

# BENJAMIN'S THEORY OF THE LYRIC

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Benjamin's place in contemporary theoretical discussion is marked by ambiguity. On the one hand, his views are cited on nearly every question of importance to literary studies, a practice which certainly evinces general consensus regarding the importance of his immense and diverse corpus of work. On the other hand, these citations often take the form of appeals to an oracular authority; that is, rather than encourage theoretical reflection, they replace it. Paradoxically, it is precisely Benjamin's omnipresence in critical discourse today that occludes a serious critical engagement with his writing. Everyone "knows" about Benjamin; his texts are dissolved in *Gerede*. Perhaps only a second forgetting can save him.

This situation commands modesty on the part of a teacher or a writer who would take up Benjamin's work, and it is a modest task I have set for myself here. I offer a commentary on the essay from 1914, *Zwei Gedichte von Friedrich Hölderlin*.<sup>1</sup> Commentary is the discourse of modesty in that it does not seek to place itself above the text that is its subject matter, but rather endeavors to efface itself before the inner movement of that text. Hence, I will offer no decisions on the issues of the Benjamin debate such as the question of mysticism or materialism, nor any contributions to the periodization question, nor any speculations about the situation of the modern intellectual. I will simply try to adhere as closely as possible to the thought of this single text and to arrive at a statement of what Benjamin's theory of the lyric is.

## I. The Mode of Discourse: *ästhetischer Kommentar*

The initial gesture of Benjamin's text is one of delimitation, distinguishing the *mode of discourse* of his own study from that of traditional aesthetic inquiry. This complex rhetorical operation starts

by contrasting "generic construction" as the primary task of traditional aesthetic theorizing and *ästhetischer Kommentar* as the task of Benjamin's inquiry. (Let us note that Benjamin does not deny the legitimacy of genre construction. On the contrary, his opening move is to develop precisely such a construction, and in doing so he relies on others.) The term "commentary" is a rich one, resonant with a variegated history. Out of the fluidum of determinations that surrounds the term, Benjamin's opposition selects one: the discourse of commentary has as its object of study individual works as opposed to general regularities (genres).

Subsequently we shall see that the concept "individual work" is a problematic one for Benjamin; that the work itself, thought of as a completely determinate individuality, is an "absolute," an *Idee* in the Kantian sense, and therefore inaccessible to analysis. For the present, however, it is useful to take the opposition "general regularities" vs. "individual works" unproblematically, and to ask: does this opposition specify commentary as a hermeneutic inquiry? Hermeneutics, after all, involves interpretive engagement with individual works. This is an important question to ask because the present climate of theoretical discussion is characterized, especially in Germany, by an expansive, colonizing use of the term hermeneutics. Indeed, a certain universality (*Universalitätsanspruch*) has even been attributed to the term, an attribution which has successfully masked the contingency and limitations of hermeneutics as a discursive formation.<sup>2</sup> In view of this ideological expansionism, then, it is useful to stress the non-hermeneutic, the other-than-hermeneutic potential of the concept of commentary.<sup>3</sup> The first point to be made in this regard is that Benjamin never employs, throughout the text, the terms *Verstehen* or *Interpretieren* as designations of his own mode of inquiry. These terms, the leading ones of hermeneutics, designate mental or cognitive operations. As such—and in contrast to a term such as "commentary," which alludes to a tradition of textual practices—they set into motion that process of ideological universalization mentioned above which disavows the discursive specificity and positionality of the hermeneutic enterprise. But beyond this lexical matter, Benjamin's text bears the marks of a polemic against the predominant mode of hermeneutics available at the time of its writing, for Diltheyan hermeneutics takes as its object of inquiry that subjective process of creation rooted in the "Person oder Weltanschauung des Verfassers" (II, 105) for which Benjamin declares his unconcern. Benjaminian

commentary, by contrast, is directed toward an objective moment, not the process of *Dichten*, but *das Gedichtete*, the sphere of the work's truth. Benjamin repudiates the vitalist ideology of immediate expression which animates virtually all of post-Diltheyan *Literaturwissenschaft*.

Of course, in the work of Heidegger, and later in that of Gadamer, this antisubjectivism (antipsychologism, antiexpressionism) becomes itself a central feature of hermeneutics and Adorno was certainly correct to point out—precisely as regards the concept of *das Gedichtete*—affinities between the former and Benjamin.<sup>4</sup> I certainly do not want to deny these affinities here. On the contrary, it is my view that a ramified account of the Heidegger/Benjamin relationship is one of the central tasks facing contemporary theoretical discussion: one need only think of the astonishing parallels between *Die Zeit des Weltbildes* and *Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit*. For the present, however, and within the context of a polemical operation which seeks to resist a "hermeneutic" appropriation of Benjamin's text, I would accentuate an important difference between Benjamin's commentary and the Heidegger/Gadamer version of an ontologically based hermeneutics. This difference emerges first of all on the terminological plane: Benjamin remains true to the term "aesthetic" and the tradition of philosophical inquiry it designates, whereas both Heidegger and Gadamer reject this tradition as a version of modern subjectivism. This same difference reveals itself on the level of practice as well: Benjamin avoids altogether the drift toward turgid paraphrase, the antiartistic orientation toward the "essential message," that is the price both Heidegger and Gadamer pay for their rejection of aesthetics. The abstract negation of aesthetics as a means to recover the truth and objectivity of art runs aground, in Heidegger and Gadamer, on the reef of semanticism. Benjamin seeks something of the same pre-modern objectivity, but through a mediation of the modern tradition of aesthetic inquiry.

