SATURNINE VISION AND THE QUESTION OF DIFFERENCE: REFLECTIONS ON WALTER BENJAMIN'S THEORY OF LANGUAGE

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The history of the criticism to which Benjamin's writings have given rise, is the story of many friendships. Whether he has been linked up with Hegelian thought, coupled to the theology of the Jewish religion of revelation, tied to Romantic linguistic philosophy, paired off with historical materialism, or even related to Lutheran theology, the critics have primarily sought to appropriate Benjamin's thought for their own philosophical viewpoint.[1] Yet Benjamin, as is well known, did not fraternize easily. As reserved as he was, how could he have held all those views, or been all those things that critics have suggested? Undoubtedly, Benjamin's philosophical allegiances that critics have pointed out have significantly contributed to our understanding of this complex author. If Benjamin, as Gershom Scholem has insisted time and again, was indeed a philosopher—a metaphysician—it ought to be possible, in principle, to assign a definite place to his writings in the history of philosophical thought.[2] But can Scholem's characterization of Benjamin as a philosopher (and hence the possibility of assigning his affiliation) simply be taken for granted? How is one, indeed, to explain the lack in Benjamin's writing of almost everything usually associated with the philosophical enterprise: a homogenous conceptuality, canonized rules of argumentation, and reference to the traditional set of problems? Bernd Witte, on this basis, has convincingly argued that Benjamin is no philosopher at all.[3] The total disregard in Benjamin for any form of sustained conceptuality and argumentation, as well as the elitist, esoterical, if not idiosyncratic nature of at least Benjamin's early writings—an aspect that Witte is so far the only one to have systematically explored—runs

counter to the philosophical requirement of transparency and systematic exposition of arguments. In addition, what Witte calls Benjamin's authoritarian and hypertrophic subjectivism irreducibly resists the claim to universality to which philosophy must measure up. From this perspective it is ultimately impossible to tie Benjamin to any of the philosophical currents that characterized his time. And yet he had, undoubtedly, something at stake with philosophy. Until the debacle regarding his habilitation dissertation, Benjamin even flirted with the idea of becoming a university teacher of philosophy. Moreover, most of his work up to that point is obviously of philosophical inspiration. In view of this paradoxical situation, rather than choosing between Scholem's or Witte's position on Benjamin, should one not first explore Benjamin's relation to philosophy in general? Instead of trying to discover one more philosophical indebtedness that would link this author up with an established brand of philosophical thought, it might be appropriate to begin by inquiring into the importance that Benjamin gave to philosophy as well as in the modalities of such valorization. To do so I will consider some of the writings by Benjamin that are commonly referred to as his metaphysical and historico-philosophical work; in short, writings of that period in his life that stretches from 1915 to 1926. Since during those years Benjamin's thought is still in a process of maturing, it is difficult to approach this period as a whole. Nevertheless, many motifs of a philosophical bearing characterize his writings at that time, offering clear testimony to sustained and persistent philosophical concerns. Benjamin himself suggests such a continuity of views and interests when he claims, in a letter to Scholem, that the "Epistemo-Critical Prologue" of *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* not only replaces his earlier essay "On Language as Such and the Language of Man," but expresses its original intentions perhaps more effectively.[4]

Before analysing some of these persistent motifs in greater detail, let me emphasize that, notwithstanding Benjamin's often obscure and idiosyncratic writing, the essays and larger works of the period in question also reveal considerable philosophical refinement. Such subtlety, however, does not consist in technical refinement; rather it touches not only on philosophically elementary distinctions, but above all, on the difference that philosophical distinction makes in the first place. It is my contention that when Benjamin broaches questions of philosophy, this concern with the difference philosophy makes

is what occupies him primarily. "Fate and Character," is a case in point. In this essay, in which the author is primarily concerned with establishing a total divergence of both concepts—"Where there is character there will, with certainty, not be fate, and in the area of fate character will not be found"—Benjamin shows himself fully aware of the philosophical implication of such an operation.[5] Fate, he explains, is a connection (*Zusammenhang*); more precisely it is "a nexus of meaning" in which the natural life in man is indiscriminately "coupled to cards as to planets" so as to weave a net of embroiling threads (*Verkettung*) in which the possibility of difference is entirely liquidated (*Reflections*, pp. 305, 308). Such non-difference in weblike interconnectedness "corresponds to the natural condition of the living," or, in other words, to "the demonic stage of human existence" we are told (*Reflections*, pp. 307, 308). Webs of whatever sort, because they make difference impossible, are mythical in essence. In the essay on Goethe's *Elective Affinities*, Benjamin notes that without difference, all of existence succumbs to the power of nature and its concept which, free of boundaries, expands monstrously. Without a sovereign principle or limits, "the life of myth . . . sets itself up as the sole power in the realm of being."[6] Where character is understood to be, as is commonly the case, "a network that can be tightened by knowledge at will into a dense fabric" made up of "finer and closer connections until what looked like a net is tightened into cloth," it can then become, as Benjamin remarks, erroneously connected to fate (*Reflections*, p. 309). To make character a function of an embroilment of threads in a weft, is to endow it with the same mythical indifference that already distinguishes fate. Character, for Benjamin, can be clearly demarcated from fate only if it is defined not by the immense complexity of a tightly woven cloth, but, on the contrary, by an exclusive character trait through which the knots of fate are cut apart. If distinguished by "the brilliance of its single traits," character stands in radical opposition to the interconnectedness and embroilment of fate, causing it to be (in all its forms) "liberating" (*Reflections*, p. 311). The importance that Benjamin attributes throughout his writings to the tragic hero is based on a similar principle. By proudly recognizing that he is better than the gods with whom he has been chained up, this hero instigates a myth-shaking difference by which he rises from out of what is termed "the mist of guilt," or in other words, from out of the realm of mythical and natural interconnectedness. Through this eye-opening insight into man's distinction from the gods,

