane" and "plan") testifies to a linguistic effect that is intimately connected with spatial representation: the difference of the visual-literal and the spiritual-metaphorical plane is collapsed onto one surface, into one plain meaning. The plan of fate is plain.

Benjamin takes the poem at its word ("Does your foot not walk on truth, as on carpets") precisely at the point when he does not want to stay on the surface. He reads literally truth as a *Lage*, something laid out, a carpet, a layer, a "situatedness." Like the Platonic *chora*, the space that is both shaking and shaken, the truth of the layer (*Wahrheit der Lage*) is both determining and determined: "The spatial and spiritual order turn out to be connected through the identity of the determining and the determined" (II.1, 114). The identity of the determining and the determined is the conceptual essence of autonomy, the counter-concept to fate, and enigmatically identical with it here in the walking of the poet.

The essential unity of Hölderlin's poem is mediated for Benjamin through the spatial conception of *Lage* which he reads "als Identität von Lage und Gelegenem" ("identity of that which is laying and laid out"), II.1, 115). Again language produces a double sense: *das Gelegene* is that which is laid out as a layer, but also the right occasion, opportunity, the red carpet rolled out for him or her who knows how to walk on it. Hölderlin's poem is quite literally grounded on this opportune carpet from which the genius can take his confidence: "Was geschieht, es sei alles gelegen dir!" ("Whatever happens, it must all be opportune to you!"). Every situation an opportunity: in the determined/determining word, fate is sublated through the positing of a will that determines the determining situation as opportunity. The opportunity of the situation is the result of a thetic position, composed as poem and song: "All figures gain identity in the context of the poet's fate in such a way that in it they are sublated in one conception (*Anschauung*), and as sovereign as they may appear, they finally fall back into the composition [*Gesetztheit*—more literally: composedness] of the poem" (II.1, 113).

While song (*Gesang* is Hölderlin's term for poem) points at the musical ground of poetic language, its composedness indicates the notation of writing. The poet is writer and composer, *Tonsetzer*, as an

archaic German word calls the composer. Both Hölderlin and Benjamin circumscribe the poetic activity in a vocabulary that is largely derived from the Latin *ponere* and that appears in German in the threefold form of *setzen*, *stellen*, *legen*. All three positions of *ponere* participate in Hölderlin's poem: the *Gesetzheit* (composedness) of the poem structures its appearance, the *Lage des Wahren* (the layer/situation/situatedness of the true) is its ground. But what about the *stellen* or *Gestellte*, that which is posited to stand? It is not lacking either; it appears in us, the beings that walk upright:

Der den denkenden Tag Armen und Reichen gönnt  
 Der zur Wende der Zeit, uns die Entschlafenden  
 Aufgerichtet an goldnen  
 Gängelbanden, wie Kinder, hält.

He who grants the thinking day to poor and rich  
 He who, at the turn of time, holds us the sleeping ones  
 upright on golden  
 Leading-strings, like children. (vv. 17-20)

The upright walk has long been the proud figure of autonomous man, of the enlightened free subject. Here, we read it slightly differently. The upright walk here is not our doing, rather we are *aufgerichtet* and kept on leading-strings. Thinking, the foundation of enlightened autonomy, is not denied but is strangely displaced in the "thinking day" that is only granted to us. Thus the poem enters into a subtle critique of Enlightenment without discarding it.

We are *mündig*, of age and able to use our mouths to speak, not when we insist on *our* thinking and manly erection, but when we, like the sovereign figures of the poem, fall back into the composedness of song and language and let its situatedness be opportune to us: the carpet on which we walk.

The *Lage* is concrete and visible in writing, in the disposition of the letters. To read what is written is Benjamin's task and vocation. He sees in the carpet not only its *Lage*, but also its texture and pattern: "seine Musterhaftigkeit, die geistige Willkür" ("its modelled pattern, the spiritual arbitrariness of the ornament"), II. 1, 115). Here, then, rather than in the poets, the gods, or the people, lies freedom as the assertion of the will of the spirit in the form of the ornament. And only insofar as the figures of the poem participate in the ornament,

insofar as they find themselves in this situation, do they participate in freedom.

