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Werner Hamacher

Johns Hopkins University

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The Word Wolke—If It Is One

Abstract

Walter Benjamin's theoretical linguistic considerations of the "Doctrine of Likeness" and the project "On the Mimetic Capacity" were formulated in close—not only close in time—connection with the recording of *Berlin Childhood Around Nineteen Hundred*, to which "Berlin Chronicle" a year earlier, in the Spring of 1932, had served as a prelude. It cannot be doubted that Benjamin's memoirs represent the impetus as well as the explication, extrapolation and fulfillment of the program that his theoretical writings formulate. But the memoirs are, at the same time, its radicalization. And that comes across most clearly when this doctrine of mimesis is condensed in the function of the word cloud. For the word cloud is just that site in which the divergent elements of Benjamin's text step into the ether of their likeness, as *Worte* steps into *Wolke*. But it becomes this site at the price of likeness with itself.

WERNER HAMACHER
The Johns Hopkins University

For Ursula

THE WORD *WOLKE*—IF IT IS ONE

—belongs in Walter Benjamin's texts to those who are determined in the language of intentions to designate its intention toward "language." For in the *Worte*, "word," due to its likeness to *Wolke*, "cloud," language stands on the threshold of forgetting everything that may be meant in it. Cloud—but not this single word, for it is disfigured; not the thing, which is never *one* and never assumes a lasting form; not the vague representation or idea, for what is an idea, if it is vague?—"cloud" is, in a certain sense, the forgetting of ascertained meaning, of linguistic convention and everything that can enter into its space. And whoever uses this "word" has already fallen into this forgetting and can no longer become like himself. When he writes *Wolke*, it is only as that word which hinders him from knowing what a word is and whether he even writes it. If he reads it, he, along with everything that is life for him, is lost in its snow flurry, in which no figure entirely develops before it dissolves into another. If, however, the word cloud—let it be the only one in the language—maintains such an intensive tie to forgetting, what power can language have to remember and to disclose the experience of past life, a childhood in Berlin around nineteen hundred? And how can this language and that word still be read, if reading has already fallen prey to it? And why is every reading of Benjamin, hardly less explicitly than this one, instead of keeping its distance from his idiom, inclined to make itself, entirely without ironic intention, into a pastiche of his own by adopting the cadences of his language, his syntactical gestures and his words?

With somnambulant sureness, Walter Benjamin leads his texts to

the word *cloud* in the unfinished, “smashed” book *Berlin Childhood Around Nineteen Hundred*, which is not neglected by his readers but very much so by the so-called criticism. Benjamin leads his texts to this word and all the connections that are condensed in it. The most obvious instance occurs in the section whose title, “Potboiler” (*Schmöker*)—and titles are under discussion throughout this text—lies close to the thought of a cloud of smoke. Benjamin discusses the books that “were only once in a dream given to him to see again.” These dreamed books are named in sentences whose every word and every interconnection count at first glance as a riddle:

To open one [of the books], would have led me into the midst of the womb, in which a changing and gloomy text clouded over, pregnant with colors. They were bubbling and flowing, but always turning into a violet that seemed to stem from the interior of an animal for slaughter. Unnamable and as laden with meaning as this outlawed violet were the titles, every one of which appeared to me more peculiar and more intimate than the previous one. Yet before I could make sure of the first, I awoke without once in the dream having even touched upon the old, boyish books.¹

It is not difficult to become aware of the strain in logic between the closed volume and the knowledge of its interior in the subjunctive mood of the first sentence. The volumes to which he is faithful because they are the oldest, the first ones to ignite his desire to read, he does not even open in the dream that alone offers him their image. He has never read them. And yet he knows what would have come of reading them. He relates himself to it as if it were a past, and indeed an always already past possibility of reading, not as if it were a past reality. This becomes evident from the fact that he opens his eyes instead of the books, and awakes without having touched the books and even without having read their exterior legend, their title. The dream, this *via regia* to memory and the most excellent, if also most dissembling mode of reading, does not lead him to the reality of reading but only to its possibility, breaking off at the impossible. It is not, however, an impression from the outside—but what could be outside when an extreme distance remains between him and the most intimate of his books?—it is rather the dream of a potboiler’s inner body and of the possibility that one could open it as if it were an animal fit for

slaughter: this wakens him and prevents him from fulfilling the possibility indicated within the dream. The dream of reading, strictly reading, breaks down the dream and breaks off the reading, even before it ever really starts up. What would have been possible and what is already real for the dream knowledge—opening up the book, opening the womb, slaughtering the animal—entirely enters into the act of awakening. The one who is awake can only carry out this possibility insofar as he diminishes and, as it were, profanes it at the onslaught of its sexual or murderous moment: he opens up a book, as if it were a book, and reads without the grounds of reading—the fantasy of slaughter and of sex—being present to him. He reads only because he has forgotten what reading means, because he has forgotten how to read strictly. He cannot do otherwise, for what hinders reading and makes it forgetful is reading itself as striking, slaughter and sexual act, as *Schlagen*, *Schlachten*, *Geschlechtsakt*. Benjamin's dream text manifestly treats *Aufschlagen* (opening up) and *Schlacht tier* (slaughter animal), and it scarcely conceals the sexual act, as Stephan Broser has indicated, with its twice mentioned "violet that seemed to stem from the interior of an animal for slaughter": the text in the book's womb is colored with violet because of a *viol*, a violation. Whatever the object of violation may be, it is in the first place the reading itself. For this possibility of reading, which makes reading into the oldest, into strictly reading, *Lesen schlechthin*, insofar as it leads "into the midst of the womb"—where the text clouds over—is suspended by an awakening that robs this reading not only of its object but even of its own reality. And this theft is also prescribed for him in the *violet* as *vol*. Reading—and precisely that reading from which every later one emerges—does not read. Even before the origin of reading arrives—which only becomes an origin, always only becoming an origin through this interruption—it breaks itself off and turns itself into a non-reading. The shock—this strike and *Schlag* that proceeds from it, isolating and separating it from itself—still destroys less than it shelters reading and preserves it as a sprinkled cell of remembering. In those cells dreaming is permeated with awakening, memory with the forgetting, and it is made into that *gloom*y—impermeable and melancholic—*text* whose clouds are always again colored violet.

The color violet appears once more in a section of *Berlin Childhood* which, although it seems entirely unrelated to the pot-boilers, concerns the explicit thematic connotation of *violet* as *vol*,

that is, as theft. The section is entitled "A Spectre" and treats a strange coincidence between a dream and an event of waking life. The dream is retold in two sentences: "a ghost was occupied with a wooden frame from which silks hung. This ghost stole the silks" (IV. 1, 279). No less important than this single action within the dream and indeed the key to its meaning is the dreamed room. It is, significantly enough, just as inaccessible as are the potboilers in the dream of reading and, as in the other dream, the violet color appears therein:

It would have been difficult for me to be able to describe the places where the ghost was occupied. Yet it had a likeness to something that was familiar to me, if also inaccessible. It was in the room where my parents slept, a corner disguised by a shoddy, violet plush-curtain, behind which hung my mother's morning coats. . . . The scent of lavender came from the small, compact silk [seidenen] sachets that dangled down over the pleated covers of the inner sides of both cupboard doors.