a difference is made by which boundaries are assigned to myth and nature. Benjamin can, therefore, consider the tragic hero as the prototype of the philosopher who dispels natural and mythical indifference in an act of setting himself apart by raising his head higher. Distinction and difference are rooted in an act of demarcation by which the interlacings of myth are shattered in the name of a radical heterogeneity—truth. In his essay on Goethe, Benjamin writes: "Genuine art and genuine philosophy—in counterdistinction from their nongenuine and theurgical stage—begin in Greece with the end of myth, because both rest, one not less, the other not more, on truth" (*GS*, I.1, 162).

I would like to show in what follows that the concept of difference—of a difference that breaks up the continuum of the mythical chain—is a persistent concern of Benjamin's thought. But in analysing this philosophical motif par excellence—and, it is indeed, through difference that philosophy comes into the world—I shall also be able to reflect on the limits of philosophy from the perspective of truth that Benjamin adopts. From the start, let me emphasize that the act through which the tragic hero raises his head above the mythical interconnectedness of guilt is not simply a purely mental act of abstraction. The difference that he inaugurates, the limits he draws, are not the result of pure cognition, meditation, or contemplation, but of a hubristic reflection that culminates in self-confident recognition that he is better than his gods. The difference that the tragic hero brings into the world is rooted in an act of revolt; it is a very practical act of cognition. Instead of proceeding through philosophical abstraction or reduction, the tragic hero achieves difference by destroying the interwoven threads of the mythical web, or, by violently breaking up the mythical web of the realm of mere appearance. Difference, in short, is based on an act as concrete as a revolt, a violent exhaustion (*Aufzehrung*) or burning up, by what Benjamin will later call "The Destructive Character." This difference is thus not simply philosophical. As the tragic hero's hubristic act shows, it is artistic and religious as well.

In order to bring Benjamin's treatment of philosophical difference more clearly into view, I will briefly consider the essays "On Language as Such and the Language of Man," "The Task of the Translator," as well as some aspects of the "Epistemo-Critical Prologue." From the start it is necessary to emphasize that Benjamin's elaborations in the essay on "Language as such" do not

fall in any of the traditional philosophical modes of discussing this issue. This is of capital importance considering that throughout the period of Benjamin's writing that we are concerned with here, the pilot science for the coming philosophy he envisioned was to be a theory of language. All his developments of language have a double thrust. They intend to dismantle both an instrumentalist understanding of language—what he calls the bourgeois theory of language—and a theory of language that takes the word to be the essence of the thing, or in short, what he calls mystical linguistic theory (*Reflections*, pp. 318, 324). Roughly speaking, Benjamin distinguishes his own investigation of the nature of language from the two views on language as discussed in Plato's *Cratylos*, that is, against the two theories on language that have informed all philosophies of language hitherto. Critics such as Winfried Menninghaus have argued that by dismissing as insignificant language's utilitarian function, and by inquiring into the non-signifying nature of language, Benjamin became a structuralist before its time.[7] Richard Wolin, by contrast, contends that Benjamin's criticism of the receptive and cognitive aspects of language is a result of a "long-standing Kabbalistic doctrine of language as the divine substance of reality."[8] As I shall argue, Benjamin's theory of language is based neither on insight into the structure of linguistic representation nor on the assumption of a definable divine linguistic substance. Benjamin leaves those alternatives behind.

All language, Benjamin insists, communicates primarily a mental meaning (*geistige Inhalte*). But, language does not communicate such mental content by way of serving as an agency for it. Rather, this content is communicated in unmediated fashion *in*, and not *through* the medium of language. Although this content is communicated in language, it does not coincide with the linguistic medium in which it is expressed. It is something quite different from that medium. Benjamin notes that "the distinction between a mental entity and the linguistic entity in which it communicates is the first stage of any linguistic theory" (*Reflections*, p. 315). What, then, is the specific object that language communicates? Benjamin writes: "As communication, language communicates a mental entity, i.e., something communicable per se [eine Mitteilbarkeit schlechthin]" (*Reflections*, p. 320). The mental content distinct from the linguistic entity in which it is communicated is thus communicability itself. In itself, that is, as an expressive medium, language communicates communicability. It is the primary content of language, and for Benjamin, the true and sole

object of a philosophical theory of language. Yet apart from a very brief reference by Derrida to the issue of communicability in Benjamin, not one of the leading Benjamin critics has bothered to shed some light on this rather intriguing notion.[9] Without its clarification, however, Benjamin's theory of language remains necessarily obscure. The same must be said of Benjamin's concept of translatability which informs his entire theory of translation. It has not to my knowledge drawn any attention by Benjamin scholars.

One might, at first, be tempted to understand communicability as simply the (condition of) possibility of communication. Since Benjamin also notes, however, that "languages have . . . no speaker," and that communicability is communicated, not *through* but *in* language, communicability is obviously not a Kantian formal condition of possibility (*Reflections*, p. 316). Its characteristics are not subjective. Thus, if communicability is at all to be related to the traditional concepts of possibility, it is rather of the order of a real possibility (*dunamis*) of potency in language. As we will see hereafter, it is indeed an objective characteristic of language as language. But rather than speculating on the status of communicability, let us return to the text of "On Language as Such" to clarify this concept's meaning.