A few years after the Hölderlin essay, Benjamin directs his attention specifically and literally to the position of writing. The essay on painting and graphics locates the essential difference as a difference of position: "An image demands to be held vertically before the beholder. A mosaic on the floor lies horizontally at his feet" (II.2, 602). This literally superficial way of looking at things leads precipitously into depth:

We are confronted here with a very deep problem of art and its mythical roots. One could speak of two cuts through the world-substance: the longitudinal section of painting and the cross section of certain graphics. The longitudinal section seems to be representative; it somehow contains the things; the cross section is symbolic: it contains the signs. Or perhaps it appears so only to *our* reading that we put the pages horizontally in front of us: and is there perhaps also a vertical position original to writing, like the inscriptions carved in stone?

In *Einbahnstrasse*. Benjamin takes the question up again and sketches a history of writing according to its dominant positions (IV.1, 102–104): "If, centuries ago, it [writing] began to lie down, from the upright inscription to the manuscript lying on the slanting desk, in order to be finally bedded flat in print, it now begins just as slowly to lift itself up from the ground again. Already the newspaper is read more in the vertical than in the horizontal; film and advertising finally push writing into the dictatorial vertical position" (IV.1, 103). Such a view of writing seems closer to the sacred than the secular sphere. But just as Mallarmé's hermetic poetry already suggests to Benjamin the ornamental arrangements of advertising scripts, Benjamin's attentiveness to the position of writing allows him to read the forest of advertising as a new mundane forest of symbols. Benjamin's thinking of writing is central to his essay on Goethe's *Wahlverwandtschaften* as well as to the *Trauerspiel* book. In his letter of March 5, 1924 to Scholem, he declares writing as the ornamental telos of his study of the *Trauerspiel*: "The last chapter leads precipitously into the philosophy of language; its object is the relation of type-face [*Schriftbild*—literally also "written image" or "image of writing"] and signification [*Sinnbestand*—"being of meaning"]" (*Br.*, 342).

Benjamin refers explicitly to the language theory of the romantic Johann Wilhelm Ritter, "whose tendency it is to establish the written sign as an equally natural and revelatory element . . . as the word has always been for the mystic conception of language [*Sprachmystiker*]; and he does not deduce this from the pictorial, hieroglyphic aspect of writing in the usual sense, but from the assertion that the written image [*Schriftbild*] is an image of the sound [*des Tones*] and not immediately of the thing signified" (*Br.*, 342-43).

As "image of the sound" (or of the tone), writing points at the composedness of song as the form of poetry. Hölderlin's poetics formulate this relation in the theory of the permutation of tones as the determining structure of poetry. It is usually treated as an idiosyncratic, hermetic theory of poetry, that is relevant, if at all, only for Hölderlin's poetry. Yet, it was conceived as a general theory of poetic language and of textual structure. Its principle is a double structural axis: one horizontal, one vertical. Horizontally, the text extends over a certain sequence of "tones." Through this spatial extension, the text appears as a temporal event. Benjamin refers to it, when he writes of the order of truth in the poem, that the intense activity of song is inscribed into it as an inner, graphic, temporal form (II.1, 115).

While the text thus extends over the sequence of its distinct moments, there is also in every moment a vertical axis in the form of one tone over another tone: to every tone appearing in the text corresponds a *Grundton*, a ground-tone, that, as such, does not appear, but becomes manifest in the following sequence. The text is structured as a double layer.

Hölderlin describes the difference of manifest and latent text in a specific difference of terms. He speaks generally of "tones" when it is a question of the horizontal, temporal axis of the text. In the vertical axis, however, he differentiates between *Grundton* (ground-tone) or *Grundstimmung* (ground-tuning) as opposed to the *Kunstcharakter* (artistic character) of the manifest text. The ground of the text, thus, belongs to a musical or tonal sphere, whereas its manifest appearance takes the form of character, *Gestalt*, image.<sup>11</sup> One might notice the striking analogies to Nietzsche's differentiation in the *Birth of Tragedy*, where the Apollinian formed image emerges as beautiful appearance out of the musical sphere of the Dionysian.