It is almost suspiciously clear that, since the only silken things mentioned in the dream text are the "compact, silk sachets," these sachets must be from his mother's toilette closet and they must be the sachets with which the ghost was occupied and which it finally stole. The narrator explicitly calls up his harmless concern with this maternal *Seiden*—and since we are carried along by French, with the *sachets* that correspond to it—with this *seins*, and he relates it to the "heavenly kingdom" which has its *infamous pendant* in that corner disguised by the "violet curtain." Yet precisely this corner—like the "weather corner" where the potboilers lie with their *violet*—is designated as the site of the dream, and so the "infamous pendant" of the "silk sachets" is designated as hell:

. . . behind it [the violet curtain] hung my mother's morning coats. The darkness behind the curtain door was infathomable: in the corner was the infamous pendant of translucent paradise that opened itself to me with my mother's toilette closet. . . . The scent of lavender came out of the small, compact silk sachets that dangled down over the pleated covers of the inner sides of both cupboard doors. Such was the old, secret weaving spell that once possessed its place in the spinning wheel, divided up now into heaven and hell. The dream was from this. . . .

From hell. Thus the dream theft of the silk sachets is shown only as the translucent pendant, as the screen image of the gloomy process condensed in the phrase “violet curtain” and indeed in the phrase “shoddy,” violet curtain. The word *shoddy* (*verschossen*) is important because it opens the passage to the interpretation of the dream text which is offered by the favorite game of the narrator, played on the day after the dream and in a manner that makes its gesture into a replacement for its recitation. This game is one with “shots,” *Geschossen*.

Perhaps I had enough of my favorite game, and sitting somewhere in the bushes I aimed the rubber bullets of my Eureka-pistol at the wooden birds, which sat inserted into the foilage and fell from the target upon the impact of the shot.

Just as the “wooden birds” form the pendant of “wooden frames” with which the ghost is occupied in the dream, these too are pendants, if not of the nesting parents—“that was in the room where my parents slept, a corner that was disguised by a shoddy, violet plush-curtain”—then of the mother, her body and her sex—“disguised by a plush-curtain, and behind it hung my mother’s morning coats.” The Eureka-pistol’s attack on the “wooden birds” is, like the theft of the silk sachets, an act of violence against the mother, her violation or *Vergewaltigung*. The name of the ghost may agree with that of the pistol shooter and future author of a *Kritik der Gewalt* (Critique of Violence)—who published, not accidentally, under the pseudonym Detlev Holz (wood)—and this name may have something to do with the emergence of a lasting fascination with the color violet: it is Walter. So in this color and, more exactly, in the *word* for the color violet, all the decisive moments of the dream process come together—actor, Walter, violation and *Gewalt*, theft, *viol* and *vol*, its bloody result and the object of attack, the mother, whose morning coats hung in the parental bedroom behind the “shoddy, violet curtain.” In this one word—a word that is therefore no longer simply one—everything is dissembled with everything else through a complex play of translations between and within the French and German languages. To apprehend this distortion, to *read* it, assumes that one pay attention not so much to the proximate semantic contents of the words as to their formal and thus entirely non-sensuous correspondences, ana-semantically, with the suspension of the words’ semantic intentions.

But what can correspondence and correlation mean, what can non-senuous and thus formal mean when the event of the dream, condensed in the word *violet*, indicates the most extreme measure of sensuousness and when its power of producing meanings, instead of being limited, is only increased through this condensation? And what does reading mean, if, instead of keeping its sober distance from the dissembling shape of the word *violet*, it participates massively in its production, even wandering into this violet itself? For violet colors that cloud of the text which the reading of the potboilers would encounter, and thus reading itself would be, as an act of violence against the mother's sex, that *viol* already inscribed in the violet: reading itself would be a moment of the violet writing. An answer to the first of these questions can be found in a text Benjamin drafted in two versions at the same time that a series of miniatures of *Berlin Childhood* was emerging—"The Doctrine of Likeness" and "On the Mimetic Capacity," texts that can be read as the continuation of his earlier essays on linguistic theory. These projects concern the question of the degree to which all language is onomatopoetic and not a conventional system of signs:

If one orders the words of various languages which mean the same thing around that meaning as their middle point, what must be investigated is how they all—often possessing not the slightest likeness to one another—are like that meaning in the middle. Such a conception is, of course, narrowly related to a mystical or theological theory of language without, however, being foreign to empirical philology. (II.1, 207–08)

Nothing could be more idle than to go searching for some sensual likeness, however small it may be, between a word and its intended meaning; nothing would be more foreign to Benjamin's investigative hypotheses than the assumption that there is a substantial middle, independent of the movement of particular languages, around which one could arrange particular words in order to establish, through a process of comparison, their likeness to the thing itself. On the contrary, this middle point is first constituted by the arrangement of the particular words of the language, and it must be thought of as their dynamic result and as itself a linguistic being. The likeness Benjamin speaks of is thus neither the likeness between a sign and a thing, nor that between a sign and a representation, but rather the likeness

between the words—and these words are never reduced to their sign character—of virtually all languages, on the one hand, and their configuration, on the other. This likeness does not *persist*, is not static and has no consistency, but is generated—and indeed without pre-given rules—by each new configuration “everytime in a completely new, original and non-deducible way” (II.1, 208). That Benjamin’s hypothesis should be understood as a calculus of modalities without substance becomes clear when one considers his early work on linguistic philosophy entitled “The Task of the Translator,” whose echo can be heard in the passage cited on non-sensuous likeness. Benjamin proceeds from a consideration of two words in French and German:

In the words *Brot* and *pain*, the thing meant is the same, but the modes of this meaning are not the same. It is due to the modes of meaning that the words mean something different to a German than to a Frenchman, that they are not interchangeable for the two speakers and that, in the last instance, they strive to exclude one another; with regard to the thing meant, however, they are one and the same. While the modes of meaning in these two words conflict, they supplement each other in the two languages from which they stem. And indeed their modes of meaning supplement one another, their result being the meaning itself. (IV.1, 14)

What *Brot* and *pain* mean in various modes is not already objectively given before these modes or independently of them; rather, what they mean is first constituted through their reciprocal supplementation, carried out in the act of translation. The meaning is always only the relationship between the modalities of meaning and thus, in the end, is what Benjamin calls pure language. Its messianic harmony, whose organon is translation, remains distinguished from the pre-established harmony insofar as the latter has a strong ground of linguistic unity at its disposal while the former merely reaches a fruitless ground and a preliminary unity and completeness of linguistic modes—Benjamin calls it *ironic*—through a translation that only promotes the survival of languages, without itself being able to live on (IV.1, 15). The meaning, and indeed every meaning—including that which *Brot* and *pain* mean in their reciprocal relationship—always lies in the

shadow of irony. Every intention is ironic as long as the complete common measure of all linguistic modes—that is, pure language—is still outstanding; and since the privileged medium of its presentation—translation, and also that translation within a language that is called interpretation—remains itself tied to a linguistic mode and thus prevents the intention from reaching its totality through the very manner of its promotion, every intention is infinitely ironic. The concept of pure language and even the concept of language in general stands under the sign of this irony.