After having established that the mental being which communicates itself in language is not outwardly identical with the linguistic being in which it is expressed, Benjamin remarks: "Mental [geistige Wesen] is identical with linguistic being only *insofar* as it is capable of communication [mitteilbar]. What is communicable in a mental entity is its linguistic entity." The communicable, consequently, is that part of a spiritual being that is linguistic, that part that is expressed in unmediated fashion in the spiritual being's communication. What this means is that what is being communicated is primarily its language itself, language (*Sprache*) being understood here in a strictly verbal sense as relating exclusively to language as act. The communicable *per se* is, thus, language's language, or communicability. This is the spiritual content *kat'exokhen* in language. When Benjamin writes: "The answer to the question '*What* does language communicate?' is therefore 'All language communicates itself,' " he does not contradict his earlier statement regarding the difference between language as linguistic being and the content expressed in it *qua* linguistic medium. *Itself*, indeed, designates a "substance" different from the specific language in which the communication occurs. This substance is language's communication itself, the very act and fact that it speaks.

Beyond the Cratylic alternatives of understanding the word as either a means to designate things different from it, or as expressing immediately the essence of things themselves, communicability refers to the speech act in the word. This communicability, language's act of communication in a verbal sense, is for Benjamin the fundamental problem of all philosophy of language. It is the communicable *per se*.

What I have said up to this point about communicability as the object par excellence of the theory of language may seem simply trivial. Upon further scrutiny, however, this impression may dissolve and the triviality of communicability may reveal itself as similar to those essential simplicities with which philosophy is concerned. Although communicability has the looks of a philosophical condition of possibility, it designates only language's communication itself. Why, then, does Benjamin still cast language's communication of *itself* in terms of possibility? At the beginning of the essay "On Language as Such" Benjamin contends, in order to insinuate at the outset that communicability is not simply a philosophical category, "that we cannot imagine anything that does not communicate its mental nature in its expression" (*Reflections*, p. 314). A linguistic theory for which communicability is the object par excellence, has indeed, as he claims, an "intimate connection with the philosophy of religion" (*Reflections*, p. 320). Communicability, understood as language's communication of itself as communicating, is, in things, "the residue of the creative word of God" (*Reflections*, p. 331), and thus oriented by the horizon of this divine source. Rather than a category of possibility, communicability is constituted by things' yearning to relate to the origin of their creation in the Word. In language, in a verbal sense of their expression, things communicate that they are of divine origin. It shows them in a process of wanting to communicate, to be heard, and redeemed. This then is the point where one can grasp the specificity of communicability. It marks the difference it makes to be able to speak—a difference that shows everything created to have its truth in the divine Word. But such yearning, such intention in language, is not subjective. Not things yearn to be heard; only that part of them that is spiritual, already linguistic—the residue of the creative word—does so. Communicability is, thus, an *objective* (metaphysical) category that designates the difference that expression or language makes to the extent that as expression and language it communicates all by itself its difference. Yet language makes such a

difference only by marking itself off against something else. Communicability, consequently, implies a motion of breaking away from, of separation. It represents a tendency or intention only to the extent that it is a part of a flow that leads away from a given condition. This condition is that of the world of appearances (*Schein*). For Benjamin, language is characterized in depth by a tendency of pointing away from that realm, thus making a difference.

In order to understand better this difference-producing function of communicability and hence the status of this category itself, I turn to "The Task of the Translator." From the start, let me emphasize that the law of translation which Benjamin formulates in this essay is as objective a law as the one that we have seen determine language's expressive function.

In the same way as communicability indicates a yearning of language to be heard as expressing communication itself, independently of all symbolic and utilitarian functions of language, in the same way translatability, as an objective category of the work of art, points beyond the original itself. Rather than aspiring at a fulfillment of the original, translatability indicates the work of art's search for a fulfillment in something other than the original itself. Translatability, as a call in the work of art, calls for a liberation of the work of art from itself. Benjamin remarks: "No translation, however good it may be, can have any significance as regards the original."[10] On the contrary, a translation implies a displacement, even a disregard of the original's sense, as we shall see. The objective possibility of translation, a possibility that is also a call for it, can thus best be described as an inner limit of the work of art; or in short, as a structural feature that, within the work itself, points beyond it. Translatability is the means by which the work of art rises above itself, above its own linguistic enmeshments. It is an operator of sorts, of difference, and not what one could commonly call an essence.

According to Benjamin, the language of works of art differs from that of ordinary language to the extent that it is no longer simply referential and intentional. As Benjamin's strong criticism of intentionality reveals, intentions for him belong to the world of appearances and phenomena.[11] They are a function of natural and subjective ends by which words become chained up with things external. In this sense ordinary language is thoroughly natural language since it is governed by mythical interconnectedness. While artistic language breaks with these natural and, thus, mythical properties of language,