But how is Benjamin's practice of aesthetic commentary defined positively other than in its concern for individual works? Benjamin acknowledges that commentary has existed, albeit as subordinate to genre construction, throughout the tradition of aesthetic inquiry, adding, however, that it has been restricted to "classical" works, above all to tragedies. This statement allows us to define an essential feature of Benjamin's strategy here (and of his work generally). He

establishes his own discourse through a displacement of a particular discursive tradition. The traditional form of commentary is directed to the work as "classical"; its modesty and marginality are grounded in the *classical authority* of the work commented upon. Benjamin's discourse, however, carries this practice of commentary into domains from which it has been previously excluded, taking as its object non-classical texts (those of Hölderlin) from a subsidiary genre (the lyric). He endows the non-classical with the authority which traditionally is only accorded a limited canon; he maintains the stance of commentary (the acceptance of the authority of the text commented upon), but explodes the historical and generic limits of its use. It is exactly this strategy of displacement with regard to the notion of commentary that Benjamin makes explicit in his essay on Brecht's poetry: "Der Kommentar geht von der Klassizität seines Textes und damit gleichsam von einem Vorurteil aus. . . . Und es ist ein sehr dialektischer Sachverhalt, der diese archaische Form, den Kommentar, der zugleich eine autoritäre Form ist, im Dienste einer Dichtung in Anspruch nimmt, der nicht allein nichts Archaisches an sich hat sondern auch dem, dem heute Autorität zuerkannt wird, die Stirne bietet" (II, 539). If *Kommentar* is, as Benjamin formulates it elsewhere, the "Grundform jüdischen Denkens" (III, 106), then his own critical strategy—dialectically theological—is to apply this form to the aesthetic domain: to endow the secular text with an authority which, by tradition, it cannot possess.

It is important, I think, to stress the double nature of this displacement vis-à-vis the concept of the "classical." At once preserving the authority of that concept and dispersing it, Benjamin's aesthetic commentary contains both these moments, and it is as if to underline this point that he concludes his introductory lines with a further distinction: where commentary has moved beyond the limits of the "classical" traditionally conceived, Benjamin remarks, it has lost its philosophical intention, has become philological commentary. Philological commentary can direct itself to all texts, regardless of their classical character, but in doing so it homogenizes them, integrates them into an order of historical facts. The complete elimination of the moment of classicity nullifies the emphatic truth of the work, which Benjamin wants to preserve; it is an abstract (as opposed to dialectical) secularization of classical authority and as such it reduces—to take a related distinction from the *Wahlverwandtschaften* essay—the *Wahrheitsgehalt* of the work to a

philological *Sachgehalt*. What he here calls aesthetic commentary (and later, for reasons it would be interesting to speculate on, *Kritik*) has precisely this truth as its object of inquiry.

## II. Introduction of the Concept: *das Gedichtete*

Having circumscribed his own mode of discourse, Benjamin moves on to define his object of study. This object—that which aesthetic commentary would disclose (*aufweisen, ermitteln*)—is called *das Gedichtete*. Not merely the terminological innovation, but also the considerable labor of explication that he devotes to the introduction of this concept point to the extraordinary complexity (and intellectual ambition) of Benjamin's thought here. In fact, one would be hard pressed to name a work in literary theory which is more conscientious as regards this decisive issue of the constitution of the object of inquiry. The fact is that Benjamin does not provide a compact and punctual definitions of *das Gedichtete*, but rather situates the concept, as it were, stereoptically within an array of frames of reference. He defines it five times over and each of these five "takes" on the concept engages fundamental issues in the philosophy of literature. Let us consider them in sequence.

A. *Anacritic Definition*. *Das Gedichtete* is first defined through an *Anlehnung* on tradition. In other words, Benjamin gives himself support by leaning on, but at the same time bending to his use, three traditional terms drawn from what we can call classical-romantic aesthetics. Of course, the subsequent definitions of *das Gedichtete* are anacritic in this intertextual sense as well insofar as they rework pre-existing conceptualizations of the literary object of study; but in this initial case the terms, and the authors associated with them, are openly and deliberately cited. They are *innere Form* (Humboldt), *Gehalt* (Goethe), and *Ideal a priori* (Novalis). It would be senseless to attempt to say anything definite here about "influences"; we are not faced with a genuine *Auseinandersetzung* with the theories of the three named writers. Rather, the traditional terms, each of which is surrounded by a nimbus of associations, have been detached from the particular discursive contexts in which they were formulated and set into the text (*hineinmontiert*) to resonate. This move at once establishes a certain legitimacy for what is to follow, and indicates a vague direction for the ensuing construction of the theoretical object. Thus, all that can be rigorously said on the basis of these citations is that the concept *das Gedichtete* names a structure which includes what are

called formal and contentual elements, a structure which, as the unity of form and content, cannot be grasped within that categorical opposition. This effort to think beyond the dichotomy of form and content, it seems to me, is what Benjamin borrows from his classical-romantic precursors, a point which is made explicit in a later passage: "Das Gedichtete unterscheidet sich als Kategorie ästhetischer Untersuchung dadurch, dass es die fundamentale ästhetische Einheit von Form und Stoff in sich bewahrt und anstatt beide zu trennen, ihre immanente notwendige Verbindung in sich ausprägt" (II, 106). Of course, nothing is more common in literary theory than the appeal to the unity of form and content, an appeal often supported through reference to the authority of classical-romantic thought. The proof of Benjamin's theoretical stature will be the degree to which he is able to transcend this abstract claim and to think concretely the nature of this aesthetic unity. That such is indeed the case becomes clear as we move to the second conceptual take on *das Gedichtete*.