The likeness Benjamin treats in his "Doctrine of Likeness" and "On the Mimetic Capacity" is therefore also ironic: it is not only subjected to an infinite number of historical transformations, it also dissembles necessarily and incorrigibly in every one of its manifestations. It is just as impossible to obtain a final correspondence of all modes of a language in the structural harmony of likeness as it is to encounter the particular monadological elements of languages in a simple correspondence of form and meaning. Rather, the elements—what is spoken, written and meant within the particular languages and in the translation of one into another—present a *Vexierbild*, a picture puzzle of one another, a game of "spot the object." Every one of their relationships emerges through a suspension of their semantic intentions and, furthermore, through a distortion of their formal character. Their likeness is never the sensuous likeness of correspondence but rather the non-sensuous likeness which two different elements maintain in their common relationship to a third element—an element that is never, or if so, only preliminarily, given: this goes for all linguistic relations, and it goes for the dream and text work which one finds in the miniatures of *Berlin Childhood*. Thus, there is hardly any semantic, graphic or phonetic correspondence between the word *violet* and the word *Gewalttat*; between the latter and the name *Walter* there is only a graphic and phonetic, but no semantic, correspondence; and finally there is no immediate correspondence between *potboiler*, *mother* and *violet* at all. All these relationships—even the ones between *shot* and *shoddy* or between *wooden frame* and *wooden birds*—only present themselves in the medium of translation among various languages, between levels and segments of the text and word fragments of one or another of its languages. As fragments, all the monads of this text relate to one another in the movement of translation and dissemblance, and this movement never finds completion in an immediately given sense but finds support for itself only in the mate-

rial constituents of sound and writing. Every text, whether or not it operates with elements of a “foreign” or a dream language, is a process of translation of its various words and sentences into one another. The process is not executed as a drama between empirical figures—not as the “psychological” interaction between mother and son—but rather essentially as a drama of translation between their words and emblems in which the forces of the empirical, insofar as they emerge in it, pass over into a more general sphere. Since this process, however much analysis and interpretation may accelerate it, only results in preliminary, unstable figures that are incapable of verification but are still capable of, and indeed demand, further transpositions and interpretations, this process remains just as fragmentary as every word through which it is carried out. No text and none of its words can have a likeness to another from its own repertoire or from that of its interpretations, except as a piece broken off from it, and that makes every one of its correspondences allegorical: they intend a likeness that they are constitutively incapable of reaching, that withdraws from even the most complex communication. Yet the fact that they are related, if only allegorically, to these correspondences between their own and all languages in pure language, makes them—and thus also the text of *Berlin Childhood*—into figures of an always preliminary and thus ironic mimesis of a future whose only testimony is those very figures.

Yet, as was already indicated, it happens that this text and these words, as picture puzzles of one another, reciprocally dissolve their unity and determination, or, more exactly: the text and words indicate that such a unity and determinateness never existed. If one has good reason to identify the ghost in the similarly named story with *Walter*, then one can indeed find further support for such an identification in the text “Hideout” which treats the words *ghost* and *door curtain* once more, and says: “the child, who stood behind the door curtain, himself became something drifting and whitened, a ghost” (IV.1, 253). But the answer to the question of what transformation the child undergoes when he turns into a curtain and into a ghost becomes more complicated if one turns to another section of *Berlin Childhood* entitled “School Library”—a section explicitly occupied with reading and the dissemblance of words:

Yet how much more gloomy [than the horror that the skull and cross-bones introduces into *Robinson Crusoe*] was the terror

that came from the woman in white garments who wandered through a galery with open eyes, yet still asleep, carrying a lighted candelabra. The woman was a kleptomaniac. And this word, in which a bleak and evil first tonal clang distorted the two already ghostly syllables "ahnin," as Hokusai made a death face into a ghost through a few strokes of the pen—this word petrified me with horror. (IV.1, 277)

The thieving ghost, the commentator of that other one who stole the silk, in all likelihood, has nothing more to do with *Walter* than the fact that both are connected with an act of violence and a threat of death. If the mother in "The Ghost" is the object of attack, she is here, as "ahnin"—as mother or grandmother—its agent. But if in this text the childish ghost turns into something feminine, *Walter* into the object of violence, the son into the mother and the reader into what is read, then it is only by the constraint to supplement the insufficient determination of their identity. This determination of the undetermined is here brought forward in the translation of a word—the foreign word *kleptomaniac*, *Kleptomanin*—whose final syllable *ahnin*, once isolated, is compared to a death face (be it because it lies close to *manes*, be it because it is something that one can only suspect [*ahnen*], be it because here recalls something *ohne ihn*). As if through a graphic retouching, the *kl* of *bleckend* or *bleak*, the first tonal clang of *klepto*—it is *bleckend* because it forces the speaker to show his teeth—distorts those final syllables into a ghost and together with them the entire scenery is drawn into this anamorphic displacement showing a *lighted candelabra* in a *galery*. The image that thus emerges is ghostly not because there is a gloomy, flickering light and not even because there is a question of theft or of an attack upon someone's property. Rather, the other way around: it is ghostly because the word standing at its origin compels the reader along with all the other words in its neighborhood to assume, if only for a second, a hungrily threatening grimace. The ghost is not the "woman in white garments"; she is only the picture puzzle of this word. Ghost is the word. And the entire scene becomes ghostly not because it stages the lexical meanings of this word but because this word's physiognomic traits, its characteristics of sound and articulation are impressed upon the scenery: a bleak spectacle that shows its teeth in which a voracious syllable threatens with death: *klept*. The word physiognomically imprints the speaker. It makes him, with lightening speed, into a

prankster of a hungry ghost, into a "death face" and into that "woman in white garments," the mother who incites his hunger.

Kleptomaniac: that means not only the word—the mother—rips and robs me of what is mine; it also means: the word—the mother—I—rips apart what belongs to me, to her. This process of translation and interpretation is independent of any primary intention; it plays itself out with a bodily automation that has the power to make an impression precisely because it is not clouded with a will. Only after its physiognomic outcome, in which the word—but not the sense—and the reader, *Kleptomanin* and *Walter Benjamin* have become alike in a non-sensuous way, can its semantic investment set in, producing the representations of death and mother and causing the horror. The word becomes a Medusa who petrifies the reader—indeed *this* reader of *this* word—and in terror the reader bears a likeness to that which threatens him: the word, the ghostly death face, the mother. Like so many other words—such as *Brauhausberg*, *Stieglizter Ecke*, *Anhalter Bahnhof*, *Mark-Thalle*, *Blume-Zoof*, *Hallesches Tor*, *Näh-Frau*, and *Panorama*—it enters into the archive of his gestures, his inner personalities and places, making himself—but who is then himself?—and his life—but does it live?—into the stage of their intercourse. What makes every reading into an essentially traumatic event—that is, into an event that cannot be entirely retrieved through memory—is the fact that it always and even preeminently takes place on a level of linguistic receptivity inaccessible to intended meanings: every translation into semantic contents, however close it may approach its goal, still comes too late to grasp the physiognomic effect of that word. The paronomasies of understanding, through which *Blume-Zoof* takes the place of *Blumeshof* (flower-house) and *gnädige Frau* (gracious lady) turns into *Näh-Frau* (sewing woman), are always only the masks covering that distance from intention in which the words, as dumbfounded and expressionless gestures, renounce the concept. And yet the possibility of a more than conceptual understanding is still ironically indicated in those very gestures, if only they remain faithful to the physiognomic movement of the *a priori* foreign words. Thus the distance of the body, instead of being dissolved, draws into the nearness of meaning and disavows it.