the work of art has not for that matter already transgressed all of language's mythical interconnections. Its language is still characterized by a certain natural relation between its content and itself, a relation that Benjamin describes as forming "a certain unity in the original, like fruit and skin" (*Illuminations*, p. 75). A poet's effort, Benjamin reminds us, is directed "solely and immediately at specific linguistic contextual aspects [sprachliche Gehaltszusammenhänge]." Therefore, the work of literature and poetry finds itself still "in the center of the language forest [innerer Bergwald der Sprache]" (*Illuminations*, p. 76). As similar images in *The Origin* (or the Goethe essay) reveal, where Benjamin refers to the "wooded interior" of the symbol—a reference probably to Baudelaire's poem "Correspondances"—the image of the language forest serves to stress the literary works' symbolic aspect, which is to say, its being constituted by a natural unity based on natural relations between sign and content (*Origin*, p. 165). Now, translatability represents in the work of art the objective call for overcoming this still natural unity rooted in mythical linguistic relations. Translatability is, in the work of art, the yearning to break the mist of the symbolic relations that constitute it as a mythical web—or, a text for short. Translations, if they are to be successful, must indeed, achieve this goal. As Benjamin's stress on literal, or verbatim translation clearly shows, a translation that measures up against a work of art's demand for translation does not only disregard content and sense, it destroys the original's *structures* of reference and sense communication as well. Whereas the language of the original destroys language's state of being hooked up to empirical intentions, a translation destroys the art work's natural linguistic unity "with root and branch [mit Stumpf und Stiel]" (*Illuminations*, p. 75). It "faces the wooded ridge of language from the outside" (*Illuminations*, p. 76), Benjamin remarks. Because the language of translation undoes language's functions and structures for imparting sense, and with this all natural linguistic relations, the language of translation stands in a relation of disjunction (*Gebrochenheit*) to its content (*Illuminations*, p. 75). It is characterized by broken natural or symbolic relations, or to refer to another of Benjamin's images, by a relation of discrepancy. Indeed: "While content and language form a certain unity in the original, like a fruit and its skin, the language of translation envelops its content like a royal robe with its ample folds. For it signifies a more exalted language than its own and thus remains unsuited to its content, overpowering and alien." Like

the royal robe, language in translation represents nothing but the power of language, language *in actu*, independently of all content it may impart and of the structures that make such communication possible.

Translatability is, in the work of art, that structure that points away from its still natural linguistic unity and weblike quality, toward language itself. It is, within the artwork's language, the structure directed beyond its own symbolic language and its entanglements, "at language as such, at its totality," "Intention auf die Sprache als solche," says the German text, intention being understood this time in a radically nonsubjective and nonempirical fashion.[12] This structure, immanent to the language of the original, calls for a departure from that language toward pure language—language beyond its utilitarian and symbolic functions, beyond the burden of extra-linguistic meaning and the structures upon which it rests; which is to say, toward the difference that language as language makes. Thanks to this structure the work of art raises itself above textual, weblike, and hence mythical interconnectedness to communicate that within it, language speaks, or that within it, a difference has been set forth.

Because of its direction (*Richtung*), a translation is not called upon by the original work of art for the sake of that work itself, but rather for the benefit of pure, or divine language itself. The difference that translatability makes is a difference determined by this objective intention toward what Benjamin calls the "afterlife" of the works of art, or in short, toward what is thoroughly on the other side of natural life and its connections.

Yet what does this nonphenomenal and pure state of language, at which art's demand for translation aims, represent? And what is its relation, finally, to the original itself? Translation, Benjamin writes, "ultimately serves the purpose of expressing the central reciprocal relationship between languages" (*Illuminations*, p. 72). He continues: "Languages are not strangers to one another, but are, a priori and apart from all historical relationships, interrelated in what they want to express." But languages are not akin to one another as far as their words, sentences and linguistic structures are concerned, nor are they related through the content that individually they impart:

> Rather, all suprahistorical kinship of languages rests on the intentions underlying each language as a whole—an intention, however, which no simple language can attain by itself but which

> is realized by the totality of their intentions supplementing each other: pure language. While all individual elements of foreign languages—words, sentences, structure—are mutually exclusive, these languages supplement one another in their intentions. (*Illuminations*, p. 74)

What Benjamin establishes here as "a basic law of a philosophy of language," namely, that all singular languages intend one and the same thing (*eines und zwar dasselbe*), had already been thematized in the earlier essay "On Language as Such" under the name of communicability. The latter stipulated that language, *qua* language, *qua* linguistic medium, communicates only the unmediated communication of its own communicating. And in the same way as this medium-related quality presupposes a distancing from language's instrumental functions, language's intention toward pure language likewise becomes manifest only if languages become thoroughly denaturalized. Such denaturalization of natural language—the task par excellence of translation—is achieved by translation's focusing not on a language's intended objects, but on the mode of its intending, or on what the Scholastics called *modus significandi*—the mode, or intention, of meaning (*Art des Meinens*).[13]

By finding in his own language those tendencies or intentions toward pure language that transcend its own natural condition, the translator produces "in it the echo of the original" (*Illuminations*, p. 73). In this, his enterprise resembles the Adamic naming language as described in "On Language as Such." As Benjamin establishes in this essay, man can name things only because they communicate their expression, their linguistic being to him. What they express is their communicability, their each-time-singular intention to communicate: "Their language passes into man" when man contemplates (*Anschauen*) things and names the singularity of their expression (*Reflections*, p. 329). A name is the proper name, so to speak, of things' intention, or mode of signification. In other words, in thus calling by their name the each-time-singular mode in which things yearn to speak, man completes language as communication *in actu*, by naming it. The name names language's each-time-particular mode of communicating, its mode of expression. Hence Benjamin can state that the name "is the innermost nature of language itself. Naming is that by which nothing beyond it is communicated, and *in* which language itself communicates itself absolutely. In naming, the mental

entity that communicates itself is *language*. Where mental being in its communication is language itself in its absolute wholeness, only there is the name, and only the name is there" (*Reflections*, p. 318). He can conclude, therefore, that "one can call name the language of language (if the genitive refers to the relationship not of a means but of a medium)" (*Reflections*, p. 319). It is of interest to note that Benjamin, in "On Language as Such," also calls man's naming language—which is both receptive and spontaneous—translation; it is "sprachempfangend" to the extent that it listens to "the language of things themselves," and independent to the extent that in naming it names itself as language (*Reflections*, p. 325). In short, in translation as in naming, the intent to communicate as well as its each-time-specific mode of meaning is named, and thus raised to an autonomy of its own.