B. *Praxis-oriented Definition*. The central terms here are task and solution (or fulfillment), terms that are drawn from the sphere of what we might call practical doing, for it is activities—*praxis*—which have tasks that they either fulfill or do not. The term "task" (*Aufgabe*—that which is given up to the activity to be done) receives initial accentuation, but it must be emphasized that, even as *das Gedichtete* is the task of the poem, it is also its *Erfüllung*. It is the sphere in which task and fulfillment are mediated and pass over into one another. What I think is at play in this aspect of Benjamin's definition is the Aristotelian concept of *poesis* as an activity that has its end in itself. The task which *poesis* fulfills is not, as in practical/purposive activity, extrinsic to the activity; it is not given in advance, but rather emerges only within the activity. The task is its own accomplishment. Hence, the task can only be derived, constructed, from the activity, in our case, the poem: "Nicht danach kann die Bewertung sich richten, wie der Dichter seine Aufgabe gelöst habe, vielmehr bestimmt der Ernst und die Grösse der Aufgabe selbst die Bewertung. Denn diese Aufgabe wird aus dem Gedichte selbst abgeleitet" (II, 105).

C. *Structural Definition*. *Das Gedichtete* is thirdly defined as a particular type of structure, as the "unity" of two orders: It is "die geistig-anschauliche Struktur derjenigen Welt, von der das Gedicht zeugt" (II, 105); the "synthetische Einheit der geistigen und anschaulichen Ordnung" (II, 106). The structure in question, then,

relates two sub-structures—a sensate-perceptual order and an intellectual order—and the name of this relation is “Einheit.” The terms “anschaulich” and “geistig” remain relatively vague here, although they certainly carry a Kantian, or idealist resonance. What Benjamin focuses on, rather, is the nature of the relation into which these orders are brought, and it is here that his theoretical project reveals affinities with the formalist-structuralist tradition of aesthetic thought. As mentioned, this relation is called unity, but its more precise definition is that of *Identität*. The unity of the two orders is achieved when they are brought into a relation of “identity.” Identity does not mean here sameness of substance. It is a relational concept, and it implies that both orders, and all the elements within them, belong to a single system of relations which is determined by a “law”: what Benjamin calls *das Identitätsgesetz*. Each individual element, then, is a condensation of “functions” within the functional system (or *Funktionseinheit*); it has its identity only within this system, and the system governs all the sensate-perceptual elements (from rhythm and punctuation through “images”) and all the intellectual elements (the concepts set into play by the text) equally. No element can be defined “outside” the text. Another way of putting this is to say that the text contains no “elements,” for the self-identity of the element presupposes that it exist outside the system: “[Der Darstellung des Gedichteten] kann es nicht um den Nachweis sogenannter letzter Elemente zu tun sein. Denn solche gibt es innerhalb des Gedichteten nicht” (II, 108). *Das Gedichtete* is a sphere of relations and each apparent element is really only a bundle of these relations, a functional nexus which refers to all the other functions operative within the text.

D. *Semantic Definition*. I want semantic to be understood here in the strong sense in which one says, for example, that a semantics for a language will necessarily contain a theory of truth in that language, for Benjamin is adamant that *das Gedichtete* is the sphere of the text’s “truth”: “In ihr [der Sphäre des Gedichteten] soll jener eigentümliche Bezirk erschlossen werden, der die Wahrheit der Dichtung enthält. Diese ‘Wahrheit,’ die gerade die ernstesten Künstler von ihren Schöpfungen so dringend behaupten, soll verstanden sein als Gegenständlichkeit ihres Schaffens, als die Erfüllung der jeweiligen künstlerischen Aufgabe” (II, 105). It is this insistence on the emphatic truth (recall what was said above regarding “classicity”) of the work that distinguishes Benjamin’s theoretical construction from

the formalist-structuralist position to which, in other respects, it bears such notable similarities; the systematic relations disclosed by structuralist analysis are indifferent as regards their truth value. At the same time, however, it should be stressed that Benjamin's notion of truth is by no means easily assimilable into one of the "truth theories" available today. Indeed, the uncharacteristic use of quotation marks at that point where he introduces the concept suggests a conceptual swerve away from any traditional use of the term. The truth of the poetic text is immanent to that structural sphere of identity which is *das Gedichtete*; it is the passage of task into fulfillment, the realization of this passage in what Benjamin calls the *Gegenständlichkeit* (roughly and provisionally: material objectification) that emerges from poetic writing.

E. *Methodological Definition.* The methodological awareness that caused Saussure to write, at the outset of his *Cours*, that "it is the [theoretical] viewpoint that creates the object"<sup>5</sup> of study, is manifest as well in Benjamin's remarks. *Das Gedichtete* is not an object in itself, but is the product (as well as the object) of the inquiry: "Diese Sphäre [des Gedichteten] ist Erzeugnis und Gegenstand der Untersuchung zugleich. Sie selbst kann nicht mehr mit dem Gedicht verglichen werden, sondern ist vielmehr das einzig Feststellbare der Untersuchung" (II, 105). *Das Gedichtete* is a model produced through an abstraction from the full determination of the text in its actuality, a virtual object.

### III. Metaconceptual Definition

The fivefold definition of *das Gedichtete* can be called a "conceptual" definition insofar as it specifies the determinations which give the concept its "content." But one can also ask the question: what *kind of concept is das Gedichtete?* How does it emerge *as concept?* Let us call this step from content to structure a metaconceptual reflection, that is, a reflection which asks after the conditions of possibility of the concept employed. It is on this metaconceptual level (a level rarely attained in literary-theoretical work) that Benjamin's theoretical enterprise acquires its genuinely *synthetic* power, for it is here that we discover how the five aspects of the conceptual definition—anaclitic, praxis-oriented, structural, semantic, and methodological—fit together, how their specific array delineates *one and the same sphere*.