The central section of "Potboiler" reports how this distance is related to reading. It offers at first glance an image of a safe intimacy with a story that can draw the child into sensuous intoxication. If one

reads this image of snow and letter flurries in conjunction with the first sentence of "The Sewing Case," one already senses that a threatening event is indicated under the white veil:

We were no longer familiar with the spindle that pricked Sleeping Beauty and sent her to sleep for a hundred years. But just as Snow White's mother, the queen, sat at the window when it snowed, our mother also sat at the window with her sewing equipment, and it was only because she wore a thimble while she worked that not one of the three drops of blood fell. (IV.1, 289)

Only the white snow and the mention of three drops are left of the fairy tale's more bloody scene in which Snow White almost succumbs to the attacks, if not of the mother, then of the step-mother, who tries to kill her by making her eat a poisoned apple. But even the more sheltered Snow White, who is the reading child—in "Reading Child" from *One-Way Street* one finds that the child is "covered with snow from reading"—is exposed to a bloody event under all this whiteness. And indeed exposed to an event most closely bound to the image of the mother. The central section of "Potboiler" reads:

The book lay on a table that was much too high. While reading, I shut my ears. Soundlessly I still heard stories being told. Not by my father, of course. Often however, in winter, when I stood at the window in the warm room, the snow flurries outside told me stories soundlessly.

(After the rigorous, one knows not whether sardonic or bitter, exclusion of the father, all the attributes of the snow flurries fall to the mother, even if she is never once mentioned; she also sat at the window while it snowed. It is not a word but rather a gesture that indistinctly gives maternal shape to the snow flurry.)

What it told me I was never able exactly to discern, for something new imposed itself too thickly and too incessantly amidst what was already familiar. Hardly had I connected myself to a group of flakes more intensely before I realized that I had already joined another group that had suddenly thrust itself into the first. Now the moment had arrived to go after the stories in the flurry of letters—stories that had drawn away from me at the window.

(The successors to the flakes are the letters which, although they still form whirling flurries, allow themselves to be followed more easily than the flakes. Yet the letters' movements remain the same as the snow's: they trickle. In the section entitled "The Fever" one finds, in a passage that once again binds the telling of stories to the mother and to snow—"I loved it, for from the [stroking] hand of my mother there trickled stories . . ." [IX.1, 270].)

The distant lands, which I encountered in them, swirled intimately around each other like snowflakes. And because the distance, when it snowed, no longer led afar but rather inside, so Babylon and Bagdad, Akko and Alaska, Tromso and Transvalia lay in my interior.

(The names of the distant lands, the flakes from the mother's hand, from another Mother Carey—lands which, through their virtually infinite recounting, assume a form of distance articulated only in their name—enter into the reader's interior without, however, lessening the distance: this interior itself turns into a distance, into the flakes, into the mother who lets them trickle.)

The mild air of the potboiler, which pervaded those distant lands, ingratiated them to my heart through blood and danger in a manner so impossible to resist that my heart remained faithful to the worn-out volumes. (IV.1, 275)

The change from snow to blood, from white to red and, furthermore, to the violet of the reading dream that follows without a change in tone is astounding only to one who has forgotten the traces of violence in the *Snow White* text and the one who no longer remembers the logic of exchange in the dream of the thieving ghost through which the white paradise of silk could stand for the hell of violet. According to the same logic, the snow and letter flurries that induce an intoxicating experience of reading are only the slack matter whose reverse side, as in a lining, almost entirely conceals a bewildering experience and its color, in order first to show itself more clearly in the report of the test's violet cloud that follows. But also in the euphoric foreground, even before the blood is mentioned, a thread breaks through: the violet of the oldest encounter with a text—an encounter that cannot be carried

through—already shows through in the *letters*. They are, if one condenses the dissemination of this “word” throughout Benjamin’s text into a single expression, *violetters* from the interior of a slaughter animal, which here, through reading, draw into the reader’s interior. And so the snow, which harmlessly reminds one of whiteness and of mother’s trickling stories, turns around and becomes colored when one reads the “Sewing Box”:

Doubts levelled me whether this box [with fine needles and shears in various sizes] was exclusively for sewing—they were like those doubts that now often came over me on an open street, when I cannot decide whether I see a bakery or a barber shop.

Thus a place of sensuous enjoyment or a place where something is snipped. And further:

Snow White’s mother sews and outside it snows. . . . The darker it became during the day, the more often we used the shears. (IV.1, 290–91)

The idyllic ambience of the sewing mother, of the children playing with shears and wool thread and of the boy reading stories is a picture puzzle of a word: *schneit es—schneidet es*. It snows—it snips. It snows and the mother snips. While reading in her snow, the boy, in accordance with the fairy tale’s model, turns into a maiden, into Snow White. And so becomes like the mother; of the female sex, he handles the shears and tells stories—like those about snow. It snows.

It snows and the mother snips, it snows and snips the mother. That means: it is the mother who snows and snips since she lets stories and “violetters” trickle from her stroking hand; and that means: it—the child who reads and plays with the shears, Snow White—snips and snows the mother, and makes her that cloud of violetters into which it—the child, Snow White—falls, intoxicated; and that means: it snows—it snips—the mother—: it is this “word”—*es schneit, es schneidet*—that lets the mother snow and snip, makes the mother into snow and into a snippet, and makes whoever reads it into Snow White.

It snows, it snips—the “word”—the “mother.” Even before there is the mother as *this* mother and even before the reading child turns into Snow White, there is this “word”—and in this “word,”

snow and snippet, whoever uses and reads it is transformed; not, however, whoever “understands” it, semantically, lexically. For this transformation into the “word” is possible only so long as it does not have a fixed identity and does not refer unequivocally and linearly to a well-determined sense. “*Es schneit*” means “*es schneit—es schneidet*” thus only because it is not yet a determined word but rather a still undetermined and cloudy word and because it still disperses into flakes, snipped into many pieces. In the word *snow*, it snows. *Mana*. If child and mother, reader and letters become like it, then they become like one that is unlike itself and unlike all others. The distance of this word, which cannot be understood even through its translation into “*es schneit—es schneidet*,” enters as a name—for one cannot understand and can never translate names—into its paronomasies and into the reader of this unreadable word as his soul.

And because the distance, when it snowed, no longer led afar but into the interior, so Babylon and Bagdag, Akko and Alaska, Tromso and Transvalia lay in my interior. (IV.1, 275)

Reading thus becomes an involuntary conjuring of a distance, however near it may be, of an aura. “The closer one looks at a word, the further it looks back”—this sentence from Karl Kraus, which Benjamin cites in the essay devoted to him, contains not only the formula for reading Benjamin describes in *Berlin Childhood* but also for his experience of language and of things in general, and also for the linguistic gesture of his writings which never come forward more than in this essay describing the words and places of his childhood.