The "Translator" essay reproduces this same movement of language, a movement that names that which language yearns to communicate, and which does so in setting itself off from all of language's natural and mythical qualities. A translation, I have said, focuses on what in the original is of the order of intention toward the divine, and difference-creating Word (independent of the content intended), and, more precisely, on the overall mode of its language as language. In its own language it establishes a correspondence to the mode in which the original speaks by activating that which in its language breaks with the latter's natural condition. A translation, therefore, can be said to be "directed at language as such." In philosophical terms, a translation seems to be based on what the Scholastics called *intentio secunda (formalis)*. Rather than focusing on the object intended in the initial intention, translation—but naming as well—cognitively reflects on the *ens rationis* that is the primary act of intending itself (*actus intellectus reflectus, id est quo aliquid per reflexionem cognoscimus*). Indeed, in naming the singular modes in which things express themselves, things become known to man: "Only through the linguistic being of things can he gain knowledge of them from within himself—in name" (*Reflections*, p. 319). By translating, in the original, the intention toward pure language, this intention is also reflected upon and made known. In naming as well as in translation, communicability and translatability—or the structures within language that yearn for a liberation from its natural and mythical interconnectedness and weblike quality—are cognitively appropriated. The name as well as a translation reflect on difference, on the

difference which in language itself permits language to overcome its own mythical entanglements.

The reference above to the philosophical issue of *intentio secunda* is not a reference to one particular philosophical problem. Rather, it is a reference to philosophy itself. Philosophy constitutes itself in the act of a distancing reflection as a rational entity, different from the immediate, from being, etc., and as concerned with exploring and assessing its own difference in the attempt to secure its autonomy in self-foundation. Naming and translating, because they reflect cognitively on difference, are of the order of philosophy. Benjamin himself makes the connection, at least as far as translation is concerned. The "divination and description" of pure, or divine language is, he writes, "the only perfection a philosopher can hope for." Yet such pure language, the language of truth, "is concealed in concentrated fashion in translation." Translations are therefore not only intrinsically philosophical, but "there is (even) a philosophical genius characterized by a yearning for that language which manifests itself in translation" (*Illuminations*, p. 77).

But such cognitive reflection of difference as it occurs in the Adamic act of naming, in translation, and in the task of the philosopher, has its intrinsic limits. Indeed, it does not, for Benjamin, escape all mythical predicament. Let me first remark that a translation is in principle unable to "possibly reveal or establish" the pure language intended by the nonnatural tendencies of artistic language (*Illuminations*, p. 72). Although the translator's task is spurned by "the great motif of integrating many tongues into one true language," his intention remains "ideational," that is, regulated by this idea in a Kantian sense (*Illuminations*, p. 77). All a translation can hope for is to "represent it in embryonic or intensive form [darstellen, indem sie es keimhaft oder intensiv verwirklicht]." The mode of representation in question, a mode "of so singular a nature that it is rarely met within the sphere of nonlinguistic life"—a mode, by the way, that originates in chemistry—allows only for an "intensive—that is, anticipative, intimating—realization" of the hidden relationship between the languages (*Illuminations*, p. 72). What is true of translation, that it "is only a somewhat provisional way of coming to terms with the foreignness of languages," since "an instantaneous and final rather than a temporary and provisional solution of this foreignness remains out of the reach of mankind," is valid for Adamic naming language, and for philosophy as well (*Illuminations*, p. 75). Although man, in "On

Language as Such," is shown to be "the speaker of language" since "he speaks in name," this only "vouches for the fact *that language as such* is the mental being of man," and not, for the one realizing language as such in naming, the divine word (*Reflections*, pp. 318–19). Adam's naming language, which answers things' language, is, notwithstanding its importance, only one moment of "the uninterrupted flow of . . . communication [that] runs through the whole of nature from the lowest forms of existence to man and from man to God" (*Reflections*, p. 331). Philosophy too, and its thought of difference, is only one rung on the ladder that leads to what Benjamin terms doctrine (*Lehre*), which is concerned with the Divine, or pure difference itself.[14]

As Benjamin knew very well, the translation by name of the difference that things communicate to man in their expression, as well as a translation's articulation of what in the original's language hints at the hidden kinship of languages, establishes a community between two spheres that needs an ultimate grounding in a higher sphere. However perfect the language may be into which the less perfect language is translated, "the objectivity of this translation" must be "guaranteed by God," he reminds us (*Reflections*, p. 325). Indeed, as Benjamin argues in "On Language as Such," it is only because the divine word created things, which thus contain as a residue "the germ of the cognizing name," that man can name things in the first place (*Reflections*, p. 325). Benjamin demonstrates a fine philosophical sensitivity when he declares that the task by man of naming things "would be insoluble were not the name-language of man and the nameless one of things related in God and released from the same creative word, which in things became the communication of matter in magic communion, and in man the language of knowledge and name in blissful mind" (*Reflections*, p. 326). For naming and translation to be possible, a prior "identity of the creative word and the cognizing name in God" must, indeed, be assumed. The identity of the creative and at once cognizing divine word—this ultimate community—is the condition of possibility of all expression and all naming, or translation.