The differentiation of texts into a manifest form of appearance and a latent ground could be traced from Hölderlin to Nietzsche and

to present textual theories, as for example Kristeva's differentiation of genotext and phenotext (pp. 83–86). The genotext is thought of as a ground or base: "Le géno-texte se présente ainsi comme la base-sous-jacente au langage que nous désignerons par le terme de phéno-texte" ("The genotext, thus, presents itself as underlying the language which we call phenotext"), p. 84). It seems that a ground has been found. But can we build on it? However it is thought of, it is not *firm*, rather strangely soft, evanescent, ungraspable, something like a trembling or vibration, be it the pulsation of drives and their tracings or the vibration of tones, of moods, or the rush and trance of Dionysian music.

The search for the ground is generally a search for an origin. The thinking of the ground differs, however, from positivism and psychology in that it cannot think the ground without ungrounding it in the abyss as its limit.

"Ein Rätsel ist Reinentsprungenes" ("A riddle is the purely originated"): Hölderlin's gnomic utterance in the Rhine-poem points at this limit. Far from mystification, it demystifies all ideology from crudest positivism to speculative metaphysics that claim firm ground outside of the symbolic net.

Benjamin's early work is already involved in the delineation of origin as ground over the abyss: "The poetic task as precondition for an evaluation of the poem has to be found. . . . This task, this presupposition is to be understood here as the last ground that is accessible to analysis" (II.1, 105). The "last ground" is limited to that which is "accessible to analysis." Any attempt to go beyond that would be a plunge from abyss to abyss.

The essay on Goethe's *Wahlverwandtschaften* introduces the decisive difference between *Urgrund* (ultimate ground) and *Ursprung* (origin). Against Gundolf's sacralization and heroization of poetry and of the poet, Benjamin rigorously separates creation and artistic form: "Form originates [*entspringt*] in the unfathomable, whereas the creature is created from nothing," he writes in the notes to the essay (I.3, 830), while the essay itself denies any notion that poetry descends from God; it ascends "out of the unfathomable of the soul" ("aus dem Unergründlichen der Seele empor"), I.1, 159). The artist, then, is "less ultimate ground [*Urgrund*] or creator than origin or form-giver [*Bildner*]." The categorical difference of *Urgrund* and *Ursprung* separates the sphere of art from creation. Only an *Urgrund* could be a ground in the rigorous sense; origin is the

name for the absence of ground. The German word *Ursprung* is related to the ambivalence of *ent-springen* which indicates a point from which something leaps out and from which it escapes and that escapes it at the same time. *Ursprung* is less a ground than the enigmatic unfathomable.

What does it mean that poetry ascends from the unfathomable of the soul? First, it belongs to a human and not a divine sphere; but second, this human sphere cannot be *enunciated* as something preceding its poetic utterance (as for example psychological or sociological motivations believe). It is only in the symbolic representation. As such it is only appearance that fades for us into the unfathomable like the dream in what Freud calls its "navel": "Every dream has at least one spot where it is unfathomable, so to speak a navel through which it is connected with the unknown."<sup>12</sup>

Again we are led to the edge of the abyss as limit. But about the abyss we can say nothing. We speak over it from that point where speech rises up, as in the moment of awakening when we find ourselves again in the stream of discourse. The moment of waking up is a privileged point for Benjamin's attention: at significant moments it appears in his work. One of Benjamin's very early poems places the poet at "the edge of the immense abyss . . . between night and colorful life" (II.3, 832). From this twilight—*Dämmerung* is the title of another early poem—Benjamin's thought branches out. The fairytale of *Dornröschen* (Sleeping Beauty) was already in 1911 the image for Benjamin's involvement in the youth movement (II.1, 9–12), and it returns years later in the unpublished first preface of the *Trauerspiel* work in modified form as an allegory for the intention of this book to wake up the sleeping world of academia with a thundering slap on the ear. Later, Baudelaire's poems, their beginnings above all, mark the spot: "The particular beauty of so many of Baudelaire's first lines is: their emergence from the abyss" (II.2, 657). When Benjamin began to work on his project on the Parisian arcades and the nineteenth century, one of the central problems he faced was the status of the collective image as the phenomenalization of that entity that historians often take for granted: the collective subject as the agent and medium of historical coherence and homogeneity. One of the contemporary discourses that addressed this question was psychoanalysis, and Benjamin was planning to investigate proximity and difference of his notion of the collective image in relation to psychoanalytical theories. The point of proximity and distance that