What goes on with words and things—no, what goes on in them and what constitutes their interior, their essence—finds its programmatic explanation in the section entitled “Die Mummerehlen.” There, once again, Benjamin treats the paronomasies and anamorphic distortions of unfamiliar, incomprehensible words and their correspondences to things. The section begins:

In an old children’s verse *Muhme Rehlen* appears. Because “*Muhme*” meant nothing to me, this creature turned into a spirit for me: into *Mummerehlen*. The misunderstanding dissembled a world to me. Yet it was in a good way; it showed the ways that led into the world’s interior. Each occasion was right. (IV.1, 260–61)

The dissemblance that the word undergoes because it is not understood at the same time dissembles the world, whose lexical laws give it form. And indeed this dissemblance dissembles the world in the sense that it blocks an entrance into the conventions of its language. Non-correspondence plays a trick on its orthosemantic form and slips into the interior of a dissembled world through a side-entrance. Mummery, dissemblance, disguise of words, things and persons: these are not exterior to them but rather, as the exteriority of their exterior, constitute their very interior. The interior of words and things, their essence, the things and the words *themselves* are mummery. They have their particular form in the disfiguration which makes them, being what they are, unfamiliar. Disguise lays them bare and it shows: they are disguise. They do not have an interior as substantial core, and their true name is not one that corresponds to their conventional costume but rather one in that they are mispronounced, just a little—a near name, a paronym. Therefore nothing that enters into them can arrive at this interior. Yet, even in its most interior, there is a slip that at no instant and under no aspect allows for its determination and its proper form to become manifest. The compulsion, the imperative: to become like and to correspond to the conventions of language and behavior; this imperative appears as itself dissembled. It cannot be fulfilled, answered, and, above all, understood, because only its disfiguration, its lapsus and its promise, its *Versprechen*—never, of course, a contradiction—leads into the interior of this imperative of mimesis. In order to correspond to the imperative of correspondence, I myself must turn into a lapsus, a promise. That is, into its most exterior, most exorbitant outside, which bears now frivolous, now grotesque traits—into houses, furniture, clothing, into masquerade and mummery.

The gift of being able to know likenesses is nothing other than a weak remnant of the ancient compulsion to become and to behave alike. For me, the compulsion exerted itself in words. Not such that made me like a paragon of refinement but rather like houses, furniture, clothing. (IV.1, 261)

The mimetic imperative proceeds from words, not from comprehensible but from incomprehensible ones. The incomprehensible dictates. Whoever bows to this compulsion turns into a word himself.

And indeed into an incomprehensible word. He turns into a part of the interior of the world: into the mummery wherein the world lays open its secret.

In good time, I learned how to disguise [mummen] myself in the words that were properly clouds.

Whoever disguises himself in words turns into their interior and thus into that which they “properly” are, into clouds. But not only into the “propriety” of the words but also into the “core of things”—into *Mummerehlen*. Benjamin says that he sought her in the image of the ape—the grotesque emblem of imitation—“in the vapor of barley and sago rising from his plate” and supposed her as *najade* or *naze* in the *Mummel* sea, under its water’s grey pelerine: under clouds or waves. But clouds or waves here, as everywhere else, of language. And not so much under these clouds but rather *as* them. Like so many other words that are closely related in Benjamin’s texts—like *Marmara-Meer* and marmalade, like *Murmelspiel* and *Marmorbelag*—*Mummerehlen* is a figure of murmuring, of inarticulate and mummied speech, a figure of defiguration, and so it can never be grasped in an entirely determined place and never in a completely determined sense. Because all words—and all things—point toward it as their core and because it always points toward something else and something else as itself, in the end pointing toward its meaninglessness, *Mummerehlen* is thus allegory; and because it *means* itself as just this meaningless word, *Mummerehlen* is the ironic allegory of the linguistic essence of the world and of the dumbfounded interior of language.

She was the dumb, slack, flaking one who, like the snow flurries in the small glass sphere, was clouded at the core of things.

All words are affected by this ironic-allegorical character—and this goes for language in general and *a fortiori* for Benjamin’s language. That means: neither snow nor clouds are to be taken here as metaphors at all, for they do not mean something else that could be said more appropriately, and they are not sensuous images of a noumenal content; rather, they mean that they do not mean, and indeed do mean this “not.” This “not” is dissembled into *cloud* and

snow in the silence of the slack monadic material of mummery. But, once again, the material is of words and everything they cite. Thus in the word *snow*—and in the mummery, murmuring and the *Mummel sea* of *Mummerehlen* which also point toward her, the image of the mother who tells stories and snips is cited from “The Sewing Box” and “Potboiler”; and in *Wolke*, as the paronym of *Worte*, one finds by means of the *lk*—the substitute of *rt*—inscribed the *klept* of *kleptomaniac* from “The Ghost,” shortened to that *kl* which pervades the entire tonal world of “Die Mummerehlen”: in the *clap* and *clatter* of the *lamp clock*, in the tassel of the *lock cord*, in the *kling* and the *clipped* children’s verse and finally in the *slack* and *flaking* of the small *glass sphere*: *Knall*, *Klirren*, *Lampenglocke*, *Schlüsselkorb*, *Klingeln*, *kleinen*, *Lockeren*, *Flockigen*, *kleinen Glaskugeln* (IV.1, 262). These clouds again are preludes to the color clouds by which the painting child in the paragraph that follows is absorbed into the Chinese porcelain, just as the old Chinese painter was absorbed into his image; and they are preludes to the *nuages* described in a report on *Peintures chinoises à la Bibliothèque Nationale* which Benjamin published in French in 1938 and whose final lines condense his doctrine of likeness into the image of a cloud:

Et penser, pour le peintre chinois, veut dire penser par ressemblance. Comme, d’autre part, la ressemblance ne nous apparaît que comme dans un éclair, comme rien n’est plus fuyant que l’aspect d’une ressemblance, le caractère fuyant et empreint de changement de ces peintures se confond avec leur pénétration du réel. Ce qu’elles fixent n’a jamais que la fixité des nuages. . . .

Pourquoi les peintres de paysages atteignent-ils une si grande vieillesse? Se demande un peintre philosophe. “C’est que la brume et les nuages leur offrent une nourriture.” (IV.1, 604–05)