We can perhaps get a handle on this very intricate movement of

Benjamin's thought by contrasting it with a more familiar paradigm. The classical structuralist position defines its object of study as a "system of relations" and we have seen that both the structural and methodical aspects of Benjamin's definition reveal remarkable similarities to this structuralist view. However, according to the structuralist position, this system itself is not relational; it is rather conceived as a positive entity which can be attended to in a theoretical regard. The task of analysis is to develop a model of this empirical-psychological object, the conditions of possibility of which are never called into question.

But it is precisely the conditions of possibility of the concept *das Gedichtete* which concern Benjamin in the second and third paragraphs of his essay, and of course it is the thought of Kant, specifically the notion of *Idee*, to which he turns. Kant writes:

Ich verstehe unter der Idee einen notwendigen Vernunftbegriff, dem kein kongruierender Gegenstand in den Sinnen gegeben werden kann. . . . Sie sind Begriffe der reinen Vernunft: denn sie betrachten alles Erfahrungserkenntnis als bestimmt durch eine absolute Totalität der Bedingungen. Sie sind nicht willkürlich erdichtet, sondern durch die Natur der Vernunft selbst aufgegeben, und beziehen sich daher notwendigerweise auf den ganzen Verstandesgebrauch. Sie sind endlich transzendent und übersteigen die Grenze aller Erfahrung, in welcher also niemals ein Gegenstand vorkommen kann, der der transzendentalen Idee adäquat wäre.<sup>6</sup>

*Ideen* belong to the conditions of possibility of our knowing insofar as they anticipate the totality of the object in question; this unrepresentable totality orients inquiry by, as it were, casting its light back onto the movement of the investigation. In Benjamin's view, the concept of *das Gedichtete* occupies a space defined by two such ideas: on the one hand, the poem itself (*das Gedicht*), in its full actuality, and on the other hand, "life" (*das Leben*). *Das Gedichtete* is the limit concept (*Grenzbegriff*) that marks the differentiation and articulation of these two spheres, which, as ideas, cannot themselves be given to a representation. Thus, far from being a positive, empirical entity, *das Gedichtete* is a relational sphere, the site where *Gedicht* and *Leben* pass over into one another.

The task of the analysis, then, is to chart the differential move-

ment—the limit—between “poem” and “life.” Within this movement, each of the contentual determinations of the concept *das Gedichtete* acquires its specific function and sense. As regards the praxis-oriented perspective, we can note that for Kant the *Ideen* are “aufgegeben” (above quotation). For Benjamin, the “task” posed in the *Idee* likewise implies the idea of “fulfillment” (“Denn Aufgabe und Lösung sind nur in abstracto trennbar” [II, 107]). Hence “life” becomes the “Idee der Aufgabe,” the poem the “Idee der Lösung,” and *das Gedichtete* is defined as the sphere in which task and fulfillment are mediated. In terms of the structural definition, it is useful to recall that the Kantian *Idee* designates the “synthetische Einheit” (p. 359) of all the determinations of its object, and that this is precisely the term Benjamin employs with regard to *das Gedichtete*. However, this unity (or structural identity) is never complete in *das Gedichtete*; such thorough-going structuration is, rather, the methodological goal defined by the two ideas in which the analysis would attain its “absolute”: “Die Ermittlung des reinen Gedichteten, der absoluten Aufgabe, muss nach allem Gesagten das rein methodische, ideelle Ziel bleiben. Das reine Gedichtete würde aufhören Grenzbegriff zu sein: es wäre Leben oder Gedicht” (II, 108). Thus, the methodological and structural definitions go hand in hand: the abstractive “Absehen” from certain determinations of the poem is conditioned by the fact that the full determinateness of the text (its “Totalität der Bedingungen,” in Kant’s terms)—like the totality or “Funktionseinheit” of “life”—is “nicht erfassbar” (II, 108). Finally, the semantic definition: if the “truth” of the work resides in this sphere, it is because *das Gedichtete* is the passage between the two ideas “life” and “poem.” The truth in question here is not an *adequatio* of works/ideas to things, but rather a self-determination of life through the poem: “Das Gedichtete erweist sich also als Übergangssphäre von der Funktionseinheit des Lebens zu der des Gedichts. In ihm bestimmt sich das Leben durch das Gedicht, die Aufgabe durch die Lösung” (II, 107). Poetic writing does not mirror being, but rather delineates, and in delineating brings forth, the constellation of being. This constellation—“ein durch die Kunst bestimmter Lebenszusammenhang” (II, 107)—has the form of a “geistig-anschauliche Struktur.”

The metaconceptual reflection, then, gathers together the praxis-oriented, structural, semantic and methodological aspects of the concept *das Gedichtete* by locating that concept in a structural space

defined by the absolute poles of *Gedicht* and *Leben*, "ideas" in the Kantian sense. In doing so, this arc of reflection culminates in an ontological definition of *das Gedichtete* as the self-delineation of being through art. But this conception (especially the formulation: "In ihm [dem Gedichteten] bestimmt sich das Leben durch das Gedicht . . .") seems to verge on a vitalist, expressivist view such as we find in Dilthey. It is in part to combat the identification of his thought with such a view that Benjamin introduces the concept of *Mythos*:

Gerade die schwächsten Leistungen der Kunst beziehen sich auf das unmittelbare Gefühl des Lebens, die stärksten aber, ihrer Wahrheit nach, auf eine dem Mythischen verwandte Sphäre: das Gedichtete. Das Leben ist allgemein das Gedichtete der Gedichte—so liesse sich sagen; doch je unverwandelter der Dichter die Lebenseinheit zur Kunsteinheit überzuführen sucht, desto mehr erweist er sich als Stümper. (II, 107)