In his "Program of the Coming Philosophy," where Benjamin takes in the name of a unitarian approach to the question of the ultimate ground, a critical stand against the Kantian division between epistemology and metaphysics, or in short, between criticism and dogmatic philosophy, he already severely criticized the

Kantian philosophical notions of experience and cognition. Yet, the metaphysics aimed at in this essay still envisioned the possibility of a higher form of specifically philosophical cognition and experience in which the "absolute, as existence," God for short, could be encountered in unmediated fashion.[15] Although such concepts of experience and cognition already turn philosophy into the doctrine of religion with its immediate absolute certainty of the absolute, Benjamin continued to think the latter as cognitively apprehensible in systematic unity. But by the time of his later work, *The Origin*, Benjamin had given up the hope that mere thought could think and conceptually come to grips with the fundamental identity and unity of the ultimate ground. In the Goethe essay, Benjamin already established that the unity of philosophy, its system, is in no way within the reach of philosophical questioning (*GS*, I.1, 172–73). Truth, he states in "The Epistemo-Critical Prologue," "is devoid of all intention, and certainly does not itself appear as intention. Truth does not enter into relationships, particularly intentional ones." Its mode of existence is that of "an intentionless state of being." The prior identity that, as seen, must underlie both poles of a translation process, can no longer be approached philosophically since, as he writes, "truth is the death of intention" (*Origin*, pp. 35–36). All attempts to come to grips with it cognitively, by attempting to ensnare truth in the "spider's web" of thought "as if it were something which came flying in from outside," show philosophy still to be in the grips of myth (*Origin*, p. 28). Cognition is still intentional and relational, and thus mediated by natural desires and ends. Benjamin writes: "Knowledge is possession. Its very object is determined by the fact that it must be taken possession of—even if in a transcendental sense—in the consciousness" (*Origin*, p. 29). Knowledge, because it is reflective, is still a function of natural subjectivity. The systems it weaves, and in which everything becomes linked to the subject, are mythic webs that allow for no difference.

The Adamic naming gesture, the task of the translator and of the philosopher as well, are thus limited to being moments in a higher scheme because naming, translating or reflecting difference presupposes an underlying prior unity which they themselves cannot hope to bring about. But it is not so much because of their status of being moments that all three orders are limited; it is, rather, the fact that they are still cognitive, and hence fundamentally incapable of truly setting difference free.

Truth, or the prior identity, not only escapes the reach of

cognitive appropriation, it also does not relate intentionally to what it embraces, itself included. It does not relate to itself in a relational manner, since all such relation would, according to Benjamin, still be mythical. For the same reason, truth is not of the order of *intentio recta*, the intention of intention, nor for that matter, the language of language. The reflexivity characteristic of *intentio recta* only distinguishes man's naming language, as well as the status of translation and philosophy, each of which are mere moments in the flow of communication of difference that runs through all of creation toward God.

Although naming, translating, and philosophizing are constituted by the *telos* of the creative word and the hidden kinship of languages, they cannot by themselves bring that unity about, or cognize it. In spite of the fact that communicability and translatability point away from the mythic web of language toward the difference of nonphenomenal "Otherness," the philosophical activity of naming and reflecting these difference-producing tendencies remains caught up in what it yearns to transgress. In other words, the structures of transcending immanent to language, the structures that create difference by pointing away from language's empirical and mythical entanglement such as translatability and communicability, are unable to achieve the pure difference that they aim at and presuppose. However decisive the transcending power of the linguistically immanent structures of difference may be, they remain finite. They are not different enough, not as radically different as an absolute ground, by right, ought to be. Their transcending and difference-creating power, as well as the objectivity of these structures, are themselves in want of an ultimate justification and legitimation by the absolute Otherness of truth. But they cannot hope to bring this sanctioning about on their own terms. It is a legitimation that only truth itself can, in its own time and on its own terms, grant. And since truth is not relational, intentional, or based on reflection, such granting cannot, for Benjamin, be of the order of the modes of grounding available to philosophy, such as legitimation or justification. Since Benjamin conceives of truth as radically different, and in total disjunction from that of which it might be the truth, such demand for grounding by the structures of difference that are communicability and translatability can only take place through their radical *Erlösung*, or release from the prisonhouse of language.

Communicability and translatability, as seen, come closest to

being philosophical concepts of difference. But this proximity is also that which for Benjamin constitutes their limit. They are still epistemological concepts of difference, and in want of a redeeming relation to truth which thought is unable to provide. The difference from the embroilments and enmeshments of nature and myth they achieve, however decisive it may be, is not yet radical. The difference-producing thrust of these structures depends, as to their possibility and effect, on a difference so radical that it escapes the spider web of thought. Philosophical difference, for Benjamin, is thus a function of a difference that escapes its grasp, but a difference that it must nonetheless presuppose, even though by itself it is unable to secure this difference's legitimizing function. Because of these limits of philosophy, to truly disrupt the threads that make up the tightly woven web of myth by establishing a difference that would escape the empirical and the subjective, and that would be fully objective (or rather, because of philosophy's limitations in immanently and singularly securing the transcending thrust of the difference which philosophical difference makes with respect to and at the level of myth, the empirical, and the aesthetic), philosophy itself must call for legitimation by a higher instance, namely, by the doctrine of truth. Yet it is not in the power of philosophy to secure for itself an answer to its pledge.