However much they may become, for a second, like something else, the clouds are themselves not alike but rather changing, unstable, ungraspable, the relationship of likeness itself. But if the doctrine of likeness is supposed to have a strict sense, one must claim for the word in which they are condensed the same thing that is hypothetically claimed in an even higher measure for all linguistic and sensuous appearances: that they, though still fleeting, enter into a relationship of

likeness with others *always in a completely new, original, non-deducible way*, and show themselves in the end as nothing other than this relationship itself. It is therefore not excluded that the *Wolken* under discussion are just as much bound to that “woolen thread” which the children in “The Sewing Box” use to stick their net-work into cardboard (IV.1, 291) as to those “untouchable, woolstring colossuses,” the market women in “Market-hall Magdeburger Platz,” who traded with one another with their “bosom” swelling “sighs,” while a market god invisibly attends them (IV.1, 252), and, furthermore, to that “woolen mass” of rolled up and wrapped up stockings, in whose “woolly warmth” the hand looses itself when it tries to pull out the inside, making the pocket along with the inside disappear altogether (IV.1, 284). And just as little can it be excluded that the *clouds* of which Benjamin speaks are only citations from the clouds Aristophanes invoked to ironize Socratic ideas in his *Nephelai* or that they are citations from the *Wolken* of Hamann, whom Benjamin highly esteemed. And when one thinks about how, in the Greek myths, whose figures, together with the figures of some fairy tales, traverse *Berlin Childhood*, Ixion was deceived in his attempt to violate Hera, mother of the gods, and, instead of encountering Hera, inseminates Nephele—cloud or snow, her name means both in Greek—and they produced the double-formed centaurs; submerged in the thought of the multifarious scenarios of onomatopoetic copulations inherent in the *cloud*, one is not far from that copulation of Benjamin’s second surname—Benedix, expanded to BenedIxion—with a cloud—: and Benjamin, as an early letter to Ernst Schoen demonstrates,² had an exceptional interest in centaurs, in those of Pindar and Hölderlin (whose “Chiron” he cites in his book on Romanticism) and in those of Maurice de Guérin. But nearest of all, one must read the clouds that, for Benjamin, cloud over the core of words and things by their likeness to the colors in wash-painting, of which he says in “The Colors” that through them “things opened their womb to me, as soon as I encountered them in a cloud of colors” (IV.1, 263). And: “I resembled the porcelain which I entered along with a color cloud,” he says in “Die Mummerehlen.”

The cloud is the medium of likeness. In it, all things, men, places and experiences can correspond with one another and turn into one another, and they do so whenever they enter into the *Wolke*: into the interior of *Worte*. In the program that emerged at approximately the same time as “Die Mummerehlen” entitled “On the Mimetic

Capacity,” wherein the sentence about the compulsion to become alike finds an early formulation, Benjamin calls language, “the most complete archive of non-sensuous likeness” (II.1, 213). It has its center in the word cloud. Since language, as the most complete archive of likeness, is nothing but that harmony of language defined by Benjamin as messianic, one could say, without erring too far afield, that the word cloud—thus the *word* in whose disfiguration the correspondence to every other word and to everything else opens up, fleetingly and in a flash—is the nucleus of that messianic language. Now, it is beyond doubt that the theoretical linguistic considerations of the “Doctrine of Likeness” and the project “On the Mimetic Capacity” were formulated in close—not only in time—connection with the recording of *Berlin Childhood*, to which *Berlin Chronicle* a year earlier, in the spring of 1932, had served as a prelude; and it cannot be doubted that Benjamin’s memoirs represent the impetus as well as the explication, extrapolation and fulfillment of the program that his theoretical writings formulate. But the memoirs are, for this very reason, also its radicalization. And that comes across most clearly when this doctrine of mimesis is condensed in the function of the word cloud. For the word cloud is just that site in which the divergent elements of Benjamin’s text step into the ether of their likeness, as *Worte* steps into *Wolke*. But it becomes this site at the price of likeness with itself. The word comes to agreement with itself as little as does that child, who, through words he does not understand, is exposed to the compulsion to become alike:

Not such that made me into a paragon of refinement but rather into houses, furniture, clothing.

Only never into my own image. That’s why I became so perplexed when someone demanded from me a likeness of myself. (IV.1, 261)

However much a word may be like another or even like all others, it is never like itself. And only insofar as the word does not correspond to itself, all others can correspond in it. But all others, once again, to the extent that they are not themselves. There is no word. For in every one there is a place—itself—in which it resists translation, lacks mimetic capacity, is unable to be supplemented to that whole which would be the **WORD**, *logos*, in which language would be reason and common ground.

The word—cloud—the medium of likeness, is the absolutely unlike. It is the likeness that slips away from itself, dissemblance without semblance. The virtually infinite relations that are condensed therein—for the word is the monadological expression of the principle of synthesis in language—enter into it as a complex that is without a relationship to itself: a complex, therefore, that, if one determines Being as relation, is not. Their synthesis is that in non-synthesis and this non-synthesis, as Benjamin makes clear in the “Program for the Coming Philosophy,” is not something like a disjunction of already given or postulated relations but rather the “not” of their relation. The word, together with everything that enters into it, is a relating without relation. Since the intensive infinity of language realized in it at its core—a core to which the word can never correspond—is finite, groundless and without a goal determinable through it, language along with the word is exposed to all the adventures of history. History is the road upon which the universal harmony of language can be realized in its purity, but it is the errancy upon which a language unable to produce this harmony by itself must go. The gap in the archive of likeness—and this gap is language itself—is what holds it open for the arrival of another—itself: the word is the open place in which the “word” can enter, dissembled. Language can secure this possibility through neither anticipation nor construction, for this possibility is without security, without expression and in every one of its elements that to which the word does not relate itself. Attention and forgetting maintain only a paradoxical relation to this possibility. As attention is marked for a future of which it knows nothing and which is not its object, so forgetting unknowingly establishes the relation to the unrelatable, in that it lets the intentions extinguish. The most profound forgetting is that one whose subject is the future. It is that one which still precedes the possibility of remembrance. Because this forgetting, as its incorrigible disfiguration, is inserted into every word, there is history, and, as Benjamin makes clear in both of the theoretical linguistic projects of 1933, the history of the word’s capacity for mimesis is at the same time the history of the forgetting of its likenesses, of their becoming incomprehensible and, in the end, the liquidation of its magical part, whose effect is greatest when the child, like the Chinese painter with a moist cloud, disappears into his image.

Benjamin described the abysmal figure of this forgetting with melancholic irony in the gnome from another children’s verse, in the

"hunchbacked little man," who, with his sharp gaze, "from each and every thing upon which I came, collected the half-part of forgetting." His gaze upon the "entire life" is the gaze of the dying and of those who relate their lives. The images are visible before him for a second, as in flip-cards and later in cinematography—images that devolve upon forgetting and whose storage area is memory. Those images are half and so is, from the beginning, the "entire life." For, "the little man arrived everywhere before me. Arriving before me, he placed himself in my way" (IV.1, 303). Forgetting exists before that which is forgotten and before the one who forgets. Arriving before, he hinders him from arriving at the whole of what is his own. In forgetting, his life is interrupted, set apart. But in this partition forgetting and likeness take equal part. Just as forgetting stretches apart every word and every thing, every word is halved and everything is divided by its likeness to another. Thus the moon, this opposite and near sun, transforms the earth into an "opposite and near earth" and, in its light, lets appear everything that is audible or visible as the ghostly repetition of itself. "Thus every sound and moment approached me as the double of itself" one reads in the gloomiest section of *Berlin Childhood* entitled "The Moon" (IV.1, 301). Nothing is itself where everything is alike. Only a question remains of the world and everything that can be said of it—a question that even puts itself, along with the world, into question. It is not Leibnitz's question, which Heidegger reopened in his *Introduction to Metaphysics* of 1935, but rather its ghostly repetition. It is not posed by the child but rather poses itself to him; a question without questioner, it alone is the remainder of the world in which it, as the double of itself, as the double without self, still stays on. It is a moonly, not a mundane, an opposite or near question.