Benjamin chooses is significant: not the world of the dream as such, but the moment of awakening, where alone, facing the day, the traces of the dream world are graspable. (On this point, Benjamin is closer to Freud than Freud's epigones, not to mention Jung). On June 10, 1935, Benjamin writes to Adorno: "I will study Freud in the near future. Can you think, by the way, whether there is such a thing, either in Freud or in his school, as a psychoanalysis of waking up? Or are there studies on this subject?" (V.2, 1121). They probably did not exist, nor do they exist today. But there is, in Kafka's work, something like a phenomenology of waking up. A passage of the *Trial*, crossed out by the author, reflects on that moment:

Someone told me—I can't remember who it was—that it was remarkable indeed that, when one wakes up early in the morning, one finds, at least in general, everything in the same place where it had been in the evening before. One has been after all in sleep and dream, at least apparently, in a condition essentially different from waking; and one needs, as that man remarked quite rightly, an immense presence of mind or rather a quickness of repartee (*Schlagfertigkeit*) in order to grasp, when one opens one's eyes, whatever there is, so to speak, at the same place where one left it in the evening. Therefore, the moment of waking up is the most risky moment of the day; if one has gotten over it without having been pulled away from one's place, one can be confident for the rest of the day.<sup>13</sup>

Benjamin leads us to that fragile ground and asks us to walk on it, no less than Hölderlin would have us step onto the carpet of truth.

## NOTES

1. On the relation of "mother tongue" and model text see the chapter "Vatertext und lyrisches Ich," in R. Nägele, *Unessbarer Schrift gleich: Text, Geschichte und Subjektivität in Holderlins Dichtung* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1985), pp. 123–30.
2. All quotations of Benjamin (in my own translation) from: *Gesammelte Schriften*. Werkausgabe Edition Suhrkamp, ed. Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppen-

häuser (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1978). Letters are quoted as *Br.*, page after: W. Benjamin, *Briefe*, ed. Gershom Scholem and Theodor W. Adorno (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1978).

3. Quotations of Hölderlin are, whenever possible, from the Critical Frankfurt edition, referred to as *FA*; otherwise from the Stuttgart edition, referred to as *StA*.

4. What Benjamin refers to as the "earliest version" is already a revised version which appeared in the Hellingrath edition as "second version."

5. This essay is now available in an English translation: "Program of the Coming Philosophy," *The Philosophical Quarterly*, 15 (1983), pp. 41-51.

6. See Benjamin's essay "The Task of the Translator." In the essay on the *Wahlverwandtschaften*, Benjamin subjects the concept of task to a radical critique and no longer considers it applicable to the work of art.

7. On the problem of subjective intervention see Peter Szondi, "Der andere Pfeil. Zur Entstehungsgeschichte des hymnischen Spätstils," *Schriften I* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1978), pp. 289-314. For a further discussion of the problem of subjectivity see also my recent book *Unessbarer Schrift gleich* (note 1).

8. Georg Büchner, *Sämtliche Werke und Briefe*, ed. Werner Lehmann (Hamburg: Christian Wagner, 1967), Vol. 1, pp. 449-51.

9. Julia Kristeva, *La Révolution du langage poétique* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1974), pp. 22 ff. On Plato's conception of the *chora* see *Timaios*, 52d-53c.

10. The fundamental importance of Plato's philosophy for Benjamin is most evident in his epistemological introduction to the *Trauerspiel* book. In a similar way as for Hölderlin, Plato and Kant are the pillars for the early development of Benjamin's thinking.

11. See Hölderlin's poetological fragments, especially *FA* 14, 369-72.

12. S. Freud, *Gesammelte Werke*, Vol. 2/3, p. 115; *Standard Edition*, Vol. 4, p. 110.

13. Franz Kafka, *Die Romane* (Frankfurt: S. Fischer, 1965), p. 465.