Whether this inability of the philosophical concepts of difference to secure their own legitimation truly implies an irreducible relation of philosophy in general to theological concepts, as Benjamin seems to suggest, or whether such a problematic is not rather a function of a lack of an ability on Benjamin's part, to sound the intellectual possibilities of philosophy, along with a perhaps too-narrow Kantian concept of philosophy as criticism, are questions I cannot hope to solve here. What, by contrast, I can try to show is that the flaws of the philosophical concepts of difference are not, for Benjamin, simply shortcomings. Indeed, their finite nature contains paradoxically, not the promise, but the possibility of a chance that they might truly strike a difference. To show that this is the case, I shall return once again to the internal limits of the structures of difference that I discussed.

It is not in the power of these structures, however objective they might already be, to break away once and for all from the empirical and aesthetic web of language toward divine language. All they achieve is a *caesura* in the realm of mythical entanglement. A *caesura*, Benjamin tells us, does not lead to a complete separation of

what it divides; as an instance of critical power a *caesura* only prevents the parts and levels in question from becoming mixed (*GS*, I.1, 181–82). A *caesura* keeps them simultaneously together and separate. Benjamin illustrates such caesural difference when discussing the relation of a translation to the sense of the original, with the following simile: "Just as a tangent touches a circle lightly [*flüchtig*] and at but one point, with this touch rather than with the point setting the law according to which it is to continue on its straight path to infinity, a translation touches the original lightly and only at the infinitely small point of sense, thereupon pursuing its own course according to the laws of fidelity in the freedom of linguistic flux" (*Illuminations*, p. 80). In order for a translation to correspond to the demand for translation in the original, it must disregard, or rather, touch the original's sense in such a manner that a movement away from sense is inaugurated. The disregard of sense must not be absolute; such difference in translation would be abstract, false, erring difference. True philosophical difference is achieved in the fleeting touch of what is to be disregarded, in fidelity to what is to be abandoned. A *caesura* thus seems to yield to the philosophical demand par excellence—that genres as different as the universal and the particular, the empirical and the transcendental are not to be mixed—of which Benjamin has shown himself fully aware in his criticism of Friedrich Schlegel's attempt to conceive of the unity of art (first, thought as an idea in the Platonic sense as *proteron te physei*) as itself a concrete work of art (*GS*, I.1, 90). But the difference between that philosophical law itself and Benjamin's use of it is rather striking. For Benjamin, the universal or transcendental is not, as seen, a given or something that could be thought in its unity, and that could thus be clearly marked off against the empirical or the particular. Benjamin's concept of difference is based on the assumption that the radically differing pole of philosophical difference or opposition is not at hand. In lack of the radical and non-phenomenal Other, all that thought can do is touch on what is in order to move away from it. In this motion alone, in a differing in an active sense, can the Other, truth or originary difference be anticipated. Benjaminian difference, as it is formulated in such concepts as communicability and translatability, is thus a difference that realizes in perhaps a fundamental way the philosophical demand not to mix genres. By fleetingly touching in a disrupting movement away the webs of language that allow for no difference,

difference is produced in the first place, and with it, the empty space of the Other of myth. Although the difference thus created does not imply clearly divided realms (nor a constituted Other), it anticipates the possibility of the radical Otherness of truth whose thinking does not fall into the powers of man.

In short, the difference with respect to the interlacings of language in the grips of myth and nature, which Benjamin seeks to conceptualize, is a difference not between already constituted poles or realms. Still, the philosophical requirement not to mix remains a must, or better, becomes even more pressing since in the mythical absence of difference the demand not to mix turns into the more fundamental demand for difference in the first place. Benjamin's concept of difference inscribes in itself the impossibility to immanently distinguish between the profane webs of language and its total Other; but the demand for difference becomes, then, all the more urgent. In the absence of the total Other—"Other" to a point that it must necessarily be absent from the mythical webs of language if it is to truly make a difference—of an Other so beyond man's finitude and his natural condition that it can only be termed the sacred, the fleeting touch that touches to break away is the sole means to instigate difference. This finite difference, however, points at the radical difference that alone can make it meaningful, and that alone can grant significance to the fundamental philosophical law not to mix.

As mentioned, from a philosophical viewpoint, communicability and translatability are finite concepts of transcending and difference. As such they might seem to mix the incommensurable dimensions of the universal and the particular. But that is not so since Benjamin's notion of language—and not unlike Kant's notion of the sublime which only negatively represents the realm of the ideas—refers to that same realm by violently destroying language's aesthetic and structural characteristics. In this manner, communicability and translatability precisely avoid mixing domains. In the same way that reference in aesthetic considerations to theological concepts does not only imply no *metabasis eis allo genos*, as Benjamin remarks in *The Origin*, but serves instead to demarcate levels in the first place so that the theoretical paradoxes which distinguish these considerations can be solved, the finite concepts of difference, rather than implying an illegitimate confusion of levels of thought, secure their distinction by likewise representing (*darstellen*), that which pertains to "the higher

domain of theology," in the very destruction of the networks of language (*Origin*, p. 216). Such destruction, as said, makes the difference.