When the moonlight, flickering, had soothed it [my hand] and me, it turned out that nothing more was left of the world than a single stubborn question. It may be that this question lay in the folds of the curtain that hung in front of my door in order to guard against the noise. . . . It ran: why is there anything in the world, why is the world? I was struck with amazement that nothing in the world could make me think the world. Its non-being would have appeared to me in no way more questionable than its being, which seemed to blink at its non-being. The moon had an easy time with this being. (IV.1, 301)

Just as being blinks at non-being, every word, as one that is like but not the same—like itself but not itself—blinks at its non-being. Every one stands naked and alone as a dissemblance that no longer has any measure of semblance or a substance that could exclude the possibility of its non-being. Hence, no word can be understood as a word, and the question of the grounds for the world, once exposed to its possible groundlessness, cannot be understood as a question. Exposed to it, language and every one of its words is abandoned. And in this question, in every word that could be subject to it, interpretation is interrupted: ex-posed, it is without object. Just as language in this state of stubbornness and dumbfoundedness becomes the language of dead things that are not themselves, remembrance stubbornly stops before it, and, except for this scanty remnant of a question, yields up the field to forgetting.

Yet this remnant of language, which collects into the question as if it were the hunchback of the little man from the children's verse of Scherer, is still always the half-world—the world as it appears in dreams and under the aspect of likeness. In the half-world the nothingness of being is dreamed, yet this dream is itself, as a barrier, raised up before it. The question concerning the ground of the world is the index of its possible groundlessness, but as this question, it still holds to the possibility that there is a ground. Thus, during its second appearance in the same text, the moon appears ambiguously as the catastrophic promise of a new world into which the child thinks to enter with a Romantic's verse. The moon, *der Mond*, which makes everything stop speechless, having been transformed into a voracious mouth—*ein Mund*—that dismembers the ramparts of the balcony and all the bodies on it, sucks the entire world into itself: "The funnel which the moon formed in arriving sucked everything into itself" (IV.1, 302). But greater than the success incumbent upon a new world-domination by so ambiguous a moon is the threat of violence that goes along with its oral authority. It is the threat of that self-annihilation and that nothingness which the question concerning the ground of the world has still withheld. During the dream of a mouth that destroys without ever speaking, nothingness breaks through its enclosure and awakens.

Yet when I sought to familiarize myself with these words[of Brentano's poem], I was already awake. And now the terror that the moon drew over me first appeared to nestle in me, forever,

without conciliation. For this awakening, like others, did not set its aim to the dream but rather betrayed to me that it had escaped it and that the moon's authority I experienced as a child had foundered for another world of time. (IV.1, 302)

A riddling sentence. The dream's aim has escaped the dream, awakening has escaped. But what escaped the dream that lets the moon's authority, like that of the dream, founder, without thereby dissolving the terror? At the end of the passage cited above one finds: "The moon had an easy time with this being." It had an easy time with a being that it could expose to the ambiguity of its possible non-being without seriously endangering its own authority. Nothing could have gotten away from it. And here again it is nothing that gets away: *everything* had taken place on the balcony, crumbling on *all* sides; the moon sucked *everything* into itself; *nothing* could hope to get through untransformed (IV.1, 302). Nothing but the dream itself gets away from the dream of oral annihilation by the moon. It is not within its power as a dream to be capable of annihilating itself. Something gets away from its apocalyptic authority—the dream itself. Its nothing does not fulfill itself in this dream but rather is betrayed by awakening. Awakening is the passage from an ambiguously conciliatory annihilation to the nothingness of the dream in a waking world that is without consolation. So the awakening is the almost dialectical leap that, from the violence of the dream, goes overboard and leads to an awakening that no longer can wallow in the illusion that a resistance, a ground, a question unimpaired by nothingness could stand opposite the nothing. The dreamed annihilation, with which the ambiguous logic of likeness announces its permanent regime, is undone and the unambiguous nothing endures, without question or consolation, because in it the power of the mouth, the force of magical speech and the mimetic capacity founder, while the impossibility of interpreting the world steps forward unprotected in the void of likeness that disconnects all perceptions. The dream dissolves, but the nothing that only is indicated in it although it could not be dreamed—for it is the nothing to which the dream itself falls prey—lasts. The mode of its stepping forward is awakening. In awakening, nothing is alike, not even itself, everything singular.

In the sober light of the world by day, the Romantic ambiguity of the question about the ground, which is not a question, dissolves, as does the Romantic ambiguity of the understanding that does not

understand and of the word that is not a word but rather a cloud. With the rupture of the moon's regime and its double world, the rule of likeness ends and with it ends the rule of formal and, at the same time, magical correspondence. Likeness to itself would be the catastrophe that installs the eternal return, the catastrophe in permanence. Therefore, the dreams, which Benjamin retells and which are strongly distinguished from those of the Romantics by the fact that they are waking dreams, always stand on the threshold of likeness, in the foyer of destruction of the same and self-destruction. Just as the dream of the moon cannot attain its own aim, so the dream of the primordial first reading cannot get its aim in sight without rupturing in front of it. The dream founders—and so reading founders—because at its ground, at the ground of reading it encounters its own impossibility, death. But just as no one can correspond to oneself, no one can correspond to one's own death. The end of reading holds every reading at bay. One should read:

To open one [of the books] would have led me into the midst of the womb, in which a changing and gloomy text clouded over, pregnant with colors. They were bubbling and flowing, but always turning into a violet that seemed to stem from the interior of an animal for slaughter. . . . Yet before¹ I could make sure of the first, I awoke, without once in the dream having even touched upon the old, boyish books. (IV.1, 275)

The violet textual cloud in the womb of the books which the reader cannot touch is the counterpart of that "moist cloud" in which the child presses into the "womb" of things (IV.1, 263): no matter whose womb it is—that of the mother, of the sister or another woman—once in it, the reader could encounter himself as a cloud and as the intestines of an animal for slaughter: as not being any more.

In order to understand better the enormous pregnancy of this image, one must think of the impression made on Benjamin by an image, not an image which he dreamed but one that he read and mentioned explicitly at least three times in his texts. It comes from Hugo von Hofmannsthal's tragedy *The Tower*, an adaptation of Calderon's *Life Is A Dream*, which appeared in 1925 and in a revised version in 1927. The first time Benjamin writes about this image is in a letter to Hofmannsthal dated November 6, 1925, where he gives an estimation of the first version: "Yes, the prince must

succumb. Isn't it fundamentally just the returning violence of dead things, of the pig he feared he was becoming, to which he must succumb?" (*Briefe*, I, 387). In the scene to which Benjamin here refers, Sigismund, the prince, says to his foster-mother:

You know the pig that father slaughtered, and it screamed so strongly and I screamed with it—and how I haven't been able to touch any meat and even if you used violence, if you broke my teeth, I wouldn't. It's hung up on a wooden cross in the hall in front of my chamber door, the interior so dark that I lost myself there.—Was that the soul which flew from him in the last terrible cry? and did my soul then go into the dead animal?

.....
Mother, take me to you! Your face is like an apple and still earthly, your eyes water-bright like eternity. Take me over to you: where then are you and where am I?