The causal-expressive generation of text by life disqualifies the product. Only when life, in determining itself through art, makes its passage through the detour and transformation of the mythic does it achieve truth and genuine aesthetic dignity. The concept of *Mythos* does not designate an inherited narrative representation (for this notion Benjamin employs the terms *Mythologie*), but a structure in which the elements achieve a maximum degree of *Verbundenheit* (II, 109). It is this feature of structural binding which brings the concepts of *Mythos* and *das Gedichtete* into such proximity that the categories of the former can be applied (through a process Benjamin himself calls *Anlehnung* [II, 107]) to the latter. At the same time, however, Benjamin is careful to distinguish the two concepts. Indeed, the closing sentence of the theoretical introduction to the essay indicates that the two concepts are related not merely by similarities and differences, but rather that *das Gedichtete*, as the particular sort of structural unity it is, comes about through an operation performed on the mythic: "Während die Analysis der grossen Dichtungen nicht zwar auf den Mythos, aber auf eine durch die Gewalt der gegeneinanderstrebenden mythischen Elemente gezeugte Einheit als eigentlichen Ausdruck des Lebens stossen wird" (II, 108). The structure of *das Gedichtete*, earlier defined as the "Einheit der geistigen und anschaulichen Ordnung," is here declared to be an "Einheit" of

conflictual mythic elements. In other words, *das Gedichtete* comes about as an overcoming of the mythic, a negation of the mythic conflict in a structure that brings that conflict (that *Gegen-einanderstreben*) to rest.

#### IV. The Argument of Benjamin's Hölderlin Reading.

The basic task of the Hölderlin reading is to demonstrate how his texts enact the problematic of *das Gedichtete* elaborated in the theoretical introduction. This task is accomplished across two phases or argument. First, Benjamin devotes a brief analysis to the text *Dichtermut*, showing that it is determined on the one hand by a reliance on the "mythological"—that is, a set of borrowings from a narrative system that is given outside the text and which the text can therefore not integrate into its own order—and on the other hand by a diffuse concept of *Leben*. *Dichtermut*, in other words, is revealed to be a text in which *das Gedichtete* is not fully achieved, in which that sphere is characterized by "Vereinzelung der Gestalt" and "Beziehungslosigkeit des Geschehens" (II, 111). This analysis then sets up a contrastive background against which the realization of *das Gedichtete* as "synthetische Einheit der anschaulichen und geistigen Ordnung" can be demonstrated with regard to the poem *Blödigkeit*. Only this second phase of Benjamin's reading will concern me here. The reading of *Blödigkeit* addresses itself to four thematic spheres (each marked off typographically by paragraph divisions): 1) the abstractly defined structural "identity" of orders in the text; 2) the order of the *Lebendigen*; 3) the order of the *Götter*, 4) the nature of *Mut* or *Blödigkeit*. My procedure will be to consider in this section the first three phases of this reading together. In the subsequent section of my commentary I will compare the dynamics of Benjamin's argument with a semiotic problematic which Benjamin himself elaborated in a pair of theoretical fragments written some three years after the Hölderlin essay. Via this detour through the philosophy of signification I hope to prepare an understanding of the final (4) turn of Benjamin's reading, the discussion of which will return us to the question of the "mythic."

The structural node which provides for Benjamin's reading its point of departure is given in the lines from strophe III: "Denn, seit Himmlischen gleich Menschen, ein einsam Wild / Und die Himmlischen selbst führet, der Einkehr zu / Der Gesang. . . ." The analysis of these lines focuses on their rhetorical strategy. The

paratactic emendation ("und die Himmlischen selbst") brings about a sublation of the simile preceding it such that the two orders which the simile compared—and which therefore were *separated* as paradigm and copy—are drawn into, and become functions of, one and the same order, that of *Gesang*. In tracing out this rhetorical movement Benjamin establishes the trajectory for his entire reading. It will be a question here not of "applying" the conceptual apparatus of the introduction to a particular text, but rather of showing how that conceptual problematic engenders the very movement of the text. Thus, Benjamin reads the equalization of "men" and "gods" in "song" as a figuration of *das Gedichtete*: the poem performs the emergence of that "Identität der anschaulichen und geistigen Formen unter-und miteinander—die raumzeitliche Durchdringung aller Gestalten in einem geistigen Inbegriff, dem Gedichteten . . ." (II, 112). The first phase of the analysis, then, establishes a grid of equivalences, which we can chart as follows:

Lebendigen	anschauliche Ordnung
Himmlischen	geistige Ordnung
Gesang	das Gedichtete
Schicksal des Dichters	Identitätsgesetz

This schema can be considered as a conceptual map for the remainder of Benjamin's analysis, which undertakes to articulate the inner logic and movement of each of the terms arrayed here. In this way, the abstract character of the initial interpretive hypothesis is overcome in the specific dynamics of the reading.