This concept of difference, then, is not simply a philosophical concept. Benjamin agrees with Kant that reference to the absolute ground as absolutely Other is inevitable. He also agrees with this same philosopher that such a ground cannot in its difference from objects of nature, be known. Thought cannot hope to conceptualize it, or realize it in consciousness. Yet Benjamin refuses, not only in "Program of the Coming Philosophy," but throughout his writings, to go along with Kant's injunction to keep criticism and metaphysics separate. For Benjamin to conflate both realms is not to indulge in empiricism, or what amounts to the same, in the leveling daemonic forces of myth; on the contrary, such conflation serves only to realize difference in the first place. Benjamin proceeds from the assumption that actual reference by (critical) philosophy to the higher domain of the ground is that which endows philosophy with its distinguishing trait. Although it cannot think the ground, it actually anticipates it in the existent. In that sense critical philosophy is for him always already theology, but not theology, of course, in a positive sense. Benjamin's concept of difference is not only not a pure philosophical concept inasmuch as it implies actual reference to "the higher domain of theology"; neither is it a purely theological concept since what has been established regarding philosophy as a cognitive undertaking is valid of theology as a positive discipline as well.

Benjamin's thought of difference cannot be cast in terms of any particular philosophy, and can thus not be appropriated for any particular brand of thought. The paradoxical nature of his intellectual enterprise, permitting multiple appropriations, may well stem from, on the one hand, his seemingly unconditional acceptance of the Kantian concept of philosophy while refusing at the same time to yield to the Kantian requirement of distinguishing the critical and the dogmatic without, on the other hand, opting for a Hegelian solution of that difference (and in this sense Benjamin is also very much like Kierkegaard). But Benjamin seems to be specifically concerned with the fundamental question of how philosophy in general is to make a difference. Reference in philosophy to the "higher domain of theology" seems, for Benjamin, to make such difference possible. But at the same time, this constitutive reference to the absolute Other of myth and the entanglements of language is also what strikes, with

irreducible finitude, philosophy's attempt to raise itself above the web of language. Or rather, it causes such attempt to become utterly idiosyncratic.

For such a position as the one outlined, a position based on a tension between philosophy and theology, there is, it seems to me, a name in Benjamin's writings. In *The Origin* it is called "saturnine vision" (p. 179). Such vision, or theoretical glance, realizes reference to the Absolute, to that which is completely separated from the embroilments of myth and the mythical interconnectedness of language, not through cognitive abstraction, but in "close touch" with what is, namely, by violently tearing its texture to shreds. This vision's transcending glance reaches only beyond the realm of interconnectedness to the extent that it stands under the sign of the natural powers and their mythical embroilments that it seeks to overcome. Saturn is the sign under which Benjamin was born.[16] The daemonic powers that it symbolizes are such that they limit any order of existence to and within the plane of the profane and temporal. Yet, the infinitely small crack or the almost insignificant disruption that such vision under the sign of the most earthy planets produces in the tightly woven web of the daemonic forces of fate is, because it *is* (as opposed to merely phenomenal and cognitive nondifference), anticipatory of the *being* of the ideas—or to use another of Benjamin's expressions, of the "indivisible unity," or, rather, as the German original puts it, "the crackless (*sprunglose*) unity of truth" (*Origin*, p. 33).

NOTES

1. For the Lutheran connection see Julian Roberts, *Walter Benjamin* (London: Macmillan, 1982), pp. 126ff.

2. Gershom Scholem, *Walter Benjamin und sein Engel* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1983), pp. 14–15.

3. Bernd Witte, *Walter Benjamin—Der Intellektuelle als Kritiker. Untersuchungen zu seinem Fruhwerk* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1976).

4. Walter Benjamin, *Briefe*, ed. Gershom Scholem and Theodor W. Adorno (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1966), Vol. I, p. 372.

5. Walter Benjamin, *Reflections*, trans. E. Jephcott (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., 1979), p. 306.

6. Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1974), I.1, 149.

7 Winfried Menninghaus, *Walter Benjamins Theorie der Sprachmagie* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp 1980), p. 16.

8. Richard Wolin, *Walter Benjamin. An Aesthetic of Redemption* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), p. 40.

9. Jacques Derrida, "Des Tours de Babel," in *Difference in Translation*, ed. J. F. Graham (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), p. 180.

10. Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken, 1969), p. 71.

11. See the "Epistemo-Critical Prologue," of Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, trans. John Osborne (London: NLB, 1977).

12. *Illuminations*, p. 76. For the German original see *GS*, IV.1, 16.

13. It is not altogether wrong to translate as Harry Zohn does *Art des Meinens* as *mode of intention* as Paul de Man contends in " 'Conclusions' on Walter Benjamin's 'The Task of the Translator,' " *Yale French Studies*, No. 69 (1985), pp. 39–40, since it is precisely in the way in which language is meant to mean that it realizes its intention toward pure, or divine language.

14. For the religious connotations of "Lehre" or doctrine, see Gershom Scholem, *Walter Benjamin—die Geschichte einer Freundschaft* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1975), pp. 73–74.

15. Walter Benjamin, "Program of the Coming Philosophy," trans. M. Ritter, *The Philosophical Forum*, 15, 1–2 (Fall–Winter 1983–84), 51.

16. Scholem, *Walter Benjamin und sein Engel*, p. 54. For a discussion of the saturnine in Benjamin, see also Susan Sontag, *Under the Sign of Saturn* (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1972), pp. 109–34.