.....
I'm not setting it apart, myself with it and again myself with the animal that was hung on a cross of wood and taken out and inside complete bloody darkness. Mother, where is my end and where is the end for the animal?³

The violence of dead things to which the prince succumbs in the first version, according to Benjamin's interpretation, is the magical violence of limitless likeness: not only his likeness to the slaughtered animal but also his and the animal's likeness to the mother: "where then are you and where am I?" This deadly connection to the mother robs him of language in screams and stammerings, making the chthonic image binding earth and mother into the singular salvation; it would be redemption to disappear into the bloody image. Benjamin finds in the second version of *The Tower* the agony of being without language, to which the musty connection to the image of the mother condemns the prince, if not dissolved, then at least loosened. He devotes to it the entire second and most significant section in his 1928 discussion of it; he speaks there of the "secret connection of wordless indulgence to everything that is foggy and motherly surrounding early childhood" and he tells how in the new version "the lighted silence of the prince tore apart the morning fog." It tears apart the cloud of fog as the cloud of the mother's toneless words or her "agitated sea of

sound" in which the prince until now remains caught. His release from this cloud is at the same time his relief from the deadly image of likeness. Benjamin reads it in the transformation which the motive for the slaughter of the pig undergoes in the final scene of the play's second version:

And nothing is more significant for the rigorous and relaxed deportment which the poet shows in the new version than the fact that even the most terrifying sign of the bodily interior—the stomach of a pig, all cut up, which in former times Sigismund, shuddering, saw on the wooden cross in the farmer's, his foster-father's house—has now changed its meaning: "The morning sun fell into the interior that was dark; for the soul was called up and flew elsewhere. It's all a joyous sign but to what extent I cannot say." (*Briefe*, III, 99–100)

With this statement Sigismund wakes up, as it were, from his dream of the creature's interior, from his entanglement in the motherly word and from the ban of likenesses that leaves him dumb, and he becomes articulate. The terrible sign of the book's bodily interior is in the same way transformed in the dream from "Potboiler" through an awakening into a "joyous sign"; for, in this case too, through awakening, the soul has "flown elsewhere." As long as reading still holds to the image of the mother, it retreats into that image without reserve. Reading tears itself away from the violence of its magic the moment it becomes aware of the threat of death, the interruption of voice and the deadening of the gaze. The one who speaks first becomes articulate when the irony of language, with a shock, fleetingly, opens up in the unlikeness of the likenesses that traverse language. The reading that is then possible is not the ambiguous reading of the magic which, making itself into what it reads, does not read; it is not the allegorical reading that pretends to know that it does not read; it is rather the ironical reading that even abandons this knowledge without thereby making itself at home in the "not" of its knowing. It is preliminary, it ends, but its death is not the death of an animal for slaughter, not one that lets itself be grasped in an image, not a death that one fears and not an end upon which one could pin any hopes. Benjamin, who had an understanding of such a reading, writes at the end of his review of *The Tower*: "If, in passing away, the words 'I am much too well to hope' pass his lips, does this mean

anything other than Hamlet's words, 'the readiness is all. Since no man knows aught of what he leaves, what is't to leave betimes?' " There is no more cogent expression for the sober sadness of irony.

The cloud—and a cloud also shows up in *Hamlet*—does not stand in the sky of irony, for that is empty. It is a requisite of the allegorist, which Benjamin also was. It is for him the sign of a Protean capacity to transform oneself, the medium of likenesses and at the same time that which clouds all likenesses, making them non-transparent and disfiguring them. As such, it is the sign of failure that still awaits its critical and, even more, its ironic dissolution. Unlike and yet linked to this allegorical clouds are those which Benjamin found in the writers of his time most closely akin to him, in Proust—Benjamin's "Notes on Proust and Baudelaire" (II.3, 1063) are nothing more than variations on the cloudburst of likenesses wherein it rains remembrances—and in Kafka. In the essay devoted to him, Benjamin understands the gesture as the center of Kafka's fiction—and indeed the gesture directed toward death, the gesture of Abraham who intended to slaughter his son "as willingly as a waiter":

This Abraham appears "as willingly as a waiter." Some things were only conceivable for Kafka in the gesture. And this gesture, which he did not understand, formed the cloudy place of the parables. Kafka's fiction issues from that gesture. (II.2, 427)

No interpretation and no remembrance could clarify this cloudy place, for what is covered by it is nothing that was ever understood and could thus be encountered in memory. It would be that bodily gesture which, associated with death, is just as impossible to understand as death "itself," and which, in the household of experiences, performs the work of the "hunchbacked little man"—the work of forgetting—that arrives before all possibilities of experience. While the intention of Kafka's fiction is directed toward doctrine and thus assumes the form of the parable, the cloudy place from which it issues is just that place where doctrine is not. Doctrine—and this goes for Kafka and his readers, not less for Benjamin and his—"it is not there" (II.2, 420). Doctrine would be imageless; the gesture, the image, the cloud that intervenes in the parable not only cast a gloom over its pure geometric figure and make it into the rhetorical figure of rupture and of an accompaniment that founders—into anacoluthon—the cloud makes clear precisely through a rupture in the intention toward imagelessness that

the imageless is unreachable through any intention, that it is imageless, seemingless and even one that is not there. Thus the text and every one of its words by being at a distance from doctrine is distanced from itself and therefore turns into its own anacoluthon. Its self-commentaries are just as much self-privations. Reading is not the gathering of disparate things but rather that dispersion in which gathering alone is possible. It belongs to the distancing of the past which dictates forgetting and to the distancing of the future which dictates hopelessness. The word is, on account of reading, to be grasped neither as a semantic intention nor as a non-intentional correspondence. It neither means nor does it supplement another one. The word—cloud—is the becoming imageless and wordless of the word. It proceeds as dematernalization from the word. As weaning. It de-interprets, dis-appoints, dis-pairs itself; its texture becomes threadbare and perforated with remembrance not of something forgotten but of forgetting itself. Nothing could come closer to the doctrine that is not there than the word that lets itself disappear. Thus it follows the methodic nihilism of the profane, which Benjamin recommends for politics in his "Theologico-Political Fragment." The politics of the *Worte—Wolke*—is to make the word itself forget in its intention toward meaning so that in its intention toward "language," which is not there, at the most extreme distance from himself, it can awaken.

And what of the pastiche to which every reading of Benjamin's writings, this one not the least, inclines? In "Die Mummerehlen" one finds: "So it happened that once in my presence copper-plate engravings [Kupferstichen] were spoken of. The next day I stuck my head from under the chair: that was a 'head-sticking' [Kopf-verstich]" (IV.1, 261). Like this head-sticking, the pastiche is a form of likeness which, whether it succeeds or fails, interrupts the continuum of reading for a critical, a dangerous moment. In these places, reading no longer blinks at an image but rather is itself a disruptive moment of an image in which it is exposed to its non-being. It is the moment, not lasting, of awakening. Now.

(Translated by Peter Fenves)

NOTES

1. Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. R. Tiedemann and H. Schweppenhäuser (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1972), IV.1, 275. Subsequent references will be given in the text, citing volume and page number.
2. Walter Benjamin, *Briefe*, ed. Gershom Scholem and Theodor W. Adorno (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1978), I, 140.
3. Hugo von Hofmannsthal, *Gesammelte Werke*, ed. B. Schoeller (Frankfurt: Fischer, 1979), *Dramen*, III, 304-05.

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