The figuration of the *anschauliche Ordnung* in the order of the *Lebendigen* unfolds as a metaphorical spatialization: "Die Lebendigen sind, jeweils deutlich, in dieser Welt Hölderlins, die *Erstreckung des Raumes, der gebreitet Plan, in dem . . . sich das Schicksal erstreckt*" (II, 113). Decisive here is that the space of the "living" is not thought as volume, but rather as two-dimensional surface, as plane. And if, as Benjamin claims, both "living" and "gods" are only "Dimensionen" of *das Gedichtete*, then we can say that the first of these dimensions is a certain horizontality. The central point, however, is that this horizontality does not enter the text as indefinite and empty expanse, but rather as a surface articulated, inscribed with an order (and hence related by "identity" to a *geistige* sphere). This is the thought that Benjamin develops with regard to the

powerful second line of Hölderlin's text: "Geht auf Wahrem dein Fuss nicht, wie auf Teppichen?" The line specifies the poet's "acquaintance" with the "living" as a patterned movement across a surface. This "walking out" is the poet's destiny; its every step constitutes the true. In what is probably the boldest move of his entire reading, Benjamin concretizes this notion of pattern by interpreting the carpets as "oriental": the poet's steps trace out the windings of the carpets' ornamental design. The notion of ornament forms the crux of Benjamin's reading: in its peculiar logic of "Lage" (II, 114), in which every point is at once determining of and determined by all others, the ornament—this asemantic inscription of a plane—realizes the *Identität der geistigen und anschaulichen Ordnung* which is *das Gedichtete*.

Of course, the poetic task is not yet complete. The ornament figures, to be sure, the unity of orders, but does so only with regard to the "living," the dimension of horizontality. There remains another dimension to be considered, that of the gods, a dimension which is characterized by plasticity (or *Gestalt*) and temporality. This is the sphere where *das Geistige* reigns, just as the living represent the sphere of *Anschaulichkeit*. Thus, it is no accident that at every point where Benjamin explicates the spatial figuration of the "living" he hits upon a moment of plasticity and temporality that signals the intervention of the spiritual/intellectual within the sensate/intuitive. This is the case with all his local readings in this section of the essay: the reading of the ornamental carpet, of the notion of *Gelegenheit*, of the phrase "zur Freude gereimt." What marks these interventions is in every case a "Dissonanz": "Diese Dissonanzen heben im dichterischen Gefüge die aller räumlichen Bestimmung einwohnende zeitliche Identität und damit die absolut bestimmende Natur des geistigen Daseins innerhalb der identischen Erstreckung hervor" (II, 117). Dissonance—this differential strife—is the unity of the two "gegeneinanderstrebenden" orders within the order of *Anschaulichkeit*, the realization of *das Gedichtete* as absolute script.

The integration of the living into the poet's destiny—the articulation of a spiritual/intellectual principle across a horizontal plane—culminates in a peculiar deadening: a radical abstraction and "Vereinzelung" in the phrase "einem zu etwas"; an "Entpersönlichung" (II, 116) of the people on the surface of its mosaic-like arrangement. Benjamin calls this process "Versachlichung" (II, 118),

a tendency toward reification, toward the material world of prose. At this point, the full significance of this notion cannot be stated, but I introduce it here in order to indicate the direction of the second movement which Benjamin's reading traces out, for the entire logic by which the gods—the *geistige Ordnung*—are brought into, and made functions of, the poetic destiny (*Gesang*) tends precisely toward such materialization and objectification, toward prosaic sobriety.

As the "Gegensatz" (II, 118) of the living, the gods represent an intensive formative principle of plasticity. This principle is one of identity, but, whereas identity in the ornamental order of the living was constituted as the extensive relationality of locations on a surface, in the realm of the gods it appears as the intensive self-identity of the *Gestalt*. The *Gestalt* is the whole that it is by virtue of an inward concentration, an immanent plasticity which Benjamin sees as a function of time. Thus, his discussion of the gods focuses on the phrases "der denkende Tag" and "Wende der Zeit," in which temporal, intellectual, and plastic-architectonic registers complexly interfuse. The time of the gods is not the linearity of horizontal articulation, but rather the full self-presence of the *Gestalt* to itself. The operation which the poet must perform with regard to this self-presence of the gods is more complex than in the case of the living. In effect, he intensifies the principle of *Gestalt* to such a degree that the principle reverses itself, becoming its opposite. This intensification or inner concentration moves first in the direction of the *Idee*, of absolute-presence, from which point it reigns sovereign over the poetic world: "Zugleich aber bedeute[n] sie [die Götter] die reine Welt zeitlicher Plastik im Bewusstsein; die Idee wird in ihr herrschend; wo vordem das Wahre der Aktivität des Dichters eingeschlossen war, tritt es nun beherrschend in sinnlicher Erfülltheit auf" (II, 120). A self-generating, autonomous form, the commanding presence of the truth in the work of art: here the text brings to figuration the classical ideal of the artwork as "sinnliches Erscheinen der Idee" (Hegel), an ideal which was, of course, developed with reference to the Greek gods. And yet this point of absolute sovereignty, of the full self-presence of the *Gestalt* in the *Idee* is likewise the point at which the *Gestalt* becomes *gestaltlos*: "Die gleiche Identitätsbeziehung, die hier im intensiven Sinn zur zeitlichen Plastik der Gestalt führt, muss im extensiven Sinne zu einer unendlichen Gestaltform führen, zu einer gleichsam eingesargten Plastik, in der die Gestalt mit dem Gestaltlosen identisch wird" (II, 120). At the extreme of their own principle where

they attain to the full self-presence of the Idea, the gods die, they are "en-coffined," reified to dead objects, in which *Gestalt* and *das Gestaltlose* are indistinguishable. This deadening effect again carries the name of "Versachlichung" (II, 120); it is the movement by which the gods cease to rule the poetic cosmos and instead are made functions of that cosmos. This movement culminates in the phrase from the final strophe: "und von den Himmlischen / Einen bringen." Benjamin's commentary: "Die Gestaltung—das innerlich plastische Prinzip, ist so gesteigert, dass das Verhängnis der toten Form über den Gott hereingebrochen ist, dass—im Bilde zu sprechen—die Plastik von innen nach aussen umschlug und nun völlig der Gott zum Gegenstande wurde" (II, 121). *Das Gedichtete* is realized—this is the movement Hölderlin's text enacts—when the commanding principle of the spiritual/intellectual order, the principle of self-presence, is broken. As "tote Unendlichkeit" the god is "brought": objectified "zum versachlichten Sein der Welt im Gedanken . . ." (II, 121).

#### V. Graphics and *Gestalt*

Benjamin's commentary seeks to capture the problematics of *das Gedichtete* in the figurational (and disfigurational) movement of Hölderlin's text. This movement is double: two "gewichtig sehr abgehobenen Ordnungen"—the "gods" and the "living"—proceed "in entgegengesetztem Rhythmus" (II, 113) through the poem in order finally to be integrated as functions of the poet's destiny, of *das Gedichtete*. In the theoretical introduction, these orders were called *anschaulich* and *geistig*, but their precise nature remained unclear. In the light of Benjamin's reading, however, they can be more precisely defined. *Das Gedichtete* proves to be the intersection of two modes of signification: graphics and *Gestalt*.

I draw support for this thesis from two theoretical fragments by Benjamin dating from 1917 and entitled, respectively, *Malerei und Graphik* and *Über die Malerei oder Zeichen und Mal*. These fragments develop what can be called semiotic concepts, but do so in such a radically innovative way that they cannot be assimilated to any existing semiotic theory. Indeed, it is precisely the generally accepted semiotic notion that graphic and painted representations belong to the same class which Benjamin's fragments put into question. The inherited view considers semiotic phenomena in terms of the relation sign/signified object. Pictorial representations, be they graphic or

painted, signify by virtue of their similarity to the object and hence are iconic.<sup>7</sup> As such, they are distinguished, say, from written linguistic signs which refer to their objects by virtue of a rule or convention, and which Peirce, for instance, calls symbols. Benjamin's break with this classificational schema rests on the fact that he dispenses altogether with its semantic, or representational, basis; for him the relation sign/object signified is without theoretical pertinence. Instead, he organizes his investigation around the axis of material presentation, the relationality to the body of the viewer. This theoretical reorientation yields a distinction between graphics and painting as belonging to two radically heterogeneous spheres. Painting is positioned perpendicularly to the ground, it stands opposite the viewer, whereas graphic works, at least in their ordinary form (e.g., childrens' drawings) are spread out horizontally. Nothing is said about content or representational force, which we (like semiotic theory generally) would ordinarily take to be the essential matter. Rather, Benjamin's thought establishes itself at a level of inquiry prior to semantic considerations, the level of material deployment, and it is here that he discloses an antinomy fundamental to art generally: "Man könnte von zwei Schnitten durch die Weltsubstanz reden: der Längsschnitt der Malerei und der Querschnitt gewisser Graphiken" (II, 603).

Of course I do not mean to claim that this distinction coincides with that between the "gods" and the "living"; indeed, I will subsequently stress an important divergence between them. Nevertheless, the similarities between the Hölderlin essay and the aesthetic fragments are strong enough to warrant interpretive comparison. This is especially the case as regards the graphic domain and the poetic figuration of the living. Both are characterized by a horizontal dimensionality across which the inscription is made. Furthermore, Benjamin designates the living at one point as the "Zeichen und Schrift" of poetic destiny, just as the graphic sphere is said to be that of signs generally, one of whose subtypes is "Schriftzeichen." The correspondence becomes still more precise when we consider the analysis of the graphic line elaborated in the second fragment: "Die graphische Linie bezeichnet die Fläche und bestimmt diese indem sie sie sich selbst als ihrem Untergrund zuordnet" (II, 603). This relationship of line and ground recapitulates that between the "poet" and the "living" exemplified in the ornament. Finally, we can note that the first example from the graphic sphere that Benjamin alludes to is a mosaic laid out on the floor and that he likewise describes the

"people" articulated by the poet's movement across their surface as a "Byzantine mosaic" (II, 106). What these points of contact reveal (and others could be cited) is the basis of Benjamin's reading of the "living": if they represent one of the fundamental dimensions of *das Gedichtete*, it is because they are figurations of a fundamental semiotic modality, the sphere of the graphic in general.

Such rigorous equivalence cannot be established between the "gods" and painting. As we have seen, the central feature of the former is *Gestalt*, a concept which appears not at all in the aesthetic fragments (although plasticity and architectonics are mentioned in connection with the "painterly" region). Painting belongs to the general sphere of the *Mal* (an untranslatable term) many of whose manifestations (blushing, for example) lack any configurational structure whatsoever. There is nevertheless a certain affinity between the two which we can exploit in order to render more precise our understanding of the function of the "gods" in Benjamin's argument. Note, for example, that both are characterized by a certain verticality (the perpendicular position of the painting, the golden *Gängelband* extending to earth from the heavens) that sets them in opposition to the graphic domain. The *Mal* is also linked to the *Gestalt* by virtue of its temporal structure, a simultaneity of past and future within the present that recalls that architectonic Hölderlinian "Tag" and "Wende der Zeit." But the point of tangency that is most central for my purposes has to do with what might be called the *emergence* of the *Mal*, its *Hervortreten* (II, 605). The *Mal* comes forth out of its own center; it has no ground from which it differs, but rather appears in the self-sufficiency of its *Erscheinen* (II, 606). (The concept of self-sufficient appearing can only be formulated pleonastically.) It is here that we discover the core of the Benjaminian notion of *Gestalt* in its opposition to the graphic. Like the *Mal*, it emerges autonomously out of its own absolute concentration; it knows no difference and no background; its identity is the intensive unity of the *Idee*.

The opposition between graphics and painting, Benjamin writes, bears on the "mythische Verwurzelung" of art in general (II, 603). This statement clarifies what was said at the outset regarding the concept of *Mythos*. If *das Gedichtete* is a "durch die Gewalt der gegeneinanderstrebenden mythischen Elemente gezeugte Einheit" (II, 108), it is because it is the intersection of two modalities of signification: the spatial expanse of graphics and the temporal intensity of the *Gestalt*. These mythic tendencies find their expression in

the art of two different cultural spheres. The *Gestalt*, as sensate appearance of the Idea, is embodied in Greek art, whereas graphics, more ancient, expresses an Oriental or Asiatic principle: "Sie [die Kunst] entspringt mit dem Ornament aus dem Mythischen. Das asiatische Ornament ist mythologisch gesättigt . . ." (II, 132, from the study *Über das Mittelalter*). *Das Gedichtete* of Hölderlin's text is the sublation of these two divergent cultural-artistic tendencies: "gerade das griechische Element ist aufgehoben und ausgeglichen gegen ein andres, das (zwar ohne ausdrückliche Rechtfertigung) das orientalische genannt war" (II, 126). But, as we have seen, at every point where this sublation of *Anschauung* and *Geist*, of graphics and *Gestalt*, of Greek and Oriental, manifests itself it is marked by a dissonance. *Das Gedichtete* is a sphere of dissonance: the dissonance between graphics and *Gestalt* and the dissonance within each of these domains.<sup>8</sup> But this differential strife is itself the expression of the limit-quality of the concept which the metaconceptual reflection had disclosed. As *Grenzbegriff* between two "absolutes," *das Gedichtete* is constituted as difference; it sets its internal moments, as it were, outside of itself, carving a border between them. The infinite concentration of the *Idee* as *Gestalt* corresponds to the intensive totality of *das Gedicht*, the *Idee der Losung* as fully self-determined form, while the infinite extension of graphics (figured in the "Lebendigen") suggests the totality of *das Leben*, the *Idee der Aufgabe*. By breaking these two totalities and setting them—broken—into its order, *das Gedichtete* brings the mythic strife to rest.

The aesthetic fragments provide a certain clue regarding this rest or "beruhende Einheit" (II, 124). Both conclude by considering related forms that have to do with the unity of the opposed modalities of signification. In the first Benjamin asks: "gibt es etwa als ursprüngliche Lage der Schrift auch eine vertikale, etwa in Stein gehauen?" (II, 603); which question the second fragment almost seems to answer by referring to a spatialized form of the *Mal*: "Vor allem erscheinen sie nämlich als Toten- oder Grabmale . . ." (II, 607). The point where graphics and *Gestalt* intersect and pass over into one another, where their fundamental dissonance expresses itself as a positive, worldly object, is death. This is the process which Benjamin's reading identified as *Versachlichung*, that deadening reification which marks the final integration of "gods" and "living" into the order of the poem. Thus it is no accident (rather an index of the rigor of his thought) that Benjamin focuses, in the final section of his

reading, on the question of the death of the poet: "Vereint sind im Tode, der seine Welt ist, alle erkannten Beziehungen. In ihm ist höchste unendliche Gestalt und Gestaltlosigkeit, zeitliche Plastik und räumliches Dasein, Idee und Sinnlichkeit" (II, 124). Death is at work as the "Mitte" and "Ursprung" of *das Gedichtete* (II, 124); it is the "Einkehr" toward which the poet leads the mythic forms of the gods and the living. The *Versachlichung* that results from the dissonance of the orders constitutes the overcoming of the mythic, that simultaneous transformation and preservation of the "mythischen Verbundenheiten" (II, 126) which, for Benjamin, is the accomplishment of *das Gedichtete*, its turn from the sublime to prose.

Dialectically theological: this was shown to be the nature of Benjamin's aesthetic commentary. Why this is the case should now be clear. *Das Gedichtete*, the intersection of *Gestalt* or the absolute self-presence of the gods and *graphics* or the absolute extension of life, is (and is not) the Cross. Theological truth is preserved in a domain in which it cannot possibly be.

## NOTES

1. Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1977-), Vol. 2, pp. 105-26. Subsequent references to Benjamin's work will be given parenthetically within the text; volume and page numbers are indicated.
2. See Friedrich A. Kittler, "Vergessen," in *Texthermeneutik. Aktualität, Geschichte, Kritik*, ed. Ulrich Nassen (Paderborn: Schöningh, 1979), pp. 195-221.
3. Such potential is one of the resources of Roland Barthes's text *S/Z* (Paris: Seuil, 1970).
4. Theodor W. Adorno, *Noten zur Literatur III* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1972), p. 146.
5. *Course in General Linguistics*, trans. Wade Baskin (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1966), p. 8.
6. Immanuel Kant, *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, ed. Raymund Schmidt (Hamburg: Felix Meiner, 1956), p. 359.
7. This remains the case even in the most advanced arguments in which the notion of

iconicity is severely criticized. See, for instance, Umberto Eco, *A Theory of Semiotics* (Bloomington and London: University of Indiana, 1976), pp. 191-217.

8. This notion of *Dissonanz* as well as the phrase "eine durch die Gewalt der gegeneinanderstrebenden mythischen Elemente gezeugte Einheit" signal the pressure of Nietzsche's *Geburt der Tragodie* on Benjamin's text. My own formulation of this point is influenced by that of Werner Hamacher's essay on Yeats's *Among School Children*, in *europaLyrik. 1775-heute*, ed. Klaus Lindemann (Paderborn: Schöningh, 1982), p. 345.